

In the thick of February on Long Island, cabin fever is epidemic. But faced with winter's tedium, we can take inspiration from that boredom-basher of childhood, game-playing, which often tells us more about our personalities than our ability to roll snake eyes.

Every age has its games: Way back in 3000 BC, ancient Mesopotamians in the city of Ur were rolling lapis-lazuli dice in a Tigris-Euphrates version of backgammon, and a thousand years

later in Egypt, a board game called *senet* was such a popular pastime that Tutankhamen was buried with one.

In this special issue of *LI Life*, we look at some of the hot new games people are playing these many millennia later, from the fang-free role-playing of *Vampire: The Masquerade* to the minotaur-decorated cards of *Magic: The Gathering*. We follow sports fanatics as they queue up in Glen Head to buy the latest teams for the statistics-fueled baseball fantasy

game *Strat-O-Matic*. We explore how some of the classics from the 1930s heyday of American gaming, such as *Monopoly*, have made the cyber-leap to CD-ROM, and look at a group of die-hard wordsmiths who gather every week to play verbal hopscotch.

And, hopefully, we'll inspire you to thumb your nose at the tail end of winter, dust off that closet-bound *Monopoly* box, and settle down to the very serious business of debating who gets the little metal terrier.

# Are You Game?

From vampire role-playing to fantasy pennant races and magical showdowns, you can visit worlds you may never have imagined — if you play your cards right

BY MATTHEW MCALLESTER

STAFF WRITER

THEY ARRIVED AT NIGHT. They always arrive at night. They drove past the church, white in the thin light that the moon cast down from behind a filter of winter clouds. It was cold. The graves behind the church were silhouettes against the moonlight. Long shadows cast by trees caught in the cars' headlights.

Craters in the long, muddy driveway that lead to the gamemaster's home might persuade less-determined visitors to turn back. But not these visitors. When they arrived, the gamemaster walked across the wide room to greet them, his long, dark hair wet and shiny.

His name was Dave. His voice was calm and full of authority.

He glided over to the couch beside the open fire. On the mantel sat a painting of a Merlin-like figure holding a huge sword. On the coffee table in front of the fire was a small box in the shape of a coffin. A skull-and-crossbones flag hung from the balcony in the room.

By the time all were gathered, the gamemaster's long hair was dry. And then, about an hour before midnight, without warning, without even a sign from the gamemaster, the young men and women in sweats, jeans and T-shirts started to take on the personalities of vampires.

"We must keep our activities away from the Nosferatu," said John Smedley, 22, now known as the vampire James Wyrnfield. His voice was deep and deliberate, and his hands came together, as if he were praying. His teeth, however, stayed the same length and



Newsday Photo / Phillip Davies

The fantasy game *Magic: The Gathering* uses cards for a contest between two "wizards." Each wizard has 20 "life points," and the object is to drain your opponent's lives.

didn't appear to grow any sharper. He remained more interested in drinking Pepsi than human blood.

"That is true," said a very tall, muscular man of few words who sat across the table. Though he recently abandoned his birth name for Sage — "That's it, just Sage" — at that moment, the 27-year-old was the vampire Alistair.

Though he had entered into a vampire pact with John, his skin remained relatively ruddy and his appetite remained focused on the two slices of pizza within reach of his left hand. Instead of a black cape, he wore a white T-shirt with black lettering that read, "If you don't like my attitude, quit talking to me."

