

BEYOND THE HIGHEST
levels of power, unafraid of the deepest
dungeon or fiercest dragon, stands
E. Gary Gygax — a frustrated insur-
ance salesman who turned a private
fantasy into one of Wisconsin's most
spectacular success stories.

LORD *of the* NERDS



by Perry M. Lamek

DAMN! You drive almost four days to get here from California and suddenly find yourself cornered by an enraged bear, without the aid of your magic sword, or a drop of healing potion, or a prayer for resurrection.

Just like that, you're dead.

Dick, also known as Balek the dwarf, a 21-year-old computer programmer from Orange County with shiny brown loafers, white knee socks and khaki Bermuda shorts that are hiked way up over his belly and held there by a thick leather belt with an official Dungeons and Dragons belt buckle — he, Balek, is at this moment dying, bloody and helpless in a dank stone corridor deep in the bowels of a decrepit castle.

But that's okay, because Dick is wearing his favorite gamer T-shirt — the one that says **ENTROPY IS NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE** — and now he can simply grab his backpack filled with manuals, modules and graph paper, wish the surviving members of the expedition party luck, and lope off in search of another adventure.

Contributing Editor Perry M. Lamek, A.K.A. Rondel, first level fighter, was attacked and slain by an army of skeletons in Haunted Keep at Gen Con XV.



He's not angry. He was murdered fairly by that brutal bruin and that, after all, is the kind of thing you have to expect in a tough campaign. That's good D and D for you. A battle of wits, survival of the fittest — not like the totally insipid game being run by this one Dungeon Master from Indianapolis where spells are thrown way above the ninth level for no particular reason whatsoever. Sure, deities are employing magic of higher levels these days, but everyone should realize that a dweomer beyond the ninth level is unwarranted and counterproductive.

Who needs that? A good gamer will gladly take his chances with cave bears.



manticores, and doppelgangers, but forget Dungeon Masters like that guy from Indianapolis. There's plenty of other campaigns around here.

Of course! This is Gen Con XV, the world's premier role-playing game convention, and 7000 devoted gamers — like Dick — have converged upon the U.W.-Parkside campus in Kenosha to romp for four full days in a vicarious world populated by dwarves, gnomes, sprites, goblins, elves, fairies, orks, ogres, trolls, wizards, clerics, sorcerers, and assorted dragons.

This is something special — more than just fun and games. For Dick, and most of the others here, Gen Con is also a serious

demonstration of unity, a pilgrimage, a gathering of the clan to pay homage to one E. Gary Gygax, president of TSR Hobbies, Inc. in Lake Geneva and creator of the Dungeons and Dragons phenomenon — the man who made it possible for these disciples to finally break free from the bounds of an intellectual reality that would traditionally have cast them in subordinate social roles and set them apart as impotent victims of blatant peer discrimination — the man who freed them from the stigma of being...

NERDS.

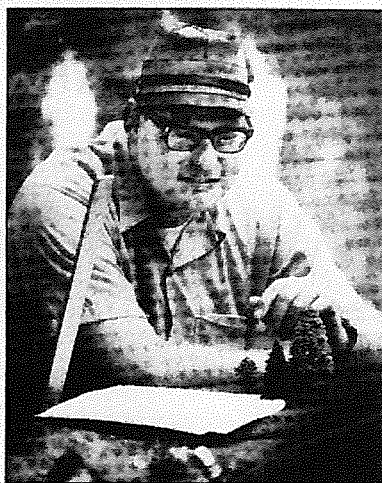
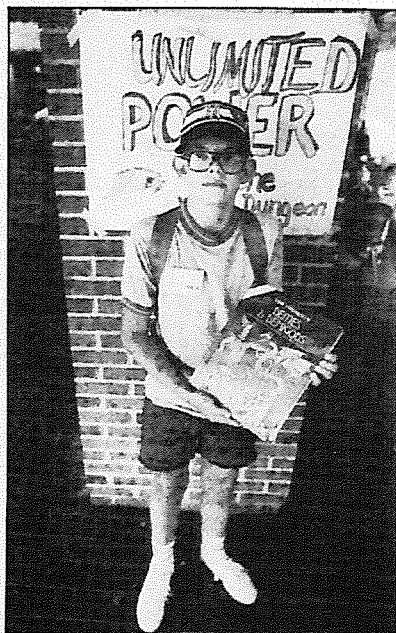
Ask Dick, with his Coke bottle horn rims and permanently disobedient apricot coif-

