"A 'Nobody' with a Sword and a Shield": The Rise of 'Dungeons & Dragons'

Social relationships and structures of morality affirm and shape themselves through play, as described in the work of noted sociologist Émile Durkheim.[1] Conflict is a recurring theme in that play, perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the long-lasting tradition of wargaming. As with all other types of media, gaming underwent a great many variations; through the changes, wargames consistently blended strategy and suspension of disbelief to play out fictional simulations of battle. From chess board to maze-laden sheet of graph paper, wargames took many forms. One such form came from an unassuming company in a small, lakeside Wisconsin town. Despite difficult fiscal beginnings and a lackluster entry into the market, one game rose to make a lasting cultural impact rivaled by few others. 'Dungeons & Dragons' incorporated literary traditions and entertainment trends, and filled an important narrative-based gap in the gaming scene. 'D&D' captured and confused in equal measure. At its inception, it provided a possible educational tool for use in the classroom; at its height, a satanic threat feared by a wave of fundamental Christianity. Through the action of player and non-player alike, the name of 'D&D' rose to pop culture infamy. Non-gamers used the term "Dungeons and Dragons" in reference to an entire genre rather than an individual game, spreading the name of 'D&D' further than the game itself. 'D&D' was a pioneer in gaming, the forerunner of a genre later known as fantasy role-playing games. Its co-creator, Gary Gygax, rose with it from failing author to the "father" of a new genre of games. Following the highly-publicized disappearance of James Dallas Egbert in September 1979, the image of a particular group of players –college-aged teenagers– cemented itself as the norm.

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[1]See Durkheim, Émile. *Sociology and Philosophy*, collected/translated by D. F. Pocock (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1953).

Tactical Studies Rules, Inc., a company owned and operated by game developer Gary Gygax, published the first 'Dungeons & Dragons' manual in 1974. Gygax and another rising developer, Dave Arneson, took part in the game's creation. The two met through wargaming events in and around Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, in the early 1970s while Arneson studied at the University of Minnesota.[2] Arneson developed the initial idea for what would become 'D&D'; Gygax disagreed with Arneson's execution and adapted the rules to his liking. The edition published in 1974 blended the two men's work. Their professional and personal relationship splintered in the middle of the game's development due to these creative differences. Through a difficult separation, TSR eventually reached a deal to credit Arneson as co-creator on subsequent publications.[3] Where previous games provided stricter structure, Arneson and Gygax's manuals served as guidebooks for role-playing scenarios set in a fantasy world of the player's choosing. It added a new level of character personalization. Players created their characters by assigning such characteristics as race and class, each of which conferred a different set of skills upon the player character, henceforth PC.[4] Players developed a backstory and imagined the physical appearance of their PC, as well as personality, age, moral alignment, and, depending on the desired level of role-playing, character voice.[5] With characters assembled, players moved on to the difficult task of finding a world in which to play. Players controlled every aspect of the PC, save for what

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[2]Stackpole, Michael A. "David Arneson (obituary)," *Guardian (London, Eng.)*, 23 Apr. 2009.

[3]Kushner, David. *Rise of the Dungeon Master: Gary Gygax and the Creation of D&D* (New York: Nation Books, 2017), 111.

[4]Halflings were initially listed as "Hobbits" as a nod to J.R.R. Tolkien's creatures, but accusations of copyright infringement caused the name to later be changed. Wizards of the Coast bought TSR and, by extension, 'D&D,' in the late-1990s. After a few unsuccessful guidebooks, they published the most recent and widely-popular fifth edition, usually shortened to "5e," in 2014. In 5e, races are: dwarf, elf, Halfling, human, dragonborn, gnome, half-elf, half-orc, and tiefling. Classes are: barbarian, bard, cleric, druid, fighter, monk, paladin, ranger, rogue, sorcerer, warlock, and wizard. There is frequently an overlap in skills and abilities from race to race and class to class. In 5e, these skills are: strength, STR; dexterity, DEX; constitution, CON; intelligence, INT; wisdom, WIS; and charisma, CHA. Skill checks are usually used to accomplish particularly difficult tasks; such items as speaking or equipping items are free moves, and do not require a roll.

[5]Alignment ranges from chaotic evil to lawful good, with true neutral in the center. It serves no real function within the game, other than to remind the players how their PCs should make decisions.

happened to them in the adventure. To create the game world, dungeon masters, henceforth DM, combined scenarios provided in handbooks with elements from their own imagination. DMs wrote the story arc from start to finish, attempted to keep the players on track, and managed non-player characters, or NPCs. NPCs functioned as everything from bystanders to enemies encountered along the PCs' adventures. Depending on the schedule of the DM and players, the frequency of the dice-rolling mechanic's use, and the expanse of the adventure, 'D&D' campaigns became infamous for lasting months or years. The complications of fan culture meant 'D&D' and its contemporaries fell victim to the tricky business of names. Press and fans used a variety of terms to refer to the same or similar trends in gaming –wargames, board games, table-top games, role-playing games, sci-fi games, SF/F games, adventure games, or miniatures. 'Dungeons & Dragons' served as a new intersection of two preexisting paths –miniatures and table-top games– and combined elements of each tradition in a new way. Players found it just as difficult to name as to describe. By the mid-'70s, demand for these games, regardless of name, was high.[6]

At the time of its inception, gamers saw 'D&D' as entirely novel for its structure and fantasy elements. The ability to personalize characters in place of the personality-free pawns of previous wargames opened new doors for imaginative play. Some prospective players found the concept of the game itself difficult to understand. Based almost entirely in the imagination, without physical figurines to represent PCs, 'D&D' offered a new role-play-based style of play. Many found the oddest part to be the lack of a definitive winner. "No one wins a game of Dungeons and Dragons," wrote a columnist in the *Missoulian*, "It's simply one adventure after

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[6]Gildea, William. "Complex Sophisticated War Games Obsess Passionate Players," *Anderson Herald (Anderson, IN)*, 10 Aug. 1975.

another in which players assume the roles of super or not-so-super heroes pitting their energies

and abilities against monsters, rascals and evil."[7] Even if the concept appealed to some potential

players, the pages and pages of rules and guidelines explaining races and permitted actions,

campaign details, magical items, monster strengths and weaknesses, and backstory drawn from

other fantasy worlds and the minds of the game's creators made 'D&D' unique. The "essential

ingredient," wrote one reporter, "doesn't come in a box. It's up to you to provide the imagination

that makes the game work."[8] Players needed a certain level of skill and drive to understand the

complicated myriad of rules. In a later interview, Gygax sarcastically remarked that the game's

concepts were too complicated for adults to understand.[9] TSR created a new kind of game in

'D&D,' which found a niche with specialists of a specialty game market.[10] A select number of

gamers chose to play wargames, the specialty market in question, which dated back to the

earliest forms of chess in India from the sixth or seventh century CE. A complex term,

"wargames" ranged from physical simulations of battles used to prepare soldiers for war, to the

comparatively lower stakes of games conducted on a board or tabletop. Developers often themed

wargames after existing conflicts, such as the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century. Others

utilized entirely hypothetical situations. The creators of 'D&D' drew from a long, storied

tradition of taking elements of other games and adapting them to fit a player's needs. Developers

seldom included fantasy elements –such as warlocks, wizards, dragons, and dungeons– in a

