

The Birth of Fantasy Role-Playing Games

Imagination is but another name for super intelligence.

—Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Jungle Tales of Tarzan*

All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible.

—T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

Dungeons & Dragons inspired countless other fantasy role-playing games, defining the genre.¹ The origins of Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's extremely successful game did not lie in theater or storytelling but in wargaming—a hobby in which players simulate historical battles using miniature soldiers. Wargaming developed in the nineteenth century, primarily as a training exercise for Prussian military officers. It was eventually adapted for civilian leisure, but it has remained an obscure hobby. Not only does wargaming demand a serious interest in military history, but the rules frequently require complex mathematical calculations and charts that most people would regard as a tedious exercise rather than entertainment. Thus wargaming was an unlikely midwife for the genre of fantasy role-playing.

D&D combined two very different ways of thinking about the world. On the one hand, it entailed a preoccupation with mathematical models and rules, the roots of which can be traced back to Prussian officers perfecting “the science of war.” On the other hand, it reflected the cultural trends of the 1960s, including a fascination with history, myth, and

fantasy as well as a renewed appreciation for values such as cooperation and imagination. This combination of mechanistic and romantic thinking was developed by a group of wargamers at the University of Minnesota and in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. In traditional war games two players control armies, with each acting as a sort of abstract commander. As in an actual battle, each game ends with a winner and a loser. However, some wargamers began to experiment with scenarios that involved numerous factions, which might or might not be adversarial toward each other. These experiments in wargaming required an impartial referee to mediate between players. Others were changing the genre of wargaming by including elements of the fantastic. Where traditional war games reenacted famous historical battles, by the 1960s some players were designing rules for battles that involved dragons and wizards. Finally, the scale of the conflict shifted from entire armies to individual heroes. Together, these changes resulted in a new game that had much broader appeal than war games ever had. It was a game that resembled both science and art, combining the analytical and the creative functions of the brain. But something else happened: the new genre of game somehow smacked of religion in a way that wargaming had not.

THE EVOLUTION OF *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*

While Gary Gygax did eventually write a number of fantasy novels, the creators of *D&D* were not artistically inclined in the ordinary sense. C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, both members of Oxford's literary circle "the Inklings," shared interests in mythology, theology, and writing. By contrast, Gygax and Arneson were wargamers who would have been more at home discussing the comparative merits of crossbows and longbows than Anglo-Saxon poetry. However, the most important development of the fantasy role-playing game was not the content of the fantasy but the ability to create plausible simulations of an alternate reality. This was something that Gygax and Arneson learned from war games.

War games are almost as old as warfare itself. Simple games designed to represent battle existed in Egypt and Mesopotamia as early as the third millennium. Go was created between 206 BCE and 8 CE and was a favorite game of Chinese generals and statesmen. Chess, the classic war game, is believed to have originated in the Gupta empire of north-west India in the sixth century CE. While chess entails strategy and employs the symbols of feudal warfare (knights, castles, etc.), it is a symbolization of war rather than a simulation. In Europe, war games

changed following the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers believed that war, like anything else, could be understood scientifically and simulated using mathematical models. In Prussia, military officers attempted to make an increasingly accurate simulation of warfare using models to represent all of the factors that determine the outcome of a battle. This process began with Christopher Weikmann, who created an expanded version of chess called *Koenigspiel* (The King's Game) in 1664. Weikmann claimed his game "would furnish anyone who studied it properly a compendium of the most useful military and political principles."² In 1780, Johann Christian Ludwig Hellwig, master of pages to the German Duke of Brunswick, developed a game called *Kriegspiel* (War Game). The game was played on a board with 1,666 squares. Squares were painted different colors to represent different types of terrain. Pieces could move a different number of squares depending on what type of terrain they were crossing.³ The pieces represented units rather than individual soldiers and were designated as infantry, cavalry, and artillery. Hellwig even created rules to represent entrenchment and the use of pontoons. In 1798, George Vinturinus of Schleswig expanded on Hellwig's game to create "New Kriegspiel." This game expanded the board to 3,600 squares and featured a sixty-page rule book.⁴

War games were revised again following the Napoleonic Wars. In 1811 Baron George Leopold van Reiszitz and his son developed a new game that they called *Instructions for the Representation of Tactical Maneuvers under the Guise of a Wargame*. This game introduced many of the elements that came to define modern wargaming as a genre. It did away with a board entirely and was instead played on a "map" consisting of a special table covered in sand. Ceramic models could be placed on the table to represent terrain. Units were represented by miniature soldiers, colored red and blue respectively. Each unit had a different "speed" and could move a different distance across the map each turn. The game also featured dice to determine the success of actions, and an umpire to adjudicate the outcome. The game was prescribed for Prussian officers, but the rules were so complex and tedious that some officers were reluctant to play it. In 1876, Colonel von Verdy du Vernois produced a simplified version of the game that removed the dice and delivered more authority to the umpire, who was expected to be a veteran officer who could draw on his own combat experience to determine what the results of each player's action would be.⁵ This role was an early forebear of the dungeon master.

