

an Interview with DAVE ARNESON

The infamous Blackmoor Campaign, **Dungeons & Dragons**™, and Fantasy Role Playing games all began during the summer of 1970. At that time, Dave Arneson was active with the **Midwest Military Simulations Association**. The group was mostly interested in Napoleonic Miniature Campaigns and a segment of that group met every weekend in the basement of Dave Arneson's parents' house in St. Paul. One weekend, instead of hundreds of Napoleonic Miniatures, the gamers discovered Blackmoor, the first Fantasy Role Playing Adventure Campaign. After some initial groanings about trying something new, the players descended the now well worn, main staircase to Blackmoor dungeon. Once play began, the players were hooked and the Blackmoor Adventures came to dominate the group's interest with only an occasional break for Napoleonic.

From that inauspicious, but sometimes rowdy, beginning grew the concepts that became **Dungeons & Dragons**™. The "rules" developed from notes Dave kept on decisions he made. News of the game spread beyond the Twin Cities to Lake Geneva, Wisconsin and Gary Gygax. Both Gary and Dave had been active in the Castles and Crusades Society, a wargaming group devoted to play with miniatures in a medieval setting. They had also worked with Mike Carr on a set of Napoleonic Naval Combat Rules entitled **Don't Give Up The Ship**™. So they frequently corresponded regarding gaming news and ideas, and Gary was quite interested in the Blackmoor Campaign. After Dave visited Gary in Lake Geneva during February, 1976 and led him down into the Blackmoor Dungeon for his first adventure. Gary was fascinated with the game and immediately began a similar role playing campaign, Greyhawk, for his wargaming group in Lake Geneva.

Within a month after that visit, Gary and Dave decided to collaborate in writing a set of rules so that other groups around the country could play and enjoy this exciting new game of Fantasy Role Playing. After extensive correspondence and play testing, by both groups, they managed to complete the original three booklets entitled **Dungeons & Dragons**™ by the end of the year. **Tactical Studies Rules**, predecessor of **TSR Hobbies, Inc.**, was formed to publish and market the game after several companies failed to show interest in the game. From its first publication in February, 1974, **Dungeons & Dragons** took off. By 1975, the first supplements were being published. At that time, Dave was active in promoting **Dungeons & Dragons** and **TSR Hobbies, Inc.** In 1976, Dave moved to Lake Geneva, Wisconsin and worked directly for **TSR** as a Creative Director. Late in 1976, he left **TSR** to pursue a career as an independent game designer. At this time, some differences arose between Dave and **TSR** regarding his creative and royalty rights in **Dungeons & Dragons**. This dispute was settled on March 6, 1981 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Pegasus: Tell me a little about some of the major products you have designed.

Mr. Arneson: Back in the early 1970s I did some design work on a Napoleonic Naval Game called **Don't Give Up The Ship** c. I also fooled around with some regular war game designs, mostly miniatures rules, for the local group. From there I went on to **Dungeons & Dragons** c. After completing **Dungeons & Dragons** c and the supplements I did **Dungeon Masters Index** c which was an index of the first six volumes of **Dungeons & Dragons** c as well as articles in **The Strategic Review** and early **Dragon**.

Then I did some work for Discovery Games on a fantasy supplement for **Source of the Nile** c. This project grew out of a single evening of playing **Source of the Nile** c. My adventurer

had become ill in the middle of Africa and was hallucinating (he was seeing Gold Dragons flying around), before I knew it I was sketching out the rules but I don't know if they will ever be published.

Since then I've been staying with the design of Fantasy Rules. Soon after **Source of the Nile** supplement I started work on **Adventures in Fantasy** which we will be expanding. I'm also working on some modules for Judges Guild and a set of Japanese role playing rules. Within the past year, I also came out with some computer Air Combat games which are being marketed by Discovery Games. I did a series of three of them in the space of six months while working for a company called 4-D Interactive Systems. The first was quite a success and the other two will be out in the near

future. I am real excited about them because although they are traditional war games, I could see a lot of the applications for Fantasy Role Playing on the computer. They could be far more interesting than the tapes that I've seen on the market now would indicate.

