

Review: *Game Wizards: The Epic Battle for Dungeons & Dragons*, by Jon Peterson. 2021. The MIT Press. xii + 386 pp.

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I did not start reading *Game Wizards* expecting it to be a page-turner.

No disrespect toward Jon Peterson's prior work, but his latest foray into the history of *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*)—and the multifarious games, hobbies, and businesses that played a part in its astonishing rise—is more accessible than the canonical *Playing at the World* (2012). Where the author's previous offering can be a challenging read due to its ambitious scope, *Game Wizards* is a much more tightly written affair. Peterson propels the reader through the early history of *D&D* and the emergence of the now defunct Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) company, tracing the emergence of the fantasy role-playing business landscape in the 1970s and 1980s. In Peterson's own words, this is "the story of how *D&D* rose from its humble origins to become a pop culture phenomenon, and what that remarkable journey did to the people who made it" (p. xi). It is this focus on personal relationships and corporate rivalries that makes *Game Wizards* so compelling; Peterson shirks idealistic narratives and long-winded rule descriptions in favor of sordid business affairs and the strained relationships between hobbyists-turned-entrepreneurs.

Many authors have approached the history of Gary Gygax and *D&D* over the past decades, but the success of such chronicles have been mixed. Michael Witwer's comprehensive biography of Gygax, *Empire of Imagination* (2015), is informative but tends to gloss over some of the less savory aspects of his personality in pursuit of a hero's narrative. This is particularly noticeable in Witwer's downplaying of David Arneson's contributions to the tabletop game, often relegating him to a supporting role in the franchise's history. *Of Dice and Men* (2013) is similarly enlightening, with David Ewalt weaving together bits of corporate history, biography, and personal reflections. But it reads as a mélange of information rather than a definitive chronicling and comes

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across as a touch threadbare when compared to Peterson's rigorous approach. These histories—and numerous others scattered across television, magazines, and blogs—paint Gygax as a game enthusiast turned visionary designer who ended up out-of-his-depth as a corporate leader, culminating in a dramatic exit from the company he helped build. While this timeline is not inaccurate, like many media histories it defaults to a chronology of “great” men—“exceptional heroes responsible for steering the course of history through their leadership, wisdom, initiative, or daring” (Arsenault, 2017, p. 11). Overlooking the multitude of stakeholders who contributed to *D&D*'s early days risks simplifying the evolution of the game to a single man's history.

While Gygax is the de facto protagonist in early histories of *D&D*, a single person does not make a corporation (especially when considering that TSR had 400 employees at its peak). While still elaborating on the life and biography of Gygax—and his early days as a gaming fanatic and financially precarious family man—Peterson focuses the bulk of his attention toward the corporate history of TSR. In his typical detail-oriented style, Peterson adds nuance and posits questions that frame TSR's history through recognizable business conflicts. What happens when someone's beloved hobby transforms into a business? What conflicts arise when friends, family members, and colleagues become business partners? What happens when petty disputes over authorial credit escalate into high-stakes business rivalries? These interrogations ground *D&D*'s history, shirking sweeping narratives in favor of detailed analyses of TSR's growth and (often toxic) corporate culture.

Game Wizards begins with a short prelude about Gygax's early involvement in the wargaming scene and his collaborations with Arneson on *D&D* and other games—well-trodden ground for aficionados of the game's history. While this is necessary groundwork, the book really picks up steam in the middle chapters, which document TSR's business history year-by-year. Beginning with the company's entry into profitability in 1975 and dramatically culminating with the so-called “ambush at Sheridan Springs” in 1985 that saw Gygax ousted from TSR, Peterson dissects the internal struggles of the company and its place within the larger game industry. Peterson also concludes each chapter with a “TSR Turn Result” for the given year, a useful narrative device that outlines the company's revenue, number of employees, and stock valuation for that year. Cheekily, he also includes several esoteric facts that bring attention to the drama and dysfunction of the fantasy role-playing industry. The most consistent of these facts is head-to-head attendance figures from TSR's GenCon and its rival convention Origins, which Peterson frames as a war between Gygax and the rest of the industry. Other intriguing nuggets of information, such as the number of TSR's board members and the value of Arneson's *D&D*'s royalty settlement, help provide context to the company's meteoric rise, overexpansion, and eventual descent into dire financial straits.

