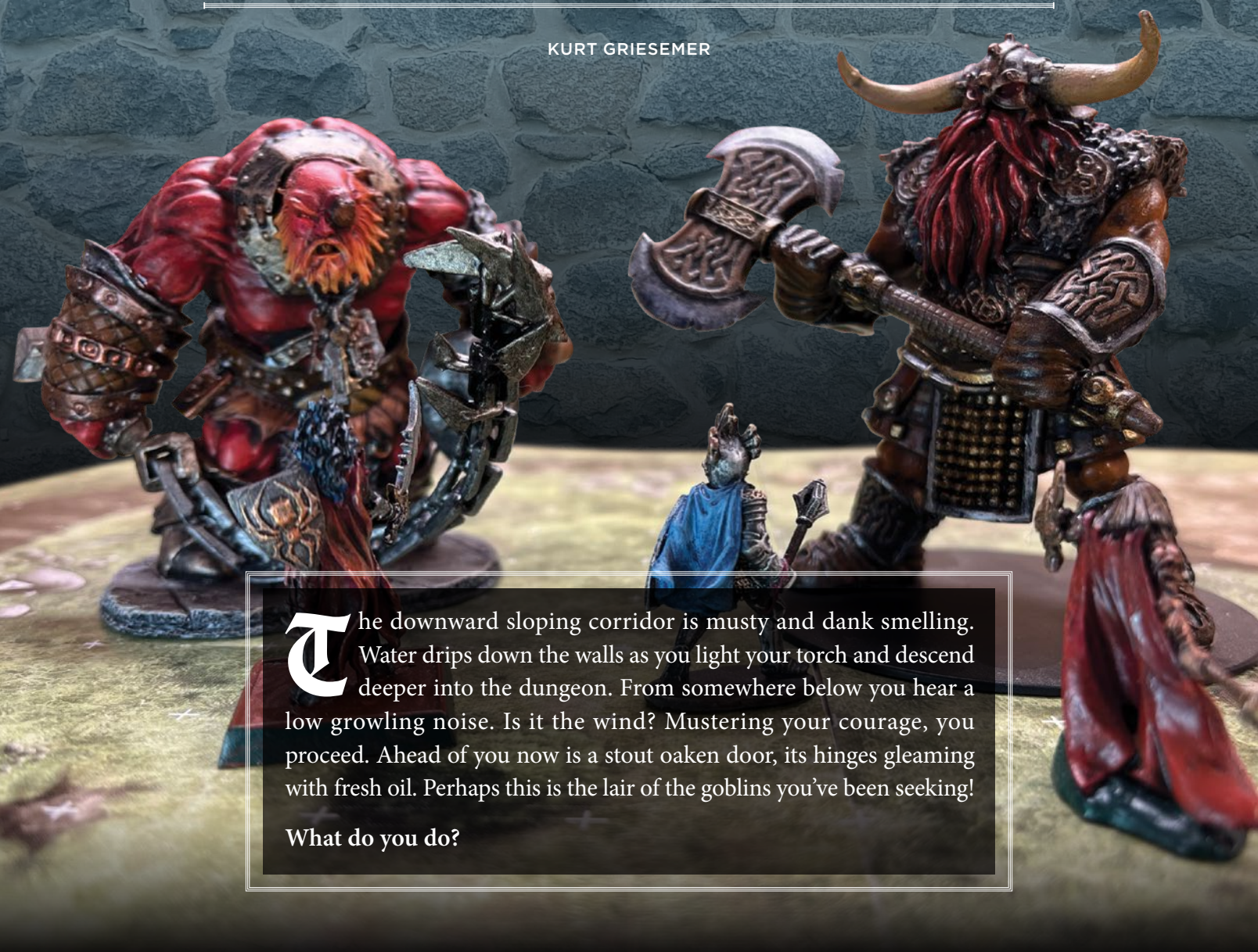
FEATURE

Dungeon Crawling at Lake Geneva

FIFTY YEARS OF DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

KURT GRIESEMER



The downward sloping corridor is musty and dank smelling. Water drips down the walls as you light your torch and descend deeper into the dungeon. From somewhere below you hear a low growling noise. Is it the wind? Mustering your courage, you proceed. Ahead of you now is a stout oaken door, its hinges gleaming with fresh oil. Perhaps this is the lair of the goblins you've been seeking!

What do you do?

