

THE STUDENT WRITER MAKES MAGIC: FANTASY ADVENTURE GAMING IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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Remember our first look at teenagers in *E.T.*? They are sitting around a table playing a game that seems to center on some miniature figures and a group of similarly-scaled cardboard corridors. Are they playing a typical board game as they speak in excited tones of “goblins,” “wandering monsters,” and “resurrection”? It may seem so, but, to those who have participated in this special kind of pastime, which is known as a fantasy role-playing game, it is apparent that the cardboard walls and leaden figures have much less to do with the activity these players are so involved with than the game board would have if they were playing *Monopoly* or *Clue*. In fact, many avid fantasy gamers never use such props at all, preferring to stay exclusively with the materials of which their games are really made, words.

What is a fantasy role-playing game? To begin with, it is not a game with winners and losers in the way that baseball and *Monopoly* have them. In this sense, it is similar to many simulation games, such as the *School Electronics Planning*

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Exercise described by Abt (1970), though, as a fantasy game, it isn't trying to simulate anything in the real world, except, in some ways, human interaction. A fantasy role-playing game, like many games, has players and a referee, but, in fantasy gaming, the referee has an unusually pervasive role: he must create a fantasy world and report to the players on their interaction with the elements of this world, its people, monsters, magical forces, natural disasters, etc. In the milieu which the referee creates, players assume the roles of characters and attempt to use their various abilities, as established in the rules, to deal successfully with the challenges they face.

The fascinating thing about fantasy gaming, from an English teacher's standpoint, is that this deeply engaging activity is almost entirely verbal, though, as in *E.T.*, miniature figures and other markers are used by some players to indicate the relative positions of characters. In the course of a typical adventuring session, a student who is role-playing (or "running") a character might be required to visualize in detail a room described by the referee, describe the character's exact movements around the room, persuade other characters that a course of action she espouses is best, analyze the nature of a trap she uncovers, and creatively overcome opposing characters who are, in some ways, much stronger than she.

With a little imagination (and occasionally with a little help from the period-ending bell) teachers can, when they wish, easily turn some of these oral activities into written exercises. For instance, if we find that, near the end of the period, Rudolph the warrior and Theodore the cleric are fighting carnivorous apes in the dungeons beneath the quarters of an evil magic user, the teacher might simply require that all the players write a clear description of their attempt to defeat their monstrous opponents without arousing further trouble. In the midst of one of my creative writing classes that was playing *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, an unusually popular fantasy game, one player who found himself in a difficult situation volunteered to write a prayer to his deity in an attempt to save himself. The result was an unusually poetic piece of persuasion, albeit an unsuccessful one, as ruled by the student referee.

But, if this fantasy game gimmick has such wide application, why don't we hear of more English teachers using it? Generally, the main reason seems to be the complexity of

the games themselves, a complexity that is indeed real and probably inevitable: In order to deal consistently with a reasonable percentage of the situations that can occur in these games, the referee needs a fairly extensive system of rules. (The basic rules of *Dungeons & Dragons*, a relatively simple system, thus run about sixty-five printed pages.) However, in order to get started playing the game, the players need to know almost nothing if the referee provides them with pre-created characters at the start of their first adventure. Eventually, those players who enjoy the game will generally want to create and equip their own characters (a process which takes about an hour per character) and substitute their own characters for the ones the referee gave them.

For example, a referee might begin an adventure by providing one or more neophyte players with this information: "The character you will run, for now at least, is Edna, a first-level magic user. Under the basic rules of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the game we are playing, magic users may neither wear armor nor use shields, and may use only a dagger, with which you are equipped, for a weapon; and so your prospects for success in hand-to-hand combat are not good. However, you do have the ability to cast a powerful magic spell, known as 'sleep,' with which you can put to sleep from one to sixteen of most types of hostile creatures, depending on the strength of the creatures and the luck of a die roll. In addition, your master has given you a potion that will heal wounds and a wand which will temporarily paralyze most opponents that are caught in the cone-shaped ray it projects. Your master has informed you that the spell will work once per day, that the potion must be drunk in its entirety to be effective, and that the wand will work a total of six times. Edna is a fundamentally good person who believes in law and order."

The player or players who are running the character Edna now have all the information they really need to get started. If, as often happens, they eventually want more information, the referee will usually be able to provide it. "How much physical strength does the character have?" they may ask. By consulting his notes, the contents of which the rules clearly specify, the referee will be able to reply that Edna has a particular strength score on a three-to-eighteen scale, probably about a "ten" for a character of this type.

