



PROJECT MUSE®

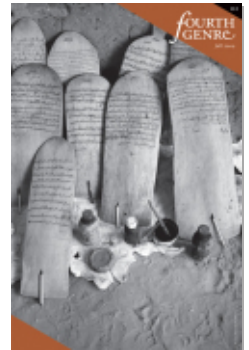
Geas

Ander Monson

Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction, Volume 11, Number 2, Fall 2009, pp. 43-54 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/fge.0.0081>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/362765>

Geas

ANDER MONSON

Gary Gygax is dead. Sorry. Really sorry for your loss. He has left the building. There will be, at the risk of sounding flip, no resurrection. The founder of Dungeons & Dragons, and in fact the whole idea of role-playing games, often blamed for our increasingly many social ills—from the destruction and desecration of our youths and their drugged-out, sexed-up escapades in high school or in the steam tunnels beneath our colleges to the difficulty we increasingly have in separating game, or fiction, or film, or dream, from reality, just to name a few—Gygax found religion in the years before his death. He increasingly believed in the spirit exceeding the body, a corollary to Dungeons & Dragons, really, which allows the body to be resurrected, resuscitated, raised from the dead. While the theology of D&D has undergone a number of overhauls (from dalliances with demons and devils, immortals, the Ethereal and Astral planes, and some really wacked out and interesting stuff to a more traditional pantheon of deities and demigods and dragons that live forever), it has always been based on the idea that the character extends beyond the body into the nothingness, or whatever you want to fill it with, thereafter. When your character died in D&D, you could either make up a new one or else undertake a quest to try to get your character resurrected.

He died a week ago, nearly, and the fact that I didn't hear about it until now depresses me further. To think I am so disconnected from this gaming, fantasy hinterland from whence I emanated in my teenage years is near-crushing to the body. I do claim the moniker of *gamer*, as a descended D&D player, descended as in testicles, as in no longer playing, as in having abandoned that

imaginative and physical life (or lack thereof, as some suggest) in college, having given it up after a decade, easily, of playing and entering into that story space after my mother's death—maybe that being a factor, maybe that opened me up for it—and living in my dad's duplex, dice clattering across the downstairs kitchen table, the light luminous and fluorescent above us, with my brother and my friends, Chris, Matt, Jerry (whose brief dwarf character was named “Cooler”), occasionally Jody (now murdered, and by putting her into the essay at all, by iterating her name, almost obliges me to address that welt, that hurt, to do something with it—she who has left her body some years ago—though I did so at length in another text that will go unmentioned here), and a host of others, who joined us for a game, or for the better part of a decade.

This fact, the fact of his departure from this mortal whatever, feels like punctuation. It closes a door on my life, a door that closed a while ago, in truth, though recently I had been reintroduced to RPGs on my Playstation 2, with *Final Fantasy XII*, a game certainly descended from D&D.

On the day I am trying to reckon with the loss of Gygax, the news is made public that I am leaving this, my current job, a good job with good people, for another job, which will also presumably have good people. The body is already quavering, contemplating giving up my house, this city, this skyline, this weather, and this, my native state, for something else with scorpions and desert. As I work on generating this bit of prose, faculty stop by my office to mock-accuse me for leaving, and to congratulate me. It is a mix. Their emotions, mine. I have loved this office, with its ravine view, and humming fan amid the silence, and green technology. This borders on an elegy for this job, this former iteration of Monson, which will be left behind and vacated like this space, like my parents' former houses, one after another, as we moved from place to place (to Saudi Arabia and away)—and an elegy for my students, whom I have loved also in my way. But elegy is grandiose. I am becoming maudlin. It is too much. I move close and I push away.

I don't even know if this is true emotion, or if it's a role I am expected to play, and am so playing, or how to tell the difference, if there is any at all. If my colleagues and friends here will be sad, exactly, to see me go, or if it is a social obligation, self-pity, envy, or what. I feel I am of this place, that it has acted on me, like other formative places, settings in my life. In D&D we might

call this place a continuity of character and action, the overarching scope of the novel, an arc, *a campaign*. Sometimes when the Dungeon Master loses his players, as when they no longer want to play, or are dissatisfied, or bored, or have had their outside lives interfere with the shared ongoing fantasy, or in a case where the plot has become too byzantine, too dumb, or the players too spoiled, you have to scrap it, the whole world you've created, and start another.

