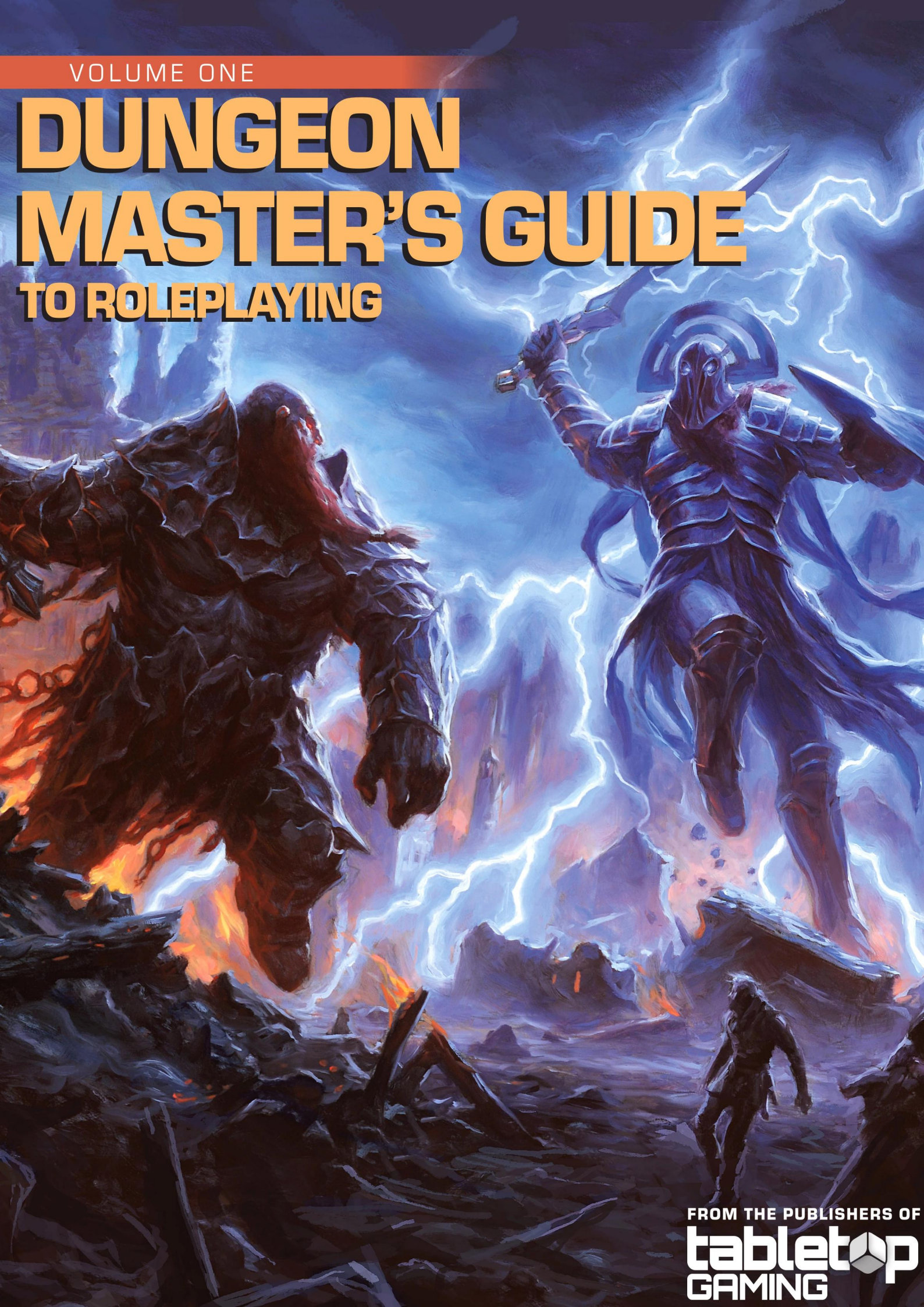
VOLUME ONE

DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE

TO ROLEPLAYING



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Welcome



Welcome to our first collection of roleplaying game writing from the last five years of Tabletop Gaming Magazine. Within you'll find pieces that delve deep into the dungeons where many of our favourite RPGs were forged, as well as reviews, interviews and most importantly, our long-running series of advice columns for DMs. Whether you need guidance on when to break the rules, tips on creating strong backstories, or just the best way to introduce new players to a game that's already running – we've got you covered.

In Volume One we explore *Call of Cthulhu,* right from the start, level up in *Pathfinder*, *Tales from The Loop,* and meet some interesting people who have started streaming and recording their play sessions – who knows whether it'll work out for Critical Role... We also take a look at indie RPGs like *Spire* and *Harlem Unbound* – so you can imagine these worlds beyond the blockbusters we all know and love.

Plus, we have painting guides to get you started on making your *Dungeons & Dragons* miniatures look as good on the table as they do in the theatre of your mind. And if you're looking for something to support your GM, then our games for map making, world building and artefact creation are the gift that keeps on giving.

So then, onwards dear adventurers, there are many worlds contained within, and we're hoping you'll enjoy thriving or failing in all of them.

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Christopher John Eggett Editor

QUICKSTART

> "The live audience gives things that electric current of immediacy."

***Liam O'Brien, Critical Role*, p28**

> "Glorantha is a world in which the gods are not only real but palpable and knowable"

***Steve Perrin, Runequest* p68**

> "There's something cathartic about writing and playing a game about revolution or rebelling"

***Grant Howitt, Spire*, p108**










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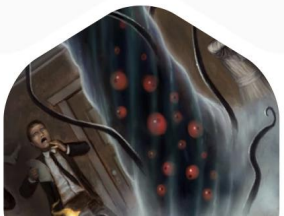




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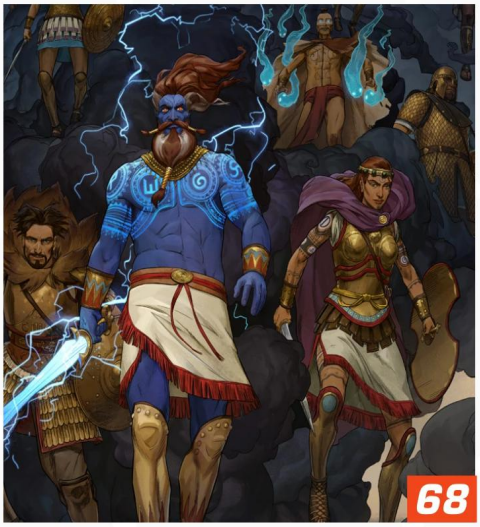
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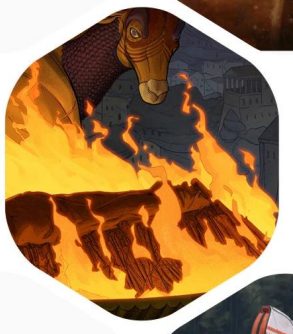


















THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO...

BUILDING AN RPG CAMPAIGN

Our new regular column will focus specifically on providing tips, guidance and advice to RPG Dungeon Masters as they create their own worlds in which to run campaigns. Some of the advice will be specific to the fifth edition of Dungeons & Dragons, but the majority of the concepts are applicable to any setting, game or ruleset that you prefer. In the first entry in the series, we take a look at high-level world-building

Words by **David Jagneaux**

Welcome to the first iteration of The Dungeon Master's Guide to Building an RPG Campaign!

Roleplaying games come in all shapes, sizes and subgenres, as do the DMs that run them. But a common thread that runs through all of those games and all of those players is the need for a believable and articulated world.

Building a world as the DM is about much more than coming up with a plot for the players to follow. Whereas something like a book or film is linear and has defined plot points, the moment you give players agency in a world you invite variability.

"I don't want to follow this lead right now, can we go explore in the forest to the south instead first?" someone might ask. "Surely I can buy a horse somewhere in this town. You said it was a major trading hub in the region, right?"

That could be a bit of a curveball.

As a DM, if you're working on a custom campaign, there are a lot of questions you need to answer, all of which should not only help you prepare for these kinds of surprise scenarios, but should help the world as a whole feel more realistic and believable.

The first edition of this column will focus specifically on the high-level aspects of world-building, which includes, but is not limited to, establishing the setting for your campaign, deciding on the themes and planning out the large-scale events that take place around and because of the characters.

GETTING STARTED WITH WORLD-BUILDING

All good campaigns will take a players-first approach in their storytelling, allowing the characters to be the catalysts for events, rather than simple passive bystanders to the occurrences of the world. Before you can start thinking about how players interact with your setting, you've got to build the setting itself first.

Before you actually do any of that, we'd highly recommend talking to your players. Basic questions like whether they prefer traditional fantasy, a bit of sci-fi mixed in or something with horror elements will go a long way towards informing the type of world you build. Beyond that, asking whether or not you need to actually create an entire new world or if you just want to use an existing setting, such as the Forgotten Realms from *Dungeons & Dragons*, and just creating a new nation or region within that established lore. Often times, it works best when you combine two otherwise disparate settings or genres together.

Regardless of which approach you take, there are two fundamental approaches to world-building that we'll refer to as top-down or bottom-up.

A top-down method means you look at the big picture first; how was the world created? What are the major events over the course of the years? What are the major features of the land? What is the system of government? What are the major political or military conflicts? These are all very big-picture questions that will trickle down to informing how the rest of the world is structured.

A bottom-up attitude is the flip side of this arrangement. Start by looking at where the players begin their journey in a specific region, town or even building. What are their goals? Who is around them? What are the breadcrumbs you've laid to motivate their adventures?

Alternatively, you could take a more dynamic and hybridised approach. Try deciding on the core questions at a very high level and get an idea of what the world is like, which could even include drawing maps, but then zoom into the players and build out their immediate area before worrying about the world at large. This also has the benefit of letting you make more decisions on the fly as the campaign starts.

DESIGNING A PLAYERS-FIRST ENVIRONMENT

When you're crafting an original universe like this it can be easy to get caught up in the excitement of theorising an entire world just from your own imagination. You'll want to craft the details of every thing and person in it, which can sometimes lead you to lose sight of the players themselves.



"Keeping the players at the centre of the experience is important for them to have fun and want to continue."

Images: Wizards of the Coast.

As proud as you are of the setting you've built, it's vital to remember that keeping the players at the centre of the experience is important for them to have fun and want to continue playing. Otherwise it's going to feel like they just happened to stumble into something that has nothing to do with them and, despite how much more realistic that would be, it's a bad way to tell a story in an RPG.

Try to put yourselves in your players' boots. If you were playing a custom campaign that someone built, how much extra flavour and colour would you want to hear about unwillingly? It's one thing if players seek a library and want to learn about the world, or talk to the townsfolk about things. But it's something else entirely if you're too heavy-handed with your lore and details. Always make the players the real stars of the story.

THE ESSENTIALS FOR A BELIEVABLE WORLD

That covers the basics of what you need to keep in mind when constructing a world, but there are a few core ideals you should remain aware of while you're building out your setting. For example, you want it to be as believable as possible.

That means thinking about the economy and what the most heavily traded goods are, how crime and punishment are handled, as well as the actual climate and topography. Is it always raining, snowing or windy? Does the sun never rise, or do the clouds never part? What do people eat? Do people keep pets and, if so, what creatures? What are the roles of magic, science and technology?

Figuring out the answers to all of these questions is an important starting point for the creation of any new world for a campaign, or even iterating on an existing setting. ▪



THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO...

BUILDING AN RPG CAMPAIGN

PART TWO

Our ongoing column focuses on providing tips, guidance and advice to Dungeon Masters as they establish their own worlds to run campaigns in. Some of the advice will be specific to the latest fifth edition of Dungeons & Dragons, but the majority of the concepts are applicable to any setting, game or ruleset that you prefer. The second entry in the series looks at the first steps of creating a world

Words by **David Jagneaux**

Welcome to the second entry of The Dungeon Master's Guide to Building an RPG Campaign!

In the previous first entry of this column, we spent all of our time discussing the high-level notions of what it means to build a custom adventure, topics that you should keep front of mind and what you can do to help the adventure stay focused on the players. Now, it's time to extend some of those ideas a bit further and look at how they can be applied to an actual role-playing setting.

The majority of roleplaying game adventurers, especially if they take place in a fantasy setting, are derivative at this point in time. Rather than trying to create a completely original and groundbreaking tale that will keep players guessing at each and every turn, it's more important to establish a fun and dynamic playground for them to go out and create their own stories in. The most memorable moments from any campaign – officially written, custom or otherwise – are always those that occur organically through player interaction. It's important to always remember that.

In the last entry we talked about the differences between a bottom-up approach and a top-down approach to building a campaign. For the sake of this entry we'll utilise a hybrid approach that employs a bit of both where most appropriate.

FRAMING THE SCOPE OF YOUR WORLD

The process of creating an RPG campaign is a lot like the process associated with creating a novel. You need to not only think about the adventure the players will go on and the story that you want to tell on that adventure, but also how it fits into the overarching narrative of the world as a whole. Tolkien's Middle-earth and George R. R. Martin's Westeros are memorable not just because of the individual moments and action scenes, but because of how well everything is tied together. That's why it's so crucial to look at things closely on a small scale to make sure the emotion is palpable, but also to stand back and address the overarching themes at play.

Once you've talked to your players and agreed on things like genre (Fantasy? Sci-fi? A bit of both? Something else?) then it's time to really get started. Depending on how your creative juices choose to flow, there are a few ways you can begin framing things.

Start by literally drawing a map of the world in which your game takes place. Is it one large continent, or several? Is the ocean accessible? How much distance is there between settlements? What type of environmental features does the region have? That will help you and your players visualise things. At the beginning of a session, place the map in the middle of the table and use it as a prop to lay the groundwork for the world.

When you're creating the setting, if you have a map – or at least the outline of one – established it's easy to name areas, which will help bring things to life. Create a short backstory explaining how each area was founded and how it got its name. Those small narrative threads will all feed into the overarching identity of the world as a whole.

At this point it's typically a good time to start whittling down the details. You've got settlements and regions in the world so it could be a good time to establish a government of some kind. Is this a monarchy? A democracy? An oligarchy? Who is in control right now and what are their laws? Outlawing magic, instituting racially-fuelled subtext or imbuing specific groups of people with divine power are all tried and true methods of placing some flavour within otherwise run-of-the-mill worlds.



Image: Wizards of the Coast.

TYPES OF STORIES

Every group of players is different. Some players want you to lay out the framework for a quest, give them objectives and let them go delve into a dungeon to complete the quest. Then there are the players that want to go off the beaten path and find other ways to explore and have an adventure. If you've given thought to the game world, established a setting, and theorised how all of the regions interconnect, then you'll be best prepared for all of it no matter what.

There are a few tricks that you can use as a DM to make sure you are even more ready for what an unpredictable batch of players might throw at you. When designing a dungeon or map of some kind, remember to keep things like physical details (stone, wood, underground and so on) fluid and open to adjustment.

For example, maybe you intended on players venturing into the forest to find the bandit hideout first, but they opted to hunt some trolls in the mountains. You could still use the same interior map layout – just adjust the details.

HOW DOES THE JOURNEY BEGIN?

If you're creating your own campaign then the catalyst for how players come into contact with one another can be a bit tricky. Often it's easiest to just skip ahead and assume all of the players are a group of adventurers, but it can add a lot of layers to the storytelling if each person has specific motivations driving them in the story that may not coincide with the hopes of others.

The most important thing you can remember as a DM is that you need to always be ready to improvise and toss out the plans you had made at a moment's notice if needed. That can often mean detailed preparation at the start of a campaign to try and account for diversions and forks in the road, but it will lead to a much more rewarding and exciting adventure all around. ■



Drawing locations in your world will help you to visualise and name them, bringing them to life.



THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO...

BUILDING AN RPG CAMPAIGN

PART THREE

Our ongoing column focuses specifically on providing tips, guidance and advice to dungeon masters as they create their own worlds to run campaigns in. Some of the advice will be specific to the latest fifth edition of Dungeons & Dragons, but the majority of the concepts are applicable to any setting, game or ruleset that you prefer. This is the third entry in the series and focuses on how to expand upon a world you've just started building using smart storytelling

Words by **David Jagneaux**

Welcome to the third entry of The Dungeon Master's Guide to Building an RPG Campaign!

In the previous second entry of this column, we spent our time helping you get the ball rolling on your great new RPG idea. Whether that was by simply coming up with a world for the first time, figuring out where to start with your ideas or deciding on a scope for the adventure, you should be able to crack open this issue of *Tabletop Gaming* with confidence about where things are headed in your story. With those first two entries out of the way, it's time to finally dive into some of the details about storytelling in tabletop roleplaying games.

Do you ever find yourself stumbling over ideas because you can't quite figure out how to put them into words, or you're not sure how to start an adventure or keep it moving forward because you're overwhelmed with the burdens of your universe? Then you're in the right place. Once you begin laying things out with names, motives and locations it starts to feel real and can get intimidating.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

For starters, take a look down at the map you drew last time (you did actually draw one, right?) and pick your favourite spot. It could be anywhere. Maybe it's the tip of a mountain range, the centre of a lake or even just the biggest, best capital city. Now, decide why that place is special. Maybe it was the location of a legendary battle, where the queen met the king and fell in love or where a civilisation's hero was betrayed and slain in cold blood. Assign some significance to that favourite area and build it up in your mind.

If you want to get extra special, come up with a magical item of some kind that's tied to that place. Well-known examples include The Lady of the Lake creating Excalibur, Link retrieving the Master Sword from the Lost Woods or even Frodo destroying the One Ring in the fires of Mount Doom. These are iconic things, places and actions tied to some of our favourite works of fantasy fiction. Your world needs its One Ring or Excalibur.

It's a classic trick with fantasy fiction and it's so easy to sell to players. Create a mythos around this place and this item, or person, and make your story focused on it. Don't start the journey there, since that will rid you of your ability to build it up. Instead, choose a nearby location where the locals are familiar and place breadcrumbs along the way to not only lead your players down that path, but to build their excitement as the plot unfolds.

GIVING YOUR WORLD A VOICE

A huge part of being a DM is of course about crafting a story, building a believable world and keeping players engaged, but there are some nitty-gritty details that a lot of DMs forget. The age-old adage of 'show don't tell' might seem like an oxymoron in the case of a roleplaying game that consists of almost entirely verbal dialogue, but it makes sense when you think about it.

If your players have entered a new town, you could just say, "Your party enters the town from the main entrance and you find a shop, an inn, a tavern and a handful of residential buildings. Now what?" You can totally do that, but it's boring. Try to think about how the scene would play out in a movie, a game or even in real life.

Instead, try something like, "Your party enters a small town that's tucked away in the hills at the base of the region's capital and immediately notice it looks like a farming village. Animals roam freely and you count at least a dozen armed guards, probably of the lord's affiliation, roaming the streets. You can wander around on your own, ask a guard for directions or do something else entirely." By adding that extra flavour you're framing the moment for players, suggesting courses of action, but giving them enough freedom to go in whatever direction they please. It's a rough example, but you get the idea.

DOING YOUR PART

Combat is usually the most exciting part of any RPG session, but it's not the only part. As a DM you aren't just there to try and kill players but are instead the orchestrator of a grand spectacle of events. Take pride in establishing personalities for various NPCs around towns and in dungeons. Give villains an actual personality, or make allies more nuanced and layered than they at first seem.

As a general rule of thumb, it's often best not to fully script out or consider every little detail when it comes to an RPG campaign's narrative. Having a framework in place is important, but most players are going to go off book unintentionally. Plan out the motives of your NPCs and consider how they fit into the overarching web of intrigue your players are building, but don't be surprised or frustrated if you lose your flow and have to combine some characters together to finish a quest, erase someone the players never met or add in new people to spice things up. Being flexible and adaptable is just as important as preparing a campaign beforehand.

Now that you've picked a spot to focus your story around and have a good idea of where your players might start, as well as how they will discover new areas, that's when things can start to move along. Decide motivations for key villains and NPCs along the way to ensure that your players aren't just being ushered from one dungeon to the next. A living, breathing, vibrant world is much more worth saving than an empty and uninspired one. ▪



Images: Wizards of the Coast.



■ *Above: Give villains personality rather than making them simple sword fodder.*

■ *Opposite: Building a story around a specific place or item is a classic fantasy setup.*

■ *Left: Be ready to improvise and don't overplan everything, as players can often go their own way.*



THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO...

BUILDING AN RPG CAMPAIGN

PART FOUR

Our ongoing column focuses specifically on providing tips, guidance and advice to dungeon masters as they create their own worlds to run campaigns in. Some of the advice will be specific to the latest fifth edition of Dungeons & Dragons, but the majority of the concepts are applicable to any setting, game or ruleset that you prefer. This is the fourth entry in the series and focuses on both creating dungeons from scratch and balancing them for your party's size and skill level

Words by **David Jagneaux**

Welcome to the fourth entry of The Dungeon Master's Guide to Building an RPG Campaign!

In the previous third instalment of this column it was all about taking your story to the next level. We took the ideas from the back of your mind into a world ready to be explored by adventurers with real and specific tips about telling a good story for players. Together, the first three entries of this column laid a lot of groundwork. Now, as the great DM that you are, we need to give your players something to do inside that world you've made. Somewhere to go, somewhere to explore... It's time to finally talk about the first 'D' of *D&D*: dungeons!

How many times have you found yourself with the plot getting derailed and being unsure of where to take the players next? How often do you realise a quick dungeon would be a great way to break up the monotony, but didn't come prepared? Or maybe you just want to do a quick one-off story if you don't have time for a full session and are eager to make your own dungeon from scratch. Then keep reading!

For the sake of this column we're going to assume that you build dungeons by drawing them out using a square-inch grid. We're going to have a traditional high-fantasy evil lair that's littered with enemies, random bits of treasure and some booby traps in mind.

BLANK SLATE

There are lots of reasons why you might need to make a dungeon from scratch. If this is your own 100% original campaign then you might be building every dungeon from scratch and if it's just a one-off adventure then you have a lot of flexibility. I've even found myself literally making a dungeon up as I go while the party is exploring it, which can be a really exciting exercise.

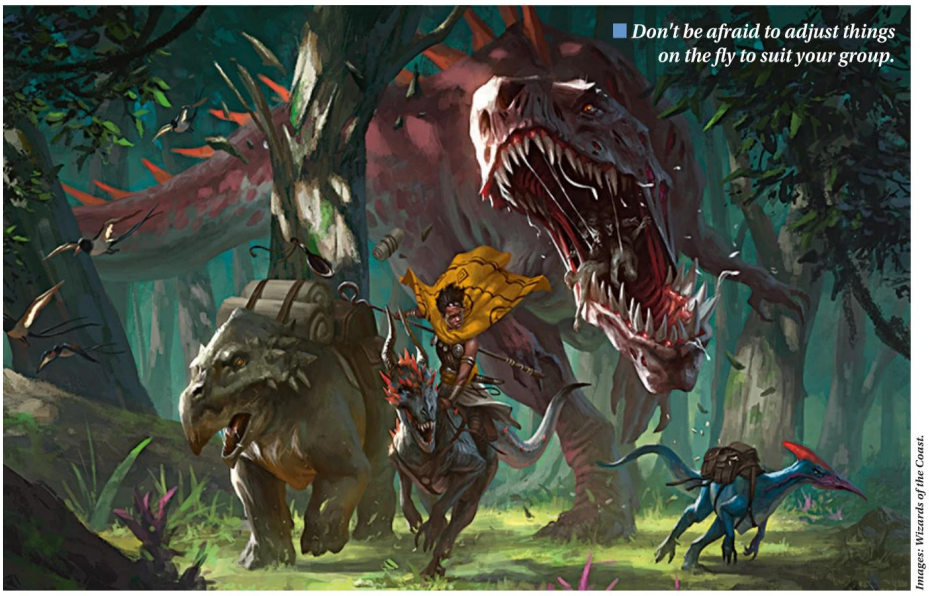
Just like anything when it comes to being a dungeon master, the importance of pre-planning cannot be overstated. Before you ever start actually building a dungeon you've got to establish things like the theme, size and purpose of it all. Is this an evil lair where the big baddie hides out between their excursions of rampaging the countryside, or is this merely a cave created thousands of years ago that goblins now call home for lack of a better alternative? These are important questions.

Think about how your players are going to approach this dungeon, as well. Do they know exactly where it is, or do they stumble across it? Are you prepared for them to try to enter it from any conceivable direction that isn't the front door? One of the unspoken rules of *D&D* for most players is to always think outside the box – sometimes that results in climbing on top of buildings and trying to sneak through windows.

PUTTING PEN TO PAPER

Now that you have a pretty clear idea of the type of dungeon you want to make we can actually make it. There are two ways we recommend building a dungeon from scratch on your own without any other resources. The first way is to start by actually drawing out the entire layout and getting it exactly how you want it, adding in the details after. The other way is by building it as you go and as your players explore one room at a time. The latter option can get really complicated, so we'll focus on the former first.

Try to imagine your dungeon as an actual layout of the thing it's supposed to be. Don't give it more rooms than seems plausible and make the rooms large enough and full of standard items and objects. Would a dungeon just have tons of rooms full of enemies and treasure and that's it? Probably not. Think about adding in a barracks for henchmen to sleep in, a cafeteria-type room with a big table and food, training rooms if the group is known for their fighting, and so on. How would the leader or occupant of the area design it to fit their needs?



■ *Don't be afraid to adjust things on the fly to suit your group.*

Images: Wizards of the Coast.



■ *Try to create believable areas that people could actually live in.*

But if you are just building it on the fly as you go, like a random cave that doesn't serve a real purpose, feel free to add some twists and turns. Write out a d20 table to roll on that's full of possibilities for rooms. For example, if players open a door and walk in, roll a d20 on your table and pick something that happens. Maybe they hear a sound or see a glimmer of light, or they could even hear a voice say a riddle quickly or trigger a trap. Keep them guessing by adding in small flourishes like that.

BALANCING IT ALL OUT

The best-laid plans often go awry so, no matter how perfectly you think you've built and balanced your dungeon, there's a good chance that things are going to need to change on the fly. If combat encounters are too hard then let players kill enemies earlier than they should. If they're making quick work of groups throw in an extra minion or two. Typically, adding more varied enemies and environmental advantages makes the fight better than if you were to just boost monster hit points.

Coming into a *D&D* session with a plan is smart and advisable, but the most important thing is knowing when it's time to change plans and pivot. Making a good dungeon from scratch or adjusting an existing one is all about adapting to the unknown. ■



THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO...

BUILDING AN RPG CAMPAIGN

PART FIVE

Our ongoing column focuses specifically on providing tips, guidance and advice to dungeon masters as they create their own worlds to run campaigns in. Some of the advice will be specific to the latest fifth edition of Dungeons & Dragons, but the majority of the concepts are applicable to any setting, game or ruleset that you prefer. This is the fifth entry in the series and focuses on giving you specific puzzles, riddles and other creative setups to pick and choose from for any existing or future campaign

Words by **David Jagneaux**



Image: Wizards of the Coast.

Welcome to the fifth entry of The Dungeon Master's Guide to Building an RPG Campaign!

In the previous fourth entry of this column it was all about building on your established ideas and crafting an adventure for your players. As a dungeon master it can often be frustrating how easy it is to get derailed and have your players wander off the beaten path. We talked about ways to make new dungeons on the fly that can funnel players back towards the plot or even just how to map out and design a dungeon as players are discovering it, room by room, instead of drawing it all out beforehand. But now we're going to set our sights on an even more specific area of being a dungeon master: actual specific ideas for puzzles, riddles and other obstacles.

When you're designing an adventure or dungeon for your players it's easy to fall into the habit of littering each and every room with enemies to fight in different groups. Making a combat encounter interesting – not just a way to level up and find loot – is difficult. That's why the best dungeons aren't just all about combat; the best kind of DM offers much more for players to test their mettle on than just how well they can roll a die against a goblin's AC.

In this column entry we're going to give you three specific ideas that you can leverage, edit and customise to fit any dungeon or adventure that you might be running. Have an empty room to fill? Some time to kill? Throw one of these situations at the players and see how they respond. Write out some summaries and have it handy in your DM folder so you can whip one of these out at a moment's notice.

THE MYSTERIOUS MIRROR

Of the three sample ideas that we're covering in this column entry this may be the most versatile for any dungeon master to use. The premise is simple: the players walk into a room and all they find is a large, ornate mirror. When a player stands in front of it they see themselves, but something seems off. From here you can get creative with it. Perhaps the reflection is slightly altered, like showing the player themselves holding an object that they're seeking, or it shows something in the room that only exists in the mirror but not in the real world. With puzzles like this it's best to consider a wide variety of solutions and be sure to reward creative problem solving when implemented.

For example, if a player shatters the mirror trying to receive the treasure this probably doesn't qualify as creative problem solving, but if a nimble halfling did a handstand to see if a treasure chest might pour out its contents into the real world you could consider that counting as a solution.

RIDDLE ME THIS

The next idea is really a series of ideas that can be used to spice up anything: riddles. A well-placed riddle with the right surrounding context and enough subtle hints can add a high degree of interaction and interest to any adventure. For example, you could add a riddle to the mirror above to make it even more interesting.

Let's cover three specific riddles, what their answers are, and how you can establish them in your world so that they don't feel out of place.

Riddle #1: You must keep it after giving it.
Answer: An oath. (Other answers: your word, a promise, etc.)
Riddle #2: If you feed it, it lives. If you give it something to drink, it dies.
Answer: Fire.

Riddle #3: I am always in front of you but cannot be seen.
Answer: The future. (Other answers: your decisions, your fate, your destiny, etc.)

Each of these riddles is vague enough to apply to a wide variety of situations, but also thematically poignant enough to not feel random. Describe them well and with the right intentions and your players will figure them out after giving it some thought. You could also institute a penalty for each wrong guess, such as a monster spawning or some type of trap springing.

WORDS OF WISDOM

Finally, my favourite riddle/puzzle to introduce into an adventure is a wall that I like to refer to as "The Words of Wisdom". This one is a bit of a hybrid of a puzzle and a riddle into a single mega obstacle that I've never seen approached the same way twice.

It's a straightforward setup: there is a decorative wall with words written across the top. The words may appear all the time, only when triggered, or perhaps in a rare language – that's entirely up to you. But, regardless, the wall reads:

"The key exists inside your head,
Use the key to paint me red,
But be aware of what you spurn,
For what was taken shall be returned."

This should be enough to get your players thinking about what to do. Basically, you want them to put some blood on the wall. The idea is that whatever blood touches the wall will create a more powerful replica version of that person or creature. For example, if a player cuts their hand and puts their blood on the wall, a more powerful clone of them will spawn.

Half the fun with this puzzle, just like any good puzzle, is the debate it creates amongst your players if they have a good rapport. You should use colourful language to evoke a certain sense of dread and trepidation with how they approach the situation because you want to force deliberation and decision-making between the members of the group. ■

THE MAKING OF...

CALL OF CTHULHU

More than 35 years after it debuted, Chaosium's seminal RPG remains one of the most illustrious tabletop reimaginings of horror author H.P. Lovecraft's twisted universe. Original designer Sandy Petersen and current line editor Mike Mason reflect on the title's creation and lasting legacy

Words by **Owen Duffy**





At the dawn of the 1980s, roleplay gaming was fast becoming one of the cornerstones of nascent geek culture. In bedrooms and basements across the world, groups of teenage adventurers were exploring perilous lands and slaying ferocious beasts. But while games like *Dungeons & Dragons* offered the chance of heroic escapism, something far darker was awakening – something that would captivate generations of gamers with its blend of insanity, mystery and dread.

Call of Cthulhu introduced generations of players to a world of sinister cults, forbidden knowledge and malevolent, godlike aliens. *Tabletop Gaming* spoke to its creator, and to the man responsible for the latest edition of one of the most influential titles in all of gaming.

HORROR TAKES HOLD

Howard Phillips Lovecraft is one of the most revered writers in the history of horror fiction. Born in 1890 in the US state of Rhode Island, his work broke from the genre's traditional fixation with haunted mansions and vengeful spirits to embrace a scientific view of the universe. In Lovecraft's imagination, humankind was rendered insignificant by a vast and inhospitable cosmos. His portrayal of a reality populated by ancient, deiform alien beings continues to captivate, terrify and inspire readers today, 80 years after the author's death.

Game designer Sandy Petersen first encountered Lovecraft's work on his father's bookshelf. It made an instant impression on his young mind.

"I read my first Lovecraft tale when I was eight," he recalls. "I had already read some Poe, and liked scary stories, but Lovecraft was like nothing I'd ever encountered before. You have to understand that when I read *The Call of Cthulhu*, I had no idea what Cthulhu was. I worked through the tale completely on tenterhooks. That's not possible for most people today.

"Lovecraft changed the way we looked at horror. Before Lovecraft, horror was a frisson that entered into a story, had an effect, then exited. But in a Lovecraft story, once the horror entered in, you could never return to the real world. Knowing that an alien Thing lurked beneath the sea, ready to exterminate us any moment; or that all of reality was just mathematical angles, and the Other was right there at our gate; or that things flopped and fought and floundered through us outside our consciousness – all these were mind-boggling."

Petersen also had a strong interest in tabletop games. He remembers his first encounters with mainstream family titles, from which he quickly graduated to more complex offerings.

"I remember staying in from recess in fourth grade to play *Clue* [*Cluedo*]," he says. "I found an old incomplete copy of the Avalon Hill *Gettysburg* game when I was nine or 10 and tried to figure out how to work it. At 12, I used my Airfix plastic figures to invent my own miniatures games and played with my friends. At 16, I pretended to be sick and stayed home from school so I could play with the my copy of *Panzerblitz* that came in the mail that morning."

Petersen tinkered with games from an early age, but it was his first encounter with an iconic roleplaying title that would put him on the path to designing games of his own.

"While I was still a teenager, *Dungeons & Dragons* came out and I was immediately building dungeons and inventing replacement combat rules," he says. "We were a bunch of college freshmen who played in the rec room downstairs. We loved it."

D&D presented players with an immersive and innovative form of fantasy adventure gaming, and it soon inspired other designers. Subsequent releases like *Tunnels & Trolls* put their own spin on its narrative concept. But while some games, like the science fiction RPG *Traveller*, deviated from the genre conventions laid down by *D&D*, roleplaying remained primarily concerned with clashing swords, powerful magic and monster-infested subterranean caverns.

All of that was about to change.

PUT OUT THE CALL

In 1981, RPG publisher Chaosium released *Call of Cthulhu*. Designed by Petersen, it dropped players into H.P. Lovecraft's cold, dispassionate and deadly fictional universe. It did away with the musclebound warriors and lithe elven archers of games that had come before, casting players as ordinary people caught up in horrors beyond human understanding. In doing so, it created a level of darkness and dread that had never before been seen in gaming.

Mechanically, the game was based on the Basic Roleplaying system used in Chaosium's *RuneQuest* fantasy RPG. Petersen had played and enjoyed the game – "It had replaced *D&D* for my group," he says – and felt that it had several elements that made it a good candidate for a new focus on horror. Where *Dungeons & Dragons* grouped characters into classes based on specific abilities like fighting, stealth or magic use, *RuneQuest* gave players freer rein to build more rounded characters. And where *D&D* allowed players a dice roll ▶





■ *Left: Original Call of Cthulhu designer Sandy Petersen (left) and current line editor Mike Mason (right).*

to prevent damage to their heroes, *RuneQuest* did away with this safety net, creating what fans felt was a more genuine sense of peril.

Petersen took this mechanical foundation and added rules for modern weaponry, stats for a multitude of alien horrors and an insanity system to represent the effect of constant exposure to traumatic and inexplicable events – a marked departure from other RPGs, which saw players' characters become stronger and more capable over the course of their adventures.

"It was completely contrarian," Petersen says. "First, your characters got worse, not better, with experience. Second, combat, if it happened, was one big climax at the end, which was terrifying rather than heroic. Third, players spent more time in the library than polishing their guns.

"The weakest monster in the game – a cultist – was by definition exactly equally powerful to a player character. And when you were victorious, you got no accolades, no treasure. No outsiders ever knew you'd saved the world. There were lots of games which let people be great heroes and dominate the landscape. But if you didn't want that kind of game, *Call of Cthulhu* was pretty much your only outlet. We were sort of the alternative to normal roleplaying."

A NEW GENERATION

Petersen's work on *Call of Cthulhu* was well received by Lovecraft fans, and it also attracted an audience of roleplayers who weren't familiar with the author, but appreciated its novel approach.

Its creator went on to have a successful career in the video game industry, working on hit titles like *Doom*, *Quake* and *Age of Empires* and, while he remained involved in the development of later editions, over the years a number of other contributors made their mark on the game.

Today, *Call of Cthulhu*'s development is led by Mike Mason, a long-time fan who first encountered the RPG a few years after its first publication. He was immediately impressed by the game's emphasis on mystery and danger.

"I'd already been roleplaying for some time, and then a friend introduced me to *Call of Cthulhu* in about 1983," Mason says. "I was already a fan of horror films and horror fiction, so it hit the right buttons for me from the word 'go'.

"Where most roleplaying games were about the accumulation of power, killing monsters and grabbing treasure, this was a game where you were playing normal people who weren't powerful. Not only were you risking life and limb, you were risking your sanity as well by encountering these terrors from beyond.

"The actual games themselves were more interesting. They were more involved because they were centred around some sort of mystery and investigation. It's like a tapestry of threads that are drawn together. So I found the whole experience much more compelling than anything I'd played before."

Mason soon started to develop his own scenarios for the game, eventually drawing the attention of its publishers.

"In the 1990s I started running scenarios at roleplaying conventions," he said. "I met other GMs who were doing the same thing, so I started a group of GMs called the Kult of Keepers, and we would write new scenarios every year, take them to conventions, run tournaments, things like that. I met Sandy Petersen a few times at conventions; I played in his games, he played in mine and we got on very well."

Mason began working on new material for Chaosium, acting as a freelance editor. While he was excited to be working on a game he'd quickly come to love, he also had bigger ideas.

"I'd been talking to Chaosium about a new edition of the rules," he says.

"There were a few rules that nobody could ever agree how to implement. You could go on any forum and ask: 'How does the grapple rule work?' and you would never get the same answer twice. Clearly there were some rough edges that could be smoothed, so I proposed a new edition and a friend of mine Paul Fricker proposed the same idea, then I was offered the role of line editor, which I jumped at because it was kind of a dream job for me."

Now in charge of the game, Mason set about making the changes he'd argued for. But he stresses that his first priority was remaining true to the game that players had enjoyed for decades.

"The number one tenet of the new edition was that it had to be compatible with everything that had gone before," he says. "It would have been easier to write a new game, because you wouldn't have had to worry about any of those considerations, but that was the fundamental principle that the new edition had to be built on. We didn't want to do anything that would harm the game or change the nature of the game. We wanted – where possible – to streamline, clarify and enhance rather than change things for change's sake.

One alteration, though, was to the game's system for resolving physical conflict be-

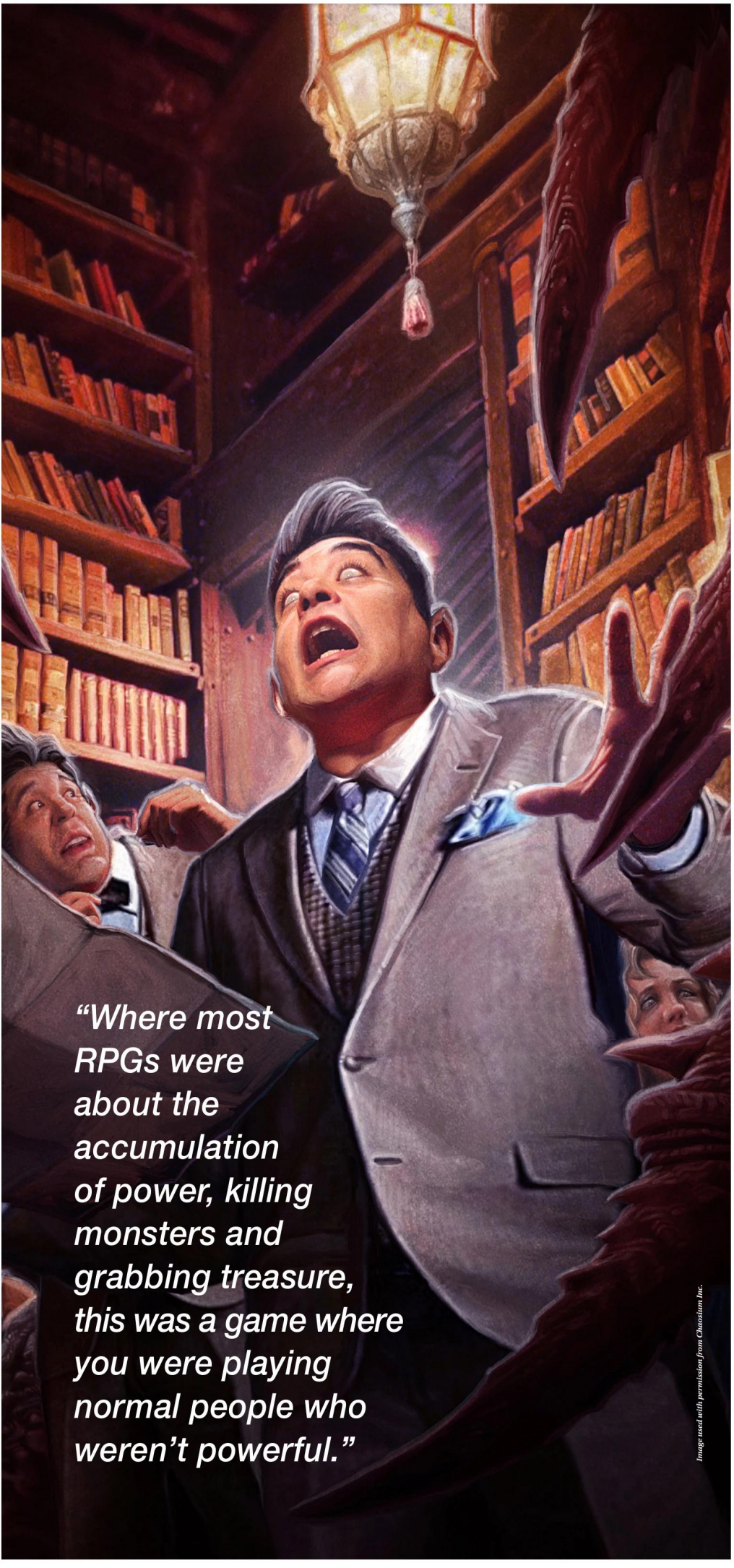


Image used with permission from Chaosium Inc.

tween players and their adversaries.

"Combat had always been a bit of an issue with the game," Mason says. "There were situations where you could get into protracted combats because of dice rolls. Successive fails on both sides meant you could have groups of people just missing each other for 20 minutes, so we streamlined the combat so that each turn the chance of something happening increased dramatically."

The new edition also introduced a way for players to make a second attempt at failed tasks by introducing greater risks for their characters. A character who failed to pick a lock, for instance, could make an attempt to force a door open at the risk of being heard and discovered by a nearby ghoul.

"It pushes the player to present more risk, which is the nature of a horror game," says Mason. "There's a higher risk, so you may get the outcome you desire, but if you fail then the consequences are that much more dire. It fits very well into the concept of a horror game and, as a secondary bonus, some of the old scenarios had situations where the clue trail would come to a bottleneck. Experienced Keepers [*Call of Cthulhu*'s term for a game master] could handle that by making sure the clue could be found somewhere else, but less experienced GMs might not feel confident to do that. So providing that rule was a way of ensuring that a clue wasn't lost because a player failed one roll. It keeps things moving."

As a long-time scenario designer himself, Mason was also keen to ensure that players had compelling adventures to experience in the game. A key part of this was creating memorable, believable characters for them to encounter along the way.

"Traditionally, from my days of playing *D&D,* non-player characters were pretty two-dimensional cardboard cutouts. They were there to say: 'Why don't you go there and get me this thing and bring it back?'

"*Call of Cthulhu* is very much a character-driven game and, because of the nature of investigation, it's likely that in most games you're going to meet people with information to impart. So you want to convey those people with their different quirks and different motivations to ensure that they present interesting ways for the characters to engage with the plot.

"The cultists aren't just sat there in a warehouse by the docks all day waiting for the players to turn up; they are continuing with their plans. So if the players muck ►

about and don't follow a lead, they've already moved on. You want the world and the people within it to be believable, because it makes the horror that much more sharp."

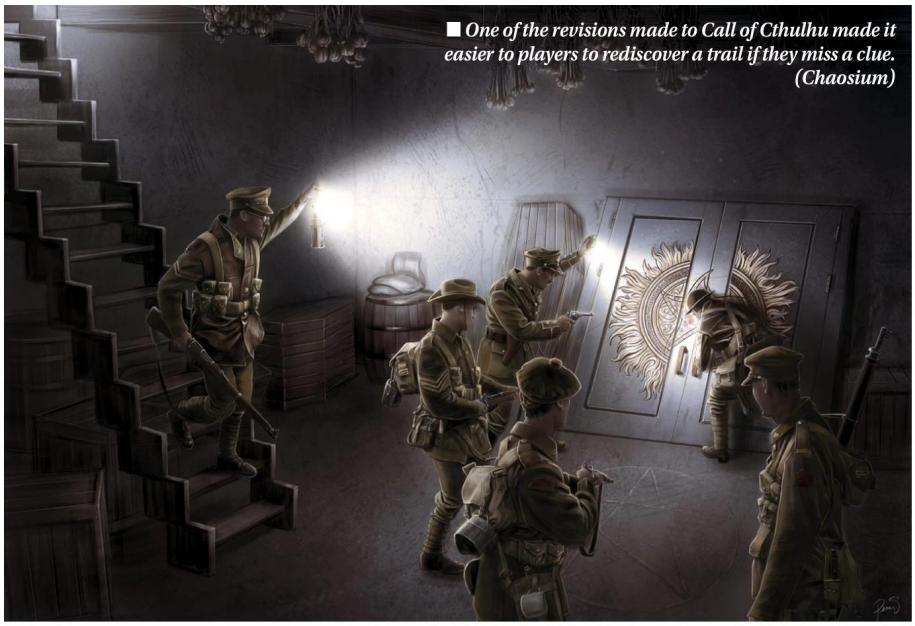
TROUBLED HISTORY

The new, seventh edition of the game met with an enthusiastic response from fans, who raised over half a million dollars on Kickstarter to see it published in 2013. But while Lovecraft remains a perennial draw for many horror-loving gamers, his social attitudes, particularly his unapologetic racism, leave some feeling uncomfortable. To Sandy Petersen, that discomfort says as much about modern readers as Lovecraft himself.

"Because of our grievous over-sensitivity and eagerness to be offended, it is impossible for many modern people to be able to read anything written more than a generation ago," he says. "Yes, Lovecraft had a primitive attitude towards race, but it extended towards other Caucasians as well, such as Poles and Italians. I view him more as a pro-northern Europe chauvinist rather than anti-anyone else. In the end, his dislike of 'swarthy foreigners' didn't take the form of thinking they should be injured or lose their franchise."

To Mike Mason, though, Lovecraft's views seem more troubling. He argues that to enjoy his work, it's necessary to mentally divorce the stories from their author's xenophobia.

"I think you treat him like any other historical writer who held views that we would find abhorrent," he says. "You could name numerous writers whose personal views aren't shared by yourself, but does that lessen their work? You can still enjoy it without accepting the writer.



■ *One of the revisions made to Call of Cthulhu made it easier to players to rediscover a trail if they miss a clue. (Chaosium)*

"There's a double-edged sword with Lovecraft, because the abhorrent racism in some of his stories is not acceptable: the end. However, without some of his quirky and unpleasant views, you wouldn't have got some of the fiction. It's certainly informed by some of his oddball views at some points. You have to understand the nature of the man and his time, yes, but it doesn't mean you have to see them as acceptable today. To blacklist Lovecraft means you have to blacklist a lot of other writers, too."

The *Call of Cthulhu* RPG doesn't, and never has, condoned discrimination, and it leaves the decision on whether to explore the politics and prejudices of Lovecraft's 1920s world up to the players themselves. If its continued popularity is any indication, that's an approach that its audience has no problem working with.

Sandy Petersen recently returned to Lovecraftian gaming with *Cthulhu Wars*, a strategy board game that sees players assume the identities of rival alien demigods battling to enslave the earth. At Chaosium, meanwhile, Mike Mason is planning to expand *Call of Cthulhu* into new settings including the American Old West and a dark science-fiction future.

"One of the beautiful things about *Call of Cthulhu* is that you can set your games anywhere and anytime," he says. "The Mythos entities were around long before humanity, and they'll be around long after humanity has gone." ▪



■ *Above: Call of Cthulhu's systems have been taken to various settings, including the 1930s in Pulp Cthulhu and the American Old West in an upcoming new release.*

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS STARTER SET

Designer: Wizards of the Coast | **Artist:** Various

64+ 13+ £25



Have you ever watched a film or read a book and found yourself thinking, "I wouldn't have done it like that" or "that's obviously a trap, why are you going in?" Well with a role play game you are the hero/heroine and you can make the choices.

I have played the Dungeons & Dragons role play game in one form or another for more than 30 years now. It is basically a group of people getting together to play out tales of adventure similar to those in Lord of the Rings and similar movies. One person (usually me) acts as a story-teller/narrator or Dungeon Master, while the others play the roles of the heroes of the tale, saving the villagers from raiding goblins, exploring ancient ruins for lost treasure, or even hunting for the great dragon that has terrorised the kingdom.

The Dungeon Master (DM) sets the scene and portrays all the people and monsters the heroes encounter and the players decide their responses. As with all games there are rules for creating the player's characters, running combat encounters (not everyone the players meet with will be friendly) and even rules for the DM to create balanced, fair and exciting adventures for his players. Most things are decided by the player's ingenuity but for that random element certain things are done with dice rolls (such as combat or anything with a chance of failure) - you swing your sword round at the goblin - rolls the dice - but your strike falls short. The wicked creature grins as it raises its rusty spear and tries to hit you back.

Even though the players are pitted against foes and scenarios presented by the DM it is not Players verus the DM to see who wins. The whole idea is for everyone to have a fun experience and to enjoy the game. While the heroes may triumph over their foes or find the treasure that has been lost for centuries, it can also turn out the other way with some of the heroes returning to their homes battered and bruised, carrying the body of a fallen comrade.

Role play games (and D&D in particular) have suffered from a lot of negative press over the years, with religious groups in particular being against the games, calling them such things as mind warping and leading to demon worship. Well in 30 years of playing I must have been doing something wrong then I as turned out ok (I think?).