For the Prussian military, war games were not understood to be an "escape" from reality. On the contrary, the experience that officers

gained while playing these games was expected to have immediate application in the real world. Game designers also understood that the more realistic and detailed their models of warfare were, the more the simulation would prepare officers for actual combat. In 1870, the militia army of Prussia defeated the professional army of France. The Prussian success was attributed to war games, and other Western militaries began to develop similar training exercises. In 1880, Charles Totten, a lieutenant in the United States Army, developed a game called *Strategos*.⁶ Within a decade, German-inspired war games were introduced to the US Army and incorporated into the curriculum of the Naval War College.

War games were not easy to learn, and it was some time before anyone attempted to create a war game for civilians. The science-fiction writer H.G. Wells was among the first to create an “amateur” war game. In 1913, he created a game entitled *Little Wars: A Game for Boys of Twelve Years of Age to One Hundred and Fifty and for That More Intelligent Sort of Girl Who Likes Boys’ Games and Books*.⁷ A pacifist, Wells was not interested in creating a game that would train better officers. *Little Wars* was meant to be fun and possibly even to satisfy impulses that might lead to actual wars. This book also contained over a hundred photographs depicting battlefields that featured miniature soldiers and scenery. These photographs added nothing to the strategy of the simulation but were a source of pleasure for the players. In this sense, *Little Wars* marked a transition in wargaming from science into art.

Evidence of what may be the earliest transition from wargaming to role-playing appeared in the pages of *Life* magazine in 1941. An article entitled “*Life* Visits the Planet Atzor” described nineteen-year-old Frederick Pelton of Lincoln, Nebraska, who had organized a club around a fantasy world called Atzor. Each member of the club created a persona who ruled a nation of Atzor. The group held parties in which attendees would hold court in their personas. Atzor parties were attended in costume, which generally resembled the dress of European royalty. The club eventually expanded to 400 young Nebraskans, many of whom were women and played queens and empresses. Court gatherings usually resulted in declarations of war, and battles were resolved using miniatures. But Atzor involved much more than simulated battles. Club members produced Atzorian currency, a passport and postal system, and even a dictionary of the planet’s language, Samarkandian.⁸ Atzor became a paracosm, and the war game became a sort of performance art. Daniel Mackay suggests that the increasing emphasis on aesthetics in war games was a backlash against the cult of reason and effi-

ciency that had, paradoxically, inspired military simulations in the first place.⁹

The first commercially successful war game was *Tactics* designed by Charles Roberts in 1953. He later formed the company Avalon Hill and published *Gettysburg*, a game in which players could simulate one of the most storied battles of the Civil War. *Gettysburg* was a huge success, and by 1962 Avalon Hill was the fourth largest producer of adult board games.¹⁰ It is significant that the first truly successful war game in America was about Gettysburg. This battle was not only the turning point of the American Civil War; it was a sacred event, vital to the story that Americans tell themselves about their nation. In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln spoke in explicitly religious language about consecrating and hallowing the battlefield as a sacred space. The carnage of the battle, according to Lincoln, had also been “the birth of a new freedom.” The popular appeal of war games, then, did not lie simply in models and calculations but in revisiting and reenacting moments of historical and cultural significance. *Gettysburg* was commercially viable because it allowed Americans to experience and participate in a moment of sacred history while sitting at their kitchen tables.

Dave Wesley and Braunstein

By the 1960s, a subculture had formed around wargaming. There were several magazines for wargamers, and wargaming clubs had begun to appear on college campuses. As with *Gettysburg*, wargamers turned to military history for new conflicts to simulate. Where the military games of the nineteenth century had been attempts to simulate current technology, wargamers created simulations for World War II, the Crusades, and the campaigns of Roman generals. Dedicated groups would arrange series of games known as “campaigns” in which each battle determined the starting conditions of the next. Campaigns added a further sense of realism and immersion into another time and place.

The first step in the transition from war games to fantasy role-playing games occurred with an experimental game called “Braunstein” hosted by Dave Wesley at the University of Minnesota in 1968.¹¹ Wesley enjoyed war games but disliked their competitive nature. Too often games degenerated into bickering. Another problem was that games lasted for hours and allowed for only two players. In college wargaming clubs, it was not uncommon to see bored wargamers sitting idly, waiting for their chance to play. Wesley discovered a copy of Totten’s

Strategos in the university's library. Like the Prussian war games, *Strategos* called for a disinterested referee to supervise the game. This was an element that had been dropped from war games like *Tactics* that were intended for a popular audience. Reintroducing a referee offered one way of resolving the arguments that marred the games.

But Wesley also wanted to create a non-zero-sum game that was not inherently competitive.¹² In the 1960s, opposition to the Vietnam War and militarism had inspired interest in noncompetitive games. The so-called New Games movement began with Stewart Brand, the editor of *The Whole Earth Catalog* and a member of Ken Kesey's "Merry Pranksters." In 1966, an antiwar group asked Brand to create a public activity to oppose the war in Vietnam. Brand responded with a game called *Slaughter*. As the name implied, *Slaughter* was a full-contact game. It featured a six-foot ball painted to look like Earth. There were virtually no rules other than to push the ball to the other side of the field. Teams were not declared but rather formed spontaneously. Curiously, whenever the ball neared one end of the field, some players would spontaneously decide to change objectives and begin pushing the ball in another direction. Much like fantasy role-playing games, *Slaughter* was "pointless," as there was no way of ending the game or determining a winner. However, its proponents defended it as art. If nothing else, *Slaughter* seemed to be an interesting critique of the Cold War as an equally pointless struggle by the two superpowers to "steer the planet." Brand went on to found the New Games movement, which emphasized play for the sake of play over competition.¹³ Whether or not Wesley was aware of the New Games movement, his experiment at the University of Minnesota bore a family resemblance to *Slaughter*.

