



Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks: An Epic Quest for Reality Among Role Players, Online Gamers, and Other Dwellers of Imaginary Realms, Ethan Gilsdorf, The Lyons Press, Guilford, CT, hardcover, 336 pp., \$24.95, ISBN: 978-159921-4801

Ethan Gilsdorf had a respectable adult life. As a successful forty-something year-old, he had a loving girlfriend, a prestigious position as a college instructor and a growing reputation as a gifted poet and author. However, no matter how successful Gilsdorf became, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing. He wouldn't be the first middle-aged man to feel that way, but where others might have sought to remedy their midlife crisis through the purchase of an expensive sports car or by throwing themselves into golf or sailing, Gilsdorf chose a different path: he chose fantasy. It all started the day he found an old box of his *Dungeons & Dragons* books and dice. An avid player throughout his youth, Gilsdorf had left the hobby behind as part of his shamefully geeky past. Having taken great pains to recast himself as a hip young adult, Gilsdorf had buried any and all interest in fantasy. He had not always been successful in doing so, though. For years he had quietly fed a growing obsession with Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, hiding the extent of his fandom from colleagues and friends whom he suspected would never understand. Like a lot of people, Gilsdorf had bought into the conventional thinking that dungeons, dragons, hobbits and elves were the province of children and childish adults, and that growing up meant putting such things away forever. Finding his old *D&D* books got him thinking again about his past, and reconsidering his own relationship to fantasy. As a teenager, taking to *Dungeons & Dragons* had been as much of a survival strategy as an enjoyable pastime. When he was 12, Gilsdorf's mother suffered a brain aneurysm that left her partially crippled and mentally shattered. Her erratic behavior and unpredictable mood made her a stranger to her children. Gilsdorf grew to love fantasy gaming because it gave him an opportunity to escape from a world where he was powerless and frightened. Now an adult, Gilsdorf had questions about what role fantasy could and should play in his life, and like his old *D&D* characters, he set out on a quest to find the answers. His journey took him around the world, from the basement of his local hobby shop to the mountains of New Zealand. Gilsdorf lived as a monk at the Society for Creative Anachronism's huge yearly gathering, Pennsic War. He spent a weekend in the woods playing a Live Action Role-Playing game. He played tabletop role-playing games and video games and made a journey to

Great Britain to speak with Tolkien scholars. Where there is a story to be found, Gilsdorf found it, talking to fantasy enthusiasts from all walks of life. Not all of the stories covered in *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks* are happy ones: there are those who succumb to the dark side of escapism, neglecting their loved ones and themselves, their lives swallowed whole by pastimes like *World of Warcraft* or Live Action Roleplaying Games. The majority, though, find a balance between their hobbies and their responsibilities. Many of them even find love and a sense of community in fandom, something formerly missing in their everyday lives. All of them find their pursuits rewarding, and through their stories show Gilsdorf—and the reader, too—that there's no reason to be ashamed, and that there's no reason why a rich fantasy life can't be compatible with a successful adult life. Even if these are lessons the reader already knows, anyone with even a passing interest in fantasy games should pick this up. *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks* provides a unique and affectionate overview of fantasy gaming from the trenches.