

RPGA INTERVIEW with...

E. GARY GYGAX

E(rnest) Gary Gygax is a graying, slightly portly gentleman with very thick glasses. He has achieved Top Executive status of a multi-million dollar corporation of his own creation while still in his forties, and has put in many 30-hour days during its formation. To appearances, he could be anything - a shoemaker, an insurance underwriter, a businessman.... In fact, he has been each of these things. He has a long and varied history of employment, interwoven with an extensive record of hobby gaming in all its shapes and sizes.

Gary is hard to get a hold on. One minute he'll be the archtypical Senior Executive; the next, a fanatical gamer executing a military coup. He occasionally gets tired of the business routine and dumps everything (unless of critical importance) to preserve his own peace of mind in any of a variety of ways: repeatedly shooting for a wastepaper basket across the room until he's banked it in...

debating a very minor point of rules into absurdity or extinction... suddenly affecting a complete change of attitude about someone - only to unexpectedly revert to normal later. In short, Neutral Good with Chaotic tendencies.

Gary is hard to get a hold of, too. Whenever he ventures out of his office in the main headquarters of TSR Hobbies in Lake Geneva, a crowd of employees - some executives, most not - gather in his vicinity and dribble off behind him en masse, some hoping to get a quick solution to problems and others just seeking his opinions. He rapidly disappears into his own domain, however, often leaving hopefuls in his wake still laughing over some bon mot he has cast off as a smoke screen for his retreat. He still works too hard, steering the now large corporation through the world of modern business.

Gary relaxes at his home in Wisconsin with his wife, one son, two daughters, and a large assortment of dogs and cats.

His eldest son Ernie drops in regularly, as does his eldest daughter Elise (both of whom work for TSR). The Gygax home is not huge but is secluded. Its location is not advertised, as many people have sought his time, advice, and attention since he became well-known as the creator of the *Dungeons & Dragons*® game.

When asked for an article for the first RPGA Newsletter, Gary indicated that he was far too busy - as indeed he is - to produce anything. He did seem willing, however, to be interviewed if time could be found. And so, one murky morning with tape recorder running, we managed to catch Gary in the right mood and with a little time. Thereby came this article; in fact, a whole interview series is planned, to be found in upcoming issues. After editing, trimming, and smoothing the results, we proudly present this profile of E. Gary Gygax, President of TSR Hobbies, Inc.:

EGG: Good morning. What can I do for you, sir?

RPGA: Well, I have a few questions for you, sir, representing the RPGA members and their upcoming newsletter. This is to be an article for our first newsletter, which will also contain articles by most of TSR's best game designers.

The first question is, almost of necessity, the much misused, much rumored "How did the *D&D*® game get started?"

EGG: How we started selling it, you mean, or...?

RPGA: Well, how was it created? And why?

EGG: The progenitor of the *Dungeons & Dragons* game was simply the fantasy component of the *Chainmail* game published in 1971 by Guidon Games. Those familiar with the rules for that particular thing will notice that heroes have four hit dice, superheroes have eight hit dice, magic-users can toss fireballs; there are various colors of dragons mentioned, orcs, giants, etc. It's all pretty closely tied to what you see later on in the original *D&D* game. Many of the spells, in fact, and so on are all tied to the system that was built into the *Dungeons & Dragons* game. We played miniatures games; the fellows enjoyed the fantasy so much

that about 1970 we began to play a lot of them.

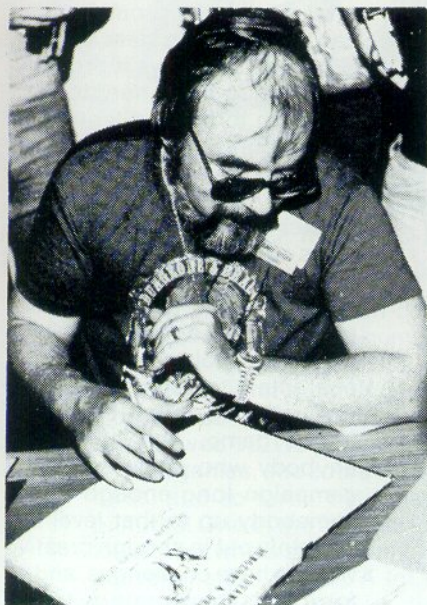
After Guidon published *Chainmail*, and that became one of its most popular sellers - and what with all of the questions pertaining to fantasy - it became apparent that there was a larger element of people interested in fantasy than we had thought. So I began working on what I initially thought of as a supplement to *Chainmail*, and it eventually grew into its own game.