In *Strategos*, Totten emphasizes that the referee "must remember that anything which is physically possible may be attempted—not always successfully." Wesley expanded on this idea to create an entirely new kind of war game. He took a game published in *Strategy and Tactics* magazine called *The Siege of Bodenburg* to use as a springboard for his experiment. *The Siege of Bodenburg* was designed by Henry Bodenstedt, the proprietor of a hobby shop in New Jersey. It is a relatively simple war game in which an army of knights defends a medieval town against an invading force of Huns. The game called for miniature knights and Huns that could be purchased at Bodenstedt's shop. Wesley renamed the town "Braunstein" and set the siege during the time of Napoleon. More importantly, he modified the game to include multiple players as well as a referee. As with a traditional war game, two of the players assumed the role of the French and Prussian commanders. Wesley included more players by

allowing them to assume the roles of various parties in Braunstein: the mayor, the banker, the university chancellor, and others. When interest in Wesley's experiment attracted twenty people, he found roles for all of them. Each role had its own objectives and goals. With autonomy came chaos. The game did not develop the way Wesley had imagined it and resembled an undisciplined brawl. The Prussian and French commanders announced that they had agreed to fight a duel, and Wesley was forced to improvise rules for this contingency. Wesley felt his game was a failure, that the players had taken over the game, and that the rules he had lovingly created no longer applied.¹⁴ The players felt differently about Braunstein. They had enjoyed their chaotic struggle over the town. One particularly enthusiastic player was Dave Arneson, a student at the University of Minnesota. He recalled his experience of the game: "As a local student leader, I tried to rally resistance to thwart a French attack. (I ended up arrested by the Prussian General because I was 'too fanatical.')"¹⁵ Wesley's experiment had failed as a strategy game, but it had triumphed as a role-playing game. He created more scenarios including a game set during the Russian Civil War and another set during a Latin American coup. Local gamers came to use the term "Braunstein" (or "Brownstine") generically to describe this new genre of open-ended war games.

The cooperative spirit of *Braunstein*, which was reflected by the New Games movement, also marked a "ritual turn" in war games. Claude Levi-Strauss argues that while games and rituals often resemble each other, games are *disjunctive* while ritual is *conjunctive*. In games with winners and losers, players or teams begin the game as equals, and differences are established between them. By contrast, ritual creates a union between groups that are initially distinct, such as congregation and priest. Levi-Strauss cites the Gahuku-Gama people of New Guinea, who play football continually until both teams have won an equal number of matches—a process that often takes days. For the Gahuku-Gama, Levi-Strauss argues, football is not a game but a ritual.¹⁶ The Gahuku-Gama learned football from the British but "ritualized" the game, giving it a conjunctive function. Wesley made a similar move with *Braunstein*. As wargaming developed into an autotelic pastime, it increasingly came to resemble ritual.

Gary Gygax and Chainmail

The same year that Wesley organized *Braunstein* at the University of Minnesota, Gary Gygax organized the first annual "Gen Con," a

convention for wargamers. It was held in the Horticultural Hall in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, which Gygax rented for fifty dollars. There were ninety-six attendees, which was just enough to cover the costs. Gygax was not a university student. In 1958 he married Mary Jo Powell, with whom he had four children. He worked odd jobs and took night classes at a junior college where he made the dean's list. He was admitted to the University of Chicago, but decided instead to take a job as an insurance underwriter for the Fireman's Fund in Lake Geneva to support his family. Later, he ran a small shoe-repair business out of his basement.

Gygax was a leader of a wargaming group called United States Continental Army Command. As the group's interests and membership expanded, it was renamed the International Federation of Wargaming.¹⁷ A subgroup of Gygax's International Federation of Wargaming was called the Castle and Crusade Society. The society was dedicated to simulating medieval battles and appealed to a rising interest in fantasy and medievalism under way in the 1960s. Wargaming was not the only outlet through which Americans were attempting to recreate the medieval past. In 1966, Diana Paxson of Berkeley, California, founded the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA). This was an organization dedicated to "living history." Members dressed in costume, assumed personas as feudal lords and ladies, and gathered for feasts and others events. They revived medieval arts such as weaving, cooking, dance, calligraphy, archery, horsemanship, and fencing. The SCA, now larger than ever, also organizes battles in which combatants don metal armor and battle with weapons made from rattan. Significantly, the group describes its goal as recreating the Middle Ages "as they ought to have been."¹⁸ That is, group members are not interested in strictly recreating history but rather in celebrating aspects of medieval culture that are interesting and appealing to them. The SCA is more an art form than a rigorous historical endeavor. For the counterculture of the 1960s, the Middle Ages were not merely the past, but an alternative world that seemed more personally satisfying. Gygax made a similar move toward reenacting history "as it ought to have been" through wargaming.

