

An introduction to computer adventures

By Arnie Katz

SLAY

There's a dragon living at our house. In fact, we're also infested with kobolds, zombies, orcs and hordes of evil-doers of every description. Fortunately, there's no immediate cause for alarm. They're all trapped on diskettes, and an intrepid band of heroes intends to finish most of them off this weekend.

Combatting the forces of darkness—and other familiar elements of sword and sorcery hijinks like finding treasure and saving damsels in distress—are among the thrills that await players of computer adventure games. Already running a close second to arcade-style computer programs in overall popularity, adventures give devotees the opportunity to spend a couple of hours vicariously experiencing worlds of frightening dangers and glorious deeds.

Computer adventures are loosely based on concepts introduced by non-electronic

games like **Dungeons & Dragons**. Unlike more traditional games like chess and **Monopoly**, 'D&D' emphasizes creating a persona for a game-character and then play-acting that character through a series of increasingly challenging situations.

In another striking departure from the usual boardgame, participants work cooperatively to accomplish common goals instead of competing against each other. It is not uncommon to see one player sacrifice a character to preserve the others in the adventuring group.

"Winning" in games like 'Dungeons

role-playing (RPGs) such as **& Dragons**.

The four most popular fantasy roles— wizard, dwarf, cleric and warrior

& Dragons,' as in real life, is not a cut-and-dried proposition. RPGs are generally played as a series of semi-connected episodes. Characters accumulate experience as a result of their exploits and gradually rise in power during the course of their heroic careers. Sometimes, success is measured in the number of characters that survive a deathtrap to fight again another day.

The hub of any non-electronic role-playing game is the so-called Dungeon-master (DM). This individual designs the scenarios, referees games in progress and informs players of the consequences of their characters' actions. Here's a segment that might occur in a typical session of 'Dungeons & Dragons':

Party Leaders: We're walking slowly down the passage. Tovah the Thief is carefully checking the walls and floors for pitfalls and traps. Hercules the fighter will bring up the rear,



ING DRAGONS



watching behind us for an ambush.

DM: You walk 60 ft. and see a door on your right.

Tovah: I'm looking at the door and, particularly, the lock.

DM: It is an oaken door reinforced with metal strips. The lock appears to be of the pin tumbler type.

Tovah: I will attempt to pick the lock.

DM: You succeed.

Party Leader: Let's open the door and enter.

DM: You're in a dimly lit room and six hulk shapes charge at you from the dark corners.

Party Leader: Battle positions everyone!

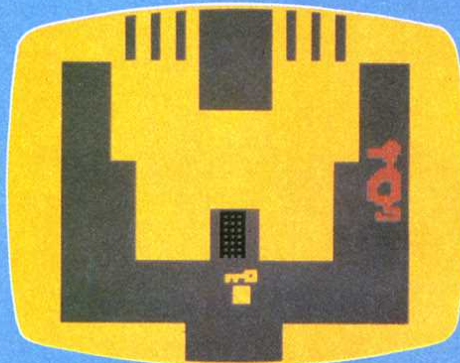
And so it goes. The only catch is that the Dungeonmaster usually ends up spending untold hours creating the fantasy world and dreaming up exciting scenarios. What's more, the DM must function solely as a neutral arbiter and can't run a character!

Electronic adventures substitute the computer for a human DM. While no machine can match the imagination, creativity and resourcefulness of a live Dungeonmaster, the computer version requires little set-up time and no impartial umpire. Virtually all computer adventures can even be played solitarie, while non-electronic RPGs require at least four or five participants.

The development of interactive computer adventures confirms that necessity is, indeed, the mother of invention. They were truly an inspiration born out of desperation.

The first generation of personal computers, however well they balanced checkbooks and stored mailing lists, just didn't have the capacity to adequately render arcade games. The reasons were simple and obvious: the earliest micros lacked the basic ingredients that make up such programs. They possessed neither sound nor color and offered only the most rudimentary on-screen graphics.

Perhaps novelty alone made those pioneering computer arcade games look



Owners of programmable videogames can also get in on the fantasy fun with games such as "Adventure" from Atari

less crude back then than they do today, but that couldn't have made them any more exciting to play.

Text-based games created by pioneers like Scott Adams filled the gap admirably. Since these contests relied on mental, not physical, dexterity, the slow response time of games programmed in BASIC was totally irrelevant.

Of course, the scope of adventure games has widened enormously as personal computer hardware improved. Some of the newest titles include such niceties as illustrations of key scenes, multi-character play and even animated sequences. Some companies are even producing additional scenarios that tack onto the basic game program.

There are five distinct types of adventures currently available. They are:

Text adventures: These resemble short stories that are, in a sense, jointly written by the game's designer and each individual player. When the person or persons manipulating the on-screen characters inputs one- or two-word commands via the keyboard, the program responds with the appropriate description. Often but not always, text adventures present a series of puzzles that must be solved in a pre-determined order until the ultimate goal is finally achieved.

Augmented text adventures. These are basically similar to the standard text adventures but add an extra dimen-

sion in the form of a few audio-visual enhancements.

Illustrated adventures. Actual pictures replace the long descriptions of what the on-screen hero sees. These generally take the form of multi-color line drawings in the high-resolution graphics mode. Movement is still accomplished by the input of commands through the keyboard, though the range of commands is frequently more restricted than with the text or graphics adventures.

Action adventures. Manual dexterity plays a much bigger role in this type of adventure than in any other, since the gamer maneuvers and fights by utilizing a joystick. There may or may not be a few additional one-letter commands such as "get," "shoot" and "examine," but the emphasis is on navigating your adventures around what amounts to a schematic map of the game's setting.

Graphics adventures. The newest arrival on the computer adventure scene combines elements of all four other types in varying proportion. The trend is toward giving the gamer the view of the hero's surroundings as he would actually see them rather than offering an omniscient overhead perspective.

Although a good case can be made for graphics adventures as the true state-of-the-art variety, all five approaches have their unique strengths. Many RPGers, for instance, claim to prefer the text adventures. They liken the experience of playing an all-text game to listening to the radio, in that it gives free rein to each gamer's own imagination instead of fencing it in by displaying everything in minute visual detail.

So if the workaday cares of 1982 have got you down, why not strap on an electronic sword, don your armor, and head for the dragon's lair? Maybe you can become the Siegfried or Conan of the computer world!

