

Dungeons and Dragons, Magazines, Business, and Everything In-Between

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A history and analysis of *Dragon Magazine*, the premiere publication of Dungeons and Dragons creators, TSR Inc.

(This writing sample is a cover of the first five pages of my thesis and includes the introductory material to show academic writing and Chicago writing style.)

Introduction

Take a journey back to June 1976, to an old grey house in Lake Geneva, WI. It was the personal residence of a former insurance salesman and small business owner. Within was the seed of a future multi-million dollar business. A handful of men worked tirelessly to create a new hobby. This house belonged to E. Gary Gygax; it was the center of Tactical Studies Rules (TSR), a small startup responsible for the new tabletop game called Dungeons and Dragons (D&D). D&D was a role-playing game (RPG) that in less than 15 years would change the culture of America.

For the past year, TSR had been publishing a magazine, *The Strategic Review*. It was a digest of various news in the war-gaming industry and a hobbyist magazine in the Lake Geneva area. *The Strategic Review* ended its run in April of 1976 in anticipation for the next greatest thing. This next thing would be *The Dragon*, an all-inclusive professional magazine devoted to fantasy and science fiction. TSR was publishing and selling the first pen-and-paper RPG in a market dominated by tactical war-games, and *The Dragon* was a way to shape their audience.

The Dragon was a window into the history of TSR, from its founding in 1974 to its sale to Wizards of the Coast in 1997. TSR was more than just a frontrunner in the RPG industry. TSR defined the RPG industry; it defined RPG culture. The norms that seem common in RPG culture today were pioneered by TSR in the 70's and 80's. Much of their cultural influence stems from *The Dragon*, their main source of cultural dissemination. *The Dragon* was the single most important part of TSR's business and industry presence aside from *D&D* itself. TSR was a poorly managed company, with consistently shaky finances. TSR survived only because *D&D* was the first game of its kind.

Like all media, *The Dragon* acted as a vehicle for TSR to define and direct the minds of its customers. It also acted as way for advertisement, as a feedback center, as a patchwork system to clarify rules across all RPG's TSR was publishing, and as a platform for new creators to have their work seen. TSR used *The Dragon* as a tool to dictate how their products were used. But as much as TSR used *The Dragon*, they put so much of themselves into it. *The Dragon* often provided a window into the company and its place within the industry. Competitors never truly challenged TSR's place in the industry, and so other publications never truly challenged *The Dragon*. This essay shall explore the evolution and history of *The Dragon*, while pairing that with a history of TSR to explore the ways in which *The Dragon* came to be a pillar of the RPG industry.

However, one cannot understand *The Dragon* without understanding the history of TSR and the importance that *The Dragon* played in the success of TSR. The beginning of TSR was nebulous and very muddy. The idea for the company was an after-thought to the product, and the product itself, that being *D&D*, was formulated over years of quiet and careful consideration. This context is vital to understanding the history of TSR and the history of *The Dragon*, if only for there to be some continuity of events within the readers mind.

The Founding of TSR Hobbies

In the early 1970's Gary Gygax was an insurance salesman and avid war-gamer. At this time, companies like Avalon Hill dictated gaming culture with a plethora of miniature Napoleonic war games. In this time, Gygax created a medieval war-game called *Chainmail*. It wasn't much different from other war-games, save for its rules for man-to-man combat.¹ Those specific rules were the precursor to the dungeon delving and adventuring in early *D&D*.

Earlier, in 1969, David Arneson was gaming with an amateur game designer named Dave Wesley who created a Napoleonic war-game called *Braunstein*, that included rules for individuals units that had special objectives within a battle scenario. Later that year at the second Gen Con, the International Federation of War Gamers annual convention, Arneson met Gygax. Arneson included Gygax in games of *Braunstein*, giving Arneson exposure to its early *Chainmail* rules. Eventually, Arneson combined both *Braunstein* and *Chainmail* into a new medieval war-game called *Blackmoor*, which included a pseudo-level system by which characters could gain experience between each battle². *Blackmoor* would eventually evolve into *D&D*.