[7]Gross, L.D. "Escaping into the realm of Dungeons and Dragons," *Missoulian (Missoula, MT)*, 7 Dec. 1980.
[8]Verhulst, Roger. "A do-it-yourself trip to medieval adventure," *Chicago Tribune*, 8 Nov. 1978.
[9]Kirkpatrick, Terry. "The Fantasy World of Dungeons and Dragons," *Honolulu Advertiser*, 13 Jul. 1980. Gygax was a notoriously difficult person to get along with, whose particular sense of humor sometimes rubbed people the wrong way.
[10]Meyer, Bruce. "War Games," *Burlington Free Press (Burlington, VT)*, 30 Jan. 1977. Horstman, Judith. "War games have a cult following," *Ithaca Journal (Ithaca, NY)*, 26 Feb. 1977.

published game until 'Dungeons & Dragons.' As put in an article in the *Times Record* of Troy, New York:

> Wargamers no longer had to confine themselves to the Battle of the Bulge or to the mud of Waterloo. They could now play among trees which talked, or, alternately, be eaten by purple worms. Someone had made a game in which all the old rules were swept away, and in which all new ones took their place.[11]

'D&D' did not introduce wargamers to the hobby. Wargames existed across the United States for decades before the 1974 publication. The hobby saw a rise in popularity in the mid- to late-1950s with titles such as 'Tactics' (1954) and 'Gettysburg' (1958), self-published by Charles S. Roberts, who later created Avalon Hill, a wargame developer in Baltimore. These games and their contemporaries recreated real wars through play that utilized names of actual people and places, though the outcome of the session did not always match that of history. Audiences at the time did not know how to qualify Roberts's games. When 'Gettysburg' hit the market, an article in the *Baltimore Sun* likened it to a new version of chess. Players needed a similar level of concentration, Roberts replied, "but it is based on realistic military tactics, with elements of chance, while chess is pure skill."[12] The same sentiment would later be echoed in coverage of 'D&D.'

College students made up a large contingent of wargamers. Countless articles in the 1960s and '70s showcased the wargaming hobby of collegians. Based only on these articles, readers could mistakenly think the only players of such games were those most commonly depicted: white male college students. Students took up wargaming during the boom of the 1950s, and later continued the hobby with a handful of strategic conflict simulation clubs, such

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[11]Ricciardi, Gary. "Greek city-states fight in Schenectady on Thursdays," *Times Record (Troy, NY)*, 15 Mar. 1976.
[12]Reppert, Ralph. "They're Fighting Gettysburg All Over Again," *Baltimore Sun (Baltimore, MD)*, 28 Dec. 1958

as the Strategic Games Society at MIT and the Society of Strategic Conflict Simulation at Cornell. The games they played, categorized as "miniatures," involved moving pieces meant to represent PCs around a board or scaled-down version of an environment. College newspapers depicted the players as everything from simply "odd," to "fanatics" who played for the sick pleasure of fictional bloodshed.[13] As national gaming trends evolved, wargames on college campuses followed suit –expanding miniatures to more heavily emphasize elements of role-playing characters and scenarios. Eventually games no longer needed miniature figures, and the use and personalization of miniatures became, as they are now, a matter of personal preference. Practicality in part explained the popularity of wargames on campus. The limitation of schedules provided a major difficulty for this style of gaming. Players found it nearly impossible to arrange for all members of a group to be in the same place at the same time. Though gamers today have the benefit of technology that can connect one side of the world to the other, early wargamers and role-players only played as schedules allowed. Some played only once every few months, or carried out campaigns a few moves at a time via letter.[14] Dorms solved the problem of physically getting people together; so long as party members had nothing better to do, DMs could easily organize a campaign with those living just down the hall. Gygax himself attributed collegiate popularity to the fact college students had more time to devote to play.[15]

It was several years before players and press considered 'Dungeons & Dragons' popular. By the mid-1970s, the "variation on chess" seemed to invade colleges across the nation.[16] It marked a change from preceding wargames. To interested parties, the concept was simple –a

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[13]Davis, Ken. "SGS: Conflict simulation," *Tech (Cambridge, MA)*, 22 Sep. 1972.
[14]Acres, Mark, interviewed by Hannah Rea, 13 Feb. 2019. Gold, Lee, interviewed by Hannah Rea, 16 Feb. 2019.
[15]Gygax, Gary. "Gary Gygax on 'Tomorrow,'" Interviewed by Tom Snyder on "The Tomorrow Show," 8 Nov. 1979.
[16]Nichols, Jim. "Home-bound? Bring out your games," *Dayton Daily News (Dayton, OH)*, 5 Feb. 1978.

game based in the imagination, without figurines to represent characters. The pages and pages of rules and guidelines, though, made 'D&D' an "unlikely game to become popular."[17] A complicated game such as 'D&D' found a natural home on campus.[18] Colleges already deemed wargames, or "strategic combat games," complex enough to have courses dedicated to their mechanics, including one offered by the Army ROTC program at MIT.[19] Some collegiate wargamers considered themselves traditionalists and shunned new titles such as 'D&D.' Other players incorporated it into a preexisting interest in the hobby. At some universities, players of 'D&D' and subsequent titles formed dedicated clubs, such as the Fantasy Gamers' Club at Auburn University, formed after months of disorganized attempts to play led interested 'D&D' players to overflow dorm rooms and apartments.[20] At other schools, interest in 'D&D' built on a strong foundation of wargaming. Such a foundation had been in place for years at the California Institute of Technology, where some students would playtest for Avalon Hill, a popular developer of wargames since the '50s.[21] By 1977, though, 'D&D' reportedly passed other wargames in popularity on Cal-Tech's campus.[22]

Though present on campuses across the nation, gamers and play groups did not often make it into yearbooks or college newspapers. The above examples from collegiate media were rare and difficult to find, due to the hobby's position on the outside of "normal" hobbies. Non-players saw 'D&D' and wargames as an outsiders' activity that only rarely deserved to appear in mainstream coverage. While not explicitly said, the treatment is exemplified by instances of

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[17]Whitmire, Richard. "For This Game You Can Use a Month to Get Ready," *Press and Sun-Bulletin (Binghamton, NY)*, 24 Dec. 1978.
[18]Meyer, "War Games," 30 Jan. 1977.
[19]"Why Not Try Something Different this Semester? (ad)," *Tech (Cambridge, MA)*, 4 Feb. 1977. The course was MS 321 Tactical/Strategic Gaming.
[20]"'Travelers' only limit is their imagination," *Montgomery Advertiser (Montgomery, AL)*, 26 Dec. 1977.
[21]Smith, Nick, interviewed by Hannah Rea, 16 Feb. 2019.
[22]McGuinness, Liz. "Derring-Do With Dragons and Dwarfs," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 Dec. 1977.

universities and other organizations ignoring gaming groups on campus. Take for example the case of two gaming clubs at MIT –the Chess Club and the afore-mentioned Strategic Games Society– who wrote to the campus newspaper, the *Tech*, to express frustration at the administration of the student union building. Though the clubs reserved rooms for their respective activities, the administration ignored their reservations in favor of other university-sanctioned organizations. The root of the clubs' frustration came from repeat offenses. The representative of the Chess Club wrote that the university shifted members from their reserved room with little or no notice no fewer than five times.[23] A study of yearbooks between 1975 and 1980 from Cal-Tech found allusions to science fiction and fantasy, but few mentions of gaming on campus. On the rare occasions wargames appeared, chess received the focus.[24] The presence of 'D&D' on campus may well have been missed without articles from outside sources or interviews with student players. Mainstream coverage facilitated the game's rise to pop culture fame.

