

## Drugs, Fantasy

# Games Give Students Their Own World

By RONA JAFFE, *Independent News Alliance*

NEW YORK—Their parents went to college in an era when everything seemed possible: Life itself was the fantasy, and adolescent dreams of the future were likely to come true. Today's college students live, work and act out their fantasies on campuses whose atmosphere would probably send most of their parents into shock.

In fact, in the first year of college, and often beyond, it is enough to send some of the students into shock. Suddenly the restraints of family life are gone, along with the tugs and supportiveness of childhood peer groups.

A college campus is often an enormous and lonely place. In the newly co-ed dorms, the first thing that strikes a visitor is the noise. Everyone seems to have a stereo with huge speakers, and day and night the music speaks to them of their own inarticulate dreams.

There are no mandatory quiet hours, no curfews. All the doors have locks, like an apartment house, to keep out burglars or give privacy to lovers. But there is little privacy—phones ring, friends throw pebbles at bedroom windows if there is no answer. To be unpopular in the midst of this seething life is doubly painful.

### Now There Are Drugs

As always, there are parties and there is drinking. But now there are also drugs offered, and often accepted. I asked one student, "Why, when you are so involved with health foods and sports and a healthy body, do you take drugs at parties?" The student answered: "To stay awake."

I suggested that if the party was so boring it wasn't worth staying awake for, but I suspect her answer to me was just sidestepping the issue.

College students today are reluctant to talk about their parents' divorces and lovers, the emotional chaos they have left behind at home. They compare notes, and they all know the mess is still waiting for them when they go back. . . . if they do go back.

Even the students from happy homes have problems to deal with. There is a poignancy in knowing that if one falls desperately in love at 18 it will probably be the right person at the wrong time. Happy endings are no longer guaranteed—in fact, they are often purposely deferred.

These are the children of parents who believed in happy endings, and today are putting together the pieces. The kids have to put together the pieces too—not just shards of a broken dream but bits of a puzzle.

It is against this background of energy and longing that fantasy role-playing games have sprung up on college campuses. They are medieval war games, played in the imagination, by a group, in which each person pretends to be a character and they all "play" a sort of story. The original and best-known of the medieval war

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games is Dungeons and Dragons, although there are others too.

The players of a fantasy role-playing game are supposed to sit in a room, using nothing more than dice, graph paper and pencils to draw maps, and a scenario invented (or purchased) by one of the players who acts as a referee and who has an instruction manual.

Each player creates a character, complete with name, attributes, and weapons or spells—for example, a fearless warrior, a treasure-hunting sprite, a magic-using holy man, or a wily charlatan—and they are plunged into a series of imaginary adventures involving frightful and violent dangers; monsters who can kill, maim, enchant or paralyze, and must be killed, maimed, tricked or routed. The players are after a hidden treasure.

The point of the game is to amass a fortune and keep from getting killed.

In a way it is like psychodrama—they can act out their deepest fears and neurotic problems, they can have powers they do not have in real life, they can fulfill their forbidden fantasies, and it can be either a wonderful escape or get a player into serious trouble if it becomes too real.

If it were psychodrama, the group would be in the hands of a trained therapist. But in the game, the group is controlled by a referee who is just another player like themselves, so there is no control. The monster in their own minds can rise up to overwhelm them.

Some of the students who play these fantasy role-playing games have already taken their games a dangerous step too far by playing them in real environments: forests, caves, even steam tunnels underneath the campus. The thin line between fantasy and reality blurs and vanishes.

Why would young people who have been sent to college to prepare for life, offered the American Dream, reject it to live in their own world of invented terrors? Many answers have been suggested, ranging from innocent to sinister, but no one is really sure. For each player it is probably somewhat different. But I would submit this:

Each of these young people really wants the same thing—communication, devotion, love. Their bonding with each other to go on a "quest" and protect each other fulfills their needs. They are unable to tell each other their secret feelings, and use the characters they adopt in the game as a substitute for what they would like to be in life.