PHOTO BY CARRIE GRIESEMER

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"These rules are strictly fantasy. Those wargamers who lack imagination, those who don't care for Burroughs' Martian adventures where John Carter is groping through black pits, who feel no thrill upon reading Howard's Conan saga . . . will not be likely to find DUNGEONS & DRAGONS to their taste. But those whose imaginations know no bounds will find that these rules are the answer to their prayers."[1]

So began the foreword of the groundbreaking Dungeons & Dragons box set from 1974, inviting what would become generations of players into the realm of fantasy role-playing where, as creators Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson promised, "The fantastic is fact and magic really works!"[2]

As Paul Stormberg, president of the Gary Gygax Memorial Fund, explains, "Dungeons & Dragons was the first role-playing game ever and, as such, was only the seventh type of tabletop game created by humanity."[3] Up there in history with dice games and chess, D&D has changed the landscape of how people around the world spend their leisure time. Fifty years and five-plus editions after the game's creation, its cultural influence extends far beyond the original box set.

Yet this giant in the role-playing gaming industry got its start in the small town of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

Origins

The concept for D&D was born out of two minds approaching a similar idea: What if magic was real? If there were monsters to fight, who would be the heroes? And how would it all work?

Enter the two creators of Dungeons & Dragons, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson.

"It's hard to imagine a game with humbler origins than D&D, which emerged from the work of two amateur hobbyists and a ragtag handful of backers and investors," says Jon Peterson, author of *Playing the World*, a history of the game's origins. "Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson did not have the smoothest of collaborations, but they had complementary skills and together they managed to get a revolutionary idea out into the world."[4]

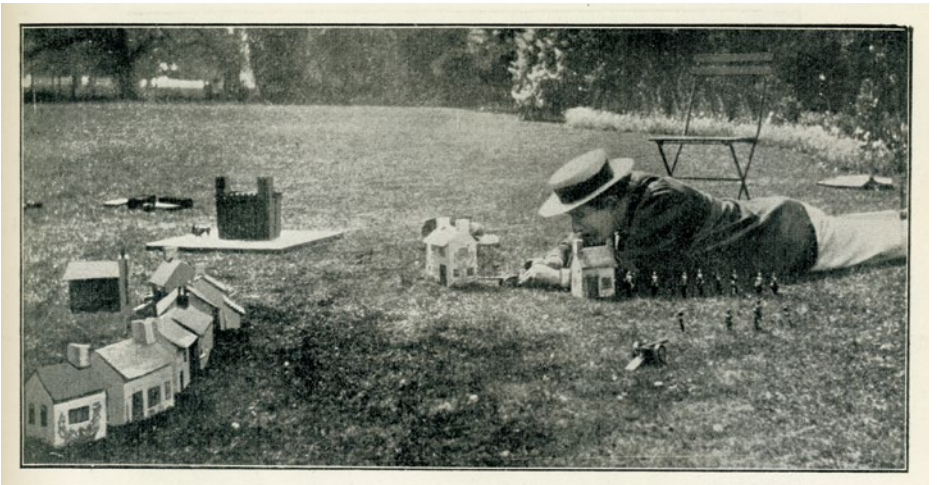
Gygax had been a "wargamer" for years. As a father of five (and, eventually, six), a cobbler, and an unemployed insurance underwriter, he spent much of his free time creating games and playing them with friends and family. In addition to shoe repair, he worked for Guidon Games where he created Chainmail, his first wargaming miniatures set of rules, in 1971. A unique feature of Chainmail was the incorporation of fantasy racial groups, such as J. R. R. Tolkien had done in *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* series. This moved the game well past the historic nature of wargames and added an element of fantasy and whimsy to the battles. Additionally, players could re-enact battles from those famous adventures and become, for example, the King of Rohan leading his army at the Battle of Pelennor Fields or a dwarf lord leaping down from the mountain with his family and friends in the Battle of the Five Armies.[5]

Gygax's passion, military wargaming, had existed for well over a century. Kriegspiel, or "war game," created by the Prussian army in the 1800s, had been used to train military leaders on strategy and tactics. Over time, the game incorporated more complex rules of engagement to simulate battle conditions and realistic outcomes, with decision-making at its core.[6] Kriegspiel evolved from being a strict military training method to a pastime enjoyed, as H. G. Wells wrote in his 1913 book of wargaming for toy soldiers, *Little Wars*, by "boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty." (His grudging addition, "and for that more intelligent sort of girl who likes boys' games and books," shows the genre's exclusiveness and sexism.)[7] Complete with painted miniatures, buildings, and terrain or sand tables built to scale, war games sought to emulate real-life historic battles.

In 1967, Gygax became a founding member of the International Federation of Wargamers. By the next year, the group had grown large enough to meet. Gygax put up fifty dollars of his own money to rent out the Horticultural Hall in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, calling the event the Lake Geneva Gaming Convention. The yearly gathering, now held in Indianapolis and known as Gen Con, is one of the largest annual gatherings of gamers in the United States. (Gary Con, started in 2008 after Gygax's death, takes place each year in Lake Geneva.)

Previous page | Modern Dungeons & Dragons miniatures.