I think that is where my view point is shifting, away from traditional boxed games to computer games.

Pegasus: That seems to be a general trend.

Mr. Arneson: Yes, a lot of people are getting into computer games.

Pegasus: What is your favorite historical gaming period?

Mr. Arneson: Napoleonic Sailing Ships.

Pegasus: *Have you designed any games in this period other than Don't Give Up The Ship?*

Mr. Arneson: No, I've done some stuff with Napoleonics for the local group but I'm probably never going to publish any of it. I have different Sailing Ship Rules that I use now instead of the ones that came out in **Don't Give Up The Ship**. I was going to modify the system but by the time I was done there was nothing left. They are uninteresting but would probably work on a computer, otherwise they would be unplayable unless you grew up with the system like the locals did.

"I just applied the idea of (role-playing) to fantasy."

My favorite period other than Napoleonic Naval is Civil War Naval. I have done some rules for this period that the locals enjoy playing but I don't think they'll see the light of day. I get as much satisfaction out of interacting with the players as I do when I have something published.

Pegasus: *What inspired you to co-author Dungeons & Dragons?*

Mr. Arneson: Back in 1972, I started doing dungeon explorations with the local gamers building up a set of rules as we went along. I kept track of my rules decisions in a big black notebook as we went along so I didn't contradict myself too often.

We were in correspondence with the group from Lake Geneva through the Napoleonic Campaigns at that time, so we mentioned that we were doing fantasy stuff on alternate weekends and they became very interested in it. After I made several trips down there so they could go down in my dungeon, they became very excited about it.

At the time, they had a lot more spare time than I did and they had a lot of ideas, so they came up with their own version of the rules. They sent theirs to us and we fooled around with them for a while. We exchanged

letters for awhile and just kind of slipped into it. It just felt natural that Gary and I worked together on the D&D rules because the two groups were associated and Gary and I had worked together on projects before.

Pegasus: *I assume that the Lake Geneva group is what went on to become TSR.*

Mr. Arneson: Yes, but TSR wasn't actually formed until 1973 or 1974.

Pegasus: *Tell me a little about the Blackmoor Campaign.*

Mr. Arneson: Well, as I've quoted in other articles, I was judging Napoleonics so much that I just started getting tired of it. That happens after you do the same thing for three or four years. So I began with a variation of Dave Wesely's **Brownstine** game where you go into some Banana Republic. Your object was to become dictator or try to overthrow the government or something like that. You had a role that you were playing. I just applied the idea of having a role to being in a fantasy world (an idea I got from reading **Conan** for awhile).

I had a weekend off, so I sat up reading books, eating popcorn, and watching the boob tube. I drew up a maze and populated it with creatures. Then the next time someone showed up for Napoleonics I said that we were going to do something different. Unfortunately, at that time I visualized that I wouldn't have to keep track of all those records and maps. I really thought that it was going to be easy (just draw up one map and use it forever along with all kinds of other ideas on how to make things easy for the Judge). Needless to say, my illusions were soon shattered but I had gotten excited about it because it was different and I wasn't tied to historical restraints. I could let my imagination run rampant which it wasn't usually allowed to do. By the time I was done, there was little left of Wesely or **Conan** but a lot of rules for fantasy role playing!

Pegasus: *So historical gaming did influence you when you set up Blackmoor.*

Mr. Arneson: It certainly did. We established (in our historical campaigns) the principal of having a Judge

who everyone listened to and who set up the battle or campaign. That's where we were coming from, traditional wargaming.

Pegasus: *It's nice to hear about a campaign where people listen to the Judge. I've seen a lot of campaigns that are a little more chaotic.*

Mr. Arneson: Yes, but it took a lot of forceful diplomacy on my part (the baseball bat helped). The games were held in my basement and I have thrown out disruptive players. That way I established the fact that I was in charge and when I talk you had better listen. Then when others would Judge, I could use my influence to back them up by saying "If you don't listen to this Judge, I'll remove you". Before I knew it, even I was listening to the Judge whether I liked it or not. I think in 15 years only one person was ever removed (and that by popular demand!).

