

GiantLands: Introducing Ernie Gygax

Andrew: Welcome to The GiantLands Podcast. I'm your host, Andrew Spohn. And with us today is the one and only Ernest Gygax Jr. How are you doing today, Ernie?

Ernie: I'm doing great! It's a wonderful day to talk games.

Andrew: Absolutely. Isn't it always? It's cool that. We're able to connect over something like GiantLands. Like it's such a cool new project, but it has roots that are so, so old and so rich connected with the kind of origins of the modern role playing game, which is so cool. And something that your family obviously was a big part of.

I know you've got like a lot of stuff on your resume, but I was kind of curious to know, um, what all kind of stuff you're up to these days.

Ernie: At 60 years of age, I'm mostly trying to just lay back and enjoy the time I do have. So I, I spend a lot of time I'm with my pets. I have a lovely fiance and then I try to game as often as I can. And occasionally crank out something that's so much fun that I really want to share it.

Andrew: That is so cool. And I also love the idea of, instead of treating it like a job where you're like, "I have to crank out the numbers and hit the quotas," it's like, "no, this is fueled by passion. And if I didn't love this, I wouldn't be doing it, and I would just be keeping these stories internal, you know, my little friend group or whatever."

So that's, that's so cool. I'm glad to hear you're still enjoying the hobby and it's not too much of a drag or a chore or anything like that.

Ernie: Well, no, but I certainly get less done than many other people cranking out the materials, everything that I do do I enjoy.

Andrew: Cool. And I know you were a part of a Kickstarter a few years ago. Can you tell us kind of about that experience while that was like? It was hugely successful!

Ernie: Well it was hugely successful. And what happened is that we got too excited on stretch goals and started promising too many items. So it got so rich that instead of concentrating on what we really already had done, we started saying, "well, with this addition here, changing for this addition... Now we'll add in our heraldry we'll add in world setting and all of this."

And it is going to be good because originally we were working on something called the Hobby Shop Dungeon, which I created 1978. At the Dungeon Hobby Shop, which was TSRs house organ. At that point, I saw this other fellow Benoist Poire who, uh, was offering some free concepts with his own Dungeon and it, it would look so cool and his maps were fantastic. Then I said, "What are you doing, Ben? You could be making something out of this!"

He said, "I just wanted to see my stuff in play." So then we started working together on the Hobby Shop Dudgeon and my old levels, he, uh, he increased by about 600% in scale. So that means we have to add that many more things. We've got four levels drawn out the concept for the fifth and my sixth will stay the original that it was. Which is probably about it was a, a four by three piece of graph paper, 10 squares to the edge filled up completely as a dungeon. To give you an idea. So that'll be the, the creme de la creme the final piece. But anyway, the Marmoreal Tomb was a Kickstarter. It is now in the capable hands of Troll Lord Games. Stephen Chenault, and his people are pushing it out.

Everybody's got a rough draft now, which is called the beta, online only. And then it's going to be cleaned up and printed out for all the Kickstarter people. There's about 1200 people that got into it.

Andrew: That's so cool. And yeah, like we said, it was, it was hugely successful, like six times the funding goal or something, but it's so cool to hear your perspective on it. And that it's called GP adventures -- your kind of collective that both the G meaning you and the P being Benoist. He was doing it just so that people would be using his maps and stuff. And being able to turn that into something that people actually, you know, can pay for and support. And I just think that's such a cool and interesting and pure way of art meeting commerce. I dunno. I love the kind of stuff that can come out of that work environment.

Ernie: The only negative on that of course, is that deadlines didn't--years late. And it did take finally, um, some professional businessmen to step in and get involved with the project.

Instead of trying to fill the whole ceiling with this incredible mural, coming back and saying, Oh, I've got the eye color wrong from this panel to this. (Laughter)

And just doing all these incredible details and all he does. And he, he can't sleep if he has something wrong. So I couldn't find a better creative partner.