You can also buy another, buy into one of the ongoing campaign-worlds that published D&D “modules” (usually these take the form of a dungeon with a goal, side quests, and lists of *dramatis personae*) come with. Greyhawk was one. Forgotten Realms, another. Krynn, home of the *Dragonlance* books, another. There are dozens of published worlds with their own continuities, clashing races and clans and what have you. With the Internet and the rise of online gaming, there are surely thousands of collective, published imaginations for you to choose from.

For me it comes down to not wanting to let inertia, the fact of this job and this role, this office, these classes, these students, direct my life. To not get too comfortable, if this isn't a story I am telling myself to enable motion. I haven't signed the new contract yet. I'm still hedging, just a little, until it arrives. I am apologetic for my departure, and there's no reason to be, not really. But the fact of it remains.

Perhaps it is the province of those who are self-involved, or sensitive, or inward-directed, or neurotic, or solipsistic, to overly analyze at length, to ramble on and circle the fact in prose. It allows me to contain two roles at least: both excited at new prospects and sad to be leaving, and aware of these things, both existing. I can play both sides. I can feel torn. I can generate enough emotion to want to line up sentences on a page. Equivocation is one of my character flaws. I like to have it both ways, always, even. It's not quite duplicity, but it's on the road towards it. Equal and opposite reactions. The mind casts itself as passive, as watcher of the action, not as actor. I want to talk about it, and to do it, but to hold the imaginative possibility of action and inaction.

In D&D your character has an *alignment*. This describes his moral compass, his approach to good and evil, law and lawlessness. It can range from Lawful Good to Chaotic Evil. The alignment defines your character perhaps more than anything else. It circumscribes the way you can play your role: whether you are a thoughtful type or a man of action, whether you subscribe to the

life of the mind or the body heaving the axe at a troll, and whether you are a force for good in this or another world.

And even as I am always reckoning, always analyzing, equivocating, I move.

So I have to admit that the idea of reckoning with the loss of Gygax is a reductive one: it's naive, a lack of specificity, of deep engagement with the subject. I don't think of him that often, and I'm not even sure how to pronounce his name, which *g* gets the soft and which the hard, and so I vary (ending up on soft-*g* *gy* and hard-*g* *gax*, but if you use both hard *g*'s it's more warriorish, something your paladin could shout on the battlefield as he charges towards a swarming force of orcs). For me he was as myth already, even as living man. I'm sure he got that a lot, being the honored guest at thousands of RPG conferences, having his myth tended to and honored publicly, even as, like many men-made-myth, the public thinks about his past and not his present, not his finding Jesus, not his new game systems. (He left D&D to his former publishing company, TSR [the company that owned D&D until it was sold to Wizards of the Coast in the late '90s; originally it stood for Tactical Studies Rules, demonstrating D&D's origin in tactical war games, and eventually the company jettisoned this moniker so it no longer stands for anything] in 1985 and hadn't looked back.) So the Gygax I know (or conceive of) is at least 20 years old, like light from a closer star, and just a name, almost, a reputation, a signifier that points to the emanation of this game-world in my and others' lives. I know him not at all except by reputation, as what he means, or meant, or, well, means, still: let's be honest, his name will be yoked to D&D and this particular variety (if not all varieties) of nerdery for decades to come, as we see how far the effects of D&D and RPG and gaming culture have permeated our media, our stories.

At the same time, in the last few years D&D has become acceptable to talk about publicly again. The actor slash action star Vin Diesel cops to it, even writing an introduction to a recent retrospective (and really terrible, actually) book about the history of D&D. Television satirist Stephen Colbert talks D&D, or, failing that, the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, about every week or two on his show. The musician Final Fantasy has a whole album centered around the concept of the various schools of magic in third-edition Advanced Dungeons & Dragons. A brilliant essay in *The Believer* by Paul LaFarge interviews and describes and talks about Gygax, and plays a game with him, and comes to its own terms with his history of playing as a player-character.