In a television programme on Channel 4 a while back, people voted for the 100 greatest toys, and I was very happy to see that D&D came third (only beaten by Monopoly and Lego) and it was great to see some TV celebrities reminiscing over their former hobby. People such as Stephen Fry, Jeremy Clarkson, Eddie Izzard and Jason Bradbury all played D&D at some time (and how awesome would it be to see all of them sat round together playing again).

I believe role play games are great ways to express creativity and to socially interact with people who have similar interests. It promotes working as a team to overcome obstacles and lets your imagination roam free.

So, who's brought the dice? Those goblins won't go away on their own!

MIK CALOW

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS ESSENTIALS KIT

Designer: Wizards of the Coast | **Artist:** Various

64+ 13+ £25

There's something wonderfully precise about the naming of the *Essentials Kit*. In one smallish box it holds everything needed to sink your teeth into the latest version of *D&D* and, though veterans might find it a little lacking in substance, there's no better place for newcomers to hop on and get rolling dice.

This kit comes along as a replacement of sorts for the *D&D Starter Set* that first hit shelves five years ago. Just like its predecessor it provides a stripped-down set of the core game's rules, providing just enough to get rolling with the most iconic combinations of classes and fantasy races.

Of course, the open-ended nature of RPGs means that even this limited slice of the ruleset is enough to keep a table happily hacking their way through several months' worth of dungeons. With that in mind, the *Essentials Kit* comes packed with just over a dozen short adventures and encounters that can be woven into a neat little campaign or just used to give the players a taste of the game's many elements.

These quests will probably be the greatest lure to existing players looking to snaffle up the box set, and don't disappoint on that front. They're generally well-written and mercifully concise. Even the most complex takes up just four pages – an ideal length for newer DMs looking to avoid overly complex plots or mysteries.

Alongside the books the kit is stuffed with a solid fistful of cards showing magic items, important NPCs and noticeboard quests, as well as a set of dice and a DM screen. In all honesty the quality of these accessories is a little shaky – the screen is thin enough to barely qualify as cardboard – but when you consider the price it's hard to complain with any real conviction.

If you've never dabbled with the latest version of *D&D* this is the easiest, cleanest way to do so. It offers a delightful taste of the dangers and delights of tabletop roleplaying in a way that should be instantly familiar to anyone who has so much as glanced at pop culture in the past 40 years.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES



PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY


Dark Mistress



BEHIND THE MASKS

More than 30 years after it debuted, Call of Cthulhu's Masks of Nyarlathotep remains one of the greatest roleplaying adventures ever created. With the globetrotting horror tale returning to drive a new generation of players insane, we revisit a true classic

Words by **Matt Jarvis**
Illustrations by **Jake Murray, Wayne Miller, Caleb Cleveland, Victor Leza, Jonathan Wyke, Eric Lofgren**

Your friend is dead, the murder victim of a sinister cult after he suddenly sent you a telegram calling for help investigating the mysterious fate of the Carlyle Expedition. Finding the answers will take you around the world and risk the loss of your life and sanity – and the total destruction of humanity should you fail.

This is the opening to *Masks of Nyarlathotep*, the epic multi-part *Call of Cthulhu* campaign first released more than three decades ago in 1984 and universally considered one of the pinnacles of roleplaying storytelling since, collecting the 1996 award for Best Adventure from the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts & Design, the precursor to the Origins Awards. Even *Psycho* author – and friend of H.P. Lovecraft – Robert Bloch was a fan.

Set in 1925 and starring Lovecraft's shadowy deity Nyarlathotep, *Masks* was a revelation upon release due to its sweeping tale that saw players globetrot from America and England to Egypt, Kenya, Australia and China, and the non-linear approach used to unfurl its shocking narrative across several interlinked adventures.

Masks' narrative hook of an expedition missing in Africa was inspired, unexpectedly, by Kenyan politician and founding father Jomo Kenyatta, who had been researched by roleplaying author Larry DiTillio while writing a script for children's television show *Against the Odds*. DiTillio was later approached by *Call of Cthulhu* publisher Chaosium to pitch a scenario for its horror RPG and, despite his initial reluctance, eventually came around on the idea of putting together a story. With Kenyatta's life still fresh in his mind, DiTillio began to write a scenario featuring a group of explorers that had disappeared in Kenya. The multi-country setting grew out of a need to justify how players' investigators would end up in the African nation, with DiTillio throwing in extra locations based on some of Lovecraft's stories.

Eight months later, the 400-page manuscript submitted by DiTillio was expanded further by the late Lynn Willis, who added detailed background on each of the countries visited along the journey.

"Larry understood that Chaosium wanted something different to the *Call of Cthulhu* books they were putting out at the time – many dealt with sinister New England locales and small hidden-away villages," *Call of Cthulhu* line editor Mike Mason reflects today. "So his idea about something set in Africa was the spark that ignited the campaign. What's more, Lynn was looking to show that *Call of Cthulhu* could be played in different ways, so Larry's pulp-inspired story approach to *Masks* fitted the bill."

Chaosium had previously put out two longer-form *Call of Cthulhu* campaigns, *Shadows of Yog-Sothoth* and *Fungi from Yuggoth*, but *Masks* was something else. Its sprawling, connected tale blew apart the largely episodic nature of its predecessors, handing even more control of the narrative to the whims and decisions of players – including actions that could have consequences in later chapters – and allowing a single plotline to build to a thrilling finale over dozens of hours. After the opening section in New York, players could head to any of *Masks*' global locations and find their own path through the story.

"One reason why *Masks* worked so well was that the story was cooked up by a single person who was able to translate that story across differing locales," Mason suggests. "Often campaigns are written piecemeal, with different writers putting together their scenarios in isolation. Once the parts are complete, someone must gather the scenarios and mesh them together to form the campaign. If this isn't done carefully, the campaign can feel unconnected and the logic absent. Thus, ensuring different writers are working closely together throughout the entire process is essential; allowing them to contribute ideas to each other's scenarios means the whole is tighter and better formed. *Masks* avoided these pitfalls because Larry and Lynn worked closely together."

> "It's become almost a rite of passage for many GMs to run the campaign."

In fact, the original draft of *Masks* was so ambitious in scale that its creators ultimately had to leave out an entire sixth chapter set in Australia inspired by Lovecraft's *The Shadow Out of Time* due to the size and cost of the book. The missing scenario would finally hit the table in 1987's *Terra Australis* supplement, before being reunited with the full campaign in 1996's *The Complete Masks of Nyarlathotep*. From its initial sold-out run through its equally popular reprints, *Masks* has remained a consistent hit for generations of roleplayers.

"*Masks* fired up people's imaginations and its pulp ethic of keeping the pace and story moving hit a positive chord with players around the world," Mason says. "It's an epic story that creates epic gameplay – which means great and memorable scenes around the gaming table that players love to recount. It's become almost a rite of passage for many game masters to run the campaign."

FRESH HELL

This year sees Masks return to terrorise a new wave of players, coming to *Call of Cthulhu*'s seventh edition in an expanded form.

It's the first major update to the campaign since the 30th anniversary edition hardback, which introduced new artwork but left things otherwise largely unchanged. This time around, Mason and co-authors Lynne Hardy, Paul Fricker and Scott Dorward have revisited and refreshed the entire campaign chapter by chapter, with Mason promising the team added "cool ideas to strengthen the campaign's narrative" alongside updating its rules to support the seventh edition.

Chief among the changes is a brand new chapter set in Peru, which serves as a prologue to the main story and lends greater depth to the character of Jackson Elias, whose research kicks off the core mystery.

With props playing a key role in the story, the new edition marks the first time *Masks* will be printed in full colour, complete with new art, cartography and player handouts – some of which have appeared in the French and Spanish versions of the book in the past.

For the first time, the campaign can also be played in *Pulp Cthulhu* – the rollicking *Call of Cthulhu* spin-off that toughens up investigators and allows for a more action-heavy tone. Alternative scenes and options for the RPG are included alongside their *Call of Cthulhu* counterparts, while a set of appendices act as a reference for the campaign's various spells, items and more – which should make running the notoriously complex story easier for game masters, referred to in-game as 'Keepers'.

"We've also strengthened the clue trail to ensure there are no 'clue bottlenecks' while also making it easier for the Keeper to keep a handle on the various moving parts of the campaign," Mason adds. "In terms of running, we feel it's the most user-friendly version of the campaign to date, with plenty of advice and guidance throughout."

The revised campaign should be a little easier-going on players, too. *Masks* is infamous for chewing up investigators throughout the course of its brutal story, with a staggering ra of





mortality and insanity, and the need to regularly introduce new characters, which can be intimidating for players today.

"It was a constant churn of characters, which meant the players often became detached and unconnected to their characters," admits Mason. "The end result being that many groups failed to ever finish the campaign, abandoning it when they just got fed up with another of their characters dying in an random and uninspired manner."

To improve the life expectancy of investigators on the trail of Nyarlathotep, the new *Masks* tones down many of the campaign's most lethal scenes and encounters, particularly reducing the punishment inflicted on players for taking a wrong path and other relatively minor mishaps. Don't expect an easy ride, though.

"We didn't declaw it fully," Mason quickly adds. "Certain climactic scenes remain, where the threat of character death is a possibility. Also, by including *Pulp Cthulhu* optional scenes we were able to up the ante from time to time, as *Pulp Cthulhu* heroes are more durable and tougher than regular *Call of Cthulhu* investigators – so, depending on your play style preference, you have the option to ramp up certain encounters for pulp play.

"Certainly, in whatever style you end up playing, *Masks* remains a tough campaign – but, now, the concept of deaths by a thousands cuts is diminished and put into the hands of the Keeper. Which, all in all, we hope that the majority of player groups get to enjoy the entire campaign and reach its epic ending."

It's not just *Masks*' gameplay that needed bringing into the 21st century. The original campaign suffered from outmoded treatment of gender and race – even in the context of its historical setting.

"Most of the original characters were male, which didn't really reflect society or history," says Mason. "We've refitted some of the characters to better reflect reality, as well as adding further details on the different locales, providing more in-depth background for the settings and the period in which the campaign takes place.

"We also addressed ethnic portrayals to ensure balance and fair representation. We researched the various settings and historical portrayals to ensure these are as correct as possible, tweaking and rewriting as necessary to ensure accurate and sympathetic portrays of the differing communities and locales. I personally spent a great deal of time looking up old maps from 1925 of various places to ensure authenticity in terms of location and travel."

HORROR COMES HOME

Chaosium had already been planning to bring back *Masks* in an updated form for *Call of Cthulhu* when another way to tell the story anew arose.

Mega-studio Fantasy Flight contacted the publisher with the idea to bring the campaign to *Eldritch Horror*, a descendant of *Call of Cthulhu* board game spin-off *Arkham Horror* – making the proposed project a reunion of sorts.

The board game expansion takes its cues from the roleplaying campaign's groundbreaking structure, adding a campaign mode that tracks the group's progress over multiple chapters as their actions dictate the ultimate fate of the world. Players get to explore their characters' histories further, too, with personal stories developing their background and ties to the action. It doesn't quite have the depth of an RPG – but it's not a bad way to get a taste of the story in just an evening or two, either.

"The storyline is more abridged, as there just isn't the room to tell all the levels of the story," Mason says. "Of course, this also means the game is quicker to play while providing a fun experience. In *Call of Cthulhu*, the experience is different: the full story can be played out,



including sidetracks and red herrings. It's a deeper, often more personal experience. If you've been playing through the full *Masks* campaign, then its climax will be that much more rewarding. That's not to say the board game version isn't rewarding too, it's just a different experience and still lots of fun.

"While the experience can never be so freeform and unrestricted as in the *Call of Cthulhu* version of *Masks*, the board game version hits other highs – for one, you can play the entire campaign in a single night! Thus, we see both working in unison. You can enjoy many sessions of play and deeper levels of understanding with the *Call of Cthulhu* campaign, while also enjoying an entirely different style of play and take on the campaign with *Eldritch Horror* in a simpler and easy to pick up manner.

"We expect many people may first encounter *Masks* through the Fantasy Flight version, who will then be turned onto the mystery of the Carlyle Expedition and wish to play through the full campaign using *Call of Cthulhu*. Why enjoy only one version when you can play both? You might fail at one but achieve success in the other!"

BABY 'TEPS

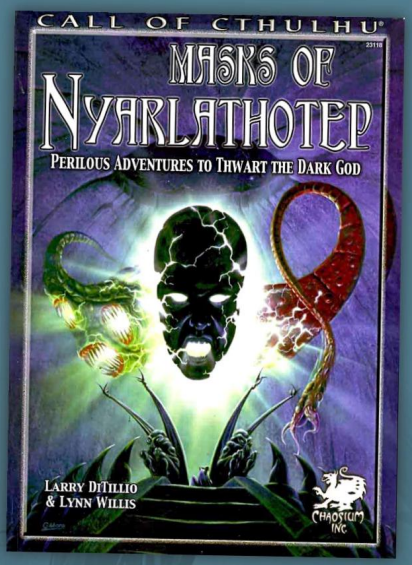
Call of Cthulhu line editor Mike Mason recalls his own introduction to Masks and offers some tips to those taking on the adventure for the first time

"My first encounter was as a player back in 1985, soon after its release. My school friends and I gathered each Friday evening to play and muddle our way through the campaign's twists and turns. We didn't fare very well, I'm afraid, and came to a quite a messy end – meaning we didn't save the world! I remember that my first investigator in the game ended up being sacrificed to the Outer Gods in a rather unspeakable way. Despite our poor attempt to uncover the mystery of the Carlyle Expedition, we had great fun and still talk about those game sessions today.

"There are so many elements in *Masks* that I like. But, for me, the London chapter has always been close to my heart. It has one of the best villains in it, and also includes two 'sidetrack' mini scenarios unconnected with the core campaign, which allow the players to let off some steam and chase a red herring or two. There are also some fabulous setpieces in the campaign that are grand in scale and turn *Call of Cthulhu's* usual cultist gatherings on their head. Oh, and one more cool thing is the range of non-player characters, each with their own motives and agendas, who are just fun to play as the Keeper. As I say, there really are too many just downright cool things in the campaign!

"If you are planning to run the campaign, read the whole thing through first. It's key to understand the interdependencies and motivations of the main characters, all of which are helpfully summarised in the campaign. Prep game sessions by making some bullet-point notes of the key information, encounters, and characters the players should find in that session – as there are often a number of moving parts going on, having these aid memories can be a real help to ensure you don't forget stuff.

"Also, don't fuss about the little stuff. There's no need to worry overly about the investigators' finances or how they sometimes get from A to B in terms of travel; the core of *Call of Cthulhu* gaming isn't about accounting. Keep things apace and on track. Of course, all of this is covered in more detail in the actual campaign guidance, so be sure to pay attention to the advice given, which stems from years of experience running *Call of Cthulhu* and this campaign in particular."







Critical Hit

The world's biggest Dungeons & Dragons campaign has changed the face of roleplaying forever – and its cast have had an absolute blast along the way. Critical Role's Matthew Mercer and Liam O'Brien reveal how a birthday treat turned into a cultural phenomenon and what's in store for season two

Words by **Matt Jarvis** | Cosplay photographs by **Pamela Joy**



Could you and your friends run your roleplaying campaign with ten people watching? How about 100? Or 1,000? What if it was an audience of hundreds of thousands? Or even millions?

That's exactly the daunting task faced by the cast of *Critical Role*, a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign streamed live every week by Geek & Sundry, the web video network that's also the home of Wil Wheaton's hugely popular board game series *TableTop*. Since its all-star *D&D* show began, *Critical Role* has racked up tens of millions of views on live-streaming site Twitch and video library YouTube, including a staggering 6.7 million views of its first episode, *Arrival at Kraghammer*, which debuted in June 2015.

The game that would grow into a show watched by millions began like any other roleplaying campaign – a bunch of friends sat around a table, having fun. In this case, the organiser was Matthew Mercer, a professional voice actor with credits across video games, TV series and films, who put together a one-off simplified scenario for his friend and fellow voice actor Liam O'Brien's birthday.

"When we started this campaign in our home game, it was for mostly a bunch of people who I'd never played before," Mercer says. "It was supposed to be just a one-shot for my friend Liam's birthday, and we invited a bunch of our compatriots who had never played before and they all got immediately hooked, and it turned into a campaign."

Mercer, O'Brien and their friends – including several other actors – soon switched to *D&D 3.5*-based RPG *Pathfinder* and continued to play at home for two years, before one of the group, BAFTA-winning *The Last of Us* star Ashley Johnson, mentioned the campaign to Felicia Day, the cult actor who co-founded Geek & Sundry.

ABOVE Matthew Mercer (centre) and the rest of the *Critical Role* cast: Ashley Johnson, Laura Bailey, Liam O'Brien, Marisha Ray, Sam Riegel, Taliesin Jaffe and Travis Willingham

OPPOSITE Travis Willingham as Grog Strongjaw (right) and Ashley Johnson as Pike Trickfoot (left)

BELOW Liam O'Brien's Vax'ildan (left) and Marisha Ray's Keyleth (right)

"Felicia was like, 'Why don't you... You guys should do that on our channel!'" Mercer recalls. "We went, 'Ohhhh, I don't know, playing *D&D* on the internet seems like a terrible idea. People will light us on fire.'"

Much of the group's hesitation was down to a reluctance to change anything about the campaign they had been running in private for years.

"It was still our game, we playing for ourselves," explains Mercer. "It wasn't until Twitch became a thing that it was a scenario where we said, 'If we can put us in a room, turn on cameras and not change any of how we play our game, then we'll say yes.' And so, for us, Twitch and streaming was the capability for us to just continue to play our game, not trying to change or alter it for an audience, just do it for ourselves and invite other people to come and watch if that's something they wanted to do."

Geek & Sundry agreed. The result is a friendly, genuine series of videos that captures the sparky creativity of the group in episodes that can last up to five hours or more, with the first campaign – following the Vox Machina party – split across 115 such instalments.

"There are less brunch platters and mimosas for us now," O'Brien jokes about taking the campaign to the masses. "Things were even looser around our home table, although I think they're still pretty loose. One of the best parts of the stream, though, is that live element. The game still feels very intimate, because it is still just the eight of us around a table. But the live audience gives things that little electric current of immediacy. We know once we say something, either stupid or amazing, it is out there in the ether. It's part of what makes theatre so magical. You know that there has never been a moment quite like the one you're currently in."

Mercer, who takes on the role of the dungeon master throughout the series with the exception of a few special episodes, says that the cast's familiarity with appearing on-screen helped with the leap to the public gaze.

"Because we're all performers by nature, our home games weren't all that different," he says. "We were all shouting at each other over the table and getting way



> "The live audience gives things that electric current of immediacy. Once we say something, it's out there in the ether."





into character and standing and flailing about wildly. So it didn't really change the game so much as far as the presentation of it."

What has changed significantly, even from *Critical Role*'s beginnings, is its production values. The audio and video quality of the first few episodes – "It's a little rough at the beginning," admits Mercer – has since been polished by professional lighting, microphones and sets. As the person pulling the strings behind the world – not to mention providing dozens of unique voices for any NPCs encountered – Mercer's own ability to layer in atmosphere and weave the group's story has improved, too.

"I've definitely fine-tuned and honed things as I've played and learned, as you do as anyone's GMing a game – the more you play, the more you define your techniques and get better at certain things," he says.

"I will say, having that big of an audience definitely teaches you to be much more conscientious with your world-building. Because it's one thing to create a story and a world for your eight friends who are sometimes having a beer or two and won't notice your mistakes and won't notice your plot holes, it's another when you have hundreds of thousands of people on Reddit and social media who are every week picking apart the minutiae of your storyline."

CROWD GAME

One of *Critical Role*'s biggest draws is how much it feels like watching a Netflix or television series. The talented party's impressive vocal talents mean that, even without much in the way of visual flair, watching or listening to an episode gets you immediately invested in the story and its characters. There's a similarly passionate following, too, with fans drawing artwork based on the heroes, discussing story beats and binge-watching older episodes while waiting for the next chapter.

"It's perpetually surreal," Mercer says of the fandom. "It never stops and only continues to get more and more and more so. It's hard not to fall into a trap of continuous imposter syndrome, 'cause it doesn't feel like we deserve this attention. It's a phenomenon that even we don't understand and we're humbled by it, but we're excited by it, too. Because it's one thing to have a thing that people like, it's another to have a community that's so gracious and so happy to engage with each other and us. It's special, it's special. That's the only way I can say it. I don't know what it is, but I like it!"

The show's likeable players and engaging story have even seen it break out of the roleplaying niche and attract a wave of fans who have never touched a pen-and-paper RPG, some of whom go on to try out *D&D* after watching.

"Part of the reason we even started *Critical Role* was the inevitably difficult conversation in a party or a co-worker scenario where someone asks, 'What, wait, what is *Dungeons & Dragons*?'" Mercer enthuses. "And that horrible moment where you're like, 'Well, you know, it's– You make a character and then it's like a fantasy, but you can be like a spellcaster, or you could be like a fighter, and it's like there's a lot of you, and there's a person who's a– Y'know? Nevermind.' I've had that scenario happen so much in my life that I wanted to put something on video



that could be something to show people very quickly and be like, 'Oh, it's just friends around a table telling a story, I could do that.'

"So now that we've built off that, the community is now reaching out to people in their circle who they think might really enjoy this but never had the opportunity to be exposed to it and be like, 'Hey, watch this,' or 'Hey, come over on Friday and see if you wanna jump in and give it a shot.' I've heard story after story of people getting their co-workers into it, families – you know, those tenuous teen years between parents and teenagers absolved by having a family *D&D* night every week. That to me is the core of it; it's bringing people together and sharing a really amazing experience that you all create together. That's a very fulfilling experience and it just builds social skills, it builds problem-solving skills, team-building. I owe so much of who I am today to *Dungeons & Dragons* and roleplaying games, and it excites me to think that so many other people are now getting a chance to learn through that same lens how to better themselves."

"I think we all continue to prove that it's a game everyone can play," O'Brien agrees. "Hell, I think table-top RPGs are games everyone should play. I think they make us better people. Everyone has a story to tell, and the beauty is, you get to write anything you want. And anyone with kids? Run a game for them!"

Most friendship groups are unlikely to involve a line-up of experienced voice actors accustomed to embodying a character and projecting an alternate personality to a room of people – even close friends. But while *Critical Role* may be an idealised version of roleplaying for some people, its stars are quick to dispel the idea that it should be treated as the template for a perfect experience.

"First and foremost, there is no requirement for you to do voices or to be really into character," Mercer reassures. "Especially at the very beginning of a campaign, that's something that comes with comfort. Most of the people I've played with most of my life have not been actors, they've all been people that went on to become game designers or tech experts. I grew up with the nerd crowd, we were the computer club in high school. It was those people. So I was probably the more outgoing of most of my gaming groups growing up, so by no means do you have to be a performer."

"Don't stress. Embrace feeling foolish," O'Brien adds. "The only goal you really need is having fun with each other, making each other laugh. And don't wait 'til you 'feel ready.'



Or perfect. It'll never be perfect. But it will be great."

For confident players that do want to introduce a little more theatricality to their games, Mercer suggests that even basic lessons in improvisation can pay dividends.

"Not only does it help keep you clever and quick, which is a great thing to have in a lot of roleplaying games, but it'll help you feel more comfortable jumping and taking charge in a challenge – which as we all know when you're playing *D&D*, sometimes you have that moment when everyone's like 'Urr, I don't– Do you wanna? I don't know– I– I'll g– Oh, okay, you go ahead,'" he says. "Improv helps you feel more competent in taking the spotlight when nobody else will and just keep the story moving forward, so that is a helpful skill set to have.

"If that's where your comfort level goes and you want ascribe to be that, then just clearly define your character's personality, what their goals are, what their fears are, what their worries are, and try and add an element to their backstory that's a mystery even to you as the player that the GM can play with. Because that helps you start the game with a strong idea of what the character's decision-making would be based on and over time you'll feel more comfortable in those shoes. Once you feel more comfortable, you'll generally be more comfortable in stepping forward and embodying the personality of that character whether that be a voice or physicality or just a presence. It doesn't have to be as big as us. We're all actors, that's our skillset, so of course that's what we're going to use to tell our story, but don't feel like you have to do that by any means. Some of the best games I've ever played have been with non-actors and in hindsight, in memory I don't recall it being any less magical. So please don't feel that pressure."

OPPOSITE Laura Bailey's Vex'ahlia (left) hangs out with Johnson's Pike (centre) and Ray's Keyleth (right)

BELOW Vax and Vex'ahlia are siblings as well as companions in the Vox Machina party

Although the quick wits and on-the-spot invention of its players provides many of *Critical Role*'s best moments, the show's casual surface is held together by hours of work done in the background. As DM, Mercer reveals he plans between four and six hours of content for each episode, taking between an hour to an hour and a half of prep for each hour of actual gameplay.

"I have, when I'm preparing like a story arc, I'll usually beat out the general arc – what kind of important beats should happen – and develop the in-between on a more immediate basis, meaning episode to episode," he says. "When we have a session, as we play through that bit of the arc, I'll try and prepare in advance where I think they might go within that session.

"If we're going into another big story arc it's going to be a lot more front-end prep to make sure I know where we're going. I'll beat out the loose locations and events that will happen, I'll create a bunch of NPCs that are intrinsic to the storyline and some that are not that I can just plug in wherever – they can help kind of give them some direction





– and then prepare some very loose possibilities if they go completely off the rails, which inevitably they do. That's the nature of roleplaying games! As much as you prepare, it's never enough. You're usually pulling stuff out of your ass left and right, and that's part of the thrill of GMing."

Mercer laughs as he recalls plenty of times where decisions made by the rest of the group had resulted in his hard work going to waste.

"Plenty of social and combat encounters," he says, when asked which of his plans had never come to fruition. "Y'know, whole possible dungeon-delve scenarios that just never ever came up where they completely skipped over.

"There would be NPCs – like, for instance, in the final arc of the last campaign, I'd created a creature that was going to be a Gollum-esque-type entity, where it was semi-neutral but it had information on the villain and they could encounter it and it was going to be one of the only social encounters in this dungeon they would have, as most of it was just a climb towards the big bad. So I had described it by itself, looking kind of pitiful on its own as it's, like, feasting on this corpse, and the first thing one of our players did was throw his daggers at it and kill it in one round. I was like, 'Alright! Well, moving on...' He had a name! I showed him after the campaign, I'm like, 'He had a name, Liam!'"

A FRESH START

After wrapping up its first season after two years, early 2018 saw *Critical Role* launch into a brand new campaign, with a new setting, new story and new characters – which, of course, means new voices.

ABOVE The Vox Machina party from *Critical Role*'s first campaign

OPPOSITE *Critical Role* is streamed live on Twitch each week, with videos going up on YouTube afterwards for fans to watch – and rewatch (*Geek & Sundry*)

O'Brien's human wizard Caleb Widogast (accompanied by his unlikely goblin partner, Nott the Brave, played by Sam Riegel) replaces his fan-favourite half-elf rouge-paladin Vax'ildan from the previous season. He's joined by Laura Bailey's tiefling cleric Jester, Marisha Ray's human monk Beauregard, Travis Willingham's half-orc warlock Fjord, Taliesin Jaffe's tiefling blood hunter Mollymauk and Ashley Johnson as aasimar barbarian Yasha. Where the group's previous characters had established their backstories, relationships and personalities over hundreds of hours to the delight of fans (as lengthy wiki entries will attest), the second season sees the players starting completely afresh – an exciting but intimidating prospect.

"*Dungeons & Dragons* has so much range, I'm really just wanting to try out some of those other avenues I haven't had a chance to explore yet," O'Brien says. "I was almost magic-free for the entirety of the last campaign, and when I did acquire some, it was fairly light. I'm both nervous and excited to wrap my head around all the ins and out of the wizardly path. Plus, I'm pretty sure I'll enjoy inhabiting a different headspace than Vax in the last campaign. He was very rash, headstrong, and uncompromising in the ways he strove to do right. Which I loved playing. Caleb is not cut from the same cloth, however. Not by a longshot. And every

actor likes to try on different hats."

The group first meets in an inn in the city of Trostenwald on the continent of Wildemount, a more politically incensed region than the land of Tal'Dorei explored by the Vox Machina party. With the players taking on new roles, the different landscape – both literally and metaphorically – similarly provides their dungeon master with the opportunity to paint on a blank canvas.

"I'm curious," says Mercer. "I want this campaign to have a different narrative flavour to it. It's going to largely depend on what the players want to, what they want to pursue and what threads catch their attention. This continent is designed to be a little more politically involved, it has a lot more moral grey I think they may well encounter in this campaign versus the previous one where it was a very clear, like, good versus evil. It was pretty easy to pick which side you're on. It may be a little less easy in this campaign, which I think will be very unique for them at the very least. For those players, who are used to very much like, 'Oh, that's the bad guy, we have to fight, let's go kill it!' Y'know. So I'm curious to see how that plays out."

REMAINS OF THE PLAY

One and a bit seasons in, there are already more episodes and hours of *Critical Role* than many long-running television shows. (By way of comparison, the 143 videos counted as part of its 'Campaign 1' YouTube playlist is over twice the number of episodes in total for *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire*, even without taking into consideration the RPG show's much longer individual runtimes.)

The Vox Machina campaign ran for more than two and a half years, hinting at a possible length for the second season, but Mercer admits he has "no idea" how long the latest story will last.

"To kind of show the microcosm of it, you'll prepare a session and be like, 'This will feel like a good solid four to five hours of gameplay, I feel pretty good about this,' and then the players will get through the first page and that one session prep will last you three sessions," he says. "Comparatively, I've prepared a similar amount of work and they'll breeze through it in an hour and then we're all living in this blank space where I loosely have an idea of where we're going and we're just making it up as we go along. So it's hard to gauge a length when the nature of the game is to be so amorphous and open. I don't really feel there's a need to ascribe to a specific structure or a specific length, I just kinda wanna see where the story takes us, and when it feels like it naturally has ended then that'll be the end."

His players are equally clueless about where the sprawling tale could go next.

"I've no clue," O'Brien says. "And that's the beauty of it."

With *Critical Role*'s audience only continuing to grow and its cast's creativity seemingly endless when it comes to bringing their world to life, there's no end in sight yet for the story that began as a one-off birthday scenario and was propelled into the cultural stratosphere.

"It was kind of an unexpected opportunity that we didn't think was going to go anywhere and, thankfully, we were very wrong!" Mercer says.

"As far as I know, I'm going to keep doing this as long as we want to keep playing together and telling stories. I've been playing roleplaying games for over 20 years and I haven't got sick of it yet. So we'll see. It's such a fulfilling creative process to do this with your friends and so I don't– There may come a day where we stop because of life reasons, health reasons, who knows? But for now, I haven't even looked that far ahead, I'm so focused on the now and what's happening with the story now."



ROLE CHANGE

Critical Role is all about Dungeons & Dragons, but what other roleplaying games do the cast enjoy? We asked two of its stars

Matthew Mercer: *D&D* was my introduction to it [roleplaying]. I grew up a hardcore Tolkien high fantasy nerd, so it's definitely my preferred place, but I've played a lot of other RPGs that I enjoy thoroughly. I've played a lot of *Traveller*, I've played *Exalted*, I've played *Deadlands*, I've played the *Warhammer Fantasy* roleplaying game, I've played *Diaspora*, *Paranoia*, the old *Star Wars RPG*. I've played a lot of them throughout the years but *D&D* has kind of been my go-to comfort food, if you will. For me, I think I just like telling stories and swords 'n' sorcery tales. I just love fantasy races, I love the idea of small individuals becoming heroic characters in this high fantasy setting, so *D&D* is just a natural fit for me, I guess. As much as I try and pontificate about other great systems that I've really enjoyed as well, I keep going back to *D&D*. Maybe it's the nostalgia.

Liam O'Brien: I think my first encounter with tabletop was pretty typical. A classmate let me borrow the *D&D* red box, and I instantly fell in love with it. I spent much of my high school years playing *D&D*, *Cyberpunk* and *RIFTS*. That's when I fell in love with the fantasy genre.

The most gaming I do outside *Critical Role* is the GMing I do for my kids. I run one to two games a month for them. My son has a game with a few friends, as does his younger sister. I am actually loving running her and her four friends through a sanded-down version of *Curse of Strahd*. I gave her a choice of any adventure module on the shelf, and she was adamant that they slay vampires. It is so damn fun to see them all thrill at the danger and problem solve their way out of it.

EXPLORER'S GUIDE TO WILDEMOUNT

Critical success for Critical Role

Designer: Matthew Mercer & Others | **Publisher:** Wizards of the Coast

304 | 11+ | £39

Cracking open the pages of the latest tie-in between *D&D* and the Critical Role crew feels a lot like walking into an impossibly polished version of somebody else's homebrewed world. It's a book packed with the kind of plot hooks and alternate rules that fill a million tattered campaign journals, but rather than being scrawled in illegible biro they're all neatly arranged and backed up with the maps and stats needed to smoothly take them to the tabletop.

Of course, it makes sense that Wildemount feels like it was dreamed up by a fellow GM, because that's more or less what happened.

The entire world is the creation of Critical Role's GM Matthew Mercer, and the region laid out in the book is the setting for the incredibly successful



live-play show's second (and still ongoing) campaign. A lot of the writing within its 300-ish pages was supplemented by other folks on the D&D team, but the heart and soul of it's still the creation of just one person. Well, one person and his table of talented nerds.

This slow-burn method of creation has produced a world that sprawls and spirals in a rather charming way. It lacks the sharp, single-sentence summary required from settings that needed snappy pitches to editors and managers – the closest you could get is "high fantasy adventures, but with war brewing and a shedload of spiritual intrigue to uncover" – and while this does result in a pretty fuzzy core identity it also helps Wildemount to feel properly organic.

Indeed, perhaps the book's greatest strength is that it really doesn't concern itself with trying to shake-up the classic *D&D* formula too much. Where other settings, such as the steampunk madness of last year's *Eberron: Rising From the Last War*, try to take a battle-axe to the game's old clichés and tropes, the *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* is more than happy to merely remix them.

The beautifully rendered maps stuck in the back of the book are littered with dwarven mines, monster-filled swamps and dragon-haunted peaks, any one of which could be neatly transplanted over to home games. Even the special character options, such as the undead Hollow One race, could easily be slipped into a standard *D&D* campaign with minimal fuss.

That isn't to say there aren't sparks of originality here and there, of course. The Krynn Dynasty, a nation of creatures

traditionally considered monstrous foes, is a fascinating creation, for example, as is the gravity- and time-warping magic they use. It's just that the most creative ideas impact things on a local level, rather than ones that radically shape the flow of the entire world.

Okay, you may not consider this to be a particularly positive thing if you're sick and tired of the fantasy staples. However, for those of us who want a solid D&D world to explore but want something other than the current edition's staple Forgotten Realms setting, it all works rather wonderfully.

And in case you were wondering, this all applies even if you haven't even heard of Critical Role until you opened up this review. If you and your players are counted among the show's legion devoted fans, though, you'll probably be able to squeeze even more delicious story goo from its pages. On top of this, fans will probably be able to all-but ignore what's probably the biggest issue with the world's rather loose premise.

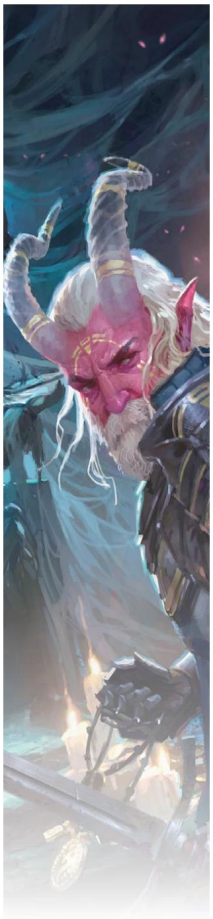
This is useful, as it really feels as though the book's first few vital pages are written mostly with existing fans in mind. Oh, there's plenty of words devoted to explaining politics and history, but you get a lot more careful nuance than the broad strokes that really allow newcomers to get a handhold on what makes Wildemount special.

It doesn't help that the map that accompanies the list of regional powers at the core of the setting doesn't actually label most of the nations you've just been reading about, either. Instead you get a geographical map that seems to assume you'll fill in the border markers yourself.

It would be sad if this caused any potential converts to bounce off the *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount*, as once you get your initial reading squared away it really is a very impressive piece of work. Within its pages you get huge amount of content, ranging from new adventures and magic items to long lists of important NPCs and the secret history of the world.

By far the lengthiest section of the book is an incredibly extensive gazetteer that runs through the details of dozens of towns, forests, dungeons and cities stretched from one end of the continent to the other. The writing is snappy and packed with little titbits of information ranging from who runs the local government to what kind of gear you might able to pick up in the shops.





Almost every single one of the locations it outlines manage to have something that makes them stand out from the crowd and feel worthy of hosting an adventure. What could easily have been just another trading post is instead home to a special breed of silkworms cultivated by dwarven clans, rife with struggles between farming families and spies trying to claim their secrets.

On top of this, almost every one of these entries comes with at least one idea for a plot hook or an adventure for GMs to seize on, with many offering a handful of suggestions depending on your party's level. There are well over 100 of these scattered throughout the book, and while some may represent a quick diversion that adds a bit of local flavour to a session, others can form surprisingly deep and creative quests that might reshape an entire campaign.

It's no exaggeration to say that you could potentially run an entire game about adventurers roving through Wildemount using nothing but these story prompts. This is one hell of an achievement, and one that sets a rather high bar for future setting books to aspire to.

Of course, these aren't the only adventure ideas nestled within the *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount*. There are also a quartet of solidly written quests, each of which aims to cover a party's first handful of sessions and get them exploring a different part of the region.

A couple of them are given to the hand-holding found in many adventures aimed at brand new players, but they're a wonderful way to ensure that your heroes always have a way to get going in whatever part of Wildemount you want to focus on. The downside to all this is that it can make it tough to actually use all four of the adventures, as they're all aimed at the same, fairly narrow, set of early-game levels.

Accompanying all these glorious tools for the GMs among us are the near-obligatory handful of new character options for players to try out. Actually, calling it a handful might not be quite fair, as between the magic items and the plethora of racial options you get rather a lot of new toys to choose from. Few of them seem particularly ground-breaking, but they represent rather good value for money – especially if you're looking to pick up all the monstrous and rare races scattered across *D&D*'s back catalogue.

The coolest and most potent new powers all come tied up in the funky 'dunamancy' magic found in the Krynn Dynasty. This gives both fighters and spellcasters a few ways to start messing with things like time, gravity and fate and, honestly, really drives home the fact that Wildemount got its start as a homebrew setting.

This isn't because it's bad or even silly, mind you. Rather, it feels like something ripped from a homebrew because it's so unselfconsciously cool. Warriors who can fight using time-echoes of themselves as allies is just the kind of thing a thousand GMs sitting at home have sketched out in the margins of their notebooks. However, it the *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* was just what it took to get those ideas written up, playtested and put into an official *D&D* product.

This is the heart of the book, and perhaps of Wildemount as a whole. It's a world that so many of us could imagine creating, one settlement and dungeon at a time, but with slick production values and a bit of actual editing. Even if you aren't a fan of Critical Role, this is a book well worth checking out and one that sets a high standard for the game's future releases.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

A world so beautifully messy it feels like you could have made it yourself. That's a good thing.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED D&D ESSENTIALS KIT...

If you hopped into *D&D* aboard the Critical Role train, this is a wonderful place to head after getting your toes wet with the starter set



SECOND THOUGHTS

12 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NEW **PATHFINDER**

Pathfinder: Second Edition is out, bringing over a decade of improvements and additions to the fantasy RPG. Pazio's director of game design Jason Bulmahn talks us through what's new – and what isn't

Words by **Matt Jarvis**

1 IT'S BEEN PLAYTESTED TO PERFECTION

Pathfinder: Second Edition is officially out on August 1st, but a playtest version of the new game was released last summer as a way of ensuring that the finished thing lived up to its full potential – by putting the designers' changes fully through their paces.

"The playtest was specifically designed to stress test the game," Bulmahn says. "Its entire purpose was to push the boundaries of the game and see where it broke. Some of the challenges there were that it didn't break where we expected it to or, y'know, the characters were too durable or they weren't durable enough."

The playtest game was packed with ideas that the designers were considering for *Second Edition*. Some of them worked perfectly, others needed a bit more tweaking and a few just didn't pan out at all – but the team didn't hesitate to make the decisions necessary to make the proper book as strong as possible for players.

"Some aspects of the skills system didn't quite work the way we wanted. There was a lot of things that we threw out there to see how the audience would interact with it, and whether or not they would find it acceptable," Bulmahn continues. "We're changing a lot of the base assumptions of the game; in the end, we still want the play style to be the same, we still want the stories to be the same. But how we get about it we changed in some ways, and we wanted to find of where that felt like a natural progression and where other players might feel like we went in a direction that wasn't allowing us to tell the stories that we were telling."

Bulmahn admits that the five-month playtest was "a challenging endeavour", but that getting players' feedback on *Second Edition* while it was still in the works was key to ensuring it lands with a bang.

"We learned a lot about where we had gone right, and kind of where we had gone wrong," he says. "Making it, frankly, a relatively easy job to patch up some of those problems.

"In the end the results and feedback we got really did allow us to make a better game."

2 IT'S THE PATHFINDER YOU REMEMBER, BUT NOT QUITE AS YOU REMEMBER IT

It's called *Second Edition* for a good reason – this is a very much a new version of Pathfinder, not a totally new game. The things that make *Pathfinder* its own RPG are still here: the tactical combat, the way magic works, the way characters can use their feats to take down dungeons full of foes.

"When people come to it, they don't want to be playing an entirely different game – they're playing *Pathfinder: Second Edition* because they liked *Pathfinder: First Edition*," Bulmahn says. "They're interested in what it has to offer because they like that style of game."

At the same time, like any game, *Pathfinder* has aged over time – some parts of the rules have grown a little flabby over the years, and look less sprightly than some of the more modern RPGs that have sprung up in its wake. *Second Edition* brings the experience back up to speed for 2019.

"That was how we approach everything: what can we do to make this a better experience for people running the game, people playing the game, but at the same time leave them feeling like they're playing *Pathfinder*?" Bulmahn says.

Bulmahn is confident that veterans will feel at home in the new edition, with the changes geared towards making what was already so good about the RPG even better.

"Whenever you're redesigning a game, it's always a question of: what can you do to make the game experience better that doesn't cost the game its soul?" the designer says. "When it comes to what we changed and what we altered, we always had that in the back of our mind: where are we going, how are we changing this to be a better expression of the game that we know it is?"

3 IT DOESN'T FIX WHAT ISN'T BROKEN

Second Edition features plenty of improvements and fixes that have sprung up in the decade-plus since *First Edition* launched. Some are better ways of doing things that were in the first game, while others are brand new systems and features that replace those elements with something new – which were then fine-tuned to make sure they were the absolute best option.

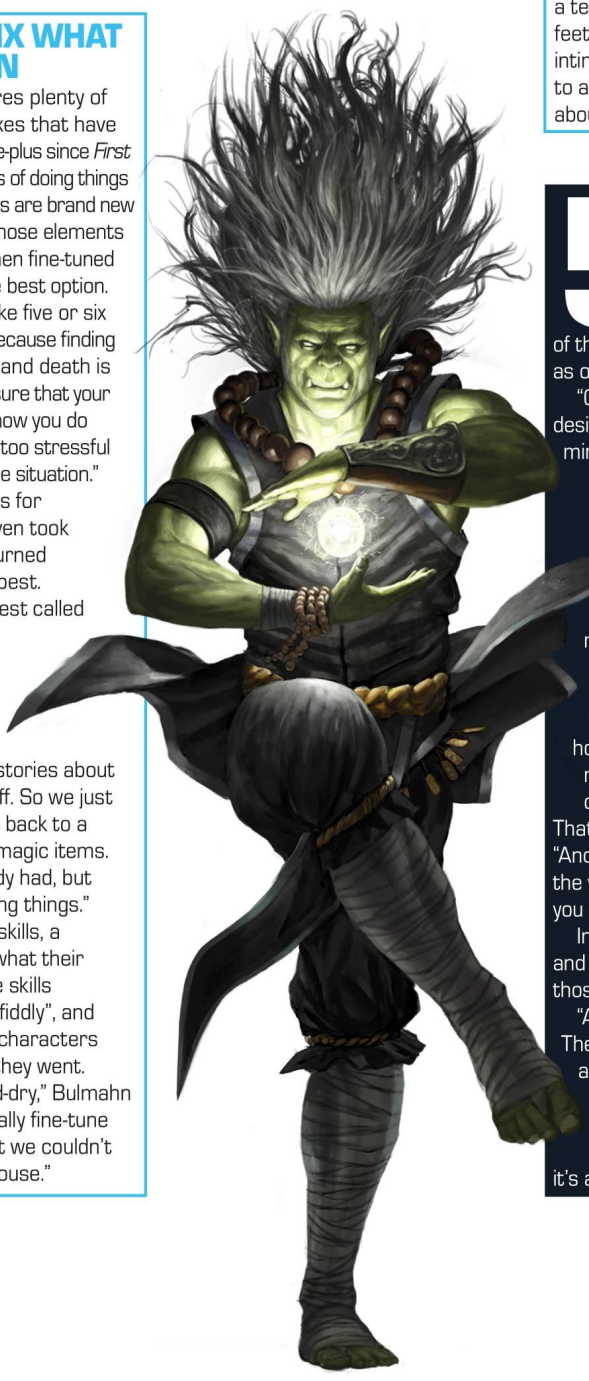
"Death and dying went through like five or six different iterations," Bulmahn says. "Because finding that right tipping point between life and death is tricky business and you wanna make sure that your game has a lot of tension in it – and how you do death and dying can really make that too stressful or can drain all of the stress out of the situation."

But the team didn't change things for the sake of changing them – and even took out new additions entirely when it turned out that the old ways were still the best.

"There was a system in the playtest called resonance, that was basically there to limit how you use magic items in the game," Bulmahn explains. "The fanbase was not interested in that system. They didn't feel like it would allow them to kind of tell the same stories about using all these magic items and stuff. So we just pulled the system entirely and went back to a more gold-based approach to limit magic items. Which was a system that we already had, but we were exploring a new way of doing things."

Another example was signature skills, a way of helping players understand what their character's class is best at. But the skills turned out to be "unnecessary and fiddly", and stopped players from making their characters exactly what they wanted – so out they went.

"Some of them were real cut-and-dry," Bulmahn says. "The playtest allowed us to really fine-tune some of those systems in ways that we couldn't do with just a handful of games in-house."



4 IT'S EASIER TO LEARN AND PLAY...

A big focus for the team was keeping the overall feeling of the gameplay the same for existing fans, but also letting newcomers jump into *Second Edition* with as little effort as possible.

"For *Second Edition*, we wanted that [tactical combat] to still be a strong part of *Pathfinder*, but we wanted to do it in such a way that a new player or a player that was just learning the game would have an easier time to get into the action," Bulmahn says. "So figuring out a way to streamline the way actions work and make that a simpler process makes that kind of onboarding easier, and it still keeps that depth of strategy that people want out of the game."

Second Edition represents a way of getting into *Pathfinder* without having to trawl through 12 years of books and adventures, collecting all of the most important parts of *First Edition* in a single volume.

"We have an audience that enjoys the style of game that *Pathfinder* is, and I think the barrier to making that a bigger audience is oftentimes how complicated the rules can seem," Bulmahn admits. "*Pathfinder* being a ten-year-old game means that there's three linear feet of bookshelf filled with rulebooks. That alone is intimidating, so just having a fresh start is a new way to approach this. But it goes deeper than that. It's about making it so that the game is more intuitive."

5 ...BUT IT'S JUST AS DEEP

The rules are easier to pick up if you're new (and if you're not), but don't expect *Pathfinder* to suddenly fit on one side of A4. The second edition of the game lives up to *Pathfinder*'s reputation as one of the crunchier RPGs out there.

"One of the things that I stress with the team of designers that I work with is that what we want is the minimum amount of complexity for the maximum amount of depth," Bulmahn explain. "So I want a game that, yeah, you have to learn some rules. It's not just sit down and tell whatever story you want to tell; you have to learn how the game functions."

The important thing is that *Pathfinder*'s meat is easier to chew through than ever, giving players a fully-featured toolkit to create a detailed world and characters.

"I want you to spend as little time learning how the game functions before you start making decisions about what the vision of your character is and what the vision of your story is. That's what *Pathfinder* is best at," Bulmahn says. "And the more I can get some of the rules out of the way and get you to the choices that define who you are and how you play at the table, the better."

In the end, it's telling those stories that come first – and *Pathfinder* is still geared towards amply rewarding those willing to get to grips with its wide-ranging ruleset.

"Are we a more technical game? Yes, absolutely. There are games out there on the market that are certainly a lot more rules-light," Bulmahn acknowledges. "But for learning those extra rules, we want to give you this broad, deep world that can fully express the idea that you have in your head. So it's a little bit more effort, but it has a lot more payoff."

6 DON'T EXPECT IT TO BE ANOTHER DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: 5E

The original *Pathfinder* was created as a spin-off from *Dungeons & Dragons 3.5*, making it a distant relative of today's *D&D: Fifth Edition*. Although it's similarly streamlined its experience, *Pathfinder: Second Edition* sees the game continue to strike out in its own direction – rather than playing catch-up with *D&D*, it's running alongside it.

"We share a similar lineage with *Fifth Edition*, that's absolutely true," Bulmahn says. "We are coming from a similar place. But we've taken a different fork down the road. We're trying to find a way to allow you to express whatever character idea comes into your head, whatever game idea comes into your head. We want to give you the tools to make that happen. That's the big thing about *Pathfinder*: we want to help you tell the story that you want to tell – and not just as a game master but as a player as well."

Bulmahn says that what continues to make *Pathfinder* stand alone is the way that players' imaginations are given real meaning and power at the table by the game's set of rules.

"If you want to be the mystic monk who occasionally loses control and grows bear claws and fights people, we have rules that can make that happen; maybe your grandfather was a werebear," he suggests. "Whatever idea you come up with in your head, we want to find a way that you can map yourself through the rules to make that not only be meaningful to the story, but also meaningful in combat or in town. The rules have to support it for the story to have meaning."

7 CHARACTERS ARE MORE PERSONAL THAN EVER

The way that players create characters has been overhauled to make it simpler, but without taking away from the customisability that we all come to roleplaying games for.

