

DEATH MAZE

BY PHIL ALEXANDER

Mini-Games have rapidly become one of the most popular branches of the board gaming hobby. As well as appealing to long time historical gamers, the mini format has developed its own enthusiasts who would never consider sweating it out for hours playing a multi-map campaign and yet who will readily admit to gaming over their tiny board till the small hours.

A major proportion of mini-games are based on Sci-Fi or Fantasy themes and with D&D and its variants predominating "swords & sorcery" gaming at present, it cannot come as a surprise to see board game formats being introduced that follow the individual hero/dungeon crawling concept. First to expedition into the idea have been games such as TSR's own 'Dungeon', Metagaming's Fantasy Trip and Aerial's Sorcerer's Cave. Now we have Death Maze (Heroic Adventure in the Corridors of Doom).

Although comparison with Fantasy Role Playing (FRP) systems is inevitable, especially as the promotion of DM states that this is a FRP game, we cannot really expect this tiny package to stand up against the expensive and numerous volumes of D&D or C&S. Therefore a resolution to approach the game without prejudice provoked by the 'Giants' seems a prior requirement.

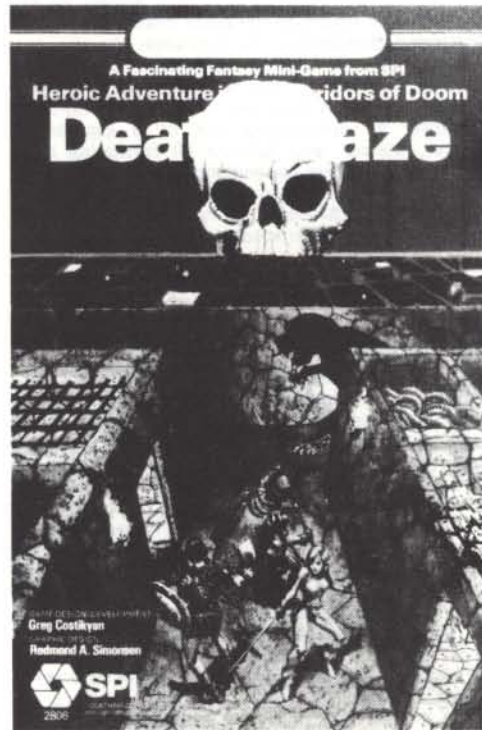
Death Maze could be described as an unrefereed dungeon that uses counters for a map so that unique labyrinths develop at each gaming session. Therefore, due to the approach of the rules that requires players to compete against the system rather than each other, DM is capable of solitaire play as well as accommodating up to six players. Players create characters who then explore the maze seeking treasure and slaying the monster guardians who might be in the way. By accumulating experience from this activity, players may then add extra strengths to the specifications of their characters which will give them greater capability to survive further expeditions.

Components

Death Maze consists of a 8½ x 5½" 16 page rule book with additional charts and two identical sets of 100 counters, detailing the heroes, monsters and the Room and Corridor chits which substitute for a game map and form therefore the heart of the game. The players, draw randomly from either the corridor or room counters and, build up the game map of the maze, as they explore, by laying down the selected chit against the last area the party reached. As it is possible to have more than one suitable configuration, the layout of the map varies considerably from game to game.

The lay-out system allows the game board to fall into place quite neatly although the counters do seem frustratingly small at times. Some of the rooms have unusual features, and oddly there are six fountains to four statues and trapdoors which seems to indicate a well watered place (pun intended). With these being the only details, the maze counters are somewhat plain and the occasional natural cave, circular room or unusual hall would have been nice to break the monotony and stimulate the imagination. The same could be said of the Hero and Monster counters. Characters are represented by somewhat bland heads 'couped' and the rather casual counter approach has other disappointing designs such as boss-eyed Kermit's pretending to be Goblins and Orcs resembling elderly Bruce Forsyths. I can only feel that a bit more care could have been taken in the graphics with perhaps dynamic silhouettes being more appropriate to lend a bit of imagination to the design.

Monster counters display the combat strengths of individual type or personality, with die variants for wound points which have a bearing on both their durability in melee and their experience value after being slain.



Playing the Game

The rules are concise and uncomplicated. Before setting off to the unknown, players detail their characters with names, class and specifications. There are two classes in the basic game, heroes and thieves or their female equivalents, with magicians being added in the advanced game. Specifications include Wound Points, which represent the amount of damage the character is capable of sustaining from monster attacks; Magic Resistance which is checked so as to save the character from the effects of spells or traps, and Skills, (whether in weapons to assist the chance of scoring damage in combat or in the case of thieves, detraping talents to avoid the booby trapped doorways etc). These characters have minimal variances at the start but should they survive a few games, experience starts to develop them a little more.

Once into the maze the players explore, designing the maze as they move as previously explained. Players check for any fearsome occupants at each move on to the next area counter, laying down maze counters and noting the party position by a counter of the same name. Individual's counters are laid aside in marching order i.e. in ranks, some players in the front rank, others in second, third etc. On discovering monsters, whether die-generated as a room occupant or a wanderer, players can either negotiate or fight. Negotiation may result in a fight anyway or otherwise in an agreement to avoid combat. There is also a cowardly monster result which can mean the explorers will be paid off to leave the creature alone.