You may notice that the early *Dungeons & Dragons* game was still kind of neither fish nor fowl, and referred the reader to *Chainmail* all the time. For the first six months after publishing the original *Dungeons & Dragons* game, we thought of the game as going only to those people who played miniatures. That's why the game was put together as it was, making a lot of assumptions. It was not what people said - incomprehensible; they were not miniatures players. Any miniatures player could pick it up and know how to handle it, easily.

RPGA: You mentioned, a few times, "we" and "the fellows," and so forth. Who are you really referring to?

EGG: At the time that they - *Chainmail* and then the original *D&D* game - were written, we had an active group of game players called "The Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association" whose membership included Jeff Perren, Lee Tucker, Mike Reese, myself of course, Rob and Terry Kuntz, and Don Kaye. Those were the active people in it. We had a few others. It grew; it grew amazingly by '73. We had perhaps twenty or thirty other people at various times.



RPGA: When the *D&D* phenomenon first started, of course, there were just a few players. We've been explaining to people how the first set was for hard-core gamers, and then the audience became more widespread. The version written by John Eric Holmes was a little bit easier, and now the latest version is easily understandable by anyone willing just to spend the time to read it. You've made the terms a little blander, and have been getting rid of a lot of the game; in general, improving it for the mass market. Do you like what has happened to the *D&D* game? I'm sure you like the widespread publicity and the approval it has received, but do you like the directions it has taken?

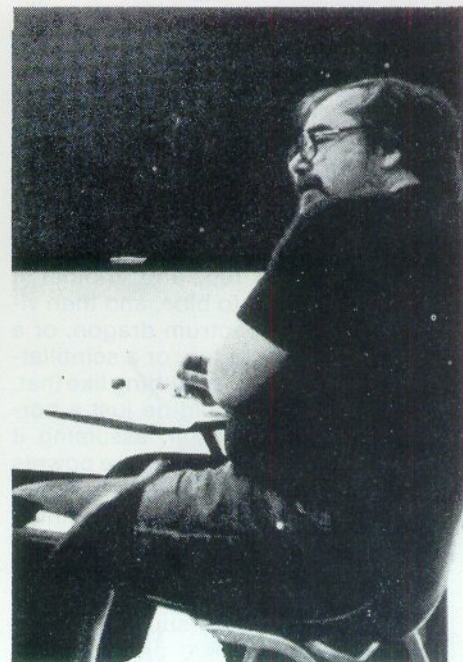
EGG: (chuckles) If I understand right: I'm not really too fond of the way *Dungeons & Dragons* games have kind of mutated and changed into very strange exercises. But who can say "nay" to someone who's having a good time with the game? One of the reasons that I was able to throw myself into the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*® project with such vigor, and put in so many hours and turn it out as quickly as I could, is that I felt that a game was needed that would have more control over its audience, and one that was not so open-ended and one that was going to have more uniformity of play, and yet retain the sense of wonder and imagination and creativity that the *Dungeons & Dragons* system, as a game form, had produced. So I have high hopes for *Advanced D&D*™ games

in that respect. Unfortunately, it seems as if they're still being perverted, although not as badly.

I believe that the RPGA influence is going to help to raise the level of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* play by forcing a little more conformity. I don't mind creativity, I don't mind mutation, if it brings out better game play, and superior gaming in general. But from everything that I can see, all the changes that are made are usually foolish and meant to either baby players along or kill them off, one way or another. They're destructive, rather than creative.

Just think about some of the outstanding changes that were made in *Dungeons & Dragons* games, and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* games too, for that matter, and look at what their effects are. Consider the "double damage on a natural 20", which of course seldom went to the monsters, but only went to the players, therefore making it yet easier for the players to kill monsters.