Instead of a race such as human or elf, characters now have an ancestry that combines with a background to sketch out their origins and help define their talents. Completing the character is the classic roleplaying selection of a class, which further outlines their abilities.

"You have proficiency that defines how good you are at things and you have a whole bunch of base abilities and actions that any character can perform," Bulmahn explains.

As characters level up, they gain feats that grant them new skills with every new level. These feats let players choose new features to round out their character, both general and those specific to their character's ancestry and class. Although the list of feats in the game is long, players only have to choose from a few each time they level up – making it easy to build a character to your liking and not feel overwhelmed by learning the rules.

"That process customises your experience at the table," Bulmahn says. "You're always adding to and growing your character experience. But that's an additive process – it's usually just one or two at a time, you get a chance to get used to it, then you get another one. Those just kind of expand the options and choices that you have at the table.

"Over time your character becomes more of a rich, complex expression of your adventures."



8 YOU CAN PLAY AS A GOBLIN – AND BE MORE THAN A MONSTER

Goblins have been a mascot of *Pathfinder* – and its sci-fi sequel, *Starfinder* – since the beginning, taking centre stage in the first chapter in *First Edition*'s *Rise of the Runelords* Adventure Path, *Burnt Offerings*, shortly after the game launched in 2007. (The scenario even included lyrics for the now fan-favourite Goblin Song.)

The designers later experimented with goblin player characters in the series of *We Be Goblins!* modules released for Free RPG Day.

"Every year we would release one for Free RPG Day, and people just loved them," says Bulmahn. "The years where we didn't do a *We Be Goblins!* adventure, we got complaints."

With players already calling for more opportunities to slip into the green skin of the food- and song-loving creatures, Bulmahn calls the decision to make them a full ancestry in *Second Edition* "the obvious choice".

"When it came time for us to design *Second Edition*, we were talking about: what else can we add to the default options that speaks to *Pathfinder*? We toyed around with orcs, we toyed around with catfolk, ratfolk, tengu, lots of different things. In the middle of the meeting, I was just like: 'Well, guys, it has to be goblins. Why are we even considering this? This isn't even a discussion! It has to be goblins, that's what we're known for.' We have goblin plush and goblin banks and crazy goblin stuff, all over the place!"

Making goblins more than fodder for players to cut down during their adventures gives them a new dimension in *Pathfinder: Second Edition*, taking them beyond what Bulmahn calls "a pretty shallow stereotype".

"Any ancestry in the game – be it goblin, be it orc, be it hobgoblins, whatever – treating them as monolithic evil is too simple for today's standards," he explains. "Allowing players to explore that narrative, to have them be introduced to the game, to take them on a journey of exploration and acceptance, is a story worth telling.

"The same goes for all of our fantasy ancestries that are a lot more like human than we care to admit. Giving them a deeper story, giving them more of a narrative, giving them agency and depth, is kind of something that we really think is important – and it's something I look forward to exploring in the coming years."



9 IT'S FANTASY, BUT MODERN

It's not just goblins that Bulmahn hopes to break away from fantasy cliché in *Pathfinder: Second Edition*. Asked about the way that fantasy as a whole has evolved since *Pathfinder* first came out, he points out that there are parts of the genre stretching back years that deserve to be updated for today.

"There's a lot of tropes that float around that seem innocent enough at first blush, but if you dig deeper some of them have some pretty problematic roots," he says.

"Finding ways to free ourselves from some of that and move the game in a more positive, open, inclusive direction, that's the right way to go. As a modern game, that's the responsible way to go."

10 YOU CAN CONTINUE YOUR 1E CAMPAIGN

Thousands of players have invested countless hours into the first *Pathfinder*, and the idea of a *Second Edition* may have some asking why they should bother if it means starting from scratch. The good news is that you can bring your campaign and characters from *First Edition* over into *Second Edition* with a minimum of fuss.

"Fundamentally, if you're a character in our world and yesterday you were a *First Edition* character and today you are a *Second Edition* character, I don't want you to notice," Bulmahn says.

It's all part of letting players keep telling their own stories, and feel like *Second Edition* is still the world they known and love in an even better form.

"That gets back to making sure that the story is the same, right?" Bulmahn says. "If you get to the new version of *Pathfinder* and fire giants are now first-level monsters and skeletons you only fight at 20th level, all of a sudden none of the stories make sense."

There are some caveats, though. For example, magic-shooting gunslingers from *First Edition* will have to hold on for the time being, as the class isn't included in the core rules. That doesn't mean it won't come to *Second Edition* eventually – and for the time being, most players should find that their character makes the leap unscathed.

"If you're a middle-of-the-road fantasy character, I want the world to be the same world it was yesterday," Bulmahn promises. "I just want the rules engine to work better, and I want your narrative power to be better."

11 THE WORLD HAS CHANGED

It's not only *Pathfinder*'s rules that have changed. The game's setting of Golarion, now known as the Age of Lost Omens, has been brought forward just as many years as the game itself, advancing from the 2007 timeline of 4707 to this year's new era of 4719. Although it's not quite the jump to the far-flung future of the universe explored in *Starfinder*, the movement forward in time has let the designers revisit parts of the world and ensure it's set up to give players plenty of new things to discover.

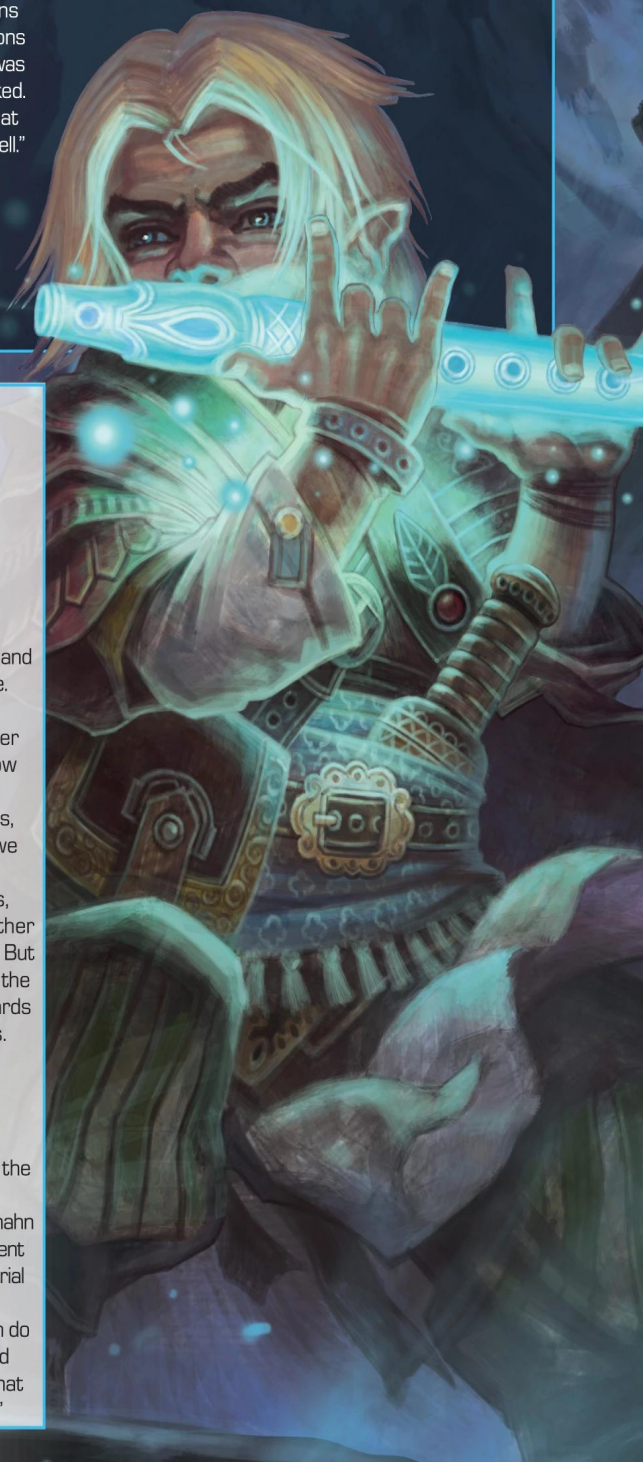
"With the world, we have a chance to advance that as well," Bulmahn says. "Looking back at how we built the Lost Omens world, there were a lot of decisions that were made out of necessity, there were decisions made that it came time to decide what this nation was going to be, or it came time to decide how this worked. Over the past 12 years, we told a lot of stories in that world and it's time for it to advance and evolve as well."

Bulmahn says that the world changes won't necessarily play a major part in *Second Edition*'s core rules, but players will notice that the game as a whole has moved on in several ways.

"I don't think a lot of that is necessarily mechanically, although plenty of the world will change and grow with the new ruleset," he explains. "Most of it just allows us to re-examine and have the world itself change and evolve with the stories that are more relevant to us today."

As *Second Edition* ushers in a new age for *Pathfinder*, it also means closing the book on the previous edition's storylines, beginning a new chapter for the game's official scenarios with *First Edition* now as its history.

"That goes back to all the Adventure Paths that we've had," Bulmahn continues. "Those narratives over the past 12 years will be wrapping up and codified in the world, and now it's time to tell new stories in a world that is very much like the world that we had before, but has changed and is moving forward."



12 IT WILL ONLY GET BETTER

Pathfinder: Second Edition brings together years of its designers' experience expanding and refining the original game with the feedback from players who've spent the last decade seeing the game evolve.

Bulmahn says that a big part of *Second Edition* is the ability to look back on how *First Edition* changed and use that knowledge to plan ahead for the new game.

"In *First Edition* a lot of the things we added to the game were just that – they were additive after the game was designed," he says. "We didn't know where we were gonna go until we got there. And while that certainly made for some exciting products, it also meant that there were some things that we could do then other things that we couldn't do."

He gives the example of character archetypes, which let players push their characters even further by swapping class features for alternate elements. But some of the game's classes weren't designed with the system in mind, making the likes of clerics and wizards look decidedly limited compared to other classes.

Problems like that have been solved for *Second Edition*, which has been designed to allow the team to keep the game moving forward and add even more exciting features in the future.

"We were able to say, 'We know we want this in the game, let's make sure that the core of the game is accepting of that piece when we need to add it,'" Bulmahn explains. "It opens up the design for us in a lot of different ways, so that when we look back at some of the material we did in *First Edition* and are thinking of how we're going to import it or add it to *Second Edition*, we can do it in different ways – ways that feel more natural and holistic as part of the game. Kind of a full tapestry that doesn't just have things that were stitched on later."



PATHFINDER: SECOND EDITION

Magic, monsters & maths

Designer: Paizo team | **Artist:** Various

638 | 13+ | £48

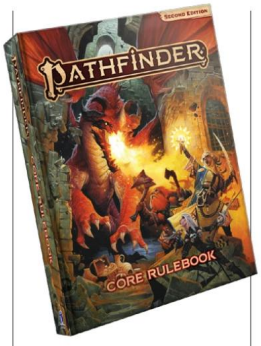
When you sit down to a game of *Pathfinder: Second Edition* it's very hard to forget that you are, in fact, playing a game. Where other titles turn their back on complex rules and highly-tuned characters in favour of light-touch storytelling, Paizo's latest take on traditional fantasy adventuring absolutely revels in it – for better and for worse.

A great many people will see this focus on mechanics and raw numbers as an instant red flag. However, if you've ever sat down with an RPG character sheet and felt the urge to tinker until the rules on the page fit in with the badass you picture in your mind, creating and playing out your chosen hero can be unbelievably satisfying.

We say 'hero' there, because *Second Edition* is very much a game about larger-than-life heroes setting out on magical fantasy quests. While you could certainly use it to weave tales of courtly intrigue or desperate wilderness survival, the heart of the RPG revolves around beating up monsters, exploring dungeons and extracting big piles of loot.

If that all sounds very familiar, that's because – like its predecessor – this new *Pathfinder* is directly based on *Dungeons & Dragons*. Indeed, tucked away at the back of the core rulebook you can still find the text of *D&D*'s 19-year-old Open Gaming Licence. While it retains a lot of the touchstones that have helped define the genre, such as classes, spell slots and the d20, however, the developers haven't been afraid to make a few sweeping changes.

Perhaps the most obvious of these is that the smorgasbord of action types available in earlier editions has been heavily streamlined. Rather than having turns divided up into distinct chunks, every character simply gets to do three things each round. Want to spend your entire turn sprinting across the battlefield? Go for it. Feel like stabbing a dude, raising your shield and then using it to smack someone else? That's fine too.



While it can take a little while for players who cut their teeth on *First Edition* to adjust, this single change helps combat flow a little easier. It also helps avoid the depressing moments where you waste a bundle of actions because there's nothing useful to do with them.

More than a few of the game's sacred cows have been sacrificed for this new edition, too. The noble paladin is no longer a core class, for example, having been replaced by the much broader 'champion.' A character's ancestry also plays a reduced role in choosing their class, allowing you to flesh out kinds of weird and wonderful concepts without sacrificing too much effectiveness.

In fact, this is one area where *Pathfinder: Second Edition* truly shines. There are plenty of games out there that offer incredible choice when it comes to character creation, but it's rare for these choices to be backed up with hard mechanical consequences. This means that the enormous blade being lugged about by the goblin barbarian isn't just a reskinned longsword, it actually deals extra damage, while that pirate you dreamed up can find abilities helping her specialise in underwater fighting, climbing ropes and navigation.

All this minutiae and minor details come at a cost, and that's complexity. Even first-level characters have a long list of abilities, powers and skills to pick from and, as campaigns stretch on and power levels climb, things can begin to get increasingly hard to manage. Much of the fun in *Pathfinder* comes from playing your character effectively, and doing that requires you to be on top of spells, special actions, focus powers, magic items and much more besides.

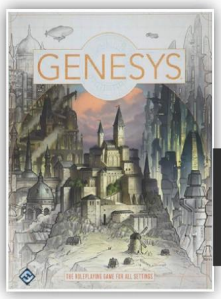
On top of this, the core ruleset seems absolutely determined to make sure that virtually every action a hero might take is codified, written down and measured. There are more than 100 words devoted to the rules for pointing out a hidden enemy to your friends, for example, with different mechanical results depending on how the dice roll goes.

Enjoying *Pathfinder* isn't easy. It requires you to find real enjoyment in mechanics as well as roleplaying, a love of shameless heroism, and either the willingness to memorise a lot of rules or the confidence to ignore the ones you don't feel like following. If you and your friends tick those boxes, however, it does an incredible job of hitting everything you could want from a brand new RPG.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

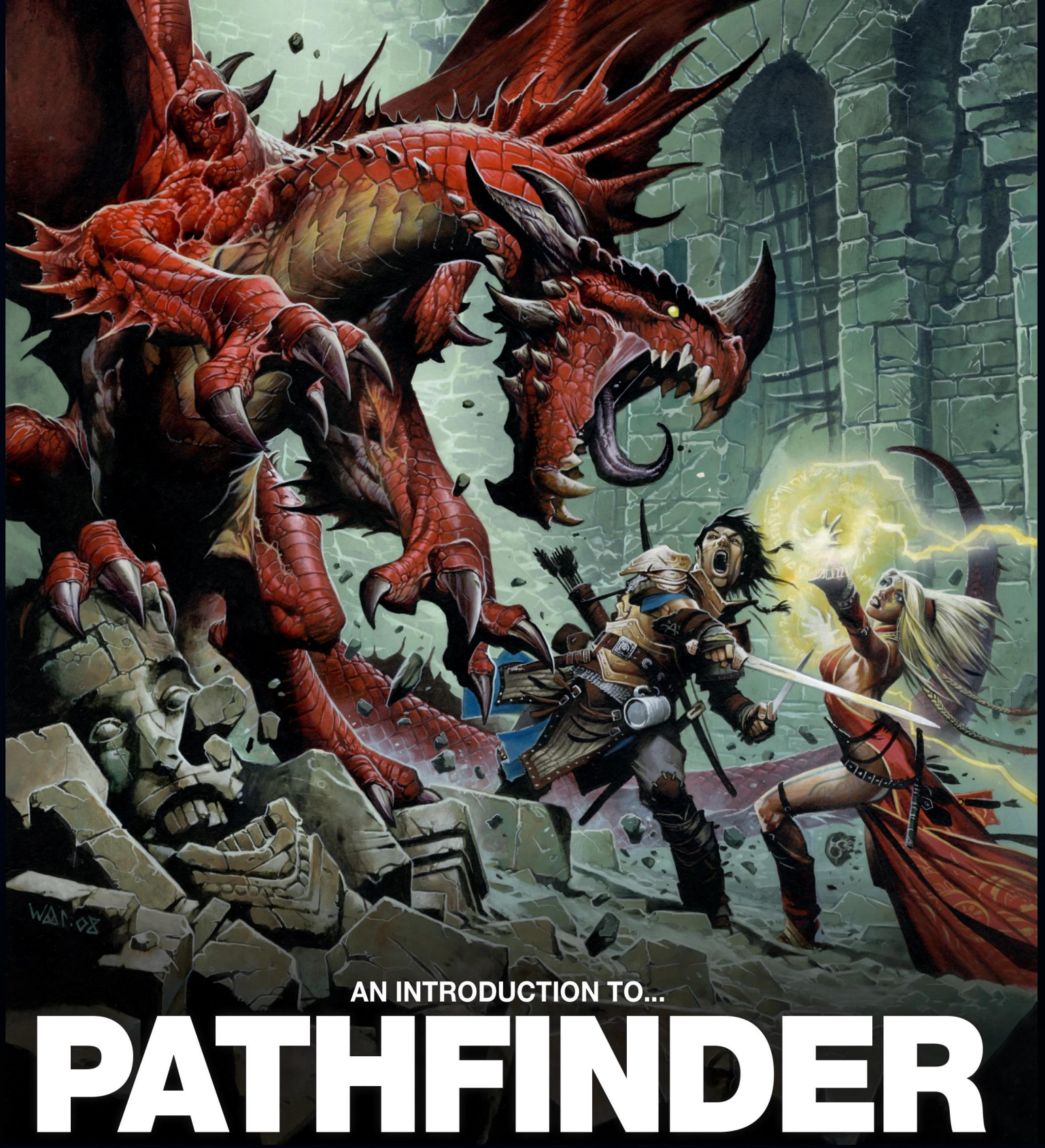
PLAY IT? YES

A slab of a core book for a monster of a system that offers incredible customisation at the cost of more complex mechanics.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... GENESYS

Pathfinder's second edition is a fair bit chunkier than Fantasy Flight's genre-spanning RPG, but it has the same love of fiddling with characters and rules to create exactly the hero you want.



AN INTRODUCTION TO...

PATHFINDER

Created as an offshoot of Dungeons & Dragons, Pathfinder has since grown into its own roleplaying giant. As the RPG's sci-fi sequel Starfinder prepares to blast off this summer, we discover why it's still worth visiting the fantasy world of Golarion

2008 marked a revolution in roleplaying. Wizards of the Coast announced that the fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* would drop the Open Game Licence (OGL) introduced with the third edition of the RPG in favour of a new system known as the Game System Licence (GSL). The decision caused uproar among fans, as the OGL had allowed third-party creators to use elements of *D&D* to create their own roleplaying titles, whereas the GSL offered a far more restrictive system that only permitted use of certain approved phrases and simply referred players back to the fourth edition rules, rather than allowing the rules themselves to be used in other titles. (Wizards would later reverse the decision with *D&D*'s fifth edition in 2015, returning to the OGL.)

What followed the shocking announcement was another surprise, as Paizo Publishing revealed its plans to take a stand against the introduction of GSL and continue to release adventures for *D&D*'s 3.5 ruleset under the OGL. Paizo had been closely linked with Wizards since its inception, taking control of the official *D&D* magazines *Dungeon* and *Dragon* until it dropped them in 2007. What's more, Paizo announced that it wouldn't just be releasing adventures for *D&D 3.5* – it would be launching its very own roleplaying system and world, based on the 3.5 rules and released with the OGL. *Pathfinder* was born. ►



■ *Pathfinder is full of weird and wonderful characters, such as the bomb-throwing goblin Mogmurch.*

The move divided the roleplaying community, with some fans sticking to the older 3.5 rules at the heart of *Pathfinder* and others moving onto *D&D*'s updated fourth edition. *Pathfinder* was much more than a shell wrapped around the 3.5 core, however – lead designer Jason Bulmahn and his team made significant changes to the systems, with Bulmahn's own design documents originally referring to the game as '*3.75*'.

Pathfinder's revised rules were an evolution on the 3.5 framework, massively expanding the options for character classes in order to make sticking with a single class more appealing for 20 levels – something that Bulmahn felt was an issue in *D&D* – and clean up elements that were considered messy to attract more newcomers. Other tweaks affected combat actions, skills, balancing and spell-casting, but a key part of the design was that *Pathfinder* remained compatible with *D&D 3.5*, allowing existing adventures and characters to be used with the improved rules.

To help ensure that *Pathfinder* ticked all the right boxes for players, Paizo held a year-long public playtest of the RPG split into alpha and beta releases, providing the chance to fine-tune different sections of the final game. More than 45,000 people ended up participating, offering over 100,000 comments on Paizo's online forums, before the final 576-page core rulebook was released in August 2009.

In the nearly eight years since, Pathfinder has continued to evolve thanks to dozens of expansions and supplements, from bestiaries and guides to races and combat to scenarios focused solely on horror. One of the biggest early additions were archetypes, introduced in the *Advanced Player's Guide*, which allowed players to customise their character's class. Other rules, detailing elements such as chases, duels and corruption, have similarly been introduced, and can be added to or removed from the base rules as game masters see fit.

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Although *Pathfinder*'s rules and systems can be transplanted to any setting, Paizo's adventures and materials for the game take place on the planet of Golarion, a fantasy realm located in what's known as the Material Plane. There are eight continents on the world, separated by five oceans and nine seas, and each of the regions has a distinct history, environment and civilisations living there, from Casmaron, the home of the Kelesh and Vudra empires, to the frozen tundra of The Crown of the World.

Much of Paizo's official narrative for the game takes place in the Inner Sea, which has at its centre the city of Absalom where characters from around the world come to meet – a sort of fantasy Mos Eisley Cantina, if you will. Absalom also has a cathedral containing a rock said to have fallen from the heavens and that holds the power to turn you into a god, if you're into unlimited power and all that jazz. As well as Absalom, there's also the opposing nations of Andoran and Cheliax, plus the Egyptian-inspired territory of Osirion and the raider-infested Lands of the Linnorm Kings.

As with any classic work of fantasy literature, there are many secrets and hidden histories in Golarion, including mention of warring deities, long-lost kingdoms and the belief that at the core of Golarion is imprisoned the evil mad god Rovagug.

Pathfinder's world and narrative are built out twice a year by the *Pathfinder Adventure Path* scenarios, which offer a linked campaign beginning with *Rise of the Runelords* in August 2007 and continuing through more than a dozen serial instalments. Paizo also releases around three *Pathfinder Modules* a year, which offer short adventures that can be played on their own or woven into part of an existing campaign.

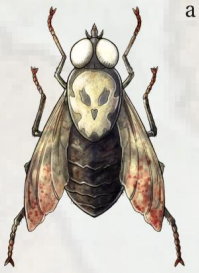
Outside of the RPG, *Pathfinder*'s universe has also been explored in more than 30 novels known as the *Pathfinder Tales* series, as well as audiobooks and comic books – one of which even involved crossovers with Edgar Rice Burroughs' literary characters Tarzan and John Carter.



■ *One of Pathfinder's biggest changes to the D&D formula is expanding the flexibility of player character classes.*

As in any roleplaying game, the focus of *Pathfinder* is on characterisation and storytelling, allowing players to explore the world as guided by a game master and flesh out the background of their tabletop avatar and the setting around them, discovering secrets, engaging in battles, encountering the locals and adventuring.







DIFFERENT PATHS

Soon after it was released, *Pathfinder* quickly emerged from the shadow of *D&D*, picking up a number of the roleplaying-focused ENnie awards and even overtaking *Dungeons & Dragons* in the rankings of best-selling RPGs from 2011 to 2013 to become the most popular roleplaying title in the world – the first time *D&D* had been ousted from the top spot since 1974.

This success quickly led to spin-offs, including the *Pathfinder Adventure Card Game*, which launched in 2013 and distils the RPG's *Rise of the Runelords* Adventure Path into a co-op campaign that can be played using the cards found in the set in around an hour and a half. The game has since been expanded itself with new classes, adventure decks and other expansions, as well as being adapted for phones and tablets as *Pathfinder Adventures*.

Meanwhile, WizKids has produced a line of pre-painted miniatures for use in the roleplaying game under the *Pathfinder Battles* name, while online tools for enhancing a tabletop campaign exist in the form of packages of rulebooks and character creation utilities in mobile and PC app *HeroLab* and *Syrinscape* soundboards to add atmosphere.

There's also *Pathfinder Online*, a massively multiplayer online video game for PC that first emerged in 2012 and went through years of testing and development difficulty after raising more than $1 million on Kickstarter. In March 2017, Paizo announced that it would commit to completing the troubled title within a year.

That's not to mention the Pathfinder Society, the organised play system that provides a universal campaign for players around the world, with players joining one of a number of competing factions and participating in campaigns broken up into seasons comprised of multiple scenarios set across Golarion. Actions and achievements during each season affect the continuing storyline, and Pathfinder Society meet-ups are often held at major gaming conventions throughout the year.

The *Pathfinder Adventure Card Game* has its own guild that features a similar ongoing narrative split into seasons made up of around 30 90-minute scenarios, with scenario bundles released each month.

WHY SHOULD YOU TRY IT?

Pathfinder remains one of – if not the – most popular roleplaying games out there, thanks to its accessible systems and flexible nature.

Whether you choose to play using Paizo's official line of adventures or not, the streamlined *D&D 3.5* rules provide plenty to dig into and enjoy some of the best roleplaying gameplay to ever hit the tabletop.

If you opt to adventure around Golarion, you'll find an incredibly expansive and well-realised universe to explore, with plenty of extra materials to indulge your intrigue about the world's history and inhabitants.

Pathfinder is an ideal starting place for first-time roleplayers thanks to its refined ruleset, but also has plenty to offer experienced players due to the expansive character creation options, large amount of supplements and story available, and the highly popular organised play. Especially if you're a fan of *D&D 3.5* and have somehow never encountered *Pathfinder*, the game serves as essentially an ultimate version of the much-beloved system.

What's more, if you're more a fan of sci-fi than fantasy, you'll soon be able to experience some of *Pathfinder*'s gameplay for yourself, as this year's sequel *Starfinder* looks to build on the game with refined rules, new alien monsters, races and classes, rules for starship combat, and a story set in the same universe of Golarion but thousands of years after the fantasy adventures take place. *Starfinder* will be compatible with *Pathfinder*, meaning your characters and campaigns should be able to make the leap between the games.

If *Starfinder* manages to capture the same magical mixture of accessible gameplay, fulfilling mechanics and gripping world-building as its fantasy forebear, it may very well do for science-fiction roleplaying what *Pathfinder* did for fantasy – and that will be something very special indeed. ▪

■ ***Left: Gods, represented here by their symbols, play a prominent role in the history of Golarion.***

■ ***Below: One of the many fantasy inhabitants of Pathfinder's world.***







THE PATH AHEAD

After toppling Dungeons & Dragons from its throne a decade ago, Pathfinder finds itself faced by the might of Fifth Edition. As it prepares for its first major revision, can the fantasy RPG keep up?

Words by **Matt Jarvis**

As someone who spent his formative years in the 1980s playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, Jason Bulmahn could have never imagined he would himself go on to become a guiding light into roleplaying for a new generation of gamers just two decades later.

"That never gets not weird for me!" he laughs. "It's always strange to run into folks who are like, 'Yeah, I first played roleplaying games with *Pathfinder*!' I'm like, 'No, c'mon now…'"

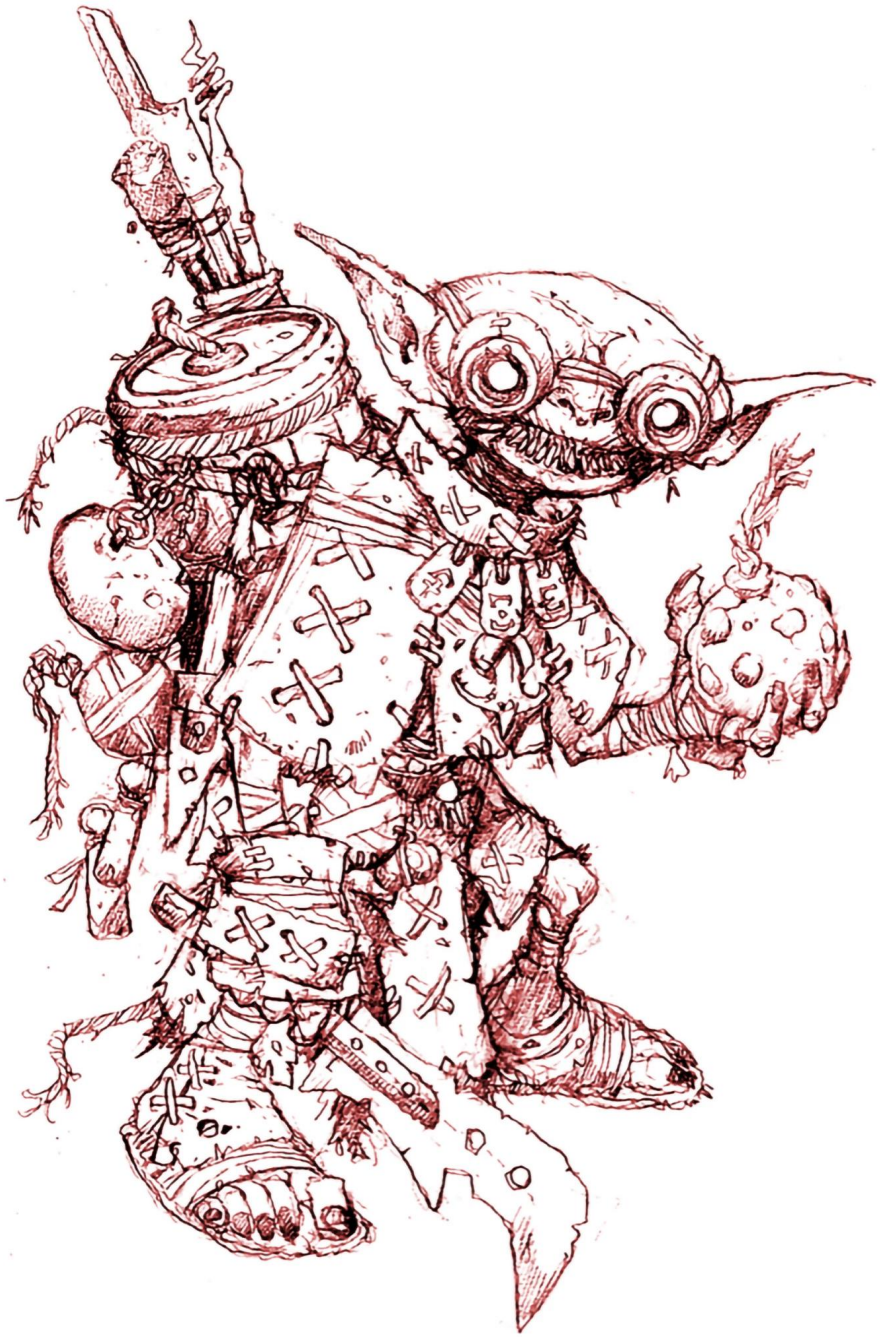
It is Bulmahn who has been at the heart of *Pathfinder* since the fantasy RPG first appeared ten years ago; as director of game design at Paizo, he was lead designer for *Pathfinder*'s first edition and now leads the team working on its upcoming second incarnation, which launches into a playtest this month ahead of a planned full release next year.

"It is really exciting how that audience has grown over the years and how it's kind of matured," he says. "We've kind of reached a point now where there are people who consider themselves old-school *Pathfinder* players. They were there in the alpha playtests."

As its creators and audience have expanded and evolved, so has *Pathfinder* itself, rapidly ballooning from an evolution of *Dungeons & Dragons 3.5* created as a reaction to Wizards of the Coast's restrictive fourth edition to a roleplaying giant in itself, with a singular universe – the capacious setting of Golarion – and gameplay systems that, while derivative, were distinctive enough to take it beyond being a simple act of preservation.

The significant modifications *Pathfinder* layered on top of *D&D* (the game was nicknamed '*D&D 3.75*' during development) converted roleplaying diehards and newcomers alike. Within two years of the first edition's launch in August 2009, *Pathfinder* had become the first roleplaying game to outsell *D&D* since the seminal title's release almost four decades prior – a lead it went on to hold for over three years. *Dungeons & Dragons*' fifth edition retook the crown in 2014, spurred in part by streamlined gameplay changes and a free rules taster. *Pathfinder* has continued to nip at *D&D*'s tail since, offsetting its aging systems with fresh injections of supplements and modules, but has remained outpaced by the bigger game's more drastic iteration. *Pathfinder: Second Edition* presents the chance to bring together the RPG's decade of many parts into a whole and finally take the leap forward.

"You know, it's funny; I think the first steps for *Second Edition* started the day we sent first edition to the printer," Bulmahn says. "Because there's always things that you look [at], you're like: 'Well, I wish we



could've done more. I wish we could've changed this.' The design of a game is never really done. I think you eventually come to a point where you just have to kind of go, 'Well, it has to go now, so this is as good as we can make it.' Because you can always work to make a game better. You can always spend more time iterating. You can spend more time creating a better ruleset and testing it and refining it.

"So, for *Second Edition*, for the *Pathfinder* playtest, we really started taking notes almost that first day, because there was a lot of things about *Pathfinder* that we felt we kind of couldn't change – that it was a bridge too far. That it was too radical. But over ten years, we've added so much to the game. We've created entire rule systems, we've kind of upended the way a lot of things work and over time it became kind of clear that we really were pushing into new territory. We really were creating a game that wasn't the same. We had added so much to it that we really were working with a brand new entity. So I think we kind of stopped and took stock of the situation and realised: 'Hey, if we codify all of this, if we start kind of from scratch and build the game to make all of these components work with the core of the engine, we'll end up with a much better experience for everybody involved.'"

ABOVE Goblins are now a fully playable race, inviting players to take control of the bloodthirsty creatures for the first time

STAR CHILD

While *Pathfinder*'s second edition has existed as a hypothetical next step for as long as the game has been around, it wasn't until more recently that it began to actually take shape. Specifically, development of *Second Edition* started roughly at the same time as an even more radical reinvention of *Pathfinder* in the form of sci-fi sequel *Starfinder*, which took both *Pathfinder*'s gameplay and universe into the far-flung future last summer.

"I like to talk about them [*Second Edition* and *Starfinder*] being more like siblings," Bulmahn suggests. "They both kind of grew up at around the same time. The new version of *Pathfinder* just had an extra year to kind of finish. To be honest, some of the same people worked on both – I designed the entire starship combat system [in *Starfinder*]!"

Alongside completely new considerations for vehicular combat, character themes and exploration of alien worlds, *Starfinder* boasted a polished version of *Pathfinder*'s core rules, fine-tuned to both better accommodate its focus on ranged combat and account for the way that roleplaying trends had changed over the years.

"There are a number of elements that are similar [between *Second Edition* and *Starfinder*], because we looked at them and said: 'This is just a better way to do this,'" Bulmahn says. "There are other elements that we looked at for *Starfinder* and said, 'We can't do this





for *Starfinder* because it's too far away from the core of *Pathfinder*, but we can do it for the *Pathfinder* playtest.' Conversely, there are some things that we did to *Starfinder* that we said: 'Y'know, this makes more sense for a science-fiction game and doesn't make more sense for a fantasy game, so we won't change it for the other one.' So they informed each other to some extent – there are elements of the two of them that are similar, there are other elements that are drastically different. Some of that has to do with [the fact] they need to be different games; *Starfinder* is a science-fantasy game and has very different needs than a just pure fantasy world. That's kind of it. I think neither one is the parent of the other, they're both the children of *Pathfinder: First Edition* – they just went in different directions."

> "The one thing we don't want to do is make a fundamentally different game – we want to make the best Pathfinder we can."

More fundamentally, *Second Edition* was faced with the question of whether to stay true to its legacy of being a direct evolution of *D&D 3.5* – now 15 years old and counting – or to break even further away from the limitations of the venerable ruleset, potentially jeopardising the very vision that had first cemented its popularity.

"It's a delicate balance," admits Bulmahn. "There's a lot about *3.5* that harkens all the way back to the earliest roots of fantasy tabletop roleplaying games. And there's a lot of that that we want to keep. Y'know, the concept of: there is a group of adventurers, they go on quests, they kill monsters, they get treasure, they get more powerful. Some of that is at the heart of the narrative underpinnings that everybody comes to these games with. Even people who haven't played roleplaying games, they've played enough video games that are all based off that that they still come to it with that expectation. It's amazing to me how this ecosystem feeds that sort of gameplay mechanic. So, for us, we look at that and go: 'Well, we're not changing that.' Right? If we change that, we're fundamentally making a different game. When it comes to a new version of *Pathfinder*, the one thing we don't want to do is make a fundamentally different game – we want to make a game that's better, we want to make the best *Pathfinder* we can make. So there are things that we look at and go: 'Well, that's not really critical to the core of the game experience. That's a minor thing.'"

In some cases, this doesn't necessary mean removing things from the game completely, Bulmahn quickly adds, but instead taking a kind of ownership over

them: "Making more *Pathfinder* and, in other cases, making them more kind of ours or trying different things."

He gives the example of Golarion goblins, which *Pathfinder*'s first edition established as far more devious and dangerous (not to mention darkly comic) than their low-INT sword-fodder cousins in other RPGs. In *Second Edition*, players can create a goblin character for the first time, becoming one of the game's playable races – which have been newly redubbed 'ancestries' and adjusted to allow players to gain race-specific feats as they level up, allowing them to fully explore their character's cultural heritage.

"So there are things that we look at and go, 'That might be a spot where we can innovate, where we can evolve,'" Bulmahn presses, before admitting: "Then there are other things that are just legacy kind of hallmarks that, to be honest, I'm probably too sentimental to change; Magic Missile is still called Magic Missile, it still hits automatically."

CRUNCHY BUT SMOOTH

In the years since *Pathfinder*'s hefty tome first slammed onto tables, roleplaying has given rise to a wave of slim micro-RPGs and one-shots that, in some cases, have rules that take up little some than a single side of A4. What they lack in depth or longevity, these tastes of roleplaying make up for with a friendly approachability – they can be taught and played by friends in a single evening with little preparation, often leading those previously put off by complex calculations and the pressure of creating a highly detailed character to discover a craving for meatier RPGs. Bulmahn says that finding a way to be both welcoming introduction and long-term fixation was central to *Pathfinder*'s latest iteration.

"One of the things that we looked at, especially with a lot of more modern game designs, is that a lot of the games are pushing for a bit of a simpler system expression," he explains. "But that's not quite our bread and butter. I think people come to *Pathfinder* because they look at it as a game with a very deep variety of options. There's a lot of different ways you can take the game, you can kind of make whatever you want. But that variety comes at such a price. There's so much you have to learn, there's so many things you have to kind of navigate. So, when we started with the new edition, I think one of our big goals was to find a way to make learning and understanding the game quite a bit more straightforward, but still keeping a lot of those options, keeping that depth that people kind of come to know us from."

Combat has been completely revisited in *Second Edition*, doing away with the sometimes overwhelming separation of actions into move, standard, immediate and swift types in favour of a simplified system of three actions and one reaction each turn.

"If we just made it a simple system of, like, well you can open up a door, swing a sword or try and disarm a trap or something – if we just narrowed that down to something really, really basic, then I think we would end up with a system that just had no variety to it; it would have no depth of strategy," Bulmahn says. "But what we've tried to do is make sure that all the characters have different components of their class, of their ancestry, of their spells, of their magic items, that give them interesting tactical choices, so that it's really easy to say: 'Hey, you get three actions on your turn.' That's not a hard thing to figure out but, when you dig into your character, your character has a depth of options as to what you do with those three actions. You end up with interesting choices, like: do I attack for the third time or, instead of attacking, do I spend that third action to raise my shield and increase my defence? So you end up having to weigh the choices.

"I think very frequently with *Pathfinder: First Edition*, there was always a kind of right answer for most situations. It was like: 'Oh, that's clearly the best thing to do.' We wanted to step back from that and make it a little bit more strategic. So where we simplified in one area, we added meaningful choice and complexity to another area.

"I've taught the new version of this game now to dozens of players and all of them kind of approach as, like, 'Oh, that sounds really simple and easy.' And then when they dig into it, they go: 'Oh, I can do this or that or this other thing. And, depending on the situation or the circumstance, one might be better than the other, but it might not be, so I have to make the right choice here and live with the consequences.' That makes for a much more exciting play experience than just kind of, like, 'I run up and keep swinging until he dies.' So, yeah, it's deceptively simple to learn but difficult to master, which was our goal."

The new way combat is handled is coupled with a fresh balancing of class abilities, addressing the gripe of some players over the relatively restricted skillset of fighters and other martial characters compared to their magic-using companions.

"What we tried to do is ensure that spellcasting characters have their role to play in a fight, and that role varies depending on what type of character it is," Bulmahn says. "The martial characters have a role to play. Everybody kind of has their thing that they are supposed to do. We call it 'niche protection,' and what we basically tried to do is make sure that the wizard can't be a better rogue than the rogue, right? It's kind of a two-sided approach."

Bulmahn gives the specific example of the *First Edition* spell Knock, which allowed a magical character to pick a lock – making the nimble fingers of the rogue redundant.

"That's no longer the case," he reassures. "Knock gives you a bonus on your ability to pick a lock, but if you don't have any ability at it, you're still pretty terrible at it. It's almost better for the wizard to cast Knock on the thing and then let the rogue pick the lock than it is for the wizard to try and do it themselves,





because it doesn't just make it so that it automatically happens."

On the battlefield, Bulmahn says that spells that could "automatically win the fight" in *First Edition* have been pared back down, while martial characters have been gifted with a greater ability to control the "flow and feel" of an encounter by pushing enemies around, applying negative conditions and use reactions to do more than just dish out damage.

"Fighters can be very good at scaring folks, they can be very intimidating in a fight, and they have a number of abilities that make them even better at doing that if they decide to build that kind of character," he explains. "We kind of make it so that you get to choose how you want to contribute. And, assuming everyone's working together, they're not all picking the same thing. If the wizard's picking a whole bunch of fear things and the fighter's picking a whole bunch of fear things they're going to overlap quite a bit. But it's a group game, so we kind of assume that most people work together."

All of this means a more approachable, smoother *Pathfinder* experience, without taking away from the game's signature crunch for those wanting to dig their teeth in. Bulmahn emphasises that *Second Edition* is still very much *Pathfinder* – but with a lighter touch.

> "A game that's easier for everyone to grasp and explore makes for a game that's better to stream."



"If you come to the new version of *Pathfinder* and you learn how to make a character, you don't have to relearn that process just because you're making a cleric instead of a barbarian," he suggests. "There's a few things you need to pick up, but it's not an entirely different class. There is a chassis that a lot of these things are built off of. So you kind of learn the process once and then you can repeat the process and kind of build entirely different characters. So the goal really is to make sure that the people who come to our game still get the game they expect, but we don't want new players to have to jump through quite so many hoops to get there."

The designer reveals that part of the renewed focus on taking the hard work out of *Pathfinder* has been inspired by the rise in players broadcasting their campaigns as online video over the last ten years. This includes *Critical Role*, the all-star web series featuring voice actors that began as a *Pathfinder* campaign in private before being converted to *D&D: Fifth Edition* as a result of the latter game's stream-friendly simplicity.

"I think a lot of the goals overlap in interesting ways," Bulmahn says. "Making a game that's kind of easier for everyone to grasp and explore makes for a game that's better to stream. Creating a game system that has more narrative kind of gameplay mechanics that are not only more engaging for the players, but it's also far more interesting to watch people do that on a stream, right?

"We have a number of Actual Play podcasts that play various parts of *Pathfinder* and it's interesting how their play style influences the way we think about the game and how kind of everybody thinks about games. The rise of people watching other people play tabletop roleplaying games has really changed some opinions about how some things should probably work. Giving the GM more agency, giving the players more control over how the world affects their characters: things like that kind of make for a more engaging play experience. Even without that, though, a lot of that's our goal anyway, right? We want everybody to be invested in telling their story, telling the tale of their adventuring group as they traverse the dangerous world in search of fame and glory, so we want them to be engaged on that anyway. It's fortuitous, a lot of the goals overlap."

WORLD IN MOTION

As *Pathfinder* moves onwards, so too does its setting. In fact, Golarion has been continually advancing since *Pathfinder*'s first Adventure Path, *Rise of the Runelords*, debuted in 2007. At the time, the team decided to lock step with reality, progressing their fantasy world at the rate of one Golarion year for every Earth year – but began in the year of 4707, matching



the last two digits of our calendar to make it easily memorable. Monthly Adventure Path chapters – each six forming a connected campaign – have kept the clock running since.

Second Edition leaps the timeline forward by a couple of hundred years, to 4919, and officially marks the completion of past storylines in the world, opening up new room to explore *Pathfinder*'s world and inhabitants.

"The thing that we haven't done up to this point with that [passage of time] is we have all these Adventure Paths with these random storylines," Bulmahn says. "We haven't updated the timeline to account for those. Until now.

"We'll be advancing the plotline and saying, 'This is what happened to our world, this is how the world has changed.' I don't think anyone who is familiar with Golarion is going to come to it and go: 'Oh my god, everything is so different, I don't recognise anything.' But a lot of those big storylines are going to play out and come to fruition. So we'll see how it goes."

ABOVE Martial characters are able to better control the battlefield

OPPOSITE Combat has been streamlined into a system of three actions

He laughs. "There's a bunch of really exciting things coming up in the next year, but if I spoil them people will run out of the office right now and stab me, so I'm not going to do it."

FIND THE WAY

Pathfinder's second edition brings together a decade's worth of its creators' ambitions and players' wishes. It's still taking form: this month's playtest is expected to last for around four months, with Bulmahn and his team working to polish and tweak the final release in response to feedback before its 2019 launch.

"After that, it's off to the races," he says. "I have calendars and plans that stretch out with numbers like 2022 on them, so we're looking way into the future about what we want to make for this game and what exciting directions we think it can take."

Even so, the designer knows that, just as with the game's first edition, this incarnation is both a move away from the past and a step towards the future for *Pathfinder* – with Bulmahn forever chasing the next improvement, the next story to tell.

"Whenever you create a game like this, part of the process of making it is more than just setting down where it is right now, it's also setting down the skeleton of where you want to go," he accepts. "In our meetings, I say we need to make sure that we build the design space for ourselves. So we don't want to fill in all the holes. We don't want to plug all the gaps. We want to leave ourselves room that says, 'Hey, this is a really cool new mechanic.'"

While total perfection might remain just out of reach for its creators, the new *Pathfinder* will doubtless inherit its predecessor's legacy as the revolutionary introduction to roleplaying for thousands of new players – as well as continuing to be the definitive RPG for those who remain enthralled, all these years later. There's room for everyone to become part of the game's history, and it's still just beginning.

"We're excited to move forward and create kind of a fresh start for a lot of new people to be able to access the game, but we also want to make sure that the people who have been with us this whole time still come to the game and find it to be the game they know and love," Bulmahn says.

"Just looking at the way we've designed [ancestries], it leaves all of this room for us to build more of them in the future for you to use in your game. Or to expand the ones we have! Before, there was no design space there at all, other than just make a new race and then you're just done with it. The choice was made precisely once. Now it's kind of a more living, breathing part of *Pathfinder*. So those sorts of decisions give us the opportunity to build a future for *Pathfinder* that is kind of robust and rich. Deciding – not to be too cliché – what path we're going to take is half the fun."

PATHFINDER 2ND EDITION: BESTIARY 2

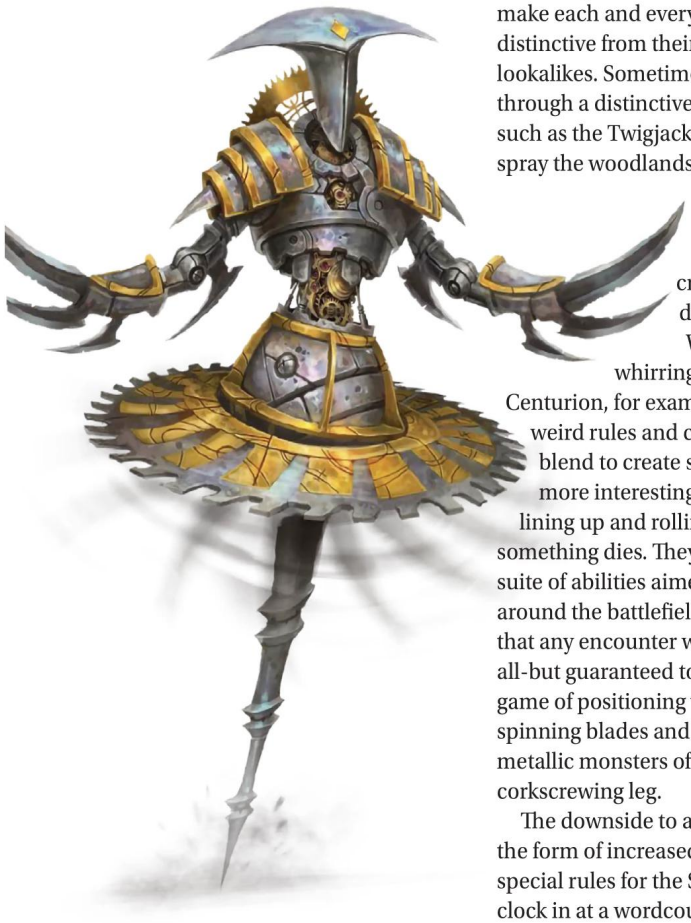
More monsters, more magic, more everything

Designer: Various | **Publisher:** Paizo

319 | 11+ | £45

Varied and exciting monsters have always been the fuel that fires *Pathfinder*'s combat-heavy gameplay, and the release of the *Bestiary 2* certainly lines up an absolute mountain of stat blocks, background notes and slick illustrations to keep both your campaign and imagination burning through the night.

In terms of raw numbers, the thoroughly chunky book promises to bring more than 350 new creatures to your table, spread pretty evenly across the game's potential levels of play. That's about it in terms of actual content – don't expect new rules or character options here – but it's still rather an impressive feat when you consider the detail of many of its entries, which delve deeply into questions of lore and potential plot hooks.