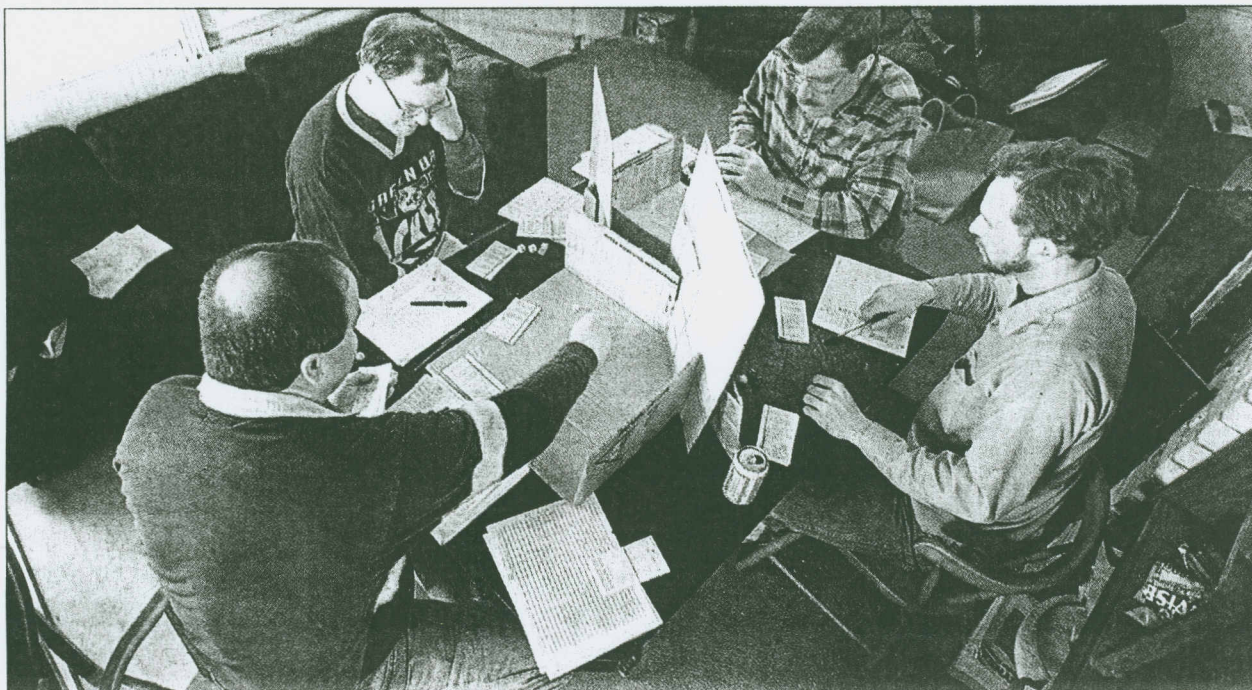
So what kind of vampires are these

anyway? Well, they're game-playing vampires. Not vampires at all, in fact.

"It's just a game," said Melanie Goldstein, 20, another gamer in the group, which meets every Saturday night at the Mount Sinai home of Dave, a computer-repair technician and singer in a "psychedelic space rock" band who declined to give his last name because he thought his fans might consider his game-playing nerdy. The game in question is the role-playing *Vampire: The Masquerade*.

Although spending every Saturday evening ad-libbing the roles of vampires in an ongoing story may sound a little unusual, these young Long Islanders are far from alone in their enjoyment of games that don't rely on CD-ROMs, whizzing graphics or a modem. All across the Island, people regularly meet to play a variety of games that ignore the age of the computer and require the players to sit down eyeball to eyeball and talk to one another. Families still play *Monopoly*, charades and *Clue*, gamblers still sit in darkened rooms to play poker and bridge, the cerebral still play chess, and two-legged dictionaries still battle it out in *Scrabble* leagues.

And then there are some lesser-known games that bring people together in passionate subcultures. Players of the statistical baseball game *Strat-O-Matic* try to prove their ability as master tacticians as they pretend to be the general managers of major-league baseball teams. Fans of the fantasy card game *Magic: The Gathering* feel the hairs on the back of their necks stand up as they prepare to strike down their opponents



Newsday Photo / John Keating

Above, Strat-O-Matic fanatics, from left, Jim Colquhoun, Kevin Vincent, Perry Glickman and Ray Gropper have played the game for years and years. At right, the rule book for the role-playing game Vampire: The Masquerade is held by player who calls himself Sage.



Photo by Ed Betz

with lightning bolts. Others, such as the players of Vampire, adopt the roles of the kinds of modern-day vampires featured in the novels of Anne Rice. Without getting up on a stage or reading from a script, they act out a story whose narrative direction lies partly in their hands and partly in the dozens of rule books published by the game's manufacturers, White Wolf.

If there's a common link between these games — besides the escapism and strategy that nearly every game ever invented provides — it's the fact that, to play, each gamer has to take time out from his or her life to drive to an agreed place at an agreed time. Once there, they meet like old friends, as many genuinely are. No lonesome battles against computers in darkened bedrooms for these people.