All these sightings of D&D in the public and now slightly-less-shameful world, and reading LaFarge's essay in particular, mean a lot to me because they enable me to come out, to admit and talk on and worry my history with D&D, which is a way of saying a history with collaborative story or storytelling, which is a subgenre of *interactive fiction* as the current academic term applies to what we formerly called "text adventures" like *Zork* and so on in the world.

Fuck. There's so much here, embedded, impacted in the subject. Like anything suitably primal, it resists being teased apart.

Outside, a dude in a black trench coat and ponytail walks by the window. His tote bag features a bunch of unidentifiable pins. Though I don't know him, his look tells me he is a fellow traveler, that he knows what *dodecahedron* means, that he could bust out some adjustments to saving throw statistics, that he might, as I did once, subscribe to *Dragon* magazine. I just took a box of back issues of *Dragon* back from my parents' garage, where they were facing certain destruction or donation to Salvation Army.

About once a year I am called to rescue or condemn a box of artifacts of my past life from their position moldering in the basement or the garage. This entails reliving, or reconceiving of, this past life, this former Monson, or stage thereof, and looking at it closely, reentering that space, and deciding what to do with it. The things I used to do are bizarre to me now, biologically so foreign (yet I still contain traces). I can't imagine sitting in the basement of a house with a bunch of other boys, surrounded by a tripartite Dungeon Master's screen filled with statistics and probably a picture of a wizard, exploring some imaginary dungeon. Instead I have no problem with sitting in some dude's rec room (or mine if I had a rec room) playing video games, exploring an imagined, virtual space. This causes me no trouble at all. I cannot comprehend my former tooth-killing interest in eating powdered sugar with a spoon directly out of the bag, occasionally inhaling some by accident and shredding my mucous membranes, quaffing liters of Mountain Dew and rubbing my little belly. (I know the word *quaffing* only as a result of the computer game *Larn*, a version of another popular computer game called *Rogue*, both of which involved wandering through dungeons rudimentarily represented as black space on the black monochrome computer screen and lit up in accordance with your character [itself represented by a character, an ASCII glyph, like a dollar sign or the letter *x* or something, I don't quite remember] as it meandered through the darkness, and turned black space into

a white dot against that space. The monsters in the game were all represented by an alphanumeric character, like a *t* for a troll and a *g* for a goblin, and your commands were entered via one-key commands from the keyboard. *Q*, then, was for *quaff*, as in quaffing a healing potion or a poison remedy. Both *Larn* and *Rogue* were solo versions of D&D, albeit with almost no graphics and no social engagement with anything beyond the screen. But they were, in their way, beautiful and immersive.)

All these selves—my Atari 2600 self, recently adopted from said garage; my PC virus writing self, also recently recalled from the dustbin; my teenage criminal self; my computer-gaming self; or my one-time GEN CON (role-playing conference) attending self—they are like characters within the larger campaign of the person, the player—being me, probably (I assume). The distance, psychologically, biologically, between there and now, between those cells, those synapse configurations and these, is almost too great to comprehend. Which should give me hope. That we can grow through obsessions like these suggests a life of disposable stages, something new ahead, a new job, a new place, new levels of dorkiness.

I'm going to head home from this office life and sit down in my sleepy hollow chair, pop a couple Mountain Dew's, order Domino's (sausage, green pepper, and onion), and bury my head for a while in video games. That would be a fitting tribute.



Q: How many times per day can a hellhound breathe fire?

A: There is no limit on the total number of times that a hellhound can breathe fire, but it may only breathe when the dice roll given in the 1983 *Expert Rulebook*, page 51, says it can breathe fire (Skip Williams, "Sage Advice," *Dragon* #124)

Q: *Geas* and *quest* spells are much abused. For example, couldn't an evil magic-user *geas* a character to never attack him? Couldn't an evil cleric do a similar thing with *quest*?

