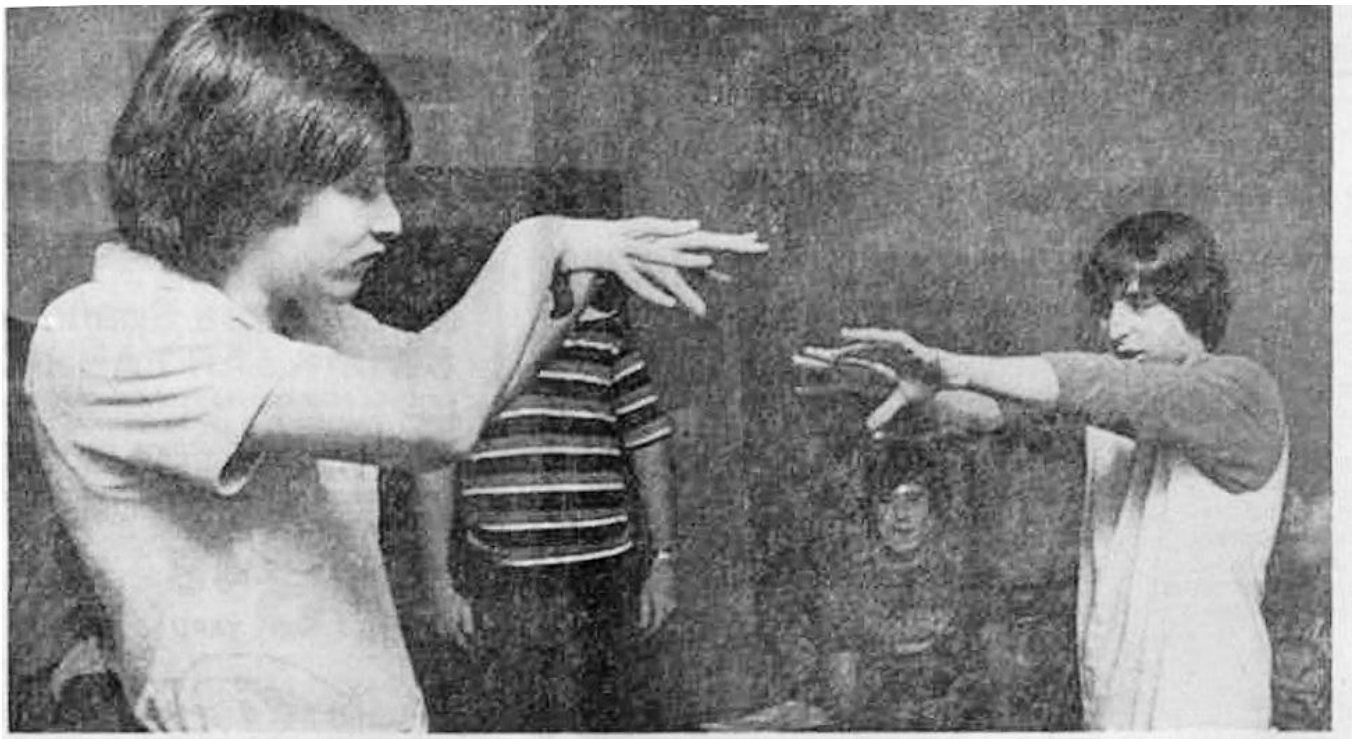

SPELL CASTING—Dungeon master Jim Perelman, left, casts a disintegration spell on [redacted], a ninth-level cleric, in a marathon Dungeons & Dragons session recently with four other teen-agers in Encino.
Photo by Bill Hodge

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS

Fantasy Life in a Game Without End

By Beth Ann Krier

L.A. Times Staff Writer

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"The first thing adults will ask about D&D (Dungeons & Dragons, a fantasy role-playing game) is 'How do you win?' Well, you don't win," explains hobby-shop owner Gary Switzer. "In D&D, you don't win or lose. You survive and you learn from your mistakes and you have a good adventure. It's a lot like life."

Only more complicated, some would argue. For Dungeons & Dragons--D&D as it's known, in its burgeoning subculture--is a frightfully complex, infinitely open-ended game that can be played with calculators and computers or with nothing but pencils, paper, and a strange array of multisided dice.