ture, about being labeled a nerd. He can tell you what it was like before he discovered D and D, when the only kids that spoke to you were the ones who made fun of the way you dressed or scoffed at your briefcase in the hall at school, when it seemed like there was no one else in the entire world that had any interests outside of sports or cars or getting high and chasing the opposite sex.

Ask Dick from Orange County, or Bob from Saskatchewan, or 32-year-old John Howard from right here in Kenosha — they can tell you the significance of role playing. They can explain why it is so important to be able to escape into a fantasy realm where you can leave behind your everyday identity

DEITIES AND DEMIGODS

MIKE, A.K.A. MENION LEAH, fourth-level fighter (left in photo at right), is an unemployed laborer from Alabama who nearly drained his savings account to attend Gen Con XV. He joined thousands of kindred fantasy buffs like those pictured here for four days of role-playing games.



and take on a new one determined by the roll of dice; where essential attributes such as strength, intelligence, dexterity, wisdom and charisma are fixed by the numbers you turn; where every gamer has an even chance to be among the heroes who emerge from perilous adventures alive and triumphant over EVIL.

It's about as far as you can get from reality, where you have no control, and the odds are stacked against you if you don't fit in with society's standards for being dashing, hip or successful.

"Gary Gygax?" says Balek the dwarf, as he saunters through the student union at Gen Con XV. "I'd like to shake his hand. He's the man who gave me power!"

At that thought, the gamer's eyes are set ablaze. He runs a finger across an upper lip where he has tried for years, unsuccessfully, to raise a moustache. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, as if to signal that he is about to explode with sheer excitement.

"You know about Gary Gygax... right?"

He glances up, reconfirming that this is truly his own domain, that he is most certainly in control of the situation.

"Everyone knows about Gary Gygax..."

Thus begins the legend of D and D, the tale of a common man who rose from the depths of corporate insurance in pursuit of a fantasy and grew to become the lord of a flourishing empire. It's a story that Dick has obviously repeated many times before, a parable of mythic proportions from which he and the others have drawn great confidence and inspiration.

As he speaks, he can feel the power surge.

"He's here you know. Gary Gygax is always at the Gen Cons."

Indeed he is. But it is more the spirit of E. Gary Gygax than his actual physical presence that presides over the hearts and minds of the loyal 7,000 at Parkside. Surprisingly, the monarch of these masses moves among his subjects inconspicuously. The high priest of role-playing wears an effective cloak of virtual anonymity; he reviews the troops unnoticed, unencumbered by pretensions of nobility.

Which seems fitting; to many of the gamers at Gen Con, Lord Gygax exists only as a sacrosanct figure. It is the legend, not the man, they worship. Thus, who among them would be so bold as to anticipate a casual confrontation? Who would imagine that this deity should stroll the grounds in blue jeans, looking more like a Kenny Rogers stand-in than a nabob or even a nerd?

But then, who would imagine that a company based on fantasy and founded with \$1,000 in borrowed capital could exceed \$20 million in annual sales after less than ten years in business?

E. Gary Gygax, that's who.

"I knew that if people were aware of these kind of games, they'd want to play them," Gygax says, touring the convention

with a small retinue at hand. "Everyone seems to possess a need for fantasy."

Born 44 years ago in Chicago, Gygax inherited a voracious appetite for fantasy from his father, Ernie, a prolific storyteller who prodded his son's vivid imagination by spinning outlandish bedtime yarns.