Critical hits? Again, players never took critical hits, only monsters, for some reason, would take critical hits. The weapons expertise idea, that a player's chosen weapon... he or she would do a lot better with it. And yet, monsters fighting with their natural abilities, fang and claw - who could be more expert than a tiger with its claws and teeth? - weren't getting any bonuses. The spell point system, which allowed magic-users to become veritable machine guns of spells without ever having to seriously consider what they were going



to take and just shoot everything down, made the magic-user the only character worth playing.

Some of the proposed classes, such as the barbarian I've heard of and the mighty knight, and one or two others that I've heard of, create super-powerful characters who just can... again, it was the only one worth being. Then you just go through and beat up on everything. The changes in the demi-human races create, again, super-powerful characters, so that everybody wants to be a dwarf, or an elf, or whatever it is, and nobody wants to be anything else, because it overbalances in favor. And generally these are done at the whim of a Dungeon Master, or from group pressure, to make a rather uninteresting campaign where everybody is one thing. These are usually the Monty Haul games.

On the other hand, you have the really silly monsters, or sure-death traps for the DM who seems to be rather sadistic and just wants to proceed to kill all of his players regularly, in capricious ways, without giving them any chance whatsoever. That's also guaranteed to spoil a game.

RPGA: So how should somebody - assuming that these major pitfalls are avoided and game balance is attempted, at least - how should someone introduce a new monster, a new magic item, and so forth, to be sure of game balance?



EGG: Compare it to what's there. There is a monster rating system; it's fairly easy, and it's given in the *DMG*. Just write up the points for the monster - and be fair - and then look at what it is, compared to the other monsters, and use it. For example, someone was talking about a dragon that changed hues, and as you were fighting it, one moment it would be red, and another it might turn to blue, and then violet... a spectrum dragon, or a rainbow dragon, or a scintillating dragon, something like that. Well, this would be just a horrendous monster, assuming it could use each of those powers (breath weapons) three times; or even if it could only use them once! Particularly if you got into some of those shades... obviously, you can't throw it against anything except super-powerful characters. The problem with characters is that... how many new monsters can you dream up, and how many new challenges can be dreamed up to handle a thirty-second level...

ANYTHING? The game is *reasonably* well-balanced, as it stands right now; so that if you add in a new character class, it should be within the general parameters of the other characters, and have some useful purpose.

Obviously, rangers have a useful purpose; they're basically an outdoor character, like a druid is, although both work well in a dungeon. A paladin is specifically aimed at fighting all the bad guys, and the undead. The cleric is there to both fight and heal. A magic-user is there to use some powerful spells to get the group through the tough times; the fighters are there to bear the brunt of all the action. The thieves are to act as, kind of, scouts, and second-story men, and deliver some nifty behind the back blows, and so forth. Illusionists are a type of magic-user, meant really to probably best combat the more stupid monsters, or humans. Bards are an interesting exercise for those people dedicated to a long-term project in an ongoing campaign.

Monks are intriguing in that they offer all sorts of promise if you can get them up near the top. But if the DM plays it properly, it's going to be so hard to get a monk up to beyond tenth level that it might mean - DESPAIR.

So, and even so, the Grandfather of Assassins - or the Grand Master of Flowers in the monk class - or a 23rd level Bard - or a 20th level magician or wizard - is certainly tough, but it's very hard to get there, and by that time there's probably one or two other characters to contest that individual's supremacy within the game. And of course, anybody who *properly* DMs a campaign long enough to get somebody up to that level has certainly put in enough creative work to have challenges, and so forth, commensurate with the level of players.

RPGA: Skipping over to a wider field of gaming, the Gen Con® convention started "way back when". "Were you there at the conception, and the first ones?"