Andrew: That is so cool. I'm so glad to hear that. And yeah, his, his work is fantastic. You can see it in the art itself. There's one, one phrase in an interview where you talked about that Kickstarter, where you kind of described it as a web of nonlinear design.

And that really captivated me as, as a former GM and a fan of roleplaying games that's just a really fascinating way to describe almost what it is to create a campaign or to be a, you know, dungeon master or game master. And I know you like to play a lot of role playing games, but is that kind of what you like about that art form of DMing or GMing?

Ernie: Well, see, at that point it was search, explore and destroy. And if you can't handle it, you, you map and come back later and do whatever is necessary to be able to handle that situation. And we did that often and I was a very good mapper and it is, it is a bit of work and, and follow through and it slows things down a little bit compared to just charging forward. And at some point, people started deciding that instead of having lots and lots of rooms, we're just going to have fewer rooms with more detail and go point to point to point.

Back in the eighties, with Flint Dille. I did something called the Sagard the Barbarian books and it, he had my dad's name on with Flint, but he didn't have the time to work on it then.

So I was the ghost writer. And they were basically Conan books with pick a path and a combat system, with hit points and experience points.

Andrew: So cool. I love that kind of stuff. I, um, I did a Kickstarter, actually. It was, it failed, but it was in 2014, but it was largely inspired by those kind of choose your own adventure style games where it's like the benefits of, of playing a tabletop role playing game. But back then, I didn't think they were as popular and I thought "maybe this will solve that problem or that, you know, that hole in people's heart, when they don't get to actually play a role playing game." But nowadays, luckily, the culture has adopted the tabletop role playing game. And it's bigger than ever and more socially accepted than ever.

And I feel like it doesn't necessarily need that, that kind of dumbed down type of thing that I was going for. So it's, it's so cool to see it become popular in be able to be a relatively mainstream thing that more and more people can enjoy every year. It's it's such a cool hobby.

Ernie: Well, it's been my hobby since I was just a little lad and reached up on top of a card table and grabbed the Panzer division off my dad's Stalingrad game and chewed on it. So I cut my teeth on gaming.

Andrew: That's amazing. Yeah. So I'm sure growing up in that, in that household was. I mean, truly fantastic and fascinating because it was something kind of groundbreaking stuff going on in there. That's gotta be such an interesting thing. So I'm always curious about how people do with that kind of, kind of legacy you're being so close to such a Saint almost.

Ernie: With wonderful points and, and negatives, some of the wonderful things were that he would, um, make up stories and tell us as children before bedtime. Often, sometimes you just read stories like a habit. And other Grimms fairytales or something, but most of the time we want stories and we'd, each of us would feed them one concept and then you'd have to try to take the ideas from however many children you had at the time and gel that story.

And then he would do all kinds of silly things like, "Oh, tell us a long story." And he say, "once there was a long man who lived in a long house town and blah, blah, blah," just killing space while his mind is quickly turning over these ideas to create the story to begin. And at the same time, uh, he didn't want nepotism in the company.

So when he hired me, he told me you're going to work for my business partner, Brian Blume. And I was, I've gotten you as a minimum wage job. And now at this point, everything that happens will be through him. But if you have an important thing to talk to, or you have a great idea, you have the ability to come and talk to the boss where no one else does, but I don't want it to be where you're complaining about some personal problem with somebody else.

But he said if a good idea, a good thing. And in fact, as was just recently brought up that I was. My dad said, "We want to get rid of the lizard man logo because we're now becoming more, uh family-oriented we need to try to figure out this new logo, do you have any concepts?" And then I said, "Well, I saw recently on a commercial, that Cody had a cricket and they were a game company. And of course, Toys "R" Us and Bargain Town-- they all had

their different stuffed guys or whatever that would be their symbols. And I said, "Well, we're the magic guys. We're the fantasy." I said, "We're the game wizards." And that's what stuck. And then from there, it went through several different changes at the end, ended up being almost a cartoon character with Morley the wizard.

but yeah, that was my first cool thing. I was 16, probably then. And dad had me put my feet up on the desk and he got me a Courvoisier and a cigar and said, "stay on the clock and now you've done, you know, you've done some incredible work here. It's its reward time."