"By the time I was done, there was little left of Wesely or Conan, but a lot of rules for FRP!"

Pegasus: *What have you been doing since you left TSR?*

Mr. Arneson: After I left TSR I went back home to Minnesota and wrote the **Dungeon Master Index c**. Then a friend and I tried working for **Heritage Models** for about a year and a half. That's when I finished the **Dungeon Masters Index c**. I also did a set of fantasy rules and a fantasy printing guide for them which they never published.

I was doing a lot of work for them but they weren't doing anything with it. I got tired of waiting a year and a half to get something published so we parted. Then I did **First Fantasy Campaign** for Bob, which was exciting because I was able to gather all of my old records into one place. After that I got involved with programming computers for which I was being paid

every day instead of some time in the future.

At about that same time **Chaosium** asked me to do a set of Samurai rules and since that has been one of my favorite topics in previous years I said yes. Since then, two other people have beaten me to being published. But, time will tell which one is best.

Pegasus: *That does seem to be a popular period, even TSR's Dragon has been publishing articles about it.*

Mr. Arneson: Yes, it is a quite popular time period, especially with the movie **Shogun** coming out. My problem has been due to the fact that the more I read, the more I feel I have to read. I now have 27 books on Japanese Culture and Society. The last playtest session fell apart because there was just too much. The system needs to be cut back but I have a problem taking the scalpel to the baby. I can't bring myself to do it (I guess I'm a bad editor when it comes to my own work). I have some people working for me now that may be able to do the hacking and slashing while I whimper in the other room.

Then **Judges Guild** approached me to do some game modules. So all of a sudden three years ago, I had more jobs than I could handle. I was very remiss because I said yes to a lot of people and I'm still doing the work that I promised them. It keeps me busy but I like to finish what I've promised before I go on to something else. **Adventures in Fantasy** also came up about that time (that was an outgrowth of the fantasy gaming I've done since leaving **TSR**). I had a local company publish it because **Heritage** was going to do it but decided not to. I had also approached a couple of other publishers who weren't interested (that wasted about a year).

Pegasus: *Why did you develop another Fantasy Role Playing System?*

Mr. Arneson: Fantasy Role Playing began to lack the role playing aspects that the original adventurers enjoyed so much in **Blackmoor**. They enjoyed the role playing instead of hacking and slashing the monsters. They thought up clever tricks and traps instead.

I also wanted to get in something on educating your character so one could learn different skills. I also

wanted to get back to using a spell point magic which had been in the original system proposed for **D&D c** and I thought spell point superior to the system that was used (as well as simpler).

Pegasus: *I tend to like spell point magic too.*

Mr. Arneson: There are a number of Fantasy Role Playing Systems out there, but I didn't think any of them brought it all together. I guess I felt I had to try to outdo myself, so I brought everything together in my fantasy rules. We are also doing a second edition of them to clear up the typo's and such to make things even cleaner.

**"I guess I felt
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outdo myself."**

Pegasus: *In what ways is Adventures in Fantasy c different from other Fantasy Role Playing Systems?*

Mr. Arneson: It's easier to understand than **Chivalry & Sorcery c**; it follows a more traditional medieval setting than **Runequest c**; it uses spell point magic; it didn't go into a lot of esoteric things in the basic volume that I thought were distracting. I felt that it would be a better system for getting into fantasy games because they would get more into role playing a lot of the other systems like **Tunnels and Trolls c** don't get into the whole playing aspects of fantasy gaming and they don't have an educational system. **Runequest c** has an educational system but is heavily involved in its own world.

I wanted to bring these elements together while at the same time being different. I asked myself how I would be different in my interpretations of how to deal with spell point magic and how I would bring that together with an educational system, role playing, and social status. There is probably no single element in **Adventures in Fantasy c** that can't be found in some other system, but there is no other system that brings it all together. I worked out my own systems, for example **Runequest c** has its own educational system. There I go talking about

education again but it's very neglected in most systems.