A game board is optional, as are miniature lead representation of characters and pantomiming of their adventures. Even when it's played with a board and tokens, D&D is a game quite unlike chess or Monopoly. Some say it is actually more of a hobby, for it is not uncommon for enthusiasts to invest

hundreds of dollar in D&D manuals and paraphernalia--despite the fact that the only real equipment one needs for play is intelligence and imagination.

Stamina comes in handy, too, for Dungeons and Dragons is played for hours, weeks, even years at a time at intervals determined by players. The game is undertaking by students at universities such as Harvard and Caltech, where a computer is sometimes used as a playing aid at the weekly Friday and Saturday night sessions. D&D is often pursued with even greater devotions by genius-level preteens and gifted teen-agers, some of whom have also attempted to produce computer variants of D&D

This is serious stuff, which parents quickly deduce when they see children--who formerly spent their free time roller skating or disco dancing--suddenly preferring to read up on the Middle Ages. Or spending the days between games drawing labyrinthian dungeons, figuring the odds on contracting "dreaded rotting mummy disease" or devising historically accurate magic systems. More than one mother has observed a distinctly depressed state overtake her child when a character nurtured through an extended campaign is killed off and there wasn't anybody around to raise him from the dead.

Some parents, whose children previously demonstrated little interest in reading, recall pleasant shock at finding their kids totally absorbed in a game whose "simplified" 48-page rule book requires an evening to read, generally longer to understand. D&D veterans say the original rules were virtually incomprehensible until they were edited by J. Eric Holmes, MD, a D&D player novelist and associate professor of neurology at USC School of Medicine.

Sales Increase Steadily

Even the manufacturer admits the game at first marketed in 1974 was "so abstruse as to be able to by played only by persons with intelligence far above the norm" and required "a volume of preliminary work, which is prohibitive for the normal individual." D&D is no cakewalk in its revised form but Gary Gygax, the game's co-creator and manufacturer, estimates that about 250,000 Americans now play D&D, a disproportionate number of whom are Californians. Gygax's TSR Hobbies, headquartered in Lake Geneva, Wis., sells 5,000 to 6,000 copies of the basic $10 D&D game kit each month. The basic set, however, is like a Barbie doll without any clothes and TSR has likewise profited on a vast assortment of advanced monster manuals, players' handbooks, adventure modules, and other accessories.

Merchants who stock D&D merchandise report their sales have been steadily increasing, particularly in the last year. Switzer of Aero Hobbies in Santa Monica, for instance, specializes in fantasy and war game materials exclusively and reports his business has improved 40% in the last month, thanks largely to demand for D&D.

Players frequently participate in more than one continuous D&D game and if they serve as a dungeon master, the game's godlike referee, they must know all the rules and stay a few steps ahead of their players. Hence, their demand for ever-advanced playing aids.

Consider 13-year-old [NAME REDACTED], who has been playing for about six months and currently participates as a player in three games and as a dungeon master in four others.

Described by his father as a "B-plus student at a tough private school," [NAME REDACTED] invests far more time in D&D than he does in homework and has spent $178 thus far on game materials.

"It's his passion," says his father, attorney [NAME REDACTED]. He's been trying to teach me the game for months. Guess what? I can't understand it. So he's teaching his 9-year-old sister."

[NAME REDACTED] figures he spends 30 hours a week on D&D, which is nothing compared to his friend Jim Perelman, who spends perhaps 50 to 60 hours weekly and has invested more than $250 on the game--$30 alone on "polyhedra" (4- to 20-sided) dice.

Intellectually Challenging

[NAME REDACTED], a psychologist, has watched her son's interest in D&D intensely over the months. She approves of the game and even volunteers to pick up the pizza the players have ordered for their dinner break.

"It's really a good thing--it's very intellectually challenging. Fantasy is a great way to work out psychological issues. In every culture there are fantasies and myths that respond to basic human conflicts and needs," she says.