Andrew: That is so cool. And just the kind of business and commerce of, you know, people kind of technically, they are maybe talking about wizards and magic a lot of their day, you know, while they're earning their pay, which is such an interesting thing.

It seems like such a dream job, but I'm sure there are. Struggles that go into that, you know, like any job that's going to be a job it's going to require work. And it's not always, you know, always going to feel like going in in the morning, but, um, it's really cool to see how, how you can create so many interesting works in that kind of atmosphere.

I can't even imagine doing that. Professionally. I think that'd be such a dream, but again, it's like, your dream is your job. So now it's like, well then do I need my, a different dream to escape from this job? I don't know.

Ernie: Nope. We still had to ship the product out. We still had to get the product. Wait, when somebody flushed a paper towels into the toilet system, Brian and I had to go take off a pipe and.

And do all kinds of silly desks like anybody. Cause there wasn't money to be wasted on plumbers and stuff. It was a hand to mouth operation where every time we got more money, we could try to put out another product to try to grow our product line.

That house on 723 Williams Street is now going to be made into a TSR Gary Gygax museum.

Andrew: Wow. I didn't know about that. That's fantastic.

Ernie: Justin LaNasa bought it, and he's a fine fellow. He's already got a museum of the obscure and the weird out in North Carolina, you know, he's, he's quite the intelligent gamer fellow. And, and after being involved in the Geek Nation Tour here that I'm a member of, I am like that the premier, you know, entertainment, whatever else with Jeff Leeson and Jim Ward and last year, um, also Tom Wham.--all TSR people.

Andrew: That's awesome. It does seem like there's something kind of special going on in the Lake Geneva area. That's kind of ground zero for a lot of this stuff right?

Ernie: Now it is. For a long time, it was dead. And there was there's a lot of people that said it's nothing but a taffy and a fudge shop zone.

It was, it was that. And there were fighting to even try to get anything up from my father at all. There still is not a statue. Alls there is is this a large brick that we have down by the Riviera fountain by the lake shore.

And there's all sorts of things going on as well as our own museum in Lake Geneva, which is only about four years old in its current location, it's got a TSR room as well that they're opening out shortly. So yeah, from nothing everything's coming back up.

Andrew: Right. That's awesome. And I think it's so fascinating that you can, can work in that industry for years, and then still, that's what you're dreaming about and wanting to go do on the weekends as well is to just play more of that game.

You know, that's my, my fear of working in an industry that like is kind of my, my side project or my side hobby, or like, you know, my passion. I feel like if I went professional, then I might need to find a new passion to do on the side. But it seems like you've been able to dive into it deep enough, or have such an appreciation for it, where it satisfies multiple parts of your life at the same time.

Ernie: Well. I took a decade off. At what point, when, when I lost my job at TSR through no fault of my own, just by being a family member during the hostile takeover. And then I, I messed around a little bit and played around with things that aren't very healthy, but I survived. Now many, many girls and such later on then and experiences and I'll write a book someday. So, and back into being more, um, down to earth, more fun and bringing joy to people's lives.

Andrew: Well, yeah, that, that sounds great. What did you do to, you know, progress your own character? You know, now, as you've leveled up over the years you've become, you know, you go through some like dramatic tension towards the middle or whatever, and then you get to be who you really, you know, maybe we're always meant to be, later in life, which is, that's something we can all aspire to you.

That is so cool.

Ernie: One of my uh... Second Greyhawk characters was Erac's cousin and he was a magic user. He had gotten all the way up to 11th level. I just read via Edgar Rice Burroughs books again. In particular, the Mars books. And Dad said, "Well, you know, with all this reading and such like this, and you're, he says, you can see the, the red planet is shining in the sky at night there. And he said, it seems to be unusually bright." And I did the thing basically like John Carter had done as sitting there you're staring at it and falling asleep up on my tower top I had a hotel at the time, whatever. And then suddenly I woke up naked on Barsoom in the middle of this area, filled with cannibals.

