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Dungeon master David Harris, 24, rolls assortment of odd-shaped dice.

The Bottom Lines

Brainy Boys Learn About Game of Life in a Game of Good and Evil

By MARY BARBER *Times Staff Writer*

For a dozen pubescent boys, the best time and place to learn survival is the two hours they spend every Wednesday afternoon in the Pasadena Library. That is when and where kids transmogrify into the creatures of Dungeons & Dragons, a game of fantasy that allows them to be good or evil and to suffer the consequences thereof.

It is not really that simple, as anyone who has played the game knows. D & D, as it is called by its intimates, has no rules, winners or losers—only survivors whose powers increase the longer they survive. Players assume the roles of characters who can “die,” but who also revive or become other characters.

The game is a continuous encounter with unknown forces that can go on for years—just like adolescence. Its manufacturer calls the game “so abstruse as to be able to be played only by persons with intelligence far above the norm.”

That is who shows up at the library meeting room. Anyone can play, but a librarian noted that it is always boys of a certain age, boys who never seem to show up for anything else at the library.

June Buhrman, head of children’s services at the library, considers the game wholesome although it has stirred controversy elsewhere from critics who call it devil worship.

D & D is charted and led by a dungeon master. In this case it is David Harris, a 24-year-old Pasadena floral designer who may be the only person in the world who understands these boys and their game.

“It’s like life,” Harris said. “If you’re stupid you get killed. If you’re intelligent you survive. If you’re lucky you survive until next time. It’s based on good, so

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—Michael Moore, 14

if you have a good train of thought you get ahead, but that’s the hardest way to be. Evil is easier because you don’t have to care about anyone else. But whatever you do, it will come back to you.”

One Wednesday, during a boisterous two hours in which almost every character in the game either was killed or thought he was, players explained their passion for the game.

David Arnold is 12, goes to Eliot Junior High School and likes math.

“Think of it as life,” he said knowledgeably of D & D. “Some players think of it as getting more magic or weapons and some think of it as getting more powerful. Magic and weapons can be taken from you, but power and experience are seldom taken. Power within you can only be taken by an energy drain. When I play, I get rid of my frustrations. If I get mad I can use my power against another guy without hurting anyone.”

Ricardo Castro Ramirez, 12, another Eliot student whose family moved to Pasadena from Colombia in 1981, said the game “makes you think.”

“You learn a lesson for your next character,” he said. “You have to think how you can work with the group to

avoid the traps and getting killed. Now here I’m dead again and I’d do anything to get back in the game.”

Andy Wagner, a 16-year-old Pasadena City College math student who wears Army boots and talks like a hyperkinetic doctoral candidate, says he prefers characters who have magic powers, not the evil ones.

“Since I’ve been playing I’ve calmed down,” he said. “I’m not as gung-ho as I used to be on Army stuff. My mom says the game has given me determination, which I didn’t use to have. Sometimes she hassles me for playing games so much, but parents don’t really understand the basic principles.”

Tysen DeJohnette, 14, likes to study math and computers at his school, Marshall Fundamental. In D & D, he said, “we all have to act as one to get through it alive. It’s like a family. You learn not necessarily how to manipulate people, but how to get around things. Sometimes I’m really acting out my fantasies. I’ve thought about how it would be to join King Arthur, and if I could do that for two months, I really would.”

Ben Engelsberg, who attends Pasadena Alternative School, likes the ingenuity and imagination the game requires. “I like to take a band of people and go adventuring,” he said. “This gives me a chance to get out aggression.”

Michael Moore, 14, another Marshall student, was on a high after spending part of that day attending a logic class at Cal State Los Angeles.

“Are we having fun?” he asked. “We’re in a pit of gold and everybody’s getting killed. Isn’t this fun? How would I know if the game is about life, when I’m dead?”