It started in 1967, with a gathering of about a dozen people at Gary Gygax’s house in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Some 40 years later, Gen Con is now as large as a small city.
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DIGITAL VERSION 1.0

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FOREWORD
BY PETER ADKISON

How ironic, to write a “forward” for a book about history. On the other hand, this is perhaps the best place to talk about the future of Gen Con, and of games in particular, given that the rest of this book does such an excellent job of creating a context for such a discussion.

CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

But, first things first, time to pay props. First props go, of course, to Gary Gygax for starting Gen Con in the first place and for managing it directly, or through TSR, for many years thereafter. Second props go to TSR and Wizards of the Coast for managing Gen Con for most of the other 40 years — particularly to those who were most directly involved, like Skip Williams and Harold Johnson — and to Hasbro, for having the foresight to sell Gen Con to me! And I offer an arms-wide, heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributed to this book — especially to Robin Laws, Michelle Nephew, and Randy Porter for writing, editing, and providing historical research — but above all to the numerous fans and industry professionals who contributed stories, interviews, and photographs. These contributions are what really bring this book to life, and I thank you for helping us document history.

A JOURNEY TO COMMUNITY, RECOGNITION, AND ACCEPTANCE

As Robin Laws points out early in his narrative, the history of Gen Con is in many ways a history of the hobby games industry. I would like to build on this thought and muse about the tremendous impact our games have had on mainstream international gaming culture, and our quest for community, recognition, and acceptance.

Early Gen Con gatherings were clearly about creating community. While communities around mainstream games obviously existed before Gen Con, a new breed of “gamer” was arriving on the scene through the growing interest in games based on historical conflict, “miniatures” games played with small “toy soldiers,” and board wargames produced by companies like Avalon Hill and SPI. These early gamers were often military professionals or devotees of military history. Since this interest was far removed from the mainstream of society, Gen Con and other, similar gatherings played an important role of bringing these gamers together, creating a sense of community.

Throughout the ’70s this community flourished. Not only did board wargaming increase in popularity — with companies like SPI producing new games on a monthly basis — the invention of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) led to an explosion of gamers by the late ’70s, and Gen Con grew right along with it. D&D also brought something else to the gaming community: recognition. Not all of this recognition was positive, however, as D&D carried with it a strong stigma of geekiness. Fortunately, gamers didn’t seem to mind much, and gaming catapulted in popularity throughout the ’80s and ’90s, fueled further by the publication of Magic: The Gathering and the creation of the trading card game category.

In recent years there has been a societal shift, in that hobby games have now reached a level of acceptance and impact in mainstream culture that can’t be ignored; this is something we should all be proud of. Perhaps one of the earliest signs of this change was when roleplaying books became a mainstay of book trade distribution through chains like Barnes & Noble. When Magic: The Gathering hit the scene one of the first big
retail chains to carry it was Electronics Boutique, and chains like Target, Wal*Mart, and Toys “R” Us weren’t far behind. Games like Pokémon and Yu-Gi-Oh! proved that trading card games were here to stay, and these chains now have permanent real estate dedicated to hobby games.

Hobby games are so accepted now that mainstream celebrities like Vin Diesel and Robin Williams have publicly talked about their love of these games in interviews and blogs. Stephen Colbert recently declared on Late Night with Conan O’Brien, “I’ve even been to Gen Con!”

With the growth of hobby games, our industry has also come to the attention of mainstream businesses trying to get into the action. Publicly traded companies like Hasbro and Topps have accomplished this by acquiring Wizards of the Coast and WizKids. Upper Deck entered the market by creating an entertainment division, licensing Yu-Gi-Oh!, and raising the bar on marketing, while companies like Bandai, Nintendo, and others have taken leadership positions in hobby games in international markets.

Eventually it’s fair to raise the question, Where do we draw the line between hobby games and the mainstream? Which leads me to my point. Hobby games are the mainstream now and it’s time for us to rejoice in this development and take credit, not for changing our standards to become mainstream, but for continuing to innovate around the notion of games with endless variety and depth of play, bringing the mainstream to us.