Pegasus: *I noticed that on certain books in the Adventures in Fantasy c set your name and Mr. Snider's are switched. Is there a reason for this?*

Mr. Arneson: No, it just happened that way. The order in which my name is listed has never been important. Lord knows when it got switched around, maybe it happened during proofreading. I never paid much attention to the title pages. Heck, Richard could have put his name there and erased mine completely and I wouldn't have noticed! Chances are, the typist did it and it was just never changed.

Pegasus: *I'm sure you would have noticed when it came out.*

Mr. Arneson: You're right. If anything I'm glad it happened though, because there is less emphasis on who did what.

Pegasus: *Why were the books printed in colored ink?*

Mr. Arneson: That was **Excaliber's** idea, and it will not be done in the second edition because there have been some complaints about the colors in certain lights. I didn't notice that problem until the game came out. **Excaliber** had done a set of rules before using colored ink, and they thought that it worked quite well. They took the idea to the extreme by coordinating the color of the cover with the color of the print. This does make the rules hard to xerox but it also hurts your eyes.

I assure you that in the second edition that will be done away with. I have been disappointed that in some of the reviews I'm blamed for things that I had no control over at all (cost for example). Since we brought **Adventures in Fantasy c** back from **Excaliber**, the people who are working for me have gotten quotations from a dozen different printers. Of those, four have quoted a price that is 1/3 of the cost we were originally charged. This will definitely affect the cost of the second edition. Since it will be cheaper we will be adding more stuff.

Pegasus: *Is Adventures in Fantasy c really less complicated than D&D c?*

Continued on page 76

Mr. Arneson: I think so.

Pegasus: *Are you completely satisfied with Adventures in Fantasy c?*

Mr. Arneson: No, and I would be disappointed if I were completely satisfied. There isn't any set of rules that I have done, or seen that I didn't want to fool around with. We had problems putting **Adventures in Fantasy c** to bed, but I'm not dissatisfied with the way it came out. When we do another edition, there will be changes but anyone that purchased the first edition will get a complete set of the changes or we will cheerfully exchange the game. I am concerned with public relations and keeping my good name because I try to do quality stuff.

Pegasus: *Do characters have to spend too much time recovering from wounds, fatigue, and sickness?*

Mr. Arneson: Not if you look at the real time that it would take someone to recover. What has happened is that in fantasy role playing you can usually recover in a week if someone doesn't have a zippo cure all healing potion to sell you. In my system, while part of the party is recovering, the rest can be off learning some new skills or earning money to back their next adventure. The Berserker in Norse literature even took time off to raise kids if nothing else.

Pegasus: *When will the promised supplements to Adventures in Fantasy c be made available?*

Mr. Arneson: The first supplement which Richard is working on, **Ritual Magic c**, will be out this summer (by GenCon). We will also be releasing a module to go with it, but neither project involves me directly.

Pegasus: *To what factors do you attribute the success of fantasy role playing games?*

Mr. Arneson: The escapist element of it (the chance to go out and slay a dragon) not escapist in the sense that you are trying to ignore the real world but the chance to act out your dreams (you are the hero of the book).

Pegasus: *What psychological and social benefits do you see from fantasy role*

playing gaming?

Mr. Arneson: I think it relieves a lot of tension. Players get to act out their aggressions without actually hitting anybody. People assert themselves in an adventure which can give them a little more confidence in themselves. It also helps develop teamwork because most successful dungeon expeditions are teamwork. Those are some positive aspects, but like anything else, there is a chance that someone will get carried away with it.

Pegasus: *Like the guy who went down into the tunnels?*

Mr. Arneson: Yes, as it turned out, 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 (I don't feel like a cult leader, but if anyone wants to make any donations. . .).

Pegasus: *It gave Fantasy Role Playing a lot of free publicity though.*

Mr. Arneson: That falls into the old advertizing cliche, "There's no such thing as bad publicity", but I would have preferred a different way of breaking into the national consciousness.

Pegasus: *How do you feel about the various religious groups that say Fantasy Role Playing delves into Satan Worship?*

Mr. Arneson: Well, I don't want to get into a theological discussion aside from the fact that if you talk to people who are into magic and such things, they would laugh their heads off at the **Dungeons & Dragons** approach to magic. Most of what those groups you mentioned say is poppycock.

Pegasus: *What segment of the population began playing fantasy role playing*

games first?

