

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Gaming films hit box offices

By T. Rob Brown

The chirping crickets and other creatures of the night echoed from the adjacent forest. The campfire soothingly crackled nearby, its flames beginning to dwindle into embers as the night went on. Inside our small pup tents, my friends and I let the oddly shaped dice roll off our fingers in the hopes of smashing another monster into oblivion.

It was the mid-1980s. This was my time in junior high school and in the Boy Scouts. I probably did not yet know what the word “oblivion” meant. This was my introduction to Dungeons & Dragons, the world’s first roleplaying game. For those unfamiliar with roleplaying games, they are basically a form of interactive storytelling where the main storyteller—called the Dungeon Master or DM—and the players keep track of the game on paper and roll dice to determine the outcomes of things like combat, skills, or other challenges.

Created by Dave Arneson, then expanded and produced by Gary Gygax, the product listed them as co-creators on the original white box released by TSR Inc. in 1974 and many subsequent editions. Currently D&D, as it’s commonly called, is in its fifth edition—though if you count the original basic D&D, it’s technically sixth. Current owner Wizards of the Coast, a subsidiary of Hasbro, is working on One D&D, which should be the next edition.

Despite its GoAT status in roleplaying games, D&D is more than just a game. Over the course of its decades’ worth of entertainment, D&D became comic books, a 1980s Saturday morning cartoon, a

vast collection of novels, various sourcebooks, action figures, miniatures, maps and other game accessories, board games, card games, the interactive DVD *Scourge of Worlds*, and, of course, a movie franchise.

After a considerable hiatus from the silver screen, D&D is back with *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves*. This isn't just another film in the D&D brand, which includes five feature films. This is, so far, "the" D&D film.

In order to really appreciate how good this new one is, we need to back up a little bit and reflect on the chaotic history of D&D films.

Visual D&D storytelling began in the mid-'80s with the beloved 30-minute episodes of the animated TV series titled *Dungeons & Dragons*. This series centered around a group of 1980s Earth children who rode a carnival ride and ended up in the Medieval-fantasy-style world filled with magic, dragons, and a mysterious character called Dungeon Master. If you watch the newest D&D film closely, there's a nice reference back to the group of children from this TV series: Hank the ranger, Eric the cavalier, Presto the magician, Bobby the barbarian, Sheila the thief, and Diana the acrobat.

Created by Mark Evanier, *Dungeons & Dragons* (1983-85), Rated TV-Y7, stars Justin Whalin, Irons, Willie Aames, Don Most, Adam Rich, Peter Cullen, Teddy Field III, Katie Leigh, Sidney Miller, and Tonia Gayle Smith. It received an 8.0/10 on the International Movie Database while Season 1 received a 75% Tomatometer score at Rotten Tomatoes and a 71% audience score. I give it two thumbs up for fond childhood memories. Also, if you happen to find the DVD box set, some versions come with a D&D third edition stat book for the characters and their magical items.

Back in 2000, my friends and I were caught up playing the then-new D&D third edition and excitedly went to the cinema to watch the original *Dungeons & Dragons* theatrical release. To our disappointment, the movie did not live up to expectations. It was as if the film's creators failed to grasp the nature of D&D. It featured no significant D&D characters—hardly a reference. Set in Greyhawk, yet most of us played Forgotten Realms or other settings, it offered little of what we wanted in a D&D film.

For goodness sakes, even the rogues in that film were the worst. It was as if they constantly rolled a one for their stealth checks—a critical failure in game terms. They bungled through the entire movie, making noise, giving away their position, as if they were not really rogues at all. The poorly written-and-delivered jokes even generated audience groans. What about the casting choice to hire the least of the Wayans brothers—why not Damon or Keenen Ivory? At least they were great on *In Living Color*. Nope, we got the No. 5-ranked Marlon. Much of the movie left a sour taste in our collective mouths. The only major star in the film was its villain, Profion, played by Jeremy Irons, who—almost needless to say—did not return for the sequel.

Directed by Courtney Solomon, *Dungeons & Dragons* (2000), Rated PG-13, stars Justin Whalin, Irons, Zoe McLellan, Bruce Payne, Wayans, and Robert Miano. It runs 1 hour and 47 minutes. It received a 3.6/10 on IMDb, 9% Tomatometer and 20% audience score. I give it two thumbs down.

Following the first film's dismal failure, the sequel did not see a theatrical release. Instead, it went directly to the SyFy channel: *Dungeons & Dragons: Wrath of the Dragon God* (2005). To its credit, this was actually a fairly good D&D film—the adventuring party felt like one you and your friends might have created and the film's executive staff seemed to have at least a handle on what D&D is about, but not

displaying a deep love for the hobby. Before this year, the second film was my favorite D&D movie ever made. This one went to DVD and Blu-ray. Its only real connection to the first film is the return of Payne in the role of Damodar—the secondary villain from the original. This film was also referred to as *Dungeons & Dragons 2: The Elemental Might* in some releases.