As we noted earlier, if the players running Edna develop

a strong interest in the game, they will probably become dissatisfied with the character because she is not of their own creation. In this case, the teacher-referee need only give the players a few pages of duplicated rules explaining how to make up a character and send them home to develop their own persona, confident that, if the rules are followed (and it's immediately obvious when they're not) the new character will not be unfairly stronger than the original one.

Suppose, for instance, that the player or players running Edna decide to change her from a female to a male, from a magic-user to a dwarf, from a person of average physical strength to a person of maximum possible strength, from a person with no armor to a person with the best possible armor, and from a good, law-abiding person (a person of "lawful alignment") to an evil, "chaotic" individual. Without unfairly altering the balance of the game, the referee can simply allow this character to be substituted for the original Edna at any point in the adventure, providing a description of the physical features of the new character for the benefit of the other players, but leaving them to discover the non-physical traits, such as alignment, for themselves. In the case of this particular substitution, a generous referee might point out to neophyte players that the new character they have created is actually a bit weaker than their original one, since he, as a dwarf, can no longer use the wand of paralyzation, an extremely powerful device.

For the players, then, the game is not hard to get started with, though, of course, it takes time to become a good player. Unfortunately, the beginning referee's lot is nowhere near so easy. In fact, despite the rather broad applicability of fantasy gaming in English classes, I do not recommend that anyone go through the rigors of learning this skill simply to use the games as classroom tools. Of course, for someone who finds the whole idea of fantasy role-playing interesting, or who is looking for a verbal activity that may prove fascinating for many members of her family, and would also like a new classroom gimmick to try out, the task might not prove too difficult.

The first part of the would-be referee's job is to acquire and become familiar with a set of fantasy role-playing rules. There are many such sets available, but the most commonly encountered one is TSR Hobbies' *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Rulebook*, a work that is relatively simple and well-written, yet complex enough for interesting classroom use. Most

purchasers of this *Rulebook* buy it as part of the *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set* (about eleven dollars), which also includes a set of six dice of from four to twenty sides and an introductory adventure, *The Keep on the Borderlands* by Gary Gygax. A beginning referee would generally have to spend about three hours reading and taking notes on the *Rulebook* to get a rudimentary understanding of it. The next step, for those who can manage it, is to observe an experienced referee (or "dungeon master," as he is called in *Dungeons & Dragons*) for a couple of hours. For teachers, finding such a person may not be at all difficult, since many will find that they have several in their classes, ready and willing to share their skills. (The average reader of *Dragon*, the best known magazine of fantasy adventure gaming, is a sixteen and one-half year old dungeon master. [*Dragon*, June 1982, P.2].) I managed to do my observing in the Creative Writing class mentioned earlier in this article, after deciding which of the class's two veteran dungeon masters to watch. Finally, before refereeing for a class, most neophyte dungeon masters should spend a few hours practicing their craft in a setting less stressful than the classroom, perhaps in a game involving interested family members or friends. Such practice really is necessary for most of us: deciding quickly and gracefully whether to roll a twelve-sided die or a twenty-sided one requires some drilling. (In fact, swiftly recognizing which is the twenty-sided die takes some practice, at least for those of us whose aptitude in spatial relations is limited.)

Teacher-dungeon masters should be armed with two further cautions. If a teacher follows the suggestions made in this article, she will be using a fantasy-adventure game called *Dungeons & Dragons*, also known as *D & D*. There is a different but related fantasy-adventure game, which is correctly referred to as *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (or *AD & D*), but which some people erroneously call *Dungeons & Dragons*. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* works just as well in the classroom as *Dungeons & Dragons*, but it is a different game with different rules and procedures, many of which are incompatible with *D & D*. (*Best of Dragon*, Volume II, p. 39.) If an experienced player in a class seems to have strange notions about dwarven fighter-thieves (which do not exist in *D & D*, but can occur in *AD & D*), this confusion between the two games is almost surely the reason. The second caution concerns the fact that some fundamentalist

groups object to *D & D* on the grounds that its extensive use of magic and occasional reference to deities is anti-Christian. If a simple pointing out that the game deals strictly with fantasy and that the magical aspects of the game are intended to be its most outrageously unrealistic elements does not suffice, a teacher-referee might consider eliminating all magic from the game and substituting pseudo-science. For example, instead of a magical wand of paralyzation, the teacher might refer to a paralyzing ray developed by a brilliant scientist.

