

PERSPECTIVES

Behind the Dice

A trip to a fantasy game night reveals a subculture full of make-believe and mettle

I guess I should have got out of there once they started debating the merits of "Babylon 5." I had mentioned the show in passing, and it created a firestorm. "Oh, the fifth season was the best by far," one guy tells me immediately.

A portly man begins a passionate exchange. "Yes, it's one of the most important episodes, granted, but..."

Then a suggestion for a "B-5" virgin. "You can borrow one if you want," someone says proudly. "I have them all on tape."

Where am I? I close my eyes and try to figure out where I went wrong, and then realize I have only myself to blame.

I ventured over to "Gaming Night" at Emerald City Comics on 13th Avenue this week. Plunging into a world where the Narn and Minbari are public enemies No. 1, Dana Scully and Xena are objects of desire and George Lucas is a jolting experi-

ence, yes, but it's also a place where some unexpected insights shine through.

But before I could learn anything, I had to get a bit used to my surroundings.

Opinion



Ashley Bach

a Collectible Card Game, sort of the '90s version of "Dungeons & Dragons." Not surprisingly, this game was based on "Babylon 5." And worse yet, these guys meant business.

"Okay, what's your conflict?" the "gamemaster" says to the players as I sit down.

One guy makes a quiet move with his cards.

"What? You can't choose disposable humans!" a goateed player exclaims. He isn't happy and isn't going to back down. Wes, the large, bearded employee of the store, who looks just like a comic store employee should, has to step in from behind the counter.

"Each one gets an influence," he says calmly. And then the game goes on.

I have no idea what this all means, but I press on. Part of me wants to laugh at what I see, but an-

other part wants to understand why these guys come here every week to play these games. And more importantly, do they know what people say?

A bit later in the night, after I'm more comfortable, I mention the word, "dork," for the first time. It's a strong term to use in this company, especially from an outsider like me.

Marlo Scott, a 21-year-old from Springfield, replies.

"My best friend is one of those jock guys," he says. "He always says, 'What are you doing with all those geeks?' I try to tell him what it's really like."

Scott, overweight with a T-shirt and jeans, does seem to fit the stereotype of a typical "gamer." But like most participants, he's fully aware of the preconceived notions people have about fantasy games.

He describes the games as "customizable chess with characters," and says his favorite involves a World War III scenario where all kinds of people die and supernatural forces populate the Earth.

"It's a mecca of magic and the cosmos," he says. "It sounds kind of melodramatic, but it's cool."

Fair enough, but don't these guys see how ridiculous the fake characters and the 30-sided dice and the sheer fantasy of it all is? Most people laugh at fantasy gaming because it seems like something entirely detached from reality or, at best, something reserved for middle-school kids.

Some of the guys do understand. Jesse Chism, a 17-year-old from North Eugene High School, says he

doesn't exactly publicize his trips to game night.

"I've always hid it from my friends," he says. "At the school I go to, the people are more stereotypical."

Scott admits the world of fantasy games isn't always for the socially adjusted. He mentioned a group of about 20 men and women who meet in the EMU each Friday night to play the roles of vampires and vampire hunters, not with cards and dice, but *in person*, complete with makeup and full costumes.

"A lot of the people are really freaky," he says.

Scary as that may be, playing fantasy games is generally a quieter endeavor. The guys say they ignore critics of their hobby and will keep meeting a few times a week as long as it's still fun.

Good for them. But for a guy like me who's never rolled a decahedron or decimated entire galaxies, the strange world of fantasy gaming will continue to be just that — strange. I admire the perseverance needed to keep the fantasy alive in a society that looks down on anyone outside the norm, but it doesn't mean it isn't funny.

"My character's a half-human, half-elf, dog shaman," one redhead tells me proudly before I leave. "I've spent two weeks creating him."

I laugh, not only at how bizarre this guy is, but how brave he is, too.

Ashley Bach is a columnist for the Emerald. His views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.

Letters to the Editor

Starving students

This letter is in regard to a cover story "Grab 'n' Go Program Proves Successful" (ODE, Jan. 7). The reason why the program has become so widely used is because it's now almost impossible to eat in Carson, the University's last on-campus cafeteria. Unless a residence hall resident is willing to eat lunch or dinner when Carson opens or right before it closes, they are forced to confront long lines and severe lack of available seating. On more crowded nights, some residents are not even allowed into the cafeteria because it's filled to capacity.