And for some folks that simple statistic is probably enough to sell them on the book. Adventurers always need more monsters to slay, after all, and the clever designs of creatures like the half-plant, half-draconic Zomok should help to keep combat fresh and exciting. After all, who among us can say they don't relish the idea of taking on a flying monster that can swallow the party whole and then teleport away at will?

If you're still on the fence, however, it's worth taking a look at both the quality of the monsters on offer and how likely you are to actually use them in a game. This is especially important when you're comparing it to the first *Bestiary* book released for *Pathfinder*'s second edition just last year.

The sheer invention on display throughout the book is impressive, and always seems to find a way to make each and every monster feel distinctive from their many rivals and lookalikes. Sometimes this comes through a distinctive move or ability, such as the Twigjack's ability to spray the woodlands with a shower of splinters, and sometimes it's through the creature's entire design.

When you fight a whirring, gyrating Spiral Centurion, for example, their stack of weird rules and complex powers blend to create something much more interesting than simply lining up and rolling dice until something dies. They have a whole suite of abilities aimed at bouncing around the battlefield, meaning that any encounter with them is all-but guaranteed to become a game of positioning yourself to avoid spinning blades and knocking the metallic monsters off their single, corkscrewing leg.

The downside to all of this comes in the form of increased complexity – the special rules for the Spiral Centurion clock in at a wordcount about a third as long as this entire review – but that has always been the price you pay with *Pathfinder*. There are a few offenders that get genuinely unwieldy to run at the table, but for the most part GM's who are happy to run the game in the first place shouldn't struggle too much.

On top of the fair few original foes filling up the pages of *Bestiary 2*, a solid slice of the book is made up by entries that expand on creatures already found in the first volume. If you're looking to spice up an encounter with a clan of trolls, for example, there are now four pages of new variations to pick from. This allows you to make some more creative choices, such as dropping in a multi-headed mutant to beef up the clan's defences or maybe adding a gem-crusted cavern troll to play with the party's assumptions about their weaknesses.

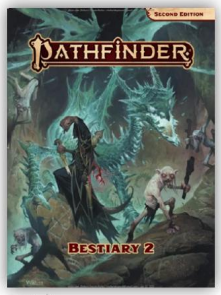
Where the first *Bestiary* took a broad-ranging, surface level skim through many environments and iconic creature types, this time around it takes a much deeper dive past the obvious fantasy monsters and into a more obscure realm. This makes it absolutely ideal for GMs looking to really flesh out their encounters and add variety to certain areas of their campaign, but if all you really want from your game is a reliable list of classic foes you're likely to find that the latest book spends a lot of time on the shelf.

Ultimately, however, for many committed *Pathfinder* players, the only really important criteria for whether or not the book is a success is whether there's a decent variety of monsters and whether they're well-built. In both cases, the answer is a resounding yes.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

It's hard to turn down the prospect of adding more monsters to a game of *Pathfinder*. Just beware of some rather complex rules, if that isn't your thing.





TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED PATHFINDER 2ND EDITION BESTIARY...

Do you like monsters? Do you want more monsters?



PLAYING WITH YOUR FOOD



Jennifer Howlett is combining the culinary with the fantasy in a new RPG where you cook in real life to complete quests. We asked the author why she decided to swap dice for dicing

Interview by **Matt Jarvis**

Cooking With Dice is an roleplaying game that takes place in kitchens, rather than dungeons. How did you come up with the recipe for the game?

I decided to create *Cooking with Dice* for the same reason I decided to create [gaming fragrance range] Adventure Scents – because I wanted to buy it and no one had gotten around to making anything like it yet! I've searched high and wide and haven't found many people working on ways to gamify home cooking, despite the popularity of so many cooking competition TV shows.

Why was roleplaying the right genre to mix cooking with – rather than, say, a board or card game?

Well, the cards get really sticky when you use them to slice cheese and scoop up salsa, so those were right out.

Honestly, I focused on the story and the feeling I was looking for first, then worked out the mechanics of the game after that.

What I wanted was for cooking to feel like an epic adventure; I wanted to get some of the same kind of joy out of cooking dinner that I do when I sit down with my family and play an RPG. So, I started thinking about how to incorporate some of the elements that make RPGs fun into a cooking game. Characters. Adventure scenarios. Experience points. Loot. And, to top it off, an element of chance.

How did you integrate the real-life cooking elements with the RPG aspects?

To begin *Cooking with Dice*, you read the adventure scenario and select a character to play for the duration of the game. Your goal is to earn XP and level that character up to the chef de cuisine (head chef). To do this, you cook your own variations of the basic formulas included in the book. Each of the formulas has an associated set of roll tables that you can use to alter the formula and increase the number of XP it's worth. Just roll the dice and swap out an ingredient. Each formula has thousands of possible recipe variations that you can customise.



Was it hard to achieve the right balance without resulting in boring recipes or pointless gameplay?

Definitely. I wanted it to have a classic fantasy RPG feel to it, but it needed to be very rules-light. Too much fiddlyness would interfere with the cooking, so I tried to keep things simple but entertaining. The whole game can be played solo, co-operatively or competitively.

Is the idea with the random rolls that any potential combination will work? Or is there the chance that some combos will come out as less than pleasant to eat?

I crafted the roll tables to contain ingredients that have similar properties. For instance, you can swap out blueberries for strawberries in a muffin without any great risk, but swapping out blueberries for tuna would be a crime against humanity.

We worked with a team of awesome 'play-tasters' to work out the best ingredients to include on our roll tables, but you are likely to roll some combinations you'd never have thought to try on your own! If you really don't like the looks of what you've rolled, you can take a penalty to chicken out and substitute it with something safer.

How did you decide which recipes should be included?

It helped to pick a theme for the first book; *Cooking with Dice: The Acid Test* focuses on debunking the idea that 'to cook' equals 'to heat'. All of the recipes in the first book utilise acidic ingredients to chemically 'cook' or otherwise alter the other ingredients.

How tough is it to make a fantastical creation using real-life components?

At first, it was hard to make the bridge between a fantasy challenge and making food in your kitchen. Originally, I tried to come up with ways that cooking skills might represent heroic actions in the game. Then, I realised that the game itself should star adventure chefs that were setting off on a quest with maxed-out whisking skills but no ability to shoot an arrow.

The recipes you're creating aren't ones that are inspired by a fantasy world – they're ones you're cooking in a fantasy world, for creatures that are in desperate need of your culinary skills.

You mentioned Adventure Scents, which also add a real-life element to gaming. For you, what is the importance of introducing real-world sensations such as taste and smell to otherwise fictional experiences?

I like when there's a blur between 'gaming' and the 'real world'.

I work as an instructional designer and am often looking for ways to add gaming and multisensory elements to educational content. I love the idea of adding scent to both classrooms and tabletop games. And I love the idea of helping both kids and adults to improve their cooking skills via a game.

Also, I believe the world is a better place when it has more interesting smells and snacks in it!

What's the best recipe you've created while playing _Cooking With Dice_?

One of our formulas is for a Poppin' Lemon Drop Martini. It has a fizzy candy rim that looks like foamy, dripping froth. Making the candy is like a fifth-grade science fair volcano gone wrong, and is an absolute blast. There's a kid-friendly version of the drink without vodka, but my favorite version was one that had blueberries, blueberry vodka and a blue raspberry candy rim. For some reason I named it a BongoBlue. We tested a lot of variations that night... ▪



THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

BENDING AND BREAKING

Rules are there to be broken, and massaging dice throws can weave a more satisfying story for your players. Do it too much, though, and you risk taking away the surprise and tension of a campaign. So when is it right to play by the rolls?



Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**



There are few things more satisfying than having the dice rolls play nicely with your narrative. In fact, it's so good that sometimes you feel the urge to give luck a helping hand.

I thought fate had my back at a recent session, when it just so happened that the party's normally jovial and generous fighter happened to be next in line to act after a flame-wreathed Demon of Vengeance struck down his helpless father. The creature had been barely clinging on to its physical form when it decided to commit its final act of spite, so it was fitting that the suddenly-furious Ellstrom would be the one to deliver the killing blow.

The possibilities for future plot threads were running through my mind as he rolled his dice, and the entire room cheered when he the attack struck home. We had spent weeks building to this moment and I couldn't have planned a more fitting conclusion to the story arc if I'd wanted to – after all, it had been Ellstrom's own brother who had accidentally summoned the beast through an act of murder, so it made sense that he would be the one to send it back to the abyss.

Half a dozen people held their breath as he rolled a final time to see how much damage his blow would cause. Only I knew that anything but a one would be enough to take the demon out.

And then fate decided to rip up the script. The dice tumbled and span across the tabletop, and came down showing just one pip. Not quite enough.

Suddenly I was faced with a decision – would I fudge the numbers for the sake of the story, or would I let things play out as the dice had decreed?

WHAT HAPPENS BEHIND THE SCREEN...

This dilemma is one that's probably unique to tabletop RPGs. I can't think of any other medium where bending or even outright breaking the rules is so routine that many consider it to be just another part of the game. There can't be too many chess games where rooks have suddenly developed the ability to move diagonally because one player decided that it would make things more exciting.

In part this is probably due to the non-competitive nature of modern RPGs – the aim of the game is for everybody to have fun rather than to win. Indeed, from what I've gathered from my fellow GMs the vast majority of nudged dice and bent rules go firmly in favour of the players rather than the monsters they control.

One of the most common examples is rounding out unexpected spikes of bad luck that would derail the story the group is trying to tell, such as when a one-in-a-million shot from a nameless guard somehow vaporises the heroine's skull just before the climactic scene with her old commander. In that case it's tempting to ignore the critical hit and have the blow simply scorch her helmet instead, leaving room for your upcoming revelations to go off without a hitch.

Everybody walks away from the table happy, and nobody needs to know what happened behind the screen. Surely that's for the best, right?

THERE TO BE BROKEN?

There's a reason why rolling dice and flipping cards are so important in tabletop gaming. They allow us to simulate the roiling randomness of reality – they add the unexpected element that can surprise even the most experienced player.

Choosing to ignore them when they spit out a result you don't want is always a little risky. Do it too much and that vein of surprise and shock gets chipped away, little by little. We all know that sometimes reality throws up unexpected bumps and dips, and if you smooth those out entirely the game you're playing becomes too predictable. An adventure isn't half as exciting if you know the good guys are going to win no matter what.

Does this mean a DM should never, ever fudge a roll? Well, not really. Different gaming groups want different things from their experience and if a totally unexpected wobble of probability would send the story off in the deep end you probably shouldn't suffer too many pangs of guilt about nudging a dice here or there.

The late, great Sir Terry Pratchett once wrote that the reason why we have rules is "so that you think before you break 'em," and that applies to tinkering with results behind the safety of your GM screen. If you're going to do it, then make sure you're doing it for the right reasons and don't let it become a habit.

In fact, the best advice I've been given on this is that if you do decide that you decide that something is so important that you'll need to skew the result if it comes up wrong, just don't roll in the first place. If you're going to break the rules, commit to it and save your troubled conscience from late-night doubts.

LETTING THE DICE FALL

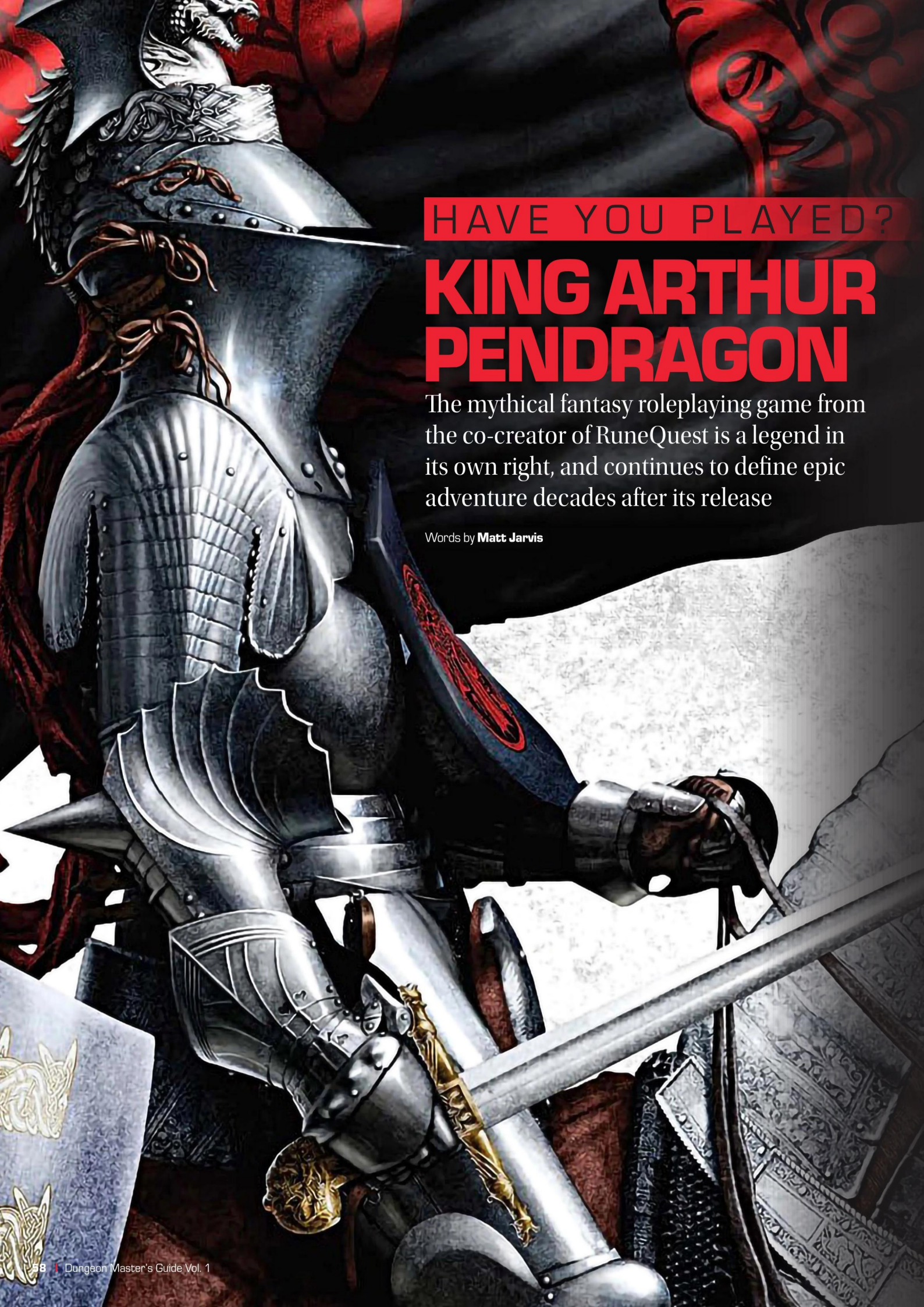
As it happens, I decided to let fate have its day with Ellstrom and the demon. The killing – or possibly 'banishing' – blow ended up falling to the party's bard Eustacia, who was mostly along for a chance to flirt with a baroness, and the creature laughed at its furious foe as it faded away to smoke, urging him to seek it out for round two.

As I write, that was almost a week ago and I'll admit that I'm still not sure whether I made the right call. If real life was playing along with the narrative then it would probably turn out that throwing things to the whims of random chance had paid unexpected dividends, and that a new, unexpected trove of story threads had been unearthed.

But it isn't, and though there are plenty of developments to work with it's hard not to feel that it would have been more satisfying if Ellstrom had been the one to take the monster out.

Perhaps that's appropriate, however. It shows that sometimes the world – whether real or imagined – refuses to warp itself to fit the story. If nothing else it has shown my players that sometimes they don't get the win just because it's what would feel right.

Plus, it gives me some room to fudge a little down the line and get away with it. If I want to, that is.



HAVE YOU PLAYED?

KING ARTHUR PENDRAGON

The mythical fantasy roleplaying game from the co-creator of RuneQuest is a legend in its own right, and continues to define epic adventure decades after its release

Words by **Matt Jarvis**

When roleplaying designer Greg Stafford suddenly passed away last October, there was an outpouring of grief at the loss of one of gaming's great innovators. The creator of Glorantha – the visionary setting for *RuneQuest*, the seminal RPG Stafford co-created with Steve Perrin, as well as the *White Bear and Red Moon* and *Nomad Gods* board games – and founder of *Call of Cthulhu* publisher Chaosium, Stafford's influence was felt across the entire tabletop.

While *RuneQuest* is likely Stafford's best-known work, it is another groundbreaking RPG that the designer apparently considered his masterpiece.

King Arthur Pendragon was inspired by Stafford's interest in the mythical British ruler, drawing from the stories of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the collection of tales that defined much of Arthurian folklore. Its gameplay built on the Basic Roleplaying system used in *RuneQuest*, incorporating several radical mechanics and ideas that Stafford had originally considered but never included in his earlier RPG. Many of those ideas would only be included in *RuneQuest* several decades later, cementing Stafford's pioneering design as still ahead of its time.

First released in the mid-eighties, *Pendragon* has since been celebrated as one of the greatest roleplaying games ever made due to its epic storytelling scope, rich character creation and devotion to the fantasy setting of Arthurian legend.

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

Pendragon is a fantasy RPG like no other. Every aspect of the game has been carefully crafted to paint the medieval Britain of Arthurian tales and legends in meticulous detail, recreating the day-to-day life of its questing knights as faithfully as it does their adventures full of jousting, hand-to-hand combat and exploration.

The adherence to its source material means that *Pendragon* is missing many of the typical tropes of fantasy roleplaying established by the likes of *Dragons & Dragons*. There are few class-equivalent options for players' characters to embody (outside of being a knight, that is), no dedicated magic users outside of a select few non-player characters and adventures typically avoid hack-and-slash monster-slaying and dungeon-crawling.

Pendragon is more about living a life in its impressively detailed world. Unlike RPGs where a party of the same characters can persist over hundreds of hours of gameplay, *Pendragon* instils a realistic sense of time into the slow evolution of its progression from the Dark Ages to the War of the Roses. Characters age over the years, potentially finding love and having children, before passing on the mantle of questing to their descendants.

While they might not fit into typical roleplaying moulds, these characters offer richly-drawn personalities for players to weave stories around. One of *Pendragon*'s crowning achievements is its character creation system, which uses a combination of personal traits and passions to form complex characters. 13 opposing virtues and vices map out a character's behaviour and personality, defining their sense of chivalry, faith and romance. The built-in tension between the juxtaposed traits – modesty and pride, or valour and cowardice, for example – leads to a strong sense of characters' ethical makeup and can influence their actions, in keeping with the moral outcome of folklore tales.

> "It represents a master of roleplaying and worldbuilding at the height of his powers."

Completing characters' realistic personalities are passions, which find drama in challenging the core beliefs of the knights. Based around central pillars such as loyalty, love and honour, passions can be tested in moments where characters might find their stalwart commitment to an ideal called into question – such as a loyal knight choosing to defy an order from their commander that would cause them to do wrong. Breaking their moral code can cause characters to eventually fall into misery and madness until they atone for their actions. *Pendragon*'s passions system was so innovative and effective that it was added to the latest edition of *RuneQuest* released last year.

Though Stafford's far-reaching game system encourages and supports a complex level of background detail in players' experience of its world, playing *Pendragon* is simple. Almost all of the RPG's test and combat rolls are resolved with a single 20-sided die, with some occasional rolls of a few six-sided dice to check for the effect of passions.

WHY SHOULD YOU TRY IT?

Even close to 40 years after it was first published, *Pendragon* remains a singular achievement in roleplaying. Few games have come close to matching its evocative mixture of a wholly immersive setting with an elegant but immensely comprehensive ruleset in any genre – in terms of purely Arthurian fantasy gaming experiences, it is still unparalleled.

The latest update (the very precise 5.2, based on the 2005 fifth edition) to the game was released in 2016 and represents the final version of *Pendragon* updated and expanded by Stafford himself before his death. The fifth edition is notably streamlined versus the older iterations of the game, allowing its groundbreaking aspects to shine through without feeling at all dated. After passing through several publishers over the years, the rights to *Pendragon* were returned to Chaosium at the end of last year, bringing Stafford's magnum opus back to the company he created.

It's not only *Pendragon*'s core rulebook and gameplay that have been acclaimed. Stafford's sprawling supplement *The Great Pendragon Campaign* is set across 80 years of Arthurian history, from the life of Arthur's father King Uther to Arthur's quest for the Holy Grail, and greatly expands Stafford's Origins Award-winning *The Pendragon Campaign* released for the first edition of the RPG. *The Great Pendragon Campaign* has similarly been lauded as one of the best roleplaying campaigns ever written, and was awarded the Diana Jones Award for 'excellence in gaming.' Several other supplements released for *Pendragon* have introduced extra detail on the inhabitants, locations and events of the mythical setting – there's even a tome and deck of cards dedicated to turning banquets into major occasions in the Book of Feasts.

Stafford created a second Arthurian roleplaying game, *Prince Valiant: The Story-Telling Game*, in 1989. Based on Hal Foster's comic strip of the same name, it is a much lighter and less diligently realistic experience than *Pendragon* – making it a friendly introduction to Arthurian roleplaying before you dive right into the Middle Ages.

King Arthur Pendragon represents a master of roleplaying and worldbuilding at the height of his powers for immersive, interactive storytelling. Its rich characters and world are roleplaying at its finest, without being saddled or obscured by outdated or overly convoluted gameplay. Take it from Stafford himself: *Pendragon* is a masterpiece.

I'LL BE BACK

An effective recurring villain can turn your RPG campaign into something especially memorable. But writing a good baddie isn't as easy as it sounds...

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Wizards of the Coast**



Foggy Tom was a first-class, grade-A jerk. The entire party hated him within 30 seconds of his first appearance. By the third time they ran into him they were prepared to burn a city to the ground so long as Tom burned with it.

Once he had been a proud vampire, but a magical malady had trapped him in the misty form normally only used to escape danger. Rather than bemoan his unfortunate state, however, Tom chose to embrace it. He fed on fresh wounds wherever possible, taunting his victims as he drained them and fleeing though sewer grates and broken windows at the first sign of trouble.

The first time our heroes ran into him they were trapped on the far side of a magical portal, somewhere in an undead mirror of the material plane. A wandering Tom offered to lead them home in return for "a little nibble on the cleric," and when they turned him down the mischievous mist brewed up every minor – and not-so-minor – irritation he could. During their final battle in the death-ridden dimension he slipped onto the scene at the worst possible moment, sucking up whatever stray life-essence that was lying about and giggling his way through the hovering portal before the party could stop him.

Their next encounter came a few in-game weeks later. Something had been convincing local devil-worshippers to step up their blood sacrifices in return for great favours and boons that utterly failed to materialise, and the party were drawn in when the cult stepped up their abduction efforts and grabbed a friend-of-a-friend. Rather that encountering the flame-eyed fiend they were expecting they instead found Foggy Tom hiding inside a statue, booming instructions from its mouth. This time he escaped by ordering his loyal followers to collapse the temple around them while he scarpered down a tiny escape tunnel.

The third and possibly final encounter is still underway at time of writing. This time the party is actively hunting the thoroughly hateable vampire in a much larger city and have only had one conversation so far – a chat that Tom managed to bow out of at perilously low health.

I don't know if they'll bring him down for good this time. But I do know that when they finally take off that final hit point, you'll probably be able to hear the cheering down the street.

THE ETERNAL VILLAIN

The recurring baddie is a trope as old as time. They're our window into the realms of evil, provide us with an alternate view to events and serve up a reliable butt to kick when things are quiet.

Think of Spike and Drusilla from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Team Rocket from *Pokémon* or even the enigmatic Q from *Star Trek*. They stand apart from the monster-of-the-week who only appears for a couple episodes or chapters, and often operate entirely independently of the series' Big Bad – a figure who might see their menace diminished by having them scarper away from danger so often.

Because of this they're allowed to build relationships with the main characters over the course of weeks and months. Sometimes this can lead to a strange sort of sympathy and an eventual heroic turn – think of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*'s Prince Zuko – and sometimes it can just make the hatred and anger fester into something truly, delightfully poisonous.

Despite the trope's popularity, however, the recurring villain doesn't actually appear all that much in the world of tabletop RPGs.

> "Nothing heats up a grudge like some pointless pettiness."

Most of the long-term foes we encounter at our tabletops tend to remain distant and enigmatic, often consigned to the worlds of backstory or only glimpsed through the actions of their underlings.

There's a damn good reason for this, of course. It's usually rather hard to produce an enemy before your party and actually find a way to let them survive the next half-hour of combat. Even if you plan out ways for them to make an escape when the going gets rough, cunning or reckless adventurers have a wonderful/terrible habit of having just the spell, item of gear or madcap plan needed to lock them in place long enough to plant that final, killing blow.

CAN'T TOUCH THIS

This, perhaps, is where a creature like Foggy Tom had a minor advantage. Not only was he a consummate coward – though he would argue that he simply acted in enlightened self-interest – he was also blessed with intangibility. When a fight started to go bad, he could simply pawn things off on his minions and disappear through a convenient crack in the wall.

Other GMs I've spoken to or read about online have tried to achieve this same kind of effect with enemies who can teleport or turn invisible at will. Some have taken the more direct route and made them clones who can be slain over and over again, only to crop up once more next week, or undead monstrosities for whom the loss of a body is little more than an inconvenience.

Another blessing that Tom enjoyed was the fact that while he was an evil, scheming jerk, he was very rarely the party's main threat. He was an irritation and a thorn in their side, so when he inevitably slinked off the battlefield our heroes were annoyed but not particularly frustrated. If he had been a major campaign villain – if his death had been the aim of the quests rather than a happy side-bonus – the ease with which he strolled away from his fate could have easily become infuriating.

RULES FOR RECURSION

If they die, they die. Having something snatched out of your hands by the GM is irritating. When that something is your victory over a hated foe it's truly maddening. Make plans for your recurring villains to escape, but if the party are strong or clever enough to dash them, they deserve to win.

Hand out small victories. Okay, so the baddie escaped again. But at least our heroes stopped this branch of the cult, saved the hostages or retrieved the stolen power cells, right? Because it would really suck if they put in weeks of effort and didn't really achieve anything worthwhile! Right?

Get personal. As the battles stack up the heroes get to know their foe. However, this information flows both ways, and soon the villains will learn all about the tavern the party always drinks at or where they park their ship. Nothing heats up a grudge like some pointless pettiness.

Pick your battles. Villains who are compelled to fight to the death or prove their worth aren't likely to survive their first session. Recurring foes are happy to run away when needed, and are usually happy to sacrifice minions to make a clean escape.

Be prepared for the face turn. The more the party run into a foe, the more they get to speak to them. The more they speak, the more backstory they uncover. The more backstory they uncover, the more sympathetic they get. Under the right circumstances, recurring villains can often end up as unlikely allies.

SAFETY FIRST

Making your gaming table a safe space

Words by **Dave Chapman**

Tabletop roleplaying games take you anywhere your imagination desires – from the darkest dungeon filled with orcs, traps and dragons, to the farthest reaches of space populated with the strangest aliens, evil empires and brave adventurers. You can go anywhere, be anyone and do anything. This freedom offers players the chance to really stretch the imagination and do things that you could never, and would never, do in reality – like leaping into battle against the forces of darkness or exploring that spooky, abandoned hospital. However, this freedom means that you can sometimes be exposed to experiences that make you uncomfortable or distressed.

In the comfort of your own gaming group, most of the time your game master and the other players will know you well enough to ensure your game remains enjoyable. At a convention, with an unknown game master and unfamiliar players, that can be a different matter.

At a recent UK gaming convention a game about teenagers investigating the weird quickly degenerated into a distressing storyline of kidnapping and extreme abuse that was so upsetting that reports of it made it onto the national news.

So, how can you be sure that a game remains fun, entertaining and exciting without venturing into areas of violence, horror or sexual content that you do not wish to experience?

As we've become more aware of our responsibility to each other's mental and emotional health, it should be easier for us to discuss these things, and a number of incredibly useful and effective tools have been created by gamers that can be employed at the table to ensure everyone stays safe, happy, and comfortable.





OPPOSITE
The *X-Card* in use, allowing players to indicate that this scene has gone too far

LEFT
A handy consent checklist from *Consent in Gaming* by Sean K. Reynolds and Shanna Germain

THE X-CARD

The *X-Card* is probably the most recognisable safety tool for the gaming table. Created by John Stavropoulos, it is a very simple device that allows players to instantly indicate when a game is straying into uncomfortable territories.

The idea is that at the start of your game you place a card with an X on it in the middle of your gaming table. If anyone has a problem with the game becoming too graphic, or touching upon themes or concepts that they find uncomfortable, they simply tap the card, or lift it up. The player doesn't need to explain why, but the game master and the other players take this as an indication to edit out that aspect, to rewind and rewrite that element, allowing the game to continue without much interruption.

If it's not instantly obvious what has prompted the *X-Card*'s use, and the players are unsure what they should be avoiding, take a quick break. The game master and the player can take a moment to have a chat in private to explain the issue, understand what needs to be removed, and the game can resume quickly.

The most important thing about the *X-Card* is the concept of introducing it into your game. By doing so you indicate that your game is going to be fun for everyone, and that it's a safe space for you to immerse yourself in the imaginary worlds of your game and enjoy the experience.

LINES AND VEILS

Lines and Veils is another useful tool for the game table which comes into play before you even start your game. This tool avoids any surprises that would require enforcing the *X-Card*, but it does require a discussion before the game where you may have to think about the very things you'd prefer to avoid.

The idea behind *Lines and Veils* is that the players discuss the themes, ideas or content of the game that is about to be played and set some ground rules that everyone adheres to.

Lines are definite hard lines which cannot and should not be crossed during the game. They are not mentioned, hinted at, or even referred to 'off screen' so-to-speak.

Veils are things that occur that the players are okay with happening, but would prefer not to go into any detail. The scene fades to black, pans away, and the game moves on to the next scene without dwelling on the details. For example, in classic movies when the romantic couple finally get together, the camera pans away to the fireplace, then we cut to the next scene without an awkward or unnecessary sex scene. Or it could be an NPC is going to be tortured or injured to motivate the group into action. The villain closes the door on the torture scene, and we don't go into the gory details. We move on, and get to the next scene without dwelling on anything that could make the players or the game master uncomfortable.

Setting out clearly defined parameters before the game starts means that everyone can enjoy the adventure and the excitement, knowing that nothing will come as a nasty surprise.

SCRIPT CHANGE

Created by Brie Beau Sheldon, *Script Change* is a set of cards with symbols like an old VHS player – rewind, fast-forward, pause and play. These cards can be placed on the table when scenes need some editing – whether it is rewinding a scene to remove an issue, to fast-forwarding through a scene to avoid the content and just skip to the next scene.

OKAY CHECK-IN

Originally employed in LARPing, the *Okay Check-In* sytem (developed by Maury Brown, Sarah Lynn Bowman, and Harrison Greene) means that you simply look at another player at the table and make the OK sign. The player then can gesture with a thumbs up, wavy hand, or thumbs down. Anything but a thumbs up results in a pause in the game and the game master can check in with the player to see what can make them more comfortable.

CONSENT IN GAMING

Consent In Gaming by Sean K. Reynolds and Shanna Germain helps you employ some of these tools, from preparation to actual play, along with a checklist of topics to address when considering *Lines and Veils*.

We asked the authors about its inception and how to use the booklet.

"I was writing specifically about consent in horror games – things like 'you might be fine with descriptions of in-game extreme gore, but not fine with child NPCs being put in danger,'" says Reynolds "and the chapter ended up having a broader focus than I initially planned. When Monte Cook read it, he felt it would be helpful as a stand-alone PDF."

As with every game's rules, there's always room for customisation, "There is no single way to handle safety and consent in your game," advises Germain "Use the tools that work for your table, adjust them as you see fit, and ignore the ones that don't make sense for you and your group."

AFTERCARE

It is just as important after the game has finished to check in with your players and make sure everyone is okay. After all, when we become excited from playing the game, that excitement can last with us after we've moved away from the game table. This same 'bleed' into real life from the game can stick with us for things we don't like either – whether that's in the form of anger, stress or anxiety. Being aware of how the game will effect others beyond the confines of the tabletop can be the most important thing to remember when setting up a game.

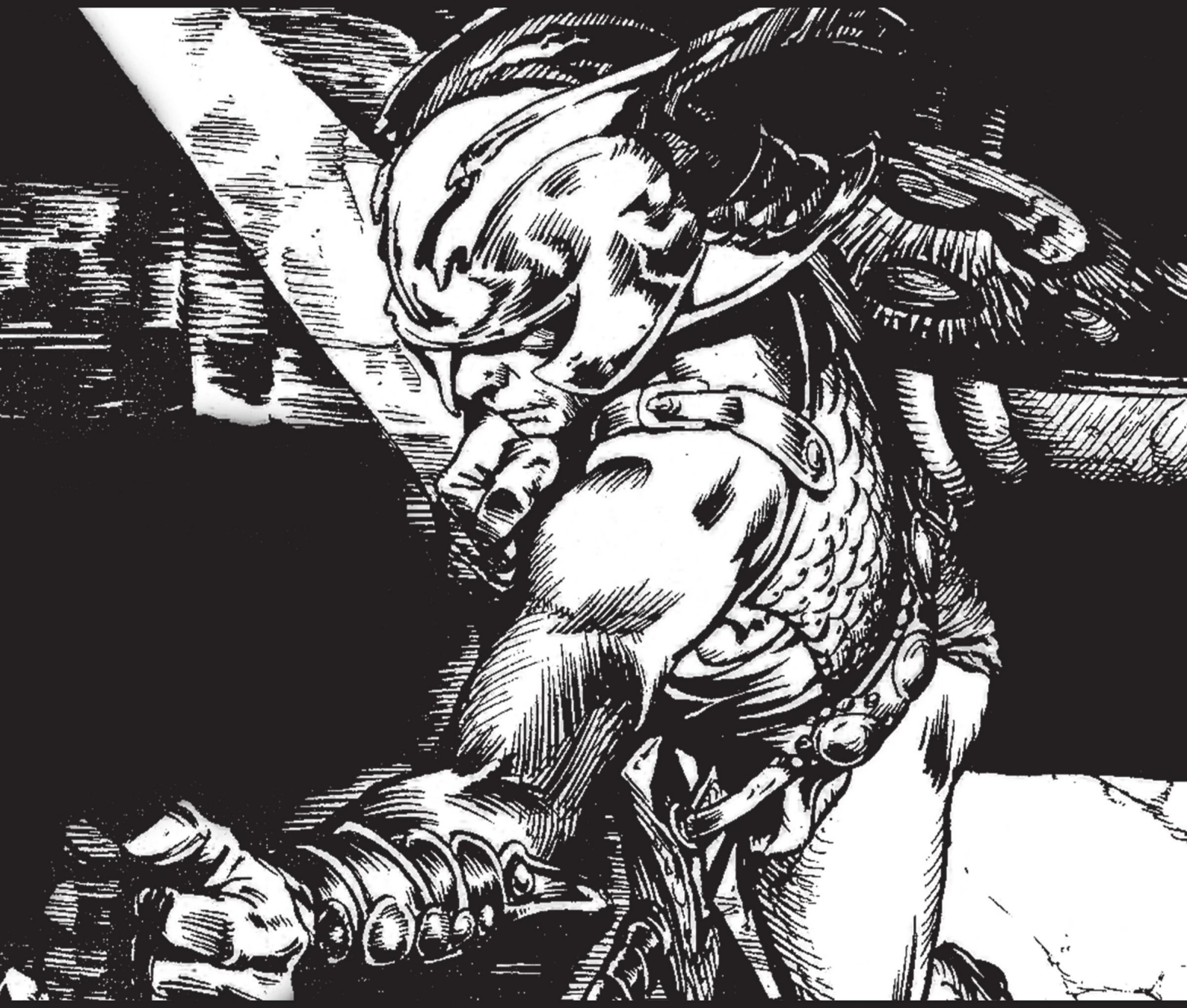
If we keep checking in with our players – before, during, and after – then we can continue to enjoy our games and be sure our tables are safe for everyone.

SAFETY RESOURCES

CONSENT IN GAMING
By Sean K. Reynolds and Shanna Germain
ttgami.ng/Consenting

X-CARD
By John Stavropoulos
ttgami.ng/Xcard

SCRIPT CHANGE
By Brie Beau Sheldon
ttgami.ng/scriptchange



DEEP DARK

AN EXPLORATION OF GAMING DUNGEONS

From mazes filled with fantasy foes to abandoned space stations, gamers explore deadly spaces of every shape and form. But what makes a dungeon worth delving? Designers tell us about their most memorable crawls

Words by **Sara Elsam**

You depart below, into the dungeon beneath the city. It's pitch black. You hear creatures moan in the distance. The walls are slick with mould, and somewhere, something larger shifts. This is the archetypal dungeon and it spans across the gaming landscape, as old and deep and unknowable as the dark liminal spaces that created it. Whether players are cautiously tapping along stone hallways or gunning down nasties aboard a spaceship, all dungeons retain the same essence at their core.

"Isolation and the sense of being trapped. A dungeon is a closed space which contains danger, treasure and excitement," says RPG designer and writer Grant Howitt. "It's almost that horror-movie element of being trapped in the cabin in the woods or the space station – it's that isolation, and that closed-off nature."

The roots of the genre hark back to the early days of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Back then, you had two adventure types: treks out into the wilderness, and grim underworld expeditions into labyrinthine dungeons.

The latter was a maze map set in a weird castle where, according to *D&D* co-creator Gary Gygax breaking down *D&D* for *Wargames Digest* magazine in 1974, "fearsome beasts" lurked, which players must "best" to nab their treasure. These early dungeons also included all number of random, utterly disconnected terrors.

In one room of a particularly memorable expedition by Gygax outlines in the article, you come across four stone chests. One somehow contains a five-headed hydra (readily dispatched by a swift polymorph to slug), while another offers to grant you "one wish of limited power".

"The dungeon exists slightly out of space with reality in fictional terms. You can get away with all sorts of nonsense," continues Howitt. "You can afford to be much looser, and much more creative with your combination of things, with the stories you're telling. Because you're out of the real world, it's almost like a little pocket dimension in narrative terms."

Old-school dungeons were often full of traps and tricks to "confuse and confound" the hearty adventurers, as recommended by Gygax. Over the years, these have ranged from trusty spear canons to dormant hives of bees.

"The health and safety implications are ridiculous!" Howitt jokes. "Most of the things in the dungeon are less intelligent than the player characters. So you're going to get orcs falling down pit traps all the time. You're just building in workplace hazards.

"There's also this fetishisation of traps. Like– Oh, there's this really horrible one, that beheads the players, then it traps their feet in glue and then it sends their mum a picture. It's this weird power play."

In the case of surprise ant-people, hovering objects or rivers that run upwards, the excuse "a wizard did it" is still always viable. But over the years writers have found new ways to add a sense of coherence to the wild antics of dungeon-diving. Take, for example, the adventure *Eyes of the Stone Thief* for RPG *13th Age*.

"Living dungeons romp around the world and eat things," Howitt explains. "The other dungeons then incorporate them in. We got in the gullet, and it was kind of breaking apart and rearranging all the different dungeons it had eaten! So the fact that you can have that M.C. Escher style of things put together, but then having an in-universe reason for that."



OPPOSITE Fighting Fantasy's *Deathtrap Dungeon* has had us going underground since 1984
ABOVE Open wide, *Dungeons & Dragons' Tomb of Horrors*
BELOW One of the friends you can make along the way in *Escape The Dark Castle (Alex Crispin)*

Howitt's own upcoming tabletop RPG Heart: The City Beneath creates another sentient, breathing dungeon.

"It's about an infinite city and the cave network beneath this mile-high city on the top," he says. "And the deal with the Heart is that it reacts to you going down into it. It's semi-parasitic and semi-aware; it will build itself around your dreams. It will give you what you want. Whether you know it or not."



FALLEN GRANDEUR

The approach of looking into the 'why' behind the gnarliness and building an ongoing world outside of the enclosed space is a key part of the modern dungeon-crawler experience.

"Every encounter should answer one of three questions," advises RPG designer and writer Jay Iles. "And that is: what did this use to be, how did it fall from grace? And what's happening now? And if every encounter is addressing one of those, or maybe two, that would be even better."

It's an approach seen in the *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne* series of video games, whose epic (and uniquely melancholy) eldritch worlds have lurched onto the tabletop. In the tabletop dungeon-crawler spun out of the series, *Dark Souls: The Board Game*, players assume the role of the video game's cursed undead who are perpetually reborn in a world indelibly scarred by its masters.

"They build locations that tell their story as you kill things through them," she adds. "There's this sense of fallen majesty that is now doing something."

Dungeons also run deep in our cultural consciousness.

"It harks back to this medieval, culturally historical feeling of castles and dungeons and the past," says Alex Crispin, co-designer and illustrator of *Escape the Dark Castle*. "This kind of untouchable ancientness, which I think is quite deep in lots of cultures, Europe especially.

"It comes through in a lot of fairytales. A lot of time-honoured traditions will include their negativity in a castle or a dungeon. All of which are kind of the same thing: stone claustrophobia."

In a sense, the dungeon is not far off the haunted house – which too has its roots in the looming castles of European lore. Much like surviving a malevolent house, hostility is a key part of the dungeon experience. In *Dungeons & Dragons* terms, that can be gelatinous cubes that blend in with the shadows or sentient treasure chests bearing pointy teeth.

"All the things you really don't want to have in your life are basically included in a dungeon," says Crispin. "Otherwise you're just going to be anywhere, any old corridor."

Crispin's current project, *Escape the Dark Sector*, takes the dungeons of *Escape the Dark Castle* out to the deep black of space. As sci-fi and fantasy go "hand in hand", he feels the transition between dungeon genres has been relatively seamless.

DREAMING OF DUNGEONS

When both torches in the halls and savage aliens equally evoke dungeons, it would seem

that at its core, journeys into the depths of tabletop dungeons represent a liminal place – not unlike dreams.

"A dungeon is an exploration of space, and of history," says Iles. "In my favourite dungeons, as you go through them, you learn more about what this place is – about why it's here, about the person or creature or event that made it. Each dungeon tells a story.

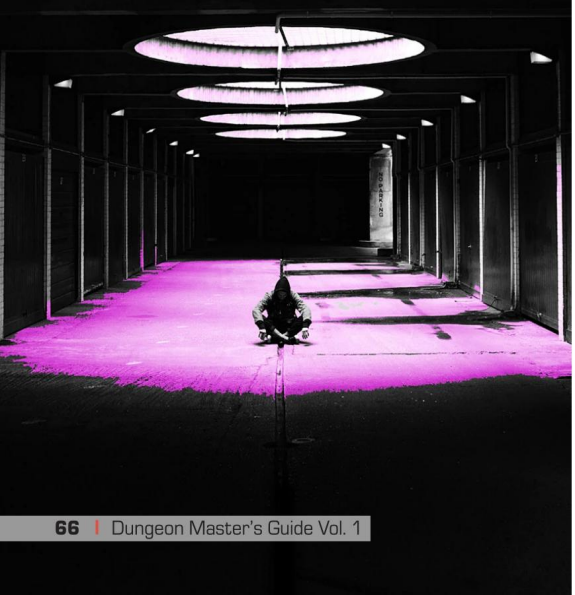
"It can be a psychodrama, where through fighting monsters you learn more about everything that was here. And it's interesting because we call them dungeons, but most of the ones we see aren't places where people were imprisoned.

"They're places where forces are mustering or places where there's a portal to somewhere else. What really defines dungeons is that movement beyond the mundane, into the place which is intentional and hostile and alien to you."

In Iles' own title *Voidheart Symphony*, you've found a way to break into people's minds, which takes the form of a dungeon themed around someone's personality. Inside these dream dungeons, you learn their secrets and can even steal their powers.

Dungeons have come from a place of modular horrors filled with fairground scares to desolate places concealing strange, sad secrets. Worlds that are gloomy but achingly beautiful, laid out with the crisp rawness of a psychic event. Worlds where the delvers aren't high-end heroes in search of riches, but plunderers and lost souls driven by something else entirely. In this context, crawling through a dungeon is akin to tearing through a dark dream, with (likely murderous) friends in tow.

"It's about that sense of we as a group, are going into this hostile place," concludes Iles. "It's all about this is a place that's alien to us. And dangerous to us. And we are going to try and understand it, and master it, and find our way through it."





LEFT The living dungeons of *Eyes of the Stone Thief* rise

BELOW *Voidheart Symphony* sends us into the depths of the mind *[David East and Jay Iles]*

DUNGEON DIY

Tabletop writers Grant Howitt and Jay Iles reveal their top tips for running an effective dungeon in an RPG.

YOU ARE THE MURDERERS, MOSTLY.

Howitt: "Underline the fact that you're breaking into someone's house and taking their things. What you're doing is a horrible act. You are scary to dungeon denizens because you're generally a higher level than them. If it's not expressly a monster, if it's got a face and arms and legs, make it a person. Then they can choose what to do at that point. And if you want to just kill people all day, that's an interesting choice you've made."

KEEP THE MOMENTUM GOING.

Iles: "I always think that when you're creating a scenario for players to get involved in, it should have something that is in the process of happening there. It shouldn't be in equilibrium, there should be something that's going to happen if the players sit back and do nothing. And it's probably going to be bad. Time pressure is really important with dungeoneering because players are like, 'We clear out this room, then we rest, then we'll do the next thing.'"

ENSURE EVERYTHING MAKES NARRATIVE SENSE.

Howitt: "Don't just make it a series of prisons under the ground. It has to make sense. There has to be a reason for it to be there. So why are there orcs here? Why aren't they on top? Who's in charge of them? Why are you effectively breaking into someone's house? And taking their things? Rather than saying, 'This is crazy and wacky, why has this happened?' and extrapolating and rationalising after the fact."

KNOW THINE ENEMIES.

Howitt: "Give every adversary a name. They don't have to wear name tags, but they can call it out to each other as they die. Which is fun. Give every single adversary something. So not just, 'Here's goblins one, two, three, four and five,' – it's, 'This goblin's got one eye, this goblin's got wild hair, this goblin's covered in feathers.'"

LEAN INTO ENVIRONMENTAL STORYTELLING.

Howitt: "When you're designing the dungeon, think about what the inhabitants are doing, and what its purpose for existing is. You can be like: 'We've got some ogres over here, and we've got some snake people over here. And there's a kitchen in-between them.' But you don't know what the join is. But by listening to the players and by intuiting what that is, you can make your own story. You know, they've decided to set up an ogre/snake-person cooking business. And this is the only place they can have, and you've stormed into here and you're trying to kill them."

EXPLORE THE 'WHY' OF IT.

Howitt: "I think, where you just open a door, and there's an orc there, he's got a chest he's guarding, and he's trying to kill you. It's like, 'Why is he here? What's he doing? What does the orc want, why is the orc guarding the chest with his life? Could we bribe the orc? Is this a religious thing for the orc?' And, like, if you can qualify this murderous and suicidal deal, then fine, that's interesting, but if it's just cause, 'Yeah, I've got hit points,' then it's less interesting and exciting."

AMP THE PRESSURE UP IN FIGHTS.

Howitt: "So you have this really basic puzzle, but because there's a bunch of vampires trying to rip off your face while you're solving it, it becomes interesting and you can use it against them. Any sort of secondary objective is worth it in fights. I would argue any sort of secondary object is needful in fights. Fights shouldn't be because we're on opposing sides!"

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS CHARACTER SHEETS PACK

12+ £10

Designer: Wizards of the Coast Team | **Artist:** Various

Key to any roleplaying campaign are its characters. It's player-created heroes that are the focus of this compact pack for *Dungeons & Dragons*' fifth edition, which offers a tidy way to keep character sheets together inside a protective folder.

The folder consists of a simple single-fold sleeve, made of thick card and slightly bigger than the A4 sheets it stores. The black, grey and red *D&D* ampersand logo design on the front makes for a striking look and the card is sturdy, but it certainly won't outlast a tougher plastic wallet. What a standard wallet will lack, however, is the handy quick reference list for player actions during combat and object interactions printed at the bottom of the book's interior, which serve as useful guides – especially for beginners (or those with a poor memory).

Inside the folder are standard A4 printouts of character sheets for fifth edition. There's a handful of different double-sided designs, which play around with the layout and sizing of different sections to suit varying play styles – if you're a ranger or barbarian, it's probably best to know your attack and AC at a glance, while sorcerers and warlocks will prefer to keep a tab on their magic. For some extra help, there are a few sheets dedicated to recording known spells. All of the layouts won't be for everyone, but there should be enough of an interesting mix for at least one to be useful.

Although the custom styles will suit those with at least a couple of campaigns under their belts best, some sheets designed to make creating and tracking a character easy for newcomers to *D&D* are also included in the set. All of the sheets are printed cleanly and clearly – but with PDF character sheets available to download and print for free online, it's hard to justify the extra investment when you could put together almost the same set for a fraction of the cost at home.

There's a healthy stock here to last for a number of sessions, and the sheets can obviously be photocopied to produce more, but it's a shame the sheets are little more than plain A4 printouts. A laminated copy of each would've been a nice alternative option – as well as providing a little extra protection – especially given the pretty hefty cost for what is essentially a few sheets of paper and a cardboard folder.

If you're happy to cough up the price tag, it's a tidy and relatively quality package that would make for a decent gift for a first time roleplayer. Otherwise, it might be worth sacrificing the eye-catching artwork and putting your money into a longer-lasting way of storing your tabletop alter ego. ▪



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: GUILDMASTERS' GUIDE TO RAVNICA

256 11+ £39

Designer: Wizards of the Coast team | **Artist:** Various

It's hard to imagine why it took so long for a setting stuffed with mad science-wizards, demonic jesters and a ghostly mafia to find its way into *D&D*, but while *Guildmasters' Guide to Ravnica* is undoubtably a blast from end to end it struggles to dive into the details that DMs need to run a living campaign.

The sprawling metropolis of Ravnica first saw light as a setting for the *Magic: The Gathering* card game, establishing a strong tone stitched together from steampunk and fantasy tropes. On its own this would be enough to set the world apart from the Forgotten Realms, the high-fantasy default setting of the current edition, but perhaps the most unique aspect of Ravnica is the titular guilds.

Rather than any governments or countries, these ten enormous organisations take the lead role in running the city, handling everything from finance to the military. If you're adventuring in Ravnica you're almost certainly going to be working for or against some the guilds.

Fortunately this is something that the book handles well, laying out neat summaries that include solid guild-based backgrounds for players to choose from. These backgrounds come with plenty of benefits, including extra spells, which encourages players to pick an allegiance early on.