It was also through his late father's example that Gary learned about the value of good timing in professional ventures, and the bitter frustration that comes with unfulfilled ambition.



dollar short and a day late — that was the story of Ernie Gygax. He came to America from Switzerland prior to the turn of the century, worked in a Chicago drug store and saved his earnings to study violin. One day a friend of his employer offered to sell the young musician a quarter interest in a soft drink formula he had developed in Atlanta. But Ernie declined, hesitant to risk his \$600 nest egg on another man's pipe dream — a pipe dream that became Coca-Cola.

The Gygax patriarch joined the Chicago Symphony and, intent on atoning for his unfortunate reluctance in the Coke deal, began to invest heavily in stocks. He played the market well, and by 1929 had accumulated more than \$100,000 in holdings. When his broker advised selling, Ernie demurred, favoring one extra day of speculation — only to be caught high and dry by the market's crash, and left with nothing but an abundance of worthless certificates.

Gary never heard his father play the violin, for Ernie had grown discontent as a musician and put aside his Jacob Steiner to pursue a sales career by the time his son was born. The family relocated to Lake Geneva in 1946, where the senior Gygax sold retail clothing and satisfied his creative drive by puttering surreptitiously as an amateur inventor.

Gary was a precocious youth who loved to read and listen to radio adventures. A child of the war era, he extended his deep-rooted penchant for escapism into military miniatures and strategy gaming. Soon he became hooked on toy soldiers, and began devoting more and more time to the study of historical battles.

While he enjoyed learning, Gary hated school-with a passion. He found his teachers to be consistently inadequate and unchallenging; there was a greater wealth of knowledge, he discovered, in his grandfather's library. There, he devoured volumes of history and science fiction at his own pace.

He dropped out of high school, and after working several odd jobs in Lake Geneva, moved to the Chicago area. He went to work there, first in the service/supply department of the Kemper Insurance Company,



and later as an underwriter for Fireman's Fund.

Gary Gygax never planned to dedicate his life to the business of insurance; still, the job gave him enough money to survive and enough spare time to be involved with a myriad of outside activities. He enrolled as a night student at Chicago Junior College and quickly made the dean's list. He then became a precinct captain for the Republican Party. In 1958, he married his childhood sweetheart, Mary Powell.

And, of course, there were always games to be played, battles to be waged.

Gary established a reputation as an insatiable war gamer; he spent at least 24 hours of every week plotting out strategies with other enthusiasts. He was instrumental in organizing an event designed to unite similarly inclined individuals for a formal convention in Lake Geneva — which became known appropriately enough as the Geneva Convention, or Gen Con.

While miniature military campaigns offered a needed refuge from the daily tedium of the insurance business, Gary felt increasingly stifled by his career as the years passed. He had strong creative urges that were destined to remain unrequited at the Fireman's Fund. So in 1968, he laid it on the line.

"I want to quit my job to write and play games," he told his wife, who was understandably a bit taken aback by the announcement.

"What are we going to do for money?" she responded, pointing out that they now had four small children to support in addition to themselves.

She had raised a good question. Gary knew that while he could earn a living by writing military game rules, it would be a meager one at best. As a compromise solution, they agreed that the wise move would be to get fired from the insurance company — thereby becoming eligible to collect unemployment checks during their period of adjustment.

"Now..." Mary Gygax had said a few weeks later, after Gary had indeed managed to be ousted from the job he had held for more than eight years. "Now go ahead and give it a shot. Do what you really want to do."

Gary and his family returned to live in Lake Geneva. He began writing games for a small, moribund company called Guide On, and opened a shoe repair business in the basement of his home to supplement his income. Though he had finally attained the independent status he had long desired, there were private moments of anxiety; his situation seemed tenuous after years of routine financial security.

"It was scary," Gygax recalls, holding his Zippo to the first in a succession of Camel straights. "It was like the silver cord had been cut. I wondered if I could really make it."