"I've been at this business for eigh-

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teen years," said Jim Katona, owner of Men At Arms Hobbies store in Middle Island, which sells many sorts of games. "I think people do like the interaction you get only from dealing with other human beings. . . . There's a bond that takes place in gaming that you can't get in a computer. There's something that as a human being you require."

The noise of men shouting that emanated from a small white house in Long Beach on Super Bowl Sunday bears witness to Katona's theory. The shouting started long before the kickoff.

Inside, eight men sat around two tables throwing dice against cardboard mini-stadia, checking the statistics on their Strat-O-Matic baseball cards and yelping with glee if one of their star players hit a homer. It was the final day of their imaginary regular season, and the general managers in the eight-man Oldsom league were vying for spots in the playoffs. They also were enjoying one another's

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company, as they have once a month for years and years.

"When Pat was moving, some of us went over to help him out," said Perry Glickman, 43, who works in insurance, lives in Deer Park and has won the league for the past two years.

The eight friends have been to one another's weddings, lived through one another's divorces and kept an eye out when anyone needed help. For two years, they stopped meeting in person and tried playing via computer. That just wasn't the same.

"Part of this is definitely the social aspect," said Ray Gropper, 38, a wiry man who refinishes wood floors and was the host of the day's game at his Long Beach home. "It's kind of like the bowling alley except you throw dice instead of bowling balls."

Sometimes, Strat-O-Matic players care so much they throw punches.

"I remember some guy choking some other guy once," said Jim Colquhoun, 39, of North Massapequa, who is the commissioner of the league as well as a general manager — something that sometimes causes the other GMs to question his lack of bias. "His head turned blue."

Some players of Strat-O-Matic also care enough about the game to drive hundreds of miles to the game's manufacturers in Glen Head every January to pick up the new season's cards, which are the basis of the game. The Strat-O-Matic Game Co. Inc., started by owner Hal Richman in 1961, compiles the statistics of each real-world major league player and then puts together a card for each man. The numbers and plays on the cards are arranged to produce statistically probable plays when the dice are thrown. For example, a player who has the 1996 Bernie Williams will usually find Williams to be as big a hitter in Strat-O-Matic as he was in Yankee Stadium last season. The skill in playing comes in making exactly the kind of decisions that team managers and officials make.

There's no doubt that winning is a big concern for players. But perhaps the magic of the game comes in the comradeship and the slightly crazy devotion to the game and to fellow players that it breeds.

"It's an obsession," said Hannon, 29, of Amesbury, Mass.

Since 1990, Hannon and John Saliva, 30, have made the trip from their homes in Massachusetts to Glen Head for opening day. This year was no exception for the two, who have been friends since Little League.

After buying his cards from the modest little office that sits just off the Railroad Avenue parking lot in Glen Head, Hannon sat in the driver's seat of his beige Blazer, rarely looking up from the reams of cards sitting his lap. His fingers flicked through them, his eyes scanning the players in anticipation of the draft pick he would soon enjoy with his friends back in Massachusetts.

"It's the fabric of baseball," he said. "It's the only real baseball game out there. It's just not the same as other games."

Hannon's devotion to Strat-O-Matic is typical of not just its fans, but of most gamers. Many are fiercely loyal to their own favorite games, and frequently dis-

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missive of other games and gamers. Ask a Strat fan about players of Magic and Vampire, and the Strat fan will suggest the other gamers get a grip on reality. Ask most Vampire players about Magic devotees, and they'll come close to baring their fangs as they dismiss it as insubstantial, a cheap high, a "cocaine for gamers." Many Magic players think Vampire players are weirdos. And one gamer, who happily plays both Magic and Vampire, offered this reaction to a description of Strat: "Eeeurrrrrch."

Intra-gaming sniping aside, the enthusiasm on the faces of many Magic players who meet every Monday evening in the food court of the Smith Haven Mall is similar to the concentration on the face of a Strat player — though the faces tend to be 10 or 20 years younger.

Usually between 30 and 35 people show up, most of them teenage boys, but some younger boys and some older men. On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, 52 players showed up, all of them male.