Non-players saw 'D&D' as odd, not abhorrent: "The exploits are what draw most people. 'Dungeons and Dragons' offers the opportunity to be heroic or dastardly, to kill good guys and bad, and still remain socially acceptable."[25] Early in the game's life, coverage often highlighted the social aspect of 'D&D.' Outsiders knew the wargaming hobby for bringing together people with similar interests, gamers pushed to the outer circle of mainstream pop culture. Playstyles encouraged the social aspect for players around the table and their fictional counterparts within the fantasy world, and set 'D&D' apart for an emphasis on team-building and the formation of a

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[23]Meschter, Peter and George Phillies. "Chess club checkmate (letter to the editor)," *Tech (Cambridge, MA)*, 7 Nov. 1967.

[24]California Institute of Technology, *The Big T, 1976 (Yearbook)*. Pasadena, CA, 1976, 89.

[25]Haskin, Carol. "Fantasy dragons are lurking below," *Lansing State Journal (Lansing, MI)*, 26 Jul. 1978.

community for previously-ostracized individuals.[26] Given enough time and dedication, 'D&D' could be a hobby for everyone. Interest in the game prompted a wave of other fantasy role-playing and board games. According to the *Tampa Times*, "They take you to a world where a 'nobody' with a sword and a shield can rise to power."[27] Previously mentioned via tongue-in-cheek asides, the concern of addiction and a "cult-like" following on college campuses entered mainstream attention. By the mid- to late-1970s, what was once "odd" became "consuming." A series of events in fall 1979 cemented that idea in popular consciousness.

In the middle of August, a young student at Michigan State University vanished without a trace. Ten days after his disappearance, a photo and description appeared in a local paper, the *Dayton Daily News*.[28] A week later, James Dallas Egbert III made it to national syndication. "'Dungeons, Dragons' may be clue in disappearance," headlines blared.[29] It seemed to many that 'Dungeons & Dragons' had swallowed Egbert. Rumors abounded that local players used steam tunnels beneath MSU to bring their "mazes" to life. Rescuers scoured the tunnels, grimly expecting to find Egbert dead after discovering a suspected suicide note in his dorm room. Egbert's parents hired a flamboyant private detective out of Texas, William Dear, who fielded reporter questions from his private jet and led a high-profile investigation into Egbert's friends and hobbies. Hundreds of articles followed, sharing revelations about the missing student's private life in papers across the country, even into parts of Canada. A reigning theory concerned Egbert's young entry into college at the age of 15; he fit the bill of a gifted "whiz" kid who was not satisfied by schoolwork, and instead sought challenge in the world of fantasy.[30] Some said he

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[26]Hansen, Linda. "Chivalry lives in social game," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 26 Oct. 1977.
[27]Taylor, Scott. "New board games stir adventure," *Tampa Times (Tampa, FL)*, 27 Mar. 1979.
[28]Huffman, Dale. "Wayne Twp. youth missing, Michigan police seek leads," *Dayton Daily News (Dayton, OH)*, 24 Aug. 1979.
[29]*Dispatch (Moline, IL)*, 6 Sep. 1979.
[30]Robbins, William. "The Short, Unhappy Life of Dallas Egbert," *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, 26 Aug. 1980.

took the game too far and lost track of the line between reality and fiction. Police feared the worst. The investigation seemed to shift from hour to hour. Dear often painted Egbert in a sympathetic light and claimed authorities believed the student committed suicide, something he later insisted he never truly believed. Some investigators thought Egbert left clues for them to find, but were unsure how to interpret them. Was this a case of abduction, as the parents insisted? Of a troubled youth calling for help? As the investigation dragged on and frustration mounted, many began to believe it was part of an elaborate hoax. The irritated MSU police chief took this stance, saying the police were just "pawns in this game."[31] A leading sergeant on the case laid out the investigating officers' dilemma:

> 'Was he telling us where we could find him if we want to find his body?'…'Or did he want to make us think he was going to harm himself, then go off on some new adventure? Or did he want us to find him? I just don't know.'[32]

Nearly three weeks later, Egbert was found alive under circumstances which to this day remain in the dark. Dear and Egbert met in an unknown location, and agreed to keep the matter of details between themselves. James Dallas Egbert died by suicide in 1980, nearly a year to the day after his 1979 disappearance. Investigators did not officially tie his disappearance or his death to 'Dungeons & Dragons,' but the association would not be dislodged. 'D&D' was no longer an innocent hobby, but an insidious force that drove its players, many of whom were teenagers, to take drastic measures to continue or deepen their immersion in the game. The next stage of the game's life drew near-continuous ties to Egbert's disappearance and death, regardless of any facts to the contrary. Egbert's "somewhat bizarre lifestyle" –ties to the gay

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[31]"'Genius' may have tried suicide," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 12 Aug. 1980.
[32]Morello, Carol. "Did missing student leave clue?," *Lansing State Journal (Lansing, MI)*, 2 Sep. 1979.

community at MSU and his devotion to 'D&D'– forever altered the image of 'D&D' and its

players, and the memory of young Egbert.[33]

Descriptions of Egbert perfectly matched that of the average player: a teenaged college

student of above-average intelligence, a social outsider absorbed in his own fantasy world. Pale

and scrawny, he appeared to spend most of his time indoors, hunched over a table or a board. By

1980, popular culture absorbed the image.[34] Egbert's disappearance saw a mixed reaction from

within the gaming community. Some thanked him for bringing more attention to the game,

hailing the weeks of near-constant coverage as a reason for a surge in popularity of wargaming

clubs and hobby shops.[35] Other gamers responded with less enthusiasm, sending letters to their

local newspapers to clarify a myriad of misunderstandings about 'D&D.' One player wrote to the

Iowa City Press-Citizen:

> In both of your articles, you state that a 'dungeon master' creates a 'prison' from which
> the players must try to escape. This is not the point of the game…The players want to go
> into a dungeon and are free to leave if they want.[36]

Some articles written during Egbert's disappearance raised the possibility he combined

'D&D' with witchcraft or satanic practices. In response, a group wrote to the *Boston Globe*:

> While there is always a tendency to exaggerate the weirder side of an issue, I think that it
> was carried to an extreme in the article. We aficionados of D&D are not Satanic Cult
> members, nor entirely out of touch with reality. To the contrary, D&D requires a

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[33]"Missing Computer Whiz Located," *Citizens' Voice (Wilkes-Barre, PA)*, 14 Sep. 1979. Despite his assurances to the contrary, Dear later released a book detailing his side of the investigation. It paints a somewhat different picture than that given by the press coverage, but was not able to dislodge any of the mystery that lingers around the disappearance.
[34]Hughes, Beth. "Tobruk? Over there, Gen. Rommel," *San Francisco Examiner*, 1 Sep. 1980.
[35]Roysdon, Keith. "The Club that Time Forgot Holds its First Meeting: 'Dungeons and Dragons' games come to Ball State," *Muncie Evening Press (Muncie, IN)*, 17 Mar. 1980.
[36]Murray, Margaret. "Readers comment: about Dungeons, Dragons," *Iowa City Press-Citizen (Iowa City, IA)*, 15 Sep. 1979.