Gary continued to invent new battle scenarios and toil by rote in his subter-

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ran a cobbler shop until 1971, when he quietly added a fantasy supplement to a war game called Chain Mail — a move that shocked the military miniature establishment. Purists immediately denounced Gygax as a heretic, charging that by introducing the fantasy element he had effectively reduced a "man's game" to child's play.

That riled Gary.

"To me, pushing little toy tanks around a field isn't all that manly anyway," he says. "I think it's rather childish, to tell you the truth. But I don't mind admitting that I'm still a little boy at heart."

As it turned out, the fantasy element proved to have broad appeal. War gamers, suddenly set free from the restriction of history, welcomed the opportunity to utilize their imagination, to employ magical weapons and conjure wild spells in the midst of battle.

Inspired by what he saw as a wide-open market for fantasy gaming, Gygax expanded and refined his concept, and eventually arrived at the role-playing format that became Dungeons and Dragons.

However, his attempts to place the game with major manufacturers fell flat; the industry at large simply refused to recognize a commercial potential in fantasy-adventure. Avalon Hill, then kingpin of the war gaming business, rejected D and D, calling it far too complicated and open-ended to catch on.

So Gary, operating out of his basement workshop, filled the growing number of requests for D and D rules, one at a time, through the mail. As word of mouth spread, however, demand for the game burgeoned, and it became apparent that he was sitting on a veritable gold mine.

In 1973, Gygax approached Don Kaye, a friend and inveterate gamer, with what amounted to a desperate proposal.

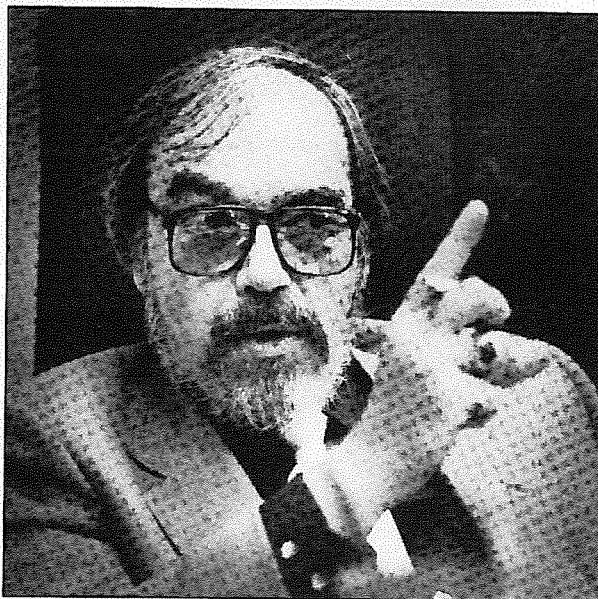
"We've got to start a company!" Gary implored. "The adventure game market is ripe and no one is taking advantage of it."

Gygax himself was broke. His combined income from writing games and fixing shoes barely supported his family, which by now had grown to include another child. But he managed to convince Kaye, who was apprehensive at first, to put up the \$1,000 needed to form Tactical Studies Rules — TSR — and market Dungeons and Dragons on a full-scale basis.

What Gygax had introduced to the gaming world was nothing short of revolutionary. He took the element of imagination and elevated it from its secondary role to primary status; imagination became, in effect, the stage and only limitation on the game.

Dungeons and Dragons does not even require the use of a gaming board, because all the action takes place in the minds of the participants. Each gamer assumes a specific role, or character, and works with other members of the expedition party to achieve the object of their quest — treasure, immortality, or simply triumph over evil.

Each role is developed through a series of



"FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE, D and D offers the first chance they ever had to be creative. They invest so much of themselves in a campaign that they eventually say, 'Hey, this is the greatest thing I ever did!'"



dice throws before the game gets under way. Basic character attributes such as strength, intelligence, wisdom, constitution, dexterity and charisma are determined by the numbers on three six-sided dice. Throws for great physical strength make one an able fighter — no matter what one's wisdom quotient. If the dice endow a player with outstanding intelligence but the constitution of a wimp, he would be more qualified to take on the role of, say, a capable cleric, or magic-user.