And so the first thing I try to do is I try to throw like a sleep spell, you know, just picking up some dirt, whatever else. Cause it's sand would be another component... and magic doesn't work at all. So then as I, as I try to, right away, I fly through the air and all this stuff that like the John Carter character did.

And I ended up finding a big stick, jumping to the top of a tree and fighting these, um, these cannibals one to time at the tree top. So they can't get a bunch on me. Until I can get a sword, make it better and blah, blah, blah. And then from there worked my way up. That's how I became a fighter magic user.

Andrew: That's fantastic. That's such a cool combination of kind of mechanics and storytelling. You know, each informing one another.

Ernie: I couldn't be a fighter anymore because my strength wasn't high enough. Once I was no longer on Mars. See, that's how dad stopped all that--went back to magic use.

But, so I had an interesting character because I would lots of times prep things. Like I'd throw a strength spell on my character, a haste whip on some magic armor ahead in my portable hole, grab a magic sword and I'd go in hand to hand fighting in an encounter that I knew was something like this. And I might first someone, some monsters as well. So I have some monster somebody, and at my side, we go in there and do that.

Then afterwards, put the armor away. Greyhawk just inspired so much. And my own dungeon is, is is fantastic. But my dad, not only did he have the imagination that he's genetically passed on to me, but he also had this incredible work ethic, which, sadly, I'm lacking in. Um, but there's reason why he put out so many works.

And even his Gord the Rogue novels, he really, he had no practice as a novel writer, but that comes across as high adventure and excitement. So some people don't like it because no he's not Fritz Leiber, but the action comes through so much stronger than say, like a better, a written... Tolkien, and that could, that could put me to sleep with the slow...

Andrew: Absolutely. I think that might've evolved just from role-playing. I feel like it does make you a better storyteller as far as action and making it dynamic and something different happens in every encounter instead of just, "I use the same spell every time" it's, you know, "something's going to go wrong at some point." And that makes for a much more exciting story. And that's the fun of a role playing game, instead of say a video game or even a novel, which is obviously not interactive... Is that things aren't always going to go your way and the way you pictured it in your head, doesn't always come true. And that's a good thing because it makes for a more compelling story and makes the DM a better writer. And hopefully it allows everyone in the group to kind of appreciate what they've got there. Cause it is such a special and magical thing to, to share a table with someone in that kind of gameplay setting.

Ernie: I was just listening to a Jim Butcher interview from about two months ago. And, um, he's also a Dungeons & Dragons player, though I think he's probably third edition--he's quite got the old school down.

What he does a lot with his thing is that he's by all the flavor and energy of Dungeons & Dragons, as well as he ends his adventures in the middle of the big boss fight or whatever you're doing, and then lets of people think about everything and come back the next week to that.

Now I don't know if I could, I don't know if I could do that.

Andrew: Yeah. That takes a lot of self discipline, right. To not just complete it. Get your dessert, you know, right after the meal, but save it, oh man.

Ernie: Of course, it was hard enough growing up in the house with my dad and just bothering him like "dad, dad, dad, let's let's do another adventure." Cause I was like 13, 12, you know, growing up. So it was always around me and that's why I did get more adventures than anybody else. And that's, my dad had to keep on changing things by my playtests because not only I would have too much time, so therefore if I was getting all these levels and all of a sudden he would actually make it so it would take some game time. So that other people could then play as well. So every day it would be a day off in the game as well. But then however many days my actions took within put me on a calendar that much farther ahead. And then I couldn't play until other people's and start catching up. Or, you know, or real time had elapsed.