EGG: Well, what happened is that the





year before the Gen Con convention started, I invited a number of fellows up to my place in Lake Geneva for a gaming session, and as I recall, about a dozen showed up. We played Avalon Hill games, and some miniatures, and so forth. I still have pictures! One of the original fellows there who's still in gaming, actively, is Bill Hoyer. A lot of the others have either disappeared or dropped out, at least, from the active ranks, but Bill and I also belonged to a group called the IFW (International Federation of Wargamers), and I was one of its officers, and Bill was eventually president in a couple of years. I suggested to Bill Speer and Scott Duncan, who were president and vice-president - I don't know, maybe I was vice-president and Bill was secretary - but anyway, I said "We ought to have an IFW convention". And they said, "Hey, that sounds like a great idea! You're it!"

So I put the first Gen Con event together, and we held it in Horticultural Hall and had about a total attendance of about fifty or sixty hard-core gamers, who came from all over the country. We had a Canadian or two there; we had some people from out on the west coast, from the east coast, from Texas.... There just weren't too many of us that were aware of each other - then, at least. There were probably more out there, but it was hard to get to them. We did have a lot of walk-throughs, even the first year; the total different people there - I think there was something over 150 at the first Gen Con convention that was run at Horticultural Hall, here in beautiful Lake Geneva.

RPGA: It's sure grown since then. Do you like the way the Gen Con scene has gone? There are mammoth, incredible problems involved these days in handling the thousands of people who show up for the various games.

EGG: It's all right. We had incredible problems handling the fifty peo-

ple that were there the first year, so we just have more people to deal with. I ran the first one all by myself, virtually, with some people to help me set up. It was a one-day show, and I was there the day before and the day after, first setting up and then taking down and cleaning up. From a personal standpoint I don't like the large ones as well, because you can't possibly know all the people there, and a lot of the feeling of comradeship is gone... the closeness, the general tenor of things has changed considerably. On the other hand, it does give a chance for many, many more people to come and see what gaming is all about, get into things, take a look at the new projects that the companies have produced, and meet their friends.

I still see a lot of the old-timers there, and say "hi" to them. It gives a better exposure to the hobby; in that regard it's great. It allows more competitive gaming; you can have 500-man tournaments, 600-man tournaments... that is marvelous. So I think the big convention is a very good thing, and it's here to stay. That's why we also run the three small conventions every year, too. And these are more like the old-time Gen Con events - such as the Spring Revel we just had here - because there you recognize the people, and can sit down and talk with them. It's not a mob scene; things are a little chaotic - some of the games don't come off like they should have, or you go change and play in a different room, or play something different - but it's fun, and everybody has a good time, and that's what the small convention's all about.

RPGA: Doesn't TSR make piles of money off of every Gen Con convention, though?

EGG: Ho ho ho, BOY oh boy, do we LOSE piles of money at every Gen Con convention!

RPGA: Then why?

EGG: As a service to the hobby! We're still basically... this is a company run by people who like games. Most of the people here are gamers. We have some people who don't play games, we have professionals, and we're becoming very professional in the way we do business, and we're looking to be professional, too. But first of all it's a service. Secondly, it helps promote the hobby. So it's promotion, I guess, and we're doing it now; if

the game players didn't like it and never came, then we would drop it gladly, because it costs us a lot of money to put it on. But we do it now because it's expected of us, and we don't want to let anybody down. It is a good chance for publicity, as far as the news media are concerned, and it's good exposure for new, would-be game hobbyists.



RPGA: The Gen Con event is known as the longest continually running game convention around. Is it the biggest?

EGG: Well, it is absolutely the first of the gaming conventions started. There are older conventions, but they were for figure collectors, and things like that. We're the graddaddy of conventions. Sometimes Gen Con has been bigger than Origins, and at other times it hasn't been as big. I don't think *big* is necessarily the measure of how successful a convention is. Really, if people like it and come back, it's successful, if it's got twenty people there or twenty *thousand* people there. We certainly have a lot of events going, and a lot of dealers, and it's a good convention. (*Testily*) I don't think much more can be said on that subject.

RPGA: Feel like a short break?

EGG: Yeah.

Due to lack of space, the short break must become a long one. Watch for the conclusion of this interview next issue, when Gary talks about (among other things) his own favorite games, the D&D movie, and the future of the D&D phenomenon.