

THE BEST XMAS PRESENT EVER

Before the age of 11 my very favourite game to play was War. This was an outdoor game that me and the local kids played en masse around the fields and ditches near our house. Being the 70s we were allowed out until dark and only had to beware flashers and men with puppies. War was a simple game, you were a goodie or a baddie (it was never about Brits and Jerries, that would have been beyond our comprehension) and the idea was to sneak up and shoot each other with sticks, or with grenades made from a handful of wheat stubble pulled from the ground. The mud made for a very satisfying heft, with good explosion capacity too. Sometimes there were all out charges with shouting, but mostly it was a stealth game.

Summer holidays called for a six week War frenzy with special missions and battle royales with kids from other estates. The ultimate mission, only ever talked about in hushed whispers in case the grown ups found out about it, was Operation Garden. This could only ever happen at the stroke of midnight, and involved climbing over the fences of all the back gardens in your street until you got to the end, in our case marked by the Victoria pub. Then you could work your way round to the front and sprint home. I only ever heard tales of a neighbour's older brother trying this daring operation, and he was caught at the last house. No one spoke of his punishment.

Our favourite battleground for War was rather charmingly called The Pit. This was accessed round the fields at the back of our houses. Imagine if God had taken a giant ice cream scoop to a field, and then filled the resulting crater with trees. That was The Pit. According to my dad it used to be a Victorian rubbish dump, and that was confirmed by the huge amount of old glass bottles lying half buried in the undergrowth. To our eyes this was the ultimate playground. Full of slopes, tracks and hidden areas, we had names for every part of it. One massive slope was worn from years of boys and girls sliding down it. Obviously this feat was best achieved in the carcass of an old fridge. Health and safety, like the Internet was still a way off.

I used to love to lurk in a track that ran round the lip of the crater called the Battlements. You could circumnavigate the whole pit from that track and eavesdrop or ambush at will. The only downside was that if you were discovered you had to be quick to get away. Another well loved spot was only accessible by crawling through a rabbit sized hole in a giant bramble bush. That led to a cave like hole in the thing which we set up as a club house. We didn't have much in the way of furnishings, just some of my Marvel comics and a collection of broken floor tiles.

Happy days.

Eventually secondary school loomed and we moved to the other end of the village. In the first week of new school we had all the usual orientation. Each of us received a slip of paper that outlined all the clubs and societies that you could join. I plumped for two, snooker (it was massive at the time) and Wargames.

My mate didn't fancy Wargames, so I went on my own. I genuinely imagined that the history classroom in which it was held would be turned into a battlefield just for the occasion. I wondered whether or not I'd be able to choose goodie or baddie myself, or more likely, one of the older boys

would have all that sorted out. I regretted not bringing a stick with me to represent a Sten gun. Stupid really, literally a schoolboy error as I'd always been able to just grab one at The Pit. Perhaps a seasoned War player would be able to lend me one in the meantime?

I opened the door. Bizarrely all the tables and chairs were upright. No one lobbed a clod of earth at me yelling 'banzai!' (Historical accuracy wasn't necessary in The Pit). No one was having a 'bundle' on the floor and handing out Chinese burns. Instead, there were two groups, sat round some pushed together tables, intently studying some books and some sketches. At each table one of the boys sat behind a cardboard screen. They appeared to be in charge. No one even looked up.

I approached the table furthest away from me. Always best to go to the back if you're new. I said "hello" to the boy behind the card screen. It looked like a maths exam on there. He muttered "this one's already full, try with Derek over there." I tried with Derek, over there. Derek passed me an enormously heavy book, like an oversized annual. He also gave me three dice. "Roll up a PC and come back" he said. No one had yet to look me in the eye. I sidled off to a lone table and chair and opened the book.

I don't remember being confused by the first edition AD&D Players Handbook. Some of the words were new to me, but I got the gist well enough. I was intrigued. Within a few minutes I had a basic character written out, and by now I knew what a PC was. To this day I think Player Character before I think Police Constable or Politically Correct.

I went back to Derek who paused the intense table conversation to ask me "what have you got?" "A paladin" I replied. Groans erupted all round the table and I dimly remember someone actually throwing a dice at me. "Well, you had better sit down anyway." said Derek.

I honestly remember nothing of the next hour. No details. No story. No action. I just remember thinking this was the best and coolest thing I'd ever seen and that I wanted to do it forever. The second thing I thought was, wonder what the game at the other table was like? (It was Tunnels & Trolls. Our table looked down on them)

And so to the best Xmas present ever. That night I asked my mum if I could have the Dungeon Masters Guide for Xmas. She had no idea what I was talking about, but said if I was good, and very very lucky, she'd have a word with Santa. This was September. I went on about it every day for three months. Eventually December rolled round and I was bursting with anticipation. So much so, that to my eternal shame, I must confess I stole into my parents wardrobe while they were out and rifled through the presents. I found a heavy book shaped parcel, and gently peeled back the tape enough to get a corner of the book visible. There it was. The DMG. (I knew enough to call it that by now). Deep abiding joy. I could hardly breathe.

Every few days I returned to that wardrobe, and eventually managed to get the whole book out of the wrapping. I stole a few minutes of wonder opening the book at random. Then, I would gently slide it back into its festive housing and replace it with the other by now redundant packages.

When Xmas morning came, I knew I had to be cool. But I couldn't. It was the DMG and I was as excited as it is possible to be, even though I must have read a good half of it already. You see, this time, I'd be able to read it in order. Priceless.

I don't still have that exact DMG (a story for another time) but I have replaced it. I try not to look at it so much these days as I don't want to spoil an otherwise perfect memory. I still DM, and it's all down to that misunderstanding in my first week at school in 1979. Thank goodness for that.