But all of this talk about using *D & D* in the classroom must still seem rather flat and vague for those who have never played the game, so let's get into some typical dungeon situations and see what happens.

Suppose that a teacher-dungeon master's notes for a particular adventure indicate that a party of nine beginning characters, each controlled by one or two students, is standing in a long corridor outside a heavy wooden door in a treasure-laden dungeon populated by an evil magician and his nefarious minions. The dungeon master simply describes the situation to the student-players and waits for them to decide what their characters will do. If the players are clever, they may decide to have one character listen carefully at the door to try to get some idea of what's inside. Let's assume that, after consulting the rules, which deal with this situation quite thoroughly, the teacher-referee decides that this character does hear noises emanating from the room, noises which suggest that roughly twenty human-sized creatures are eating a meal inside.

The party has many options here. It can try to bypass this area without encountering its inhabitants, probably a good idea since there are so many of them. Or, it can fight them with its non-magical weapons, such as swords and maces, probably the weakest option for the same reason. Or, it can fight the creatures with non-magical weapons and with whatever spells and magic items it may have, recognizing that the spells will thus be expended, at least for one day, and that the magic items will be partly used up. Finally, the party might try a nasty trick of some sort, such as tossing several flasks of oil and a burning torch into the room. Clearly, situations like this one provide a good opportunity to assign the writing of paragraphs developed through reasons for the choice each student supports, as well as narrative or descriptive paragraphs detailing the proposed actions.

The players' oral exchange of such reasons can often become quite heated in a situation like this. One of my summer school classes, composed mainly of students who had just finished failing their regular English courses, willingly spent over a half hour generating and stating reasons for opening or not opening a door like this one, even though all the players were in only their third brief session of adventure gaming.

The flaming oil option raises a moral issue that concerns many fantasy gamers and their critics: the question of excessive violence. The rules attempt to address this issue, especially with regard to characters who profess a "lawful" or "good" alignment (philosophy) by restricting their tools (e.g. forbidding the use of poison) and by threatening them with various penalties if they fail to respect life sufficiently. In addition, a teacher-referee may decree that all damage done by a predominately lawful party such as the one presented here must be fifty percent permanent and fifty percent temporary. Thus, when an opponent reaches the point at which the rules would consider him dead, he's merely unconscious.

Sometimes, more complex adventuring situations provide students with even more stimulation for their creativity. For example, in a time-travel adventure I've developed for my classes, a group of adventurers, with their typically medieval weapons, find themselves in the long corridor of a partly destroyed twentieth-century high school, fighting enemies who are armed with guns, and partially protected by a barrier (in this case, a wall of junked IBM Selectrics).

The predicament requires some creative problem-solving, since a simple frontal assault on the enemy position would likely result, at best, in the deaths of a number of party members. As in most fantasy-gaming scenarios, several solutions are possible here, including the use of a teacher's desk from a nearby classroom as a moving barrier to get within dagger-throwing or magic-wand-using range of the monsters. In addition to providing a chance for the kinds of writing activities mentioned earlier, this situation thus provides an opportunity to discuss the process of creativity itself. How did the players "create" their strategy? How is this process similar to the one we use in "creative" writing? Is all writing "creative?"

With more advanced classes, a teacher might even want

to delve into the structural differences between the plot of a *D & D* adventure and that of a more conventional work of literature. Gary Gygax offers a helpful analysis of these differences in *The Best of Dragon*, Volume II, p. 45.

Finally, we should note that a *D & D* adventure can even be structured as a review of factual material. For example, in a scenario I wrote for my American literature classes, a group of adventurers encounters a powerful, evil cleric who falsely identifies himself as the Puritan poet Edward Taylor. Players who fail to note his lack of knowledge of his own past will be sorry when he turns on them during a battle with more obvious foes. And should an adventurer pick up an obviously magical sword that's labeled "Chillingworth's Eversharp?" Players who have read *The Scarlet Letter* carefully will find reason to hesitate, but what if some daring (or ignorant) fighter does seize the enchanted weapon? Find out by writing to me at Bedford High School, Bedford, MA 01730, before my supply of copies of the adventure runs out, or play the creative dungeon master yourself, invent your own answer, and try it on your students the next time you're all looking for a pre-writing activity that's a little bit magic.

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