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*"The frightful bulk of night,
feebly pushed aside for a moment,
as quickly, and with
an irresistible
violence,
regains
empire."*



WHY THE
UNDERWORLD

I LIKE DEEP PLACES AND THE IDEA of deep places. When I was small I was a little frightened of the sea because I worked out that the only thing keeping deadly sharks (which I knew were real) from the invisible section of the sea right beneath my naked feet, was distance. If they wanted to, they could swim all the way from wherever they were and be ready, right underneath the surface, to eat me as soon as I stepped into the sea.

If they could be there, statistically, at some point they would be there. The possibility became the certainty. The sea became a gateway to all of the invisible places that it touched, the most distant alien oceans, the strangest and most violent forms of life, the lightless depths, all entirely possible, all just there, under the reflective surface of the waves.

What terrified me as a child enraptures me as a man. The fear has decayed somewhat, but the attractive force in fear, that thing that pulls you to the edge of the cliff to look over, that makes you want to push your hand into the tiger's cage, not a desire to die so much as to experience something totally outside your understanding. That remains.

"The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword, are portions of eternity, too great for the eye of man."

— William Blake

That thing is why I made this. It's not about the ocean, perhaps because I found a deeper world. A world of stone.

Stone is time made sensible to touch.

The earth is very old and our species and our history is very young. We can sense this a little when we look at the stars and imagine the vastness there. But we can't touch the stars.

Running your hands over the rings of a tree can be a little intimidating. An old tree is much older than you, and you can count your culture's history in its growth. But the rings of a tree are time tamed and made into a toy. The tree used to be alive like us. It has a year zero, just like us, and we killed the tree, and carved and polished it just so we could run our fingers across its rings; this is an act of domination and control. In a war between the trees and men, men win. Counting time this way is ultimately reassuring. After all, the tree is dead and we are not.

Stone does not live. We can count our history in its strata, but not for long. Reading time in the hands of coloured rock that line a cliff, human action is shallow, a mere skim across the top. We can carve and cut the stone and run our hands across its lines, but there is no lasting victory in this. In a war between stone and man, stone wins. Thinking about geology and the engine of earth that created it is like gaining access to deep time. Indifferent aeons await us on the other side.

Caves are a route through stone and therefore literally a route through time. A world inside the stone, inside the earth, is a world projected back into deep time.

That's why I began. I carried on for the science, the stories and the strangeness of the world described.

WE KNOW MORE NOW OF caves than we did when the old RPG underworlds were devised. Our mines have reached so deep that the miners have to wear refrigerated suits, caving expeditions have penetrated further than they ever have before, our understanding of the bioverse is changed. The genetic mapping

that was just beginning thirty years ago has unfolded and re-arranged the history of life, and we have found life and its story everywhere. Microbial life in most cases, but still, alive, thriving literally inside the stone miles under the surface of the earth.

RPGs have always been partially evolved from the fiction of the time, taking the mechanics of story and drama, cannibalising, improvising, altering and re-making them into tools.

The culture and stories of cave-explorers are a so-far almost unplumbed source of fuel for Role Playing Games. I have tried to boil down some fragments of the experience into an elixir which can be drunk directly by anyone using the style of rules-light old-school game that I prefer and which can be mixed relatively easily with almost any other game.

As well as that, there is the strangeness and beauty of caves themselves. This is a thing not simply expressed. They are like no other space.

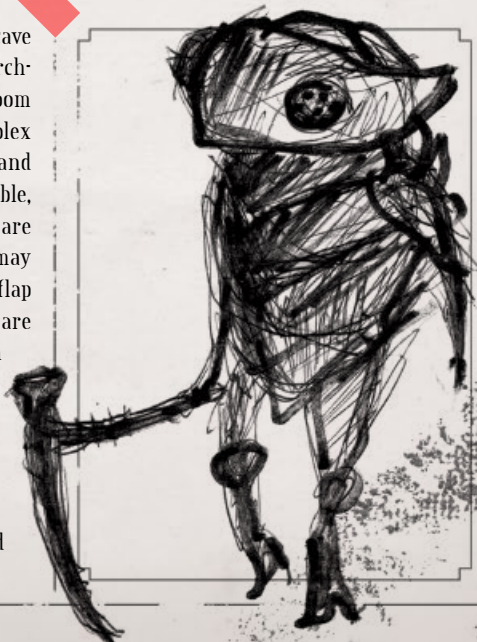
The cave used in most games is the cave from serial television. A flat-floored arch-shaped space with doors. Essentially a room of stone. The cave in reality is a complex expression of the interaction of water and rock. They are fluid, organic, unpredictable, indifferent to man. Their surfaces are arranged with no regularity. You may crawl through a vent smaller than a cat flap and arrive in a vault so huge that you are numbed by the echoes it holds, you can disappear under a shelf of stone and enter another world. And they are beautiful. They are the cathedrals of the earth and the earth has often worked them with more care and blind adoration than an army of Michelangelos could bring to a church.

A spider that walks across your outstretched hand might tell itself a tale of what you are. It does not know. There are veins beneath the skin it takes to be the whole. The world you think you know is nothing but a shell, a thin carapace over the skin of the, deeper, unbound world below.

You have existed, up to this point, on the illusion of a plane, bordered by mountains, rivers, seas or the politics of maps, and this life has been a lie. Its borders are made up, its seas are gateways, its mountains are cradles of deep life. There is no plane.

You were raised within a history running back through recorded time, written in ink, carved in stone, scooped from clay, hidden in songs. Your primal myths are an eye-blink of the memory of that place. Your history is a candle burning out.

The real world, the deeper, more true world, is bordered only by light above and fire below, and perhaps not even by that.





*"Now we descend
to the world of
shades."*