A: A *quest* must be a specific and finite task; the victim must be able to take actions that will bring about the end of the *quest*, or the spell has no effect.

A *geas* is similar to a *quest* in that it must be specific. (Skip Williams, “Sage Advice,” *Dragon* #124)

Geas is one of these words that I try to deploy periodically in conversation, or, worse, in *Scrabble*, where I am destined to lose by virtue of my reliance on knowledge gleaned from fantasy books, mythology, or *Dungeons & Dragons*. This happens way more often than it should because I usually can’t differentiate actual knowledge from fantasy knowledge. The wall between the two is glass, and flimsy, clear. In one of my Ancient Greek classes I used some bit of knowledge from the (old, crappy, fantasy) movie *Krull* to underscore a point I was making about the Cyclops, that he had traded one of his eyes to one god or another for the ability to see the future, but that he was tricked: the only future he could see was the day of his own death (or possibly the day of anyone’s death, which would be a little more useful). This tidbit was met by the laughter of Stephen Fineberg, my Greek professor, who asked me where I got that from. I confessed. More laughter. Embarrassment. Silence.

A *geas* comes from *geis* in Celtic, Scottish, or Welsh mythologies, which vary a bit. It is essentially a specific curse/quest that a character must live up to or undergo. It is a spell (interchangeable with *quest*) used by magic-users (wizards/sorcerers), or by clerics (religious magic-users) in D&D. D&D is an exceptionally complex and expansive system, covering, I’m sure, thousands on thousands of pages worth of mythology and backstory, game mechanics, sexy weapons. The attraction of the *geas* spell is one of control—one of the attractions of role-playing games at all, of attaining power over others, of commanding them.

The above quotes are from *Dragon* magazine, a monthly tome devoted to role-playing games, primarily one of the iterations of *Dungeons & Dragons*. My parents’ basement contains issues 75–130 of the magazine. Many pages are dog-eared or show obvious signs of my devotion. My favorite sections in the magazine are the ones where serious players write in and passionately query or debate obscurities, such as the sections above.



Version 4.0 of the Advanced *Dungeons & Dragons* rules comes out in six days, on July 8, 2008. The version I played mostly was 2.0 (the version after D&D—the simpler version—was split into two, the simpler D&D and a more

complex AD&D). I haven't paid any attention to the state of all things D&D since I stopped playing shortly before I went to college. I did not have a falling-out with the game, but it just became less fun to me, like it occurred to me that there were, at last, at least, other things to do. I played one role-playing game (or tried to; we got bored and then drunk and then it was over) in grad school, and I played one session of *Vampire*, which came out when I was in college, with two guys who wanted to be called in real life (not in game) "Pasha" and "Ghost," their given names too banal to bother with. They played with some goth girls (*Vampire* attracted the goth girls like nothing else), which was sexy in theory, but there were no capes or bodices, and the experience was, on the whole, a bore.

Really, I don't know if I was ever a very good player of D&D or any role-playing game. I was always the Dungeon Master (DM, or as they say, GM, in other games—and in the new version of D&D), responsible for the creation of the fictional world and for refereeing the play of the game. The storytelling aspect must have appealed to me (and still does), but I've only played a character a handful of times, and I was not good at playing the role, which is a huge part of what makes RPGs fun, or so I am told. My brother and I both played, and we attended the yearly Gen-Con convention (the big convention for RPGs in America), which took place in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, close to the birthplace of TSR. My brother and I played at the convention, but I remember being too young, among a bunch of college kids and older people, and not really getting it. It was fun, and my father surely deserves an award for indulging the quality of our dorkiness to bring us to the convention, but the game I saw wasn't the same as the game we played. Mostly I remember the fries at one of the Milwaukee malls as I stuffed them into my mouth. They were thick cut, natural, with bits of potato skin, covered in salt. And they came from a mall, not a chickenshit little mall like our hometown Copper Country Mall, where the biggest store for four hours was a JCPenney with their cool, cool cardigans.

