

Game on: D&D, board games making a comeback

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Those outside the gaming world may have missed the news that "Dungeons & Dragons" -- the legendary fantasy role-playing game in which players assume the roles of paladins and wizards and battle mythic creatures with a set of polyhedral dice -- released the fourth edition of its series on June 6.

The new edition consists of three rulebooks -- the "Player's Handbook," "Dungeon Master's Guide" and "Monster Manual" -- which can be purchased separately (entry-level players simply need the "Player's Handbook" to get started) or packaged together as the "Core Rulebook Collection." The rule changes in the new edition are designed to add more action to the game play and make it more accessible to entry-level players.

In honor of the release, Saturday was declared Worldwide D&D Game Day, and scores of locals celebrated at Boulder's Karliquin's Game Knight and Time Warp Comics. Both stores hosted in-store games to commemorate the release.

At Karliquin's, 3330 Arapahoe Ave., a few dozen gamers gathered outside the shop a full hour before it opened in anticipation, and from open to close Karl Schwols, the store's owner, hosted three tables of games spread across two rooms. Within two hours of opening, roughly 50 people had come through the store to check out the new edition, get in on a game or just start up a conversation with other gamers, like Mira "Spider" Rookey, 28, and her daughter Samantha Rose, 11.

For Rookey, who started playing D&D when she was 12, the game provides respite from a hectic daily life.

"I need to have two days a week where I don't have to be part of this mundane world and be part of something fantastical," she says.

Human touch

It's this element of fantasy that has had people convening around tables and rolling dice for hours at a time since D&D debuted in 1974. But gamers say it's the human element that keeps them coming back, especially in an era where video games have reached a level of sophistication inconceivable 34 years ago.

"It's a social event," says Jason Ledue, 34, who has been playing D&D for 26 years and showed up at Karliquin's to help run games as a Dungeon Master. "Online gaming is not sociable. You're missing the sitting and talking to people."

D&D sessions, he says, involve more than just gaming. A group of friends get together and catch up on each other's lives and share jokes and companionship, similar to a poker night.

"There are large communities of people who like to play D&D," says Schwols, 38, and he should know. In addition to having owned Karliquin's Game Knight for the past three years, he runs an online Google group called Boulder Gamers, which boasts more than 100 members and gets traffic from hundreds looking to interact with other players or get in on a game.

It backs up what those in the community have known for a while: Even with the proliferation and improved sophistication of video games and massive multiplayer online games (MMOs) like "World of Warcraft" (a D&D-inspired fantasy quest that tops all other online games with 10 million subscribers), offline gaming is alive and well.

"Gaming's not going anywhere. It's only getting better," says Ed Brewer, gaming coordinator at Time Warp Comics, 3105 28th St.

D&D is the most popular of what are called role-playing games (RPGs), and it's estimated that there are more than 5

million regular D&D players worldwide, with four times that number having played the game at some point in their life. Upon its publication, the "Dungeons & Dragons 4th Edition Core Rulebook Collection" was the top-selling fiction release on Amazon Canada, and on the American site it ranked third among all book sales.

Cards and boards

But gaming encompasses more than just RPGs. Card and board games also occupy the gamer's universe, and both are prominently featured at both Karliquin's and Time Warp. Schwols and Brewer say the most popular product in their stores is "Magic: The Gathering," a collectible card game in which two or more players play with a deck of cards featuring magic spells.

"I typically describe 'Magic' as being poker with pictures," says Brewer, who hosts "Magic" tournaments in the store on Fridays and Sundays.

"Magic" is to collectible card games what D&D is to RPGs: "Magic" pioneered the format in 1993 and remains the most popular of its kind, with an estimated 6 million players.

According to Patrick Begley, manager of It's Your Move on the Pearl Street Mall, other popular card games include the humorous "Killer Bunnies" and "Munchkin" series. "Killer Bunnies," in which players attempt to keep their bunnies alive while killing their opponents via such weapons as egg beaters and whisks, appeals more to teenagers and families, while "Munchkin," a spoof on RPGs in which players defeat monsters and gather treasure to progress through levels, is popular among adults.