If combat is chosen or occurs as a result of failed negotiation, then the aforementioned marching order becomes the battle plan against which the monster or monsters are ranked. The front rows of the protagonists are the only ones in direct confrontation, i.e. able to use melee weapons such as swords, daggers or hammers, while the second can only add missile weapons to the fray. Combat consists of a number of Combat Rounds which are further subdivided into several phases, all taking place within a normal movement turn. The party lead off with hand held or missile attacks, followed by a response from the monsters. Then the party may reorganise their marching order to change positions and thus their battle plan, saving those who may be too wounded to risk in direct combat and bringing fresh warriors to the fore instead. The monsters close that combat round by also reorganising but conforming to the systems die rolls. However in the party's case, as organisational movement is limited, some care is needed or good characters can be lost because of the inability to back out due to bad strategy or congestion in the ranks.

To resolve combat, a basic die roll with variables for any individual specifications are compared to a combat table that gives the result in the form of damage scored. These points, if any, are deducted from the unfortunate's wounds points immediately. If brought to zero then that character or monster is removed from play. Monsters add a basic combat strength to their rolls and some are formidable indeed, with almost guaranteed damage being meted out each combat round. Combat continues until all of one side are destroyed.

Rewards for the Heroes

Players who survive can then count any treasure they find (from the treasury tables) and divide the spoils amongst the party. Each monster has a different rating for the possibility of guarding or carrying loot, whether occupying a room or wandering through the maze. Experience is shared out at this point as well for defeating the guardians, based on the creatures wound points and the number of

	Thief		Hero
	Party Counter		Wizard
	Goblin		Orc
	Room Cup Corridor Chit		Room with Fountain
	Room		Room with Statue

Sample Monster Unit

Combat Bonus (or Weapon)	7	Number of Dice Rolled for Wound Points	1+2	Number Added to Die Roll	Mummy	Monster Name
Monster Symbol						

survivors in the party, who divide points equally. Should a character acquire 75 e.p., which isn't as easy as it seems at first, and to this add a few piles of coin, then that character is allowed a +1 on a specification of the player's choice in time for the next expedition.

As well as filthy lucre, there is also the chance of gaining a magical item from one of the more powerful monsters. In this department there are weapons, armour, potions, medallions and spices to be found. Concerning the latter group, since first spying Cronk counters in the mix which were carried over from Swords and Sorcery, I had been hoping that the unnecessary humour that marred that otherwise enjoyable game had not also been brought over. Thankfully spices are the only 'jokes' in the game, with such items as Red Pepper for fire breathing and Spinach for strength. We may even have Cannabis to alter time perception and improve combat??? Perhaps we should also have a rule that heroes might hunker down in the third rank and impartially accompany combat rounds with cries of "Far out" and "Too much". Oh well . . . Apart from this excursion into the absurd, magic items are useful aids to the adventurers and quite sensible given the myths. However, it should be noted that a few are trapped.

Oh, not another Evil Wizard!

Special monster capabilities such as stone gaze and fire breathing are introduced in the Advanced game which most Fantasy fans will be playing from onset of course. Spells contain standard fare such as sleep and charm as well as lightning, which all evil encountered mages use exclusively, as it is in usual circumstances the most obviously powerful spell. Spells are cast by deducting a spell point cost from the wounds points total. Consequently wizards tend to be 'one-shot' specialists who tag along at the rear of the party until they can build up their spell points from accumulated experience earned by the hard-working heroes/heroines in the front ranks. Sometimes they get lucky with magic items although, incidentally, I seem to have had singular misfortune in losing all of mine to trapped magic paraphernalia.

Generally games play out in a fairly short space of time, with high losses in a party of beginners seemingly inevitable. Sometimes it might be advisable to create a couple of higher level characters to assist beginners when starting off and keep them in the rear ranks for those unfortunate occasions when a vampire or gargoyle is rolled up, these being types that always dole out damage due to their bonuses. However, it is noticeable that the combat tables seem favourable to the party, because a band of starters can slay even the most fearsome creatures by gradual attrition, especially as daggers can do more damage on the tables than the monster if combat bonuses are equal. Daggers also match bows, and with these odd comparisons, choice of weapons doesn't really matter except to indicate if a character intends to spend a lot of time in the first rank or back in the others. Obviously these measures have been taken to ensure that players aren't out of the game too easily. Another of the problems that must be tackled in designing a mini-system for individual combat is how to balance a fast-play system without it resulting in instant kills that have the same effect, players out before they have got started. The slow damage accumulation resolves this to some degree, but then it does make the melee a bit frustrating as the party wear down the creatures, trading point for point. As there can be no retreat, combat commitment sometimes means that a weakened party on its way out of DM can have an unlucky roll and be faced with something heavy in wound points and also unsociable enough to have plenty of minuses in negotiation. Effectively therefore the game ends there. To avoid this we have used a house convention that, should the monster front rank not outnumber the party front rank, the latter can fight a rearguard action that allows at least some of the party in the other ranks to escape. This action takes place after at least one round of combat rolls. Should the monsters prevail, then they are placed on that section of the maze and automatically attack should the party be forced to return.

