Lake Geneva celebrates D&D roots

SUSAN R. POLLACK
Special to The Detroit News

LAKE GENEVA, Wis. — As I ducked into Wisconsin's Geneva Lake Museum on a rainy Sunday afternoon, a volunteer docent greeted me with the question: "Would you like to see our Dragon Room?"

Not knowing what to expect, I entered a long, dark space showcasing stained glass artwork, coats of arms emblazoned with dragons, knights and swords, a collection of early rulebooks and other memorabilia highlighting 50 years of Dungeons & Dragons, touted as the most significant tabletop fantasy role-playing game of all time.

The room's centerpiece, a large wooden gaming table with a fantasy-nautical theme, displayed polyhedral dice, the heart of D&D gameplay. Players roll the three-dimensional, multi-sided dice to control everything from determining success in identifying a poison, picking a lock or attacking monsters to calculating damage from weapons and spells.

Called "The Wizard of Lake Geneva," the exhibit celebrates the legacy of author, game designer and hometown boy Gary Gygax. In 1974, with co-creator Dave Arneson, he launched Dungeons & Dragons, the role-playing fantasy adventure game that morphed over a half-century from a nerdy niche hobby to an international phenomenon with millions of players and fans across the globe.

D&D is recognized as the beginning of modern role-playing games — and the entire role-playing game industry. It has had a huge influence on video games and has permeated popular culture, inspiring characters and plots in TV shows, movies and literature.

The game's current surge in popularity — it can be played remotely with video-sharing technology — even includes millions of fans watching live streams of other people playing it.

And it all began in Lake Geneva, a Wisconsin resort town with fewer than 9,000 residents. The "Wizard of Lake Geneva" exhibit details D&D's 1974 birth nearby, in the basement of the modest Gygax family home at 330 Center Street. It also explores the game'sroots in the Lake Geneva Public Library, where young Gary Gygax spent countless hours in the book stacks, poring over titles on history, warfare, mythology, religion, science fiction and fantasy.



SUSAN R. POLLACK, SPECIAL TO THE DETROIT NEWS

The wooden gaming table is the centerpiece of "The Wizard of Lake Geneva" exhibit.

Standing guard outside both the Lake Geneva library and museum are large metal dragon sculptures, in keeping with the game's theme. Inside the beautiful Frank Lloyd Wright-influenced library, another permanent exhibit, Gary Gygax's Appendix N Alcove, displays over 100 fantasy and science fiction works that inspired Dungeons & Dragons.

Visitors may lounge in a red throne chair for a photo op while sampling books by favorite Gygax authors, including H.P. Lovecraft, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert E. Howard, Fritz Leiber and Jack Vance.

In turn, Gygax, Lake Geneva's most famous son, has inspired gamers everywhere.

"People come here from all over the world as a sort of pilgrimage to Dungeons & Dragons and this little tiny town of Lake Geneva," says Paul Stormberg, a D&D historian who is spearheading local initiatives to recognize the game's co-creator. An ardent player and fan, Stormberg describes D&D as a collaborative "game for humanity" in which the players' shared experience transcends competition.

"Lake Geneva's history is filled with billionaires and titans of industry — Wrigley, Schwinn, Maytag," he says. "And here we have Gary Gygax, this out-of-work insurance salesman who cobbled shoes... and published this game that would change the world. People say 'Dungeons & Dragons saved my life.' You don't hear that about Monopoly or chess!"

This Friday through Sunday, Oct. 2-4, some 3,000 D&D fans are expected at Lake Geneva's fourth annual Dragon Days Fantasy Festival, according to organizers. It features cosplay, live entertainment, and gaming, including introductory sessions where anyone can learn to play Dungeons & Dragons.

Other highlights include a costume contest and trick-or-treating in an "Enchanted Bazaar," circus performers, a dungeon maze and demonstrations of Medieval music, craftsmanship, archery and swordsmanship. Fairy tale story times are on tap at the library, with screenings of a D&D movie and cartoons at the town theater. Check dragondays.org.

In recent years, Lake Geneva, 40 miles southwest of Milwaukee and 75 miles northwest of Chicago, has wholeheartedly embraced its Dungeons & Dragons connection and staged several tributes to the late Gygax, including designating his birthday, July 27, as the city's annual Gary Gygax Day.

A memorial park bench was installed on that day three years ago at the west end of Library Park, near the city's famous Shore Path that winds past lakeside mansions. "He used to sit in this area of the park and dream about being a famous fantasy author living in one of the mansions on the other side of the lake," Stormberg says.