Right | **A game of war.** A photograph from H. G. Wells's *Little Wars*, a book that brought Kriegspiel into popular culture, setting the stage for modern wargaming.



H. G. WELLS, *LITTLE WARS* (1913)



WISCONSIN HISTORICAL MUSEUM F2024.11.2 AND F2024.43.2

WISCONSIN HISTORICAL MUSEUM F2024.11

In 1969, Gygax met Dave Arneson. Their meeting would change the world of gaming—and pop culture—forever.

Arneson lived in St. Paul, Minnesota, and had been working on his own take on miniature wargaming. Building on a set of rules developed by David Wesely called Braunstein, Arneson created a world he called Blackmoor. In Blackmoor, instead of armies marching across fields to destroy one another, players took on the roles of heroes, facing monsters in castles, swamps, and, eventually, dungeons. In creating Blackmoor, Arneson intentionally included aspects of Chainmail, Gygax's own set of rules for fantasy wargaming.

Because of Blackmoor, Arneson is often credited with being the first Dungeon Master (DM) as opposed to a referee, the term commonly used in miniature wargaming. Like other war games, Blackmoor used dice and was typically played with miniatures, but it was also built on the idea of interactive narrative and individual actions. Instead of simply marching miniatures across battlefields, players told the referee what they wanted to do, and the referee assigned a dice roll to it or described what happened. Arneson made the referee more personal, giving them the role of storyteller and arbiter within a fantastic, highly developed world versus simply resolving dice rolls and disputes.

The first game Gygax and Arneson worked on was a Napoleonic naval wargame called Don't Give Up the Ship. Published by Guidon Games in 1972 with cocreator Mike Carr (who would eventually join the D&D family), the game consisted of battles between individual ships or entire fleets of warships. Some of its innovations, including character sheets and morale-affecting battle performance, would later be seen in Dungeons & Dragons.

As lore has it, in early 1973 Arneson drove down from St. Paul to Lake Geneva, his Blackmoor game in hand. One of Arneson's friends, Dave Megarry, brought his board game Dungeon!. In Dungeon!, characters of various classes explored six dungeon levels filled with monsters and treasure, all laid out on a single gameboard. Each character class achieved different goals in order to win the game. However, Dungeon! differed from classic role-playing games in that its players had no need to inhabit their characters. Blackmoor, of course, was all about role-playing world- (and dungeon-) exploring heroes. When Gygax and friends played through both games, they knew they had the makings of a hit on their hands.

After the playthrough, Gygax asked Arneson to send him the Chainmail modifications used in Blackmoor. Originally intended for a third edition of Chainmail from Guidon Games, those changes

Above left | **Chainmail and Blackmoor.** Created in the early 1970s by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, respectively, these games represent the roots of the modern Dungeons & Dragons gaming experience. Following their original publications, new editions were republished by TSR beginning in 1975. The edition of Chainmail pictured here was printed in 1976 and Blackmoor in 1978.

Above right | **Miniatures,** another legacy from wargaming, are often used to enhance gameplay.



WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Left | **The Gygax home in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, 1985.** Gary Gygax's home was the setting for many of the events that led to the creation of D&D and was home to TSR in the early years of the company.

Below | **Sixth Printing of Dungeons & Dragons box set, 1977.** Included are three booklets, *Men & Magic, Monsters & Treasure,* and *The Underworld and Wilderness Adventures*, along with reference sheets. To differentiate it from the new Basic Set released the same year, this printing included a burst with "Original Collector's Edition" on the box front.



WISCONSIN HISTORICAL MUSEUM 2024.1.1A-F

instead formed the basis of a new and innovative dungeon-crawling game that incorporated elements of Chainmail, Blackmoor, and Dungeon!.[8] Gygax and Arneson's partnership, while not official, was certainly underway. As Arneson remembered, "[Gary] sent [his rules] to us and we fooled around with them for a while. We exchanged letters for a while and just kind of slipped into it."[9]

As the new fantasy game came into focus, Gygax left Guidon Games. Gygax and friends Don Kaye and Brian Blume formed their own company, TSR (Tactical Studies Rules), the entity that would publish Dungeons & Dragons. Originally headquartered in the Kaye family home, TSR was pushed into Gygax's basement after Kaye's death and his widow's subsequent disinvestment from the fledgling company.

In 1974, the first edition of Dungeons & Dragons was released, selling out its entire thousand-copy run. The game was a hit, and the company continued printing new editions of the game and also started their long-running gaming magazine, *The Dragon*.[10] Arneson was finally hired by TSR in 1976, but within a year, he was no longer working for the company.