pragmatic outlook. We must be capable of taking a logical, hardboiled look at the facts to make the decisions that are part of a serious fantasy gamer's psychological make-up.[37]

'D&D' players initially overlapped in demographic and interest with the Society of Creative Anachronism, or SCA, whose members organized local clubs across the country to role-play medieval-style adventures, often fashioning costumes in the style of romanticized Arthurian legends.[38] Some 'D&D' players adopted parts of the hobby, playing table-top campaigns while wearing medieval-style garb, adding to the confusion about what exactly 'D&D' players did during their mysterious, late-night sessions.[39] "D&D" became a blanket term for all fantasy role-playing games.[40] For some, it stretched further than fantasy games and enveloped all games with role-playing elements, or the activities of clubs such as the SCA. "The people who play the games are called 'D&D' fans (or freaks by some)," wrote one advice columnist in November 1979, "The games are just part of a growing fad, an obsession with some people, called dungeons-and-dragons games."[41] The separation between the two hobbies began for some as a matter of disdain, with SCA members scoffing at 'D&D' players for merely taking part in a fad; traditionalist wargamers had long expressed similar sentiments, preferring their history-based games to the fantasy worlds of this new genre.[42] That disdain turned to disgust following Egbert's disappearance, with local SCA leaders writing to their local papers, worried a mistaken

[37]Rudolph, Timmi W., Kevin Carlson, et al. "Not out of touch," *Boston Globe*, 15 Oct. 1979.
[38]"Group Relives Medieval Times With Anachronistic University," *Harvard Crimson (Cambridge, MA)*, 12 Mar. 1979. The hobby exists today in the form of Live Action Role-Playing, or LARPing.
[39]Pritula, Mike. "100 Dragons Slain," *Daily News (New York, NY)*, 21 Mar. 1977.
[40]Chapin, Bryan, interviewed by Hannah Rea, 13 Feb. 2019.
[41]Cowan, Lisa. "FIXIT (Advice Column)," *Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN)*, 9 Nov. 1979.
[42]Maglaty, Jeanne. "War Games Attract Dedicated Battalion of Men," *Hartford Courant (Hartford, CT)*, 29 Jan. 1978.

tie between the disappearance and the hobby of creative anachronistic reenactment would

negatively affect the club's enrollment:

> Although many SCA members are interested in wargaming, the majority are non-wargamers. None of us characterize SCA as a wargaming organization. As creators of several nationally available wargames, and as avid wargamers, we find it unfortunate that Mr. Egbert's disappearance resulted in concern about wargaming's safety, especially since it is apparent his interest in it had nothing to do with his ordeal. As SCA officers, we find it even worse that our organization was unjustly injected into the controversy.[43]

James Egbert's ordeal added an air of mystery and furthered the game's "cultish"

associations. As a first impression to non-players, the game's ties to Egbert cemented the

relationship between teenagers and the dangers posed by role-playing games.[44] Although

investigators officially cleared 'D&D' of connection to Egbert's vanishing, the verdict remained

in the court of popular opinion. The bad publicity helped the game's image as an enigma –a

complicated game played late at night and into the wee hours of the morning, taken seriously by

a select number of an already specialized group of gamers.[45] In the latter months of 1979,

'Dungeons & Dragons' made its rise to pop culture infamy. "Infamy" meant 'D&D' could be

casually mentioned in contexts with no connection to science fiction, fantasy, or wargames, and

be understood without explanation. In the *Morning News* of Wilmington, Delaware, a food

columnist described a meal for two, prompted by their daughter's intention to move in with some

friends from school and their son's plans to play 'Dungeons & Dragons' at a friend's house. The

author, feeling "very old, very alone and very sorry for myself," reminisced on Halloweens past

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[43]Saxman, Donald and Geneva Saxman. "Letters to the Editor: 'Creative Anachronism,'" *Indianapolis Star*, 13 Oct. 1979.
[44]Marzella, Michael. "Dungeons & Dragons: In Conflicts' back room, they escape to adventure," *Morning Call (Allentown, PA)*, 23 Sep. 1980.
[45]Severson, Ed. "Rule 1: Never trust a dwarf assassin!," *Arizona Daily Star (Tucson, AZ)*, 18 Nov. 1979.

spent trick-or-treating with their now-adult children.[46] A syndicated column suggested a 'D&D'-themed party to entertain the "hobgoblins" of the neighborhood in the run-up to summer break. With a smattering of "ye olde"s, the columnist described a party spread of "Goblets of Dragon Blood," "Troll Eggs," and "Barbecued Unicorn Sauce."[47] A book reviewer expressed frustration with a hypothetical teenaged audience uninterested in the book in question: "You'd rather play Dungeons and Dragons? Sigh. The younger generation."[48] Perhaps most notably, a *Galveston Daily News* opinion column described the presence of Russians in Cuba as "a cross between a table game like Monopoly and the electronic game of Dragons and Dungeons. Instead of paying a fine or going back to square one, if you make a wrong move, you're dead."[49] Granted, there seemed to be a misunderstanding of what 'D&D' was, though some players did develop computer versions of the game, but the intention was clear: 'D&D' was a game of strategy that presented situations with consequences that, even if only in a game, could be as serious as death. It provided means for teenagers to exercise their independence and power as consumers, reminding parents of the generational gap between themselves and their children. The food columns, book reviews, and political analysis columns each targeted different audiences, and each mentioned 'D&D' with the certainty readers would understand the reference.

Games in general and wargames specifically found an audience not just in college-aged teens, but in adults, too: in 1977, games were a $136 million industry, with a large number of players between the ages of 15 and 40.[50] On average, American kids began playing role-playing

[46]Epp, Gardy. "An adult menu for two with Halloween flavor," *Morning News (Wilmington, DE)*, 29 Oct. 1978.
[47]Larsen, Carl. "Summer a dark age away? Try this party," *Dayton Daily News (Dayton, OH)*, 14 May 1980.
[48]Declue, Denise. "Once upon a time there was a second lady…" *Democrat and Chronicle (Rochester, NY)*, 16 Nov. 1980.
[49]Hess, John L. "The Cuban crisis — now you know," Galveston Daily News (Galveston, TX), 7 Oct. 1979.
[50]Burrell, Molly. "They want to do more than just play games," *Arcadia Tribune (Arcadia, CA)*, 21 Jul. 1977.

games between seven and eight years old; for board games, they averaged 11 or 12 years old.[51]

Local libraries encouraged play by all ages.[52] Across America, middle- and high-schoolers

played 'D&D.'[53] They formed clubs and became the "troop of trolls" who needed to be

entertained in the afore-mentioned 'D&D'-themed food column. Teachers for above-average

students used the game to explore problem-solving and teamwork.[54] Some administrators found

it so enlightening they invited Gary Gygax to speak at educational conferences.[55] A pastor in

small-town Indiana used 'D&D' to create dialogue about moral decisions and teach the reality of

consequences to his teenaged church group.[56] Community centers taught 'Dungeons & Dragons'

and other strategy games to members of the public.[57] 'D&D' appeared in ads advertising game

demonstrations and free play at hobby stores from Los Angeles to Pensacola, Florida.[58] Many

players used 'D&D' to stimulate their creativity and be challenged when other facets of life

could not fulfill those needs.