Gygax founded the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association (LGTSA) in early 1970 as a hobby group for war-gaming in the Lake Geneva area. In 1971, David Arneson took his game, *Blackmoor*, to Gygax and the LGTSA in an effort to display his game. Immediately, the two began to collaborate on a game they initially dubbed *The Fantasy Game*, but later settled on *Dungeons and Dragons*. As soon as the first draft was finished, the duo began to spread the word about their game.³⁴

At first, *Dungeons and Dragons* got little attention. Gygax was giving up hope on his new game, until a group of players who liked the game showed up at Gen Con VI in 1973, and espoused their love of the game. So that year, Gygax and Don Kaye, a childhood friend of Gygax and fellow member of the LGTSA, founded Tactical Studies Rules to print *D&D*.⁵ Unfortunately, Arneson could not invest in the company initially, and was therefore excluded.

Tactical Studies Rules did not have enough money to print *D&D*, especially since it was a risk. Just as things looked grim, Brian Blume, another member of the LGTSA, became their savior by investing \$2000 of his personal funds to finance the publishing. Blume was accepted as a third partner into Tactical Studies Rules and *D&D* saw its first few thousand print copies in January 1974.⁶

In January of 1975, Don Kaye suffered a heart attack and died at the age of 37. This tragedy shook Tactical Studies Rules and the company reformed as TSR Hobbies Inc. The

¹ Appelcline, Shannon. *Designers and Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry, The '70s*. (Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions, 2014) Pg. 8

² 2 *ibid*. Pg. 9

³ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 10-13

⁴ Sacco, Ciro Alessandro. *The Ultimate Interview with Gary Gygax*. Interview with E. Gary Gygax. The Kyngdoms.com. <<http://www.thekyngdoms.com/interviews/garygygax.php>>

⁵ 6 *ibid*. Pg. 15

⁶ 7 *ibid*. Pg. 15-16

company continued to publish throughout 1975, and here began the companies meteoric upward trajectory.⁷

The Strategic Review

In spring 1975, TSR Hobbies published its first newsletter by which it attempted to inform and advertise to its members and subscribers. This newsletter was titled *The Strategic Review*. *The Strategic Review* served as the predecessor for *The Dragon* a year and a half later, and only was printed for 7 issues. *The Strategic Review* outlined the development of both TSR Hobbies and of *D&D*.

In the first issue of *The Strategic Review*, the very first section explained what the purpose of the newsletter is. Without explaining very much of what *The Strategic Review* was meant to do, it merely stated that each issue would “[...]contain as many features and news items as we can possibly find space for[...]” and that it would try to “cover as much as possible”. The stated intent was to display advertisements for all of TSR’s line of products including new distributed games, but this line belied TSR’s intent to use this newsletter as more than just a vehicle of advertisement.⁸

The first issue sold for 50 cents, a very cheap price at the time that translates to about \$2 today. It was 6 pages and was published with little to no art. This is to be expected of a company that was barely starting out, especially one that published out of Gygas’s basement.⁹

The first issue introduced what would become a very iconic enemy within the *D&D* universe, the Mind Flayer. The tables displayed and the gaming jargon used would be lost upon many who don’t know how to read it. The creature is described in light detail, being nothing more than a man-shaped creature with tentacles and a telepathic ability to attack people. The abilities are described in much more detail through a table. Players required an amount of various numbers that represented their abilities and checked them against the table provided to determine the outcome of the mind flayers mind blast. Even the treasure gained from the creature references another table. The focus on various tables was very similar to the way war-games worked, where players checked numbers they rolled against another table to determine the outcome of a skirmish. A non-war-gamer would have had a tough time deciphering all of this text, and even if they read the rules for *D&D*, the mindset of a war-gamer and the centrality of table cross-referencing was not obvious.¹⁰

Other features of the first issue included a solo dungeon adventure written by Gygas himself. This was a simple dungeon design guide. The Original *D&D* was not about stories with large and expansive worlds. Gygas here discussed with his readers the ways in which one could design an adventure for *D&D*. He made it clear that *D&D* was designed for dungeon delving and treasure hunting. The focus is clearly set on monsters, fights, and loot. Modern *D&D* adventures attempt to guide game leaders in ways to manage the choices of players. Gygas instead provided no such guidance, essentially ignoring that the players could make decisions, and truly they couldn’t. Monsters attack, players fight and win or die. Later on, especially with the

⁷ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 17

⁸ The Strategic Review 1, Spring 1975

⁹ Strategic Review 1, Spring 1975

¹⁰ Strategic Review 1, Spring 1975

publishing of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* between 1977 and 1979, it would become very obvious the intent of Gygax was to strictly control the ways in which his game was played.¹¹