Additional dice rolls fix a player more precisely into character, as do the numerous volumes of detail on every conceivable character combination available through TSR's Dragon Publishing subsidiary. The success of a D and D gamer hinges upon how intimately he knows the role, and how quickly his game persona can react to various situations.

("Two years!" gripes Dick from California. "I've been Balek the dwarf for two years and here I let a cave bear do me in.")

Once the characters are set, a player designated as Dungeon Master narrates the action, leading the party (from two to 18 per game) through an underworld of fantasy.

The DM orchestrates a campaign by using either a scenario of his own device or one of the many prepackaged TSR modules.

Throughout the game, the DM uses different dice and charts to decide the odds and results of various situations the group encounters as it journeys through an elaborate maze of corridors and rooms inhabited by monsters and loaded with obstacles designed to impede the quest.

The detail involved is staggering, and the number and nature of situations as infinite as the players' own imaginations.

Unlikely as a "game" like this might seem, Gary had hit a motherlode. Ernie Gygax would have been proud. The market turned out to be ripe for fantasy gaming — so ripe, in fact, that the demand for D and D exceeded even TSR's initial projections.

The appeal of Dungeons and Dragons reached an entirely new breed of player, attracting people who had never before considered strategy gaming, and who had no prior interest in military rules. It reached students like Dick out in Orange County, who needed more than his homework to stimulate his imagination; grown men like John Howard, whose 9 to 5 job hardly satisfied his sense of adventure; and kids

like Bob from Saskatchewan, who discovered through D and D that there were legions of allies willing to interact socially and work together toward a common purpose.

And there were women buying Dungeons and Dragons! In all his years of war gaming, Gary could not remember one female player in a thousand.

"For a lot of people, D and D offers the first chance they ever had to be creative," Gygax says. "The game requires a lot of personal investment. They invest so much of themselves in a campaign that they eventually say, 'Hey, this is the greatest thing I ever did!' There's really nothing else like it, except maybe improvisational theater."

Gary smiles broadly, pausing to admire some of the revelers at Gen Con XV. Though the majority of the 7,000 gamers here dress somewhat conventionally, there are those who choose to don medieval raiment and emulate their dungeon-dwelling alter egos. A fighter, in full chain mail regalia, passes by carrying a wooden staff in one hand and a gray vinyl briefcase in the other. A magic-user, dressed in a sorcerer's black cape and headpiece, stops to down a can of diet Dr. Pepper. There's a 9-year-old halfling elf from suburban Chicago with

tufts of purple fur glued to his bare feet, and an entire family of clerics — a father, mother and four stairstep children — all in robes and primitive leggings.

"That's great!" Gygax chuckles. "The costumes aren't necessary, but they do add color. It's a way some gamers announce their dedication to the hobby. It's just another way to use your imagination."

Imagination is the key word here. It is precisely what sets the TSR line of fantasy role-playing games above the deluge of imitations that have attempted to cash in on the Dungeons and Dragons phenomenon.

"How can you not love a game that you yourself help create?" asks Gary Gygax rhetorically.

Therein lies the secret of success for TSR Hobbies, Inc. While other companies may attempt to duplicate the appeal of Dungeons and Dragons, none have yet been able to approach its depth and scope. Or its popularity.

"Our competitors just don't understand the concept," Gygax explains. "They know what appeals to them in fantasy, and they try to design games that will appeal to everyone; our games are set up so everyone can put their own fantasy into it."