Together, Arneson and Gygax, along with game designer Mike Carr and others, would publish three editions of Dungeons & Dragons. The original D&D box set consisted of three booklets: *Men & Magic, Monsters & Treasure*, and *The Underworld and Wilderness Adventures*. These booklets formed the early canon of D&D, built on the tantalizing premise that would, eventually, draw in millions of players: magic is real, and the only limit is what you can imagine.



PHOTOS BY CARRIE GRIESEMER

Anything Can Be Attempted

What made D&D so different from traditional wargaming? First and foremost, players and Dungeon Masters together created the outcomes of the adventure. Unlike the neutral referee and set battles of Kriegspiel, the D&D DM invented scenarios and built maps for players to explore. Additionally, instead of taking on a new role with each game, players kept their characters from session to session. These characters improved over time, leveling up, getting stronger, gaining skills and (sometimes) magical weapons, casting better spells, and facing greater foes. Combined with the rolling of the many different-sided dice, these rules made for an altogether unique experience in the world of tabletop games.

As John Peterson explains, "People had played characters in games before D&D, but D&D unlocked a personal investment in characters. By quantifying attributes like intelligence and charisma, and then allowing characters to advance with experience and become more powerful, it triggered a vicarious engagement with characters that was basically unprecedented in prior games."[11]

The ability to level up—an innovation introduced by Carr in his 1966 game Fight in the Skies—was only part of the fun. In a typical session, the DM sets the scene, describes the details, and provides maps for the lay of the land (or dungeon!). Only the DM knows which foes may be lurking around the next corner. Players must work together to understand their surroundings, discover quests, fight endless hordes of monsters, and reap rewards as heroes of the realm—all through first-person dialogue with the DM. As the dice roll, the DM reads out each new twist of fate. For example:

> *DM: You see a stout oaken door ahead. What do you do?*
> *Player: I listen at the door.*
> *DM: *rolls dice* You hear faint sounds of scratching and clawing, as if something is digging into the earth beyond the door.*
> *Player: I pull my sword and kick the door in! *rolls dice* I rolled an 18!*
> *DM: The door flies off its hinges as your boot smashes into it! Reflected in the light of your torch are four pairs of beady red eyes. Giant rats! Roll for initiative!*

The dice are the great randomizer in the game. Higher numbers are always better. No matter your plan, no matter how strong your character, no matter how many magic items they have or spells they know, a poor roll of the dice can ruin everything. Rolling a "Nat 20" on the twenty-sided "d20" die showers the gaming table

Above | **Two of the author's hand-painted minis from the 1980s,** a bard and wizard, along with a self-portrait mini, ca. 2020.



PHOTO BY JOHN NONDORF

with cheers and guarantees success at every endeavor, while a roll of "1" elicits groans of anguish.

Beyond combat, players interact with the entire world as set forth by the DM. From climbing trees in the forest to ordering ale at the local pub, player actions come together under the guidance of the DM. Interacting with NPCs (Non-Player Characters) was another innovation in role-playing derived from mission-based wargames. NPCs, controlled by the DM, may be ordinary townsfolk going about their business, owners of the general store or armory, royalty, villains, or any and all of the above. Like a good sword and sorcery novel, a Dungeons & Dragons adventure is filled with settings, heroes, villains, creatures, rescues, mishaps, and more. It is the DM's job to keep track of these things in the world, and the player's job to interact with them.

From the first edition to the most recent, it has proven to be a winning formula. Yet for all the inventiveness of the game, the early D&D audience remained limited to wargamers and their clubs. As lay sociologist Manuela Oleson noted in 1975, wargaming was "nearly exclusively a white, male pastime."[12] Despite its early success, it would take many years for D&D to reach beyond the confines of basements, living rooms, and the occasional clubhouse.

Above | Polyhedral dice used to play Dungeons & Dragons

The End of an Era

Throughout the 1970s, box sets of Dungeons & Dragons were reprinted and revised, selling out over and over again. Other authors and creators came in, and product lines were expanded. In 1977, D&D rules were streamlined into a Basic Set, taking out the steep entry curve of having to understand a myriad of esoteric wargaming conventions in order to play the hero of your choice. The first adventure module many new gamers ever played was *In Search of the Unknown* by Mike Carr, included with every copy of the Basic Set starting in 1978. TSR was reaping good profits and new players were being added. But by the mid-1970s, Gygax had already envisioned a new direction for the game he called Advanced Dungeons & Dragons. And that vision would not include Arneson.

Entire volumes have been written about the split between Arneson and Gygax. Though some facts and details may be disputed, a few basic elements of the fallout are known. As Gygax rewrote the

rules for what would become the iconic hardcover books used by players in the late 1970s and beyond, he did so without acknowledging Arneson's influence on the core aspects of the game itself.