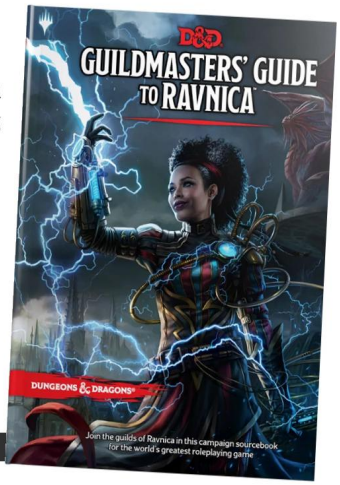
In fact, in terms of raw mechanical content *Guildmasters' Guide to Ravnica* is solid throughout, with long sections laying out creatures and monsters unique to the plane as well as a heaping of flavourful magic items.

However, while the surface-level information about the great city is stellar – the art is beautiful throughout – it all feels a little shallow when you come to plot an actual adventure there. It's clear that Ravnica is a realm that was never intended to live and breathe in the way that you'd expect from an RPG setting, and while *Guildmasters' Guide to Ravnica* goes some way to ironing this out there's still a lot of work for the DM to do.

It's a well-designed book that's packed with inspiration and ideas, and if your gaming group also dabbles in *Magic: The Gathering* you need to pick it up as soon as possible. Otherwise, it's a fascinating world to dabble in and borrow from, but falls just short of being a viable plug-and-play setting.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? MAYBE



THE LAND OF GODS

Greg Stafford turned his teenage spiritual soul-searching into a remarkable fantasy world. When he found Steve Perrin, the result was a D&D-rivalling RPG that would change roleplaying forever

Words by **Matt Jarvis** | Artwork courtesy of **Chaosium**

"I was a troubled youth, frankly, trying to fix myself through any means."

As a teenager growing up in the mid-sixties, Greg Stafford turned to classic tales of gods and legends to discover the answers he sought.

"First I read books of stories, then books about the stories – and then the books I found in the footnotes of books about books of stories," he says. "I pushed myself into adventures, some of them absolutely wonderful – being a hippy at age 18 to 20 was a very colourful and mind-bending experience. Some stuff was crazy, some dangerous, some stupid – okay, a lot stupid, some suicidal. But all of it was a search and, when I discovered people experimenting with magical and spiritual stuff, I dove in headfirst."

As his fascination with mythology deepened, Stafford began writing his own stories to help him better comprehend his increasingly spiritual outlook. In 1966, while a freshman at Beloit College in Wisconsin, he spontaneously penned – "out of nothing" – a single-page excerpt from a lifeboat's log. It was followed by a fragment of a short story about a hero named Snodal arriving on the continent of Altinela. This grew into a longer story, charting the region of Fronela. From the pieces, a new world had been formed.

"One beautiful afternoon chatting with friends I looked out into space and thought of Glorantha – actually called Acos at that time – and the whole world opened up before me, a huge and wide vista without a lot of detail but vast breadth and depth," Stafford recalls. "I was struck with awe and knew I'd be writing more about the place."

The world of Glorantha would pass through its first age while Stafford was still at college, as he continued to write. A second age coincided with his later employment and recovery from hepatitis. The universe was evolving, but in private; it would be several years before the setting first appeared in print, in sci-fi, horror and fantasy fanzine *Space and Time*, which published some of Stafford's earliest fiction. A letter of rejection for another short story would spur the writer to become a designer, eventually deciding to set a planned fantasy board game in Glorantha. Stafford would ultimately release 1975's *White Bear and Red Moon* himself under the newly-founded Chaosium label after struggling to find a publisher willing to take on the project.

A third age of Glorantha followed *White Bear and Red Moon*, as did a second board game set in a neighbouring region of the fantasy land: *Nomad Gods*. A third instalment in the *Dragon Pass* series – named after the early 1980s rechristening of Stafford's debut game – was planned, but never completed. After a few unsuccessful attempts to adapt Glorantha for the burgeoning roleplaying genre, Stafford contacted Steve Perrin, the creator of a set of alternative rules for *Dungeons & Dragons* and Chaosium-published *All the World's Monsters* supplements, to give it a go.

"The decision to have a roleplaying game was Greg's, he just asked me to supply the actual game," Perrin recalls. "In the creation of the world, Greg supplied the background and population to provide a rich roleplaying environment. *White Bear and Red Moon*, along with *Nomad Gods* and *Dragon Pass*, provided a wealth of creatures and situations that begged for roleplaying investigation."

"I didn't really have to make a lot of change for the genre, although I did adapt things to co-ordinate with the authors' creative input," Stafford adds.

RUNE TO GROW

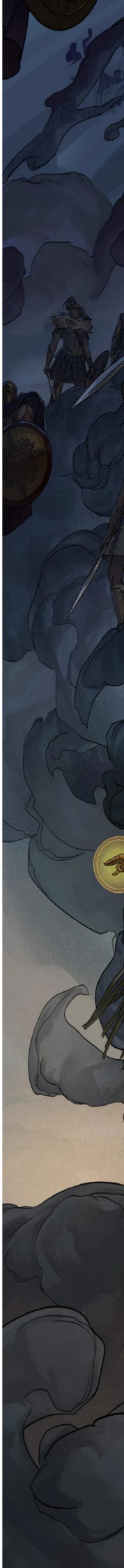
The result of the collaboration was 1978's *RuneQuest*, a fantasy RPG released just a handful of years after *D&D* that recast the molten roleplaying format into a new shape. In place of *D&D*'s reliance on d20 dice was a percentile-based system that required players to roll a value from zero to 100 under their level in a skill to succeed at various tasks. The framework would later be released as the generic Basic Roleplaying ruleset, as well as providing the foundation of many of Chaosium's subsequent games, including *Call of Cthulhu*.

"Mainly the d100 under-roll system is more intuitive," Perrin offers by way of comparison to *D&D*. "If you tell someone they have a 14 in a skill you are just begging the question of '14 what?' Saying someone has 70% in a skill is a much better indicator of just how good they are."

Just as revolutionary was a move away from the character classes and level-driven progression of RPGs such as *D&D* in favour of a skill-based advancement system.

"Players can develop their character as they have played her – rather than have the character develop according to some abstract template in the rules book," says Jeff Richard, project lead for this year's new edition of *RuneQuest*. "Your character ends up being a unique individual. Your character might have started play trained as a scribe but, thanks to adventuring, she becomes a skilled at axe fighting and moving quietly."

"The main benefit of skill-based progression is the feeling of verisimilitude," adds Perrin. "The challenge is







> "Glorantha is a world in which the gods are not only real but palpable and knowable. Their influence has a major effect on everyday life."

ABOVE The striking cover artwork for *RuneQuest*'s second edition

OPPOSITE *RuneQuest* co-designers Steve Perrin (*left*) and Greg Stafford (*right*)

that it can lead to parties where everyone has about the same abilities – it is hard to have a niche-based character who is the only one in the party able to specialise. However, this allows characters to develop into specialists naturally, as they find areas they want to concentrate on or the character seems to always make experience rolls in one direction. Also, as a character gets more advanced in a particular cult, they automatically become more and more of an embodiment of the particular god. Yet a warrior still has the chance of pulling a magical trick out of a helmet when it is needed, when in other games she would be the least likely character to have that ability."

Combined with the innovative skill system was an equally groundbreaking way of dealing with combat, influenced by Perrin's decade of activity with the Society for Creative Anachronism, a medieval study and recreation group.

"This put an emphasis on one-to-one combat and the effect of damage on locations, rather than generalised hit points," Perrin explains. "The combat system has pretty much been the same from the git-go, with variations on the effects of damage on overall health, and the effects of damage on weapons and armor. The attack and parry mechanic has remained much the same, just as it has on the tourney fields of the SCA.

"I am pleased to have essentially pioneered skill-based RPGing and developed a game that gives a 'realistic' feel to ancient/medieval adventuring."



FOR GODS' SAKE

RuneQuest's inventive gameplay immediately marked it as a landmark in roleplaying. It would take the application of Stafford's years of muscular worldbuilding to Perrin's mechanical skeleton to complete its vision.

Glorantha was a fantasy setting like no other. *Dungeons & Dragons* had begun as a set of modified wargaming rules that a world gradually formed around, new patches of lore sewn in as the gameplay necessitated. Glorantha, meanwhile, arrived as a fully-realised creation, its geography and inhabitants carefully woven together by years of Stafford's detailed writing and imagination.

"When I am writing I enter into a trance of creativity that I love," Stafford says. "When searching through the anther of conception and innovation and discovery ideas flow through me with excitement and reveal themselves to me without conscious thought. I get to watch the world draw itself out and form itself into contests and dances, into panoramas and tiny moments of passion, into expressions of affection and conflict that drive themselves into story. So that is my favourite high – better than all the drugs I have so cheerfully poisoned myself with."

Central to Stafford's cosmos was a dedication to what he describes as "mythological reality", with the logic of the universe defined by the existence of deities, rather than science. The surface world of humans is sandwiched between a bowl-like sky and bottomless sea, with an underworld below. Even without the scientific reality of factors such as gravity and physics, Glorantha appears to operate in the same way as our own world.

"The mythical reality demands multiple pantheons of deities independent of each other, but with a mystical underpinning that is not quite understandable by human beings," Stafford explains. "For instance, there is one single sun in the world, but there are multiple deities of that celestial body. It has a long mythical history preceding human existence, based in part on the actions of the pantheons on local conditions and of the various pantheons upon each other and the whole. Finally, despite the immense power of the deities and their existence defining the world, humans and other mortal races are the free agents of the cosmos and determine its changes as they work in harmony or dissonance with the immortals."

"It is a world in which the gods are not only real but palpable and knowable," Perrin adds. "While they are obligated to refrain from interfering directly in the affairs of the many races living on the world, their influence has a major effect on the everyday life of the world. The world is more ancient in atmosphere than medieval, though some areas have chivalric elements."

"It has a vivid Bronze Age feel, when mortals were closer to the gods, and one's allegiance is to tribe, city and cult, not to abstract alignments or ideologies," agrees Richard. "It is mythological rather than material – mythology is no mere euhemeristic explanation of an objective material world; in Glorantha, mythology is the source of the world!"

Despite Glorantha's spiritual origins being a defining aspect of the world, players initially struggled to come to terms with the scope of Stafford's vision.

"After first-edition *RuneQuest* a lot of people apparently felt that there were enough gods – there were three," he recalls. "Then [supplement] *Cults of Prax* added more, which was plenty, but then with *Storm Tribe* some people felt overwhelmed. To say nothing of the number of deities









added in *Esrolia* and *History of the Heortling Peoples*. I hope that people began to understand the multitudinous complexity is a feature, not a bug. Mythology just isn't a nice neat package of 12 major and a bunch of minor deities. There is a certain pick-and-choose aspect to it, depending on what task is at hand."

Even *RuneQuest*'s early designers took some time to get to grips with the complexity of the world and its celestial nature.

"They had to adapt to my inclusion of shamans and the mythological concepts in general, which was the most difficult part since they were entering new territory for them," Stafford says. "I actually rewrote all the cults for the first several years to make them conform to my understanding."

MYTH GANGBUSTERS

Today, mythology has permeated popular culture, from the ongoing surge of interest in the godlike cosmic beings of H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos and the reimagining of cultural deities in games such as *Blood Rage* and *Rising Sun* to the blockbuster success of superhero films, starring characters both directly and indirectly indebted to traditional legends.

"A few of those sources are very well known and popular, but generally most others are derivative of them and just echo the misconceptions," Stafford says of the modern treatment of mythical elements. "Such a misinterpretation is entirely understandable since polytheism and spirituality are not practised through most of the world, and people have been exposed to the most obvious and superficial aspects of mythology, mistaking them for the whole of the subject. As a result we get superheroes instead of deities, without the organic and integral depth of how deities were considered to be. Mind you, I am not saying that superhero-like entities are wrong, but they are superficial and incomplete.

"I am most proud for opening the door to mythology and making the deities much, much more than superheroes as they are usually portrayed."

Combined with the resurgence of interest in tabletop gaming and roleplaying, it seems that Glorantha is returning to an unprecedented level of fascination with mythology that it helped set in motion four decades ago. At the same time, the setting must now compete with more immersive, expansive fictional universes demanding fans' investment than ever before across film, TV, video games and the tabletop.

"I don't think the broader spread of stories drawn from myth has especially diminished immersion, but the indiscriminate intermixing of worlds has," Stafford suggests. "The mashing together of diverse sources is a very American and very modern thing. *D&D* and the Marvel universe are fine examples of it. The tendency is to throw everything in together, establish a rough baseline of equality among entities, and go for it! Glorantha itself has this quality with

LEFT Glorantha is a world full of deities and cults that provide special magic and powers to their worshippers

BELOW William Church's iconic map of Prax from *RuneQuest: Second Edition*

its many pantheons based roughly on various cultures, but Glorantha doesn't generally use sources directly – it derives from them. The indiscriminate mixing of Norse, Greek and other mythologies with science-fiction and conspiracy nuttiness destroys the subtly and differences of the sources."

LOSS OF FAITH

Having redefined roleplaying with its first edition – it was second only to *D&D* in sales at its peak – *RuneQuest* was quickly followed with a second edition in 1980. The RPG rode high on the back of several acclaimed adventures as a third edition, published by major label Avalon Hill in an attempt to grow the game's audience, was developed. When *Third Edition* was released in the mid-eighties, however, it made the once embedded world of Glorantha an optional setting for the game, now tweaked to serve as a more flexible set of rules for other worlds. Avalon Hill's proposed fourth edition of *RuneQuest* would be shelved a decade later by an unimpressed Stafford.

"With perfect hindsight, I think the decision to make the third edition 'generic' rather than root it in Glorantha was a mistake," Richard comments.

Meanwhile, Stafford developed a roleplaying game based on the legend of King Arthur, 1985's acclaimed *Pendragon*. Similarly rooted in myth, *Pendragon* pioneered several new gameplay aspects that the designer had originally considered for *RuneQuest*, including passions and personality traits. The mechanics are only now being included in *RuneQuest* – multiple decades, editions and lessons learned later.

"Between the third edition and the upcoming edition, there have been several changes that have disappeared again because the overwhelming consensus of players is that the *RuneQuest* of the second edition – with additions from third such as sorcery – is the proper realisation of the system," Perrin says. "The biggest change has been an emphasis on the influence of the runes of Glorantha, and a 'passions' system that originated in the game of *Pendragon*. The new game is, initially, going to emphasise the world of Glorantha, with much less emphasis on generic fantasy environments – though these are not going to be entirely ignored."

"What we are most proud to bring to the game are the defining elements of the newest edition: runes as integral parts of the character, rune points rather than one-use rune spells and passions," says Richard of the 2018 edition, subtitled *Roleplaying in Glorantha*. "That, plus an immersive character creation process that teaches the setting through character creation."

STILL QUESTING

This July marks exactly 40 years since *RuneQuest* made its debut. 2018 also sees the release of the game's latest iteration, built off the framework off the second edition rather than revising the third edition or the subsequent fourth and fifth variants released by Mongoose a decade ago. (A sixth edition, published in 2012, once again experimented with separating Gloranthan content from the ruleset.) It will be compatible with the updated second edition, reprinted via Kickstarter in 2016 and now known as *RuneQuest Classic*.

"I think *RuneQuest* has a good future as an RPG that emphasises realistic combat effects and a fascinating world that can be explored for 40 years of gaming to come," Perrin predicts. "As for Glorantha itself, there is a lot of world with regions that have at best a two-line description. That's a lot of world to explore. I'm working on a proposal I call Glorantha 2020, which takes Glorantha to the Fourth Age, the age of superheroes..."

Stafford, meanwhile, expresses no loss of enthusiasm for realising the ambition and scope of his imagined world.

"More fiction. More of everything," he replies, when asked what he sees as the future of storytelling in Glorantha. "Direct brain-to-brain transmission games. I'm hoping to see it as a MMORPG. Way before home computers were a thing I had a vision of some kind of massive epic, continental- and cosmos-spanning game with thousands of players moving and shaking the world. I'm hoping that some of the big guys in the computer biz who grew up on *RuneQuest* make the move! And would love to see a movie."

Still, even with his aspirations seemingly as sky-high as they were that day he stared out into space in 1966, the creator appears somewhat satisfied.



HOW WE MADE

MONSTERHEARTS

Avery Alder's coming-of-age RPG might star the supernatural, but its frank exploration of adolescence, sexuality and identity is as real as it comes. Puberty has never seemed quite so terrifying…

Words by **Owen Duffy**

From the tentacled horrors of *Call of Cthulhu* to the blood-sucking predators of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, roleplaying games have a long history of letting players confront – or become – monsters. Whether you're in search of explosive kaiju action or creepy tales of eldritch horror, the hobby has you spoiled for choice.

But one game above all others looks deep into the concept of monstrosity, using fantastical creatures to explore powerful real-world themes. *Monsterhearts*, by Canadian designer Avery Alder, casts players as teenage vampires, witches and werewolves navigating a world of sex, drugs, social cliques, nightmarish supernatural entities and sadistic levels of homework.

We caught up with Alder to learn about her story-focused approach to game design, and how she created her brilliant distillation of adolescent fear and confusion.

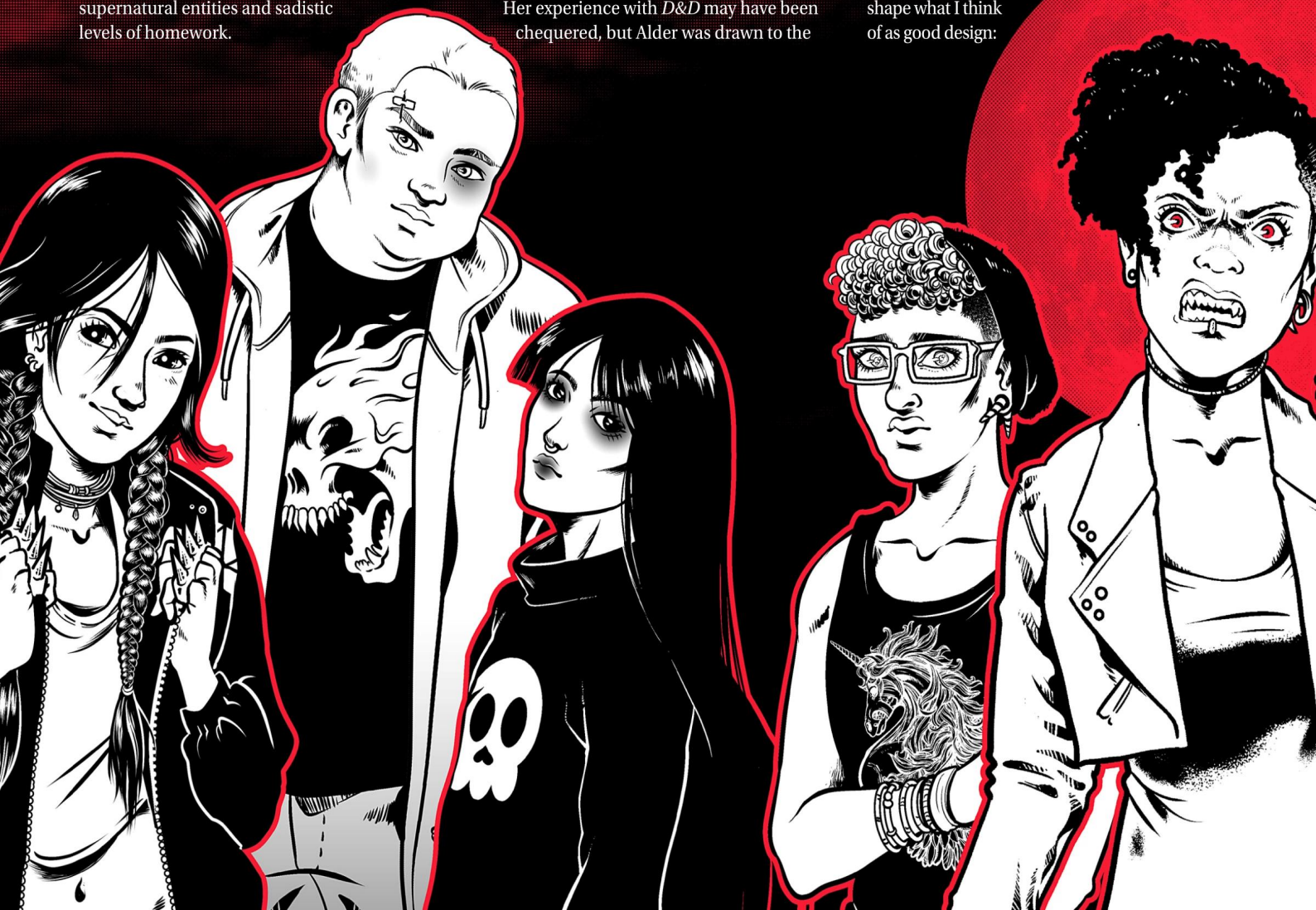
INDEPENDENT THOUGHT

Avery Alder had a typical introduction to roleplaying.

"My entry point was *Dungeons & Dragons*," she says. "I was playing with a group of fellow teen rookies, we played the 3.5 edition, and we really struggled with the game. Our rules interpretations and aesthetic sensibilities clashed, and nobody stayed dungeon master for very long. I came out of that scene knowing that roleplaying games were full of exciting potential, but that I hadn't experienced it yet."

Her experience with *D&D* may have been chequered, but Alder was drawn to the wider possibilities that roleplaying offered for creative expression, and she soon became interested in some of the small-press games being produced by independent creators. She was especially impressed by *My Life with Master*, a 2003 release by designer Paul Czege. It cast players as hapless minions employed by an evil genius – where most RPGs served as power fantasies for players, this game put them in the shoes of weary and downtrodden servants vying to avoid their master's ire.

"I was drawn to independent games and doing my own design work really early on," Alder says. "*My Life with Master* was the first indie game I bought, and it continues to shape what I think of as good design:



precisely-focused mechanics, emotion-driven play and tight aesthetic sensibilities."

She also encountered the 2010 release *Apocalypse World*, by designer Vincent D. Baker, which broke down some of the traditional barriers between players and game masters, distributing responsibility for the story more evenly around the table. For Alder, it was a source of inspiration.

"*Apocalypse World* is an amazing engine and toolset for designing new games," she says. "I feel like it has inspired and informed so many of my projects – not just the ones that are explicitly Powered by the Apocalypse, but all of them. I love its principle-oriented design, its use of lists and its focus on relationships in community."

It wasn't long before she was working on game designs of her own, and she brought touches of innovation to her work that challenged some of the core assumptions about what roleplaying games could be. In 2009 she released *Ribbon Drive*, a game that put players in the shoes of travellers on a shared car journey. Players compiled playlists of songs, forming a soundtrack for their trip that determined the mood and direction of their story.





> "Some people were immediately excited, and others indignant, at the thought of a game about sappy dysfunctional vampire romance."

"*Ribbon Drive* is a game about road trips and self-discovery," Alder explains. "It combines structured freeform mechanics with mixtapes that each player brings to the session. It's a game that I'm still really proud of, and that remains available to pick up.

"I designed it in response to a design trend that seemed overwhelmingly popular in the years preceding it: games that pushed toward conflict in every single scene, that encouraged players to ruthlessly ask 'But where's the conflict?' in any moment of reflection or dialogue. I'd been designing them too. *Ribbon Drive* reacted to that trend, envisioning play that was exclusively focused on reflection and dialogue, where the only conflict was an internal one: the question of whether people really want the things they think they want.

The game met with a positive response from players, and in 2012 Alder followed it with another innovative release. *The Quiet Year* was a post-apocalyptic game about a community of survivors eking out an existence in a harsh wasteland. Characters explored their surroundings, attempting to build a community while collaboratively creating a map of their environment.

"It's a poetic map-drawing game about community, scarcity and figuring out how to make decisions together," Alder says. "I love it because it's a game that exists at a strange intersection: it's not exactly a board game, because there isn't a board or win condition; it's not exactly a roleplaying game, because at no point do you play as a specific character or have scenes. It feels unique, an invitation to imagine what strange communities might exist in the future, and to negotiate through play how they might work together."

MORE THAN MONSTERS

2012 also saw Alder release the game for which she's now best known. *Monsterhearts* took the much-maligned genre of young-adult paranor-

mal romance and used it to explore themes of alienation, social manipulation and turbulent teenage sexuality.

"It started as a joke," she recalls. "I'd been spending a lot of time thinking about the design of *Apocalypse World*, and how to use its core engine to do new things narratively. And I'd been thinking a lot about *Twilight* – how disproportionately ridiculed it was by grown men, how that might reflect more on our cultural biases than the quality of its prose and whether there was something in it that I gravitated toward. The two lines of thought collided, and I started designing *Apocalypse World*-style moves about supernatural teen romance. Some people were immediately excited about the idea, and others indignant at the thought of a game about sappy dysfunctional vampire romance. Weirdly, both reactions invigorated me.

"I dove in deep – binge-watching seasons of *Buffy*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *Misfits*, *Roswell*, *Being Human* and *True Blood*. I studied *The Craft*, *The Lost Boys*, *Jennifer's Body*, *Ginger Snaps* and more. I worked to distil central themes from all of these chaotic, messy stories. Ultimately, I realised that these were stories about young people who didn't feel like they belonged in the world or had any power in it, and monstrosity was invoked as a metaphor to explore that emotional truth."

Monsterhearts saw players become teenage vampires, werewolves, ghouls and ghosts. Together they faced an assortment of otherworldly threats, but they also confronted the confusing, messy and sometimes dangerous world of adolescence. They might accidentally unleash a vengeful demon while agonising over how to ask their crush to a school dance. They could grapple with their overpowering lust for human blood while finding themselves caught in the middle of their parents' divorce. While this mix of the monstrous and the mundane might seem like an odd combination, there's a long tradition of using the supernatural to explore aspects of teenage existence, from *Carmilla* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

"I think that there are two ways to tell the truth," Alder says. "The first is to recount, with as much accuracy and detail, what literally transpired. And the second is to tell a story which reaches your audience and resonates with them, bringing them into the emotions and perspectives that you're trying to communicate.

"We've built a culture where teenage perspectives are often dismissed as uninformed, short-sighted, stupid, hormonal and misguided. Adults like to position themselves as 'knowing better.' And so it's hard to tell stories about teenage shame, teenage ambition and teenage self-discovery using that first kind of truth. I think artists and writers turn to the supernatural as a metaphor for adolescence because it allows them to speak truthfully about these themes, without inviting their audience to automatically and callously disregard them.

"The story of a werewolf is the story of someone who feels out of control in their own body. But adult audiences don't hear that story and snidely retort, 'Why don't you just learn to control your body?' The werewolf's story is granted legitimacy, where other teenage characters might have been dismissed out of hand.

"I think this is the same reason why monstrosity and the supernatural are often used as



a metaphor for mental illness, queerness and otherness. Audiences have been culturally conditioned to dismiss the experiences of marginalised people and so, in a bizarre workaround, creatures like ghosts and swamp monsters sometimes end up providing a more relatable, resonant lens for understanding real human experiences."

To capture these kinds of alienated teenage experiences, Alder needed to populate her world with compelling characters. *Monsterhearts* includes an assortment of different creature types, or 'skins,' for players to inhabit: possessive and controlling vampires, fickle and dangerous witches, werewolves with impossible strength and a hair-trigger temper. Each examines a different aspect of adolescent existence, with characters working out how to come to terms with their changing bodies and developing personalities.

"Each skin encapsulates not only a monstrous archetype, but also a kind of teenage struggle," she explains. "They reflect the ways that people can isolate and hurt themselves, and the ways that dysfunctional relationships can develop. But skins aren't just focused on suffering. They also reflect how people conceptualise their own power and resiliency. Are you strong because you are loyal to people even when they treat you badly? Are you powerful because you can disappear?

"The skin that I knew from the outset was going to be pivotal in designing the game was the Mortal, the hungry-for-love ingénue who gets pulled into a enrapturing, monstrous world. I had to make Bella a compelling, dynamic character with real choices. The question that really unlocked a lot of the design space for the Mortal was 'When does giving away your power give you more power?'"

SEX TALK

While *Monsterhearts*' mature, considered, literary approach made it stand out from other roleplaying games, it's perhaps its frank portrayal of teenage sexuality that most powerfully sets it apart. As in real life, sex serves to complicate the plot, and each character comes with their own 'sex move' which triggers whenever they sleep with someone.

Sexual relationships in *Monsterhearts* become part of a growing web of connections between player characters and the people they encounter: a mix of loyalty, desire, power, love and manipulation. Alder argues it's a more accurate and multifaceted representation than can be found in the vast majority of games.

"I think games have typically done a terrible job of portraying sexuality," she says. "It's often portrayed as a reward for heroic action, or as a goal to be achieved via opposed dice rolls. Sexuality is portrayed as an exchange between opposing forces. Rarely as a collaboration or generative force.

"*Monsterhearts* is working in a genre space that sees sexuality in terms of power and identity. I think it does a good job of exploring that one story about what sexuality means in our lives, but there are others that gaming really lacks for.

"I want to see more games about relationships, identity, sexuality and sex. Especially ones that get away from thinking of these topics in terms of conquest and contest. I think Emily Care Boss has done amazing work in her *Romance Trilogy* of games; *Breaking the Ice* in particular tells a story I don't see elsewhere in roleplaying games."



The game's approach to love, sex and attraction took an inclusive approach to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender characters, encompassing all kinds of orientations and identities. But it did more than just including LGBT characters as an option for players to portray: it dove deep into the experience of teens who didn't identify as straight. Depending on how the dice fell, characters might find themselves experiencing sudden and unexpected same-sex attraction and, while that might initially seem arbitrary, it meant that the game's teenage protagonists were no more in control of their own orientation than people in the real world.

For Alder, this kind of representation was one of the most important aspects of the game.

"LGBT youth are rarely given opportunities to see themselves reflected back in media," she says. "Television and movies are especially guilty of this erasure, and there are often producers and financial contributors working behind the scenes to keep that representation off the screen. Shame on them. I think that stories are one of our primary ways of understanding our own cultural fabric, and visual media in particular has a huge hand in teaching us who belongs in the world. When we see youth in movies, we typically see white, thin, able-bodied, straight, cisgender, class-privileged youth. Where otherness exists, it's a joke or a tragedy.

"Seeing authentic reflections of yourself in the world around you is important. It affirms that you belong in the world, that you have worth in your society. LGBT youth need that. Along with family acceptance, positive representation is one of the biggest factors in preventing queer youth suicide."

FROM THE HEART

Monsterhearts' combination of dramatic stories and engaging gameplay based on the *Apocalypse World* engine won it critical praise and a loyal fan following. In 2016, Alder launched a crowdfunding campaign to develop a second edition of the game.

"After five years of play, feedback and improving my craft as a designer, I knew that I could create a more elegant, well-expressed version of the game," she says. "A lot of the changes were focused on streamlining and refining, making sure that the game was inviting to new players and effortless for existing ones.

"I responded to concerns that had been brought up with me a number of times by asexual players that the game didn't create space for their stories and experiences. I sat with that, and over time developed rules to model the ways that asexual people are differently impacted by teenage sexuality.

"And, finally, a huge difference is the addition of a full chapter on navigating boundaries, and what to do when the game leaves a player feeling uncomfortable or unsafe. *Monsterhearts* is a game about teenage shame, sexuality, confusion, power and relationships. There's lots of triggering or unsettling content that could come up. The new edition does a better job of walking players through how to handle that."

While Alder has developed her skills as a designer, she has also given thought to the way she publishes her work, making her games available at a reduced cost for players suffering financial hardship. She says that while it's an approach that fits with her egalitarian principles, it's also proven beneficial to her as a creator.

"The motivation behind it is simply that I think capitalism is a rotten system, designed to exploit inequality for profit. I don't like it. And while selling games is how I put food on my family's table, I want to be mindful and intentional about how I engage and participate in capitalist markets. Taking 30% off the ticket price for people in financial need is an easy first step toward fairness.

"It's worked great so far. Sales have increased, meaning that my bottom line isn't compromised. But more importantly, I've had a number of people reach out and mention that it made a difference. Obviously, the real solution to these issues is going to be systemic – wealth redistribution, socialist public policy and tighter market regulations. But in the meantime, I want to figure out what I can do as a creator to keep my work accessible."



PAINTING GUIDE

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: NOLZUR'S MARVELOUS MINIATURES HEROES

Delve into the painting dungeon and discover how to bring your roleplaying adventurers to life

Words and photographs by **Andy Leighton**

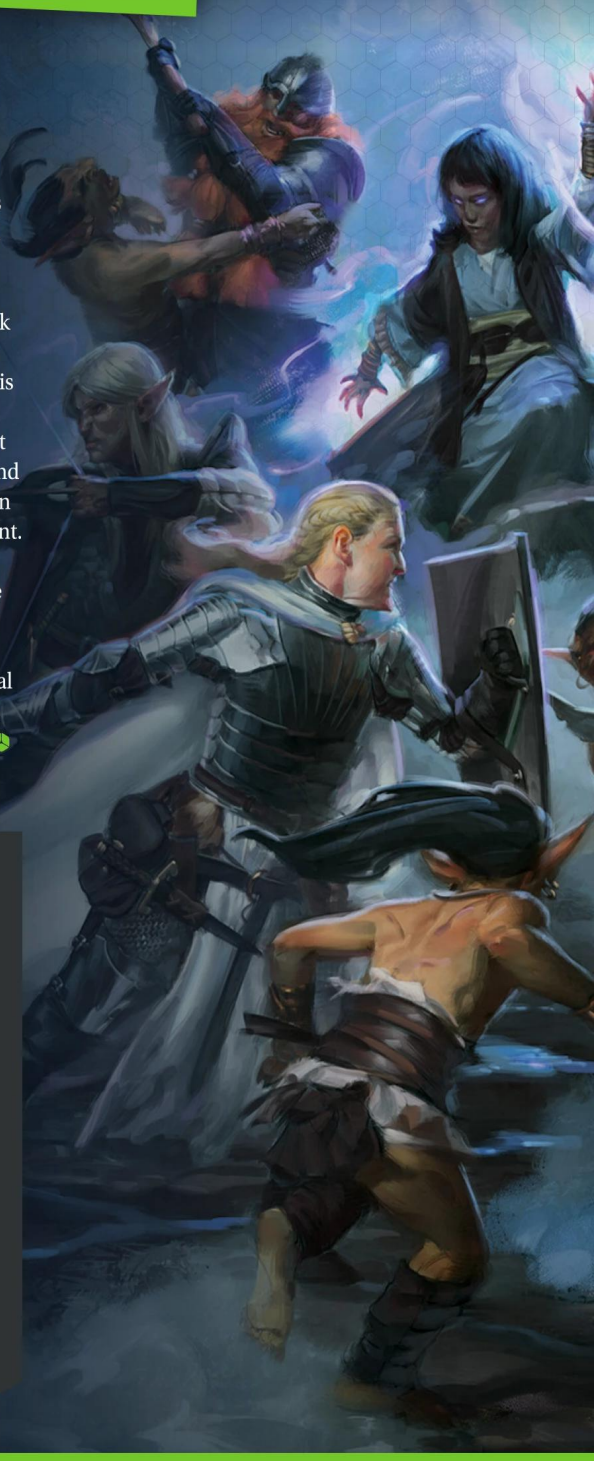
This month we're looking at how to paint a selection of hero miniatures from WizKids' Nolzur's Marvelous Miniatures range, designed to be used in your *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns.

This is a great selection of models that encompasses a wide range of both heroes and monsters. One of the things that excited me the most was the representation within the range; there's a wide variety of both races and classes, but also a healthy ratio of female to male characters. It's a good sign that this range should have something for everybody.

Also worthy of note is the fact that each clam-shell includes two versions of each figure – same class, race and gender – but in different sculpts. One appears to represent a low-level starting character and the other a beefed up, well-equipped hero they become after hours of gaining experience, giving you a visual representation for your advancements. If that wasn't enough, the price is outstanding for what you get – around a fiver will net you one pack of two heroes.

Out of the packs the models are only just this side of good. They suffer from a general lack of definition, being more akin to a board game miniature than an actual 'hobby' miniature. This can leave some areas, especially the faces and hands, looking a bit melted. But if we look back at the price this is a reasonable issue to deal with, and you would really only notice these details upon a close inspection, especially with a lick of paint.

Speaking of paint, it's even easier than most to get these started. All the models in the range come primed with a light coat of grey. I painted straight onto this with no prep, and you'll see that it worked just as well as a normal undercoat. So once they're out the packet you can get straight to painting using this guide...



PAINTS & TECHNIQUES

PAINTS USED

Abaddon Black
Altdorf Guard Blue
Auric Armour Gold
Averland Sunset
Baharroth Blue
Baneblade Brown
Bloodletter
Blue Horror
Bugmans Glow
Cadian Fleshtone
Dawnstone
Deathclaw Brown
Dechala Lilac
Deepkin Flesh
Dorn Yellow
Drakenhof Nightshade
Druchii Violet
Eshin Grey
Evil Sunz Scarlet
Flayed One Flesh
Gehennas Gold
Agrax Earthshade
Genestealer Purple
Guilliman Blue
Incubi Darkness
Ironbreaker
Jokaero Orange
Karak Stone
Kislev Flesh
Krieg Khaki
Leadbelcher
Liberator Gold
Mephiston Red
Mournfang Brown
Nuln Oil
Pallid Wych Flesh
Rakarth Flesh
Reikland Fleshshade
Rhinox Hide
Runefang Steel
Seraphim Sepia
Skrag Brown
Slaanesh Grey
Steel Legion Drab
Teclis Blue
Thousand Sons Blue
Xereus Purple
XV-88
Yriel Yellow
Zamesi Desert

STAGES

Each model is split up into four stages, each with a list of colours and the corresponding paint that was used for it. Each stage uses a different technique to achieve a similar effect on each element but with different colours.

Stage 1 is basecoating. Base colours are applied using flat colours. Since the models are primed a lighter colour these initial coats are applied slightly watered down, around two parts paint to one part water.

Stage 2 is shading. During this stage we apply washes and glazes to the more shadowed areas of the miniatures, particularly the lower edges and undersides.

Stage 3 is layering. This stage involves applying a layer of a lighter colour, generally focused towards the top of the model, avoiding the areas previously shaded.

Stage 4 is for final details and highlights. This stage involves adding the finishing touches, sometimes just small details like the eyes, and adding highlights to increase definition.

If you find yourself unsure of where to apply the highlights or spot highlights, look over the images alongside the guide and compare that stage to the last.

PAINTING GUIDE
D&D HEROES

DWARF WARRIORS



STAGE 1
Mournfang Brown: Apply a basecoat to the boots, gloves and belt.
Leadbelcher: Apply a basecoat to the metals.
Averland Sunset: Apply a layer to the straps and edging.
Altdorf Guard Blue: Apply a basecoat to the clothing.
Rhinox Hide: Apply a layer to the skin and beards.
Gehennas Gold: Apply a basecoat to the golds.



STAGE 2
Agrax Earthshade: Apply a wash over the whole model except for the blue areas.
Druchii Violet: Apply a wash to the blue areas.



STAGE 3
XV-88: Apply a layer over the lighter brown areas.
Ironbreaker: Apply a layer over the metals.
Averland Sunset: Apply a light highlight to the straps and edging.
Teclis Blue: Apply a layer over the clothing.
Steel Legion Drab: Apply a layer over the skin and hair.
Auric Armour Gold: Apply a layer over the golds.



STAGE 4
Krieg Khaki: Apply a line highlight to the lighter brown areas.
Drakenhof Nightshade: Apply a glaze over the metals.
Dorn Yellow: Apply a very light highlight to the edging.
Blue Horror: Apply a line highlight to the clothing.
Bugmans Glow: Apply a line highlight to the skin.
Karak Stone: Apply a spot highlight of the beard.
Liberator Gold: Apply a highlight to the gold.

HALFING ROGUE



STAGE 1

Rhinox Hide: Apply a basecoat to the leather areas.
Mephiston Red: Apply a basecoat to the cloth.
Cadian Fleshtone: Apply a basecoat to the skin.
Leadbelcher: Apply a basecoat to the metals.
Baneblade Brown: Apply a basecoat the the tunic.
Mournfang Brown: Apply a basecaot to the hair.



STAGE 2

Agrax Earthshade: Apply a wash over the entire model.



STAGE 3

Skrag Brown: Apply a line highlight to the leather areas.
Evil Sunz Scarlet: Apply a layer over the cloth.
Kislev Flesh: Apply a layer over the skin.
Ironbreaker: Apply an edge highlight to the metals.
Karak Stone: Apply a layer to the tunic.
Jokearo Orange: Apply a line highlight to the hair.



STAGE 4

Deathclaw Brown: Apply a fine highlight to the leather areas.
Slaanesh Grey: Apply an edge highlight to the cloth.
Deepkin Flesh: Apply a highlight to the skin.
Nuln Oil: Apply a light glaze to the metals.
Pallid Wych Flesh: Apply an edge highlight to the tunic.
Bloodletter: Apply a light glaze to the hair.

HUMAN WIZARD





STAGE 1

Incubi Darkness: Apply a basecoat to the robes.
Xereus Purple: Apply a basecoat to the edging of the robes.
Rhinox Hide: Apply a basecoat to the staff, pouches, straps and book cover.
Kislev Flesh: Apply a basecoat to the skin.
Baneblade Brown: Apply a basecoat to the pages of the book and the bones.
Abaddon Black: Apply a basecoat to the hair.





STAGE 2

Drakenhof Nightshade: Apply a layer over the robes.
Reikland Fleshshade: Apply a wash to the book, face and staff.





STAGE 3

Thousand Sons Blue: Apply a layer to the robes, focusing on the high areas and raised ridges.
Genestealer Purple: Apply a line highlight to the edging.
Steel Legion Drab: Apply a line highlight to the staff, pouches, straps and book cover.
Flayed One Flesh: Apply a layer to the skin.
Dawnstone: Apply a line highlight to the hair.
Rakarth Flesh: Apply a layer to the bones and pages.



STAGE 4

Baharroth Blue: Apply a light highlight to the robes.
Dechala Lilac: Apply an edge highlight to the edging of the robe.
Karak Stone: Apply an edge highlight to the staff, pouches, straps and book cover.
Deepkin Flesh: Apply a highlight to the skin.
Nuln Oil: Apply a light glaze to the hair.
Pallid Wych Flesh: Apply a spot highlight to the bones and an edge highlight to the pages.

FINISHING THE SPELLBOOK

STAGE 1

Rhinox Hide: With watered-down paint and very little on the brush, carefully mark symbols and images into the book. It's best to use dots and dashes to make up the shapes.



STAGE 2

Guilliman Blue: Apply a light coat over the spell.



STAGE 3

Baharroth Blue: Apply very light spot highlights to the uppermost areas of the spell.



HUMAN MONK



STAGE 1

Mournfang Brown: Apply a basecoat to the trousers and straps.
Averland Sunset: Apply a basecoat to the cloak.
Leadbelcher: Apply a basecoat to the metals.
Rhinox Hide: Apply a basecoat to the staff and hair.
Cadian Fleshtone: Apply a basecoat to the skin.
Baneblade Brown: Apply a basecoat to the wrappings.



STAGE 2

Seraphim Sepia: Apply a wash to the robes and skin.
Agrax Earthshade: Apply a wash to all of the brown areas.
Drakenhof Nightshade: Apply a wash to the metal.



STAGE 3

XV-88: Apply a layer to the trousers, straps and wrappings.
Yriel Yellow: Apply a layer over the robes, focusing towards the edges.
Ironbreaker: Apply a layer to the metals.
Steel Legion Drab: Apply a line highlight to the hair and staff.
Kislev Flesh: Apply a layer to the skin.



STAGE 4

Karak Stone: Apply an edge highlight to the trousers, straps and wrappings.
Dorn Yellow: Apply an edge highlight to the robes.
Runefang Steel: Apply a spot highlight to the metals.
Zamesi Desert: Apply a line highlight to the hair.
Deepkin Flesh: Apply a highlight to the skin.

BASES



STAGE 1

Eshin Grey: Apply a basecoat across the rocky base area.



STAGE 2

Rhinox Hide: Apply as a glaze over the rocks.



STAGE 3

Dawnstone: Apply an edge highlight to the rocks.



STAGE 4

Scenics: Apply small areas of static grass or grass tufts to the bases.

DIGITAL DRAGONS

The most famous roleplaying game of all time is swapping pen and paper for pixels with its official companion app. Project lead Adam Bradford reveals how D&D is gearing up for the 21st century

Words by **Matt Jarvis**

For four decades, hand-drawn maps, hastily-scribbled character sheets and leafing through hundreds of pages in a hefty rulebook have been as key to the classic roleplaying experience as swords and sorcery, dice and grid squares, and, yes, *Dungeons & Dragons*.

The thing is, as traditional and tangible as cramming miniscule notes into a margin or hastily scanning through pages in desperate search of a specific difficulty class are, sometimes it's just a bit, well, awkward.

That's not to say that the increasing number of digital alternatives to a good ol' hardback tome have often been much better. Between crashing apps, awkwardly pinching to zoom on tiny tablet text or scrolling through unresponsive PDFs, trying to find a happy balance between the reliance of pen-and-paper and convenience of technology continues to be the holy grail of modern tabletop gaming.

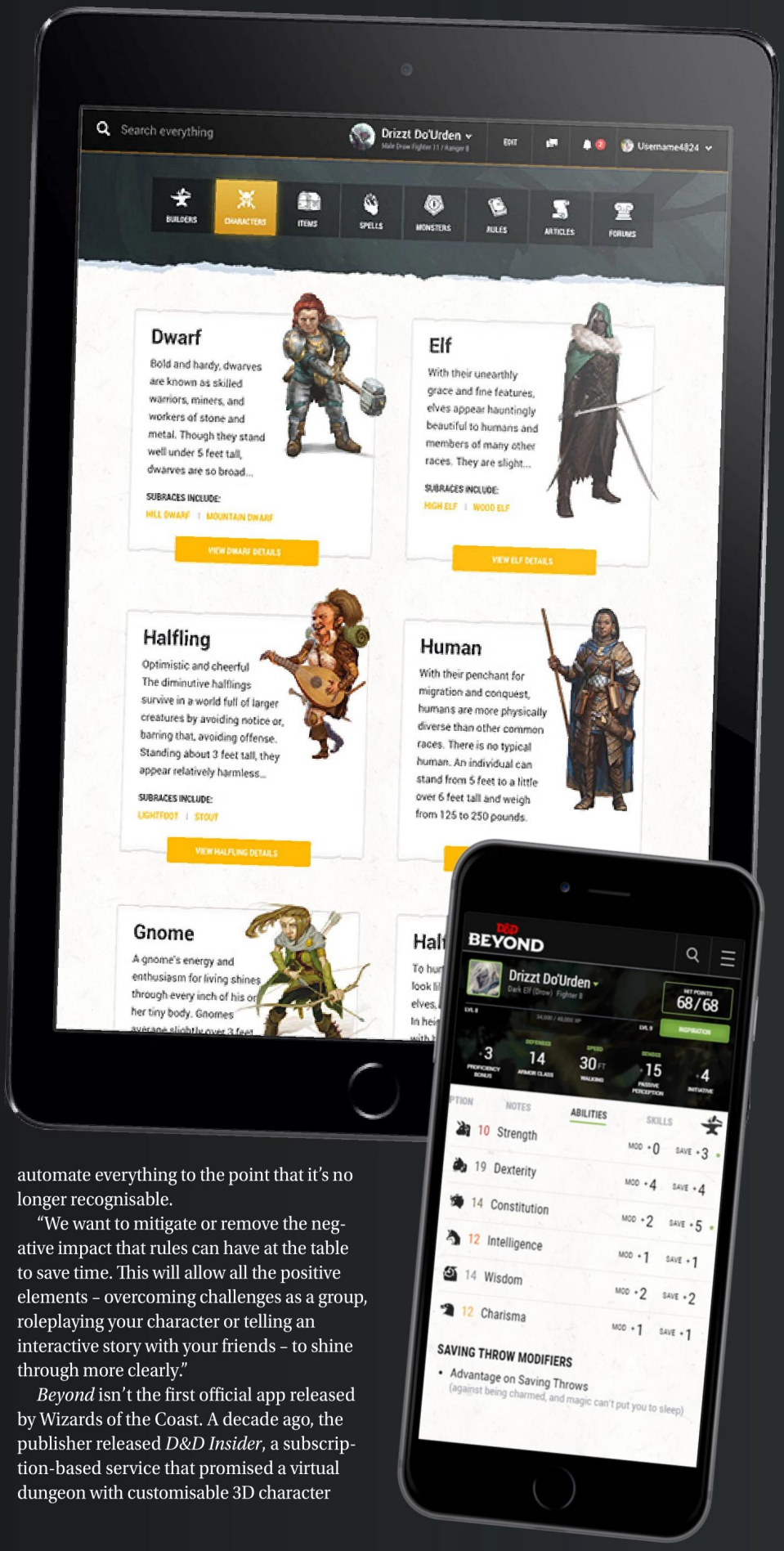
Curse's Adam Bradford believes the studio, which cut its teeth with online utilities for video games, has found the solution with *D&D Beyond*. Developed with the help of the RPG's publisher Wizards of the Coast, *Beyond* is pitched as a comprehensive toolset for fifth edition, including fully digitised versions of everything from character and monster creation sheets to the game's core rulebooks.

It's an ambitious service that aims to combine the practicality of popular third-party software with the game-spanning access and information of an official app. Although he's keen to extol the virtues of the virtual companion, Bradford is just as quick to reassure players less enthused by the idea of swapping their printouts and books for a laptop or iPad.

"*D&D Beyond* is just that – a companion," he stresses. "We are not attempting to turn *Dungeons & Dragons* into a video game or automate everything to the point that it's no longer recognisable.

"We want to mitigate or remove the negative impact that rules can have at the table to save time. This will allow all the positive elements – overcoming challenges as a group, roleplaying your character or telling an interactive story with your friends – to shine through more clearly."

Beyond isn't the first official app released by Wizards of the Coast. A decade ago, the publisher released *D&D Insider*, a subscription-based service that promised a virtual dungeon with customisable 3D character



miniatures, an archive of digital content and rules compendium based on the then-new controversial fourth edition. Responses to *Insider* were mixed, expressing criticism of the unwieldy Microsoft Silverlight platform on which it was built and the absence of some promised tools but general praise of the service. *Insider* was discontinued in 2014, but its spirit lives on in *Beyond*.