Because many residents are not willing to eat early or to fight Carson's irritating crowds, they instead opt to get their meal from Grab 'n' Go, where they can choose from a wide selection of cold burritos and candy bars. What little healthy food the program really offers is dished out in insultingly small portions. A meal at Carson is all-you-can-eat. The average meal at Grab 'n' Go consists of a tiny piece of cold pizza, an ice cream scoop of lukewarm rice and a can of pop. The only other meal options for residence hall residents consists of: Hammys, where they can get a burger and handful of soggy fries, or Pizzanos Pizza, where they can wait an hour for a six-inch pie with one topping.

Grab 'n' Go could serve as a nice addition to a pair of full-service cafeterias but certainly is not a suitable replacement. The program isn't successful. In fact, it has failed in several regards: It doesn't offer reasonable meals and has yet to save failing University Housing money, the reason why it was really created in the first place. The only thing Grab 'n' Go has actually proven successful in is preparing residence hall residents for their first apartment, where their average

meal will likely consist of ramen noodles.

Brandon Hartley
English

Exceptional students

We are writing to commend an outstanding group of University students for contributing to the success of Birth To Three's parenting education and support program.

After determining that residents in her complex wanted to perform volunteer work, Hamilton complex resident assistant Monica Neukomm contacted Birth To Three. Monica's students were attracted to the idea of working in the children's program of one of our "Make Parenting a Pleasure" classes, which are designed to address the stress, isolation and lack of adequate parenting information and social support that many parents experience. Volunteers in this program care for children while their parents are in class. Many of the children are in desperate need of attention and possible social activities, some come from impoverished homes and some are homeless altogether.

A total of 14 students agreed to form a pool from which three would work one shift per week through the end of the school year. We would like to bring public recognition to these remarkable students. They are: Monica Neukomm, Elizabeth Baxter, Pearcia Blum, Robert Campbell, Joseph Demianen, Elizabeth Foster, Jacob Houek, Kimberley Makanaoniani-Cox, Esteban Mendez, Mirutha Poling, Sanchen Puentes, Lauren Ross, Emily Seymore and Juliet Strong. According to lead teacher Mary Ann Miller, these students are doing an exceptional job. On behalf of all the Birth To Three families, thank you!

Minalee Saks
Executive Director, Birth To Three

Alternative radio

A full response to the fallacies posted by David Zartman's letter (ODE, Feb. 8) would require too much space and energy. The oligarchy he has demonized KWVA to be has no foundation. We are a small, though nationally recognized, station with the intent of exposing fresh independent music and not of using our iron fist to make DJs submit to some corporate influenced "importance."

The first line of the mission statement, upon which this station was founded and given the right to exist by University officials, states that we give "musical informational and collateral programming from the student perspective that serves as a clear alternative to the student population and community at large." Our concern is not with acquiring a large audience, but serving one neglected by all other stations in town. Unfortunately, many people become hurt because we do not play material that they can hear elsewhere. Fortunately, it allows us shows like Radio MEChA and Radio Azteca for an under-represented Latino and Chicano community, Hip-hop shows filling the void of urban radio in town and the children's show for the smallest large minority.

Because we are noncommercial by definition, playing commercial music would be a direct affront to local commercial stations. We are required by the FCC to play material that you cannot hear on other stations. Our "noble quest" is actually part of our duty as delineated by the FCC. Subsequently, playing noncommercial music is more than appropriate for a public, noncommercial campus station.

Michael McLaren
Music Director, KWVA

LETTERS POLICY

The Oregon Daily Emerald will attempt to print all letters containing comments on topics of interest to the University community. Letters must be limited to 250 words. The Emerald reserves the right to edit any letter for length, clarity, grammar, style and libel. Letters may be dropped off at EMU Suite 300.

CORRECTION

The Feb. 11 brief, "Chileans throw a party," should have said guests will have the opportunity to see the cueca, a dance of courtship, and to sample Chilean cuisine. The Feb. 11 Programs Financing chart should have shown that the increase in funding for the listed student groups was 2.73 percent. The Emerald regrets the errors.