Gygax was introduced to *The Siege of Bodenburg* by Jeff Perren, the owner of a hobby shop in Lake Geneva. Like Wesley, Gygax loved the game and immediately set about modifying it. He expanded the rules from four pages to sixteen. In 1969, Gygax and Perren debuted their new medieval war game in the magazine of the Castle and Crusade Society, calling it *Chainmail*. In 1971, *Chainmail* was published by Guidon Games and retailed for three dollars. It was a relatively popular product,

selling a hundred copies a month. A second edition, featuring a “fantasy supplement,” was published the following year. Gygax drew the fantasy elements from pulp science fiction and fantasy novels of the 1950s and 1960s, particularly Tolkien, whose *Lord of the Rings* trilogy had gone through twenty-five successive printings between 1965 and 1969. Now in addition to medieval units such as cavalry, footmen, and archers, players could also include units of hobbits, dwarves, elves, goblins, orcs, trolls, several varieties of dragons, elementals, balrogs, and ents.¹⁹

Chainmail also featured rules for battle between individual soldiers rather than units. Gygax devised rules for “heroes,” individuals who could single-handedly change the outcome of a battle. The idea of the hero was also inspired by fantasy novels, notably Robert E. Howard’s character Conan the Barbarian. In addition to powerful warriors, there were rules for wizards or “magic users,” who could summon forth fireballs and lightning bolts to devastate enemy units. The *Chainmail* fantasy supplement demonstrated that the models of simulation on which war games were based could be applied to anything that the human mind could conceive. As Ethan Gilsdorf explained, “The trolls and fireballs may be fanciful, but they have to behave according to a logical system.”²⁰

Dave Arneson and Blackmoor

While Gygax and Perren were the first to successfully publish a war game with elements of fantasy, similar changes were under way in wargaming groups throughout North America and the United Kingdom. “Ancient” wargaming referred to games that simulated battles fought by the Romans or earlier cultures. As early as 1957, Tony Bath of England created *The Hyboria Campaign*, a war game using “ancient” rules but based on Howard’s Conan stories. Bath also experimented with a war game called *Tolkia* based on Tolkien’s writings. Although Bath sometimes designed fantastic elements for war games, his British peers generally discouraged these endeavors.²¹ More often, fantastic elements were introduced to war games spontaneously out of whim or boredom. Mark Barrowcliffe describes playing war games in the early 1970s before discovering *D&D*. He recalls a game in which the players were simulating the Siege of Leningrad. In addition to Soviet and Nazi forces, his gaming group added a number of dragons, wizards, and a giant slug.²²

A similar moment of whim occurred in 1969 during a game hosted by Dave Arneson. Ever since participating in Wesley’s *Braunstein* games, Arneson had continued to experiment with new forms of wargaming.

Arneson recalled refereeing an ancient war game involving a battle between Britons and Romans:

As far as the fantasy part, I was the first one to come up with a violation of the basic concept of warfare of the period. We were fighting an ancient game. Very dull again. And I'd given the defending brigands a Druid high priest, and in the middle of the battle, the *dull* battle, the Roman war elephant charged the Britons and looked like he was going to trample half their army flat, the Druidic high priest waved his hands and pointed this funny little box out of one hand and turned the elephant into so much barbeque meat. This upset all of the participants in the game a great deal and the fellow playing the Druidic high priest was, well, he was laughing his head off in a corner. That was absolutely the only thing in the game that was out of the ordinary, but they weren't expecting it and it was of course, Star Trek was then playing, firing a phaser was adding science fiction to an Ancient game.²³

Although the Druid wielded a phaser rather than magic, many historians of role-playing games regard this moment as the birth of the fantasy role-playing genre. It is also significant that Arneson's decision was inspired by *Star Trek*. The popular culture of the 1960s provided a rich milieu of fantastic elements from which wargamers regularly borrowed.

Arneson continued to design games that combined the format of *Braunstein* with elements of fantasy. His early projects drew from the Lord of the Rings trilogy as well as *Dark Shadows*, a popular soap opera of the 1960s that featured a vampire, a witch, and other supernatural characters. His greatest success was a game called *Blackmoor*, which he created in 1971. Arneson recalled that he created *Blackmoor* as a result of "watching five monster movies on *Creature Feature*, reading a Conan book and stuffing myself with popcorn, doodling on a piece of graph paper."²⁴ Initially, the premise of the game was that the players themselves had been hurled through a time warp into a medieval world full of monsters and magic, not unlike *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. They did not play the role of a historical persona as in *Braunstein*, but rather played as university students in a fantastic setting. Arneson recalled:

In the first campaign, all of the PCs [player characters] were assumed to have come through a time/space warp into the strange new world of Blackmoor. Thus, the players *could not expect* to know everything and all information from the locals would be related by the referee. So here were these 20th-century types; naturally the first thing they wanted to do was arm themselves to the teeth with firearms. I determined that they could arm themselves on the condition that they tell me how they made the weapons. Building weapons actually turned out to be quite interesting. The bottom line was that

firearms gave the players a fighting chance to survive and learn about the world before they ran out of bullets. Some of the lads had fun with hot air balloons and steam engines, but no one knew enough metallurgy to overcome some very basic problems.²⁵