Contrary to the seeming homogeneity of the game's stereotypical fan base, the group was

more than it appeared. For one, most of the players appeared to be white males. A possible

explanation came from coverage: many newspaper articles featured white male teens in the body

and accompanying photographs. Though it likely did represent the majority of fans, the most

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[51]Salvaggio, Denise. "UCF club joins in the battles," *Orlando Sentinel (Orlando, FL)*, 27 Apr. 1979.
[52]Librarian, Lucy. "Your Play," *Noblesville Ledger (Noblesville, IN)*, 17 Apr. 1979. A recurring column written by library staff in the *Noblesville Ledger* on several occasions brought up the idea of playing 'D&D' in libraries. One column, "Computer Hobbyists Wanted," appeared Feb. 19, 1980, and ended with the enthusiastic sentiment: "Libraries are more than books!"
[53]Cronin, Anthony. "War Is Just a Game to Willimantic Pupils," *Hartford Courant (Hartford, CT)*, 15 Dec. 1977.
[54]Kalfus, Marilyn. "Super Kids: Michael and Wendy Tellone Take On The Brightest Pupils," *Tampa Tribune (Tampa, FL)*, 12 Mar. 1980. Timp, Phil. "Scores Are Tremendous," *Daily Press (Newport News, VA)*, 9 Apr. 1980.
[55]Laycock, Joseph. *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 99.
[56]Acres, interview, 13 Feb. 2019. Acres is a pastor-turned-game developer, and claims he was the one to bring 'D&D' to Paoli, IN.
[57]"Community school registration for winter session to be held," *Austin American-Statesman (Austin, TX)*, 3 Jan. 1980.
[58]"Chess & Games Unlimited (Ad)," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 Nov. 1976. Hicks, Wayne. "Dragons, Demons Populate This Place," *Pensacola News (Pensacola, FL)*, 12 Feb. 1980.

commonly-depicted group of players did not represent the entirety of the audience. Gender roles

certainly played a part. Parents and peers generally encouraged girls to avoid "masculine"

games. Players and hobby shop owners continued the gender separation by asserting 'D&D' and

other wargames were "too barbaric" for girls.[59] Class created another notable division.

Socioeconomic limitations did not allow everyone to take up the hobby. Though 'D&D' began

with a simple rulebook, usually sold for $10, it often continued with supplemental materials,

including monster books, miniatures, and sets of dice which raised the cost of playing well above

the initial $10 investment.[60] Players who did not live in or near large urban centers may not have

had access to the game. Hobby shops in smaller, rural towns often did not carry 'D&D' or a wide

variety of wargames. If a shop did have a selection of such games, it was scattered and

incomplete. For these arbitrary and involuntary divisions, fans created separate cultures across

the country.

Geographic differences led to discrepancies in rule interpretation. Players in Boston

played an entirely different version of 'D&D' than those in Los Angeles. Attempts to bridge this

gap included fan publications such as "Alarums & Excursions," an amateur press association

created in Los Angeles to facilitate rule discussion and develop a standardized method of play.[61]

Due to the range of inter-fan divisions, it was impossible to know exactly how many people were

playing 'D&D' at its inception or its height. Reporters based tentative estimates on attendance of

sci-fi and fantasy conventions, which ranged in size from 100 to 2,000 to 30,000 people, but

these proved unreliable; though 'D&D' was present at a convention, not every attendee played.[62]

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[59]Kalfus, Marilyn. "Fantasy: 19-Year-Old Shop Proprietor Offers Games Not Of This Earth," *Tampa Tribune (Tampa, FL)*, 19 Jan. 1980.

[60]"Petaluma Stores Have Child-Pleasing Selection of Toys," *Petaluma Argus-Courier (Petaluma, CA)*, 22 Nov. 1979.

[61]"An APA-L Miscellany of Comment from various L-ers" *Alarums & Excursions #1*, Jun. 1975.

[62]Corr, John. "2,000 big ones, 30,000 little ones at Widener," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 Jun. 1978.

The existence of so-called "green light copies" nullified guesses based on sales of the rulebooks, estimated at 50,000 units a month in 1980.[63] Players created "green light copies" by Xeroxing their rulebook and sharing the copies.[64] Their prevalence made it truly impossible to know how many people were playing, and sparked anger from co-creator Gary Gygax and TSR for copyright infringement. Gygax wrote a letter to "Alarums & Excursions" voicing his anger at players who took profit he felt belonged to himself and those who designed the games:

> It is illegal to copy D&D. It is unethical. And in the final analysis it might mean real loss to great numbers of people…[H]ow many copies are simply made so as to profit the fellow illegally duplicating his D&D? Or how many are made in order to save the money, so as to use it for some other form of entertainment? It all boils down to the question about whether or not the laborer is worthy of his hire.[65]

For its part, "A&E" stood behind their policy that copying rules was wrong, and deprived TSR of profit the company deserved. Even if "green light copies" did not obfuscate estimates, there came another problem of defining exactly who qualified as a 'D&D' player. From the beginning, players and press alike identified 'D&D' as a fad. In that case, who should be counted as a fan? What qualified someone as a 'casual' adventurer? As a fanatic? 'D&D' made its way across the country in fits and starts, incorporating ideas from other games and fantasy realms. As explained by a fan in the *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, "It kind of spreads. Like a disease."[66] It infected its players to different lengths and in different ways. Each region had its own variation on 'D&D,' some vastly different than the official version. Technically each gamer group did not play 'D&D,' but a variation of it. Some players were hesitant to even identify themselves as

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[63]Beale, Lewis. "'It's Your Move': Board Games for Bored People," *Philadelphia Daily News*, 25 Jan. 1980.

[64]Wharton, Tony. "Dungeons & Dragons: Avid Fans Attest to Complex Game's Attraction," *Palm Beach Post (West Palm Beach, FL)*, 3 Oct. 1979. They were so named for the color of the Xerox scan.

[65]Gygax, E. Gary. "TSR Hobbies, a letter from E. Gary Gygax," *Alarums & Excursions #8*, Jan. 1976.

[66]Perrin, Marlene J. "'Funny dice' creates Dungeons and Dragons," *Iowa City Press-Citizen (Iowa City, IA)*, 6 Feb. 1978.

"D&Ders," muddying the numbers even further. Lee Gold, founding editor of "A&E," explained that the rules themselves encouraged variation by leaving parts up to player interpretation: "This incompleteness delighted many other player groups to flesh out D&D with more spells, more monsters. From what I could tell, every hobby store had its own standing game with its own local rules."[67] Back issues of "A&E" provided a stage for ongoing discussions across a nationwide audience, to compare rule adaptations and DM techniques utilized by players across the country.[68] Gold's intention, to facilitate a unified playstyle, was no small feat. Players enjoyed personalizing 'D&D' and other role-playing games to fit their group, especially regarding areas in which the rulebooks were lacking.

