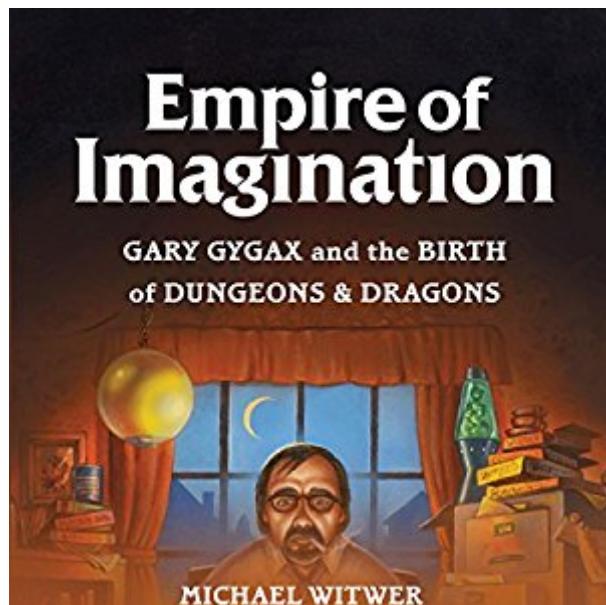


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Empire Of Imagination: Gary Gygax And The Birth Of Dungeons & Dragons



Synopsis

The life story of Gary Gygax, godfather of all fantasy adventure games, has been told only in bits and pieces. Michael Witwer has written a dynamic, dramatized biography of Gygax from his childhood in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, to his untimely death in 2008. Gygax's magnum opus, Dungeons & Dragons, would explode in popularity throughout the 1970s and '80s and irreversibly alter the world of gaming. D&D is the best-known, best-selling role-playing game of all time, and it boasts an elite class of alumni - Stephen Colbert, Robin Williams, and Junot Diaz all have spoken openly about their experiences with the game as teenagers, and some credit it as the workshop where their nascent imaginations were fostered. Gygax's involvement in the industry lasted long after his dramatic and involuntary departure from D&D's parent company, TSR, and his footprint can be seen in the genre he is largely responsible for creating. But as Witwer shows, perhaps the most compelling facet of his life and work was his unwavering commitment to the power of creativity in the face of myriad sources of adversity, whether cultural, economic, or personal. Through his creation of the role-playing genre, Gygax gave two generations of gamers the tools to invent characters and entire worlds in their minds. Told in narrative-driven and dramatic fashion, Witwer has written an engaging chronicle of the life and legacy of this emperor of the imagination.

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Customer Reviews

Empire of the Imagination is a decent, but short, Biography of Gary's Gygax's life. It has a few shortcomings, but ultimately is a satisfactory work. Just some quick background on myself before I

get into the review--I was a friend of Gary in his later years. You can find my name or initials on much of the work in the latter half of the bibliography, mostly in the days when he was doing stuff with publishers Clark and Cheunault (and Mongoose). I'm still friendly with Gail. I wanted to make sure I'm upfront about this before doing a review, because obviously I have my own biases, but I also want to make sure I'm not dismissed as a "random guy on the Internet" either. The book itself is presented in a series of vignettes--a notable point in Gary's life with some dialog and then reflections on how he got to that point. The book does a decent job of giving an overview of how things were going in Gary's life at each point. It's clear the author has taken a lot of time and tried to compile a lot of different sources into a narrative. The stories are told in an entertaining style, and I enjoyed some of the new insights into Gary's earlier life, like reading about the "Big Fish Story", or why Gary stopped driving. Based on reading this book, it's fairly accurate, and doesn't conflict with a lot of both what I've read and the private stories Gary told me, so I think he does a decent job of getting his history right. And a lot of these stories are backed up by the public record as well. I trust that Witwer did a very good job on this. The main thing I like is that Witwer does a great job of producing footnotes for the book and bibliographies. There's footnotes for each chapter. He draws upon a lot of public statements made by Gary, including his long running threads at ENWorld. The Appendixes also give a rather comprehensive bibliography of Gary's gaming work, and there's another with a dated timeline of important events of Gary's life. The very last chapters Witwer spends discussing Gary's influence on modern fiction and how gaming had changed the world, influenced popular culture, etc. I was very prepared to be disappointed since some biographies don't go into this amount of detail. There are, however, some flaws. In some cases, using the narrative device leads to some creative interpretations of the facts. There are some things I don't think he would have ever said. (I cringed when I read "What Would Conan Do?", as well as the "grim reaper" figure asking Gary to play chess on his deathbed). My personal preference would have been less "creative interpretation" and more analysis, especially where the creative process occurred. Also, he frames sections with Gary as a player in a Dungeon, and calls these sections "Levels", something that I think just makes the biography less serious and a bit too "cute" for my tastes. But that's a minor criticism based on personal taste. The book unfortunately is short...at 300 pages, to me, the book sacrifices depth for breadth. I'm not sure if Witwer was under any sort of limitation in terms of scope, but because of the quickness it feels like we are just getting highlights. There's no real attempt to try to delve deeper into Gary's personality, or to analyze his creative phases. The direct interview sources that the author has interviewed directly are surprisingly limited. Witwer interviews a few key figures but ignores a few others. One notable absence is Gail