"When we originally started talking about what became *D&D Beyond*, we actually wanted to position it in the same way for fifth edition as *D&D Insider* was for fourth," Bradford recalls. "There was a great deal of potential there that I feel like was never realised.

"The demand for digital tools has been evident through the past couple of editions, and they have fallen through for a multitude of reasons. Sometimes it's the technology – Silverlight is bad. Other times, the challenges in creating such a service are underestimated. *D&D Beyond* is coming to fruition because of Curse's experience with creating communities and toolsets, as well as the incredible success of fifth edition. We aim to grow alongside the game in the years to come."

ULTIMATE D&D

Over the years, numerous third-party developers have popped up to fill the virtual space left by publishers. Some of the most popular virtual tabletops, character creation suites and other tools have even teamed up with Wizards of the Coast to sell official *D&D*-specific content through their apps. With *D&D Beyond* aiming to bring together many of the aids delivered by separate third-party offerings into a unified platform, what does that mean for the future of these outside apps?

"Wizards of the Coast has made the great move with fifth edition to work with partners to expand and enhance the reach of *D&D*, and *D&D Beyond* is a new part of that," Bradford responds. "As far as I'm aware, the relationship with those partners will continue and hopefully thrive. We are focused on making the best digital toolset/game companion we can make, and we fully intend to work with and integrate with as many other partners as we can in order to provide value to the community."

Like a fire-breathing winged lizard, one advantage that *Beyond* boasts is scale. Bradford and his team have worked to turn *D&D*'s many rules, world, creatures, spells and concepts into an extensive and accessible library. Need to find something specific during a combat encounter or skill check? No more thumbing through books required – pop it in the search box and the app will take you to the right paragraph in a flash. With almost half a century of history and evolution behind the latest ruleset, it's been quite the task.

"A few specific rules have been interesting, such as spell casting with multi-classing or temporary hit points, but the greatest challenge has been turning such an expansive ruleset into a relational database," Bradford reveals. "We've parsed all the data into parts that we can use now. No one aspect has been too tough for us to handle – it's definitely the breadth of complexity."

It's not just all rules, either – Bradford reveals that players may discover some other surprising features hidden in the toolset.

> *"Technology is at its best when it enhances human interaction – not when it overshadows it."*



Perhaps most curious is a full pronunciation guide for all of the creatures from the game's *Monster Manual* and *Volo's Guide to Monsters*, complete with audio demonstrations by professional voice actors and stars of online roleplaying video series *Critical Role*, Matt Mercer and Marisha Ray.

"The feature came up at our own table, where one of my players really messed up with a name," he recollects. "After the laughter died down, he very innocently asked, 'How am I supposed to know how to say that?' Our toolset is a perfect way to provide such a guide for the community."

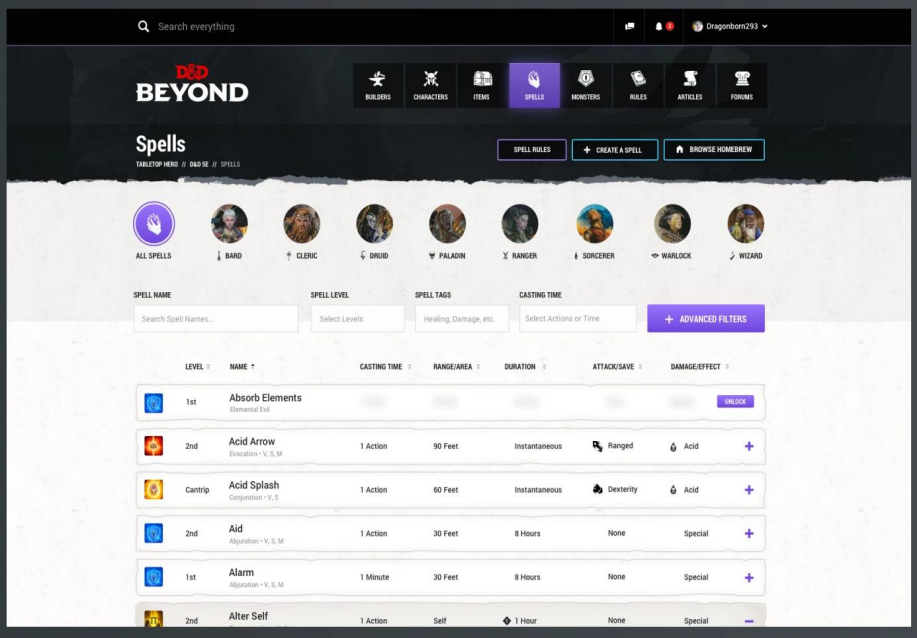
Although the app as it exists at the moment is an impressively fully-featured service, there's plenty more planned to develop *D&D Beyond*'s standing as a digital experience.

"*Beyond* is meant to unify a wide variety of features and functions under a single banner," explains Bradford. "We have to start somewhere, as we are with what's available at launch, but the toolset will expand over time to continue to bring more and more to the table.

"I find myself using the compendium a great deal. Cross-linking and tooltips make it easier than ever to run an adventure at the table. The character builder and digital sheet give players a way to engage with their characters in new and exciting ways. And I have recently started spending too much time looking at the incredibly creative homebrew spells, magic items, and monsters from the community."

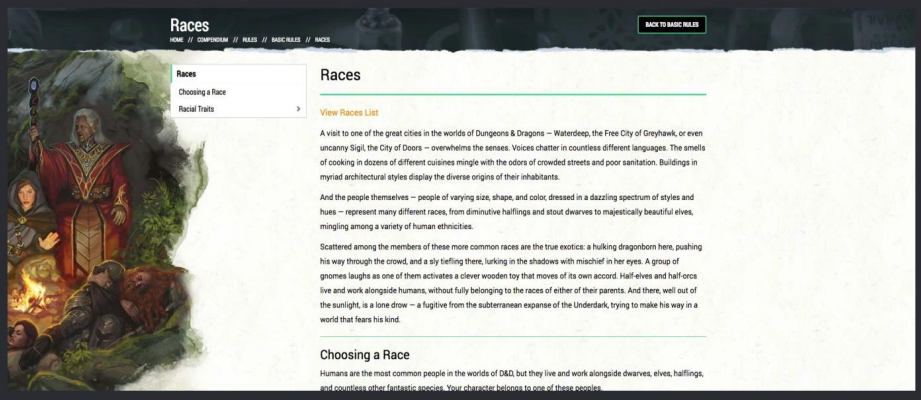
To help evolve the app over the months and years to come, Curse is enlisting the help of fans, having previously taken on board the comments of 160,000 testers during a pre-release beta earlier this year.

"The feedback we have received has cer-



D&D Beyond includes a comprehensive library of spells, rules, creatures and more for the RPG.

D&D BEYOND



■ *Two different subscription options are available, aimed at heroes and dungeon masters.*

tainly shaped the toolset already," Bradford says. "A big part of that has been confirming that we are marching down the right path, which is great to have. There have been other things that have surprised us, such as the need for a basic equipment listing in addition to magic items or how much players wanted to see tooltipping faster. We responded to the feedback throughout the beta rapidly – we want players to know how seriously we take it and how important that feedback is to the overall quality of the toolset."

THE PRICE OF ADVENTURE

As with fifth edition's basic rules, the main *D&D Beyond* app is free to download and start using right away, including the Standard Reference Document and *Elemental Evil Player's Companion*.

From there, features and extra game content are split into both subscriptions and one-off purchases. For example, digital sourcebooks, such as the *Player's Handbook* or *Volo's Guide to Monsters*, are $29.99 (£22), with adventure modules, including *Curse of Strahd* and *Storm King's Thunder*, slightly cheaper at $24.99 (£18).

Subscriptions are broken up into two tiers: Hero and Master. As the names suggest, Hero is aimed at players, removing adverts, allowing the creation of an unlimited number of characters and allowing the use of homebrew content. Master, meanwhile, is intended to be the offering of choice for DMs and groups, adding the ability to share unlocked content with players taking part in the same campaign to avoid the need to buy multiple copies of the same book.

The decision to allow sharing is one that has been greeted warmly by fans, but questions remain over the need to re-buy duplicate copies of a rulebook in the app if players already own physical or digital volumes. Bradford admits that enabling past purchases on the platform to unlock *D&D Beyond* content isn't currently a priority.

"Purchasing sourcebook content on *D&D Beyond* provides a digital version of that book, but the primary value is in the incorporation of that content into the toolset," he states. "Right now, the *D&D Beyond* team is focused on delivering the best suite of digital tools for *D&D*."

GOING BEYOND

It's still early days for *D&D Beyond* – and the role of technology in roleplaying as a whole – but Curse's app shows a promising approach to uniting the digital and analogue worlds. When it comes to the potential for virtual tools to enhance tabletop gaming, Bradford isn't short of ideas.

"We intend to release a native mobile app with offline capability, Twitch stream integration, digital dice rolling, monster progression/encounter building, and more," he details. "Once we get to a place where character management is in a good place, as well as monster and encounter management, then we will move on to automated combat tracking. That will allow for a DM to do things like target a group of players with a spell, prompt the players to roll saving throws and the players roll digital or real dice to get the results. That's the end goal for our first major functionality arc."

Still, even as he works to bring tech and the tabletop together, Bradford remains wary that preserving the real-life experience of games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* is vital to keeping the magic where it belongs.

"Technology is at its best when it enhances human interaction – not when it overshadows it," he says. "The most compelling thing about tabletop roleplaying for me is enjoying structured make-believe with friends. If digital tools can make that better without removing that interaction, they succeed." ■

TABLE TECH

Five more roleplaying apps and tools you should consider taking with you in your virtual bag of holding



ROLL20
A customisable virtual tabletop with character sheets, maps, chat features, dice rolls and support for mobile as well as PC. There's official content for games including *D&D*, plus a marketplace full of user-created goodies.



FANTASY GROUNDS
Bringing pen-and-paper RPGs to PC, the virtual tabletop platform includes plenty of licensed content for games such as *D&D*, *Call of Cthulhu* and *Pathfinder*. Some of the highlights include automated combat, shared maps and random table generation.



HERO LAB
Aimed at making character creation an easy task, *Hero Lab* can be downloaded on PC or mobile and includes electronic character sheets tailored for games including *D&D*, *Pathfinder* and *Shadowrun*. The app doubles as a handy way to quickly track your hero's status once your adventure begins.



TABLETOP SIMULATOR
This PC sandbox allows almost any game to be made and played using its virtual bits and pieces, and the community has filled its marketplace with everything from board games and miniatures to RPGs. Beware though – there is a table-flipping button!



SYRINSCAPE
Bring an added sense of atmosphere to your roleplaying with this audio tool that lets you create custom background music and set off sound effects. While there's nothing specific to *D&D*, there is a dedicated fantasy player with an official *Pathfinder* soundset and another pack for *Starfinder* – and users have made plenty of custom audio cues, too.

PAINTING GUIDE

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: NOLZUR'S MARVELOUS MINIATURES MONSTERS

Exploring dungeons is little fun without something to fling a Magic Missile at. Here's our take on some classic roleplaying baddies

Words and photographs by **Andy Leighton** | Artwork courtesy of **Wizards of the Coast**

Last month we looked at the hero models from the Nolzur's Marvelous Miniatures range of *Dungeons & Dragons* figures, but naturally they need something to test their mettle against. You're in luck, as this time around we have a selection of terrifying beasts and a guide as to how to paint them.

Much like the heroes there is a great selection of monsters available, most coming in a multipack of several different models. It's especially nice to see a spread of equipment for each of the three goblin and kobold sets.

The same positives also come with the same negatives. The quality of the miniatures is lacklustre compared to what you would receive from specialist producers, but that level of quality may not be expected here. If you are simply looking to enhance your *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns these will be perfect.

PAINTS & TECHNIQUES

PAINTS USED

Agrax Earthshade
Averland Sunset
Baneblade Brown
Blue Horror
Bugman's Glow
Cadian Fleshtone
Carroburg Crimson
Ceramite White
Dark Reaper
Dawnstone
Death World Forest
Deathclaw Brown
Dechala Lilac
Doombull Brown
Dorn Yellow
Druchii Violet
Dryad Bark
Eshin Grey
Fenrisian Grey
Genestealer Purple
Incubi Darkness
Ironbreaker
Jokaero Orange
Karak Stone
Khorne Red
Kislev Flesh
Leadbelcher
Mournfang Brown
Nuln Oil
Nurgling Green
Pallid Wych Flesh
Rakarth Flesh
Squig Orange
Steel Legion Drab
Stormhost Silver
Tallarn Sand
Tau Sept Ochre
Thunderhawk Blue
Wazdakka Red
Wild Rider Red
Yriel Yellow

STAGES

Each model is split up into four stages, each with a list of colours and the corresponding paint that was used for it. Each stage uses a different technique to achieve a similar effect on each element of the figure, but with different colours.

Stage 1 is basecoating. Base colours are applied using flat colours. Since the models are primed a lighter colour these initial coats are applied slightly watered down: around two parts paint to one part water.

Stage 2 is shading. During this stage we apply washes and glazes to the more shadowed areas of the miniatures, particularly the lower edges and undersides.

Stage 3 is layering. This stage involves applying a layer of a lighter colour, generally focused towards the top of the model, avoiding the areas previously shaded.

Stage 4 is for final details and highlights. This stage involves adding the finishing touches, sometimes just small details like the eyes, and adding highlights to increase definition.

If you find yourself unsure of where to apply the highlights or spot highlights, look over the images alongside the guide and compare that stage to the last.



PAINTING GUIDE
D&D MONSTERS

BUGBEARS



STAGE 1

Dryad Bark: Apply a basecoat over the fur and straps.
Leadbelcher: Apply a basecoat to the weapons and armour.
Bugman's Glow: Apply a basecoat to the face and ears.
Rakarth Flesh: Apply a basecoat to the teeth.
Skrag Brown: Apply a basecoat to the cloth.



STAGE 2

Agrax Earthshade: Apply a wash over the entire model.

GOBLINS

STAGE 1

Death World Forest: Apply a basecoat to the skin.
Leadbelcher: Apply a basecoat to the metals.
Incubi Darkness: Apply a basecoat to the cloth and hair.
Mournfang Brown: Apply a basecoat to the leathers, shield and bow.
Rakarth Flesh: Apply a basecoat to any bones and the arrow fletching.





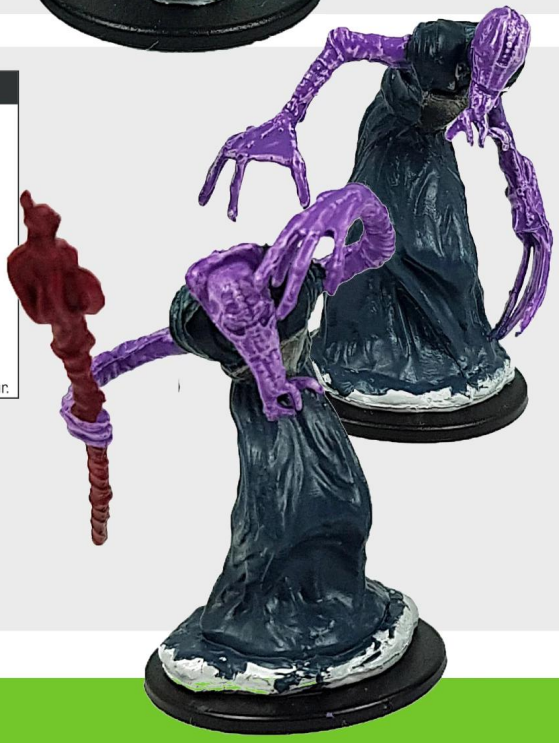
STAGE 2

Agrax Earthshade: Apply a wash over the entire model.

MIND FLAYERS

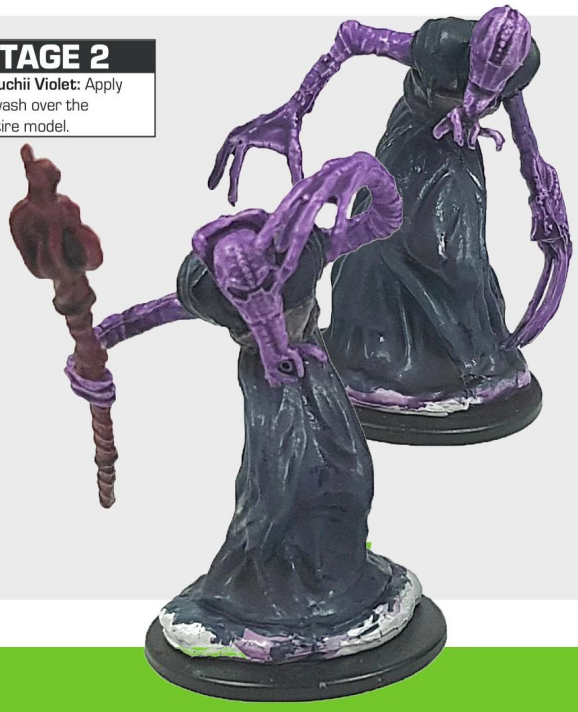
STAGE 1

Genestealer Purple: Apply a basecoat to the skin.
Dark Reaper: Apply a basecoat to the lighter robes.
Incubi Darkness: Apply a basecoat to the mantle.
Khorne Red: Apply a basecoat to the staff and eyes.
Leadbelcher: Apply a basecoat to the armour.



STAGE 2

Druchii Violet: Apply a wash over the entire model.





STAGE 3

Mournfang Brown: Apply a layer to the fur.
Steel Legion Drab: Apply an edge highlight to the straps.
Ironbreaker: Apply a layer to the metals.
Cadian Fleshtone: Apply a highlight to the face and ears.
Deathclaw Brown: Apply a layer to the cloth.



STAGE 4

Steel Legion Drab: Apply a highlight to the fur.
Baneblade Brown: Apply a further edge highlight to the straps.
Jokaero Orange: Apply a fine highlight to the cloth.
Kislev Flesh: Apply a final highlight to the face and ears.
Squig Orange: Make a mix with four parts water and apply over the metals.
Wazdakka Red: Apply a dot for the eyes.

STAGE 3

Nurgling Green: Apply a layer to the skin.
Iron Breaker: Apply an edge highlight to the metal.
Dark Reaper: Apply a line highlight to the cloth and hair.
Deathclaw Brown: Apply a layer to the leathers, shield and bow.
Pallid Wych Flesh: Apply a layer to the bones and fletching.





STAGE 4

Rakarth Flesh: Apply a final highlight to the skin.
Tallarn Sand: Apply an edge highlight to the leather.
Fenrisian Grey: Apply a spot highlight to the hair.
Jokaero Orange: Make a mix with two parts water and apply over the metals.
Wazdakka Red: Apply to the eyes.

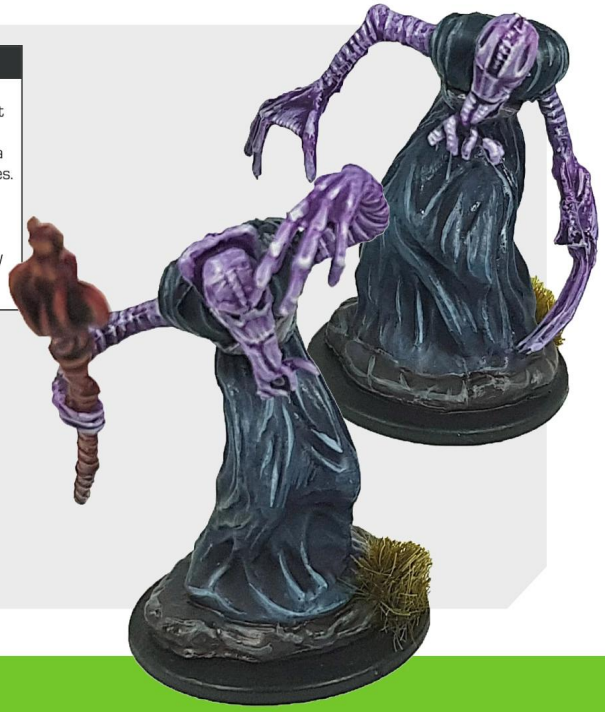
STAGE 3

Dechala Lilac: Apply a layer over the skin.
Thunderhawk Blue: Apply a layer to the robes.
Dark Reaper: Apply an edge highlight to the mantle.
Wazdakka Red: Apply a layer to the staff.
Stormhost Silver: Apply a layer over the armour.



STAGE 4

Pallid Wych Flesh: Apply an edge highlight to the skin.
Fenrisian Grey; Apply a line highlight to the robes.
Blue Horror: Apply an edge highlight to the mantle.
Tau Sept Ochre: Apply an edge highlight to the staff.



PAINTING GUIDE
D&D MONSTERS

KOBOLDS

STAGE 1

Doombull Brown: Apply a basecoat to the skin.
Leadbelcher: Apply a basecoat to the metals.
Karak Stone: Apply a basecoat to the cloth and straps.
Rakarth Flesh: Apply a basecoat to the fletching.





STAGE 2

Carroburg Crimson: Apply a wash over the entire model.

DISPLACER BEAST

STAGE 1

Incubi Darkness: Apply a basecoat to the skin.
Bugman's Glow: Apply a basecoat to the edges of the tentrils and mouth.
Rakarth Flesh: Apply a basecoat to the teeth.
Averland Sunset: Apply a basecoat to the eyes.



STAGE 2

Nuln Oil: Apply a wash over the entire model.



BASES



STAGE 1

Eshin Grey: Apply a basecoat across the rocky base area.



STAGE 2

Rhinox Hide: Apply as a glaze over the rocks.

STAGE 3

Wazdakka Red: Apply a layer to the skin.
Ironbreaker: Apply a layer to the metals.
Rakarth Flesh: Apply a layer to the cloth and straps.
Pallid Wych Flesh: Add a highlight to the fletching.
Baneblade Brown: Apply a layer to the weapon handles and arrows.





STAGE 4

Wild Rider Red: Apply an edge highlight to the skin.
Agrax Earthshade: Apply a wash to the metals.
Pallid Wych Flesh: Apply an edge highlight to the cloth and straps.
Yriel Yellow: Apply to the eyes.

STAGE 3

Dark Reaper: Apply a layer to the skin.
Kislev Flesh: Apply a layer to the edges of the tentrils and mouth.
Pallid Wych Flesh: Apply a layer over the teeth.
Yriel Yellow: Add a layer to the eyes.



STAGE 4

Fenrisian Grey: Apply an edge highlight to the skin.
Dorn Yellow: Apply a spot highlight to the eyes.
Ceramite White: Apply a spot highlight to the teeth.





STAGE 3

Dawnstone: Apply an edge highlight to the rocks.



STAGE 4

Scenics: Apply small areas of static grass or grass tufts to the bases.



THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

USING TECHNOLOGY

We venture out of the dungeon and swap our pens and paper for touchscreens and the internet as we discover how modern tech can enhance your next session

Words by **David Jagneaux**

Being a good DM requires patience, creativity and preparation, but it's also good to be versatile and flexible. That's why we always try to enter every session with a small collection of ideas that we can pull from when we're in a pinch. Sometimes, though, it's just as useful to turn the page towards the modern era and look at all of the ways real-world technology can enhance and improve your gaming sessions.

It's easy to feel trapped by the confines of pen and paper when running a roleplaying game campaign. The traditional way of doing things asks DMs to write stats down by hand, keep track of dice rolls by counting, only play with people in the same room or simply use your imagination for things like ambient noise, music and sound. Luckily the year is now 2018 and you don't have to be limited like that anymore. There are tons of options!

We're going to cover five specific ways that DMs can enhance and improve their dungeon mastering efforts through the use of technology. You'll learn how to use both official applications from RPG publishers and third-party digital tools, why keeping a tablet nearby is essential, how to amplify the ambiance of a room, and why living far away doesn't mean you can't continue to play.

MAGIC IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND

The quickest and easiest way to enhance any tabletop roleplaying game campaign is to use one of those magical little devices that everyone carries around in their pocket: a smartphone or, if you'd prefer (and have even bigger pockets), a tablet and/or laptop. Just having one of these devices handy will go a long way towards opening up your possibilities as a DM, even if you own every rulebook and campaign guide under the sun.

The fact of the matter is, no matter how many times you've read over rulebooks and character guides you don't have everything memorised. In a lot of cases, it's faster to Google or Ctrl+F something in a PDF than it is to manually flip through pages. Going a step further though, Wizards of the Coast has an official *D&D* app and website known as *D&D Beyond* that can really amplify your game nights.

On *D&D Beyond* you can do everything from check rules and look at items to search for monster stats or even use a step-by-step builder to create brand new characters. If



Add to the atmosphere of a setting with music and audio effects *(Wizards of the Coast)*

you're playing with a group of first-timers then this toolset is extremely useful.

WORLD WIDE WEB OF MYSTERIES

Going beyond just that single portal is a whole host of other ways mobile apps and websites can be used to boost your roleplaying experience. Let's say, for example, that someone in your game group didn't bring dice – there's an app for that! Or what if you don't have enough scratch paper for taking notes, marking initiative order or keeping track of hit points? There are plenty of apps you could use for that, too!

However, my favourite way to use smartphones and tablets to enhance my DMing is a bit more flavourful. If your players are slowly creeping through a dark forest at night time they'd probably expect to hear wind howling, trees rustling or perhaps the caw of a crow in the far-off distance. Or how about the hustle and bustle of people in a busy castle town? Using free websites and apps with sound effects and ambient noises you can accomplish the exact mood you'd need for any situation.

The last touch I like to use the internet for right before or during a campaign is for name generation. Just look up any number of free fantasy name generators online and give all of your NPCs a name in the world. This has the added effect of making your world feel more alive and helping your players remember and connect with NPCs individually.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Taking things a step further, let's talk about how to use the internet to play with people that may not be in the same city (or country!) as you. Just because your group isn't together doesn't mean you can't play. The least advanced way of doing things would be to have your remote player(s) call in via Skype, Google Hangouts or something similar and set up a webcam so that the DM can see their dice rolls, as well as having another webcam show the table at the main location so the player can direct what's going on. It's not ideal, but it gets the job done.

If you want to go a bit further with it you can try out online applications like *Roll20*, which feature officially licensed *D&D* materials and can let you simulate everything you'd ever need all within your web browser. As long as the DM owns the materials anyone can play with them for free and it's constantly getting updated. This is a great option if everyone in the group is a remote player.



DUNGEON MASTERS

The authors of immense Dungeons & Dragons tome Art & Arcana take us through their love and memories of the RPG

Interview by **Matt Jarvis**

Images reprinted with permission from ***Dungeons & Dragons Art & Arcana: A Visual History*, by Michael Witwer, Kyle Newman, Jon Peterson and Sam Witwer, copyright (c) 2018. Published by Ten Speed Press, a division of Penguin Random House, Inc.**
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How did you discover *Dungeons & Dragons*?

***Mike Witwer*:** Sam had been introduced to the game by a neighbourhood boy around the age of seven or eight and decided before long that he wanted his own set of *D&D* books.

Once he obtained a beautiful set of late 1970s/early 1980s *Advanced D&D* books a year or two later, Sam became the obvious choice as dungeon master and I was his player guinea pig – by then I was probably six or seven. I was too young to understand the mechanics, so Sam took care of those, leaving me and my best friend the freedom to speak and wildly declare actions as players. We were reckless and bloodthirsty and Sam usually made us pay for that. *D&D* quickly became one of our favorite pastimes and nurtured our passion for storytelling and the dramatic.

***Kyle Newman*:** My older brothers would play it with their friends on weekends and even at Boy Scout camp – at one point they played a homebrewed campaign that my brother Kevin designed set in the world of *Indiana Jones* using *AD&D* rules! – and I was allowed to watch, much like Elliott in Steven Spielberg's seminal *E.T.* I wanted so much to be a part of it but had to wait a few years until I could play with my friends.

Roleplaying games, and more specifically *D&D*, were foundational for me in terms of becoming a storyteller. The process of creating this book was filled with epiphanies, which truly made me realise just how important *Dungeons & Dragons* was to the professional direction my life has gone.

***Jon Peterson*:** I was introduced to gaming when I was eight or nine by a babysitter who was an early adopter of *D&D*, and who saw babysitting as an opportunity to recruit new opponents for wargames. He sent me into the sample dungeon from the *Dungeon Master's Guide* as a solo

first-level magic-user outfitted with a dagger and a single spell. The first room I entered was full of orcs, but I had been told I could only cast my sleep spell once, so I decided to engage them with the dagger instead. Needless to say things did not go well for me. After that I sort of admired *D&D* from afar, poring through books and rolling up characters as I played computer roleplaying games, but it wasn't until after college that I got serious about *D&D*.

What are some of your favourite memories from roleplaying in *D&D* throughout the years?

***MW*:** Sam was running us through *Tomb of Horrors* and my fighter was unlucky enough to enter the fire slide room. I don't want to spoil the trap for those who may play in the future, but I can say that I misunderstood the description of what was happening and ended up running straight into the fiery pit instead of fleeing – my character was incinerated. I subsequently fought with Sam for the next 30 minutes insisting that he had described it wrong, which caused me to make this fatal error. It's a big no-no to fight with the DM on such matters and it was definitely my bad – sorry Sam!

***JP*:** One moment that stays with me was from a heavily-hacked *Second Edition* game my friends and I were playing in the 1990s. Our party had been surrounded by a huge band of gnolls, who decided we should settle our quarrel with them through single combat. We chose from their ranks the scrawniest, most timid-looking gnoll we could find; the gnolls chose a guy from our party who was a bit of a clown, but should have been more than a match for any single gnoll. But when they entered the ring, a gnoll shaman had cast pretty much every preparatory spell in the book on their would-be champion, who was now frothing at the mouth, practically hulking in stature, and burning with some kind of mysterious fire. It was the tensest combat I remember watching, with lots of dramatic rolls, but eventually our guy prevailed and the gnolls reluctantly released us.

***Dungeons & Dragons* is a game fuelled by its players' imaginations. Why is its artwork such a key part of this open-ended experience?**

Sam Witwer: When *D&D* came out, it was such a radical new concept and it was damned near impossible to explain to newcomers. Is it a board game? How do you win? The art was hugely instrumental in bringing accessibility to the game.

The earliest art was mostly homebrew stuff done by local amateur artists and it illustrated simple concepts and ideas, like weapons and monsters – many of these monsters had rarely or never been illustrated before, so these drawings provided visual uniformity and a thematic baseline for the shared universe.

As the game grew in popularity and spread out to wider audiences, the art became instructional in nature, helping players not only conceptualise the landscapes, equipment and inhabitants of the imagined world, but also how they might be used in the context of the game.

What did you discover while putting together *Art & Arcana* that you were especially pleased to be able to include in the book?

***JP*:** This project connected us with so many people in the *D&D* community we would never have gotten to meet otherwise. Artists who were just teenagers when *D&D* first came out, who got paid a couple bucks per drawing by Gary Gygax to clue us in on what a hippogriff might look like, or a beholder, or a mind flayer.

D&D is a social game, it's all about who you get to play the game with, and a project like this was all about getting to know each other and the amazing people who made the game happen.

***MW*:** One element that stands out is finding and publishing all five of the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* wraparound covers from the late 1970s and early 1980s. These are super iconic pieces that were the covers of the books when the game began to achieve mainstream popularity and they all now reside in private collections. These pieces had never been published in their native form, always obscured by trade dress, cover text and the spine itself, and had been victims of a mediocre printing process, so putting these original pieces out there at this quality is particularly rewarding. We literally got chills when we saw some of these pieces in this way for the first time.

40-plus years on, *Dungeons & Dragons* remains the go-to roleplaying game for many players old and new. Why has it remained so popular?

***JP*:** At the end of the day, people want to choose their own adventure. Video games indoctrinate us into fantasy gaming pretty early these days – we learn about hit points, experience levels, all of that from computer games that in sales terms are blockbusters that make Hollywood jealous. But those games have to cast a wide net. When you sit down with four or five friends around a table to play *D&D*, you get to have your own game.

D&D has always been about unlocking your own creativity, and it certainly doesn't hurt that *D&D* opened up a new world for so many creators that have gone on to great success in the arts and sciences today.

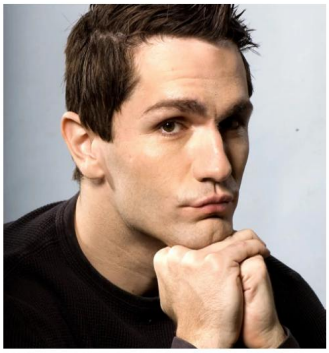
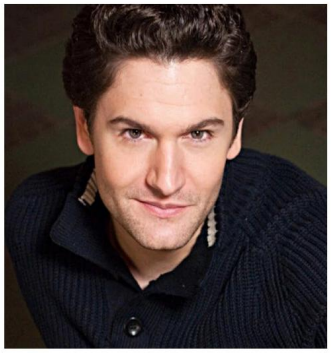
***MW*:** The game has never been as accessible as it is today, due largely to two factors. One: an elegant fifth-edition ruleset that has simplified many aspects of the game and eliminated some previous barriers to entry. And two: the popularity of live-play online shows and podcasts such as *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*. It has always been really challenging to explain a roleplaying game to someone who hasn't witnessed one before; now, anyone can go online and watch one of these shows for five minutes and get exactly what this is all about.

Having delved so deeply into *D&D*'s past for this book, what do you see in the future for the RPG?

***All*:** Now that the most challenging barriers to entry for the game have been removed, we think the sky's the limit for *D&D* and for the roleplaying game industry at large.

The same way that formerly esoteric *D&D* concepts from 40 years ago have pervaded today's popular culture, we wouldn't be surprised if we see roleplaying games become a truly everyday thing across cultures, socioeconomic classes, age groups and beyond.

It has shown to be so beneficial to nurturing creativity and fostering healthy social interactions, it may in the next few years show up as a standard part of educational curricula or even find widespread use in behavioural and/or speech therapy – with such a freeform game, the possibilities are endless!



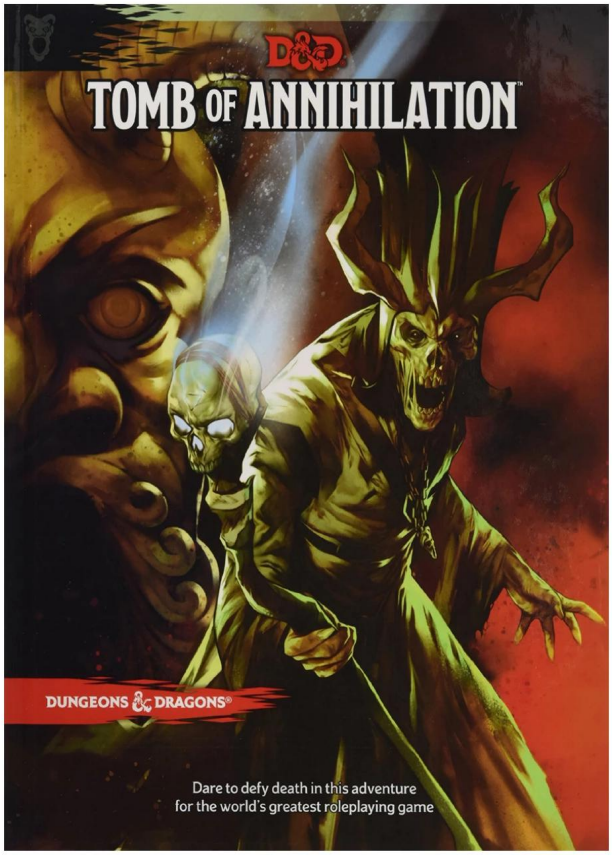
LEFT TO RIGHT Sam Witwer (© *Tim Sabatino*), Michael Witwer (© *Brian McConkey*), Jon Peterson and Kyle Newman (© *Stefan Simchowitz*)

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: TOMB OF ANNIHILATION

Rumble in the jungle with dinosaurs and the undead

Designer: Will Doyle, Adam Lee, Christopher Perkins, Steve Winter | **Artist:** Various

3+ £40



The latest campaign for *D&D*'s fifth edition takes your heroes from the mountains and forests of high fantasy and throws them into an exciting world of steaming jungles, ancient ruins and madcap pulp adventure.

The major hook for *Tomb of Annihilation* is a simple but effective one. For some reason, all attempts at magical resurrection are beginning to fail and those who have already been brought back are starting to lose their grip on life. Naturally, this represents a major problem in a world where many important people are on their second, third or fourth shot at living.

It's not a wildly elegant way of setting the party off on their adventure, but it does the job with a bare minimum of fuss and raises the stakes of the entire campaign. After all, the setup essentially ensures that there are no second chances if you send your character bumbling into a spike trap.

As the campaign begins to develop, however, it becomes clear that the main draw of *Tomb of Annihilation* isn't the quest but rather Chult itself.

Where the iconic Sword Coast – home of most of the previous *D&D 5E* adventures – has tangled forests and ice-bound mountains, Chult turns to thick jungles and wide, sluggish rivers. It's a land inspired by African mythology and *Indiana Jones,* where you're more likely to run into dinosaurs than dragons and journeys can be thwarted by tropical storms as well as hordes of undead.

The campaign itself could fairly be divided up into two major parts, the first of which involves exploring and mapping the region in a bid to find the titular Tomb of Annihilation. This is completely open-ended and can include everything from professional dinosaur racing to a battle against evil snake people in an ancient temple, but invariably involves a whole lot of travel and unexpected encounters with the denizens of the jungle.

The second part sees the adventurers work their way through the tomb itself. It's a labyrinthine deathtrap that draws on classic *D&D* puzzles, traps and monsters to create an incredibly nostalgic experience for old hands, and something new for players who have cut their teeth on the more wilderness-based adventures that have been a staple of recent years.

Regardless of the path any adventurers take, Chult itself is the highlight of the campaign. As such, it would feel unfair to write about it without at least acknowledging the region's somewhat suspect history, and how it ties into *D&D*'s wider culture. After all, *D&D* is a game mostly developed by and for white western audiences, and when the region was first being designed it relied heavily on stereotypes and classic 'dark continent' adventure stories with results that could charitably be described as insensitive.

There have been concerns raised over a return to Chult for this very reason, but it certainly seems as though efforts have been made to correct the mistakes of the past. While a few things here and there could still raise a few questioning eyebrows, *Tomb of Annihilation* definitely reflects Wizards of the Coast's considerable efforts to overhaul the hobby's record on race, gender and sexuality.

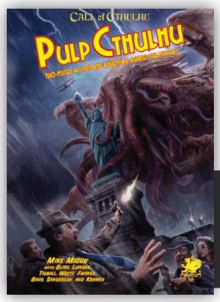
Every aspect of the adventure is enjoyable and well-designed, but the exploration aspect of *Tomb of Annihilation* stands out as some of the most fun to be found in official campaigns. The imagination on display is second to none, some of which can probably be attributed to *Adventure Time* creator Pendleton Ward, who is credited as a story consultant.

The sheer scale of options and potential outcomes can be a little intimidating, especially to new dungeon masters, but with some careful preparation and a willingness to go with the flow most should soon find their feet.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

Perhaps the best long-form campaign put out for *D&D*'s fifth edition to date, *Tomb of Annihilation* focuses on exploration and adventure rather than a more scripted story experience.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... PULP CTHULHU

Tomb of Annihilation is the closest modern *D&D* has come to the action-packed adventure *Pulp Cthulhu* also aims for – albeit with less chance of insanity and more of contracting an undead plague.



D&D: XANATHAR'S GUIDE TO EVERYTHING

Fifth Edition levels up in its first major expansion

Designer: Wizards RPG team | **Artist:** Various

2+

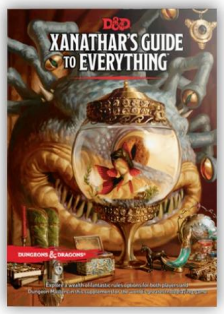
£42

It can be a little tricky to describe what *Xanathar's Guide to Everything* (*XGtE*) represents. The core of the book is a wealth of new options for building and playing *Dungeons & Dragons* characters, but there are also clarifications or refinements of existing rules, as well as fresh advice on encounter- and campaign-building far beyond what you would expect of a simple supplement.

In many ways the slightly unfocused air of *XGtE* is a reflection of how modern games – both tabletop and digital – are no longer static products, eternally fixed at version 1.0. It was clearly shaped by community feedback and directly addresses many of the questions and concerns that regularly crop up in Reddit threads and Twitter feeds.

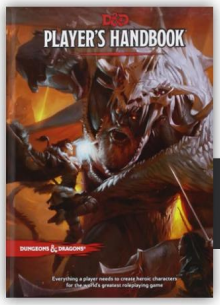
Sometimes this means clearing up ambiguous rules, such as setting out the penalties for sleeping in armour or determining whether player characters can tell what spell an enemy mage is casting. Mostly, however, it involves setting out a whole load of new rules for sub-classes, equipment and spells.

Even these new options are based around what the *D&D* community has been looking for – or, at least, what the most vocal part has been looking for. Many of the character options are designed to take routes that some players felt were missing from the initial release, such as a 'death' cleric that focuses on helping the fallen rest for good rather than turning them into cackling zombies.



There's also been a real focus on letting players translate some less traditional fantasy archetypes from their head to the tabletop without the need for reflavouring or house-ruling existing content. For example, with the inquisitive rogue sub-class you can now create a Sherlock Holmes-esque investigator with an eye for detail and a fighting style based around reading enemy movements, while new spells allow brawny warrior-wizards to mix it up in close combat and still pump out damage.

Barring one or two missteps – the designers have already acknowledged that some groups may want to house-rule an ultra-efficient healing spell – the new character options presented in *XGtE* are great fun and slot snugly into the existing ruleset.



In many ways, the fact that the new rules feel fun without seeming over-powered is perhaps the book's biggest success of all.

Major RPGs such as *D&D* tend to suffer from a phenomenon known as 'power creep.' This is where the developers feel the need to push out new content – classes, races, magic items and so on – that begins to eclipse the earlier options in terms of raw power or usefulness. *D&D*'s fifth edition has thus far steered well clear of this problem and has showed considerable restraint in terms of new supplements but, as *XGtE* is arguably the first major content update, many veterans were keeping an eye out for the telltale signs of the creep.

For the most part, this doesn't seem to be a problem. There are a few things that appeal to the power gamers out there, but this is always going to be the case and none of them seem to make any existing abilities or characters completely obsolete.

Indeed, plenty of the content doesn't have any impact on the gameplay whatsoever, such as a guide for generating character backstories or long tables of random names for the DM to consult when players insist on speaking to everyone in the tavern.

The best way to describe *XGtE*, perhaps, is that it upgrades your experience to *D&D 5.1*. It's a huge content update that tweaks things here and there, presented with all the usual top-notch design and writing work we've come to expect from the *D&D* team. Arguably some of the rules clarifications should be presented as errata or an update to the existing core books rather than requiring you to buy a new one, but when that's the biggest complaint going you know you have a success on your hands.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

It's a little on the pricey side for what you get, but *Xanathar's Guide to Everything* is an excellent way to upgrade your group's *Dungeons & Dragons* experience.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... D&D: PLAYER'S HANDBOOK

While you certainly don't need *XGtE* to play the latest edition of *D&D*, its additions and clarifications mean it's definitely worth grabbing a copy if you can.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS – BALDUR'S GATE: DESCENT INTO AVERNUS

One hell of a campaign

Designer: Wizards of the Coast team | **Artist:** Various

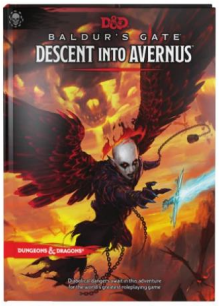
256 | 13+ | £39



One of the joys of *D&D* is its ability to transcend the traditional boundaries of Tolkien-esque fantasy – to take your game to places much weirder than even the deepest dungeon, and to battle foes fouler than even the mightiest dragon. This is exactly the feeling that washes over you as *Descent into Avernus* propels your party to hop planes of existence, negotiate with dark gods and ride infernal war machines into reality-warping battles.

Quite possibly the most ambitious campaign to come out for *Fifth Edition*, *Avernus* is a wild rollercoaster of a ride that taps into everything from *Mad Max* to *Dante's Inferno* by way of heavy metal album art. The main plot thread revolves around freeing a city bound within the Nine Hells and redeeming a fallen angel, but things are written with enough flexibility to allow parties to take whatever oddball routes through the darkness they desire.

Along the way they're likely to run into a vast cast of characters and, for all its grand ideas and epic scale, this may be where the campaign shines the brightest. There are plenty of charming allies for the party to deal with – such as Lulu the Hollyphant, a miniature winged elephant who can shoot magical sparkles from her trunk – but the rogues' gallery of enemies is equally impressive.



Indeed, one of the themes running through *Avernus* is that of battling against a greater evil and having to make deals with unsavoury sorts in order to survive. In most adventures Mad Maggie, a night hag warlord with a knack for creating infernal war-buggies, would be an outright villain to hack down and defeat, but this time around she's likely to end up as a valuable source of information and supplies.

And yes, in case you were wondering, there are plenty of rules for climbing into Maggie's weird war machines and blasting them around the wastelands of Avernus. Thankfully these are kept pretty slim and to-the-point, and are certainly more of an add-on to the base *D&D* system than their own side game, but there are just enough options included for the party to splash out on their own custom-built vehicle if they want. So long as they don't mind burning through the souls needed to power it, of course.

If that last sentence didn't make it clear enough, *Avernus* is a campaign with a pretty significant slice of moral ambiguity to it. While the core goal of saving the city of Elturel is a nice, noble aim, the book makes it clear that you can make things as tough for your party as possible. DMs are encouraged to push party members into deals with devils and demons, to take away the easy route and keep a little shard of darkness gnawing away at the heroes.

Indeed, it suggests setting up the party with a dark secret right from the very start. Perhaps they stole something or were involved in a failed coup, or perhaps they were all part of a murder. No matter what, this is a wonderful way to both tie the heroes together right from the opening and plant a seed of corruption for the DM to exploit further down the line.

This move into the grey and gritty side of things won't be to everybody's tastes – sometimes you just want to play heroes without things getting complicated – but it really does help to make *Avernus* feel like something special.

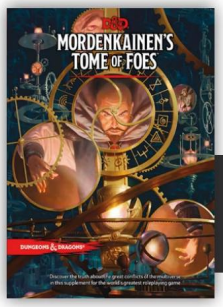
Even as you flick through the book, it's tough not to feel gripped by sudden ideas and opportunities for your players. Whether you're looking at a piece about an injured devil surprised by their sudden sympathy for hell-chickens or checking out the many paths to a final epic encounter with the fallen angel Zariel, you're always presented with options and room to explore.

There really is a lot to love about *Descent into Avernus*. It's inventive without being silly, dark without being depressing and challenging without being laborious to play. The more horrific aspects may require a careful touch from the DM if everybody's going to stay happy, but that is a task that is well worth the reward.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

The most sweeping and epic campaign yet published for *D&D*'s fifth edition, and possibly the darkest too.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED...
D&D: MORDENKAINEN'S TOME OF FOES

If you dug the cosmic wars set out in the *Tome of Foes*, you're going to love actually playing with them in *Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus*.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS – WATERDEEP: DRAGON HEIST

Treasure hunting in the city of splendours

Designer: Wizards of the Coast team | **Artist:** Various

224 | 11+ | £39



The latest hardback campaign for *D&D: Fifth Edition* shows that you don't always need world-shattering threats or sprawling trips across the planes to get players invested, managing to draw plenty of drama from just one city, a handful of villains and an enormous pile of gold.

While it may not be the most epic of quests, a limited level range – it'll take parties from first level to fifth – and a fairly straightforward plot make *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist* perhaps the best choice for newer GMs looking to get their first campaigns underway. However, don't let that trick you into thinking that this somehow makes it more limited or less worthy than any of the other adventures out there, as it has plenty of tricks that can catch even the most experienced parties off guard.

A large part of this comes from that fact that, as the first truly urban campaign to come out for the system, *Dragon Heist* is almost entirely set within the walls of the titular city. Though this doesn't change the minute-to-minute play of the game too much, it does manage to conjure up a different tone to traditional dungeon-delves and wilderness treks.

For one thing, you're much more likely to be trawling through rancid sewers and stately mansions rather than trap-filled tombs and lairs, with many encounters and combats taking place in alleyways and rooftops. This creates a unique flow to the action and helps to create a sense of constant danger and opportunity once the villains begin to take an interest in the party, as every crowd could hold allies or assassins. Every trip to buy supplies can provoke a new plot point or lucky meeting, while NPC neighbours and friends are always around the corner rather than hidden away back home.

In fact, the city itself feels like the biggest and most important NPC in the entire adventure, especially as the detailed guide to customs and festivals allows the GM to really make it feel like the bustling metropolis is should be.

It's appropriate, then, that perhaps the biggest change to the feel of adventuring is the presence of Waterdeep's city watch. Well-trained and vigilant, they're a far cry from the ineffective, corrupt or entirely absent police forces present in many fantasy adventures.

The fact that throwing fireballs in crowded markets or cutting down unarmed foes "to be certain" can land adventurers in hot water is something that many gaming groups haven't really needed to worry about before, and often demands a more measured approach to casual violence. While the presence of fantasy fuzz may not be something that every party meshes with, a great many GMs will struggle to hide smiles when the sticky-fingered rogue finally faces consequences for their chaos they leave in their wake.

The climax of the adventure is a particular highlight for this particular dynamic, as the hoard of gold coins that marks the final goal of the entire campaign isn't just some ancient loot hidden away in a dusty crypt, but rather the ill-gotten gains of a past ruler's creative accounting that truly belongs to the city itself. Watching your friends and gamily agonise over what to do with the cash after a couple months of effort is a special delight.

If we're looking for criticisms to make, some folks may be disappointed that *Dragon Heist* is much more linear than most of the *Fifth Edition* campaigns released before it, especially when compared to the continent-spanning *Storm King's Thunder* and *Curse of Strahd*'s gothic sandbox. Several times the adventure is propelled forward by forcing the party to react to some crisis rather than letting them forge their own path, and the narrative has an unfortunate habit of making the heroes arrive at a scene to find that whoever or whatever they were after has just left. This isn't too hard to forgive, as the core of the story is based around the adventurers hunting down an arcane key, but it can be frustrating when this happens several times in a row.

Despite this, the book manages to pack in a complex web of motivations, NPCs and locations for the heroes to pick their way through if they feel so inclined. Keeping track of who everyone is and what they want can be tricky, especially as the book doesn't have an index, but it provides countless avenues for the party to spiral their way out of the main narrative and immerse themselves in the business of their new home.

