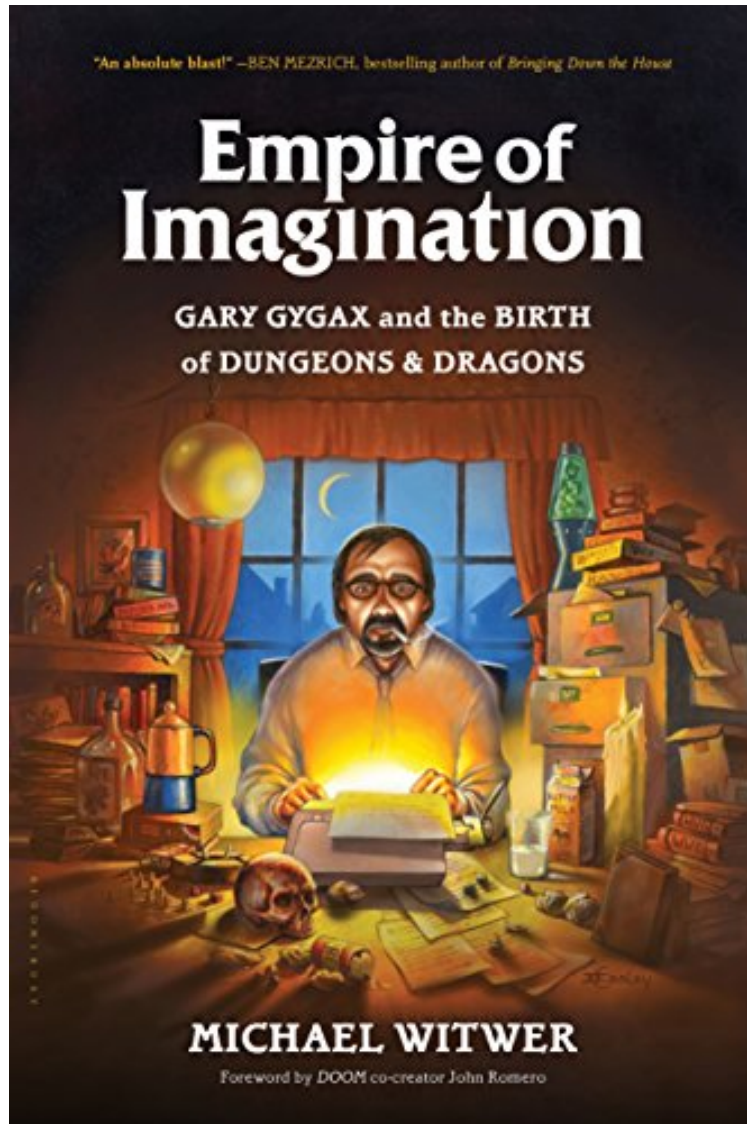


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Empire of Imagination: Gary Gygax and the Birth of Dungeons Dragons

Michael Witwer

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Michael Witwer : Empire of Imagination: Gary Gygax and the Birth of Dungeons Dragons before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Empire of Imagination: Gary Gygax and the Birth of Dungeons Dragons:

116 of 121 people found the following review helpful. Empire of the Imagination is a decent, but short, Biography of Gary's Gygax's life. By John R. Troy 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 section "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.

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. Finally an approachable and entertaining book on the creator of DDB. By Matthew A. Alef. As a life-long gamer I always wondered about the origins of DD. 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 DD through the eyes of its creator.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Magic, myths, and legends. By A reader. 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 on look at Bill Gates and you know damn well he has read the DM's guide. :)

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. DD 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 experience 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 DD'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.

It turns out that while we were down in the basement exploring his world, Gary Gygax was having a tremendous adventure up here in ours. Thanks to Michael Witwer's book, I finally got to experience it.