"It's really a laugh," he says, stroking his salt-and-pepper whiskers. "If you were to

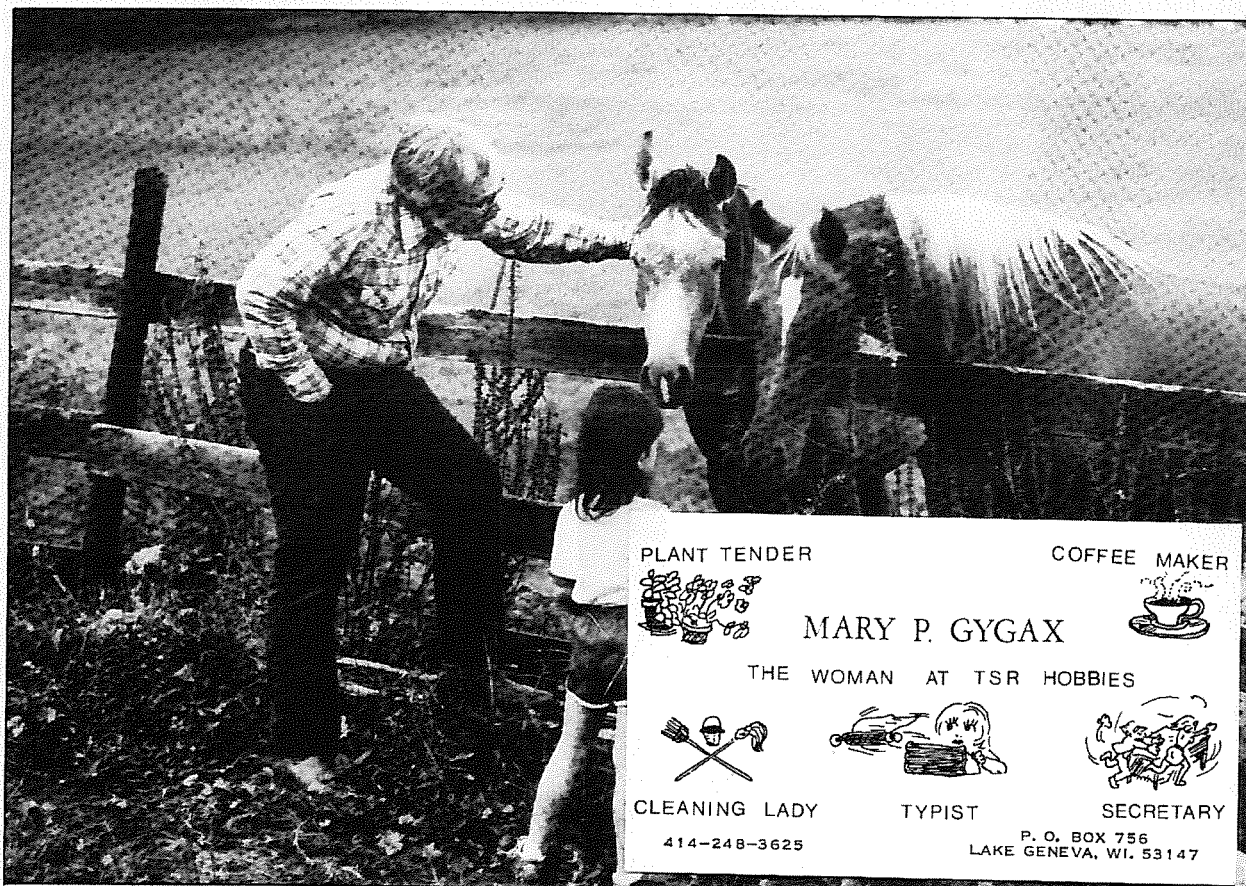
add all of our competitors' sales together, they wouldn't even equal the sales of our Advanced Dungeons and Dragons package."

Gary has indeed been able to enjoy a good laugh at the expense of his competition. TSR changed the face of adventure gaming, and actually gave birth to its own self-contained market.

Since its emergence in 1973, TSR has grown at twice the rate of the entire adventure gaming industry, including Avalon Hill and all the other manufacturers that originally dismissed Dungeons and Dragons as an overly complex folly.