While 'D&D' satisfied the demands of many players, it proved to be too combat-oriented for some. Early editions of 'D&D' entirely ignored the period between adventures. A gap in the market fueled the rise of games focused on this inter-adventure period, by game developers –like TSR's 'Warlocks & Warriors' (1977)– and by players themselves.[69] The tradition of fan variation carried through the years of role-playing games. Where a novel was the work of an individual author or authors, a game in this genre was by necessity a collaboration between player and author.[70] Gary Gygax seemed initially to embrace fan interpretation. After the release of 'D&D,' he wrote, "If the time ever comes when all aspects of fantasy are covered and the vast

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[67]Gold, interview, 16 Feb. 2019.
[68]Gold, Lee. "A Few Paragraphs from the Editor," *Alarums & Excursions #8*, Jan. 1976.
[69]Oscroft, Liz. "Fantasy's the name of the game," *Edmonston Journal (Edmonton, Can.)*, 13 Jan. 1979.
[70]Laws, Robin D. "Intellectual Property Development in the Adventure Games Industry: A Practitioner's View" in *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*, edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 62. In conversation with Edward Castronova, professor of game design at Indiana University, he described a similar culture in coding. When writing code, it is expected and understood that your work will be copied for use in another person's work. Rather than IP infringement, it is an honor, Castronova said. All or part of your work is good enough to copy, and the rest provides a jumping-off point for the next user to vary it slightly to fit their purposes. Early game design was similar: certain elements, such as combat systems or story arcs, were recycled from game to game, while parts of it were altered and improved depending on the needs of the gamers.

majority of its players agree on how the game should be played, D&D will have become stal[e] and boring indeed. Sorry, but I don't believe that there is anything desirable in having various campaigns playing similarly to one another."[71] Later, though, TSR engaged in several lawsuits to protect its intellectual property from what the company saw as copyright infringement. Gygax seemed to contradict his previous encouragements of fan variation, especially in the matter of the game's purpose: "Role-playing isn't storytelling. If the Dungeon Master is directing it, it's not a game."[72] His narrow definition caused tension between creator and player. According to Lee Gold, the only pushback she noticed while editing "Alarums & Excursions" came when players lashed out at Gygax's editorials criticizing the publication and fan variation. His perceived stranglehold on the definition of what 'D&D' could and could not be prompted open hostility from some fans.[73] Other players pointed to tension caused by the varied play. At Cal-Tech, the version students played earned its own name: 'Dungeons & Beavers,' after the school's mascot. "Oh yes, we play D&D," wrote a Cal-Tech player in an issue of "A&E," "We play it the way it should be played, not the way it was written in the official books."[74] Fans disagreed on issues ranging from rule interpretation to the morality of copying source books. Communication made the difference between inter-fan conflict and creator-player conflict. Small, informal groups of fans formed a network and an open dialogue for players to resolve differences.[75] That dialogue was not present with the creators of 'D&D,' especially with Gygax himself, who was revered by some as a folk hero and whose contact with fans came primarily from conventions such as GenCon.[76] Despite a larger-than-life standing, or perhaps because of the detachment it caused, a

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[71]Gygax, E. Gary. "A letter from E. Gary Gygax," *Alarums & Excursions #2*, Jul. 1975.

[72]Kushner, *Rise of the Dungeon Master,* 65.

[73]Gold, interview, 16 Feb. 2019.

[74]Gold, Lee. "Tantivy," *Alarums & Excursions #1*, Jun. 1975.

[75]Wharton, Tony. "Young Pattons work at play," *Palm Beach Post (West Palm Beach, FL)*, 26 Oct. 1978.

[76]Leiber, Fritz. "Wargames — Fierce Battles Fought on Mapboards," *San Francisco Examiner*, 5 Sep. 1976. In this particular article, Gygax was compared to a youthful Buffalo Bill, exemplifying the near-mythical nature in which

slogan began to circulate: "D&D is too important to leave to Gary Gygax" –something Gygax

jokingly agreed with in his first letter to "A&E."[77] Amid inter-fan divisions, the question

remained: "Why all the time and energy spent on what is basically (and say it softly for fear

some D&D fanatic will send a Level Six Black Assassin after you) just a game?"[78]

At the same time American gamers looked to satisfy their interests in strategy and

imaginative play, another genre with a similar fan base engaged in a fight for survival and found

a surprising network of support. A quick glance through contemporary authors and films showed

a rising interest in horror, science fiction, and fantasy –genres so often placed together: Stephen

King received praise for *Carrie* (1974); William Peter Blatty released *The Exorcist* (1971), the

basis for a movie which would later shock and awe its audience; Ursula K. Le Guin rose to

become one of the most respected science fiction authors of all time. Publishers reprinted the

work of authors such as H. P. Lovecraft, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Ray Bradbury. [79] While not

necessarily representative of mainstream interests, the popularity of horror, science fiction, and

fantasy media cannot be ignored. To some avid fans, each of the three genres was distinct; to the

rest of America, "science fiction," quickly shortened to "sci-fi," served as a catch-all term for a

variety of genres and content.[80]

Sci-fi themes invaded everything from music –Elton John's "Rocket Man" (1972) and

David Bowie's "Space Oddity" (1969)– to television. The lasting cultural impact of "Star Trek,"

a show which was canceled after three seasons, showed America and the world at large had at

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he is sometimes portrayed. GenCon was hosted by TSR in Lake Geneva, and one of several fantasy and wargaming conventions continuously held in the 1970s.

[77]Gygax, "A letter from E. Gary Gygax," Jul. 1975.

[78]Jacobs, Scott. "'Dungeons & Dragons' fans battle for survival," *Red & Black (Athens, GA)*, 28 Nov. 1978.

[79]Davis, Chuck. "The scope, value of science fiction," *Province (Vancouver, Can.)*, 22 Oct. 1973.

[80]Kleiner, Dick. "'Sci Fis' Plan Big Film Festival," *Messenger-Inquirer (Owensboro, KY)*, 18 Nov. 1972. Depending on the fan, "SF/F" was either preferred to "sci-fi" or a taboo term.

least a passing fascination with science fiction. "Star Trek" was one of a handful of shows pulled off air for failing ratings and a perceived lack of interest in sci-fi themes. To the surprise of network executives, fans were outraged. Despite a widespread letter-writing campaign, viewers could not stop NBC from canceling the show.[81] Instead of dissolving as expected, the fan base persisted and organized into a worldwide network, circulating fanzines to share art, fanfiction, and other original content based in the "Star Trek" universe. Years later, another letter-writing campaign brought the show back on air in reruns. "Star Trek," against all odds, was here to stay.[82] It was a remarkable achievement. In 1970, networks thought it preposterous that sci-fi could muster enough support to remain on TV. Critics warned sci-fi was "out" as a theme for successful shows. [83] Despite negative reviews, a select group of active fans devoured sci-fi in literature and film, and worked to celebrate and preserve it. Preservation came in various forms, including fan conventions which gathered people to share interests and create community. Fans formed local clubs and societies to celebrate the universality of the genre. In the words of a sci-fi newsletter's printer: "The worlds in [sci-fi] change but the real issues and problems it deals with do not."[84] Sci-fi dealt with a fear of conformity and a sense of helplessness prompted by a political climate.[85] In addition to film, literature, and television, some members of these clubs found their interests overlapped with wargames.[86] The games appeared at conventions and hobby

