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FOREWORD

A GAME OF D&D is in many ways similar to the process of filmmaking. You start in the prep phase, crafting your characters, plotting out your story, and equipping yourself with the best team possible. But the moment the campaign begins or the cameras start rolling, you realize that all your preparation only takes you so far, as the game—and the film—assume a life of their own. The challenges you couldn't have foreseen come rushing at you, whether it's a surprise attack by a horde of Gnolls or a Techno-crane breaking down on the morning of a three-page action sequence. And what you quickly come to realize is that pivoting is the point. How you adjust to what the world, or the Dungeon Master, throws your way determines your destiny. But contained in every hurdle is the potential to discover something you hadn't planned for at all. And sometimes those discoveries lead you to an even better path than all your preparation could have.

Here's an example: We ended shoot day 53 with a horseback "ride and talk" scene featuring Chris Pine and Michelle Rodriguez. With the sun setting and heavy rain moving in, we were racing against the clock. As we set up the shot, we quickly realized that because the camera truck was moving uphill, its engine noise overwhelmed our actors' dialogue. Loath to have to re-dub their lines later, we scrambled for a solution. That's when our line producer had the idea to change the direction of travel so that the truck could go silently downhill in neutral. It was a daunting prospect, as it required us to move the entire basecamp of tents and equipment 200 yards down the road in mere minutes. But there was no denying it was the best solution. The entire crew, including us, our producer, even studio execs chipped in to make the move. In that moment, job titles were irrelevant and the only thing that mattered was getting the shot. And as it turned out, the angle we ended up with was more striking than the one we had intended. That last-minute curveball made the movie better.

The freedom that D&D offers its players is exactly what made taking on a film adaptation so formidable. How do you represent in film form a game that is unique to its players, its characters and narrative constantly evolving? The answer for us was that the movie had to capture that distinctive feeling you get when playing the game. The constant interweaving of life-and-death stakes with laugh-out-loud absurdity. And, of course, the magic and monsters derived from fifty years of lore. But as with any good campaign, we couldn't embark on this adventure alone. The book you're about to read showcases the development and painstaking work of some of the most talented artists, designers, and technicians in their field. Spanning a period of over three years, we worked hand-in-hand with hundreds of these visionaries to literally create a world. Our hope is that this book and the film that inspired it will offer you a glimpse of the magic that D&D has given us and the millions of others fortunate enough to have enjoyed it.

