

Dungeons and Dragons in a Public Library

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If you are a librarian involved in developing programs for young adults, you might consider establishing a Dungeons and Dragons game club in your library. Michigan City Public Library has had a Dungeons and Dragons club for nearly a year. Though the game has been both criticized and praised by our local media, the club is still extremely popular with young adults from grade school all the way to sophomores in college.

The popularity of the game is nationwide. Dungeons and Dragons or D&D was created by TSR Games of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin and founded in 1974 on just \$1,000. Today the game has over half a million players in the United States and grossed about 20 million dollars in 1980. TSR is even working on an electronic version with Mattel.¹

The success of Dungeons and Dragons seems in part to be that it contains the elements of fantasy, adventure, and combat that young adults relish in fantasy literature and films. The game is not confined to historic reality, but rather a mythic fantasy that draws on such volumes as *Arms and Armor* and the *Welsh Wars of Edward I* as well as fantasy fiction.²

People Magazine described D&D as making "Monopoly seem crass, chess two-dimensional and the latest electronic brain-testors coldly mechanical." The reason for this is the extra dimension in

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the game that allows players to use their imaginations and ingenuity freely.³ This fantasy role playing game takes place in the minds of anywhere from two to eighteen players per game and can last for a few hours or go on for weeks and even months. Players assume the roles of such fantasy characters as fighters and magicians. The role-playing aspect requires that the players pretend they are the characters in their imagination while playing the game. Thus, the player becomes an actor, "vicariously acting out heroic deeds, fighting great battles or just fleeing to fight at some other time."⁴

In Dungeons and Dragons, the players have many kinds of variables to manipulate. They have the options of negotiating, fighting or fleeing from the monsters they encounter. The group leader, called a Dungeon Master or DM, offers the players a great variety of spells, weapons, and goods to take with them and use on their journey.⁵

The Dungeon Master holds a position that calls for special creativity and imagination. The DM is part actor, playwright, and referee, constructing a detailed fantasy world through which the players must travel. In leading the group through their journey by describing each scene of the adventure, the DM tells the characters what they see and allows them to choose a course of action. The DM may use scenarios of his own or pre-packaged scenarios called modules, leading the players through one adventure or a campaign of on-going adventures.⁶

Forming a Club

The idea to start a library game club came when I attended a meeting with other librarians. Young adult programming was being discussed; people mentioned that young adults are a hard audience to reach. Their afterschool hours are spent in school activities, part-time jobs, or in socializing with friends. Their specific interests and attitudes seem to change from year to year, and historically most of them have not been receptive to using public libraries as anything except a place to study for school assignments.

One librarian from the South Bend Public Library mentioned that young adults are very interested in the Dungeons and Dragons game, and that if a library were to hold the game, young adults would turn out in record numbers to play. He said that the Roger B. Francis branch of his library system had held some game playing sessions and that The Griffon, a book and game store nearby, did the same thing on a weekly basis.

Our Dungeons and Dragons game club actually started by my placing a news release in the paper, asking interested players to come to the library to discuss the formulation of a club. At the first meet-

ing, twenty young adults showed up. They ranged from grade school students to college sophomores. Since I didn't really know how to organize the club, I put the question to the group. I asked them whether they wanted to learn D&D through a series of lectures or just play the game. Some of the older and more experienced players replied that the best way to learn the game is to actually play it, and that most game players would rather play than hear a lecture on how to play. We then discussed how the library meeting room could accommodate a Dungeons and Dragons game playing session.

At our next meeting the room was set up with three groups of tables and chairs to accommodate the players. As they came in, the three senior members, who were the DMs, assigned the players to groups based on level of experience. One DM was responsible for training the new players, another took the intermediate players, and the third led a game for the advanced players.

Because of the length of time the games take, we held the sessions on Sundays and each one lasted four hours. During that time young adults of various ages would sit down and play the game as equals. When the older players were asked if they minded having younger players in their games, one older player said that age was not a factor in playing Dungeons and Dragons. He said that younger players can be as interesting to play as the older players. It all depends on the player's maturity of imagination and intelligence. Another older player was asked if he minded associating with players much younger than himself. He said that he enjoyed teaching the game to the younger players and supervising their adventures.

At times while the group met, interested parents would come in and ask questions about the game. After I would explain its principles most parents would be amused and/or interested. Some of the other parents who already knew about the game would sit down to play with their children in the sessions.

Due to scheduling limitations at our library, we were only able to accommodate the D&D players for one Sunday a month. Some players wanted to have more playing time, so to strike a compromise, the DMs and myself encouraged players to use the monthly sessions as a place to meet and find new players. Players themselves could form groups that would meet on a fairly on-going basis at the players' homes. A list of players' phone numbers was kept by myself and passed out to young adults who were looking for a Dungeons and Dragons group.

After a few months of conducting our Sunday sessions we found our membership had grown to nearly fifty players. At this point I asked the senior members if the group would consider another activity, such as a contest. One member was familiar with the Dungeons and Dragons tournaments, the kind held at Lake Geneva,

Wisconsin, where TSR is located. He explained that the tournaments were similar to our game playing sessions. The only difference was that all players in the tournament would play one adventure. Winners of the contest were determined by points acquired from figuring out codes and clues, slaying monsters, and/or retrieving treasures. Prizes could be awarded to individuals scoring the highest points or to the groups that score the highest.