Andrew: Wow. That is so smart. Yeah. If only every game designer had a child who was really, really into their game, think of how many more play tests would get done and how much better each of those games would be because you don't have to travel to conventions all over the place, just to beg people to play your game. You've got someone begging you to let them play your game.

Ernie: Everything was pretty much being shared by letter writing campaigns, as well as occasional phone calls. But phone calls in those days were long distance and dad didn't have any money to speak up either. We were, even though we were even on food stamps for awhile.

So, so this was real. Then by the time my dad started really striking it. Rich. I split off from the house and went into a relationship. I still had the name, nice job, but again, it wasn't paying a whole lot yet, but at some point I had 20 full time and two part time employees covering the whole retail areas of TSR, which was the hobby shop, the mail order business, the role playing game association and genuine we're all part of the consumer services division, which I was executive vice president of.

Andrew: That's pretty cool. And I know you've also been the creative vice president, at least on the Dungeons & Dragons cartoon. Can you tell us a little bit about that? I'm fascinated with animation and kind of how you got involved with that?

Ernie: Dungeons & Dragons Entertainment Corporation? Well, dad had already been going out there and as I said, he got together with Dennis Marks and they created this Bible for the Dungeons & Dragons cartoon, and then they tried to start pitching it, or Dennis really did.

And then he'd call him my dad. Once he'd finally do the initial consultations with the different executive persons. And, um, luckily they found someone receptive at Marvel. Apparently though I never was told that, but I've seen some, some stuff where it might've gone to Hanna-Barbera first to look at it because I've seen some Hanna-Barbera stamps on some, you know, talk about the Dungeons & Dragons cartoon. And then Margaret Loesch I think actually went from Hanna-Barbera. To the Marvel people and it was Marvel productions and the Marvel productions people went in, went out there, they didn't know, have anything nice to say about Stan Lee. He was in the other room and they said he's nothing but a figurehead, but we need something like that's to draw in the consumer or whatever.

Stan was a nice guy. And he actually gave me add, had, um, you know, signed some stuff and blah, blah, blah. That was nice. And then, but my job was just from the fourth cartoon episode on, I had to try to keep it Dungeons & Dragons. My dad did decisions before that because they were going to have a dog for the kids.

Because Scooby-Doo was out. It was going to be a slightly talking dog. And my dad said, "Well, this is a fantasy product. Let's at least make it, you know, a unicorn from the world." So then I think was it Frank Welker, I think as the voice of Uni. And of course, it's a hated character by most of the adults now that say, "Why did they have their stupid Uni?" Well, it might've been even more stupid if we want to hit a dog.

Andrew: Yeah. That could have been really, really awkward. Cause there were so many other shows. I mean, especially from Hanna-Barbera that were just kind of knockoffs of Scooby-Doo and you can really tell there's not a ton of substance there. I'm a big fan of Scooby-Doo. I really do like that series. Um, but I'm glad that Dungeons & Dragons got to maintain its independence from, from that whole sub genre of animation.

Ernie: But then we had the, um, cloud bears or whatever at a later episode. And that was a direct rip off from the star Wars thing.

And I think it was Karl Geurs at the time that really had this idea and he was. I think from, from season two on, he was like the big boss. So it's like, "Okay, I've got this idea. Can we make this work?" Well, sure. I guess it doesn't do any harm. It's, you know, it's a new thing. It's not a D & D thing being perverted or whatever else.

So yeah, a lot of it was give and take. I'd come to these meetings. I'd get a script and then go over it. And then very rarely did we make changes. The really big change I made was the one with the nightwalker. And, um, when they get to this oasis of lost souls, I made it into hook horrors from the fiend folio.

My job also was to incorporate our new products of the main company into the cartoon. But my favorite episode was the City at the Edge of Midnight, I think. Though, there's so many other good ones that Dragon's Graveyard, I think by Paul Dini and. So the cartoons were fun to work with, and it wasn't my only job by any means.

