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IT'S JUST A FANTASY...

The motley party creeps cautiously around the bend in the corridor. The air is thick, and the walls warm "Sssh!" warns the hobbit thief who is leading the pack. "I think we're coming up on something. "Yes," agrees an elfish wizard, "my ferret thinks she smells something strange, like —"

The wizard's words are cut off when the floor suddenly falls under their weight, and they are left facing not one, but two angry dragons, who are a bit upset at being awakened in the middle of a nap. The dragons whirl about and prepare to attack while the party furiously regroups and pulls out weapons, magic potions and scrolls with ancient spells on them. The party fires first. Two of the arrows hit their marks, but the dragons shrug them off easily. One of the spells backfires miserably, and two of the party fall into a deep sleep.

The dragons are now in position. The first opens his mouth, exposing two rows of razor-sharp teeth and a forked tongue. He inhales deeply, steam rising from his flared nostrils. With a final flick of the tongue he begins to breathe a stream of flame, and...

The Dungeon Master rolls an eight-sided die. "Looks like Smooth Louie is in trouble." One of the players rolls his eyes as the Dungeon Master rolls another die. "Six hit points damage. Are you still alive?"

College students, professional people and children bring this kind of scenario to life in dorm rooms, in back rooms of bookstores, and at dining room tables every day. It's all part of Dungeons & Dragons, one of the elaborate fantasy games that have become a big part of life on college campuses across the country, second only in popularity to beer drinking.

Although all types of people play these fantasy games, college students are some of the most avid players. Darrel Plant, of Gandalf's Den in Eugene, says "we see kids from seven years on up. There's a fair amount of adults, but it's mostly teenagers and college students."

Dungeons & Dragons started it all, and continues to be the most popular fantasy game, says Plant. In the four

years since advanced Dungeons & Dragons has been on the market, it has been joined by a deluge of similar games, including Tunnels & Trolls and Dragonquest, Top Secret (a James Bond-type adventure game) and Traveler (a science fiction role-playing game).

The popularity of the games is due largely to their elaborateness, stimulation of the imagination, and fantasy fulfillment.

The games are extremely elaborate. Detailed maps are made to show exactly where the adventurers are in a maze of tunnels. The Dungeon Master describes point by point precisely what the members of the party see, hear, smell, and do.

The rules are drawn out at length — guidelines and various character descriptions for Dungeons & Dragons take up four volumes (retailing at \$12 each). In the books, a player can find charts that decide everything from his character's

occupation to its eye color, descriptions of a myriad of monsters (and their strengths and weaknesses), magic spells for almost any situation, and combat charts for determining who wins when the arrows start flying.

The basic framework of the four books is only the foundation for the game. The rest is built in the imaginations of the Dungeon Master and the players. There is no playing board, no cards to turn over, no "moves" to be made; the action takes place in the mind. A character can be almost anything, from a friendly bard to a dastardly assassin.

Through the characters, the players can live out incredible fantasies of heroism and cowardice, benevolence or evil, and lots of greed.

David Sanders, an avid gamer, thinks this fantasy fulfillment is the games' main attraction. "This is the only place a skinny, myopic kid with

two calculators on his belt and a slide rule in his pocket can destroy the world or rule a continent. It's a great way for people to get their aggressions out. At least nobody gets hurt."

Or do they? Is it possible that some players become so wrapped up in their fantasy games that their real lives become relatively unimportant? Plant says that although this does happen to some game fanatics, "you could do that with anything. There are people whose lives revolve around sports, too."

Sanders sees it a different way. "A lot of people think that D & D makes people weird. I'll tell you something, those people are weird to start with. It may be a dangerous temptation for unbalanced people, but they're unbalanced to begin with; the game doesn't make them that way."

"Another thing people think," says Sanders, "is that D & D is part of

some satanist plot. Admittedly there are demons and devils in the game, but in every game I've ever seen no one's trying to worship them, they're trying to destroy them."

A more immediate danger, says Plant, applies to college students in particular. "It's more fun to (play) than it is to sit down and study."

Whether fantasy games are just harmless recreation or dangerous obsessions depends on the individual, but one thing is certain: 40 years from now, when aging alumni review their college memories, more than a few will remember evenings spent sitting around a kitchen table, rolling dice and vanquishing dragons.

D & D for the complete dwarf



Photo by Matt Meyer



graphic by Jane Hart-Meyer

All right, so you're a little interested in Dungeons & Dragons. But you don't know your hit points from your alignment. Here are some of the basic elements of the game, so you won't be embarrassed by throwing a sleep spell on a sixth-level illusionist.

First off, you'll need to roll up your character. That means you'll be rolling three six-sided dice ("D-six" in D & D lingo). With the help of the Dungeon Master ("D.M." in the lingo), you'll determine your character's strength, dexterity, constitution, wisdom, intelligence, charisma, and hit points (how many points of damage your character can take before he kicks the medieval bucket). On the basis of these scores, you'll decide whether you want to be a magic user, a thief, a warrior, or something else.

Most D.M.s will let you decide your own character's name, race (i.e. dwarf, hobbit, man), and alignment (lawful good, chaotic bad, etc.), or you may have to roll them up on 20-sided dice (D-20s).

Let's say your character is pretty smart, but not too strong. You'll probably want to run a magic user, since that's your best bet. Your character is Wartnose, a chaotic-good dwarf. Chaotic-good

means you're basically a nice person, but you're looking out for Number One. Kind of like anyone who's gone through assertiveness training.

On the basis of your intelligence score, you'll get a number of magic spells. If you get to choose them yourself (once again, it's up to the D.M.), make sure you get a sleep spell. It's useful for making meanies snooze, so you can quietly disperse them as you see fit. Low-level spells won't work on more experienced monsters, which is why it won't do any good to use it on the illusionist.

OK, you're ready. The D.M. tells the party the basic story behind the adventure, and you're ready to go. You decide on a marching order (sometimes illustrating this order with tiny lead figures), and off you go. You arrive at the dungeon, cavern, pyramid or whatever, and go in.

The D.M. carefully describes what you see and hear. You then carefully what you're doing (listening, walking down the corridor, checking for secret doors, etc.). Eventually you'll run into some monsters, which you battle with D-fours, D-sixes, D-12s and D-20s. Hopefully you win. If not, that's the end of the game for your character.

Assuming you survive, you then try

to find as much booty as possible. Since you're chaotic-good, you'll do it quietly, and share as little as possible. But you won't stab anyone in the back to do it.

After you've gotten what you were after, or it's time for dinner, you'll be ready to leave the dungeon and head back to civilization. When you reach town, you'll tally up your winnings, figure out how many experience points you've gotten for killing all those beasts, and maybe move up a level, which means you get more hit points and more spells.

It may seem like a lot to remember at first, but it gets easier as you go along. If all else fails, there are two main points to remember: 1) if you're in a room with a lot of powerful monsters... run, 2) don't make the D.M. upset — he's in charge of the whole garbonzo (particularly obnoxious characters have been known to be caught in small nuclear explosions for no apparent reason), and 3) enjoy yourself.


stories by matt meyer



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