Maybe it's more about control. The Dungeon Master makes the rules, knows all—or as much as is possible to know. It was hard for me to be just a player, with a more limited knowledge base, trying to inhabit a character. Maybe it was teenage solipsism, an inability or reluctance to inhabit anyone else. But reading gives the lie to this—that is the function of books, to allow us to inhabit another mind.

The penultimate version of the game was 3.5, presumably preceded by a 3.0, where the company dropped the *Advanced* from the game's title and collapsed the advanced version back to Dungeons & Dragons. You can go to their website to learn all about D&D. Watching their online demo for how D&D is played is a very weird experience for this former player. For one, a girl is involved. That happened rarely. A couple girls played with us a couple times, including one who was later murdered (sad to think of her only in these terms—as murdered girl), but for the most part we were male, juvenile (we were juveniles who were especially juvenile). Various rape fantasies were probably deployed. My memory tastefully omits this. There was looting. Battles. You know. That's what you get with a duplex kitchen full of 13-year-olds eating powdered sugar out of the bag.

Version 4.0 incorporates a board-game element (the dungeons through which the players canter and saunter and creep are 2-D, visual, and the players are represented by pieces, miniatures), as well as having the rules revamped to be significantly less technical. So the way D&D is played is now once again visual, with pieces on a board. This is a huge disappointment. Even looking at it, moving the dorky miniature representations of characters, feels reductive; it gives the lie to the imaginative qualities of the game. Are we getting more stupid? Does this make it an easier sell to parents, less transgressive with media fantasies of deranged kids running through steam tunnels under Michigan State University, taking drugs and fucking, and fighting each other with homemade foils fashioned from cut-off golf clubs? Or maybe “game” has become increasingly visual, requiring more consumption, more procuring and painting of miniatures, as if to better compete with the immersive quality of video role-playing games?

The way it used to be played (or the way we played it, anyhow) involved almost no physical props or presence. It was oral, with collaborative storytelling.



Controversy over the athcoid [more commonly known as the gelatinous cube] has long raged among the wise—quite heatedly so in the corridors of the Hall of Beast-Tamers and in the offices of the Imperial Zoo of Amn, the keepers of which have managed to keep a cube alive in captivity for some 12 winters. Over and over, the questions are asked: How intelligent are the cubes? How

amorphous are their forms? Of what is their digestive fluid composed, and can it be used as a weapon or in alchemy (or, for that matter, in medicine or in the handling of beasts)? How do athcoids mate—indeed, *do* athcoids mate?

—Ed Greenwood, “The Ecology of the Gelatinous Cube:
Unseeing, Unthinking, Unstoppable,” *Dragon* #124



Many of my friends have mated. I have mated. D&D types mate consistently, often with other gamers. They have Renaissance Faire weddings. My wife dressed up as a wench for her friend’s wedding in college. The marriage lasted less than a year.

Chivalry Sports is what appears to be a sporting-goods store in central Tucson. It specializes in reproduction or semi-period regalia for Renaissance Faires and live-action role playing (LARP), and probably everything in between or on the spectrum of this culture, including meeting up with the “girl” you’ve been chatting with on *World of Warcraft* or on one of the more hardcore, old-school, geek-chic MUDs (multi-user dungeons, all text, a precursor of *Everquest* and *WoW* and other MMORPGs [massively multiplayer online role-playing games], which you likely know because you wonder about your friend, the addict to this game, this representation of reality, this particular version of life).

I pick up a poorly printed flier for the “Empire of Chivalry and Steel,” a live-action medieval-recreation society that holds a number of medieval tournaments in which you can fight, craft, sing, and so on. From the website: “The Kingdom of Galandor is the first recognized Sovereign Territory of The Empire of Chivalry and Steel (ECS), Inc., founded on April 10, 1990. Our Kingdom encompasses all of Arizona, with an outlying territory in Illinois. We currently have three territories in our Kingdom: the Marquisate of Altiora (Tucson, AZ), the Marquisate of Solaris (Phoenix, AZ), and the Province of Northwatch (Chicago, IL).” You can find out more about them at Galandor.org.