Although a lamentable course of action in real tabletop games, one of the greatest strengths of *Game Wizards* is Peterson's willingness to "split the party" by focusing on non-Gygaxian entities and their contributions to *D&D*. While we often imagine Arneson's story ending after his early exit from TSR, the co-creator of *D&D* receives more ink in this book than prior chronicles and biographies. Peterson toes a difficult line with Arneson, painting him as a sympathetic figure who had to push through slander and legal hurdles to receive royalties for the wildly successful tabletop game, while also acknowledging his pettiness toward Gygax and TSR. For many years after his departure from the company, he dedicated enormous amounts of time and energy toward turning public opinion against Gygax while working on rival products such as the *Dungeonmaster's Index*. This animosity was by no means a one-way street, and the years of tension between Gygax and Arneson is one of the central conflicts examined in the book. Whether dissecting Gygax's attempts to minimize Arneson's contributions to the game in media interviews or quoting his rants about the "proper" history of *D&D* in his *Dragon Magazine* columns, *Game Wizards* is not afraid to delve into the game maker's spiteful side. This weaponized rhetoric toward Arneson percolated throughout TSR, perhaps most blatantly seen in a captioned photograph that Peterson unearthed from the company's archives. Underneath a photograph taken at the groundbreaking of TSR's new headquarters in 1981, a typewritten note morbidly describes the scene follow: "the TSR board of directors shovel the last spades full of dirt onto the grave of the soon to be late game designer, David Arneson" (p. 22). It seems that Gygax was heavily invested in slinging dirt at his competitor, in more ways than one.

Arneson's metaphorical burial highlights one of the greatest strengths of *Game Wizards*: its small but impactful collection of paper ephemera from TSR's early days. While it is not uncommon to see magazine excerpts, early game prototypes, and press releases in histories of *D&D*, Peterson expands upon these offerings with shareholder reports, internal newsletters, legal documents, and informal notes that circulated around the TSR offices. Particularly intriguing items include a paper bag signed by the company's staff members in 1978, shockingly well-preserved and mysteriously signed by "Shlump da Orc," and issues of the company's *Random Events* newsletter, which provides insight into the internal messaging of the hobby company. Peterson relies on these varied documents, which were thankfully saved by employees or preserved in court records, to flesh out and ground oral histories of *D&D*. As the author laments at the book's close, putting together an origin story for the tabletop phenomenon is a herculean task as many personal accounts lead scholars on "wild-goose chases, trying to substantiate later claims that turn out to be will-o'-wisps born of conflict" (p. 315). Every important figure from the early days of *D&D* has their own agenda and bias, and no memory can perfectly recollect events from nearly half a

century ago, making these texts enormously important in historicizing the hobby.

Of course, this raises a difficult question: did this book come along too late? Over half a century removed from Gygax's first foray into the world of commercial game design on the shores of Lake Geneva, one cannot help but think that there are parts of TSR's history that have been forever lost to time—a concern further exacerbated by the passing of both of *D&D*'s founders over a decade ago. Peterson is certainly aware of this conundrum, closing the book with a reflection on the challenges inherent to his documentation effort: "a history like this one can never resolve all the uncertainties around the story: some are ambiguities built into the history itself" (p. 316). Peterson laments that this is not a complete chronicling of TSR or *D&D*, as creating such a history is untenable. Regardless, thanks to Peterson's immense talent for constructing cohesive histories out of numerous testimonials and texts, *Game Wizards* immediately establishes itself as an essential resource for studying the early corporate history of the world's most popular role-playing game.

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