They were there for the weekly tournament run by Gil Rappold, 29, of Rocky Point. Rappold makes his living organizing Magic tournaments around the Island and by dealing in the game's cards.

"It's an easy game to learn but a hard game to master," Rappold said, as he organized the players into pairs for the first round of the tournament, which would last a few hours until there was an overall winner.

To play the game, all you need is a deck of the cards, but, to play it well, it helps to have some of the more unusual and powerful cards, such as the Black Lotus, which can go for as much as \$300. The more decks you buy, the more useful cards you are likely to own. A player can compile his or her own deck out of whatever cards he or she owns. That's where the strategy begins.

The game is manufactured by Wizards of the Coast, based in Renton, Wash., and was premiered in 1993. A game usually lasts around 20 minutes and is a contest between two "wizards" who do battle with cards that depict fantastical creatures, mythic figures, weapons, territories and strategic maneuvers. Each wizard has 20 "life points," and the object is to drain your opponent of his lives.

The rules, which can be very detailed, are contained in a sizable paperback. There also is a computer version of the game, produced by Long Island's Acclaim Entertainment Inc.

Magic players, like other gamers, say they enjoy the strategic and social aspects of the game. It's good to get out of the house to meet people, and planning tactics is more stimulating than watching television. But a good proportion of Magic players soon develop another motive for playing the game, even if they start out just to have fun.

"I paid for my car with money I made from Magic," said Bryan Schmidt, 17, of Centereach. He has two revenue streams — winning tournaments and dealing cards. It's the dealing that is the most remunerative.

"It's a money-making thing for me," said Nick Mitchell, 13, of Saint James, who has about 1,600 cards but keeps

his Black Lotus safely at home out of the reach of light fingers. "I make about \$100 a week. I'll buy a card for \$5 and sell it for \$10. If a player needs the card, he'll pay that much for it."

So far, Nick has put away \$1,400.75. "I'm saving up for a Ferrari Testarossa," he said.

Magic has run into some public-relations problems in its short history, as has Vampire. In Singapore, some schools have banned the game because of concern that it wastes the time and money of students. In 1995, five youths were arrested on the University of Wisconsin campus in Madison and charged with mugging other kids for their Magic cards. And in 1995, a group of parents tried to ban the game from schools

in a Westchester community, saying the game promoted Satanism.

Some concerned parents also have linked Vampire to Satanism.

One Magic player offered this assessment of his favorite game. "It's a game on a piece of paper, and anyone who thinks it's tied to devil worshiping has a few marbles loose," said Jay Como, 32, of Nesconset.

There was, indeed, no visible evidence of ritual sacrifice or devilish conspiracy among the fresh-faced teenagers who sat playing the game at the Smith Haven Mall.

There also was nothing to suggest that the dozen players of Vampire who met in Mount Sinai on a recent night were tempted to satisfy midnight hun-

ger pangs by helping themselves to the necks of two visitors. As they giggled and chatted about their jobs, their studies and their pets, the gamers could have been any bunch of warm-blooded night owls.

"There's no inherent danger in playing Vampire," Dave, the gamemaster, said, as he stretched out his long legs covered in black leather pants. "If you think this is reality, then you really need to see a doctor because you clearly already have a major flaw in your personality."

The gamemaster had spoken. The chattering voices of the other players, hushed while he talked, picked up again. They had waited six long nights, and they were itching to play again. ●



Photo by Ed Betz

John Smedley, Dawn Robb and Sage gather every Saturday to sink their figurative fangs into the role-playing fantasy game Vampire.



Newsday Photo / John Keating



Newsday Photo / Phillip Davies

Strat-O-Matic, at left, is a game of baseball statistics. Some teenagers in the Smith Haven Mall, at right, engage in a tournament of Magic.



Newday / Bob Newman

## A League of Our Own

BY JACK MILLROD  
STAFF WRITER

**A**S SNOW FELL on Sequoia Drive outside my parents' Coram home, a relief pitcher was warming up inside under the clear sky of a midsummer's night. You know, the kind of night made for fireflies, grilled hot dogs and, most definitely, baseball.