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[81]Shuit, Doug. "'Star Trek': Canceled Program Prospering," *Corvallis Gazette-Times (Corvallis, OR)*, 4 Jul. 1972.
[82]Dalmas, John. "Star Trek Lives!," *Journal News (White Plains, NY)*, 9 Jun. 1974. It also permeated other fan worlds, including 'D&D.' Tribbles appeared as monsters and NPCs in some fan variations of the game.
[83]Lowry, Cynthia. "Science-fiction, fantasy out as TV series themes," *Morning News (Wilmington, DE)*, 2 Sep. 1970.
[84]Jacobsen, Michael. "Science fiction: Creating fantastic new worlds," *Ridgewood News (Ridgewood, NJ)*, 5 Dec. 1979.
[85]Shales, Tom. "Sci-Fi Movies Are Popping Up All Over Now," *Philadelphia Inquirer (Philadelphia, PA)*, 10 Feb. 1974.
[86]Mazur, Carole. "Star Trek: The Phenomenon," *Albuquerque Journal (Albuquerque, NM)*, 12 Dec. 1979.

shops, on college campuses, and in after-school programs. Soon, they were everywhere. From these wargames came 'Dungeons & Dragons' and its contemporaries.

Novelty and timing made 'D&D' successful, but its legacy affirmed its place in pop culture. Immediately after its release, similar games appeared from developers big and small. Some all but directly cloned 'D&D,' such as 'Tunnels & Trolls' (Flying Buffalo, 1975) and 'Chivalry & Sorcery' (Fantasy Games Unlimited, 1977). These titles picked elements of 'Dungeons & Dragons' and expanded upon them; for example, the simplified combat of 'T&T' made it a more accessible version of 'D&D.' Other titles took the idea of role-playing in different directions: 'Boot Hill' (TSR, 1975) focused on gun fights in the Wild West; 'Bunnies & Burrows' (Fantasy Games Unlimited, 1976) allowed players to be non-human characters; 'Traveller' (Game Designers' Workshop, 1977) embraced sci-fi themes in a space-based adventure. Contemporary players and developers found it difficult to pinpoint the role-playing trend's origin. In 1979, a Dallas-based miniatures manufacturer –Heritage Models, Inc.– claimed to have invented the new 'adventure gaming' subgenre of wargames.[87] They attributed its success to the recent popularity of "Lord of the Rings," "Star Trek," and "Star Wars," before immediately undercutting their claim of origin by admitting they were just "taking advantage of the craze." The craze in question was certainly present for many Americans. By the end of the decade, fantasy-based games enjoyed a burst of interest which extended into the 1980s. But that interest was not quick to develop. It took nearly a year for TSR to sell the first thousand units of 'D&D.'[88] The complexity drove potential players away and drew exasperated reviews from reporters and critics: "Describing 'Dungeons and Dragons' is like summarizing *War and Peace*,

[87]O'Barski, Frank F. "Get Set for Adventure: New Game Combines Fantasy, Strategy, Skill," *Palm Beach Post (West Palm Beach, FL)*, 11 Jan. 1979.
[88]Goto, Ed. "'Dungeons And Dragons' Is New Game In Town And It's Catching On," *Santa Cruz Sentinel (Santa Cruz, CA)*, 19 Jul. 1978. According to Gygax, it took 10 to 11 months.

except that *War and Peace* ends eventually."[89] Frustrating to non-players, the complexity and

long-running nature of play drew curious gamers to 'D&D.' Psychologists assuaged early fears

about the rising interest in conflict-based games by reminding concerned readers that chess,

another popular wargame, was not known for inducing negative effects in its players.[90] Covered

by the press as a fad, many articles served as explainers to lay out the rules and principles in a

way non-players might understand. In annual summaries of the year's fads, mainstream press

acknowledged 'D&D' existed nearly everywhere. Though it was "underground," America's

youth deemed 'D&D' firmly "in."[91]

    For wargamers, 'D&D' at first satisfied a need for more character- and personality-driven

play. In games which merely used pawns without personality, players felt no regard for their

safety.[92] While some characters and places in previous wargames received proper names, the set-

up was impersonal: a common arrangement pitted a "Red Army" against a "Blue Army."[93]

Characters used the same models, differentiated only by the color of their armor or banners. The

primary color-based denoting of combatants frequently occurred in early table-top and computer

games. Later, simplistic character design appeared as a theme frequently parodied and mocked in

pop culture.[94] Players came to expect more personality from characters, playable and non-

playable alike, in games of all mediums. The change came about in full force during the

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[89]Tester, Sue. "'Dungeons' game sweeps LA," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 28 Aug. 1977.
[90]"Games people play could be their outlet," *Chicago Tribune*, 26 Jun. 1977. 'D&D' was often compared to chess in an attempt to explain its complicated rules.
[91]Tozian, Greg. "What's Out," *Tampa Tribune (Tampa, FL)*, 4 Dec. 1979.
[92]Duffy, Mike. "Fazzle Battles Orks with Giant Beetle Carcasses," *Detroit Free Press*, 17 Aug. 1976.
[93]The color scheme was used in one of the earliest wargames of the twenty-first century, *Little Wars: A game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girl who likes boys' games and books* published in 1913 by H.G. Wells.
[94]For an example of a recent pop culture reference, see Rooster Teeth's 'Halo'-esque web series "Red vs. Blue" (2003-present).

beginning of the fantasy role-playing era in the 1970s, but, as with nearly all aspects of the genre, it had its roots in the long tradition of wargaming.

No one could explain exactly why 'D&D' was the first to truly combine the pre-existing elements. When asked, most gamers simply called it the right thing at the right time.[95] A preceding game created by Gygax and TSR lent credence to this explanation. In 1971, Gygax released 'Chainmail.' Co-written with Jeff Perren, 'Chainmail' was a rudimentary version of games to come. The booklet included races which were proficient in different skills, with rules describing combat and abilities.[96] It emphasized a medieval motif in artwork and campaign setting. But 'Chainmail' did not find much acclaim.[97] 'Dungeons & Dragons,' not 'Chainmail,' rose to become nothing short of a cultural touchpoint just a few years after its inception. Stephen Spielberg chose 'D&D' to feature in "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial" (1982) to characterize the main characters as nerdy but, more importantly, average suburbanites.[98] And schools across the nation later banned 'D&D' at the height of the 1980s "Satanic Panic."

Though columnists considered 'D&D' a generally acceptable way to spend one's time, newspaper coverage tended to keep players at arm's length. Headlines referred to them as "crazy" and "fanatic." Quotes by confused onlookers described the lengths to which players went to continue their games. Some flunked out of school, others lost their jobs, still others found trouble with an unhappy spouse. When asked, players usually tied their interest to escapism, the want for adventure apart from the world in which they live: "Alternate reality is popular because

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[95]Acres, interview, 13 Feb. 2019. Acres, a former TSR employee, worked with the company at the height of the game's popularity

[96]Gygax, Gary and Jeff Perren. *Chainmail: rules for medieval miniatures, 3rd edition* (Lake Geneva, WI: Tactical Studies Rules, 1975).

[97]"Gary Gygax on 'Tomorrow,'" 8 Nov. 1979.