In 1977, just months after release of the Basic Set, TSR released the *Monster Manual*, the first of the three core rulebooks for Advanced Dungeons & Dragons. This and subsequent books in the series removed Arneson's name from the work entirely. Over the next two years, the *Players Handbook* and *Dungeon Masters Guide* were released, all without mention of Arneson.

By 1981, angry over the omission of his name and being cut from the company, Arneson had successfully sued TSR and won royalties on some of the works. His name would remain side-by-side with Gygax's on copies of the Basic Set.

Ironically, the hard-fought lesson that founders aren't always keepers would eventually apply to Gygax as well. By the mid-1980s, Gygax would find himself squeezed out of the company, first by being made a minority shareholder and then by being maneuvered out of TSR completely. But first, the company he created would become a multimillion-dollar success, selling hundreds of thousands of books per year, and it would all happen because of the Satanic Panic.

The Satanic Panic

In 1979, a young man named James Egbert III disappeared from his dorm room at Michigan State University. As weeks went by, evidence pointed to his interest in D&D, and an overly enthusiastic private investigator encouraged this line of thinking in articles, and later, a best-selling book, *The Dungeon Master*. William Dear, the investigator, believed that Egbert had confused reality with the game he was playing and that he was hiding out in the sewers and wandering in search of treasure. The reality of the situation was much different. Egbert had twice attempted suicide, and in between those attempts he stayed with friends and



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PHOTO BY CARRIE GRIESEMER

AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

Top Right | **The iconic red box set, produced from 1983 through 1991.** Authored by Frank Mentzer in a tutorial style to make the game easier to learn, this third revision of the basic rules introduced many thousands of players to D&D for the first time.

Right | **A vintage Grenadier Red Dragon**, painted by the author.

Below | **Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, first edition hardcover set.** These books formed the canon for players coming to the game in the 1980s.

avoided contact with his family. When he finally did reconnect, it was by his own volition, and not through any work the investigator had done.[13] "As it turned out," recalled Arneson, "it had nothing to do with the game. It was just so exciting for the media to pick up on. There was even a Canadian newspaper that said Gary and I were cult leaders."[14]

Church groups and politicians seized on the moment, however, eager to condemn the game with its demonic images, spell casting, and other references to what they saw as satanic influence. Books were burned and banned, and a movie was made. Starring a young Tom Hanks, the 1982 film *Mazes and Monsters* sensationalized the events of Egbert's disappearance. Parents began to look over their kids' shoulders. As one gamer remembered, "My friend's parents took all my books and burned them."[15]

As any parent of any teenager can tell you, the best way to make your child want to do something is to tell them they absolutely cannot do it. The popularity and sales of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons skyrocketed, and TSR found itself sitting on a dragon's treasure hoard of its own creation.

TSR would grow and branch out throughout the 1980s and 1990s, reaching into previously unexplored realms of television, movies, video games, and comics. One by one, these ventures ended poorly, with unfulfilled contracts, unhappy partners, and, along the way, one less founder. In 1985, Gygax lost control of the company and brand he created and was formally ousted. Twelve years later, in early 1997, TSR was functionally bankrupt. Wizards of the Coast, the gaming company that created the iconic card game *Magic the Gathering*, purchased TSR later that year. Future editions would now be published by Wizards of the Coast, and eventually, Advanced would be dropped from the title, reverting back to the simpler, iconic Dungeons & Dragons. While Wizards of the Coast would usher D&D into the new millennium, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson would go down in history as having created one of the most influential gaming concepts in modern history.



PHOTO BY JOHN BOBECK

Left | **Gary Gygax, co-founder of TSR and co-creator of Dungeons & Dragons, photographed in 2006 at a gaming convention.**

Below | **Modern D&D minis**. A paladin in chainmail with a longsword and shield takes on a mighty owlbear, with a wizard raising an offensive flame in the background.

Opposite | **Character sheet from Advanced D&D, ca. 1978.** Player character sheets provided convenient ways to track the various statistics used in D&D.



PHOTO BY KURT GRIESEMER

PLAYER NAME

DATE CHARACTER BEGAN

ADVANCED D&D™
Player Character Record

CAMPAIGN #

CHARACTER NAME: BOB

CHARACTER SKETCH

CLASS: FIGHTER LEVEL: 8

RACE: HUMAN ALIGNMENT: NEUTRAL GOOD

PATRON DEITY: RELIGION:

PLACE OF ORIGIN:

MOVE BASE | CONCEALED | CLIMBING | SPECIAL MOVE | SECONDARY SKILL | VISION | LISTENING

ABILITIES:

STRENGTH — 18 S: 92% HIT ADJ. +2 | DAM ADJ. +5 | OPEN DOORS 1-4(1) | BEND BARS 35%

INTELLIGENCE — 11 I: ADD. LANG. 2 | % KNOW SPELL | MIN. # SPELLS | MAX. # SPELLS

WISDOM — 14 W: MAGICAL ATK. ADJ. | SPELL BONUS | % SPELL FAILURE

DEXTERITY — 14 D: REACTION ADJ. 0 | MISSILE ADJ. 0 | DEFENSE ADJ. 0

CONSTITUTION — 9 C: HIT POINT ADJ. 0 | SYSTEM SHOCK 95 | RESURRECT. SURVIVAL 90

CHARISMA — 13 CH: MAX. # HENCHMEN 5 | LOYALTY BASE NOR | REACTION ADJ. +05%

SAVING THROW ADJUSTMENTS:

+/-	CONDITION	+/-	CONDITION

SAVING THROWS:

Paralyzation/ Poison—	9
Petrification/ Polymorph—	10
Rod, Staff or Wand—	11
Breath Weapon—	11
Spells—	12

RESISTANCES:

DETECTION:

LANGUAGES:

PSIONICS: — | ATK. STR./DEF. STR. | ATTACK MODES | DEFENSE MODES

MAJOR DISCIPLINES

MINOR DISCIPLINES

WEAPONS OF PROFICIENCY: 4 (NUMBER) | 1/3 LEVELS (NON-PROFICIENCY PENALTY) -2

COMBAT

ARMOR WORN: PLATE MAIL + SHIELD | AC BASE: 3 | CONDITION OF ARMOR

AC: -6 | DEX. ADJ. 0 | MAGICAL ADJ. +10 | SHIELDLESS AC: -1 | REAR AC: -1

CONST. ADJ. | HIT DIE TYPE 7 (10) | SPECIAL ADJUSTMENTS

HIT POINTS | Wounds:

SURPRISE / DEX. ADJUST. | / REAR ATTACKS ADJUST.

COMBAT ADJUSTMENTS: Totals: +2 ("TO HIT" ADJ.) | +5 (DAMAGE ADJ.)

+/-	CONDITION	+/-	CONDITION
+2	STRENGTH		

WEAPON IN HAND: SILVER

WEAPONLESS COMBAT: ATTACK ADJ.—DAMAGE ADJ.—DEFENSE ADJ.

PUMMELING: - - 2

GRAPPLING: - - *

OVERBEARING: - -

MORALE MODIFIER | # ATTACKS:

WEAPON	MAG. ADJ.	SPACE REQUIRED/ RANGE	SPEED	ADJUSTED TO HIT ARMOR CLASS 10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	DAMAGE VS SIZE S-M/L
2H SWORD	+3	3'	5	+2	+1	0	0	0	0	-1	-2		1-10/3-18
L. BOW	+1	7/14/21		+3	+3	+2	+2	+1	0	0	-1		1-6/1-6
DAGGER	+3	1'	2	+3	+1	+1	0	0	-2	-2	-3	-3	1-4/1-3
THROWING AXE		1' 2/3	4	+1	+1	+1	0	0	-1	-2	-2	-3	1-6/1-4
BASTARD S	+4	4'	6	0	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	0	0	2-8/2-16 (1-8/1-12)
AXE BATTLE	+3	4'	7	+2	+1	+1	0	0	-1	-1	-2	-3	1-8/1-8
JAVELINS	+2	2/4/6		+1	0	+1	0	-1	-2	-3	-4	-5	2-5/1-4

PATRON: AS LONG SWORD IF USED ONE HANDED

TITHINGS % | ALIGNMENT | STATUS

LADY:

MOUNT:

#	NAME	HD	AC	H.P.	#AT	DAMAGE

MAGIC COMPONENTS:

SPECIAL ABILITIES:

SPELLS—KNOWN

SPELLS MEMORIZED PER LEVEL:

1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH/1ST	2ND

TURNING UNDEAD:

SKELETON	ZOMBIE	GHOUL	SHADOW	WIGHT	GHAST
WRAITH	MUMMY	SPECTRE	VAMPIRE	GHOST	LICH	SPECIAL

FIGHTER RANGER PALADIN

4 9

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Evolution After Revolution

Today, with franchises like Netflix's *Stranger Things* and Larian Studio's 2023 game of the year, *Baldur's Gate 3*, the popularity of Dungeons & Dragons—and its persistence in pop culture—continues to soar. "Against all odds," says Peterson, "D&D became a massively influential game. It inspired a whole industry of tabletop role-playing games, and its impact of its system concepts on computer games is difficult to overstate. The fact that the tabletop version of D&D enjoyed such a resurgence after the release of its fifth edition in 2014 was astonishing—[and] now, at the game's fiftieth anniversary, it may turn out that its true influence has yet to play out."[16]