Gygax--considering that she was became closest person in his life (one could argue his True Love), this absence seems jarring, especially when we get to areas around the divorce and especially the post-TSR days. Although to be fair in that respect, Gail has not been very willing to be interviewed, and I don't know if Witwer attempted to reach out to her but was rebuffed, or just didn't attempt to contact her. Regardless of who is at fault, this hurts the biography, especially since a lot of his primary emphasis is on what family members have written. He also doesn't talk to many creative collaborators, out of the existing list, Mentzer's the only one who'd be considered one. The absence of interviews with folks like Rob Kuntz, Flint Dille, Dave Newton, Jon Creffield, and Jeff Talenian are all felt. Additionally, it's surprising that the author didn't try to get alternative perspectives from those who might have been critical or opposed to Gary, say for instance, somebody from the Arneson or Blume camps, or people who worked at TSR and were critical of Gary, just to make sure all perspectives were covered. I think that's the type of research you really need to do for a comprehensive Biography. There are also a few curious choices--why did Witwer choose Elmore and Easley in his limited pool of interviewees, considering they were more part of the art department than the gaming departments, over other folks? Another troubling thing is that the author has referenced a few things that I know Gary has denied over the years, even in private, without attributing the source. For instance, he mentioned Gary's rumored cocaine usage, but I've never seen Gary acknowledged that publicly, and I once asked him privately if he ever used that drug (he admitted to using "benzies and dexies", and a one time use of LSD--which he called "Lousy, Stupid Drug", but denied using cocaine). I'm not saying this didn't happen, but in this particular case, there's no real quote or footnote to confirm this and more importantly, who said he was using drugs. This bugs me because the accusation of that was the one time I saw Gary actually threaten legal action against somebody for suggesting that he used cocaine, and it would be nice if the book had attributed a direct quote from somebody on this subject. I will say that Witwer is willing to expand and elaborate on stuff. A blogger's review of the rough cut (actually the same review on Joseph Bloch posted here) made it sound like everything after TSR was reduced to a few paragraphs, but it looks like in this initial cut there were a few extra chapters. Also, after discussing it with Jon Creffield, Witwer did seem to approach him after I encouraged Jon to write to him. I do hope he considers an expanded edition and interviews a lot more people and can add depth to the book. As it stands, because of these omissions and flaws, I can give the book no more than 3 stars, but it deserves 3 stars because where it succeeds, it succeeds well. To use a gaming analogy, it's like the "Bell Curve" in the original DMG--he comes up as the average center. I can only hope the next printing or a follow-up comes up more to the right of the bell curve. Given that he's a new author, I think it's a

decent work, and I hope second or third printings have the opportunity to expand on what's been covered here. Specific information: I purchased this on the Kindle format, and it was on my Kindle right when I woke up today. The Kindle format has a flaw in the index, for some reason on the Kindle Fire HD the index doesn't appear to fit the page, the beginning of each index entry is cropped--hopefully this can be repaired and updated. Beyond that, there's no other flaws that I have found with the e-book format

As a life-long gamer I always wondered about the origins of D&D. Gygax was a name I have long been aware of, yet knew little about. This approachable and entertaining book describes Gygax's key role in the invention of modern gaming. Empire of Imagination shows us the evolution of D&D through the eyes of its creator.

Just the very fact that this book exists is a wonderful thing. I feel so fortunate, to have had a chance to communicate with Gary while he was still with us. It was via email, and I was astounded when I fired off an email to his alleged email address, and it turned out to not only be valid, but the man himself answered me. We shot a few emails back and forth and I was just left in awe of the guy who was already elevated to demigod status in my life, having been an avid player of the game, but moreover, an avid reader of fantasy fiction, then just plain old, lifelong avid reader. It was all his fault. He is the reason I even know what the word demigod means. :) The guy who influenced the guys who re created human existence. Take a look at Bill Gates and you know damn well he has read the DM's guide. :)

This book covers the life of young Gary Gygax quite well. It gave me some excellent insights into the person who would one day create Dungeons, and Dragons. The author does seem to want to skip past the unflattering parts of Gary Gygax's life during adulthood however, and the gaps are noticeable. I was left wondering about Gygax's difficulties as a parent and husband and how that affected people who knew him from both work and privately. The author seems to find Gary's perspective in Gygax's youth and to a lesser extent towards the end of Gary's life, but seems to lose it during Gygax's middle years. The loss made the book feel a little incomplete to me.

Through the first quarter of the book, I was inclined to agree with the majority of reviews I've seen that this wasn't a "proper" biography and that the way it was told through small vignettes glimpsing into Gygax's mind was seriously flawed (particularly the narrative of in-game D&D scenarios at the

beginning of each short chapter as corollaries to his life). So I set the book aside for a few weeks before picking it up again to try to quickly zoom through the remainder. However, from the point where it begins to chronicle the actual creation of Dungeons & Dragons and its parent company, TSR, the book gained strength and drew my interest back in. The book does a fantastic job of telling that story more so than it even does of telling Gygax's. If you are looking for stories of Gygax with cocaine and hookers in Hollywood, then no, this isn't the book for you and you'll still have to wait for that. Those looking for a "proper" biography should take a second look at the title. It's not solely about Gygax, it's just as much about the creation of a new game that changed WORLDWIDE culture in a flash - literature, board games, video games, movies, TV, cartoons, art, philosophy, copyright law, intellectual property law, etc. ad infinitum - so much of what we take for granted today literally stems from what Gygax and his nerdy friends set in motion in 1974. The finish of the book, imagining Gygax meeting the Grim Reaper for a final game of chess, is admittedly cheesy, but it doesn't detract from the story of spiritual and philosophical conversion that Gygax experiences through the last several chapters leading up to it. It made my heart glad to see that he managed to find peace before he departed this life. In general, an interesting read for anyone, but particularly for those who were touched by the sparks of wonder and imagination that Dungeons & Dragons provided your life, whether 40 years ago or yesterday, this is a wonderful book. 5 stars and the best book I've read this year

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