[98]Garner, Jack. "Spielberg lands one-two punch with doses of summer terror," *Democrat and Chronicle (Rochester, NY)*, 6 Jun. 1982.

reality is not very popular."[99] Psychologists tied wargaming to a general level of stress shared by many Americans.[100] The reality from which they wanted to escape was different from person to person. Articles reflected a temptation to draw parallels between the Vietnam War and the want for escape. Some players and non-players alike said the end of the Vietnam War drove returning soldiers to take up wargames as a way to understand military strategy.[101] While the war did directly drive some players to play wargames, it was inaccurate to tie each player's experience to the same event. The wargamers who specifically mentioned the Vietnam War as a factor in their entertainment choices shared a pacifist, anti-war sentiment. They had been politically engaged in some way before they started gaming, and tended to be left-leaning in their politics independent of their choice of game, not because of it.[102] Press coverage in the 1970s frequently pointed out the irony that many players of games concerned specifically with recreating war and combat tended to be anti-war pacifists.[103]

Gygax himself explained interest as the simple need to exercise control: "In real life, problems seem so insoluble, while in D&D you can take up arms and oppose them, sometimes with effect."[104] Wargamers found their games an effective method of escape. In his hierarchy of needs, "Maslow didn't mention our need for fantasy," argued the authors of an article in the 1980 *Wisconsin Badger* yearbook from University of Wisconsin-Madison, "In today's demanding world, some of us feel the desire to escape the craziness of day-to-day existence. Some of us jog, some 'TM' (meditate) and some 'D&D.'"[105] The vague "some of us" the authors provided was

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[99]Haskin, "Fantasy dragons are lurking below," 26 Jul. 1978.
[100]White, Melissa. "Dungeons and Dragons will be this weekend," *Red and Black (Athens, GA)*, 19 Oct. 1979.
[101]Salvaggio, "UCF club joins in the battles," 27 Apr. 1979.
[102]Acres, interview, 13 Feb. 2019. Chapin, Bryan, interviewed by Hannah Rea, 13 Feb. 2019.
[103]Cornelis, Ralph. "Science Fiction Enthusiasts Find Games Fun," *Daily Press (Newport News, VA)*, 15 Oct. 1979.
[104]Goto, "'Dungeons And Dragons' Is New Game In Town And It's Catching On," 19 Jul. 1978.
[105]Gill, Tyson and JoEllen Bursinger. "There are Dungeons and there are Dragons…," University of Wisconsin, *1980 Wisconsin Badger*, Vol. 93 (Yearbook). Madison, WI, 1980, 40-41.

appropriate, as they could not tell who played 'D&D' simply by looking at them. A 1980 article from Missoula, Montana, described players as "doctors, attorneys, loggers, housewives and students – one only 8 years old."[106] 'D&D' entertained an eclectic group of people, varied from town to town in demographics and playstyle. Despite their differences, players frequently attributed their interest in the game to their need for escape.[107] More often than not, non-gamers found the escapist explanation concerning. The author of the *Wisconsin Badger* article went on to describe 'D&D' as "the heroin of addicting games for those of us who choose to go AWOL from reality."[108] Columnists called it "absorbing" and described its influence on both players and those around them.[109] Non-players expressed skepticism about the need for escapism. "After all," wrote one columnist, "in these realistic days of inflation, recession, depression, whose mind can afford such flights of fancy?"[110]

'D&D' left an indelible mark on gaming culture. TSR grossed $1 million in 1978, and was projected to pass $2 million in 1979, figures undoubtedly bolstered by the controversy around Egbert's disappearance.[111] Within gaming circles, 'Dungeons & Dragons' and Gary Gygax occupied a myth-like status. Gygax's stature as a folk hero raised questions of how he gained notoriety when other developers of successful games did not. Even Dave Arneson, the co-creator of 'D&D,' was not so readily remembered. Why did 'D&D' catch on, rather than the work of Charles Roberts? Perhaps there was something more about science fiction and fantasy in

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[106]Gross, "Escaping into the realm of Dungeons and Dragons," 7 Dec. 1980.
[107]See: "'To be elsewhere': If only for a short, happy while," *Springfield News-Leader (Springfield, MO)*, 8 Dec. 1977. Smith, Andy. "Robot and wyverns — all at UR science fiction convention," *Democrat and Chronicle (Rochester, NY)*, 7 Apr. 1980. Sharkey, Richard. "A Fantasy Game of Wits and Imagination," *Town Talk (Alexandria, LA)*, 5 Oct. 1980. Smith, Karen. "Game conveys players into world of fantasy," *Oshkosh Northwestern (Oshkosh, WI)*, 11 Oct. 1980.
[108]Gill and Bursinger, "There are Dungeons and there are Dragons…," 41.
[109]Schaun, George. "The games people play: There's almost no escaping escapism," *Baltimore Sun*, 4 Sep. 1980.
[110]Elkin, Michael. "For elves, orcs and others in need of fantasy," *Philadelphia Enquirer*, 23 Dec. 1979.
[111]Joseph, Rob. "A Fantasy Game for Fanatics — Dungeons, Dragons," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 31 Jul. 1979.

the 1970s that prompted the rise of 'D&D'? By the middle of the decade, wargaming had "taken

off like a ballistic missile," but 'D&D' itself was still a "relatively obscure pastime."[112]

Newspaper reporters shaped the image of the "D&Der," sometimes openly mocking those

gamers whose words appeared in their columns. Following the highly-publicized disappearance

of James Dallas Egbert in September 1979, the stereotype of the gamer came into focus:

teenagers on the outskirts of popular circles. These kids, usually male, played 'D&D' and kept to

themselves, forming strong communities of gamers. 'D&D' became a fixture of nerd culture.

Critics of such media sometimes confused the definition of that "nerd culture" with the general

entertainment consumed by youth. 'D&D' reached the height of its popularity in the following

decade as it became the center of a wide-reaching controversy. The "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s

targeted hobbies of young Americans, from cartoons to rock music to 'D&D.'[113] Increased

coverage during the panic introduced gamers to the hobby, and the enticement of its forbidden

nature drove some to take it up. Described in headlines as "cultish" and its players as "fanatics,"

the air of mystery surrounding 'D&D' increased after Egbert's disappearance and introduced a

new factor: a slight fear of the hobby's power. 'D&D' was an outsiders' game; those not

previously inclined to an interest in wargames were unwilling to try it. Why 'D&D' took so long

to gain popularity, when select groups across America were so quickly infatuated with the game,

is difficult to answer. Was it the publicity of Egbert's disappearance alone which prompted such

a growth? Or the illicit nature of the game prompted by its accused ties to Satanism and

witchcraft? Decades later, media previously shunned as being too "nerdy" began to enter the

mainstream. Along with comic books and superheroes came 'D&D.' The recent resurgence of

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[112]Mullinax, Gary. "To arms! Amateurs re-fight the world's greatest battles," *Morning News (Wilmington, DE)*, 24 Jun. 1979.
[113]Frequent targets included "Scooby Doo," "He-Man and the Masters of the Universe," "The Smurfs," Ozzy Osbourne, Led Zeppelin, and Van Halen.

interest does not match the previous height of the mid-'80s, but serves as proof of the game's

power. The image of a "D&Der" and the legacy of the game is produced by the gamers

themselves, proving how significantly players influence entertainment trends.