In its first year of operations, TSR sold approximately \$50,000 worth of D and D games. After 36-year-old Don Kaye's death from a sudden heart attack in January 1975, the firm incorporated and grossed about \$300,000. Sales figures continued to double year by year, until 1981, when they tripled and surpassed the \$20 million mark. Company projections indicate that TSR has yet to penetrate half of the potential marketplace.

A basic D and D beginner's set, consisting of two booklets, six dice and a crayon, currently sells for \$12. With each game sold, retailers can reportedly expect to move about \$150 more in accessory items, mostly printed matter.



GYGAX INTRODUCES his thoroughbred Arabians to Tieu Yin Duong, the 5-year-old daughter of the Vietnamese family he sponsors.

GARY GYGAX signs autographs for youthful admirers at Gen Con XV.

The extraordinary evolution of TSR Hobbies Inc. has taken place so rapidly that the company has been hard-pressed to keep up with its own growth. Dungeons and Dragons games were first assembled and distributed out of Kaye's residence and the Gygax cellar. After the co-founder died, the base of operations was moved into a vacant home just north of downtown Lake Geneva. Six months later, the firm acquired an aging hotel on Main Street, which became obsolete even before intended renovations could be done. In 1981, TSR took over a more spacious suburban facility and soon outgrew that as well. This summer, construction was completed on a modern, computer-equipped, 100,000 square-foot warehouse and office complex adjacent to their current location. The company's final move, at least for a while, began two months ago.

TSR will undoubtedly require every inch of its new space, as the demand for its line of games, hobbies and crafts continues to swell. There are an estimated 3 million D and D gamers in the United States today, with several million more worldwide. The firm already has offices in Great Britain and France, and plans to open branches in Canada, Australia and Japan. It has a publish-distribution deal with Random House, and a slew of licensing arrangements for use of the D and D trademark on such items as belt buckles, miniature figures, notebooks, and even a Mattel electronic version of the game. TSR commissioned Academy Award-winning screenwriter James ("Lion In Winter") Goldman to create and develop a full-length feature film based on the Dungeons and Dragons premise for a 1984 release date.

"A

movie!" exclaims Mike, who is also known as Menion Leah, fourth-level fighter. "A D and D movie will be superb. How can it miss?"

Twenty three-year-old Mike is an unemployed laborer from Dutton, Alabama. He spent the majority of his dwindling bank account to attend Gen Con XV and play Advanced Dungeons and Dragons.

"I'm portraying a fighter in this game," Mike whispers during a break in Gen Con action, "but I prefer to be a magic-user. When a magic-user gets to a high level, he's one of the most feared and respected characters in the game. You have to live by your wits — you have to rely on your mind to survive.

"I live in the second highest unemployment center of the world, and I know how to survive."



Every good fantasy gamer has to have a knack for survival, and Gary Gygax provides the ideal role model. His success stands as proof positive that if you believe in yourself, you can indeed prevail over all obstacles and claim the treasure at the campaign's end.

A confident self image has certainly paid off for Gary, who now lives in a manner befitting a lord on a palatial 23-acre estate near Beloit. His primary non-gaming activity (he still plays D and D at least twice a week) is raising and showing thoroughbred Arabian horses. Like game playing, it started out as a hobby and blossomed into a business venture, this time supervised by his wife, Mary.

If the numbers have been kind to Gary, he seems to be trying to return some of the good fortune D and D has generated for him.

Through TSR Hobbies Inc., he funded the salvage of the Lucius Newberry, a 115-foot passenger vessel that sank on Lake Geneva in 1891. It was a summer-long project, with the ship finally being raised September 28 of this year. Whatever historical artifacts can be preserved from it will be put on permanent display in Lake Geneva as a gesture of civic goodwill to the birthplace and international headquarters of Dungeons and Dragons.

Not that TSR has to go out of its way to promote goodwill in a town where it has become one of the major employers. There are presently about 250 local residents on the firm's payroll, and there are plans to add another 160 over the next six months.

Another example of Gygax's benevolence is the Chinese refugee family from Vietnam that has been living in his home for the past year.