Of course, the most obvious example of how our games have affected the world is through electronic games, and let’s jump right to the elephant in the middle of the room — **massively multiplayer online games**. Is it just me, or is everyone in the world playing Dungeons & Dragons now? Millions of gamers around the world are creating characters, choosing a race, a character class, and skills, organizing into parties, going on quests, killing monsters, collecting treasure, going up levels, and increasing hit points. It might be called World of Warcraft, or Guild Wars, but it sounds to me pretty close to what Gygax and Arneson were up to back in the early ’70s, minus the electricity. And many of these gamers wouldn’t stand out as gamers in “real life.” They’re teachers, housewives and househusbands, accountants, welders, lawyers, farmers ... and, yes, soldiers and students are still in this group as well.

Once you consider the world of interactive entertainment and Internet games, the impact our hobby has had on popular culture is nothing short of astounding. And this influence is felt not just in the US, but internationally as well. Ask anyone on the development side of computer games and chances are they played D&D back in high school. They might not have stayed with it, but they never lost the dream that “this would be so cool on a computer!” And I know from personal experience that the idea of Internet games with “digital objects” that can be bought, sold, or traded owes some of its roots to games like Magic: The Gathering, which pioneered the idea of users mixing and matching game elements to customize their spellbook, army, or what have you.

Indeed, our community has a lot to be proud of, from an obscure beginning of history buffs trying to find other history buffs who liked games, through an awkward adolescence of roleplaying growth, to major worldwide influences on the way in which games are created, played, and used as a tool by businesses for economic prosperity.

And at the center there has always been Gen Con.

And so it will remain. And there we’ll gather, reinforcing our community, growing, adapting, evolving, and of course, gaming.

And from time to time we’ll take a break from immersing ourselves in an endless stream of fantastical landscapes, close friends, and exciting stories of history or future, and take time to pause and honor our past.
INTRODUCTION
BY ROBIN D. LAWS

It started in 1967, with a gathering of about a dozen people at Gary Gygax’s house in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Some 40 years later, Gen Con is now an annual gathering as large as a small city, pumping an eight-figure revenue stream into its host city’s economy.

To say that the history of Gen Con is the history of the adventure games hobby is an exaggeration, but not by much. It is where the creators of Dungeons & Dragons met for the first time. And in a few short years, the show that brought them together would be transformed by their new game and the roleplaying movement it spawned. In a pattern that continues to this day, the show would grow the hobby, and the hobby would grow the show.

Gen Con went from an event run by Gary under the auspices of two gamer organizations in which he was heavily involved — the International Federation of Wargaming and then, briefly, the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association — to one owned and operated by the fledgling company in which he was a partner, TSR.

As D&D spread through college campuses, propagated by hobby store purchases — and abetted by the occasional covert instance of photocopier usage — Gen Con saw ever-increasing attendance numbers. These sent the show, not for the last time, in search of larger facilities. After a brief but memorable stopover at the Lake Geneva Playboy Club, it landed at the University of Wisconsin at Parkside, then a bucolic commuter campus.

Ironically catalyzed by the misleadingly publicized disappearance of a troubled young former Gen Con attendee, Dungeons & Dragons then underwent its most dramatic popularity surge to date. Show organizers scrambled to accommodate an influx of newfound gamers with demos and family-friendly programming — not to mention the legendary one-time performance of the TSR house band, Duke and the Dragons.

The show remained at Parkside for six years before outgrowing its facilities yet again. In 1985, a time of financial crisis and management upheaval for TSR, Gen Con moved to Milwaukee’s MECCA convention center, where it would remain for 18 years. The Milwaukee years also saw the “combination events” of 1988 and 1992, for which Gen Con joined forces with its rival show, Origins.

In Milwaukee, Gen Con provided a rallying point for the wildly popular D&D fiction lines, and meeting place for their signature authors. And it also offered a place for up-and-coming companies to transform themselves into forces in the hobby. FASA upped the ante in the exhibit hall, with immersive displays for gamers to get their paws into. White Wolf, selling a game dreamed up on the way to Gen Con, brought a new breed of goth-ed-out gamer to the streets of Milwaukee, helping to breathe new life into the once-suppressed LARP category.

An even more dramatic upheaval followed, starting in 1993 when the transformative success of Magic: The Gathering took a company called Wizards of the Coast from upstart to behemoth. Four years later, the Seattleites would stun the industry, acquiring a crisis-stricken TSR — and scrambling to make sure Gen Con went on as scheduled.

It was during Peter Adkison’s tenure as Wizards CEO that he approved the event’s most recent move to a bigger venue — this time to Indianapolis. In 2001, another acquisition — of Wizards of the Coast, by the toy giant Hasbro — ushered...