Tournament in the Library

All of the members were excited about holding a tournament, so I lost no time in making preparations. For prizes, I asked for and received three five dollar gift certificates from the game store in South Bend that also sold D&D equipment. We started at 9:00 AM on a Saturday in January and had at least forty young adults lined up outside the library doors fifteen minutes ahead of that time. From 9:00 AM until 9:30 AM we held a registration session, where players signed up for the game and the DMs did some last minute checking of their notes for the adventure. Once the tournament began we had interested on-lookers wander in and ask me questions about the game. We also had a news reporter and photographer from the Michigan City *News-Dispatch* observe the session. The reporter wrote a favorable story about the game and included three good-sized photos of the young adults playing. Other publicity the club garnished included a half hour session on a radio show and another write-up of its activities in a local news magazine.

Just when it seemed that everything was going well, we read an editorial in the *News-Dispatch* about Dungeons and Dragons entitled "Controversial Game." The editorial pointed out several criticisms. One dealt with the idea that some people can become too absorbed in the game. The editorial cited the popular case of the 16 year old college freshman who disappeared and later committed suicide. His "acquaintances attributed his disappearance to his immersion in D&D." Another criticism accused the game of being "financially entrapping," citing that instruction booklets cost between \$10 and \$15 and that those who find themselves "caught up in the game spend more money on additional pieces and manuals." Finally, it was brought up that the game emphasizes demons and demonic thinking and "involves children in such negative thought patterns as hate, deception and conniving."⁷

The effect the editorial had on the Dungeons and Dragons Club, other than rankling some of the members, was minimal. As for other members of the community, I heard little or no bad comments about the game. I received no nasty phone calls from their parents, demanding that the game be disbanded or that the library should have better sense than to hold such a game. Instead, I received calls from mothers

asking what the game was about and whether it was safe for their children to play. My reply to them was that the game was about as harmful as reading science and fantasy literature or watching TV adventure movies. The game involves acting out a fantasy adventure, something that young adults and children have done in the form of cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians.

A more favorable review of the D&D controversy appeared in the nearby South Bend paper called the *South Bend Tribune*. In the article, two educators came out in favor of the game.

Linnea Vacca, English professor at St. Mary's College in Mishawaka, Indiana, who worked with world renowned child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim during his writing of *The Uses of Enchantment*, lauded the game for its "collaborative enterprise."⁸

"As our kids play it, it is the enactment of a hero quest against evil," said Penny Jameson, the other commentator who is a professor of child psychology and development at St. Mary's.⁹

For normal, healthy young adults, Jameson said, D&D can be used to play out conflicts. She said Bettelheim suggests that playing out inner tensions is potentially useful and that any child who allowed the game, or any other means of withdrawal, to take over his ego is very fragile with deeper personal problems.¹⁰

In an article that appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor*, people who supported the game praised it for employing group dynamics and for its mental challenge. A teacher in a Massachusetts public high school encourages the forming of D&D groups during school hours and says that "it is no worse than chess and better than monopoly." The director of a Boston area summer camp has said that its use of group dynamics has helped make solitary children into a group. In a program for gifted children in Arizona, some teachers feel it requires more imagination and cooperation than structural lesson plans.¹¹

Perhaps the only negative effect the *News-Dispatch* editorial had on the progress of the club was to cause the Michigan City Public School System to take our flyers advertising game session meeting dates, out of the schools. A school official told me that the game was controversial and that the schools didn't need any additional problems.

However, our publicity of club activities did continue. The local radio stations and newspapers still carried our announcements and the Catholic high school in Michigan City allowed our flyers to be distributed to their students at the school. Perhaps our most effective way of advertising came through word of mouth. Many of the club members would either tell their friends about our activities or would distribute flyers to them.

Most members seemed to agree that the negative editorial helped to boost interest and attendance in the club. As we continued to hold game sessions to a full house, at times the club seemed to take on the romantic air of an underground organization, indulging in a recreational pastime frowned upon by the adult world.

The editorial caused the library director and me to take a good look at the club. We decided it was not too controversial for us to hold. Those members of the community who might have opposed the club were not organized or overly vocal and did not demand that the club be shut down. The game also has the benefits of being intellectually stimulating for young adults and fun for them to play. The existence of a Dungeons and Dragons game club provides an outlet for this interest, as well as providing a place for people to learn how to play; it is providing a community service that brings young adults into the library to indulge in an imaginative pastime. Instead of using a library to primarily read materials, young people are using the library as a place where they create their own stories.

Notes

¹ Smith, Geoffrey. "Dungeons and Dollars," *Forbes*, September 1980, 138.

² *Ibid.*

³ Mills, B. K. "If Students' Tails Are Dragon and Their Minds in the Dungeon Lately, Blame Gamesman Gary Gyax," *People*, January 14, 1980, 65.

⁴ "Your Personal Invitation to Adventure: Understanding Dungeons and Dragons and Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Fantasy Adventure Games," TSR Hobbies, Inc.

⁵ Mills, 65.

⁶ TSR

⁷ "Controversial Game." *News-Dispatch*, February 13, 1981, 2.

⁸ Francis, Deanna. "Spell of Dungeons and Dragons," *South Bend Tribune*, February 23, 1981, 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Parsons, Cynthia. "Dragons, Deities, Demigods, Evil Spirits and Obsession," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 9, 1981, 17.