At this time, TSR was still very heavily involved in the war-game industry. *D&D* was popular, but not enough to sacrifice war-game sales. *The Strategic Review* dedicated half of its final page, and the only two advertisements within its pages to *Star Probe* and *Warriors of Mars*, two war-games. Neither of these games would go on to sell very well, and both games would open at \$5.00, exactly half the price of the *D&D* booklets, which sold more despite their steeper price.¹²

The second issue, released summer of 1975, displayed prominently on the first page a memorial and a dedication to Don Kaye who had died earlier that year. The first issue most likely did not include this information because it was drafted before Kaye's death in January.¹³

In an editorial by Brian Blume, he said: "TSR is not around solely to make money. The members of TSR are long-time gamers who have found that there is a great deal of satisfaction in creating and/or publishing a good set of game rules or an enjoyable game." TSR was not a very profitable company at the time, and though it was growing quickly, most of the members of TSR were living on savings and other sources of income. This quote is important to understanding the dedication and mindset of early TSR.¹⁴ This early optimism was soon lost in the years to come as Mr. Blume steered the company toward a profit-centered model in the mid 1980's.

As noted later in that issue: the first supplement to *D&D*, *Greyhawk*, was published early due to an unnamed "surge of income". This was the first ad seen for *Greyhawk* and marked the first supplement published for *D&D*. In the war-gaming world, continually reprinting and editing a game was common, but continuous expansion via supplements was not. *Greyhawk* was the first real sign that *D&D* was not just a weird war game, it was something entirely new.

In addition, later in this issue was an additional class for *D&D*, the Ranger. *D&D* had already had two other additional classes named: "Thieves" in *Game Players Newsletter #9*, a separate magazine, and "Paladins" in the *Greyhawk* supplement.¹⁵ Like all classes in *D&D*, the class determined the characters ability, and nothing else. By virtue of being a ranger, a character had the ability to do certain things, such as "...track the path of most creatures when outdoors, and even in dungeons they are often able to follow." There was no place for a ranger that couldn't track in *D&D* at the time, for if they couldn't track, they weren't a ranger. Gygax had a view of what rangers were, and *D&D* reflected his concepts. This trend is reversed in the editions of *D&D* published by Wizards of the Coast, in which characters and classes are inclusive instead of exclusive.

In issue two the break-neck speed of TSR's publishing began to emerge. TSR had barely created the first supplement for *D&D* and was already announcing its next two RPG's: *Boot Hill* and *War of Wizards*. The first was a game about wild-west gun fighting and the second was a game designed by M.A.R. Baker about dueling sorcerers. The actual games themselves are not important, but their existence and ready advertisement indicated the tireless work and varied

¹¹ Strategic Review 1, Spring 1975

¹² 13 ibid

¹³ Strategic Review 2, Summer 1975

¹⁴ Strategic Review 2, Summer 1975

¹⁵ Appelcline. *Designers and Dragons* Pg. 17

interest that TSR was attempting to capture.¹⁶ TSR was striving incessantly to create the image of variety in RPG's. They were the first on the scene. Not only did they have the availability of publishing anything without competition, but precisely because they were first they had to create the entire industry themselves.

The next few issues of *The Strategic Review* would follow the likeness of the first two. Differences between these issues were very little, and by the 6th issue, TSR was already planning to retire *The Strategic Review* in favor of publishing *The Dragon*.¹⁷

The Strategic Review laid the groundwork for what would become *The Dragon*, but it did not accomplish anything near what *The Dragon* did. This publication strove to cover "as much as it could" and it did cover quite a lot, but it was nothing more than a house organ; it was a newsletter by which TSR advertised and informed its members. *The Dragon* would be different. Though it went through many iterations and changes in direction, *The Dragon* moved beyond a house organ. Throughout its tenure, it acted as a cultural medium, a device to disseminate control over TSR products, a window into TSR's inner workings, a creative space for intrepid writers and comic artists, a place for customer feedback, a tool to advertise TSR's political leanings, and much more.

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Strategic Review 5, Spring 1976

Strategic Review 6, Summer 1976

¹⁶ *Strategic Review* 2, Summer 1975

¹⁷ *Strategic Review* 6, Summer 1976