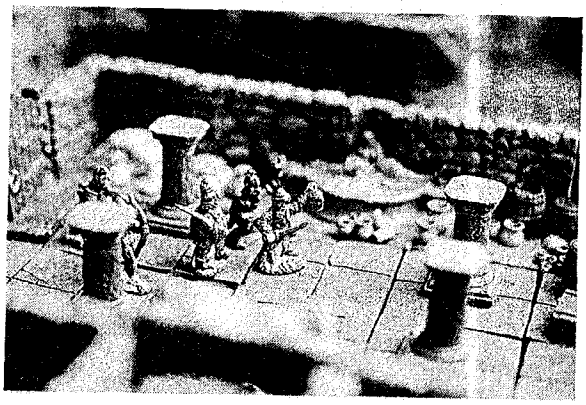

A Dungeons & Dragons miniatures layout at the Soho Gallery for Digital Art. The Manhattan gallery has an exhibit that explores the intersection of role-playing games and the art world.
New York Times

D&D's plea to fans: Tell us how to remake game

By Ethan Gilsdorf
New York Times

True believers have lost faith. Factions squabble. The enemies are not only massed at the gates of the kingdom, but they have also broken through.

This may sound like the back story for an epic trilogy. Instead, it is the situation faced by the makers of Dungeons & Dragons, the venerable fantasy role-playing game many consider to be the grandfather of the video game industry. Gamers bicker over Dungeons & Dragons rules. Some have left childhood pursuits behind. And others have spurned an old-fashioned, tabletop fantasy role-playing game for shiny electronic competitors like *World of Warcraft* and *Elder Scrolls*.

But there might yet be hope for D&D. This week, Wizards of the Coast, the Hasbro subsidiary that owns the game, announced that a new edition is under development, the first overhaul of the rules since the contentious fourth edition was released in 2008. And the game's designers are also planning to undertake an exceedingly rare effort for the gaming industry over the next few months: asking fans to tell them how exactly they should reboot the franchise.

The game "is a unique entertainment experience because it's crafted by the players at the table, and every gaming session is different," said Liz Schuh, who directs publishing and licensing for D&D. "We want to take that idea of the players crafting that experience to the next level and say: 'Help us craft the rules. Help us craft how this game is played.'"

Dungeons & Dragons, created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, was the first commercially published role-playing game when it came out in 1974. In the game, imagination is the playscape, assisted by graph-paper maps, miniature figurines of orcs and hobbits and a referee called a "dungeon master" who moderates an improvised story with a pretend fellowship of wizards, warriors and rogues. Players toss polyhedral dice and consult tomes of rules to determine outcomes.

Throughout the 1970s and '80s D&D grew from a cult sensation into a thriving pastime. Since the game's birth an estimated 20 million people have played it. The nerdy pastime has even become a badge of honor for hipsters and artists, with the likes of Jon Favreau, Stephen Colbert and Vin Diesel professing their love of the game.

But in recent years, D&D has slumped. Electronic games have done the most damage, letting players conquer acres of fantastically rendered digital landscapes without the need for hours of time spent writing the story line and sketching Middle Earth-like maps.

Edition wars have also wounded the game. Various rules systems have been released over D&D's 38-year history. Hostilities about how to best play the game — for example, how a sorcerer casts spells — flare up among the core fan base.

With the new edition and the call for feedback, in a "hearts and minds" campaign, Wizards of the Coast is attempting to rally players to the cause. The strategy centers on asking them what they'd like to see in a new version and giving everyday gaming groups the chance to test new rules.

Greg Tito, games editor for the *Escapist*, an online games culture magazine, will be one of them. "The long open testing period for the next edition, if handled correctly, could be exactly what's needed to make players feel invested in D&D again," he said.

Committed players will remind you that tabletop role-playing games still outperform computer games in one key arena: improvisation. Video games have limits. Some dungeon doors can't be opened because a programmer didn't code them to open. Dungeons & Dragons remains a game where anything can happen.