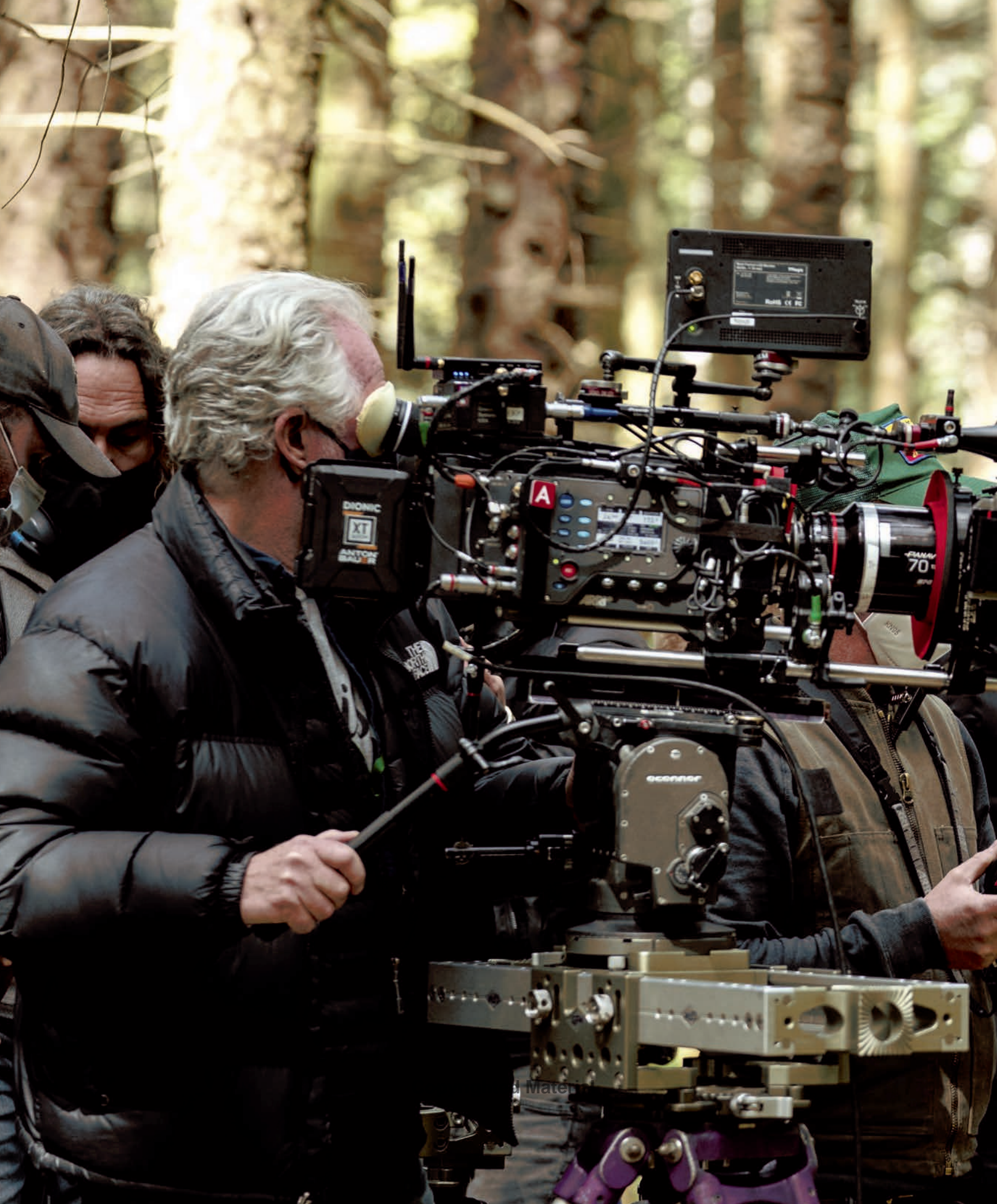—John Francis Daley & Jonathan Goldstein

INTRODUCTION

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SINCE THE 1970S, the game DUNGEONS & DRAGONS has been delighting fans with its unique blend of fantasy-genre roleplay and creative storytelling. From humble beginnings, it has grown into the bestselling tabletop roleplaying game in the United States. The game has made its way into countless areas of popular culture, from books and comics to video games and toys to an animated series, and, of course, film. D&D now has millions of fans worldwide, including the co-directors and writers for the film *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves*, Jonathan Goldstein and John Francis Daley. "John and I both [have] been longtime fans and players of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS the game, so when the opportunity came to us to, at first, rewrite and then direct the motion picture version of it, we were very excited," says Goldstein. "It's a world that allows so much potential because the game itself is so immersive and has so much creative freedom for the players. We wanted to bring the experience of playing the game onto the screen as best we could."

"What was so fun about it was that sense of sheer freedom," Daley recalls of the first time he played DUNGEONS & DRAGONS. "You're only confined by the very basic rules of the game, but beyond that, you can decide to do anything you want to as a character. And I thought that there was something so liberating in that. And so, when the option to make this movie came to us, we jumped at it because it allowed for us to capture that magic that we felt playing it."

Their own experiences playing the game meant that the filmmakers were uniquely prepared for the challenge of bringing DUNGEONS & DRAGONS to the big screen. "The overall appeal is taking something that people know and love, and using that as a platform to create a great story in a fantasy world that is fully realized," states producer Jeremy Latcham. "DUNGEONS & DRAGONS is one of the most enduring pieces of

American pop culture and being able to tell a story in that world is a real privilege. And it's something that weighs heavily on us because we want to get it right, and we want to make sure that it's done properly."

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The game itself is quite intricate, both in its game mechanics and in its world design. "It's complicated," says Latcham. "It's full of lore and rules and different classes and cultures and all kinds of different settings, and it's a really complex world. And so, to take that and to translate it, it's a huge responsibility for the guys, and to take something that's so iconic and revered and loved by so many fans around the world, it's a really large task."

To aid in the endeavor, the filmmakers collaborated with Wizards of the Coast, the current game publishers for DUNGEONS & DRAGONS. "Early in the process, we traveled up to Seattle to spend some time with the Wizards of the Coast at their offices up there," continues Goldstein. "It was a really unique experience, because we got to hear from the horse's mouth, if you will, what works and what they had some issues with."