Mr. Arneson: My group was pretty much college age.

Pegasus: *Why did the concept appeal to them?*

Mr. Arneson: When you're in college, you need to get your mind off of your studies now and then, and fantasy role playing fit right in.

Pegasus: *Has this situation changed much?*

Mr. Arneson: The people I see at the conventions seem to be getting younger, but then again, I'm getting older, so I'm not sure. I do think that its getting into other segments of the society though. As people get married or settle into jobs, they quit playing. The game requires time, imagination and brains as well. Not everyone can play **D&D** (not everyone wants to). I think you still find the time and inclination more in college age groups than any other area of society.

Pegasus: *How do you view the tendency of experienced players to modify published rules systems to suit their campaigns?*

Mr. Arneson: They do it with war-games. They will do it tomorrow with computer games. Everyone does it to everything. I do it. We ask people to use their imaginations and when you do that, they tend to have their own ideas of how things should be done. Any group that sets up a dungeon will eventually have their own rules.

Pegasus: *Do you prefer one shot dungeons or campaigns?*

Mr. Arneson: Campaigns are more interesting to me. I put a lot of work into my dungeons and modules, and I hate to see them blown away in one shot. You can have one shot adventures in a campaign, but overall I like the campaign structure and background.

Pegasus: *When did you first start your campaign?*

Mr. Arneson: We were probably fooling around with it about three years before **D&D** was published. Before

"There was a . . . newspaper that said Gary and I were cult leaders."

that, we were playing Dave Wesely's **Brownstine**.

Pegasus: *Are all or most of the original players still involved with the campaign?*

Mr. Arneson: I have to say no because some of them have moved all over the country. This spring I hope to get everybody back together. About half of the people involved in my local campaign are old timers and the other half have been playing for less than four years. I also run **Blackmoor** at the conventions, so there are actually several hundred **Blackmoor** adventurers out there.

Pegasus: *How many people are involved in your local campaign?*

"When a character gets killed, I let the player run the monsters that the party encounters."

Mr. Arneson: I'd say about a dozen. They range in age from 12 to 35. We have one little girl who has been playing since she was six years old, so she's actually an old hand (she's a pretty good player too. She's sharp, she knows when to stand and fight and when to run away).

Pegasus: *It seems to me that someone who starts that young wouldn't understand all of what happens and why it does, but they do have some pretty good ideas.*

Mr. Arneson: Like I said, she has been doing it for six years now, so she knows what is going on.

Pegasus: *How has your campaign developed over the years?*

Mr. Arneson: We started out with the **Blackmoor** dungeon and expanded into the surrounding countryside. These days the characters stay around the original areas (they know there is adventure there), but occasionally

they'll hop on their horses (or ships) and take off for some far corner of the campaign map. For the most part, they pretty much stay at home though. At the conventions, 9 out of 10 groups go down in the dungeon (it's a little more exciting for them), so after a flurry of expansion, the old empires of the past pulled back on themselves.

Pegasus: *When judging a campaign, do you allow your players to roll their own hits and saving throws? Why?*

Mr. Arneson: Yes I do, because it gets them more involved. As a matter of fact, when a character gets killed, I let the player run the monsters that the party encounters. This way he or she stays involved, rather than becoming a spectator or leaving. When the party encounters intelligent monsters, I brief them on what that monster's life goals are (usually "Guard this room, don't let anyone in"). Then if the party wants to negotiate, they negotiate with him rather than me. That system also takes a little pressure off of me as a Judge. Besides the players always feel that if they roll the dice, they are more likely to get the number they need.

Pegasus: *You just mentioned pressure on the Judge. How many players would you consider optimum for an adventure?*

Mr. Arneson: I usually prefer to run adventures with about four or five people. Twelve is about all I'll handle, and in that case, I insist that they stay together.

Pegasus: *Have you ever worked with an assistant Judge?*

Mr. Arneson: Occasionally, but not too often. I try to use one at the conventions if I can, because there are always a lot of questions that an assistant can answer.

Pegasus: *How many people do you run at the conventions?*

Mr. Arneson: Twelve, at one time.