I was working on trying to create a game to work in arcades because arcades were still big then. And with arcades, basically they had the wooden shell and then they'd put in a new program for whatever you wanted to play. Well, we were talking to Universal and Universal was thinking about adding to an arcade section where you would get like a credit card and then as you play it along, you'd keep experience points. And you'd, you're up just like when you're planning your games at home, you'd keep on increasing your levels and your skills and, and facing new foes. And that would work with a card where you could go and play somewhere in San Luis Obispo.

And then you can go to Phoenix, Arizona. And plug it in and you'd be able to pick up right where you were on a different machine. So, I mean, there, there was all sorts of things. I tried to work up a placement for Orange Julius set and that all that was all done. But then, um, somehow the CEO heard that we might be in the demonology.

Andrew: Oh yeah, that satanic panic, right?

Ernie: Had to crush that.

Andrew: Wow. It's fascinating that you're almost like sharing this. This treasure trove that you believe in so much of, of what a roleplaying game is and taking it into different industries and trying to okay. Kind of, uh, negotiate what is compromise between the original vision of, for Dungeons & Dragons and the thing that this company specializes in, but then you have to kind of figure out a way of adapting to their way of doing business.

Like I'm sure working in animation is different than working in retail or working in conventions. You had to be kind of a jack of all trades, right too. It's fit into all these different slots. Sounds crazy!

Ernie: Well, that's the difference between conceptualizing things, driving things, and actually doing them. You know, only early on in my experiences was I hands-on. Basically at a certain point, it was finding the best people to do the best work that would get rewards out of it.

Acknowledging good work, chastising bad behavior, you know, overseeing. Shepherding.

Andrew: That would be so hard, I think too, to balance between your passion and, you know, your connection to your family and your connection to the content of Dungeons & Dragons, but then also being able to be really tough, you have to be kind of a balance of, of sensitive and connected versus also kind of cold and, you know, businesslike.

I think that'd be so hard to, to bridge that gap and to be able to accomplish what you've accomplished. Like that's so cool.

Ernie: There's failures too, haha.

Andrew: Well, of course,

I'm sure, but I don't know if, uh, you know, many other people who have completed a project for Orange Julius, and then also been able to do a cartoon, you know, with so many amazing writers and voice actors involved. And then also do so much with writing and coming up with, you know, role playing settings. And it's really impressive to me how you've been able to keep that thing that you loved as a child through your entire career, even though you, you kind of had to accomplish different tasks along the way.

It wasn't like you were just constantly sharpening the same sword. You were just picking up a new weapon, every episode, you know, trying something different. It's it's fantastic.

I'm also curious about Gygax magazine. Um, can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Ernie: That was a fine piece of work by another friend, Jayson Elliot. He wanted to basically recreate the Dragon magazine. Only not as a house organ. Gygax magazine was an incredible, an incredibly fun opportunity to get together people and get all this fresh blood in for everything from an adventure from the a single page dungeon contest.

My brother and I both wrote several articles. I wrote a story telling about how my dad was a storyteller to us as children. And then in issue number three, uh, Ben and I--Benoist-- created the Marmoreal Tomb. And it was just a single level and it was just supposed to be the centerfold because other Dragon magazines had had games.

Games from Brian Blume, games from Tom Wham, particularly and things like that. Some Wormy stuff. I think there was even a backgammon board once in the center. That was Dave Trampier artwork.

Um, but now with Gygax Magazine... So that's how this whole Kickstarter began because, uh, Ben and I had already been working on the Hobby Shop Dungeon for over two years because of its massive scale. We put it to the side and the Marmoreal tomb is part of the Hobby Shop World, but it was wholly new generated material for the magazine on a one shot. And then after that it would be ours and that's, that's where we're at. The primary product would be like a four level dungeon setting, which actually allows from first to some probably superhero level, if by the time you get through everything, if you survive.

