

PETER BEBERGAL

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How 'Dungeons' changed the world

By Peter Bebergal | November 15, 2004

FOR A WHILE, it seemed, I was part of a generation with no discernable qualities, no great contribution to American culture. Too young to be boomers, too old to be "Gen X," this generation was a product of the burned out excess of the seventies married to the surface glow of the eighties. But here in 2004, I realize I belong to the luckiest generation, and not only that, I am part of the luckiest sub-culture within. Maybe we didn't give the world the Beatles or John Updike, but we gave the world Dungeons and Dragons.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the beloved, much maligned, often misunderstood role playing game developed in 1974 by Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax. Without CGI graphics, surround sound, or flat screens, they invented an immense and complex gaming system that requires only pencils, graph paper, and some oddly configured dice. Arneson and Gygax paved the way, but let's face it, my friends and I changed the world.

It started innocently enough. With a copy of "The Fellowship of the Ring" at my side and Styx on the record player, I was looking for something to help me rise above being bored, lonely, and unfulfilled. One day at school, a kid approached me. Having sensed in me an ally -- the same urgent need to avoid getting beat up that day -- he timidly asked if I wanted to play "D&D" after school.

From then on, I never had another forlorn afternoon. And to think, from that first fateful day when I decided I would be known as the half-elf wizard Vendel, I was joining a revolution. But what exactly were we transforming?

To put it simply, Dungeons and Dragons reinvented the use of the imagination as a kid's best toy. The cliché of parents waxing nostalgic for their wooden toys and things "they had to make themselves" has now become my own. Looking around at my toddler's room full of trucks, trains, and Transformers, I want to cry out, "I created worlds with nothing more than a twenty-sided die!"

Dungeons and Dragons was a not a way out of the mainstream, as some parents feared and other kids suspected, but a way back into the realm of story-telling. This was what my friends and I were doing: creating narratives to make sense of feeling socially marginal. We were writing stories, grand in scope, with heroes, villains, and the entire zoology of mythical creatures. Even sports, the arch-nemesis of role-playing games, is a splendid tale of adventure and glory. Though my friends and I were not always athletically inclined, we found agility in the characters we created. We fought, flew through the air, shot arrows out of the park, and scored points by slaying the dragon and disabling the trap.

Our influence is now everywhere. My generation of gamers -- whose youths were spent holed up in paneled wood basements crafting identities, mythologies, and geographies with a few lead figurines -- are the filmmakers, computer programmers, writers, DJs, and musicians of today. I think, for the producers, the movie version of "The Lord of the Rings" was less about getting the trilogy off the page and onto the screen than it was a vicarious thrill, a gift to the millions of us who wished we could have dressed up as orcs and ventured into catacombs and castle keeps ourselves. Only a generation of imaginations roused by role playing could have made those movies possible.

Dungeons and Dragons is seeing an increase in popularity as a whole new generation raised on video games begins to look for a way back to the more personally and socially engaging pleasures of sitting around with a bunch of friends and making stuff up. Imagine, parents, that some of your kids are actually turning the TV off to talk to each other, to play something that they have to "make themselves."

I am getting ready to introduce the game to my son. In a little drawer I have an unopened box of those funny-sided dice, not exactly a family relic, but a tradition to pass on nonetheless. And let's not forget that even though we are talking about a world of basilisks, knights, and talking trees, Dungeons and Dragons can help us make new stories out of the very world around us.

Democrats, you better get yourselves a magic shield, because in Congress, Bush has plus three to hit.

Peter Bebergal is a writer and teacher. ■