There were runners on first and second base as righthanded reliever Mike Marshall finished his warmup pitches. On first base stood Hank Aaron, who'd drawn a walk from Mickey Lolich before the paunchy lefty had been sent to the showers. Righty slugger Orlando Cepeda stood in the on-deck circle, but like everyone else in the ballpark that night, he was looking toward the dug-out bench, where a left-handed power hitter, Willie Stargell, was grabbing a bat. It was the eighth inning and the game was on the line.

"I'm pinch-hitting for Cepeda with Stargell," I told the opposing manager, Tommy Palmieri, the chubby, good-natured kid brother of my best friend, Anthony.

It's funny that I can remember the situation so clearly nearly a quarter-century later, but can't recall for the life of me whether Stargell cleared the bases with one mighty swing or went down swinging. Nor can I recall, for that matter, who won that game, Tom-

my's Stars or my Bombers.

That the snow was real and the fireflies were not, that the three of us were in the den of my parents' Levitt home and not on the field of the illustrious and wholly imaginary Bombers Park, that we were hitting and pitching with dice and cards, not balls and bats, none of these facts explains the gap in my memory. While I can't remember the combination for the gym lock I used last spring, thanks to Strat-O-Matic Baseball, I can recall Earle Combs' batting average for the 1927 Yankees.

I could no more forget the day the UPS truck arrived at our Bayside, Queens, apartment with the mysterious game that had beckoned to me from an ad in the back of a baseball magazine, the game that had promised the chance to manage past and present major-league stars, all of them guaranteed to perform with uncanny statistical accuracy.

I had discovered baseball late in life — I was 12 at the time — and had fallen so deeply in love with the sport that my enthusiasm for the game somehow survived the experience of being a Yankee fan in Queens during the summer of 1969's Miracle Mets.

Whenever we moved, Strat-O-Matic came with me. And each winter, I'd buy the cards from the previous baseball season. The best of times came in 1974, when I joined with Anthony and Tommy Palmieri from across the street and Billy Schulhoff from down the block to

create a league of our own. We drafted four dream teams from a collection of the finest players of the 1971, 1972 and 1973 seasons, and played a schedule of 60 games each. We made trades and kept statistics. My parents bought that \$100 Texas Instruments calculator for math classes, but I spent more time figuring out batting and earned-run averages than circumferences and square roots.

But just as time forces ballplayers to put down their bats and gloves and get on with their lives, Strat-O-Matic soon had to compete with high school plays, an after-school drugstore job, cars and, yes, girls. Today, Anthony is an air traffic controller; his brother Tommy, now tall and slim, is a cop. Billy is a banker and commissioner of my youngest son's baseball league. We all live nearby, but never get together to play, though it would probably do us all good.

Though I stopped playing Strat-O-Matic, I never stopped buying the teams. I married a wonderful woman who bought me the largest piece of Tupperware in creation to store all the cards. I kept talking about keeping the collection going so I could turn it over one day to one of our sons, Josh, 12, and Noah, 8. But the two of them are much more interested in a game of their own called Magic, whose cards, oddly enough, were inspired by Strat-O-Matic. Leslie is smart enough to understand that her

husband's Strat-O-Matic cards have less to do with her sons than with the little boy inside the man she married.

Last month, I turned out for the first time at Strat-O-Matic's annual Opening Day, when people too impatient to wait for the mail come from all over the country to the game company's little office in Glen Head to buy the newest cards. Inside, I met the man who invented Strat-O-Matic all those years ago. Hal Richman doesn't play much anymore, either, but he made me promise to dust off my game and play now and then. The next day, I played a game with each of my boys. In return, I promised to give Magic cards a try sometime. After all, when I watch them play their game, I see a familiar look in their eyes.

It's a look not easily mistaken. I saw it several years ago when I brought my Strat-O-Matic game into the office on a slow day and played the 1956 Yankees against a colleague, Al Cohn, who managed his beloved 1953 Brooklyn Dodgers. Duke Snider was coming up to the plate and, for just one moment, Al was back in the stands at Ebbets Field, watching his boyhood heroes again.

You see, in the world of Strat-O-Matic baseball, old ballparks are never torn down, the only strikes are the kind umpires call and the ballplayers of our youth remain forever young. Just like their managers. •