Andrew: All this stuff is fascinating really, like it's... It's so diverse, but the blood of Dungeons & Dragons still pumps through all of these different works, which is so cool. I'm curious, kind of what your thoughts are between different editions of Dungeons & Dragons. I've heard you use the words "old school" relatively often. What are your feelings on why old school RPGs might be better than some of the, you know, the new stuff.

Ernie: Well, I don't think anything was ever broken in the first place, but of course I was raised playing games. So I had the experience of tabletop, miniatures role playing and, and board games. So that's why there was even a basic set created back when it was only old school. And that was to allow people to be able to go into mostly Toys "R" Us and B. Dalton Books and these other places and without anything else, but having had read things fantasy and science fiction that they could pick this up.

And as young people figure out a way to play, and that's why there was modules. In the very first Dungeons & Dragons, there were no modules. The idea was start drawing your own, use your own mind. And this is a chance for you to open up the realms of your own imagination. And then at some point we started to see as well as a lot of people just didn't have the time that not everybody's imagination is equal--or as creative.

And old school Dungeons & Dragons is only as good as the Dungeon Master or the Game Master. So that's part of the reason why I believe new additions have come up. There was maybe going to be some more changes, my dad was doing it with like Unearthed Arcana and other things, which also was forced out too quickly Unearthed Arcana was a desperate move by my dad to try to get some cash back into TSR when, uh, his business partners had helped run it into them ground. So it should have been polished more, but it was filled with good ideas that, that needed a little bit more cleaning up. So second edition came along and a sad part of that is that my dad was collecting a healthy royalty fee from the company and he was not the majority stockholder, but he was close. And with this money he was getting paid. It was looking like if they ever wanted more money, he would be able to buy in and become the controlling factor and that wasn't sought after, by the Blume family. At that point they

started creating second edition with somewhat of the concept that as long as you change, more than 10% of the material, it is a new work and therefore not entitled to royalties. So, so as nice and as creative as Zeb Cook is he was hired to kind of peel away, you know, some of my dad's treasures and stop that move. So, you know, it's a mixed bag. So again, right there. I have less feel for it.

Third edition, I think is pretty much like going home and playing your computer games. And it gets away from the idea of imagination and it's more hard.

Fourth. I never tried and it doesn't have a good one stigma. I've played Castle & Crusades, which has done through Troll Lord. And that's pretty much taking some of the old first edition and throw it into some of the factors from third and all that and put it into bag.

And so it's fun, not quite as much fun, I think, as first. It's certainly easier to play, meaning that the DM has to create more difficulty or whatever. The way Dungeons & Dragons is set up is that it's a challenge and a reward. Now sometimes with challenge ratings and all this now there isn't a real challenge. It's this'll be your reward for doing this kind of work. It's almost like punching your clock.

Andrew: Right. It's predictable and safe and... yeah.

Ernie: Rob and I once went down to some place and we got caught in a slide and went down to like the sixth level. And we were only fourth level guys. And, on the sixth level, you should be like eighth level guys, anyway, at least a couple of you. So anyway, we're down here running away from black puddings, finding secret doors, opening them up where there's dragons then we find treasure rooms. We have this incredible time. We somehow survive. After lots and lots of stuff, we get enough treasure to go up to fifth level and almost sixth level from this, but it was like, "shoo!"

There was another level of dad had that had a giant bowling alley where. You know, you get down and there's this, there's this ditch beside here, and you get down in the ditch. You hear this rumbling noise and ditch is boulder runs you over. Um, there was, there was where tigers on the, on, on chains that were being by these giant guards that said they could find you if you're invisible, et cetera. There was, um, a wizard dress and evil wizard wrists that ran the place that I imagined jarred into once for awhile and had control over. There was all kinds of fun things.

I just can't say how much fun there was in this game, and I'm never going to run out of stories to share the idea is that it's not just like open up a book and closing it. It's "Okay. I went left. What happens when I go right? What happens if I go forward and then turn right. Uh, what happens to this part? Now we know we can kill these kinds of creatures, but why are these creatures here? Is there some way we can maybe talk to them and see if they have enemies too?"