Pegasus: *What are your opinions concerning the inequalities of Magic Users?*

Mr. Arneson: What inequalities?

Pegasus: *The argument that low level Magic Users are less effective in combat and killed more easily than any other character class. Then if they survive to higher levels, they become the most powerful characters.*

Mr. Arneson: In a way there is a balance. It's harder for them to live a long life. You find Wizards in most fantasy books, and in every case the experienced ones are implied to be very old.

In **Adventures in Fantasy c**, of course, there are no character classes so I urge anyone starting out to learn how to use a Sword. There is no reason not to know how to use a Sword even if they are planning on developing magic skills. It's a good idea to be able to protect yourself, and that is the basic complaint, people feel that low level Magic Users are easily bumped off, and they are correct. In **Adventures in Fantasy c**, on the other hand, characters have to take the time to learn how to use a weapon and keep up that training. The system

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takes up time they could spend on magic, but they usually realize how important the weapon training is because we are dealing with field Magicians, not Wizards that are sitting back studying old books. The Magicians don't usually develop their warrior skills but the party feels a little more comfortable about having them around if they can wield their own Sword.

Pegasus: *How do you deal with new players or low level characters entering your campaign?*

Mr. Arneson: Try to team new players up with the more experienced players. I have enough control over the role playing aspects of the game that if someone goes out with a party and no one else returns, that person will get

a bad reputation that will keep them from recruiting non-player characters in the future. This practice causes a tendency to look after the new characters that come in.

I also try to get the new people together by themselves for a couple of practice adventures first. This gives them a chance to get to know the game, and advance a few levels before joining the others. By doing this, I can tailor the campaign to the party, which is impossible to do if you have first level characters with twentieth level characters because anything that could touch twentieth levels would destroy the first levels.

Pegasus: *How do you deal with characters of differing alignments within the same party?*

Mr. Arneson: I don't! The only alignment that I allow to join with others is neutral.

Pegasus: *How do you deal with intraparty conflict?*

Mr. Arneson: I don't allow hostile alignments in together. If the players

"I . . . try to get the new people together by themselves for a couple of practice adventures."

themselves have a problem, I often have the players use written orders to tell me what they are doing. If it happens that two of the players are going to have it out with each other, then I let them do it. There is a problem though, non-cooperative players get bad reputations and will have a tough time raising a new party.

Pegasus: *A few months ago you informed Judges Guild that you were working on several projects. Tell me a little about how they are coming along.*

Mr. Arneson: Harpoon c is going to the printers tomorrow (4/22) and should be done fairly soon. **Mutant c** should be out for the conventions this summer. **Star Probe c** and **Star Empires c** are going to be presented in a series of about six booklets which will be released one at a time. All these are projects being done by **Adventure Games** and not necessarily by me.

Pegasus: *What are your plans for the future?*

Mr. Arneson: We will be following up on **Adventures in Fantasy c**, of course. David Megarry, designer of **Dungeon c**, is planning some new rules sets. We are working on a computer version of **Harpoon c**, and a set of rules for Horse and Musket period role playing called **No Guts - No Glory c** is coming up. By no means are we ignoring other fields but our emphasis will be role playing.

Pegasus: *Thank you for your time.*

Mr. Arneson: You're more than welcome.



PRESS RELEASE

TSR Hobbies, Inc. and Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) authors Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson resolved their creative rights dispute in an out-of-court settlement March 6 in Milwaukee.

The terms of the settlement insure authorship credits on the D&D game for Arneson as well as clarifying his rights to future D&D royalties. Arneson also received a financial settlement for his stock in TSR Hobbies, Inc., the firm which markets the game.

Dungeons & Dragons, the original fantasy role playing game, was created during the early 1970's by Gygax and Arneson. Since that time, the two authors have followed separate careers in the gaming industry. Gygax is President of TSR Hobbies, Inc., Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, which markets a varied line of D&D and other game products. Arneson is President of Adventure Games, Inc., St. Paul, Minnesota, which markets Adventures in Fantasy created by Arneson and Richard Snider. Arneson's firm will also soon come out with a new game of modern naval rules called Harpoon.

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