While *Blackmoor* employed a pseudo-historical setting in a manner similar to wargaming or the SCA, its strange premise was unprecedented. *Blackmoor* functioned like the “campaign” war games in that each session of play changed the imaginary world, creating a sense of continuity and realism. Each gaming session felt like a return to an alternative world. As Arneson continued to run games of *Blackmoor*, the players eventually assumed the roles of characters native to the fantasy world. Their adventures now almost always focused on individual interactions rather than battles, and so Arneson had to devise new rules. He met Gygax at the first Gen Con in 1968 and employed some of the *Chainmail* rules for *Blackmoor*. He also introduced a number of new concepts. Notably, he allowed players to improve their characters after each game, making them stronger. This became the basis of a “level system,” now featured in many fantasy role-playing games, in which characters become more powerful as they gain experience.²⁶

Arneson also shifted the game from the battlefield of traditional war games into large indoor settings such as castles, caverns, and mines. In one of Arneson’s most successful games, the characters were sent to infiltrate Blackmoor Castle through its sewer to open the gates. The game was essentially a medieval commando raid. To reach the gate, the characters had to traverse the castle’s dungeons, which were full of various guards and monsters. This premise helped to direct the flow of the game because the indoor environment presented players with a finite number of options. Similar scenarios became standard for fantasy role-playing games. The indoor environments of the games were known as “dungeons” regardless of the actual nature or purpose of the space. Arneson explained: “A dungeon is nice and self-contained. Players can’t go romping over the countryside, and you can control the situation.”²⁷

Dungeons & Dragons

In 1972, Arneson attended Gen Con in Lake Geneva and ran his Castle Blackmoor scenario for convention goers. Gygax was impressed, and the two began collaborating via phone and mail. Their first collaboration was a game about naval combat called *Don’t Give Up the Ship!*, published that year by Guidon Games. The game featured mechanics

gleaned from both *Blackmoor* and *Chainmail* including armor class (a number indicating how difficult an object is to damage), hit points (a number indicating how much damage a target can withstand), and morale (a number representing fighting spirit).²⁸ In August 1973, Gygax formed a company called Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) with his childhood friend Don Kaye and Brian Blume, a wargamer he had met through Gen Con. Kaye kickstarted the company with \$1,000 in start-up funds that he borrowed against his life insurance policy. The company's first product was a war game called *Cavaliers and Roundheads*, set during the English Civil War.²⁹ Gygax did not invite Arneson to join his company. He later explained: "Dave was never considered as a partner. We didn't figure he was the kind of the guy who would be too good at running a business."³⁰

Gygax and Arneson continued to collaborate on what they called "The Fantasy Game." Initially there were only three types of characters that players could role-play: heroes, wizards, and a religious class called "clerics."³¹ The game also included an experience system from Arneson's *Blackmoor* campaign in which characters could "level up" after successful adventures. There was no way to "win" the game, and the continual development of characters became the closest thing the game had to an objective.

It was Gygax who decided on a name. He wanted to continue a pattern of paired nouns already used in the Castle and Crusade Society and *Cavaliers and Roundheads*. He drew up two columns of words that included men, magic, monsters, treasure, underworld, wilderness, castles, dragons, dungeons, giants, labyrinths, mazes, sorcery, spells, swords, trolls, and so on. Then he ran various combinations of words by his play testers, who included Don Kaye and his children Ernie and Elise. He ended up deciding on "Dungeons & Dragons" because the alliteration pleased his youngest daughter, Cindy.³² These sorts of names, often alliterative, became standard for fantasy role-playing games. Tony Bath created an ancient war game called *Pelfast and Pila* that depicted Roman armies. The first games to imitate *D&D* had names like *Tunnels and Trolls*, *Chivalry and Sorcery*, and *Heroes and Horrors*. There was a superhero game called *Villains and Vigilantes*, a fan magazine called *Alarums and Excursions*, and even a role-playing game based on the novel *Watership Down* called *Bunnies and Burrows*, in which players assume the roles of sentient rabbits. (In BADD literature that was distributed to law enforcement, Patricia Pulling warned of *Bunnies and Burrows*, "These rabbits are not like 'Peter Cottontail'

they have human attributes, engage in violent/aggressive confrontations.”³³ Later, evangelical critics of fantasy role-playing games demonstrated that they could create alliterative titles too. One anti-*D&D* tract began: “Adventure or abomination? Creativity or cruelty? Diversion or demonology?”³⁴

In December 1973 the first 150-page manuscript was sent off to Graphic Printing in Lake Geneva. Gygax felt the new game needed a bigger publisher than Tactical Studies Rules, so he went to Avalon Hill, the largest war game publisher in the business. He promised that *D&D* would sell 50,000 copies, but Avalon Hill declined. Arneson later stated of their decision, “They couldn’t understand a game with no winners and losers that just went on and on.”³⁵ And so Tactical Studies Rules scraped together \$2,000 in start-up costs, much of which was contributed by Brian Blume.³⁶ In January 1974, the tiny company published 1,000 copies of a booklet titled *Dungeons & Dragons: Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargame Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures*. The booklet was soon developed into a boxed set. The game came in a brown cardboard box with hand-applied labels on the front and sides. Inside were three half-sized booklets labeled “Men & Magic,” “Monsters & Treasures,” and “Underworld & Wilderness Adventures.” But owning these three booklets was not enough to play *D&D*. The box also contained a list of equipment that was not included but necessary to play the game:

Dungeons and Dragons (you have it)

Outdoor Survival (a game available from the Avalon Hill Company used to play travel across the wilderness)

Dice—the following different kinds of dice are available from TSR

1 pair 4-sided dice

1 pair 20-sided dice

1 pair 8-sided dice

1 pair 12-sided dice

4 to 20 pairs 6-sided dice

Chainmail miniature rules (available from TSR Hobbies)

Other Supplies:

1 3-Ring Notebook (for the referee and each player)

Graph paper (6 lines per inch is best)

Sheet Protectors (the heaviest possible)

3-Ring Lined Paper

Drafting Equipment and Colored Pencils

Scratch Paper and Pencils

Imagination

1 Patient Referee³⁷

By all accounts the game was hopelessly confusing for anyone who did not already have a detailed knowledge of wargaming. In 1978, a journalist perused one of the forty-six-page rule booklets and remarked that it, “at least on first reading, is only marginally less complicated than a Ptolemaic analysis of planetary motion.”³⁸ It is hardly surprising that Avalon Hill was unwilling to take a chance on this game. Gygax’s basement, which was still filled with shoe-repair equipment, was converted into an assembly plant. Gygax, Kaye, and Blume all worked to assemble boxes, as did Gygax’s wife and children. There was no money for marketing, and so it was necessary to advertise the game by word of mouth. It took eleven months to sell the first 1,000 copies, but the game was becoming popular. Mimeographed copies of *D&D* began circulating around college campuses. Gygax began to receive letters and phone calls, sometimes late at night, asking for clarifications about the rules. The game became popular in the military (the cultural birthplace of wargaming) and American servicemen spread *D&D* to Europe.³⁹ Soon the British company Games Workshop became *D&D*’s first European importer.

After an initial slow start, business picked up rapidly. In 1975, Avalon Hill decided they would like to purchase *D&D* after all. They made Gygax an offer, which was soundly rejected. In January that same year Don Kaye, who had borrowed the initial start-up funds to create TSR, died of a heart attack. He was eventually replaced by Brian Blume’s brother, Kevin. Kaye’s stake in the company was taken over by his wife, Donna, whom Gygax and the Blume brothers found “impossible to work with.” So they simply dissolved Tactical Studies Rules and reincorporated as TSR Hobbies.⁴⁰

Gygax and Brian Blume produced a second role-playing game, *Boot Hill*, set in the Old West. However, the company’s main source of revenue was *D&D*, and TSR began to produce supplemental products at a feverish rate. An article in the *New York Times* entitled “Dungeons and Dollars” compared TSR’s products to Gillette’s business model of selling a cheap razor that would keep customers returning for blades.⁴¹ In

1976, TSR began publishing *Dragon*, a magazine dedicated to *Dungeons & Dragons* and other fantasy role-playing games. In 1977, J. Eric Holmes offered to rewrite the game to make an introductory version for younger players. By March 1979, the company was selling 7,000 copies of the *D&D* basic set each month to an estimated 300,000 players.⁴² In 1980, its gross income was \$4.2 million.⁴³

D&D rapidly became a subculture unto itself. Although fantasy role-players and wargamers still saw each other at conventions and hobby shops, role-players had become a distinct group. More traditional wargamers came to be referred to as “grogards,” a Napoleonic term meaning “grumblers” and referring to the conservative Old Guard.⁴⁴ Players immediately began creating new rules, monsters, and character classes, some of which TSR published in subsequent books. As the game developed, TSR began thinking about the distinction between the mechanics for playing the game (frame two) and the imaginary worlds in which games occurred (frame three). Arneson had continued to host adventures in his land of Blackmoor, while Gygax ran a game in his own fantasy world that he dubbed *Greyhawk*. Both games represented ongoing stories and used similar rules, but featured different characters and imaginary lands. In 1975, TSR published *Greyhawk* as a supplement based on Gygax’s world. TSR also hired Arneson, who produced a supplement called *Blackmoor* later that year. These became *D&D*’s first “campaign worlds,” ready-made worlds of fantasy that could be used in the game. The worlds of *Blackmoor* and *Greyhawk* reflected the personalities of their creators and gradually yielded new elements that were added to the game. For *Blackmoor*, Arneson invented a new character class called the assassin, an expert in poison and murder, and the monk, a martial artist inspired by kung fu movies of the 1970s.⁴⁵ Gygax also created new character classes, notably the thief and the paladin, a holy warrior.⁴⁶

Most players were as inventive as Arneson and Gygax (if not more so) and set about creating their own fantasy worlds. Many also began tinkering with the rules or creating entirely new games. In the late 1970s, an employee at a food co-op in San Francisco’s Bay Area named Deanna Sue White became a minor celebrity as a result of her campaign world “Mistigar.” About thirty people played characters that inhabited Mistigar and directed the course of its wars and politics. Those who could not attend games in person did so by correspondence, writing or calling White to explain what their characters were doing. Mistigar became so famous that a nearby group of *D&D* players calling themselves “the

Black Lotus Society” hatched a plot to “invade” Mistigar by joining the game as evil characters who would conquer and pillage White’s paracosm rather than protect it. But Mistigar was so beloved that when other players caught wind of this plot, they had their characters slay the characters of the Black Lotus Society.⁴⁷ The battles for Mistigar demonstrate how quickly these shared fantasy worlds inspired an emotional investment on the part of players.

