Introduction: The First Edition

I n the beginning were the pencil, and graph paper, and the rattle of twenty-sided dice rolling against a tabletop.

To generations that have grown up associating games with screens, keyboards, and multi-buttoned controllers, this might sound as quaint as hand-cranked automobiles or phones with wires. But in truth the seeds of one of the world's largest entertainment industries, as well as of some of the most vibrant cultures native to the new digital environment, lie here. From pencil, paper, and dice came digital swords and magic spells, chainguns and rocket launchers, clans and guilds, and, ultimately, rich virtual worlds filled with people who, in many cases, wanted to do nothing but talk.

This book is about the rise and maturation of computer game developers and communities of computer game players since the early 1970s. As the story opens in 1972, the arcade video game craze was just starting to build, driven by game designers and players at Atari and other smaller companies. But in the small Wisconsin town of Lake Geneva, a group of people was gathering who had no interest in playing games electronically, and saw no point in moving pixels around a screen. They were concerned instead with storytelling, and with the ability to play parts in each other's stories. That desire and the *Dungeons & Dragons* game that resulted from it would over time have a profound impact on the development of computer games and their players' communities.

It's almost impossible to overstate *D&D*'s role in the rise of computer gaming. Scratch almost any game developer who worked between the late 1970s and the early 2000s, and you're likely to find a vein of role-playing experience. Some of the biggest computer games have explicit roots in *D&D*.

Richard Garriott's landmark *Ultima* series was originally based directly on his high-school *D&D* games. The 1996 hit *Quake* was named after a character in the long-running games played by the developers at id Software, and the game was originally conceived as a medieval-themed role-playing game. Indeed, without *D&D* creators Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, the history of computer gaming communities would likely have taken a radically different path.

Role-playing games had roots in earlier games, just as computer gamers could later look to Gygax and his kin as predecessors. Serious, adult-oriented war games that utilized toy soldiers as virtual armies had become popular in Germany in the late 1800s, and the games had spread across Europe and America. Even committed-pacifist author H.G. Wells had been a devotee, writing a book on the subject called *Little Wars* in 1913. In mid-twentieth-century America, a game publisher called Avalon Hill started releasing strategy games based on the Civil War, the Revolutionary War, and World War II, which helped renew interest in war gaming. Gygax and Arneson had been among devotees of that company's games, and their local groups in Lake Geneva and Minneapolis were dedicated to that type of play before the advent of role-playing games.

"Paper gamers," as they would come to be known after the rise of the computer age, served very much as prototypes for the kinds of digital communities that would come later. The players were mostly male, mostly young, and mostly white and middle class. Computer researchers and programmers, a group drawn in disproportionate numbers to fantasy novels like J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series, loved the game. They played it in its original form, and because their medium was code and computer, not paper and dice, they tried to replicate its magic on their machines. Throughout the 1970s, digital versions of the game appeared on university and other publicly accessible networks, and spread quickly through programming circles.

Paper games were heavy on violence and fantasy, as computer games later would be. In the best cases, storytelling and genuine role-playing defined play, although these elements varied with the quality of the imaginations of the people running the games. In Gygax's mind, it hasn't been an accident that so much of gaming tradition centered on violence, from chess to war games to *D&D* to *Quake*, nor that players tended to be male (though other game scholars have certainly emphasized the cooperative elements of play,

even in violent games).

"Games tend to answer a lot of deep instinctive things," Gygax said. "Maybe it's men's male aggressiveness that makes them want to play games. There's a competitive aggressiveness to games, even *Monopoly*. You're there to win."

But whoever was playing, *Dungeons & Dragons* created the kind of communities sustained by simple physical presence. The games were played in garages, basements, and dorm rooms across the country by small groups of people. The fact that their games took them outside the mainstream of American popular entertainment culture helped solidify these players' bonds. Throughout the course of a night, a weekend, or even months—and amid piles of empty soda cans, pizza boxes, and more than a few marijuana roaches—players worked together to get out of each dangerously lethal situation their game master threw them into.