Begley says online games have taken a toll on tabletop games, but that offline gaming remains a popular alternative across all demographics.

"People still have the want and need for social gatherings and being able to sit down with their family," Begley says.

As a result, game merchants have noticed a rise in popularity of board games, such as "The Settlers of Catan," a multiplayer board game from Germany in which players build a civilization on an uninhabited island. The game debuted in 1995, and a fourth edition was released in 2007. It's part of what gamers are calling a renaissance in board games.

Begley says "The Settlers of Catan" is the most popular game in his store.

"It's a great game that a lot of the college crowd has been getting into," he says. "You can get together around a table for two to three hours at a time. It's a great social time."

Part of the game's appeal is that no one is eliminated and, as the game features no combat, it is a favorite both with college kids and families.

This is similar to RPGs like "Dungeons & Dragons," in which players cooperate rather than compete with one another.

"Role-playing games force you to develop social skills," says Keith Baker, a Boulder resident who has become a major force in the gaming world. "A lot of entertainment in our society is passive. We watch television or a movie. Role-playing games are an active form of entertainment where you're actually making the story."

"These are collaborative storytelling things that emphasize your creativity," he adds.

Founding father

Baker knows a thing or two about creativity. In 2002, two years after the release of the third edition of D&D, Wizards of the Coast, the game's publisher, put out a call for the creation of a new world -- a fantasy setting where

gamers could run D&D campaigns. Baker entered the contest, and from the roughly 11,000 entrants, his fantasy world, Eberron, was chosen to be the newest neighborhood in the D&D community. It was released in 2004, winning an Origins Award (the Oscars of the gaming world) that year for Best Roleplaying Game Supplement.

"Eberron is a fantastic world," Schwols says. "When I play D&D it has to be Eberron. It's that good."

Baker describes Eberron as a world that has just come to the end of a bloody civil war and the populace is wary of more bloodshed. But a mysterious catastrophe presages there may be more to come.

"It's kind of like someone's dropped an atomic bomb, but nobody knows who," Baker says. "It has this feel of the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II."

Eberron offers more action-adventure and espionage than traditional D&D worlds due to Baker's love of pulp fiction and film noir. He says players have described Eberron as "Lord of the Rings" meets Indiana Jones.

Eberron is currently being tweaked for D&D's fourth edition and the new edition will be released in 2009. Baker also has written a series of fantasy novels set in Eberron. His fourth book, "The Queen of Stone," will come out in November, and he's putting the finishing touches on a fifth.

Baker has also created a card game, "Gloom," which won a 2005 Origins Award for Traditional Card Game of the Year and has launched two expansion packs. He is currently finishing the creation of a third expansion for the card game. He is also working with Louisville-based Net Devil, a game development company, on the creation of a science-fiction video game.

Baker likes the changes in the new edition of D&D, such as the addition of an online component, D&D Insider, a subscription service that provides gamers digital tools to enhance their role-playing experience. It's not a video game, but a chance for players to create digital maps and characters.

Most significantly, it gives gamers the chance to play online with other gamers. While this last change seems to run counter to the social benefits of the tabletop version, Baker says it provides an opportunity for old friends to reconnect despite living in different parts of the country.

"Personally, I like gaming around a table if I have the choice," he says, but adds that D&D Insider gives him the chance to occasionally play with his high-school gaming group, even though the members now live in four different cities.

"It's basically to allow you to play with your friends even though you're not physically there," Schwols says.

But he's quick to add that the online component will never replace the tabletop game play that has made D&D such a success.

"It's a social game. You just can't duplicate that online," Schwols says. "You can't sit around and talk about a movie and then play a game."

And that's why, gamers say, offline gaming remains such a popular pastime.

"Gaming is good, clean fun," Brewer says. "It uses the imagination because you have to create your own strategies. You're interacting in a social environment because you're not sitting on the couch watching television or playing video games."

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