"They were so helpful in bolstering some of the plot pieces that may, or may not have, fit into the lore, and making them all work in a natural way," adds Daley.

The Wizards team was an ever-present resource to the filmmakers, making sure to answer any questions, or provide creative suggestions regarding the game's content and intellectual property as it was applied to the film. "As we're taking IP from the games and bringing them into new mediums, I like to say, 'We're not looking for accuracy, we *are* looking for authenticity,'" explains Jeremy Jarvis, senior creative director, Wizards Franchise Development. "And so, creative liberties can be taken if it's not that important, or it's too much fun to pass up. And you really want to spend [time] where it *is* important, but finding those moments of authenticity of, like, 'Yes.

This is plausible. This feels right,' even if you're taking creative liberties. Because creative liberties have to be taken as you are engaging in new mediums and new expressions."

"We've had a great amount of support from our friends at Wizards of the Coast, who've been nothing but stellar advocates for the lore, for the movie—to make sure we all do it right," Latcham comments. "Hopefully, with all of us collaborating so closely, we create something that feels true to everybody, and can bring new fans along, and delight old fans as well."

"I'll be frank—I have never played DUNGEONS & DRAGONS," executive producer Denis L. Stewart says. "I've never been a board game—or any sort of role-playing game—guy, but I will tell you that Jeremy, John, and Jonathan . . . were always checking themselves with respect to the genesis of this genre. Of this force that is DUNGEONS & DRAGONS. They always paid great respect to it. And that's the complication of writing anything comedic about something that is as near and dear to millions of peoples' hearts. They worked really, really, really hard to respect that, but at the same time, not make something that was a trope, or that you would expect to see."

Knowing there would be two types of audience members in the future—those who have played the game before, and those who haven't—filmmakers had to strike a balance to ensure everyone could both understand and enjoy it. "Making a movie like this is always walking a line from a filmmaking perspective, because you have to bring in the people who don't know much about the IP, while satisfying those who do," Goldstein elaborates. "And that was very much in our minds every day of shooting this thing. How do we not alienate those, like my mom, who doesn't know anything about D&D, to the hardcore fans, you know? And so, it's really about walking that line."

Striking that balance wasn't the only challenge the filmmakers faced. Early in preproduction—the first phase of filmmaking before cameras start to roll—the COVID-19 pandemic began, greatly affecting the project's logistics and development. "There were a lot of challenges from a physical production standpoint,"

recalls Latcham. "Trying to mount a movie this big, and to launch something this iconic in [the] middle of COVID, is complicated in its own right. You're talking about not getting to meet your actors [in person] until Day One [of the shoot]. You're talking about not getting to meet your crew until after you've hired them and [have] been working with them for months. And so, you're dealing with a lot of people on little, itty bitty Zoom boxes from all kinds of different time zones, and trying to piece that together and make a film in the midst of that is a challenge in its own right."

"Throughout it all, we only lost two days of shooting due to COVID," Stewart adds. "It was because we really dug in and implemented a close contact tracing system, and we were doing the testing regimen that was prescribed by the unions and the studios. When someone tested positive, we could immediately isolate them and then quickly determine and ascertain who they had been in close contact with, and it allowed us to keep our crew moving around to continue to shoot the movie. It was a lot of work and it was really hard. . . . Making movies during COVID is exhausting."

"I think COVID certainly, it's just a bad disease," says Daley. "It's really bad in every way, and even in the most trivial way of trying to make a movie. It makes everything ten times more difficult—between the rigorous and very strict testing procedures that they do, and isolating people—which is all, obviously, necessary, but also makes it really difficult to establish that familial mentality that you want to have on a set. And fortunately, we have such a great group here that we established it regardless of what we were all up against, and that made it all the more triumphant of a moment to get here."

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The filmmakers hope the film can bring a bit of brightness to what has otherwise been, for many, a time of struggle and hardship. "As this movie comes together, we're going to see all kinds of stuff," Latcham remarks. "We're going to see spectacular action, we're going to see great character work, we're going to see incredible humor, and we're going to see a friendship being born between a group of people as a team that becomes a family. And to me, those are the most resonant themes in cinema—a group of people becoming a family. Family is this thing I think we need more of now than ever in the world."