The spread of *D&D*-like games onto computers and computer networks changed the boundaries of the paper game. It opened up geographic borders, linking people from around the world in ways barely imaginable before. It gave storytellers, now in the form of programmers and game designers, a different canvas on which to paint their universes, changing the dynamics of their narrative fictions. Over time it gave the players themselves opportunities to interact with storytellers' worlds in new ways, changing the games in ways developers never intended.

Indeed, the high-tech story of computer game communities is about people searching for a place that feels like home, surrounded by others—even if they are only virtual representations on a computer screen—who understand them. Gygax and his Lake Geneva circle of tabletop gamers knew this well. Their influence ultimately helped millions of others find and shape game communities of their own.

The narrative of this book explores the people who have made up those communities over the years, as well as the people who created the games that have made those communities possible. We focus primarily on one developer, a Texan named Richard Garriott, whose own story stretches from the moments of his exposure to computer programming and *Dungeons &*

Dragons to the present. But the real subject of the chapters that follow is the broader population of gamers: the people who play, the people who create, and the people who sustain gaming communities.

This book doesn't cover the entirety of video and computer gaming culture. Many different strands make up that history, and this book focuses on the parts of the culture that we believe best tell the story of the rise of today's digital gaming communities. At virtually all times covered during this book, sales of video games for home console platforms, such as those made by Atari, Nintendo, Sega, Sony, and Microsoft, far outstripped most of the computer games we've examined here. The histories of those games and cultures have been told with grace and thoroughness elsewhere. Interested readers may want to pick up a copy of Steven Kent's *The Ultimate History of Video Games* for the most complete history of the arcade and video gaming industry available. J.C. Herz's *Joystick Nation* and David Kushner's *Masters of Doom* also explore the culture of video and computer games through the lens of players and developers, although *Joystick Nation* focuses more on video games, and *Masters of Doom* focuses specifically on the id Software community.

But, as has become common in the era of the Web, smartphones, and social media, the geekier side of computer gaming culture blazed a trail ultimately followed by the mainstream. The types of games—and most particularly the types of communities—that sprang up in the wake of home computing and Internet connectivity bled into the arcade and home console market. In Asia, "PC bangs," a kind of arcade room where people play games on networked personal computers, proved largely responsible for the growth of online game communities populated by millions of people. The same phenomenon is taking off in the United States, although in the U.S., the cybercafés are often populated with more action-oriented games than are their Asian counterparts. Home video game consoles now have network connections, and the same games that spurred the growth of online communities on the PC are becoming integrated into the Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft consoles.

This book will make no broad claims about who gamers are or why they play; nor may this type of generalization be possible given the increasing breadth of gaming communities and the diversity of games available. This is not a book of psychology or cultural anthropology. Rather, we hope to

explore the role and importance of community within the computer gaming world. These games play an important role in many peoples' lives, even if it seems at times that players are simply staring at screens filled with scenes of violence and bloodshed. The content of these games can often play a secondary role to their socializing effects, a point that is typically ignored in the periodic panics over the alleged effects of violent content on players.

It might sound a little grandiose, referring to computer gaming as a sweeping, socializing force. These are just games. But really they're not so different from many other components of modern life. Much of what we do with our lives, from organizing our music and movie collections to joining recreational sports teams, is about finding other people who like what we like, and making the connections that make us feel less alone in a hurried world.

For millions of people, computer and video games have provided an opportunity to find other people who share similar backgrounds, stories, hopes, and dreams. It may seem strange to think of computer game communities in the same light as sports teams, writing groups, or ordinary offline friends, particularly if you've never logged on to hunt digital terrorists in a cybercafé or listened to a bard flirting and singing songs in *EverQuest*'s land of Norrath.

But for gamers, those virtual worlds are now just an extension of the real world.