THE RISE AND FALL OF TSR

Almost as soon as *Dungeons & Dragons* was created, competitors began to produce similar games. One of the first of these was *Tunnels and Trolls*, published by Ken St. Andre of Phoenix, Arizona, in June 1975. St. Andre’s game was originally marketed as “like D&D,” which resulted in a cease-and-desist letter from TSR’s lawyers. In 1984, Avalon Hill decided a fantasy role-playing game might be marketable after all and produced *Powers and Perils*. By 1989 there were over 300 such games on the market.⁴⁸ In general the creators of these games did not see themselves as imitating the ideas of Gygax and Arneson. Tinkering with and improving on existing games had always been part of the culture of wargaming. Many of the new games were presented as smoother or improved versions of *D&D*.

Gygax believed that gaming was good preparation for business and often ran his company like a war game. He saw other fantasy role-playing games not as a sincere form of flattery but as opponents to be defeated. Lawrence Schick, who worked for TSR, explains:

As publisher of *Dungeons and Dragons*, TSR felt that role-playing was their special territory. As far as they were able, they tried to call the shots in the industry. They engaged in petty “turf” wars with other publishers and convention organizers, threatened legal action on the slightest provocation, and generally acted like the bully of the block.⁴⁹

Some gamers began to feel that TSR were not artists producing a new art form but greedy capitalists who exploited other people’s love of their game. The slogan “D&D is too important to leave to Gary Gygax” began to appear in independent magazines for fantasy gaming. One issue of *Alarums and Excursions* featured a description of a new *D&D* monster called a “Gygacks,” which began: “These bull-headed men exactly resemble Minotaurs, but are extremely and annoyingly Lawful in nature. When encountered, they will insist upon everything being

done their way, although they will insist that they favor individuality and diversity.”⁵⁰

TSR’s lawyers sent out a number of cease-and-desist letters to gamers who sought to publish their own additions to *D&D*. Ironically, TSR was being sued by the estates of various fantasy authors whose work it adapted into games without permission. An early game called *Warriors of Mars*, based on the novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs, earned a legal action from Burroughs’s estate. In 1977, TSR was sued by Hollywood mogul Saul Zaentz, who had acquired certain rights to Tolkien’s works the year before. Zaentz claimed that terms such as “dragon,” “orc,” and “elf” were all protected, and demanded a million dollars in damages. TSR settled out of court, and *D&D* creatures that were clearly derivative of Tolkien, such as hobbits, ents, and balrogs were renamed halflings, treants, and balor demons.⁵¹

In November 1976, Arneson ceased to be an employee of TSR, leading to another series of lawsuits. As the cocreator of *D&D*, Arneson was entitled to lucrative royalties. So Gygax made some minor changes and began calling the product *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (AD&D)*. TSR continued to describe all of its new products as “Advanced” in order to avoid paying royalties to Arneson. Arneson sued TSR on five separate occasions.⁵² These lawsuits were sometimes mentioned by the media and moral entrepreneurs to demonstrate that *D&D* was entangled in “controversy.”

Undaunted, Gygax’s next project was to create an “entertainment” division for TSR. The CBS network created a *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon show that aired on Saturday mornings from 1983 to 1986. The premise of the cartoon was the same as Arneson’s original *Blackmoor* campaign. It featured a group of teenagers who board a “*Dungeons & Dragons* ride” at a carnival and are magically transported to a world of magic and monsters. Each episode portrayed the teens’ continued efforts to return home. Gygax went to Los Angeles to work on the show and had plans for other projects, including a *Dungeons & Dragons* movie. He rented a mansion on Summitridge Drive in Beverly Hills where he enjoyed a hot tub, chauffeured Cadillac rides, and a barn set up with a sand table so that he and his writers could play *Chainmail*. This lifestyle caused his expenses to approach \$10,000 a month.⁵³

Back in Wisconsin, TSR had begun to unravel. Gygax and his partners had assumed that the explosive growth of the last decade would continue unabated. At 600 employees, they had overstaffed the company. The Blumes had also invested in expensive computer equipment, office

furniture, and a fleet of company cars. They invested in a salvage dive to recover the wreck of the steamship that had sunk in Lake Geneva in 1891. There were rumors that the company owned a mansion on the Isle of Man and had discussed purchasing a railroad company in order to vertically integrate shipping.⁵⁴ By 1984, TSR was \$1.5 million in debt, and it was rumored that the Blumes were seeking to sell the company. Gygax returned to Lake Geneva, where he persuaded the board of directors to fire Kevin Blume. He published a new *D&D* rule book to raise money, but to pay off TSR's debts he needed new investors. In Los Angeles, he had met Lorraine Dille Williams, who had experience as an administrator for hospitals and nonprofits. She was also the granddaughter of John F. Dille, a newspaper magnate who had turned the science-fiction character Buck Rogers into a syndicated comic strip. Williams inherited the rights of the Buck Rogers character as well as a valuable collection of Buck Rogers memorabilia. She initially turned down Gygax's offer to invest in TSR but agreed to advise him on managing the company.⁵⁵