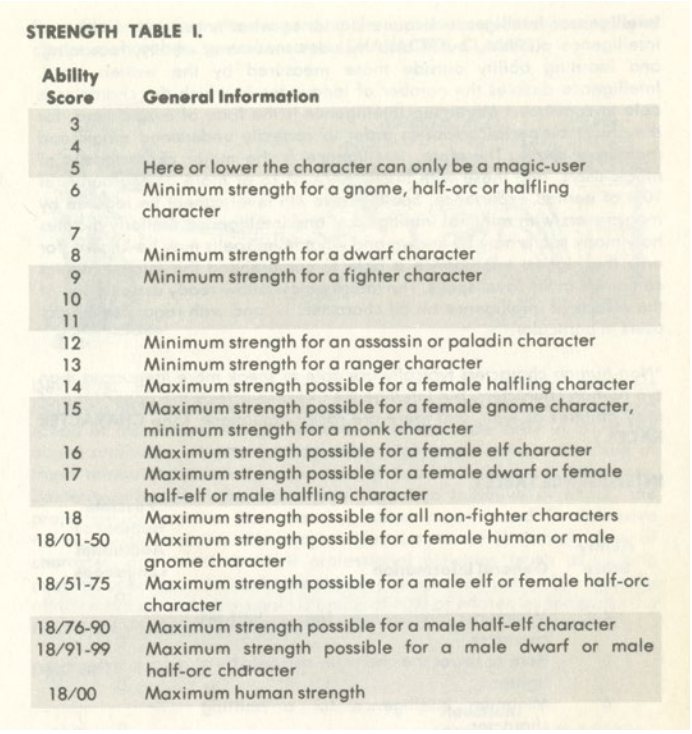
If you name a video game in which you play a character with meaningful statistics, as opposed to a pie-shaped blob eating dots, D&D is at its core. Hit points, armor class, character classes, abilities, quests, magic items, and much more can be traced back, directly or indirectly, to the game created by Gygax and Arneson. Magic systems can be found in everything from board games to books to television. From the 1977 release of *Zork*, a text-based adventure, to the *World of Warhammer* franchise, fundamental concepts from Dungeons & Dragons permeate American pop culture.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the genre of fantasy and role-playing games entered the virtual mainstream. As Clay Reimus, marketing director for the gaming website Roll20 commented, online RPGs (role-playing games) available to play on virtual tabletop sites from the comfort of home grew exponentially during this period: "In 2020 it was immediately apparent that a great migration was happening from in-person to online play. We could even see it on a country-by-country basis—traffic from Italy jumped in early March, alongside their first wave of lockdowns."[17]

Perhaps the most significant change to D&D itself has been to the game's fan base, which from its earliest days had been white, college-educated men. In the first edition, taking the role of a nondominant race or gender imposed limits on what you could accomplish, as well as how good you could be at any particular gaming trait or skill. The 1978 *Players Handbook* explained that "each racial stock has advantages and disadvantages, although in general human is superior to the others for reasons you will discover on your own."[18] In recent years, game makers have recognized the need for a more inclusive approach. *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything*, a supplement to the fifth edition released in 2020, explains that "a typical character race in D&D includes little or no choice—a lack that can make it difficult to realize certain character concepts. [These new rules] address that lack by . . . allowing you to customize your ability scores, languages, and certain proficiencies to fit the origin you have in mind for the character."[19] Limitations for "female" characters are also now nonexistent.

These and other changes have made the game more accessible, allowing it to thrive even in today's screen-heavy environment. Today's audience has expanded to include players from all walks of life. Products abound for creating characters of any stripe (even some with stripes!), and with each edition and supplement to the game, Wizards of the Coast has worked toward greater inclusivity.

Brand manager Shiela Hughes says, "There is no better time to be a D&D player than right now. Kids are playing it, adults are playing it, it's everywhere! More than half of our current audience came into D&D through the fifth edition. We have made very conscious decisions to make the game more representational. We want our products to represent the people playing the game. D&D will continue to grow as more people encounter this historic game."[20]



STRENGTH TABLE I.

Ability Score	General Information
3	
4	
5	Here or lower the character can only be a magic-user
6	Minimum strength for a gnome, half-orc or halfling character
7	
8	Minimum strength for a dwarf character
9	Minimum strength for a fighter character
10	
11	
12	Minimum strength for an assassin or paladin character
13	Minimum strength for a ranger character
14	Maximum strength possible for a female halfling character
15	Maximum strength possible for a female gnome character, minimum strength for a monk character
16	Maximum strength possible for a female elf character
17	Maximum strength possible for a female dwarf or female half-elf or male halfling character
18	Maximum strength possible for all non-fighter characters
18/01-50	Maximum strength possible for a female human or male gnome character
18/51-75	Maximum strength possible for a male elf or female half-orc character
18/76-90	Maximum strength possible for a male half-elf character
18/91-99	Maximum strength possible for a male dwarf or male half-orc character
18/00	Maximum human strength

WISCONSIN HISTORICAL MUSEUM 2024.14.1 / GARY GYGAX, *PLAYERS HANDBOOK* (TSR, 1978)

Above | Strength chart from the *Players Handbook*, 1978. The original rulebook limited races in how high their ratings could go. Female characters could not be as strong as males.