This all comes together to make *Dragon Heist* feel unique. It probably isn't the best of the current stable of *Fifth Edition* campaigns in terms of scope or value for money – unless you run the campaign repeatedly there's going to be a lot of material left on the cutting-room floor – but it's a great way to experience something new and run through an entire campaign without having to commit to a full year of gaming sessions.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

A compact urban campaign stuffed with personality and danger in equal measures.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... D&D: FIFTH EDITION STARTER SET

Dragon Heist's limited level range and clear direction can make for a great step-up from the fantasy roleplaying game's starter set. Just beware of the amount of information the GM needs to commit to memory!

THE COOL OF CTHULHU

H.P. Lovecraft's monstrous creations and tales of cosmic horror have haunted gaming for decades. Designers, experts and fans tell us why the master of fear continues to shock and inspire

Words by **Matt Jarvis**

Stephen King, the modern maestro of spooky storytelling, once called H.P. Lovecraft "the 20th century's greatest practitioner of the classic horror tale".

King's recognition of the author in the early eighties neatly summed up the remarkable boom in popularity and recognition that Lovecraft's work had experienced in the half-century following his death in 1937, when he had died largely unknown by the wider public, his fame confined to the small readership of pulp magazines in which his stories were published.

Three-plus decades on from King's eulogy, and fast approaching the centenary of Lovecraft's death, it's hard to find someone who hasn't come into contact with a Lovecraftian yarn of forbidden knowledge and cosmicism – the existential fear of an uncaring, godless universe, symbolised by the fruitless struggle of humanity against celestial beings of incomparable power that appear in so many of Lovecraft's tales. Netflix series *Stranger Things*, horror movie *The Void* and PS4 video game *Bloodborne* are just a few of the more-admired efforts to pay homage to Lovecraft and his distinct flavour of cosmic dread in the last couple of years.

Noted Lovecraft scholar, bibliographer and literary critic S.T. Joshi admits that even he is "constantly stupefied" by the author's ongoing popularity.

"I cannot think of a single writer from his era who has infiltrated both 'high' and popular culture the way he has," he explains.

While Lovecraft's presence in film, TV and games has ebbed and flowed over the decades, his work has remained consistently popular on the tabletop, with dozens of board, card, roleplaying and miniatures games inspired by his oeuvre released every year. While the unrelenting barrage of Lovecraft adaptations and spin-offs has become somewhat of a running joke (and, at points, gripe) among players, several tabletop takes on Lovecraft remain some of the highest-regarded games of all time.

The first major Lovecraft game to hit the tabletop was *Call of Cthulhu*, an RPG designed by Sandy Petersen and published by Chaosium in 1981. As well as innovating on the roleplaying staples established by earlier titles such as *Dungeons & Dragons* by grounding its human investigators in reality – death and insanity are typical, and direct combat often deadly – *Call of Cthulhu*'s themes opened the portal for games to subject players to darker, interconnected narratives and tougher challenges in line with the doom-and-gloom tone of its muse.

"Looking at the last few years, it seems that nearly everyone is trying to squeeze Cthulhu into their games," observes *Call of Cthulhu* line editor Mike Mason. "Obviously everyone is waking up to the fact that Cthulhu and his kin are just plain cool. I'm just glad that Chaosium was the first and led the way – we didn't jump on the bandwagon, we built the wagon."

Arriving less than a decade after *D&D* had generated mainstream controversy for roleplaying's supposed corruption of youth, *Call of Cthulhu* faced an extra wave of criticism from proponents of Lovecraft's prose. Among its early detractors was a "highly skeptical" Joshi.

"I thought, without actually knowing much about it, that the RPG had 'dumbed down' Lovecraft's richly textured and complex fiction to the level of cheap entertainment; I also didn't care for the fact that creations from Lovecraft's successors were intermingled with Lovecraft's own creations," he recalls. "But it turns out that many of those who use this RPG and others like it have in fact been drawn back to Lovecraft's fiction, so that Lovecraft's own writings are the beneficiary of this ever-expanding interest among those who initially may not have had any familiarity with his work."

Call of Cthulhu sowed an interest for Lovecraft in gaming that blossomed into the obsession that continues today. A proposed *Call of Cthulhu* board game emerged in 1987 as *Arkham Horror*, which later sparked the creation of Fantasy Flight's successful Arkham Horror Files franchise, uniting *Eldritch Horror*, *Elder Sign*, *Mansions of Madness* and last year's *Arkham Horror: The Card Game*. *Call of Cthulhu* is now on its seventh edition, and has given rise to roleplaying spin-offs including *Trail of Cthulhu* and *Delta Green*. That's without mentioning the innumerable standalone original and derivative games to have emerged as Lovecraft's name grew in stature.

"A great number of the games that followed were more inspired by the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG ▸







"Game designers are more intuitively aware of the potential of Lovecraft's stories than film-makers have been."

than by the original short stories, I would argue," suggests Yves Tourigny, creator of *Arkham Noir*, a series of card games that reimagine Lovecraft tales as Chandleresque detective mysteries.

"When *Call of Cthulhu* was released nobody had heard of Cthulhu or Lovecraft, except for a minority of people who had somehow managed to find and read a Lovecraft story," Mason agrees. "The game's release certainly helped to bring Lovecraft's stories to greater attention."

CAREFULLY 'CRAFTED

"The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." – H.P. Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature'

Like most horror stories, much of the terror in Lovecraft's writing comes from the unknown. You'll often find a Lovecraftian protagonist recounting their experience through letters or journal entries, hinting at a hidden secret until they are destroyed – physically or mentally – leaving a warning not to follow in their doomed footsteps and to let forbidden knowledge remain so.

It's a spine-chilling technique that resonates across the author's many short stories – you could spend dozens of hours reading and never need to revisit a single tale, preserving the dread and surprise of each. When it comes to a board game designed to be played time after time, though, it's not quite as easy.

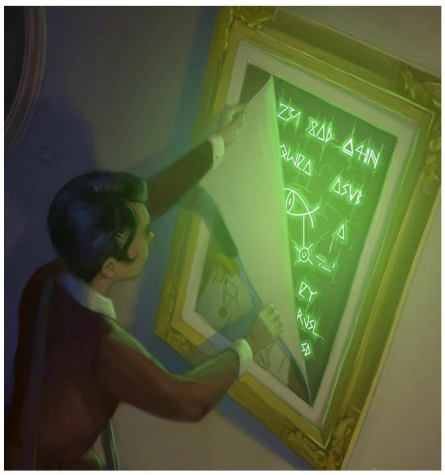
"For tabletop designers, this is a tough cookie to crack," confesses *Arkham Horror: The Card Game* co-creator Matt Newman. "After all, you buy a $40 game, open the box and know what's inside. You can see it right there; you can even read all the cards before you play. The question of how we make players feel the same way readers did reading these stories for the first time is one we constantly seek to answer."

Arkham Horror: The Card Game demonstrates just one such attempt to sustain excitement and fear. Adopting the living card game format, where periodic expansions introduce new cards and narrative arcs, the title allows players to create custom decks and replay completed scenarios as a variety of characters with individual loadouts, veering down different storyline branches. It may seem an ill fit with the guided nature of Lovecraft's writing, but the traditional and modern mediums aren't as incompatible as first appears.

"His tales are supremely well crafted as narratives, proceeding dynamically from a quiet beginning to a cataclysmic ending, with the 'monster' or other powerful revelation not shown until the reader is emotionally prepared," says Joshi. "Moreover, many of Lovecraft's stories are first-person narratives, meaning that the reader is simultaneously viewing and vicariously participating in the events as they unfold. These features would seem to lend themselves naturally to games of all sorts, and I suspect game designers are more intuitively aware of their potential than film-makers have been."



■ ***Forbidden knowledge is a key theme of Lovecraft.***



■ ***Don't expect many happy endings.***

Tabletop titles may offer more potential to capture the enthralling spirit of Lovecraft's work, but that hasn't stopped some designers and artists from taking advantage of the author's growing adulation. Most egregious is the widespread use of the author's best-known creation, tentacle-mouthed Great Old One Cthulhu, who pops up in just about every form imaginable in pop culture – a darkly fitting modern state for the iconic subject of fictional mass cult worship.

Even games that do venture beyond Cthulhu often end up including a similar line-up of monsters, making previously lesser-known creations such as Yog-Sothoth, Azathoth and Shub-Niggurath familiar sights while ignoring Lovecraft's countless other creations. The majority of games concern the Cthulhu Mythos – the collective name for Lovecraft's connected fictional universe – as a whole, rather than adapting specific stories or singular monsters.

"I don't think very highly of most adaptations of Lovecraft to tabletop games, for the same reason that I don't think very highly of most Mythos fiction [not written by Lovecraft]: it completely misses the point, and far too often devolves into an exercise in cramming the most monsters and forbidden tomes as possible into the work in question," slams Tourigny.

Sticking with a relatively small pool of increasingly recognisable Lovecraftian horrors, rather than exploring the darker corners of the Mythos, regularly means that designers and publishers can draw a far bigger audience to their game than if they were trying to establish a brand new setting or use a more generic horror dressing.

"The alien monsters and gods in Lovecraft's writing are unique and genuinely 'different' – they are things of nightmare that make no sense to a rational mind, which sets them apart from your everyday monsters we know loads about, like vampires, werewolves and zombies," Mason proposes. "Thus, not only are we surprised and horrified due to their 'difference,' but we also face an unknown challenge with uncertain outcomes.

"In terms of game design, they present plots and challenges quite different to many tabletop games. As a designer, you are trying in to engineer plots that build a mystery and suspense, which harkens back to Lovecraft's



The Cthulhu Mythos unites many of Lovecraft's creations in a single shared universe.

THE WEIRD AND THE WONDERFUL

Enjoy Lovecraftian games on the tabletop but haven't actually read any of his stories? Here's a selection of classic tales you should consider checking out.



Like *Call of Cthulhu RPG*? Read *The Call of Cthulhu*.



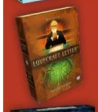
Like *Mansions of Madness*? Read *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*.



Like *Eldritch Horror*? Read *The Dunwich Horror*.



Like *Mountains of Madness*? Read *At the Mountains of Madness*.



Like *Lovecraft Letter*? Read *The Cats of Ulthar*.



Like *Arkham Horror: The Card Game*? Read *The Colour Out of Space*.



Like *Delta Green*? Read *Herbert West–Reanimator*.

stories. The inevitability of your destruction and humanity's insignificance in the cosmos are strong themes, allowing designers to craft plots with a huge breadth – from the personal to the epic, and all points in-between. The source material is a rich vein of inspiration."

With Cthulhu and all of Lovecraft's work widely considered to now be in the public domain, anyone can turn their hand to crafting a new tale or game in the extensive universe and cashing in on the seemingly unending fervor – but it takes much more than a name to break away from the crowd.

"As developers, we have to do our own research, and ensure that Lovecraftian elements feel and look the way they're supposed to," Newman says. "Provided you're not doing a parody work, it's not enough to just slap a monster on a card, name it 'Shoggoth' and call it a day.

"That being said, working within the confines of the Mythos still allows for a lot of creativity to shine through. Lovecraft's work is all about fear of the unknown, so it would be doing the Mythos a disservice to not throw some unknown factors into the mix."

LOVECRAFT AND HATE

As Lovecraft's writing and imaginative monsters have continued to rise in popularity, the more problematic personal beliefs of the author have similarly bubbled to the surface.

Chief among these is the issue of racism, although Lovecraft's misogynist and anti-Semitic views also rear their ugly heads throughout his stories. Much of the fear that Lovecraft finds in the 'unknown' isn't just limited to cosmic horrors – it extends to immigrants, Jews, Italians, Polish people, Mexicans, women, people of colour and many other races and creeds.

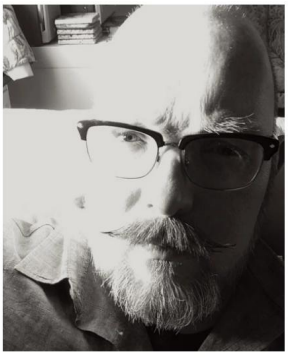
Lovecraft's attitudes towards race have been a controversial talking point for literary critics for decades, but his growing celebrity on the tabletop has brought the conversation back across to the flourishing medium. Although the horrifying treatment of certain people and cultures is completely absent from games such as *Call of Cthulhu* and *Eldritch Horror*, some of the monsters and stories that their creators pull from remain rooted in abhorrent ethics – so should designers continue to further the visions of a noted xenophobe?

"There is no problem in using an author's stories for inspiration even though that author may have held obnoxious personal beliefs," Mason replies. "Lovecraft is not the only writer to have held views we would nowadays find distasteful and downright wrong. I think most everyone is intelligent enough to separate out the bad from the good, and draw out the elements of the stories that make for engaging plots and adversaries. Lovecraft's racism isn't pleasant and shouldn't be ignored. His stories, however, are influential and groundbreaking science fiction and horror from which ideas and concepts can be drawn."

In early 2015, newly-founded publisher Monolith raised $3.3 million on Kickstarter for its debut title, a board game adaptation of *Conan the Barbarian*. *Conan*'s creator Robert E. Howard was a friend of Lovecraft and influenced by the Cthulhu creator's strongly-held views on race, many of which he shared.

Upon release last year, *Conan* ignited controversy over its troubling portrayal of women and perceived stereotyping of Chinese and Native American culture in its fantasy races of the Picts and Khitai. Monolith defended the representation as faithful to Howard's original short stories,

"The human race is beginning to comprehend our insignificance in the universe, a fear that Lovecraft explored and one that is very 'current'."





Horrors that emerge from the sea are a favourite of Lovecraft.

but the upset and debate over whether the board game was appropriate continued.

Unlike *Conan*, in most cases Lovecraft's own racism has been separated from the transformation of his work into games. Some designers have gone one step further by actively seeking to combat the history of hatred lurking in the background of Lovecraft's original texts by updating, replacing or even introducing brand new elements into his stories.

"Lovecraft's works, as inspiring and successful as they are in some aspects, are deeply problematic when it comes to race and gender," says Tourigny. "I've taken the liberty of 'casting' African-Americans in some of the depictions of the characters from his stories – Walter Gilman and Frank Elwood, for instance – as a way to ensure more diversity in the representation. I even imagined *Arkham Noir* as possibly depicting only African-Americans, to add even more significance to the game's title, but I felt that gimmick might be a bridge too far."

"We've seen, in recent years, authors taking Lovecraft's creations and repurposing them to directly address and turn upside-down Lovecraft's personal racism," Mason adds. "Modern game designers are likewise drawing inspiration from Lovecraft in a similar way."

With diversity a hotter topic than ever when it comes to entertainment as a whole, and especially in gaming, the treatment of Lovecraft will almost certainly remain a much-discussed subject for years to come. Joshi insists that designers should be inspired by the inventive storytelling and universe-building that continues to engross readers and players, and not be saddled with the politics of a bygone era – whether they're accurate to Lovecraft's work or not.

"In my estimation, far too much has been made of Lovecraft's racism – which is only one relatively small aspect of his overall life and thought, and much less significant than some other facets that could be mentioned," he offers. "Nevertheless, we do have to face the fact that Lovecraft was a racist, even though he was a lot of other things as well, and even though many other writers and other prominent figures of his era were also racists. But a fair-minded examination shows that racist elements enter into his fiction only in passing, and there is no particular reason why game designers should place undue stress on these elements.

"It is true that in some stories the 'heroes' appear to be white males while the 'villains' are alien races; but in other stories, Caucasians don't come off very well either! And Lovecraft's cosmic entities are so otherworldly that they cannot be associated, even symbolically, with the 'foreigners' whose presence in American society troubled Lovecraft. There are, in fact, no true 'heroes' and 'villains' in Lovecraft's stories at all: the whole of humanity is doomed!"

GREAT OLD ONE?

2017 marks 80 years since Lovecraft's death. Next year, *The Call of Cthulhu* – and its eponymous monster – will turn 90. Lovecraft and Cthulhu fatigue often seems to be at an all-time high among gamers, yet new instalments in the ever-widening Mythos are still regularly received with critical plaudits and the devoted audiences to match. In fact, it might be that the king of cosmic horror and existential dread has never been more in vogue.

"The human race is beginning to comprehend our insignificance in the greater universe, a fear that Lovecraft explored and one that is very 'current' in today's world," Mason says. "Games based upon these concepts somehow ring true and make them more impactful, and also allow us, within the games, to make some measure of resistance. While we can't always control the world around us, we can find some sense of accomplishment through narrative storytelling, otherwise known as roleplaying games."

Believe it or not, there may be a limit to how many people take comfort in a universe full of alien creatures, murderous cultists and deities seeking the destruction of all humanity. So while it may seem that the unstoppable wave of Cthulhu spin-offs will eventually lead to a maddening flood of disposable Lovecraft tie-ins, it's more likely to remain the current balance of first-rate games and reskinned side attractions, with designers continuing to reimagine Lovecraft's worlds for a new generation until the writer finally falls out of fashion.

"Cthulhu is not by any measure a 'mainstream' thing," Mason continues. "It remains niche and, while there does appear to be a preponderance of the world 'Cthulhu' on any number of card and board games, most gamers are shrewd enough to know when the name is being used purely to shift a few more units."

For those entranced by weird tales of undead gods beneath the sea, lost ancient cities and unimaginable horrors from outer space, there'll be no shortage of the strange to dive into for a long while yet.

"So far, those interested in Lovecraft seem to be devouring all these products with relish and show little sign of having reached their limit," says Joshi. "So let's ride the wave as long as we can!" ▪

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS – WATERDEEP: DUNGEON OF THE MAD MAGE

320 | 11+ | £39

Designer: Wizards of the Coast team | **Artist:** Various

For all the talk of dungeons in *Dungeons & Dragons*, you'd be amazed by how little they feature in many modern campaigns. This is something that *Dungeon of the Mad Mage* aims to correct with a torrent of entertaining subterranean adventures.

The campaign is a sequel of sorts to *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist* and sends the party on a quest into the sprawling complex of Undermountain. Though there are a handful of hooks that can give the heroes their first nudge into its cavernous depths, the book makes it clear that the thirst for adventure, gold and glory is probably going to be the main motivation.



This may not sound particularly exciting, but it gives the entire campaign a unique feel among the world-shattering quests of earlier books. It shows that sometimes it can be fun to just kick in a few doors, dodge a couple traps and dump a fireball on whatever unlucky creatures cross your path.

It's a little unfair to act as though *Dungeon of the Mad Mage* doesn't have much in the way of story, however. While there isn't too much in terms of grand arcs, there are a hundred little stories that emerge as the adventurers explore. They might spend a few sessions weighing their options in a conflict between minotaurs and dark elves, and then find themselves uncovering a hidden gate that links the dungeon to an orbiting asteroid.

However, there's no getting around that fact that they're all variations on a theme. Playing a campaign of *Dungeon of the Mad Mage* from start to end is going to mean spending an awful lot of time exploring monster lairs and dodging traps.

This may not be a problem for some groups – the dungeon crawl was the foundation of *D&D*, after all – but many modern roleplayers cut their teeth on more narrative campaigns and may well tire of the trek down into Undermountain after six months of questing.

Dungeon of the Mad Mage is a campaign that knows exactly what it wants to be – and that's a stack of fun, old-school dungeons for the party to delve.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? PROBABLY

AMAZING TALES

20-40m | 2-4 | 4+ | £17

Designer: Martin Lloyd | **Artist:** Iris Maertens

Roleplaying, when you get down to it, is all about make-believe. Whether you're stabbing goblins in a dingy dungeon or uncovering shadowy conspiracies in a neon-tinged future metropolis, imagination is the beating heart of the hobby.

That should make it a perfect activity for parents to share with children. But for the most part, designers and publishers are happy to tailor their products to an older crowd, with many games revelling in complicated rules and violent themes. Even when RPGs do cater for younger players, they tend to assume that they've at least reached reading age.

Amazing Tales is different. An introductory roleplaying system with an emphasis on fun and creativity, it's designed specifically for pre-school and primary-aged kids. Its rules are incredibly light – in fact, they pretty much fit on a single page – and rather than endless stats, tables and modifiers, it comes packed with hints on how to keep children engaged and interested through a game.

Much of this is common sense: keeping sessions from running too long, handing players a degree of creative control and using characters' failures as an opportunity to introduce interesting twists to the plot rather than as sudden brick walls. It's the kind of advice that could equally apply to grown-up roleplaying. What's really helpful, though, are the pages that deal specifically with GMing for kids: providing them with interesting questions, keeping things from becoming too scary or stressful, and harnessing the energy, enthusiasm and imaginative quirkiness they bring to the table.

Other than this, the bulk of the book is made up of pre-made settings for adventures, but it's far more interesting to work with your kids to create one of your own. By adult standards, *Amazing Tales* may seem rather light on actual content. But as a new twist on storytime and a way to join your children in creative play, it's priceless.

OWEN DUFFY

PLAY IT? YES



YOU MEET IN AN INN...

Whether your group is a ragtag band of adventurers or a polished platoon of hardened warriors, they often have just as much history as the world they're exploring. It's not just who you know – it's how you know them

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Wizards of the Coast**



Wrath, Okno and Xit didn't know each other too well before everything went bad. Perhaps they would exchange a nod as they passed through the dingy passageways of the mountain lair they guarded – a recognition of mutual skill – but that was about it.

When a band of high-minded heroes laid siege to the caves they called home, however, the unlikely trio was pulled together in a bid to save the evil wizards they had sworn to guard. By the time they emerged from the ruined lair, the only survivors of the wizards' many minions, they had formed a tenuous bond of loyalty and trust that only grew as more foes fell before them.

Where they had once been a band of individual warriors who happened to fight alongside one another, they were now an adventuring party. A fairly unusual one, admittedly – not many groups are led by a hobgoblin samurai – but effective nonetheless.

It might have helped that their former boss had gone utterly insane after the death of his brother and vowed to murder everything in a 300-mile radius, but that's not bad for a bunch of bad guys.

BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING

Whether you're writing a story, picking up a new hobby or making a change in your life, the first hurdle is often the hardest. This manifests in a dozen different ways when it comes to kicking off RPG campaigns, but one that you need to sort out early on is how to quickly find a way to forge a band of individual ne'er-do-wells into a team that will eventually stand together come what may.

The traditional way of setting this up is to have every character conveniently sit around the same smoky inn/jazz-filled speakeasy/neon-soaked cantina, depending on what genre you're working with, when the first quest giver stumbles through the doorway. The assumption – and unspoken rule – is that the adventurers will leap forward to offer aid and/or start asking about rewards, while the crowd of NPCs shrink back in their chairs.

While this is a tried-and-tested approach that can get a bunch of heroes out of the door and into a dungeon, it needs work if you're looking to have a party stay together for reasons that extend beyond, "Hey, we're pretty good at stabbing monsters together, let's keep doing that." At the same time, it also requires the characters to play along with the cliché – if any of them decide that they'd rather stay drinking than risk life and limb for some dumb peasant you're going to have a problem.

Many longform campaigns are designed to hook the adventurers into the action a little more directly, giving the party a much more concrete reason to tie their destinies together. *Masks of Nyarlathotep*, a classic *Call of Cthulhu* adventure of epic proportions, does this by murdering a mutual acquaintance of every investigator in the very first scene. This provides a hook that links all the players directly to the story and a shared goal for them to work towards – until they all get eaten by monsters over the course of the next few sessions, anyway.

Common variations on this kind of approach include tossing the entire party into jail before the game begins and letting them stage a breakout together, as well as the convenient shipwreck that dumps them onto the same stretch of rocky coastline. Personally, I'm a big fan of sticking them on an airship moments before some dastardly sky-pirates swoop down to attack, but that's a personal preference.

Setting this all up can be somewhat of a hassle, however, and often it's easier – and more elegant – to palm off all the hard work of establishing links between characters to the players themselves.

QUESTIONS & QUESTS

Barring particularly weird jaunts into the realms of sci-fi and magic, the characters sitting in that tavern had connections and relationships that existed long before the first die hits the table. Usually this takes the form of a backstory, but as well as the inevitable murdered parents and dark family secret you can weave in connections with other player characters.

For many narrative-driven games, such as *Kids on Bikes*, this is a core part of character



generation. It's assumed that every member of the party already knows the others and that they have some kind of shared history that connects them. The first half-hour or so of these games is usually spent fleshing out these relationships and asking questions of one another.

While this is a core part of storytelling games it can also fit neatly into more traditional fantasy and sci-fi adventures. There's no need to make things too complicated, but it's easy enough to ask players to arrange links to their future allies while they roll up stats and argue over who's going to be the healer this time.

This can be as simple as sending them a message along the lines of "Your character knows character X. How did they meet?" or as complex as getting small groups to sketch out a failed heist or battle they took on some time in the past.

Of course, it's important that you make sure everyone heads into this exercise with good faith. Nobody wants to find out that the kleptomaniac rogue wrote a 50,000 GP gambling debt into their mutual history.

MAKE THE SHOE FIT

One of the most important factors in getting a group to gel naturally is having players who are willing to make their characters fit into a party dynamic; players who are actually willing to play the game.

This is a topic with much broader ramifications than just building a party, but it always helps to remind people that the characters they create should be able to work with others. If they come to the table with someone who only works alone and insists on being the most important figure in every scene, they haven't created a player character at all, but rather a villain for the GM to use further down the line.

As a hobgoblin, kobold and goblin respectively, Wrath, Okno and Xit are all drawn from species that most *D&D* players would consider to be monsters. Indeed, until the adventure kicked off they were all evil minions and their subsequent adventures have certainly been a little grey when it comes to morality, but the players controlling them all recognised that Chaotic Evil doesn't have to mean Chaotic Stupid.

Perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise that making a strong team in-game requires players to exercise a little teamwork in real life too.

A SPIRE TO GREATNESS

Grant Howitt is fast becoming one of the roleplaying scene's hottest indie designers. We catch up with him as he prepares to release his most ambitious project yet, politically charged fantasy-punk RPG The Spire

Words by **Jake Tucker**

Grant Howitt is nervously checking his phone as we eat through a plate of takeaway dumplings.

His nerves are understandable. Howitt, the co-founder and public face of RPG studio Rowan, Rook and Decard, had just 24 hours earlier asked the internet for £25,000. The sum is for his latest Kickstarter project, *The Spire*; his third Kickstarter, but also his most ambitious.

Rowan, Rook and Decard is a collaboration between Howitt – 'Rook' – Chris Taylor – 'Decard' – and Mary Hamilton – 'Rowan'. Howitt admits with a wry smile that the names were pilfered from roleplaying characters the trio had played over the years, which they decided was more exciting than using their own surnames. So far, they've shipped two successful games via Kickstarter, while releasing one single-page RPG each month via Howitt's Patreon, the online subscription platform where fans can donate regularly to their favourite creators – often in return for exclusive goodies.

Howitt got his start creating zombie-themed LARP experiences, and worked as a freelance video games journalist, but didn't shift into making tabletop games until he moved to Australia with Hamilton for her job. With a career in games journalism tougher down under where the industry is small, he started designing games full-time, tapping his thoughts into an iPad as he tried to come up with games people wanted to play. *The Spire*, one of those ideas, was partially inspired by Howitt's own career and the world around him.

"I'm not especially politically active, but I feel there's something cathartic about writing and hopefully playing a game about revolution, or rebelling against injustice, after recent politics has been so eye-opening," he explains.

The Spire is a game about righting wrongs. You play a dark elf, looked down on because of your grey skin, hiding from the sun in corridors, temples and crumbling architecture that makes up the lawless undercity cowering beneath the titular urban setting. The high elves have forced you here, and it's those who must pay, with your characters swearing a blood oath to take down the corrupt regime via subterfuge, insurrection and other means.

Howitt mentions several crushing political events through 2016 and 2017 that were the impetus for creating the game. The designer describes Brexit as an eye-opener, with the discovery that a slim majority of his native country fundamentally disagreed with his personal views.

"There was a really horrible energy in the air after that, and then we had the American elections, too."

Still, if you're expecting tolerant drow discourse, you're mistaken. Player characters will lie, cheat, steal and kill to achieve their political ends. An early look at the rules reveals a game filled with weird tonal touches and engaging mechanical complexity; one of the classes in *The Spire*, in fact, comes with a hyena. Howitt chuckles at the suggestion of the RPG being a more mature offering than his previous work.

"I don't think it's a maturity, as a writer. But I think it's more confident, and that previous experience has given me the confidence to come forward."

It's a long way from some of Howitt's early efforts, including the aborted *Prime Time Murder Justice*, a title influenced by iconic 1990 arcade game *Smash TV* that made it to



> *"There's something cathartic about writing and playing a game about revolution or rebelling against injustice."*

the prototyping stage and took three hours to play.

"It wasn't a terrible three hours, but I feel like playing out the prime-time hour-long Saturday night TV slot took three times as long as it would take to just watch it, and that was kind of the issue."

"I'm interested in going back to it in some way," Howitt adds. "I have grown as a writer since then though, and I feel a bit squicky writing games about senseless murder for profit."

This is one of the biggest changes Howitt has noted as he's grown up: less of a desire to deliver an engine for senseless chaos, with more passion instead for something that can create fascinating stories. With his later games, the designer wants to deliver a toolkit for people to build and experience new worlds.

STRETCH TEST

Most tabletop RPG fans first encountered Howitt through his debut Kickstarter. Described as "*Itchy & Scratchy* crossed with *The Animals of Farthing Wood*", *Goblin Quest* was a crowdfunding success story, raising more than ten times its initial £2,000 target. Howitt remembers success despite several minor mistakes, such as offering to write out the rulebook by hand, in a leather-bound book, for the first four people to pledge £250 to the Kickstarter.

"My mother, bless her heart, ordered one without realising how much pain she was causing me to write it all out. I've written three now, and it's not fun anymore."

The fourth book, the one bought by his mother, is a work in progress.

"Mom, thankfully, backed down. I sent her the PDF rulebook – and remember this is a book intended for children to read. She's like, 'We got to page four and we were quite confused, so we stopped.' And that is my parents' sole direction with my creative career over the last four years."

Goblin Quest came out of two years of tinkering. It was a game Howitt kept in his back pocket, pulling it out to play with nephews and nieces, and polishing it up through repeated playtests. Hamilton was key to Howitt taking a chance on Kickstarter.

"Mary was encouraging me, she's like: 'Well, we could publish this, we could make this happen! We can afford to print this as a book, just as we print up the money, but we can go to Kickstarter.'"

"So we looked into different funding avenues and we got a print-on-demand service, which meant that the costs were not astronomical, even if the books weren't great. And we went for it!"

The following year they brought to life *Unbound*, a card-based RPG where players build a world. Each game had become gradually bigger in scope, with *Unbound* being a big hardback book that looked more like something you would find in a game store. *The Spire* will be a similarly weighty tome, if Grant has anything to do with it.

SPIRALLING UP

30 days after we eat dumplings and talk game design, *The Spire* is funded, too.

"1,483 backers," Kickstarter politely informs me, "pledged £71,708 to help bring this project to life."

This time, Howitt was more sensible with the stretch goals, delivering more art, more audio and some incredibly detailed notes on arachnid midwives. There's not a handwritten leather book in sight. Despite the improvements, the campaign's level of success surprised even its creators.

"We were figuring we'd top out at £60,000, and we shot past that in the last couple of days," Howitt enthuses.

"The other big surprise was that people seemed to get pretty steamed that we weren't giving away the quick start rules package for free; we went back and forth on it but, in addition to it being a lure to buy in, I think what we'd made was worth money.

"The quick start wasn't there as an advert, but more to let people play around with the system and setting in some small way before we move to release it next year. I don't know whether we can afford to give out free loss-leaders like a lot of bigger companies can, you know? We're still learning. Maybe next time we'll release it for free." ▪



***Left:** The Spire takes place in a fantasy world where dark elves are forced to live in a lawless undercity by the ruling high elves.*

***Main:** Adrian Stone's artwork brings the dark tone of the RPG to life.*

INTRODUCING NEW PLAYERS

If you find yourself teaching an RPG newcomer – or are trying to roleplay for the first time yourself – follow our tips to ensure the introductory experience becomes the first of many

Words by **David Jagneaux**



We've spent a lot of time in this column covering specific ways to build campaigns and improve your DM process, but none of that is very useful if you don't have a group of people to play with. Perhaps the most important skill a DM can have, in addition to being able to run a game well, is being able to entice and enthral new players. Let's dive in!

START WITH THE BASICS

Tabletop roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons* are incredibly complex affairs. There's a reason why thousands of pages of text go into each game's system across several tomes of books, notes and rules. A sure-fire way to overwhelm a prospective new player is to hand them the *Player's Handbook* for a weekend and tell them to go read it in preparation. That's like asking someone to read the entire dictionary to learn how to speak English.

Instead, you should slowly introduce concepts over time outside of a game night setting. Before you all gather around a table with dice and character sheets, chat about some ideas over lunch. If you've got a friend that's never played a tabletop roleplaying game before just sit them down and do everything verbally: "You wake up in a dark dungeon with only rags for clothes. What do you do?" See where their imagination goes.

Give them dice as needed for encounters and, by the time it's done, they'll likely be curious about where things can go next. This would be a great time to introduce character sheets and the concept of role-playing. When you do that, make sure you start with pre-generated characters, such as those included in the *D&D: Fifth Edition* starter set.

CHECK YOUR PRIORITIES

Above all else, the most important thing to remember as a DM is that players always come first. Just because you've come up with this excellent idea for a challenging campaign that could take several months to complete doesn't mean that your players will care or want to play it.

Furthermore, don't spend too long waxing poetic about your amazing world and unique



Entertaining and keeping players engaged should come first – even if it means bending the rules *(Wizards of the Coast)*

characters. Don't let the focus drift towards the non-player characters too much. Bring it back and make it about the players as the protagonists and what they decide to do inside this world you've made.

Don't forget that players are people. It might sound silly, but when you really get into the heat of a campaign it's easy to look at yourself as the DM first and friend second, but communication is vital to a successful RPG.

Before the games start, take the time to discuss what the players want most out of the experience and what their goals are. Crafting a super-serious campaign without a hint of humour for a group of people that crack jokes constantly probably isn't a good idea, for example.

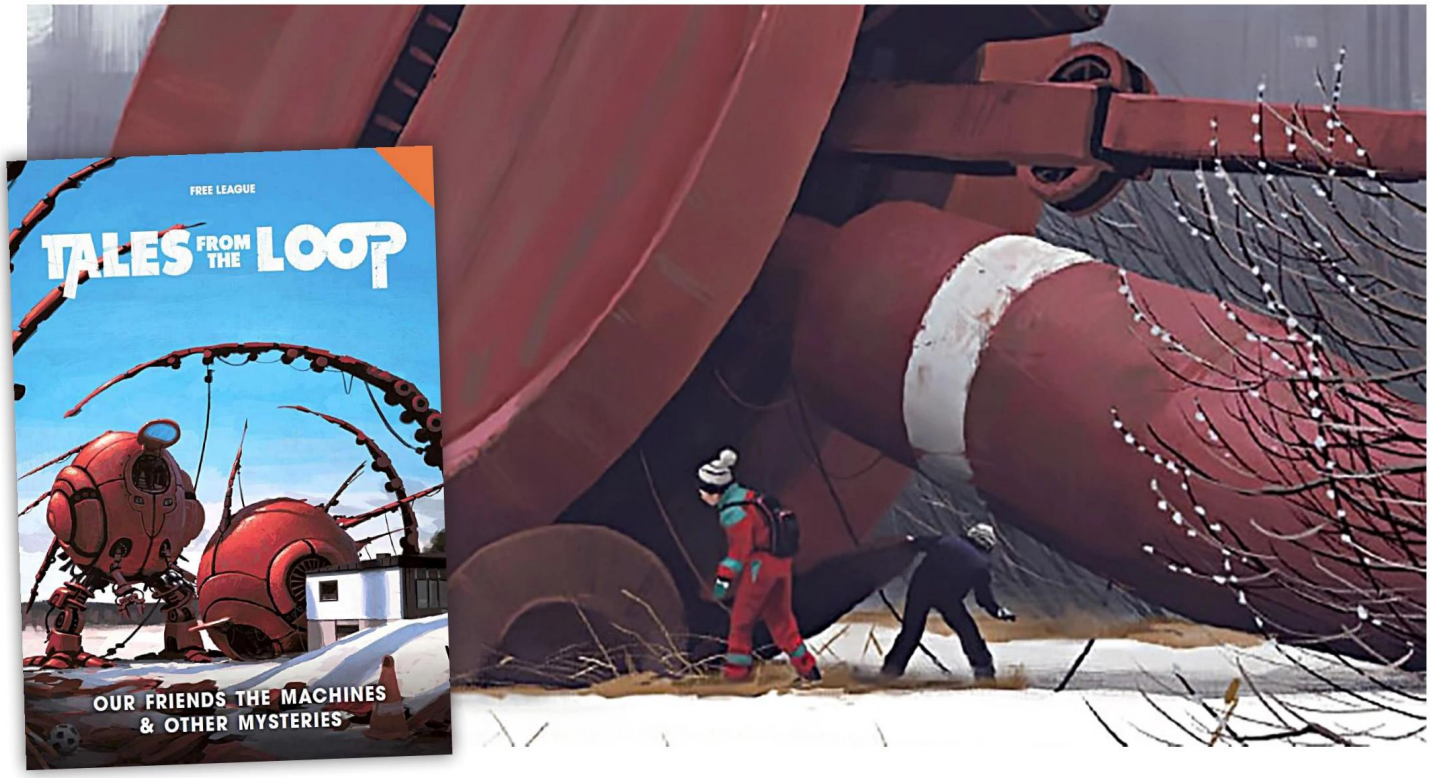
SHOW, DON'T TELL (UNLESS YOU NEED TO)

Once you get your priorities set and understand your players' comfort levels you can more easily identify areas where players can be pushed a bit outside of their comfort zone to try new things. When you're DMing a group of mostly new players, you may find that some aspects are tougher to grasp than others. A common example is a new player that loves combat often has trouble feeling comfortable with roleplaying out loud, especially in front of strangers.

So when the game is underway don't spend too long explaining the rules if you want to make sure no-one falls asleep. Teach them the basics and explain the gist of it all, but wait for specifics until necessary. For example, don't bother explaining the difference between attack and damage rolls until combat starts and don't explain how ability scores affect a character's success with actions until a player wants to do something requiring an ability check or saving throw.

Once that ball starts rolling it will likely pick up steam very quickly. To ensure player experiences stay at the forefront of it all, feel free to bend the rules where necessary to encourage a fun and casual game. Players will appreciate something that's fun, even if slightly off the rulebook, much more than they would blindly adhering to the game mechanics.

As long as you follow these basic steps, you should be well on your way towards creating an open and accommodating environment for new players.



TALES FROM THE LOOP: OUR FRIENDS THE MACHINES & OTHER MYSTERIES

Prepare to be thrown for a loop

2+ £25

Designer: Various | **Artist:** Simon Stålenhag, Reine Rosenberg

It's hard to tell which is the more impressive feat: writing an adventure directly inspired by Michael Jackson's 'Thriller', or the fact that it somehow works.

Really, though, it shouldn't come as a surprise. At its heart, *Tales from the Loop* is a game about putting inventive new spins on popular culture and nostalgia; its first supplement, *Our Friends the Machines*, kicks that into overdrive.

The slim book is home to three unconnected tales that riff on everything from *Transformers* to moral panic over 'video nasties' and Stephen King-esque horror. True to the original game's setup, each sees a group of player-controlled kids explore their town, solve mysteries and struggle with the weird sci-fi consequences of a nearby research facility.

As well as this, it holds eight wonderful mini-adventures directly inspired by an array of '80s pop hits – an idea that sounds utterly insane but somehow works in practice. These are not only great ways to burn through an evening of gaming, but also make it very clear who the game is aimed at. It's hard to imagine actual nine-year-olds getting excited about Cindy Lauper's 'Heaven is a Place on Earth', for example.

The final section of *Our Friends the Machines* is a few pages on how to 'hometown hack' and create your own setting, complete with its own loop. Though it feels somewhat out of place compared with the rest of the book, UK fans will be happy to see that the example they use to demonstrate the process is a small town on the Norfolk Broads.

As it is, the main bulk of content is the three long-form adventures that could last anywhere between one long evening and a few weeks of gaming. All the stories are all well-written but the titular *Our Friends the Machines* is perhaps the standout of the three, with a plot involving self-aware AIs, mind control and a new range of transforming toys.

To be clear: the adventures are not simple linear paths to guide your players down. Rather, they provide locations, NPCs and a general overview of likely events or set pieces to play through, and expect that the GM will fill in many of the blanks themselves.

Where other adventure books provide a strict set of instructions that would shame Ikea, this simply hands you the raw materials, a few tools and a rough sketch of what you're working towards. The closest you'll get to a clear order of play is a small flowchart towards the beginning of each section.

Some may find the lack of direction unsettling – after all, the fact that so much of the work is done for you is one of the advantages of published adventures – but it fits in perfectly with *Tales from the Loop*'s overall aesthetic. If you're happy with the game as it is set up in the main book, you'll probably be happy with *Our Friends the Machines*.

Bizarrely, the biggest letdown somehow manages to be the art. As you would expect, the actual quality is exceptional throughout, but it's disappointing that the images on display rarely seem to have much bearing to what's on the rest of the page. An adventure about an insidious brainwashing programme designed to force the town into an idealised version of 1950s suburbia is illustrated with images of unrelated technology and urban scenes, for example. Despite the unique and beautiful nature of Simon Stålenhag's paintings it all comes across as a little generic.

Overall, though, *Our Friends the Machines* is a great purchase for anyone interested in *Tales from the Loop*. Even if you don't think you'll run the adventures directly, there's so much great material here for GMs to 'borrow' from – and that's not even counting the Hometown Hack section.

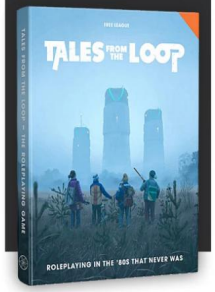
RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

There are a few flaws here and there, but they're minor indeed compared to all the great content on show in this book. Not one for GMs who aren't happy to improvise, though.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... TALES FROM THE LOOP

If you own *Tales*, you owe it to yourself to pick up the RPG's first full expansion.



THROWN FOR A LOOP

Tales from the Loop mixes nostalgia for '80s adventure films with sci-fi mysteries to create a truly unique RPG setting. Project manager Tomas Härenstam discusses how players can combine heroism with homework

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**

The sun drifts towards the horizon as a group of teenagers tromp through knee-high grass towards a copse of trees. The leader, an older girl in expensive clothes, drags the rest along as they follow a path long forgotten by the town's adults.

She points at something through the branches and a rake-thin, mop-haired boy rushes forward with a camera in one hand and a notebook in the other, while behind him a burly teen in a football shirt grips his baseball bat a little bit harder.

There, in a clearing, is a blue-white glow floating in the air – a rip in time and space. As the others crowd round and chatter excitedly, a pale girl in ripped jeans and a black t-shirt examines the ground, noticing the tracks the others missed. The tracks with claws.

In the shadows cast by the trees, something watches them with cold, reptilian eyes...

This is the world of *Tales from the Loop*, a tabletop RPG from Swedish games studio Free League that combines mysteries, sci-fi and school in order to evoke the feel of kids' adventure movies from the 1980s.

If nothing else, it's a prime example of the fact that sometimes you don't know how much you want something until you hear about it, at which point it seems like the most obvious idea in the world.

"*Tales from the Loop* is a game of the '80s that never really was," explains Tomas Härenstam, the game's project manager. "The '80s that is perhaps the way you wished it were if you grew up in that time.

"It's the imaginings of a child – of robots and dinosaurs and fantastic things making their way into your everyday life. Well, that's the basic premise, anyway."

The spark of inspiration for the game came from a series of paintings by Simon Stålenhag, set around an imaginary town next to a powerful and mysterious particle accelerator known as 'The Loop'.

Tales from the Loop has a feel that many gamers will find reminiscent of Jamey Stegmaier's 1920s-with-mechs strategy game *Scythe* – itself based on an artist's vision of an alternate past. The work mixes sci-fi trappings with nostalgia for suburban childhood, battered old Volvos and summer holidays spent aimlessly wandering the countryside. It instantly proved a hit on Kickstarter, spawning two artbooks published by Free League.

The company has a history of putting out RPGs and keeping an eye on ways to expand its international offerings, which previously included *Mutant: Year Zero*, so it was only a matter of time before the company took the idea from the coffee table and moved it over to the gaming table.

"It goes back a lot to movies like *E.T.*, and *The Goonies*, and these days *Stranger Things*," says Härenstam. It has that vibe, where everyday life meshes with fantastic elements. We can create fantastic stories from that.

"A lot of people interested in this game grew up in the '80s but, honestly, everybody can play it – those kind of stories are timeless." ▸





WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

Over the course of a *Tales from the Loop* game the players may encounter a huge variety of weird and wonderful happenings spawned from within the confines of the research station.

The core rulebook contains four separate scenarios that cover everything you might meet in an adventure film, all the way from hungry dinosaurs to runaway robots.

This doesn't mean that games always end up as wacky, over-the-top action extravaganzas, however. According to Härenstam there is a natural limit of sorts on how crazy things can get. After all, one of the core trappings of the genre is that the bizarre things the kids encounter have to stay at least somewhat deniable to the adult world.

"It's an alternate world so robots and the like may be common, but time portals, dinosaurs and really crazy things like that have to remain firmly within the domain of rumour and legend," he observes.

"The everyday life portion of the game stays separate from the sci-fi adventure part, that's one of our core aims."

This peek into the characters' home, school and social lives is just as important to the game as the more exciting action and adventure sections. Part of the character creation process involves deciding on an 'anchor' – something that makes the character feel safe, whether it's a place, person or object. This may be the musician's guitar teacher, a clothes shop in the town centre or even a moth-bitten teddy bear.

Not only do these provide the backdrop that makes the fantastical elements stand out and feel dangerous; they also play a mechanical role.

The damage mechanics for *Tales from the Loop* are rather abstracted and can lead to characters suffering negative conditions when they're out on adventures and end up hurt or scared. In order to remove those conditions and head back out into the woods and fields they need to overcome their fears by heading back to their anchor or another safe place to recover.

"There are adventure, mystery-solving scenes, but there are also scenes from everyday life, which are interweaved," says Härenstam. "You're supposed to go back to your everyday life and relate to partners, teachers, friends, and then go back out on your adventures.

"That creates a natural flow between the two types of scenes."

EMBRACING CLICHÉ

The game system is designed around the kids right from the start. Rather than the traditional classes or roles found in most RPGs, the characters from *Tales from the Loop* fall into 'types' drawn from schoolyard stereotypes.

None of these would feel out of place in the cinematic classrooms of *The Breakfast Club* or *Mean Girls*, and a group may include characters like the Bookworm, the Troublemaker, the Popular Kid and the Weirdo.

"When we were writing the early rules we weren't sure if we needed this kind of class-like mechanic – everyone would be playing kids after all, but the more we thought about it we realised that they would help people get a quick grasp of their character," explains Härenstam.

"They're clichés, but they give you a broad brushstroke idea of what the character will be like and you can build it out from there."

Another important aspect of the rules is that they place a hard limit on the age-range open to protagonists, with the youngest coming in at 10 and the eldest being 15. Once they hit 16 they have to retire from mystery-solving and start growing up.

The reason for this is partially a mechanical one, as the total amount of attribute points a character has is equal to their age. Older kids will probably be stronger and maybe a bit smarter, for example. This is balanced out by awarding younger children more luck points, allowing them extra re-rolls.

"We wanted to make sure that when you become older it had a dramatic effect. After all, when you're a kid, 15 is very different from 13, and that's very different from 11.

"However," Härenstam continues, "the main reason for limiting the ages is that we had a very specific idea of the ages we wanted to focus on.

"When you start getting to 16 and up, you're moving toward adulthood and that creates different situations and dynamics. We wanted to focus on the age where you're still very much a child experiencing these adventures and mysteries without the adult issues and concerns."

This decision presented a few big questions of its own. One of the most contentious was how to handle violence and danger in a game where the characters are all children. After all, while gaming groups may cheer when their fantasy heroes wade through buckets of blood, it can all get rather uncomfortable when the same consequences are heaped upon an 11-year-old.

"That was definitely something that came up a few times throughout the development.



One of the ways we dealt with this is that there is no mechanical way for characters to die," Härenstam says.

"In most RPGs you can reach zero hit points and you're dead, but it doesn't work like that in *Tales from the Loop*. If you suffer too many conditions you instead become 'broken' – you have to go back home, go recover.

"Of course, if you want to there's nothing stopping you from creating a scene involving death if everyone in the group was okay with it and it was dramatically appropriate, but in the game we have no rules or mechanics to cover it. We thought that was a better way to handle it."

MYSTERY MECHANICS

These rules are what set RPGs apart from simple storytelling or improvisation games, and *Tales from the Loop* uses the same core mechanics as all of Free League's internationally-released games.

As far as stats go, the characters all have four main attributes and 12 skills, each of which is associated with an attribute. These can have scores anywhere between one and ten.

When the time comes to use a skill – such as when the Computer Geek tries to hack into the research facility's network – the player rolls a number of regular six-sided dice equal to the points they've put into it, plus their score in the associated attribute.

If they roll at least one six they succeed at the task, and if they get more than one then they get a few extra benefits as well. For example, the successful hacker might not only find the information they were after, but also stumble across a few extra tidbits they weren't expecting.

"That's the core mechanic, but there are ways to play around with it if you want," Härenstam elaborates. "You can use your luck points to re-roll, push yourself to trade re-rolls for potential conditions, use equipment that gives benefits… but the core mechanic is very simple.

"That was important to us, as the setting isn't your typical fantasy or sci-fi kind of world. We've had lots of interest from people who aren't experienced pen-and-paper RPG players, and we've found that they can pick it up quickly.

"There are some tricks and some quirks that can make things more exciting, such as bonuses from equipment or circumstances, but the core mechanic is very easy to pick up.

"The fact that the world is a reflection of our own also makes it easier for people to pick it up. They know what they can do in real life."

Probably the biggest part of *Tales from the Loop* will be the kids' investigation into strange happenings and exploring the associated mystery. However, as with most RPGs, there's always the chance that the protagonists will find themselves drawn into some kind of conflict – or 'trouble', as it's known in the system.

This can take a great many forms, such as hiding from enemies, distracting them or simply running away. Every now and then there's no alternative but to take out the hockey sticks and jury-rigged tasers and get into a scuffle.