"Dungeons and Dragons is a continuous encounter with unknown forces, which is essentially what adolescence is. In D&D, the issues are power, experience, heroic kinds of quests that are the symbolic ways of talking about growing up. In D&D, kids get to act out situations impulsively. They can have impossible encounters in which they're defeated and bloodied. And they can have enormous success. In real life, their encounters have to be much more moderate and controlled because the risks in our culture are so great.

"The dungeon master becomes a mystical, magical father figure who mediates the impulsive behavior of the players. And if a quest is successful, the dungeon master gives points for it and if it's a devastating failure he can resurrect you. The game answers a very human need for mythology."

One of the groups [NAME REDACTED]'s son has been playing with has been meeting once a week with games usually lasting 10 to 12 hours. The last one began at noon and carried on until 12:30 a.m. when, as [NAME REDACTED] recalls, "we threw them out."

At a recent D&D game at the [NAME REDACTED] home in Encino, five players arrived shortly after noon one Monday and comfortably arranged themselves on couches in the family's TV room. Jim Perelman, the dungeon master, presided over the proceeding from a desk behind the couches. And though he brought a map of the city-state his players were crossing to get to a dungeon, they didn't look at it

much. They seems intuitively aware of where the expedition was heading and what they were up against.

Occasionally, players would become quite animated, jump up and down and flail an imaginary sword or cast a spell. Outside of these occasional charades, however, to all outward appearances thy might have participating in a spelling bee.

Though each player brought a pocket calculator and most of them carried notebooks and attache cases filled with D&D books and paper, the game was executed without these aids most of the time. All the players at this meeting were boys, aged 13 to 18, though a couple of girls are regulars in the group. They all attend or recently graduated from [NAME REDACTED] School in [NAME REDACTED] and all those eligible to qualify are National Merit Scholars.

Adult players, too, say they enjoy the role-playing benefits of the game. Dr. J. Eric Holmes, the neurologist who edited the D&D rule book, notes that the game enables his players "to be the heroes instead of just reading about them. The players get to invest their egos in their characters. Most of it is wish fulfillment."

Introduced to the game by his teen-age son, Holmes recalls reading all the way through the rules and still not knowing how to play the game. He first became angry and later offered to edit the rulebook.

"Some players like having D&D simplified. And there are others for whom it can never be too complicated," he says, adding that his revision attempted to preserve some of the Byzantine D&D flavor and didn't dare tamper with such beloved phrases as "loathsome trolls are tough and rubbery and have the ability to regenerate."

Holmes has played the game with doctors and nurses from County-USC Medical Center and plays once a week with his youngest son and their friends, presiding as their dungeon master. He estimates that preparation for a game takes all of his free time for a couple of days before it. Holmes, who has written a D&D novel ("Maze of Peril") he hopes to have published soon, has also invested a fair amount of time and money amassing and painting thousands of fantasy miniatures used in the game. "I'm lucky I don't have any other hobbies," he says.

Forever of Adventure Mature

Holmes has been playing with some of the same people for five years and he's watched the forms of adventure mature as the players do. "Some of my teen-age friends were extremely violent when we started out. As they got older there was a strong elements of sexuality and less violence. Most of the characters got married. The female characters introduced the element of romantic fantasy. They were more interested in building families and dynasties."

Others have noticed similar differences between adult and teen-age play. "Kids tend to play the game on a superficial level--hack and slash. Adults tend to play it on a more subtle level--solving problems,

puzzles, and riddles that require some thought. Among the kids you see more of the 'My character can whip your character' stuff," observes Ed Whichurch, owner of Le Maison de Guerre in Northridge, which carries materials for war games and fantasy games and serves as a club for their play. "D&D is an escape from the harsh realities of the environment. In this game if you don't like the environment, you can magically change it--stick a sword in the IRS man."

Like other retailers offering D&D supplies, Whichurch has profited from the D&D mania. But he maintains the sport is more a hobby than a game and "like any other hobby in the world it's a black hold for money. It will absorb all the money radiated into it." Adds Jim Sticher, a customer who plays D&D at the store, "It used to be you could by all the D&D stuff for $15. Now $200 is just a start."

D&D itself is just a start, having triggered a number of competitive fantasy-role playing variants. Tunnels and Trolls" "Warlocks and Warriors" and "Chivalry and Sorcery" are but a few of the mutants on the market. Other variants are described in The Dragon, the magazine published by the makers of D&D, which includes such instructions as how to incorporate Tarot cards in D&D to add "intrigue, confusion, and a little healthy bloodshed to your dungeon experience."