The More Things Change...

While D&D has undergone many changes since its debut fifty years ago, the core of the game remains the same. Using a framework of rules, your imagination, a Dungeon Master, and some dice, the player inhabits the hero of their choice and guides them onward as they accomplish deeds great and small. Gathered around a table, sometimes using miniatures, sometimes using the "theater of the mind," you and your friends solve deadly puzzles, save townsfolk, and sometimes even slay dragons.

My own gaming history started with an invite from friends who played the game. I was hooked from the moment I played (and lost) the first of many D&D campaigns. From player to Dungeon Master, I eventually found running games for others to be as fun as playing a character. As years went by, I introduced the game to my own family, and now all four of us play with our respective groups. I've raised two children who also DM, and I



COURTESY OF LYNN LAAKSO



COURTESY OF CORA GRIESEMER

finally convinced my spouse how much fun it is to be a hero for a day. For years, now, we've had friends sit around our table to delve into dungeons, explore fetid swamps, and fell mighty giants. Multiple sets of dice, hundreds of hand-painted miniatures, and a never-ending list for gift-giving identify me as a proud D&D nerd. But while the movies, video games, and other paraphernalia surrounding the game are fun, to me they are not the best part. What I have found to be most exciting about Dungeons & Dragons lies in a simple question that I have been asking for the better part of forty years.

> *The last of the giant rats lies twitching at your feet. Beyond, you see a faint gleam in the tunnel ahead. No one else should be here, and yet . . . you hear something . . . a slithering, slurping sound. . . . Suddenly your torch goes out and you are plunged into darkness!*
>
> *What do you do?*

Above left | **The adventurers.** The author and his spouse, Carrie, attend Minicon in Minneapolis in the early 1990s, dressed for adventuring success.

Above right | **Carrying the tradition forward.** The author's daughter, Cora Griesemer, center, takes the role of DM with her college D&D group. Also pictured are Jakob Mork, Anna Welter, Cody Burt, and Dally Dumez.

NOTES

1. E. Gary Gygax, ed., foreword to *Men and Magic*, vol. 1 of Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, Dungeons & Dragons: Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames: Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures (box game), Tactical Studies Rules, Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, 1974.
2. Gygax, foreword to *Men and Magic*.
3. Paul Stormberg, interview with author, February 19, 2024, Geneva Lake Historical Society, Geneva Lake, Wisconsin.
4. Jon Peterson, email to author, January 27, 2024.
5. Research into the origins of the game comes from Jon Peterson, *Game Wizards: The Epic Battle for Dungeons & Dragons* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021); Ben Riggs, *Slaying the Dragon: A Secret History of Dungeons and Dragons* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2022); and David Kushner and Koren Shadmi, *Rise of the Dungeon Master: Gary Gygax and the Creation of D&D* (New York: Nation Books, 2017).
6. For more on the history of Kriegspiel and the development of tabletop games, see Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Creatures, from Chess to Role-Playing Games*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Unreason Press, 2012).
7. H. G. Wells, *Little Wars: A Game for Boys* (London: Frank Palmer, 1913), 1.
8. John Peterson, "Game Wizards Development Timeline," October 2021, *Playing at the World* blog, https://playingattheworld.blogspot.com/2021/10/game-wizards-d-development-timeline.html.
9. "An Interview with Dave Arneson," 1981, rep. in *Pegasus* (Summer 1999), available at https://the-eye.eu/public/Books/rpg.rem.uz/Wilderlands/Magazines/Pegasus%20Magazine/Pegasus%2014.pdf.
10. Archived issues of *The Dragon* are available at the Internet Archive website at https://archive.org/details/DragonMagazine260_201801/DragonMagazine001/.
11. Peterson email.
12. Manuela Oleson quoted in Jon Peterson, *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022), 2.
13. Riggs, *Slaying the Dragon*, 29–32.
14. "An Interview with Dave Arneson."
15. Comment to author from unnamed gaming participant at *Wisconsin Adventures* premiere, April 7, 2024, Madison, Wisconsin.
16. Peterson email.
17. Clay Reimus, email to author, March 18, 2024.
18. Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Players Handbook* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Inc., 1978), 13, 15.
19. Wizards of the Coast, *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2020), 7.
20. Sheila Hughes, author interview, January 26, 2024, Zoom.