As president of the Gygax Memorial Fund, Stormberg, along with Gygax's widow, Gail, is overseeing the installation in Library Park of a stone table topped with a bronze castle dungeon map. A statue of Gygax seated on a throne will be at one end, with the iconic 20-sided D&D dice as finials and a guardian dragon coiled around the chair base.

Envisioned as a place where D & D buffs can gather on stone benches to play a game infused with Gygax's spirit, it will include a plaque citing his accomplishments, including his role as founder of GenCon, North America's largest tabletop game convention, and TSR Hobbies, the first role-playing game company and the publisher in 1974 of his revolutionary creation, Dungeons & Dragons.

To date, the table memorial fund has raised nearly $220,00, or $70,000 more than the project's original goal. Groundbreaking is expected next spring, Stormberg says.

Another upcoming spring event, produced by Gygax's son, Luke Gygax, is GaryCon XIX, a convention of tabletop role-playing game enthusiasts, March 18-21, at Grand Geneva Resort & Spa in Lake Geneva. Check garycon.com.

A short drive from town, in Lake Geneva's Oak Hill Cemetery, D&D fans search for Gygax's humble grave marker. It's easily spotted in the Burdick family section thanks to a handful of colorful polyhedral dice scattered on the gravestone by D&D devotees.

All of these sites and more — including the Dungeon Hobby Shop Museum — are featured on a city walking tour outlined on the Adventurer's Map of Lake Geneva, meticulously researched by Stormberg.

Don't miss the memorial brick paver dedicated to Gygax and engraved with a sleeping dragon atop a 20-sided D&D die. It's located by the Riviera Plaza fountain, a replica of the Angel of the Waters Fountain located in New York's Central Park.

The historic Riviera Ballroom in its day welcomed a diverse array of artists including Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, Herman's Hermits, Donna Summer, Village People, Stevie Wonder and Cheap Trick. Now primarily a wedding venue, the building is also the marina departure point for Geneva Lake cruise tours.

Julian Stark of Portland, Oregon, is a longtime fan of Dungeons & Dragons and is passing his passion for the game on to his son, Dash, 12, and daughter Vivian, 14. He says he'd consider visiting Lake Geneva and exploring the Gygax sites during his family's annual summer vacation in Michigan, if the kids seem interested.

"D&D is more popular now than it's ever been," says Stark, who grew up playing the game in Metro Detroit in the 1980s. He started as an eight-year-old and is still playing it 46 years later in Portland and on vacations with his two teenage nephews, Louis and Asa Stark of Astoria, New York.

As a Dungeon Master, Stark is the game organizer, referee and storyteller who creates the details and challenges of each D&D adventure. He's charged with maintaining a realistic continuity of events and describing the game environment, especially what effects the players' actions have in the imaginary world of the game.

"It's nerdy, but it's also pretty fun if you get into it," he says. "For me it has been a great way to bond with the kids."

For more information, visit visitlakegeneva.com and gygaxmemorialfund.org.

USA TODAY Network via Reuters Connect

trade winds

NOW ENROLLING

Head Start, Pre-K, 3-5 Year Olds

An inclusive setting designed with research-based Frog Street curriculum, Creative curriculum, and Early Head Start to provide a premier early childhood experience. Ensures school readiness in a safe, social, and deeply caring environment for children of all abilities.



Call today

to schedule an introductory tour

219.945.0100, ext.332

HeadStart is free hours 8am-2pm. Hours needed before and after Headtstart hours/extended care will be added via private pay or voucher.

State Licensed & Inclusive Childcare

3198 E. 83rd Place • Merrillville, IN 46410

The Times Cares

Supporting Organizations that Support the Region.

SHARED ETHICS ADVISORY COMMISSION
SERVING NWI SINCE 2005

2026 Ethics Summit

TUESDAY, OCT. 27

8-8:30 a.m. • Registration & breakfast
8:30-11:30 a.m. • Program
AVALON MANOR •
3555 U.S. 30, Merrillville, IN



KEYNOTE SPEAKER
Hon. Elizabeth F. Tavitas
Chief Judge
Indiana Court of Appeals

EVENT OPEN TO THE PUBLIC!

REGISTER ONLINE AT SHAREDETHICS.COM

KINDLY RSVP BY FRIDAY, OCT. 16

FREE EVENT REGISTRATION REQUIRED!

supported by THE TIMES MEDIA COMPANY nwi.com

THE TIMES MEDIA COMPANY nwi.com

Subscribe today at nwi.com/subscribe