This is as far as I could suggest interfering with the game mechanics, as additions to this aspect should be treated with caution. DM is a mini-game, and the rules are adequate enough to rattle through the available labyrinth, although long time FRP fans (like myself) will of course see plenty of opportunity for expansion. Rather it should be in the spell lists, monsters or characters that additions might be considered to broaden encounters and party tactics. There could be Clerics armed with the hammer who have the same basic specification as thieves except we could substitute Heal for Detrap; or weapons might be added although, as explained before, new arms would really only be chrome rather than rules changes, following the basic tables.

I have however noted a few additions, for the rather limited selection of monsters (see table), for which I accept no responsibility. There are no encounter tables provided for these as players will probably wish to decide for themselves which to use and in what proportion.

To conclude, **Death Maze** does play through steadily and the solitaire maze system, though featureless, does work quite well. Like all solitaire systems there can be few surprises after the system has been tested for a while, although the subject

matter of this game obviously has more potential than some solo concepts. Occasionally one gets the impression that the system will force you to an impossible situation from time to time but there is almost always a chance that you might beat it, so it's worth a try. Whether playing solo or in the co-operative group (there being no rules for backstabbing fortunately), decisions are really limited to making the best choices when building up the characters, to marching/combat order and whether to "jump in or get out." Consequently I feel that "fantasy game it is, but a role playing game it ain't." It seems that FRP is used these days as a golden key to unlock sales. Character play amongst imaginative players could be possible but there is no scope for characters to interact with the environment, as it is essentially passive, even if hostile. Therefore it seems unlikely that players will use roles to colour their thinking and action in the game, which is what Fantasy Role Playing is all about. There are only three roles possible after all and they only differ to a slight degree, with no detailing at all of personality, and no encouragement in the overall presentation to provoke imaginative 'pictures' of what is occurring. But let's keep this in proportion; we are after all considering a mini-game. What we have here is not a role-playing system but straightforward 'kick-in-the-door' fantasy gaming. It's fun, fast on the whole, sometimes tense and sometimes frustrating. Regardless of my remarks in the last paragraph prompted by the promo on the back cover, **Death Maze** is well worth its entrance fee of £2.95.

	Neg	Treasure	M/Res	Combat Bonus	Dice for Wounds	Special
Ape (Giant)	4	D/A	1	4	1+2	
Basilisk	4	G	1	2	1-1	Stone
Bear (Giant)	4	D/A	1	5	1+2	
Beetle (Giant)	4	D/A	1	4	2+0	
Bugbear	2	F/C	1	W	1+0	
Crawler	4	F/A	1	2	1-1	Paralyzation
Centipede (Giant)	4	D/A	1	3	2+0	
Cockatrice	5	G	1	2	2+0	Stone
* Demon	7	J x 2	5	12	4+1	Magic
* Dragon	3	J x 2	3	12	4	Magic
Dwarf	0	G/C	1	W	1+0	
Frog (Giant)	4	E/A	1	3	1+2	
Ghoul	9	F/A	1	3	1+2	
Giant	3	G	1	8	3	
Gnome	0	E/A	1	W	½+0	
Golem	5	H	2	6	3	
Harpy	4	I/C	1	3	1+0	Charm
* Hydra	4	I/B	1	2	1+2(x3)+	Multi-attack
Imp	7	G	3	2	1+2	Magic
Lizard (Giant)	4	A	1	3	2+1	
Lizard Man	4	H/B	1	W	1+2	
Minotaur	3	I/C	1	6	2+1	
Scorpion (Giant)	4	D/A	1	4	1+2	
Shade	7	H	3	2	1+1	Paralyzation
Snake (Giant)	4	E/A	1	2	1+0	
Wolf	4	D/A	1	2	1+0	
Zombie	9	E/A	4	2	1-1	
* Wraith	9	J/A	1	10	3+0	Fear

* Note that quite a few of these monsters should be reserved for only high level Death Mazes.

HYDRAS may attack up to three times per combat round, and up to three opponents. Each third of it's wound points loses one of these attacks i.e. one of its heads.

COCKATRICE AND BASILISKS are treated in the same manner as Medusa.

Paralyzation is done by rolling a 1 after a *successful* attack. Paralyzed characters cannot fight and must be assumed to be aided by at least one other character to move, until the player rolls a 6, checking each turn (not combat phase). Should affected characters be unable to continue a move due to a shortage of aides, then the party must remain where they are, checking each turn for wanderers.

Magic — Dragons breathe flames as a hell hound each attack except that damage is 2 points. On a roll of 1, checked each monster combat phase, it may cast lightning instead of standard attacks (only once).

Demons check for magic spells as a dragon. Also they may immolate on a 1, causing damage as a hell hound as well as normal damage should its attack succeed.

HARPIES cast charm on a 1-3, causing one party member to cease combat if he/she fails a magic resistance roll.

IMPS cast blast on a roll of 1 (N.B. all spell casters should be checked individually and not as a group)

WRAITHS cast fear which causes any character failing their magic resistance to miss combat in the next combat turn.