Directed by Gerry Lively, *Dungeons & Dragons: Wrath of the Dragon God* (2005), Not Rated, stars Payne, Mark Dymond, Clemency Burton-Hill, Ellie Chidzey, Tim Stern, Steven Elder, Lucy Gaskell, and Roy Marsden. It runs for 1 hour and 45 minutes. It received a 4.7/10 on IMDb, no Tomatoscore, and a 29% audience score. I give it one thumb up.

The third film in that series was so bad it went direct to SyFy channel and never reached DVD or Blu-ray. All three were set in Greyhawk.

Directed by Gerry Lively, *Dungeons & Dragons 3: The Book of Vile Darkness* (2012), Rated R, stars Dominic Mafham, Anthony Howell, and Eleanor Gecks. It runs for 1 hour and 30 minutes. It received a 4.4/10 on IMDb, no Tomatoscore, and a 30% audience score. I give it two thumbs down for being one of the worst D&D movies.

In 2005, an animated film in the DragonLance setting released: *DragonLance: Dragons of Autumn Twilight*. This film, based on the first book of the DragonLance Chronicles, featured the voice talents of Keifer Sutherland (Raistlin), Lucy Lawless (Goldmoon) of *Xena: Warrior Princess* fame, Michael Rosenbaum (Tanis) of *Smallville* fame, and Michelle Trachtenberg (Tika). Despite the film's strong casting and excellent source material by authors Tracy Hickman and Margaret Weis, the director's choice to incorporate a mix of digitally animated Draconian characters with traditional animation left something to be desired.

Now that we are all caught up on the D&D filmography, let us take a look at the newest and best film, *Honor Among Thieves*. I had to go twice opening weekend for this one—to both Cinemark and Alamo Drafthouse. I plan to see it at least once more before it's gone.

There's so much going on here: all the cool and innovative effects for magic, the humorous dialogue and situations, the interesting characters, the star power, the inclusion of a wide variety of famous D&D monsters, and the joyride of the main plot. This movie met and exceeded my expectations for a D&D film.

Actors Chris Pine and Michelle Rodriguez definitely take the lead on this one. The supporting cast complements them and makes the party feel whole—much like a tabletop D&D game. Even the plot and humorous situations reminded me of some of the crazy things our characters did in past games. The movie really feels like D&D. Pine's character epitomizes the comedic side of the traditional D&D bard. Rodriguez bares her powerful action-star chops on this one as a warrior with some barbarian influence.

The main surprise role here was Hugh Grant, adding some extra star power to a film already including several. Grant's role is played to perfection as the aristocratic back-stabbing rogue—but with the true heart of a coward. Thinking mostly of his roles in romantic comedies, I wasn't sure beforehand if Grant could pull it off—but he did.

If you haven't seen the film yet, I don't want to spoil a surprise cameo—though you've probably already heard about it—but a major actor jumped in at the last minute to play a romantic yet humorous

scene. Listening to audience reactions as they realized who it was, was almost worth the price of admission by itself—definitely a pleasant surprise.

Also, Cinemark had red dragon-head popcorn containers and AMC had giant d20—20-sided polyhedral die—popcorn containers for sale. There are also action figures at stores of characters from this film and the classic D&D cartoon.

Directed by Jonathan M. Goldstein and John Francis Daley, *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* (2023), Rated PG-13, stars Pine, Rodriguez, Regé-Jean Page, Justice Smith, Sophia Lillis, Chloe Coleman, Daisy Head, and Grant. It runs 2 hours and 14 minutes. It received a 7.6/10 rating on IMDb, 90% Tomatometer, and a 93% audience rating. I give it two thumbs up for being the best D&D movie so far.

Another major gaming film recently released: *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*. My fond, yet painful, memories returned of the many thumb blisters I created via the old Nintendo game controller while playing *Super Mario Bros.* through *Super Mario Bros. 3* on that 8-bit console.

First appearing in the arcade game *Donkey Kong* (1981), Mario became one of Nintendo's greatest assets, spinning off numerous arcade, console, and portable games. His second appearance was the original *Mario Bros.* (1983), then *Super Mario Bros.* (1985).

Mario returns to the silver screen in this fun romp, all-star voiced by Chris Pratt, along with Bowser (Jack Black), Luigi (Charlie Day), Princess Peach (Anya Taylor-Joy), Toad (Keegan-Michael Key), and Donkey Kong (Seth Rogen).

The Super Mario Bros. Movie (2023), Rated PG, is directed by Aaron Horvath, Michael Jelenic, and Pierre Leduc. At 1 hour and 32 minutes, it received a 57% Tomatometer, 96% audience score, plus 7.4/10 at IMDb. I give it one thumb up for the fun twists and exciting adventure—as well as that catchy Bowser tune “Peaches.”

Another gaming movie, *Tetris*, came out March 31 on Apple TV+. Gaming films have come a long way since the horrific times of *Wing Commander* (1999) and the original *Super Mario Bros.* (1993).

“The show must go on.”