"I felt a great responsibility for the Vietnam situation, even though I had nothing to do with it," says the former Republican party

activist. "I haven't even voted since 1964.

"But I thought that we, the United States, really used those people badly. We made a lot of promises, then bailed out and left. So I decided that since I had a big place with plenty of room, and could well afford it, why not sponsor a family?"

Thus, Gygax seems to be living up to the derivative of his name — from an ancient Mesopotamian word for giant — in the eyes of hundreds who have never once ventured down those cerebral corridors or encountered the dread ochre jelly monsters of Dungeons and Dragons.

But with prominence has come skepticism, and even some criticism.

A large segment of the public's first introduction to D and D was as some sort of vague, bizarre ritual filtered through media reports about the disappearance of child prodigy James Egbert from the Michigan State campus in August 1979. Though claims that the student had been living out an elaborate Dungeons and Dragons campaign were never substantiated, the publicity generated by the case tended to portray the game as a strange and sinister activity, which led to the inevitable charge — particularly from certain extreme sectors of the religious community — that D and D was of a satanic nature.

Gygax refused to take that very seriously, however, since none of the charges came from recognized groups or churches.

"I think what they were doing was rather dishonest," he says, lighting another cigarette. "D and D gets a lot of ink, a lot of favorable ink, and by attacking it these splinter groups get their names mentioned. They do it for publicity, and to sell their own material.

"One group that was after us recently sought to ban 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.' Now there's a dirty book for you.

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GYGAX

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What's that one lone girl doing with all those little men?"

The problem with most of the critics, according to Gary, is that they cannot seem to understand that Dungeons and Dragons is simply a game based on fantasy.

"You don't really get rich when you play a Monopoly game," he says. "And you don't become a qualified real estate broker either. It's just a game. It's make-believe. It's all hokum. Just like D and D. You don't really learn how to wield a magic sword. It's just fun. A game is a game. Wake up!"

Gary is quick to point out that Dungeons and Dragons has been enthusiastically received by educators, and even used by some in classroom situations to sharpen both mathematic and reading skills. Still, apparently aware that public perception is something best not left to chance, TSR has retained the services of superstar psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers, who is promoting the educational and sociological benefits of role-playing games. She is currently in the midst of an 18-city tour as a TSR spokesperson.

"People who play D and D apply the lessons they learn to real life," Gygax proffers. "They aren't so ready to take things at face value. They learn to analyze the situation — the who, what, where and why. They're not so quick to judge. It's a valuable approach to life.

"For example," he says, holding up one finger like a wise old sorcerer, "just because someone is good-looking, it doesn't automatically mean they're charismatic. . . ."

Like Balek the dwarf, who is low on charisma but not unattractive for a four foot tall demihuman with 60-foot infravision.

But — as Dick from Orange County likes to say — charisma was never a prerequisite anyway.

The halfling elf guarding the door reports hearing slithering noises. Balek goes for his sword. This could be a gelatinous cube, and if it is, it will react to fire and conventional weaponry, but not to cold, or lightning or spells.

The Dungeon Master speaks.

"It's a dark passage, only ten inches wide, running due south."

Balek will go in for a look. He's the only one here, beside the elf — who is actually a small 11-year-old from the Detroit area — with the ability to see in the dark.

"He sees a gelatinous cube filling the passage," says the DM. "It's about 60 feet ahead."

You never know about these first-level wandering monsters. Sometimes they're carrying treasure — diamonds or gold pieces that they swept up in the dungeon and couldn't digest. Sometimes they're worth messing with and sometimes you can end up anesthetized, unless a timely saving throw against paralysis is made.

Dick looks at his watch. It's good to be back in a game.



*Dazzling
Desirable*

18kt Gold & 5 Diamond
Ring-\$3150.; 14kt Gold
Heart Ring \$495.;
18kt Gold & Dia-
mond Necklace
\$1450.; 18kt Dia-
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