While D&D tends to be a different game from dungeon master to dungeon master, it inspires many players to invent their own usually alliterative version. Phil Henderson, for instance who plays in [NAME REDACTED]'s group, came up with a D&D variant called "Cars and Cadavers" in which "everybody gets into a car and tries to kill each other."

In the meantime, TSR Hobbies forsees marketing a computer version of the game with D&D cassettes to be plugged into a home computer, eliminating the need for a dungeon master and further popularizing D&D.

Forty-year-old Gary Gygax, who with Dave Arneson created the game originally for a small audience of wargame fanciers, figures the game's appeal--in any configuration--lies in the fact that the modern world offers its inhabitants few remaining frontiers.

"We can no longer escape to the frontier of the West, explore darkest Africa, sail to the South Seas. Even Alaska and the Amazon will soon be lost as wild frontier areas," he says. "Americans, with more leisure today than ever, crave entertainment. Some desire adventure and excitement.

"Most literate people grew up on a diet of fairy tales, Walt Disney and comic book superheroes. We somehow relate to stories of young princes going out in to the world to seek their fortune, of knights rescuing maidens in distress and slaying dragons, of dealings with wicked magicians and evil witches."

Or, as 32-year-old accountant Bob Shively, an avid D&D player, puts it, "D&D is an escape. An outlet for aggression. It's an ego trip--everything you could want."

PERILS, REWARDS OF DUNGEON GAME

At the risk of gross oversimplification, this is what happens in a D&D game: The player who is the dungeon master bears the responsibility for providing any number of players with an eventful and satisfying adventure. He functions as a cross between God and a psychologist, analyzing players' characters' abilities and giving each as much challenge as tolerable.

The dungeon master comes prepared with an adventure, which usually entails a trek through an elaborate dungeon outfitted with monsters, perils, and treasures. As players routinely accept his judgments as final and arbitrary, the dungeon master is free to modify D&D rules as he creates his own "world."

At his whim, the dungeon master can easily have players killed off or just as easily allow them to advance with little difficulty. A good dungeon master avoids both. Benevolent dungeon masters whose players meet with death are fond of sending down a god to revive them or otherwise arranging for their resurrections. Other will permit "one free resurrection" for beginning-level characters and force advanced characters to struggle for such luck.

Should players perish and remain dead, however, reincarnation is readily available. They player rolls the dice to arrange for a new imaginary presence, just as he did at the game's outset.

Character formation is determined by the roll of dice for six categories: strength, intelligence, wisdom, constitution, dexterity, and charisma. Charisma, for instance, is defined as "a combination of appearance, personality, sex appeal and so forth. A character of charisma below 13 cannot hire more than five followers and their loyalty will be lukewarm at best--that is, if the fighting gets hot there is a good probability they will run away. On the other hand, someone with a charisma of 18 can win over a large number of followers (men or monsters) who will probably stand by him to the death

Also, a female with high charisma will not be eaten by a dragon but kept alive. A charismatic male defeated by a witch will not be turned into a frog but kept enchanted as her lover and so forth."

Die rolls also determine race, profession, social status, and birth order (critical when it comes to inheritances). Based on the scores, players weigh their abilities and liabilities and choose to become fighters, magic-users, thieves, dwarves, elves, and so on. With the dungeon master's permission, they can be anything they want. Thus such characters as a samurai rabbi, a magic-user penguin, a schizophrenic troll and a "slightly gay" cleric named "Oberon, King of the Fairies" have appeared in recent local games.

Players set out to explore the dungeon master's "world," stay alive, win experience, gain power, accumulate treasure, battle monsters, and proceed to the next dungeon. Progress is based upon die rolls (chance) as well as their own inventiveness and ability to calculate and weigh the odds favoring their characters' moves against those of monsters and other barriers. The game is neatly designed to that characters much cooperate than compete with each other to get ahead. Some games in Lake Geneva, Wis., which began in 1973 before the game was officially published, are still in progress.

--BETH ANN KRIER