In May 1985, Gygax exercised a stock option that gave him a controlling interest in TSR. He named himself CEO and hired Williams as a general manager. Williams was impressed by the value of TSR's intellectual property and used her business acumen to take over the company. She bought out the Blume brothers, who were already planning to leave TSR, giving her a majority share. Gygax responded by taking Williams to court, claiming that the Blume brothers had not given adequate notice of sale. The trial lasted five days, but in the end a judge awarded ownership of TSR to Williams.⁵⁶ Now both Gygax and Arneson were legally barred from the game they had created. In 1992, Gygax designed a new fantasy role-playing game called *Dangerous Dimensions* for a rival game publisher, Game Designers' Workshop. Williams sued on behalf of TSR, claiming that the game's alliteration (two "D" words) was too much like *Dungeons & Dragons*. Gygax changed the name of his game to *Dangerous Journeys*.

Williams proved to be a far more capable leader than either Gygax or the Blume brothers. However, she approached the company from a purely business perspective and had no interest in war games or role-playing. It was rumored among TSR employees that she boasted of having never once played a role-playing game.⁵⁷ When she took control of TSR, she initially declared that she would change the focus of the company to making board games about TV soap operas.⁵⁸ Fortunately for fans of *D&D*, this did not come to pass. Williams's tenure as head of TSR saw the creation of several new campaign worlds. These worlds,

with names like Faerun, Krynn, and Ravenloft, provided a background for further storytelling. In addition to publishing game supplements, TSR published 242 novels set in these worlds as well as several computer games.⁵⁹

The company experienced another crisis in the mid-1990s. *D&D* was more popular than ever, but the company had published more supplemental products than a saturated market was willing to consume. Meanwhile, new games were eating away at TSR's market. The biggest of these was a card game called *Magic: The Gathering* published by Wizards of the Coast. Although *Magic* was not a role-playing game, it contained elements of fantasy and attracted the same market. More importantly, *Magic* was sold in the form of inexpensive "packs" that contained a random assortment of cards. Some players were willing to spend exorbitant amounts of money in search of rare cards.

Despite these obstacles, 1996 was the best sales year in the history of the company with \$40 million in sales. However, a clause in TSR's distribution contract turned this triumph into a disaster. In 1981, TSR entered a distribution agreement with Random House, which shipped TSR products to small bookstores, such as B. Dalton and Waldenbooks. At the end of the year, the contract allowed Random House to return any unsold products to TSR, at which time TSR would have to pay for the products as well as a handling fee. That year, TSR had invested heavily in hard-cover fantasy novels as well as a new game called *Dragon Dice*. *Dragon Dice* was TSR's answer to *Magic: The Gathering*. Instead of packs containing random cards, players were encouraged to purchase boxes containing randomly patterned dice. Both of these products flopped, and at the end of the year nearly a third of TSR's products were returned. After paying Random House, the company did not have the capital for printing, and finished products sat unprinted. TSR had also fallen behind on payments to a logistics company that handled printing, warehousing, and shipping. The logistics company stopped working with TSR and refused to ship existing products out. Furthermore, they had all of the production plates for TSR's best-selling products, meaning the company could not do business with someone else. Williams immediately began searching for someone to purchase TSR and assume its debts.

TSR was initially purchased by a collectible card game company called Five Rings Publishing. Soon after, in June 1997, Wizards of the Coast bought out both companies. The wild success of *Magic: The Gathering* combined with the economic conditions of the Internet bubble had left Wizards of the Coast with several million dollars of capital

waiting to be invested. Because of the crisis at TSR, it was widely assumed that Gen Con would not be held, for the first time since 1968. The convention had grown into a massive affair that drew in players from around the world. Wizards of the Coast decided that Gen Con must happen and made hosting the conference a priority. Next, Wizards of the Coast sought out the creators of TSR's greatest product. Arneson received a settlement, and Wizards of the Coast was finally able to drop the word *Advanced* from *D&D*. Wizards of the Coast also paid a settlement to Gary Gygax and gave him their blessing to develop any new games he wished. Gygax went on to produce a game called *Legendary Adventure* in 1999 and collaborated on a game called *Castles and Crusades* in 2005.⁶⁰

Gygax died in March 2008. At Gen Con, the din of the exhibit hall was halted in order to hold a moment of silence for the man who had founded the conference. The Gen Con staff also had a special plaque dedicated to Gygax, which read:

The first DM,
He taught us to roll the dice.
He opened the door to new worlds.
His work shaped our industry.
He brought us Gen Con,
For this we thank him.⁶¹

In Lake Geneva, Gygax's funeral was followed by an impromptu session of gaming that quickly developed into an annual event called "Gary Con." Journalist David Ewalt compared his experience attending Gary Con to a Muslim undertaking the hajj.⁶² At the time of this writing, Wizards of the Coast is working to erect a memorial to Gary Gygax in Lake Geneva.⁶³ Dave Arneson died one year after his former partner. Although his death did not receive the same media attention as Gygax's, a mourner posted on Arneson's online obituary:

My brother loved your games Dave. . . . He was taken too early as you were too. Please say hello to him in Heaven from me and sit down and play a few rounds of Dungeons and Dragons with him. He was very good and will give you a run for your money, or whatever you play for in Heaven. See you when I get there.⁶⁴