All the dungeon master does is he creates a scenario with options. It's like going to a buffet. On the players then pick and choose what part of the buffet they're going to experience. So that means generally that unless you have lots and lots and lots of time and ability, you're

going to not go into as, as high a detail on the small items of everything, but you're going to have a wide spread of options out there.

And then you're going to use your own mind and fill it in with the players as the adventure progresses. My dad would have something in a room where he'd say, "There's going to be a trap on a treasure chest. There's going to be a fireball wine somewhere and something and things are going to be hidden." And that'd be like all of his notes. And then from there he'd somehow create this incredible thing in this room. So it was paragraphs instead of pages. So again, it was only as good as the dungeon master.

Andrew: Absolutely. And do you prefer to be a player or be a dungeon master yourself? Cause I know you're a big fan of the game.

Ernie: Well, I prefer to be a player in a game that's got a good dungeon master.

Andrew: Do you have a favorite dungeon master of all time?

Ernie: Well, yeah, as silly as it sounds, my dad. Um, Dave Arneson was fun, Rob Koontz was very good. Now, someone who's fantastic, but not Dungeons & Dragons, or at least so much because I don't think when he played a couple of games with him ever DMing, but his Metamorphosis Alpha, Jim Ward--fantastic! A good game of Dungeons & Dragons is difficult to survive, but Metamorphosis Alpha the odds are 60/40, you're going to die. Generally, at least.

Well, at the beginning with Jim would start us as barbarians. With a tortoise shell shield and a wooden spear, you know, and off we are running into robots and things. So Jim Ward is an excellent Dungeon Master or Game Master. Um, I had a lot of fun in the old, old days with some of the guys from Game Designers Workshop with a game called En Garde! that I got to play. They were just testing that and that was... shoot... '70s again. Brian Blume ran a real good game name of Boot Hill. Dave Arneson did a real good Napoleonic level diplomacy kind of game with some fighting. And then Jeff Perrin went on to do a bunch of that. Jeff Perrin was with Chain Mail as well as many other things. He was part of the Dungeon Hobby Shop. He's still around. He once in a while gets to go to a convention, but he's now down to only one leg. Diabetes is really wicked on gamers. Those of us who want to be sedate and sit around and not move enough. You know, there's, the body has its own paybacks for, for not for not functioning like you should.

Andrew: Right. It's scary.

Well, thank you so much Ernie for being on the show. It's been so cool. I love taking in your energy. You're so animated and so lively and so passionate. It's just great to see that your journey has left you in such a joyous place.

You know, I could, I could see how you'd be, be tired of talking about Dungeons & Dragons after you know, an entire lifetime, but obviously you've got a lot more adventure in you still, which is fantastic.

It's really cool to have you on The GiantLands Podcast! Like this is awesome to have you on here. If our audience wants to learn more about you, is there a good, a good website or a place they can find more about what you're working on?

Ernie: I still use old fashioned Facebook, haha!

Andrew: Ernie Gary Gygax, Jr. on Facebook. And you go to some local conventions.

Ernie: Oh yeah. Well Gen Con, Game Hole Con um, Concinnity Con these are all within 75 miles. I'm not someone who's going big on the, uh, online convention s .

I'll probably do a few, just talks like this with people that way, but I want to save the gaming for face to face, wherever possible.

So we have a lot of gaming here in Lake Geneva. There's the Geek Nation RPG Retreat,

It's basically gaming camp for. Six days and five nights and you get to play with Jim ward or any Gygax Jeff Leeson and others. Tomb of Horrors is just one of the first things that we open up with before we go into our own dungeons and things.

Andrew: That is so cool. And like, we've been saying, like, it's so much about the people you surround yourself with at the table. So it does seem like Lake Geneva is the place to be, right? There are so many people who are true masters of the craft there. Playing the game still, you know, today, like that is so fascinating. And I really got to get up there and try this out. It sounds fantastic.