DEEP DARK

AN EXPLORATION OF GAMING DUNGEONS

From mazes filled with fantasy foes to abandoned space stations, gamers explore deadly spaces of every shape and form. But what makes a dungeon worth delving? Designers tell us about their most memorable crawls

Words by **Sara Elsam**

Y ou depart below, into the dungeon beneath the city. It's pitch black. You hear creatures moan in the distance. The walls are slick with mould, and somewhere, something larger shifts. This is the archetypal dungeon and it spans across the gaming landscape, as old and deep and unknowable as the dark liminal spaces that created it. Whether players are cautiously tapping along stone hallways or gunning down nasties aboard a spaceship, all dungeons retain the same essence at their core.

"Isolation and the sense of being trapped. A dungeon is a closed space which contains danger, treasure and excitement," says RPG designer and writer Grant Howitt. "It's almost that horror-movie element of being trapped in the cabin in the woods or the space station – it's that isolation, and that closed-off nature."

The roots of the genre hark back to the early days of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Back then, you had two adventure types: treks out into the wilderness, and grim underworld expeditions into labyrinthine dungeons.

The latter was a maze map set in a weird castle where, according to *D&D* co-creator Gary Gygax breaking down *D&D* for *Wargames Digest* magazine in 1974, "fearsome beasts" lurked, which players must "best" to nab their treasure. These early dungeons also included all number of random, utterly disconnected terrors.

In one room of a particularly memorable expedition by Gygax outlines in the article, you come across four stone chests. One somehow contains a five-headed hydra (readily dispatched by a swift polymorph to slug), while another offers to grant you "one wish of limited power".

"The dungeon exists slightly out of space with reality in fictional terms. You can get away with all sorts of nonsense," continues Howitt. "You can afford to be much looser, and much more creative with your combination of things, with the stories you're telling. Because you're out of the real world, it's almost like a little pocket dimension in narrative terms."

Old-school dungeons were often full of traps and tricks to "confuse and confound" the hearty adventurers, as recommended by Gygax. Over the years, these have ranged from trusty spear canons to dormant hives of bees.

"The health and safety implications are ridiculous!" Howitt jokes. "Most of the things in the dungeon are less intelligent than the player characters. So you're going to get orcs falling down pit traps all the time. You're just building in workplace hazards.

"There's also this fetishisation of traps. Like– Oh, there's this really horrible one, that beheads the players, then it traps their feet in glue and then it sends their mum a picture. It's this weird power play."

In the case of surprise ant-people, hovering objects or rivers that run upwards, the excuse "a wizard did it" is still always viable. But over the years writers have found new ways to add a sense of coherence to the wild antics of dungeon-diving. Take, for example, the adventure *Eyes of the Stone Thief* for RPG *13th Age*.

"Living dungeons romp around the world and eat things," Howitt explains. "The other dungeons then incorporate them in. We got in the gullet, and it was kind of breaking apart and rearranging all the different dungeons it had eaten! So the fact that you can have that M.C. Escher style of things put together, but then having an in-universe reason for that."

OPPOSITE Fighting Fantasy's *Deathtrap Dungeon* has had us going underground since 1984
ABOVE Open wide, *Dungeons & Dragons'* *Tomb of Horrors*
BELOW One of the friends you can make along the way in *Escape The Dark Castle* (Alex Crispin)

Howitt's own upcoming tabletop RPG Heart: The City Beneath creates another sentient, breathing dungeon.

"It's about an infinite city and the cave network beneath this mile-high city on the top," he says. "And the deal with the Heart is that it reacts to you going down into it. It's semi-parasitic and semi-aware; it will build itself around your dreams. It will give you what you want. Whether you know it or not."

FALLEN GRANDEUR

The approach of looking into the 'why' behind the gnarliness and building an ongoing world outside of the enclosed space is a key part of the modern dungeon-crawler experience.

"Every encounter should answer one of three questions," advises RPG designer and writer Jay Iles. "And that is: what did this use to be, how did it fall from grace? And what's happening now? And if every encounter is addressing one of those, or maybe two, that would be even better."

It's an approach seen in the *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne* series of video games, whose epic (and uniquely melancholy) eldritch worlds have lurched onto the tabletop. In the tabletop dungeon-crawler spun out of the series, *Dark Souls: The Board Game,* players assume the role of the video game's cursed undead who are perpetually reborn in a world indelibly scarred by its masters.

"They build locations that tell their story as you kill things through them," she adds. "There's this sense of fallen majesty that is now doing something."

Dungeons also run deep in our cultural consciousness.

"It harks back to this medieval, culturally historical feeling of castles and dungeons and the past," says Alex Crispin, co-designer and illustrator of *Escape the Dark Castle*. "This kind of untouchable ancientness, which I think is quite deep in lots of cultures, Europe especially.

"It comes through in a lot of fairytales. A lot of time-honoured traditions will include their negativity in a castle or a dungeon. All of which are kind of the same thing: stone claustrophobia."