"We cared a great deal—not just about executing the script we'd written—but creating something that's worthy of D&D," states Goldstein. "There's a reason it's been around and so enormously popular, and I don't think there's been a television show or a movie or anything that has done it justice yet. And we really set out to do that. And that meant digging deep into the lore. Having someone on set who could really tell us, 'Is there a verbal component to this spell? And what do they have to do with their hands?' All that little detail stuff. We took liberties where we had to, because we weren't shooting a game, we were shooting a movie, and sometimes you have to make those changes, but hopefully it will come across in the watching [of the film] that we cared a lot, and we love this game, and hopefully we've done it right."

"Going into this, we were not the sort of cynical, commercial directors trying to get a cash grab out of the beloved franchise," adds Daley. "We understand what it is that makes D&D so special, and why in my mind it is a game that can, and I don't mean this lightly, change the world—in that it's the only one that promotes boundless creativity in people that wouldn't necessarily consider themselves creative. It isn't just the [Dungeon Master] that's telling the stories. It's all the players as well. And what D&D allows you to do is enter this storytelling space in a very organic way that you don't even realize you're coming up with ideas and being a creative storyteller until after you've told it. And that to me is a magic trick. And the idea of being able to show that in the film space, and really capture the essence of that feeling, was something we took incredibly seriously, and knew that we couldn't screw up. So, hopefully that also translates to non-players. We did try to make it as approachable to all audiences as we could, but we definitely knew, at its core, this is as D&D of a film that we could ever make."

emerald
enclave
brooch

softer/kinder
to contrast w/
beastly owlbear etc.

blue green
skin fade

[1]

scales

woven viney
rope fabric

lunar
runes
markings

CREATING THE CHARACTERS

THE ADVENTURING PARTY

SITTING DOWN TO play a game of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, the first thing you must decide is what character to play. Limited only by your imagination, you develop your adventurer's appearance, personality, and backstory. Perhaps you decide to play as an overconfident gnomish fighter who believes he can take on the largest of beasts single-handedly, or an elderly dwarven bard desperate for the celebrity he once held in his youth. The characteristics you choose will become the starting point for every decision you make in your game. Thrown into the world, you meet up with other adventurers like yourself, and get thrust into an epic campaign where anything can happen.

The filmmakers went through similar steps when choosing what characters to create for the movie. "[We] approached it from the standpoint you would if you were starting a campaign in the game of D&D," co-director and writer Jonathan Goldstein explains. "It was important to us to create characters who feel relatable, even though they're of another time and they're in another world. They feel like they could be representative of the kids, or adults, who are playing the game in a lot of ways."

Once your character is chosen, you take on that role, portraying their actions and personality through your gameplay. You verbalize your decisions and interact with other characters in the way that *you* decide best represents your adventurer. Maybe your character speaks with an accent, or only in rhyme. Perhaps your character is stricken with fear whenever they smell smoked foods because they are reminded of their childhood village burning down. Whatever your choices are, you can guarantee they will be unique to you.

The actors chosen to portray the adventuring party in the film ended up being as diverse as their characters. "The casting process is always complicated," producer Jeremy Latcham reflects. "When you're creating new characters that you hope are going to be around for a long time, you want to spend all the time to make sure you get exactly the right people, and I think we've really done that."

Opposite the adventuring players, the DM, or Dungeon Master, details out the world that you will find yourself in and sets up the various challenges your group will face. The DM is responsible for orchestrating the circumstances that bring everyone together. Perhaps while chartering a boat to distant shores, you're set upon by pirates. Perhaps everyone just happens to be drinking in the same tavern when one sharp insult devolves into an all-out brawl. While the initiation of a campaign is not always simple or straightforward, it prompts the adventurers to come together, loosely aligned toward a common goal.

For this film, several central characters were entwined by a united backstory. "Our main cast of characters are a band of thieves," says co-director and writer John Francis Daley. "And the thing that separates them from bad guys is that they uphold this sense of nobility and honor among themselves. They are not *bad* guys. They want to do good, and they have turned to thieving for their own reasons, but ultimately have veered toward the path of getting the job done in saving the land." Concept artist and character lead Wes Burt set out with this design brief to craft a visual style for our so-called team of heroes.

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