David X. Cohen, Executive Producer of FUTURAMA: We live in a time when the most important people in sports are using data--statistics, analytics--to make decisions with billion dollar consequences. We live in a time when digital gaming may be more influential in our culture than sports and movies combined. In short, we live in a world perhaps only Gary Gygax could have imagined decades ago. If you want to know where it all began, this book is as good a place as any to start.

Mike Greenberg, cohost of ESPN's MIKE MIKE and bestselling author of MY FATHER'S WIVES and ALL YOU COULD ASK FOR: Empire of Imagination tells the story of the emperor himself, at times brilliant, sometimes tragic, but ultimately victorious.

Peter Adkison, founder and former CEO of Wizards of the Coast, owner of Gen Con: In vignettes which vividly illustrate Gygax's key role in the invention of modern gaming, Empire of Imagination shows us the rise of Dungeons Dragons through the eyes of its most famous father. Gygax could not have hoped for a more attentive and sympathetic biographer.

Jon Peterson, author of PLAYING AT THE WORLD: The work of Michael Witwer is all I could have hoped it would be! . . . If you want to know what it was like back when DD was being born then this book is a must have.

Ernest Gary Gygax, Jr.: Witwer's respect for Gygax is evident throughout . . . informative . . . Well-researched.

Kirkus: Witwer cleverly sorts the narrative into 'levels' rather than chapters; each level opens with a DD-style scene that both foreshadows and entertains.

Library Journal: For fans of role-playing games, and DD specifically, the book is required reading.

Booklist: [E]ntertaining . . . a fascinating examination of the birth and growing pains of the gaming industry and of Gygax's lasting influence on pop culture.

Publishers Weekly: "Empire of Imagination is an absolute blast! The narrative is fast paced, while the depth of research made me feel like I was reliving the life of one of the most creative forces of our time. Witwer had me reaching for my 20 sided dice!"

Ben Mezrich, bestselling author of BRINGING DOWN THE HOUSE and ONCE UPON A TIME IN RUSSIA: Not a dry, rigorous biographical tome . . . quite a fun read.

Frank Mentzer, former TSR staff designer and Creative Advisor to Gary Gygax: "[A] great achievement, a foundational biography, an important story to tell . . . You don't need to roll a d20 to find out whether you should buy this book. If you even know what I meant when I wrote 'd20,' the answer is yes."

Bookgasm: "Gary Gygax went on a long, treacherous and challenging journey in both his personal and business life and, after reading Michael Witwer's book, I feel as though I've been on a part of that journey, too . . . The book left me feeling warm and yet somewhat sad, but it was definitely a most satisfying read . . . Most highly recommended."

Jonathan Hicks, Farsight Blogger / RPG.net: [I]f you are a

gamer, live with a gamer or ever had the urge to understand why gamers, geeks and nerds do what they do, you must read this book." ?d20radio.com"If you have any interest in the origination of our hobby, read this book . . . amazingly entertaining and informative." ?GeeksandGeeklets"Empire of Imagination: Gary Gygax and the Birth of Dungeons Dragons is a book no geek or role player of any sort should miss out on." ?Metapunk.com"[A] brilliant book." ?Ian Livingstone CBE, Co-Founder of Games Workshop"I highly recommend Empire of Imagination to anyone interested in gaming and the creative process." ?Chris Perkins, DD Principal Story Designer at Wizards of the Coast"It's the most comprehensive look at Gygax's early life that I know of . . . Witwer excels at telling this story." ?Shannon Appelcline, author of DESIGNERS DRAGONS"A fitting tribute to a complicated legacy." ?Michael J. Tresca, author of THE EVOLUTION OF FANTASY ROLE-PLAYING GAMES>About the AuthorMichael Witwer is a lifelong gamer and gaming enthusiast. He holds degrees from Northwestern University and the University of Chicago, where this book first emerged as the subject of his master's thesis. He is also a film and theater actor and marketing professional and is the brother of actor Sam Witwer, who first introduced him to Dungeons Dragons. He lives in Chicago, Illinois, with his wife and two children.