In a sense, the dungeon is not far off the haunted house – which too has its roots in the looming castles of European lore. Much like surviving a malevolent house, hostility is a key part of the dungeon experience. In *Dungeons & Dragons* terms, that can be gelatinous cubes that blend in with the shadows or sentient treasure chests bearing pointy teeth.

"All the things you really don't want to have in your life are basically included in a dungeon," says Crispin. "Otherwise you're just going to be anywhere, any old corridor."

Crispin's current project, *Escape the Dark Sector*, takes the dungeons of *Escape the Dark Castle* out to the deep black of space. As sci-fi and fantasy go "hand in hand", he feels the transition between dungeon genres has been relatively seamless.

DREAMING OF DUNGEONS

When both torches in the halls and savage aliens equally evoke dungeons, it would seem ▶

that at its core, journeys into the depths of tabletop dungeons represent a liminal place – not unlike dreams.

"A dungeon is an exploration of space, and of history," says Iles. "In my favourite dungeons, as you go through them, you learn more about what this place is – about why it's here, about the person or creature or event that made it. Each dungeon tells a story.

"It can be a psychodrama, where through fighting monsters you learn more about everything that was here. And it's interesting because we call them dungeons, but most of the ones we see aren't places where people were imprisoned.

"They're places where forces are mustering or places where there's a portal to somewhere else. What really defines dungeons is that movement beyond the mundane, into the place which is intentional and hostile and alien to you."

In Iles' own title *Voidheart Symphony*, you've found a way to break into people's minds, which takes the form of a dungeon themed around someone's personality. Inside these dream dungeons, you learn their secrets and can even steal their powers.

Dungeons have come from a place of modular horrors filled with fairground scares to desolate places concealing strange, sad secrets. Worlds that are gloomy but achingly beautiful, laid out with the crisp rawness of a psychic event. Worlds where the delvers aren't high-end heroes in search of riches, but plunderers and lost souls driven by something else entirely. In this context, crawling through a dungeon is akin to tearing through a dark dream, with (likely murderous) friends in tow.

"It's about that sense of we as a group, are going into this hostile place," concludes Iles. "It's all about this is a place that's alien to us. And dangerous to us. And we are going to try and understand it, and master it, and find our way through it." ◭

DUNGEON DIY

Tabletop writers Grant Howitt and Jay Iles reveal their top tips for running an effective dungeon in an RPG.

YOU ARE THE MURDERERS, MOSTLY.
Howitt: "Underline the fact that you're breaking into someone's house and taking their things. What you're doing is a horrible act. You are scary to dungeon denizens because you're generally a higher level than them. If it's not expressly a monster, if it's got a face and arms and legs, make it a person. Then they can choose what to do at that point. And if you want to just kill people all day, that's an interesting choice you've made."

KEEP THE MOMENTUM GOING.
Iles: "I always think that when you're creating a scenario for players to get involved in, it should have something that is in the process of happening there. It shouldn't be in equilibrium, there should be something that's going to happen if the players sit back and do nothing. And it's probably going to be bad. Time pressure is really important in dungeoneering because players are like, 'We clear out this room, then we rest, then we'll do the next thing.'"

ENSURE EVERYTHING MAKES NARRATIVE SENSE.
Howitt: "Don't just make it a series of prisons under the ground. It has to make sense. There has to be a reason for it to be there. So why are there orcs here? Why aren't they on top? Who's in charge of them? Why are you effectively breaking into someone's house? And taking their things? Rather than saying, 'This is crazy and wacky, why has this happened?' and extrapolating and rationalising after the fact."

KNOW THINE ENEMIES.
Howitt: "Give every adversary a name. They don't have to wear name tags, but they can call it out to each other as they die. Which is

fun. Give every single adversary something. So not just, 'Here's goblins one, two, three, four and five,' – it's, 'This goblin's got one eye, this goblin's got wild hair, this goblin's covered in feathers.'"

LEAN INTO ENVIRONMENTAL STORYTELLING.
Howitt: "When you're designing the dungeon, think about what the inhabitants are doing, and what its purpose for existing is. You can be like: 'We've got some ogres over here, and we've got some snake people over here. And there's a kitchen in-between them.' But you don't know what the join is. But by listening to the players and by intuiting what that is, you can make your own story. You know, they've decided to set up an ogre/snake-person cooking business. And this is the only place they can have, and you've stormed into here and you're trying to kill them."

EXPLORE THE 'WHY' OF IT.
Howitt: "I think, where you just open a door, and there's an orc there, he's got a chest he's guarding, and he's trying to kill you. It's like, 'Why is he here? What's he doing? What does the orc want, why is the orc guarding the chest with his life? Could we bribe the orc? Is this a religious thing for the orc?' And, like, if you can qualify this murderous and suicidal deal, then fine, that's interesting, but if it's just cause, 'Yeah, I've got hit points,' then it's less interesting and exciting."

AMP THE PRESSURE UP IN FIGHTS.
Howitt: "So you have this really basic puzzle, but because there's a bunch of vampires trying to rip off your face while you're solving it, it becomes interesting and you can use it against them. Any sort of secondary objective is worth it in fights. I would argue any sort of secondary object is needful in fights. Fights shouldn't be because we're on opposing sides!"