Don’t get me wrong—this is by no means Dungeons & Dragons. We didn’t dress up . . . much . . . and if we did, and we held battles in friends’ backyards with homemade wooden swords, then that wasn’t D&D either but a natural, perfectly healthy, aerobic, enjoyable, undorky, unembarrassing offshoot of our interests. At Chivalry Sports you can certainly buy swords (“Practical Katana and Wazikashi,” Scramasax, Main Gauche and Cup Hilt Rapier, Viking Swords,

etc.), but it's mostly about the period outfits. You can buy a variety of T-shirts sporting logos of dragons ("Night Dragon," "Golden Dragon," "Breakthrough Dragon," "Black Dragon," "Dragon Whisperer," "Draco Basilica," "Whitby Worm," and "Wyverex Cipher," among others), pirate skulls, fairies ("Forest Meadow Fairy," "Purple Fairy"), along with corsets, breeches for little boys, a "Children's Commoner's Vest," a "Knightly Fighting Surcoat," "Druid Robe," and more. The models tend to be a little larger, with longer hair, especially the dudes. There are a lot of goatees. You can outfit your teddy bears with a variety of "Mini-Helms," and of course there are the books on medieval weddings.

This collective devotion to recreating the esoterica of this former culture is admirable. Glorious, even. Anyone could walk into our lame but better-smelling version of the Middle Ages just by coming through the door. I don't pretend that this is entirely due to Dungeons & Dragons, or due to Gygax, since after all, fantasy literature has been around since time immemorial, and even the Society for Creative Anachronism (you know, those kids you see dressed up and battling in armor on college campuses) has been around since 1966, when it originated reportedly (and questionably) as "a protest against the twentieth century." Perhaps all these spawned game worlds are a reaction against the undramatic life of so many (look who's talking, writer, reader, bore) today. The documentary film *Darkon* focuses on the related Darkon Wargaming Club, and specifically the lives of those engaged in a form of live-action D&D, the aforementioned LARP, contrasting the "regular" office, married, Wal-Mart lives of the players with those of their rather more spectacular characters. It's beautiful and hilarious and also more than a little moving to watch them go at it, in the way that watching anyone completely lost in a world—whether fantasy, online, computer gaming, sporting, or whatever—can be. You have to admire the complex and complete lack of self-consciousness, the commitment to the rules and procedures and limits of the world. It's as if they exceed, transcend themselves each minute they play as someone else, as if they become deities, so far beyond the rest of self-conscious us that they barely matter to us, or us to them.



Backing out of Chivalry Sports onto the road, I realize there is a huge grasshopper in the center of my windshield. It's obscene, so splayed, so *there*, such a *fact*. I have a great view of its petticoat as I accelerate to traffic speed. It seems

almost happy as I push out of the city proper and towards the foothills, my speed increasing towards 60 mph. It remains, a gargoyle, a bastion, a bulkhead, uncaring. Usually insects on the windshield are sheared off pretty quickly, but this one is stalwart. When I hit 64 mph, the grasshopper slowly starts to rotate so it faces forward, like a figurehead, Leonardo DiCaprio in *Titanic*, a dog with its face in the wind, wild, eating air. I have no capacity for comprehending the grasshopper brain, or what passes for a brain in a grasshopper (ganglia, loose groups of nerve cells, appear in each section of the grasshopper, though there is a brainlike cluster in the head), but it is still somehow awesome to watch. It is exceeding its natural capacity for speed (they can fly 8 mph) by eight times via the context of my car. At any moment I expect it to be blown off, confused, forced to go aloft, and to return to whatever grasshoppers do for fun or sustenance, if there is a difference. I drive four miles north to the coffee shop where I am planning on working on this essay, and once I pull into the parking spot gently, so as not to dislodge it, having carried it so far with me, it straightens, turns with what appears to be dignity. It slowly climbs to the top of my car, beyond my vision, beyond anyone's vision or capacity for understanding, and disappears.