"When conflict does break out in *Tales from the Loop* it shouldn't take too long or involve too many rolls, especially when compared to more traditional RPGs. You won't have to wear down huge amounts of hit points or the like," says Härenstam.

"To be honest it's more framing the conflict and the scene rather than any kind of actual simulation of combat. You're rolling the dice and letting the story unfold, not running though every blow and parry."

IT ITS PLACE

While more of us may feel comfortable role-playing in small-town Sweden in the wake of the recent run of popular Scandinavian crime dramas on TV, Härenstam does recognise that the setting may not be for everyone.

Fortunately, one of the many Kickstarter stretch goals thoroughly smashed was a second setting, this time based in a small town in Colorado. This alternative town is included in the main rulebook, and can easily replace its Scandinavian counterpart in all of the scenarios with only a few cosmetic changes.

"Even though the Swedish setting is really interesting, we felt that quite a few people would prefer to play in another country," Härenstam notes.

"We took a look at where our backers came from and it made sense to base it in the US. At the same time, Simon had created a parallel loop in Boulder City, Colorado, so it was a natural fit.

"The scenarios that we write will generally work in either location, but there are a few superficial changes – names, that kind of thing. Otherwise it doesn't effect the game that much."

Härenstam adds that one of the most fascinating parts of putting the game together was that so much of the world was already created before his team got their hands on it. However, rather than being in the form of a book or a film like most adaptations, *Tales from the Loop* existed as a series of paintings.

There were occasional areas where the art and the rules didn't align at first, but he explains that he believes this ultimately ended up being a positive part of the experience.

"We've had a lot of discussions with Simon and the main writer of the game, a man named Nils Hintze," he says. "As editors and product managers we've made sure to get them on page – to discuss what works and what doesn't work.

"It's actually been a great experience and a great way to get a better idea of the setting overall, having them both discuss and drill further into what's going on.

"Where there have been inconsistencies or problems, we've always managed to sort them out pretty well." ▪

STRANGER THINGS HAVE HAPPENED…

Even since *Tales from the Loop* launched on Kickstarter fans have been keen to connect it to one of 2015's most acclaimed TV series: Netflix's '80s-tinged sci-fi mystery show *Stranger Things*. But is it a fair comparison to make?

"The world of *Tales from the Loop* predates *Stranger Things* by a few years," explains Haerenstam. "There's certainly parallels, as both are pulling from that combination of nostalgia and soft sci-fi, but an RPG was on the table long before it became popular.

"Having said that, when *Stranger Things* became as huge as it did we were discussing when to launch the Kickstarter and its success played a role in our decision to start it last year. It wasn't the deciding thing by any measure, but it was definitely a factor."

‘AS A BLACK KID IN SOUTHERN ALABAMA, HORROR IS A GENERAL ASPECT OF YOUR LIFE’

Chris Spivey’s groundbreaking Harlem Unbound confronted the monster of racism as unflinchingly as the cosmic nightmares stalking the streets of New York. His next RPG, Haunted West, takes aim at the western

Words by **Matt Jarvis** | Main illustration of *Harlem Unbound: Second Edition* by **Brennen Reece**

For Chris Spivey, roleplaying and racism were intertwined from a young age.

The future designer first discovered *Dungeons & Dragons* when he was around seven, picking up the RPG’s iconic *Red Box* to play with a friend.

“Even as we were flipping through it, we didn’t see anyone that looked quite like us, so that was a little disturbing even at that age,” Spivey says.

Shaken but undeterred, Spivey stuck with the game, eventually joining an *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* group. A fondness for the fantasy stories of Michael Moorcock saw him then move on to *Stormbringer*, the roleplaying game based on Moorcock’s *Elric of Melniboné* books and built on the Basic Roleplaying gameplay of Chaosium’s *RuneQuest*. Spivey’s love of roleplaying soon led him to begin creating his own settings to explore.

“One of the first things I did was I actually made a sort of African fantasy world using some of the *Stormbringer* rules,” he recalls. “So around 12 or 13 I started designing and making games for myself.”

In his early teens, Spivey encountered the work of H.P. Lovecraft. The early 20th-century horror writer would further ignite the young designer’s passions.

“Around 14 or so, I was at an estate sale and I uncovered a book of Lovecraft’s work,”



Spivey explains. "'The Outsider' really sort of spoke to me at the time."

Spivey's interest in Lovecraft led him to seek out *Call of Cthulhu*. Like *Stormbringer*, the horror RPG was built on the Basic Roleplaying system. In particular, Spivey was drawn to *Dead Man Stomp*, a 1920s-set scenario starring a jazz musician in possession of a trumpet said to have been Louis Armstrong's own. (Spivey would later update the classic adventure for a 2018 re-release, something he would call "one of the highlights of my life".)

"That solidified me as a *Call of Cthulhu* player," Spivey recalls.

One of the things Spivey admired most in *Call of Cthulhu* was the game's real-world setting, which served as a background to all manner of nightmarish cosmic horror and supernatural mystery.

"The underlying level of horror is always there, but it's just out of sight," he explains. "But it's always present and something about it is usually going on. You may not know it but, when you encounter it, it potentially either shatters you or it lets you combat it and you beat it – and you may sacrifice a lot, but all you've really done is you've achieved one more day or one more week. There's a lot of power in that kind of story."

The idea of a horror hidden behind the veneer of everyday life resonated with Spivey's own experience of growing up.

"Being a black kid growing up in southern Alabama, horror is kind of a general aspect of your life," Spivey reflects. "It's less cosmic horror – it's more the actual horror of interacting with backwards-thinking people and the constant flow of racism. So there's something about supernatural horror that's layered on top of an actual realistic horror that was easy to access for me."

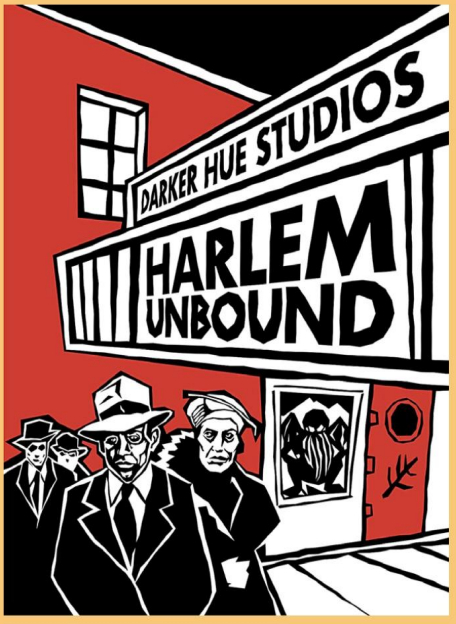
Just as he had done in his African fantasy world for *Stormbringer*, Spivey came to see his roleplaying creations as a way of helping restore a more true-to-life perspective to games, combatting the erasure and whitewashing of marginalised people.

"Eventually I sort of started adding in what I thought to be more realistic elements into games in general," Spivey says. "That means we would discuss race, we might discuss gender or sexuality, as I got older and progressed through high school. There was always a layer of realism in every game that I would run or anything I would do."

The strands of roleplaying, racism and horror that Spivey had encountered throughout his life would eventually intertwine most tightly in his tour de force, *Harlem Unbound*.

ROLEPLAYING UNBOUND

Harlem Unbound had been Spivey's passion project for years, inspired both by *Dead Man Stomp*'s Harlem setting and Spivey's own personal connection to the Harlem Renaissance, the 1920s cultural movement that emanated from the New York neighbourhood.



Harlem Unbound was inspired by the 1920s Harlem Renaissace (*Brennen Reece*)

"*Harlem Unbound* was more important to me than anything else because I considered the Harlem Renaissance itself to be so incredible," Spivey says. "It was an African-American movement that used art, music, ideas to try to politically change the world. I also have a familiar relation to it, so that made it even more important to me to get that out first and try to get it right."

While designing *Harlem Unbound*, Spivey drew from his professional experience penning stories for other roleplaying games, including *Scion*, *Geist* and *Call of Cthulhu*, as well as his lifelong love of roleplaying in settings that reflected real life.

"One of the big things is, anyone that plays in my games, all your actions potentially have consequences, but they're also kind of a free-ranging world," he says. "One of the *D&D* games that I ran, the players had a meeting with the king and the king didn't have a lot of guards, and they were relatively high-level, so the players went and they killed the king and escaped. Then they came back to the town about two or three months later and they were curious why the guards tried to arrest them and the townsfolk weren't really selling things to them, as it [had] disrupted their entire economy and way of life."

Set in 1920s New York at the height of prohibition and the creative ingenuity of jazz luminaries such as Duke Ellington, *Harlem Unbound* combined its true-life portrayal of the Harlem Renaissance and the figures at the centre of its cultural explosion with the cosmic horrors that had engrossed Spivey in his youth. In direct opposition to the xenophobic and racist undertones of Lovecraft's writing, *Harlem Unbound* turned the genre on its head; by default, players' heroes were African-American rather than the Lovecraftian standard of a white protagonist, and explored aspects of the time and setting that had been commonly ignored or misrepresented.

"I find the best way to do it is to tell people the actual truth and provide potential examples and make the material itself kind of engaging for people," Spivey says of engaging players with stories, characters and discussions often absent in other RPGs. "'cause I could go and I could tell you about the Harlem Renaissance in a way that was incredibly dull and book-centric and bore you about this amazing world-changing event, or I could present it to you in a manner that says, 'This is all the cool stuff that happened, these are the cool people that were making things happen and this is how they did it,' and give you a chance to engage with that work. Which is one of the reasons why I love roleplaying games; it's because it's more of a sort of collaborative feel for whatever it is you're doing."

A sample of the book in hand, Spivey approached a number of roleplaying publishers with his pitch for *Harlem Unbound*, only to be turned down at every opportunity.

"I shopped it around to people and I got a lot of rejections," he says. "I heard that 'It's not quite right for us,' 'No-one's gonna wanna talk about racism in gaming,' 'That's a great idea but I don't think it will sell.'"

Determined to bring the game's vital message to players nonetheless, Spivey endeavoured to found his own studio, Darker Hue, in order to publish the book. *Harlem Unbound* would become the studio's very first project.

"In the end I just had to do it myself because I considered it to be that important," Spivey says.

From his original concept, Spivey built up *Harlem Unbound* as a supplement that would be compatible with *Call of Cthulhu*'s Basic Roleplaying framework, as well as the GUMSHOE system behind the more investigation-focused RPGs of Pelgrane Press, including *Call of Cthulhu* descendant *Trail of Cthulhu*. In late 2016, the game launched on Kickstarter; within seven hours, it had passed its crowdfunding target. By the time its campaign came to an end early the following year, the book had raised almost eight times its original goal.

Widespread acclaim quickly followed *Harlem Unbound*'s release in mid-2017. The game was acquired by multiple US museums in recognition of its "artistic, scholarly and educational value", before being nominated for the Diana Jones Award for 'excellence in gaming' and lauded for its setting, artwork and writing at the 2018 ENnies. For Spivey, more important than *Harlem Unbound*'s fast-growing collection of silverware was the opportunity to amplify a discussion too often muted.

"I'm most excited about actually being able to have had included a frank discussion about

racism in gaming and racism in general," he reflects. "I've touched on that in a lot of my other work – for instance, even with *Cthulhu Confidential* where I made Langston Wright, who is a 1940s war vet in Washington D.C., it sort of interacted with it and I got to touch on it a little bit. But with *Harlem Unbound* I got to just blatantly have a talk with me as writer and you as reader."

WIDE, WIDE WEST

Spivey's next big undertaking would also stem from his childhood passions.

"Growing up, I would end up watching westerns with my grandmother on Saturday mornings instead of cartoons because we only had one TV," he recalls. "Growing up in Alabama not really having a lot of cash, there's kind of like one main room where you did all your television watching. And there was sort of a divide at around nine o'clock, the TV sort of became hers. So I had a lot of bonding with westerns with her over that, and then I got into reading westerns and I started watching a lot of spaghetti western movies, and then with *Django Unchained* along with the *Hateful Eight* and *High Noon* and some other stuff, it all just really resonated."

Haunted West had been an idea that Spivey had experimented with several years ago, running a prototype game at conventions before putting it on the back burner to focus on *Harlem Unbound*. As that RPG wrapped up, Spivey found himself drawn back to the western project.

"When Brennen [Reece, artist and graphic designer] and I were working on *Harlem Unbound* after all the writers were done, the artists were done and it was just us and layout and adding in a little bit more of this and that, I came up with ten different [game] ideas that I loved and I had to write them all down and store them away so I wouldn't forget them," he says. "One of them was actually *Haunted West* that I put aside – I had a lot more ideas for it, so I had to write it out just so I could focus on what I was doing."

Taking place after the American Civil War, *Haunted West* once again sees Spivey's love of horror woven throughout its 'Weird West' setting. As with *Harlem Unbound*, the designer is keen to observe the familiar genre with a perspective that restores those individuals and stories wilfully or mistakenly overlooked in past westerns.

"*Haunted West* is more of an entire genre than just one specific location and one decade of time," Spivey says. "A lot of the different stories that we want to tell just aren't about African-Americans or potentially just Jewish people, but we want to try to encompass everyone and all the different marginalised peoples that lived during the West."

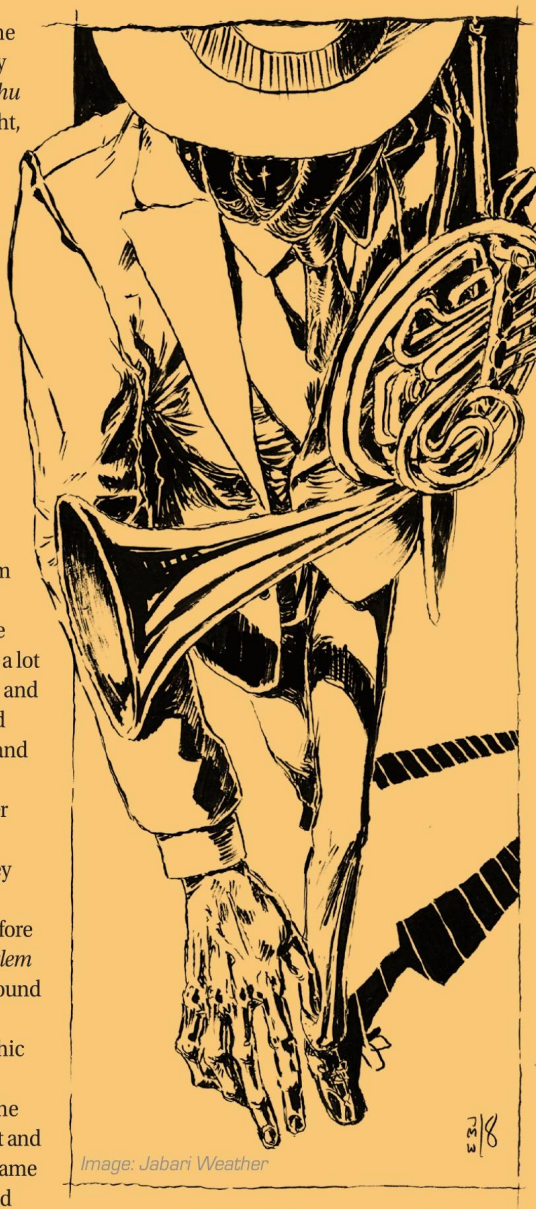


Image: Jabari Weather

Joined by a larger team of writers, designers and artists than on *Harlem Unbound*, Spivey's dedication to telling forgotten stories of the Wild West era sees Darker Hue draw from real-life figures such as Bass Reeves, Kate Warne and Fee Lee Wong, as well as the style of TV series *Deadwood*, cult sci-fi western *Firefly*, Sergio Leone's *Dollars* trilogy and more.

"I've tried to make it as diverse as possible to get as many different voices on the book as I can," Spivey says. "Because I don't want to steal anyone else's story; I want us to tell these stories together and give each one their own representation in the book. So it is a lofty undertaking to try to get right."

Unlike *Harlem Unbound*, however, *Haunted West* will feature an original gameplay system that puts its storytelling front and centre.

"I've played a lot of other western games and they were all good, but what I wanted to do none of them could do," Spivey explains. "My prototype game that I ran at Gen Con, I used [*Call of Cthulhu* setting] *Down Darker Trails* – which is a great system but it didn't do what I needed the system to do. And rather than try to force it to do what I need to do, I just figured it would just be better to build something from the ground up."

Despite flipping the stereotypical depictions of marginalised people in westerns on their head, Spivey is quick to dismiss descriptions of *Haunted West* as "subversive" – it's simply correcting a narrative that has long been wrong.

"I don't consider *Haunted West* subversive because we're actually talking about real historical facts, and we're just trying to highlight things that other people have actively either ignored, tried to appropriate or whitewash over."

GIVING A VOICE

With *Haunted West* on track for a Kickstarter in 2020 and a second edition of *Harlem Unbound* due from Chaosium later this year, Spivey continues to be led by the vital mission that has defined his work since he first sat down to bring his African setting to *Stormbringer*.

The designer is exploring outside of horror, too, with an upcoming, currently untitled sci-fi setting in the works and a recently completed modern-day superhero sourcebook for *Pulp Cthulhu*, the *Call of Cthulhu* spin-off that favours amped-up action and flavour over realistic terror.

While *Harlem Unbound* stands as a defining voice in roleplaying – one that Darker Hue looks set to continue in *Haunted West* – Spivey still sees much more needing to be done to give creators and players the opportunity to see reality fully reflected in games. Until then, children across the world will continue to open up their first RPG, only to find no-one that looks like them.

"Things are definitely not moving as fast as they should," Spivey says. "There are more doors being opened, but there aren't enough doors being opened and they're not necessarily being opened by the powers that have the power to make actual change right now and make things easier for people trying to change things.

"One of the best things that you can do is you can hire a lot of diverse voices for whatever your project is. Because if you bring in diverse people and voices and give them an equal seat at the table, that work itself is going to change and have those people represented in the work that you're doing.

"That is the only way we're going to get a constant representation of the real world that we have: make it engaging for everyone and get rid of this otherness that people keep trying to promote and push."



ELITE: DANGEROUS RPG

A galaxy of gaming awaits

Designer: Spidermind Games team | **Artist:** Various

2+ £40

Even allowing for rose-tinted view-ports it's safe to say that few games have come as close to truly recreating the vastness of space quite as well as *Elite*, and Spidermind Games has done an admirable job of translating this to the tabletop with *EDRPG*. The game offers a huge sandbox that shines when players are free to tread their own path, though it's let down by a lack of truly compelling fiction and an occasional lack of focus to the rules.

Perhaps it's unfair to criticise them on that last point, though. The original game is the granddaddy of open-world video games, after all, and was founded upon the premise of forging your own path in a hostile galaxy, whether that was as a soldier, a trader, a miner or any one of a thousand professions you dreamed up yourself.

Appropriately enough then, *EDRPG* avoids tying you to any particular play style from the very beginning of a campaign. Character creation is hugely flexible and completely avoids anything like traditional classes or even archetypes, with each pilot picking four options from a long list of backgrounds that reflect their life before heading into the void. For example, you could decide that your character used to be an engineer so they get a nice bonus to their repair skill, and that they worked as a ship hand for a while to round out their technical abilities.



The range of backgrounds is astronomical, spanning everything from mercenary work to cheerleading, and how you react to it will probably go a long way to defining how you feel about *EDRPG* as a whole. While some players may love being able to pick and choose their ideal character and have the rules to back it up, others can easily find themselves overwhelmed by choice.

This need to pick and choose is a thread that runs throughout the game and applies not just to character creation, but also to weapons, cybernetic enhancements and starships. If you want to, and can spare the credits, you can even take a look at the 'rare cosmetics' table and grab yourself some anti-grav hairspray to help out with your social checks.

While it may sound as though all these options would make the game incredibly complicated, in practice it works out surprisingly smoothly. As long as the players are the kind to be excited by working out the exact upgrades they want for their ship, you'll find that while there are plenty of choices out there none are so complex that they bog things down too much.

It probably helps that the core mechanics for *EDRPG* are incredibly simple. Checks involve rolling a single d10 and adding a bonus determined by your skills. with a moderately difficult task – say, sneaking past a guard post without being spotted – requiring a total of nine or ten. Things can be tough for new characters, who will be getting at very most a +4 bonus from their specialised skills, though this climbs at a decent pace as they complete adventures.

The flexibility of the ruleset means that these adventures could consist of dogfighting pirates one week and sneaking into a corporate HQ the next but, appropriately enough, *EDRPG* excels when you use it to create a sandbox for the players rather than pushing them into a more linear story. Not only does this feel much closer in tone to the original video game, it also appeals to the kind of player who would enjoy tinkering with ship systems and planning out equipment to buy.

Another reason to stick to the sandbox is that while the *Elite* franchise is beloved for its scope and gameplay, it's not particularly famed for its deep fiction. The developers have done an admirable job of presenting what's there, but in all honesty it'll probably feel rather generic for anybody with even a passing interest in sci-fi. The advantage to this, perhaps, is that it creates an easy canvas on which the players and GM can paint their own tales as they campaign.

After all, the best stories are undoubtedly those created at the table. And should you stick round long enough to hit the fabled rank of 'elite', you'll certainly have plenty of your own to share.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

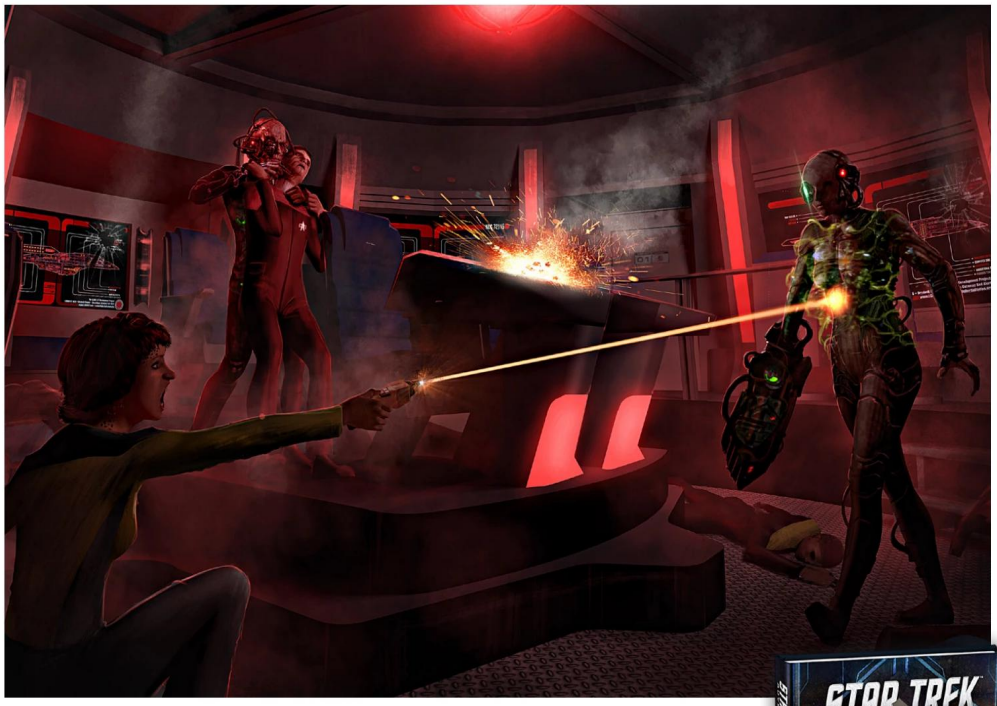
WE SAY

It's not the tightest of games, but if you want to grab some friends, pick a spaceship and set off into the void for a few hours then *EDRPG* is a great way to spend an evening.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... STARFINDER

Sure, you can't play as space goblins in *EDRPG*, but the actual gameplay is a little simpler and you still get to go wild with customisation.



STAR TREK

To boldly roll where no-one has rolled before

Designer: Modiphius | **Artist:** Various

2+

£50



In *Star Trek Adventures*, Modiphius has come up with probably the best way to recreate the feel of the iconic TV show at the tabletop – no mean feat considering the many ways in which *Star Trek* differs from other sci-fi settings.

After all, while they certainly had lasers, tentacled monsters and everything else needed to keep things exciting, the episodes' focus rarely fell on explosions as much as diplomacy, exploration and science – even if that last one amounted to little more than babbling about deflector dishes and neutrino beams.

This is reflected neatly in *Star Trek Adventures*; while there are extensive rules for combat, they aren't the focus by any means. Exploration and diplomacy are just as important as shootouts, brawls and ship-to-ship engagements, with an entire chapter dedicated to solving problems through futuristic science.

Indeed, Modiphius has made a real attempt to replicate the approach of the show and accommodate the various spanners the format would throw into the works of a more typical RPG. For example, a player taking the role of the chief engineer as their primary character can hop into the shoes of a literal redshirt for missions where there's more call for steady aim than technical skill, allowing everyone to participate without having to contrive a reason for the entire command crew to take on every excursion.

Beyond this, the impressive breadth of systems on offer means that it's possible to reproduce virtually every aspect of a *Star Trek* episode, whether you're romping around with alien princesses pulled from *The Original Series* or confronting the ethical dilemmas posed by the Borg or Dominion. However, this does come with a few downsides.

While a typical check in the game will have relatively simple core mechanics – roll a few d20s, then gain successes for each one that comes in under a value determined by your character's attributes and skills – there are a number of extra systems bolted on that can muddy up an otherwise simple interaction. None of them are particularly unwieldy on their own, but that hardly matters when they stack up so quickly.

Opening a locked door can require management of momentum and threat counters, a complication range, advantages and disadvantage traits, and a few others depending on the exact nature of the situation. All this can sometimes slow the pace of the game to a crawl, with the need for both players and the GM to be highly focused and extremely familiar with the rules to keep things zipping along.

Still, even if you do need to keep the rulebook on hand, you probably won't mind all that much. It's a genuinely lovely piece of work, crafted with obvious reverence for the *Star Trek* universe.

The background and setting sections are incredible primers for the universe and are enjoyable to read entirely independent of the rules – the section on how each class of Starfleet vessel is designed is a favourite. There's a wealth of information on offer, supported by countless extracts from in-universe reports, letters and logs. Much of the art is exceptional and does a good job of showing everything from the campy pulp of space castles to the clean curves of Federation starships.

Ultimately, this highlights perhaps the game's greatest strength and weakness. Most RPGs licensed from major properties are relatively streamlined affairs that try not to burden more casual gamers with too many complications but, for better or worse, *Star Trek Adventures* doesn't seem to share these concerns.

For some this will be off-putting, but if you're familiar with both crunch-heavy RPGs and 3D chess, it may well be just what you're looking for. ▪

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

An incredibly wide-ranging ruleset with plenty of options for exploring strange new worlds and seeking out new life and new civilisations, but probably not an ideal first step into the world of tabletop RPGs.



IF YOU LIKE THE DOCTOR WHO RPG... TRY STAR TREK ADVENTURES

Fans of classic sci-fi settings where talking and quick thinking is prioritised over combat should put Star Trek Adventures at the top of their wish list. Make it so.

STAR TREK ADVENTURES: BETA QUADRANT SOURCEBOOK

Boldly go, but only if you really want to

Designer: Modiphius team | **Artist:** Various

127 | 13+ | £25

You would think it'd be impossible to sum up a full quarter of the galaxy in a single book, but the *Beta Quadrant Sourcebook* makes an impressive attempt at doing so. However, while it's a wonderfully well put-together piece of work, it probably shouldn't be at the top of your shopping list.

At its heart, the book is a guide to playing in *Star Trek*'s Beta Quadrant, home to iconic races including the warlike Klingons, stoic Vulcans and devious Romulans. More than half of its pages are devoted to background information about the various worlds and cultures living in the vast region of space, interspersed with samples of in-universe messages, reports and notes.

Every page is stuffed full of interesting information – apparently Klingons are big fans of ice hockey and *Moby Dick* – that's been pieced together with obvious love and respect for the source material. Even if you weren't planning to run the game at all, the book makes for an enjoyable read that could even surprise a few hardcore *Star Trek* fans.

However, this dedication to the background lore does place the *Beta Quadrant Sourcebook* in a rather strange position when it comes to a target audience. If the idea of reading up on Klingon wedding ceremonies really appeals to you then you probably know most of the lore already. Even if you aren't a diehard fan of the show and are truly on the hunt for lore, you could probably get everything you need by spending a couple hours browsing *Star Trek* wiki pages. The information wouldn't be as well presented or written, and you'll miss out on a handful of original creations unique to the RPG, but you would have saved yourself a handful of cash.

With that in mind, there's a lot riding on the second section of the book – the new rules and options.

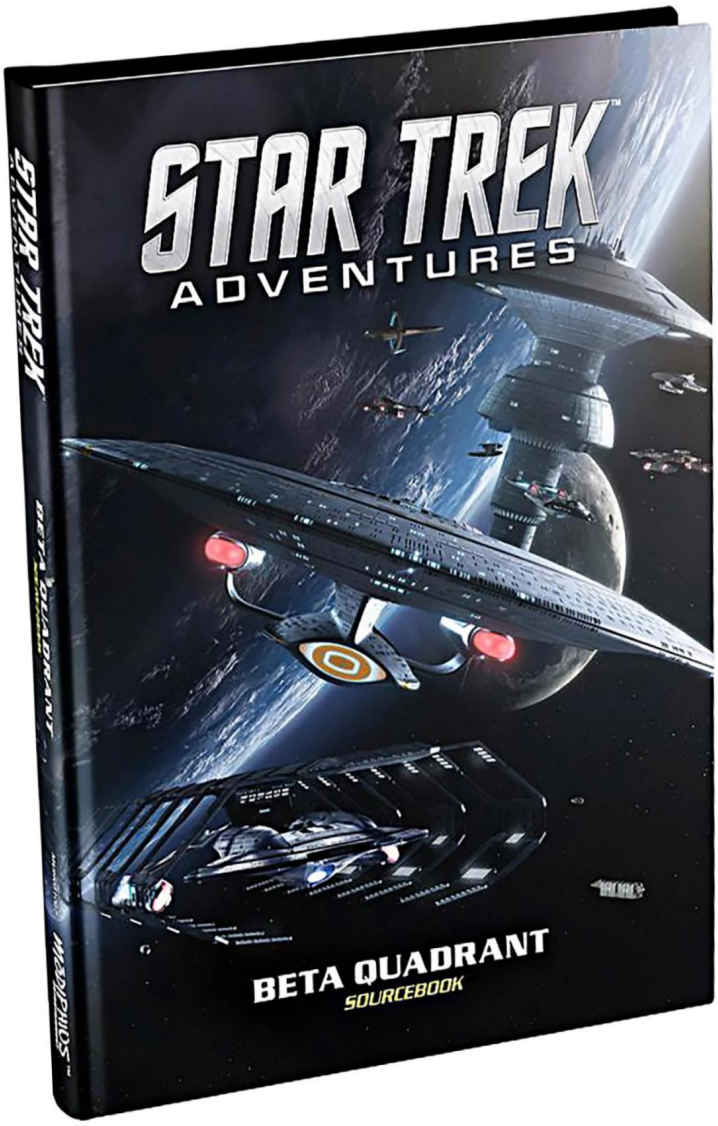
Again, while these are all nice additions to the game, there is very little that most GMs would view as vital to running a campaign. There are profiles for a few of the rarer ships and enemies that could crop up, but most of the truly iconic foes already appear in the core rulebook and leave the section feeling a little sparse.

The list of new species for players to take on their trip through the stars is impressively long, but they aren't exactly the iconic faces you think of when you picture *Star Trek*. Other than the Klingons, the most well-known species on offer is probably the Bolians or Benzites, and if you can picture what they look like without having to pull out your phone then you're probably far beyond the point where you need a sourcebook to fill you in on the galaxy.

The very final part of the book is devoted to sketching out campaign seeds in the Shackleton Expanse and, while this is handy, it's far from a comprehensive setting guide.

Now, none of these issues take away from the fact that the *Beta Quadrant Sourcebook* is a solid supplement. If you've already committed to picking up the full range of *Star Trek Adventure* books or simply want a nicely presented tome of lore, it will stand you in good stead. But if you're working on a budget, it's hard to recommend it over other supplements and releases for the game.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

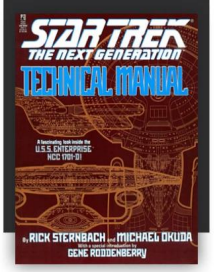


WE SAY

If you can spare the cash this is a great book filled with fascinating *Trek* lore. But if you can't, you probably won't miss it.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION TECHNICAL MANUAL

If you love the lore of the *Star Trek* universe, this book may well be right up your alley.

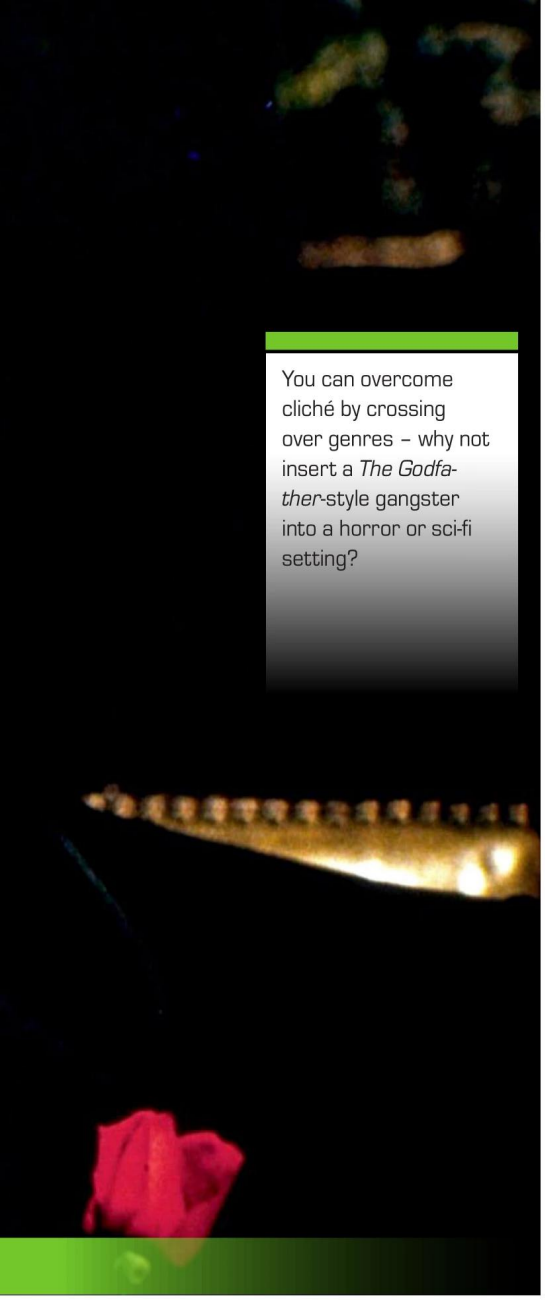




ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Don't be afraid of embracing the cliché – borrowing from your favourite books, films and games can be an easy way of creating a fun character that you can then put your own personal spin on

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**



You can overcome cliché by crossing over genres – why not insert a *The Godfather*-style gangster into a horror or sci-fi setting?

Let me tell you a little bit about Johnny 'Three Shoes' Mazetti. He's what you would get if you took every mafia cliché out there, all the way from the singalong speakeasies of *Bugsy Malone* to the shallow graves of *The Sopranos*, and melted them down into a single fedora-wearing, tommy-gun-toting wiseguy.

Sure, his work may have recently shifted from bootlegging hooch to ridding Brooklyn of eldritch horrors beyond the realm of understanding but, while that does add a bit of a twist to the old formula, it doesn't change the fact that there really isn't an original bone in his six-foot, dark-haired, strong-jawed, thoroughly generic body. He's a trope that walks like a man; a bucket of stereotypes and references blended into a fine paste and poured into a mid-range pinstripe suit.

And that's why he works so damn well. Because I got dozens of talented writers and actors to do all the hard parts of creating a character for me.

BORROWING BRILLIANCE

On the subject of clichés, there's an old one that goes "good artists copy; great artists steal," and this applies just as much to GMs and role-players as much as it did to Picasso.

After all, the vast majority of RPGs out there are set within fairly well-defined genres – fantasy, sci-fi, horror, etc. – all of which contain vast amounts of existing work. You could easily spend a lifetime exploring the worlds sketched out in tens of thousands of novels, games, comic books and movies, most of which are filled to the brim with ideas just waiting for you to pluck out and use for your own needs.

You could certainly argue that this makes it tough to come up with a truly unique spin, but I prefer to simply embrace the possibilities it presents. Such as Johnny.

For example, one piece of advice I always give to new players who are struggling to get into their character, regardless of which game we're planning to try out, is to throw their concerns about originality out of the nearest window and borrow cool ideas from anywhere they can.

That's not to say that there can be a lot of creative joy and incredible storytelling that comes from playing a nuanced, realistic hero with a complex web of motivations and fears, of course, but personal experience has taught me that you can also have great fun as an arrogant, willowy elf or a gruff dwarf with a little too much fondness for ale and gold (in that order). Neither character is going to be particularly original, but there's a good reason why the old tropes have been so successful – they're entertaining and provide an easy slab of character traits for people to weave their creativity around.

This isn't just something that should be limited to newer roleplayers either. I've been playing for years and will happily admit to embracing the cliché and shamelessly ripping off pop culture whenever I can.

In fact, if you look at the settings I've put together for my own campaigns you can practically see indicators of my tastes and current obsessions running right through the middle, like tree rings of questionable creativity. The floating islands were definitely cribbed from *Laputa*, the lightning-powered sky-pirates are probably ripped straight out of *Stardust*, while the tiny mushroom sidekick is a horrifying mash-up between *Guardians of the Galaxy*'s Groot and *Super Mario*'s Toad.

This kind of thing doesn't just come into play when you're creating entire worlds or stories from scratch, of course. Any time you're running a game you're being creative; adding your own twist to what's written in the module if nothing else. Even when you're describing a simple fight scene, few things convey someone's character quite as well as taking a page out of a certain blonde elf's playbook and surfing a shield down a flight of stairs mid-battle.

It's worth noting, however, that the difference between 'copy' and 'steal' isn't just there for the sake of an easy joke. As it suggests, while there's nothing particularly wrong with transplanting people, places and ideas from existing media over to your game, you can truly make them your own. And one of the best ways to do that is to simply add a little twist to what's already there.

DO THE TWIST AGAIN

To drag things back to Johnny, the major points that keep him from being a simple copy are twofold. First of all, he's not a direct rip of any character in particular; there's a little Al Pacino in there, sure, but there's also a smidge of Ray Liotta and a whole load of bit-part characters from a dozen crime dramas.

Just as important as that, perhaps, is the fact that his inspiration doesn't quite match up with the setting. Johnny's rough approximation of the "make him an offer he can't refuse" speech from *The Godfather* would feel more than a little derivative if the group was playing a straight game of cops and robbers, but when he's spouting gangster clichés to betentacled Deep Ones in *Trail of Cthulhu* he stands out just as surely as a wannabe-superhero would in a fantasy world, or a samurai aboard a starship.

There are dozens of ways to add a personal flourish, as both a GM and as a player, to the characters, locations and events you pilfer. For example, if you did decide to create that grumpy, boozy dwarf, you can add an easy little quirk by making them afraid of the dark, unable to grow a beard or any one of a dozen other little factors that subvert your players' expectations.

In many ways, this is what lies at the heart of most really memorable stories – at least when you're operating within existing genres – and once you learn to embrace it entire realms of wonderful ideas open up before you.

You want a cool, intimidating villain? Try starting with Darth Vader and then add a few flourishes (like enough levels in wizard to put force lightning to shame). Need an interesting antagonist that may well end up allying with the party? Inigo Montoya from *The Princess Bride* was pretty good at that, but rather than a sword-wielding Spaniard he could be an expert star-pilot.

And if you're desperate for a useful NPC to mess with your Lovecraftian investigators in 1920s New York? Well, you could always give Johnny 'Three Shoes' a call...

A PATH TO THE STARS

Fantasy RPG Pathfinder is headed to a new world – actually, dozens of them – with sci-fi sequel Starfinder. Creative director James Sutter shows us around the far reaches of the roleplaying universe

Words by **Matt Jarvis**

In 2008, Paizo changed the roleplaying scene forever with the announcement of *Pathfinder*, its fantasy RPG created from the DNA of *Dungeons & Dragons 3.5*, which initially divided the opinion of fans then awaiting *D&D*'s controversial fourth edition that the ambitious newcomer purposefully rebelled against. *Pathfinder* went on to become a roleplaying giant of its own, becoming the first RPG to outsell *D&D* in more than 30 years and inspiring further adventures, tabletop spin-offs, video games, tie-in novels and countless other additions that expanded the universe.

Close to a decade on, *Pathfinder*'s universe is about to grow like never before as Paizo prepares to launch *Starfinder*, the first full sequel to the RPG that ditches its fantasy trappings for the advanced technology and interstellar travel of science fiction.

"The idea had been percolating for a long time, honestly," reveals creative director James Sutter. "I had written a book called *Distant Worlds* that outlined a solar system for *Pathfinder* – basically a bunch of little mini-settings that neighbour *Pathfinder*'s core planet of Golarion – and that did surprisingly well with the fans, showing us there was an audience for mixing science-fiction peanut butter with our fantasy chocolate. ▶



Starfinder takes place in the same universe as Pathfinder, but is set a long time in the future. (Artist: Setiawan Lie)



“In a galaxy of billions of stars, there’s always a new corner you can carve out for whatever crazy idea you have.”

■ *Right: The gas giant planet of Liavara in the Golarion system. (Artist: Leon Tukker)*

■ *Opposite: The towering humanoid lizards of the Vesk are just one of Starfinder's new races. (Artist: Tomasz Chistowski)*

■ *Below: Navasi is a human envoy, a class suited to supporting and leading allies . (Artist: Remko Troost)*





"At the same time, publisher Erik Mona is a huge classic sword-and-planet buff and had wanted to do something like this for a while, coining the name '*Starfinder*' years before it was seriously considered. And *Pathfinder* creative director James Jacobs had done a really popular science-fantasy adventure path called *Iron Gods* for *Pathfinder*. So when you took everything together, we knew the interest was there.

"But it wasn't until last year that Erik pulled us all together and said, '*Pathfinder*'s in a good place, it's stable – I think we can do something new.' The feeling in the room was electric – after so long being focused solely on *Pathfinder*, doing something totally new was both appealing and terrifying. We all left thinking, 'We can do this!' Which fairly quickly turned into, 'Holy god, how do we do this?'"

When *Pathfinder* was created, the *D&D 3.5* rules at its core were already aging, having debuted half a decade before in 2003. *Pathfinder* made significant tweaks to the formula – it was actually referred to as '3.75' by its creators during development – but still stuck close to many of the concepts and mechanics established by its fantasy forebear. Taking *Starfinder* players further beyond these established boundaries while retaining enough of the smooth roleplaying gameplay that had made its predecessor such a success required significantly more work.

"*Starfinder* is the child of *Pathfinder* in many ways," Sutter observes. "Rules-wise, it stands alone and has many key differences – a lot of math has changed, and some rules have been simplified or altered to better accommodate a world with laser guns and jetpacks. Yet at the same time, you still have classes and feats and skills, you roll a d20 to hit, you gain experience and level up, and so forth."

Despite the significant gameplay changes required, *Starfinder* remains firmly rooted in *Pathfinder*'s foundation.

"I don't think anything was really built from the ground up – the whole thing is an evolution of the *Pathfinder* rules, and the desire for backward compatibility always kept us with one foot in *Pathfinder*," Sutter insists. "That said, some things are very different. Equipment, for instance, is different in a lot of ways – your armour has item slots, you're regularly replacing and upgrading your weapons, crafting works differently. But, for the most part, we were tweaking and refining systems and representing information to make it more accessible rather than completely rebuilding the *Pathfinder* engine. Our from-the-ground-up efforts were more focused on the new systems that didn't exist at all: things like starship combat, character themes or all the new classes and races. And then, of course, there was a ton of new content to generate on the setting side, seeing as *Pathfinder*'s whole planet was removed from the picture!"

While the in-game inhabitants of *Starfinder* have had thousands of years to adjust to the disappearance of the fantasy world of Golarion, *Pathfinder* players may balk at the idea of waving goodbye to a realm they have spent close to a decade exploring. Sutter is keen to stress that making the potentially jarring shift across as easy as possible was at the forefront of the team's minds, as they ensured elements of *Pathfinder* would fit among the unfamiliar environment.

"While complete backward compatibility was always going to be impossible, our guiding principle was that you should be able to use a *Pathfinder* monster in *Starfinder* on-the-fly and with minimal conversion fuss, and I think we've pulled it off," he says. "But the classes are all new and the core races are different – except for humans. My expectation is that while there are innumerable differences, folks familiar with *Pathfinder* will be able to pick it up and go, 'Oh, I see how this works' and begin playing with fairly little learning curve."

WORLDS AWAY

Starfinder may take place in *Pathfinder*'s universe, but it's a cosmos made anew by the drastic effects of time.

"*Starfinder* is set thousands of years in *Pathfinder*'s future – exactly how far is unclear, due to a giant magical gap in history called the 'Gap,' a sort of deity-level amnesia that affected the entire multiverse," Sutter summarises.

"While most folks have been in the space age for a long time, it's only been a few hundred years since the discovery of feasible interstellar travel via a mysterious hyperspace-like dimension called the 'Drift.' As a result, players are dropped into the start of a new age of frontier exploration, with individuals, corporations, and governments all headed out to the stars to colonise new worlds, meet new cultures and bring back lucrative new – or ancient – technology and magic.

"Another key difference is that Golarion itself has mysteriously disappeared, with not even the gods able – or willing – to tell people where it's gone."

Replacing Golarion is Absalom Station, a huge city floating in space that serves as the heart of trade and diplomacy for the galactic alliance known as the Pact Worlds. While Absalom and its surrounding planets are packed full of strange and wonderful new creatures and characters for players to meet, *Pathfinder* fans will find plenty of nods to their now-absent former domain.

"One thing I hope people will really enjoy about the game is how, in with all the new stuff, we've carried some elements of *Pathfinder* forward and changed them to fit the setting," Sutter says. "So you've still got all the old core races like dwarves and elves, but they're no longer the biggest movers and shakers in the system, having been outpaced by races like androids and ysoki ratfolk and the insectile shirren. There are still organizations like the Hellknights, only now their citadels are enormous devil-powered battleships floating through the darkness. Some of the familiar gods are still prominent, while others have fallen to obscurity and been replaced by new alien gods. It's all about finding fun ways to mix the new and the old!"

This melting pot of fantasy and sci-fi extends to the player-created characters that will spend hours upon hours embarking on the planet-hopping adventures



STARFINDER



"Race-wise, we've still got all the core races from *Pathfinder* – your classic Tolkien-esque elves, dwarves, and so on – but the focus is more on new player races that have risen in prominence," Sutter details. "The seven core races of *Starfinder* are humans, androids, four-armed kasathas, telepathic lashuntas, insectile shirrens, reptilian vesk and ysoki ratfolk.

"Class-wise, you've also got seven to choose from: heavily armed soldiers, sneaky operatives, charismatic envoys who boost their friends, mechanics who have either a customised drone or an AI linked to their brain, mystics who channel mysterious energies, technomancers who use spellcoding to hack the laws of physics and solarians who form weapons and armor out of stellar energy, and whose abilities change from round to round based on whether they attune themselves to the forces of energy or entropy."

If the mention of spellcoding and technomancers pricked up your ears, what you're thinking is probably right: players will be able to combine their technical prowess with the ability to wield good old-fashioned enchantments.

"The technology of *Starfinder* is a blend of science and magic," Sutter explains. "You've got powered armour, but it might be covered in magical runes. You've got an assault rifle, but it might be blessed by a goddess to make you better at killing demons. Your computer is subject to magical hacking. Even starship travel is inherently magical, as the discovery of the Drift was granted by an AI that achieved godhood, and nobody else really understands how it works."

It's a potentially contentious decision, with some sci-fi devotees condemning the use of magic to explain abilities and events – no matter how fantastical – that could instead be explained more 'logically' using far-flung technology or science. Of course, the argument also goes the other way: simply look at the oft-criticised use of midichlorians to explain the magical Force in *Star Wars* as a mystery that was better left unsolved.

"There's a certain mystery that goes along with allowing magic into your setting, a sense of unlimited possibility," Sutter enthuses. "But, more importantly, as soon as we decided that we wanted this to be an evolution of *Pathfinder*'s setting, we knew there was still going to be fantasy, because I've never understood the trope that technology replaces magic. To me, it seems inevitable that magic and technology would blend, that they'd just be two different ways of getting things done, and whichever was cheaper or most effective in a given situation would be the one that got used. But really, when you get right down to it, the first thing I said when Erik proposed doing *Starfinder* was, 'Hell yes! Space wizards and laser ninjas!' And I've tried to let that gut impulse be a guiding light."

While leaping into sci-fi with a standalone RPG would have provided the perfect reason to leave the world and fantasy of *Pathfinder* behind, Sutter is quick to insist that the ties between the games only strengthen *Starfinder*'s underlying lore.

"There were several reasons," he responds when asked why remaining in the *Pathfinder* universe so was important. "One was pure business – we know people love *Pathfinder*, but would they follow us to something totally new? Another was that people had been asking for years for us to expand on the solar system presented in *Distant Worlds*, and this was a chance to take that farther than we'd ever be able to in *Pathfinder*. I think in the end what really sold folks was the chance to see how some of our favorite aspects of *Pathfinder* might evolve. What gods will still be prominent in thousands of years? What organisations are still around? What's their distant, garbled perspective on this present we've put so much work into? It just seemed more fun than starting from scratch."

ALL ABOARD

Strange lands, memorable characters and thrilling up-close combat are staples of roleplaying whether players are fighting with swords and bows or laser rifles and robots. What will truly mark *Starfinder* apart is the introduction of starships, which crews of players will be able to launch into space and pilot to new planets, fighting off attacking vessels along the way. It's the single biggest addition to the solid gameplay and narrative framework set by *Pathfinder* – to the point where even Sutter was unsure about making such a radical change.

"In the beginning, I actually wasn't sold on starship combat – it seemed like a really difficult thing to get right, and I was more interested in the on-the-ground exploration of alien ruins and cities," he admits.

"Fortunately, folks like Erik Mona and *Starfinder* senior developer Rob McCreary told me I was insane, and pointed out how crucial starships are to a science fiction or science fantasy game. What's *Star Wars* without X-Wings and the Millennium Falcon? What's *Firefly* without the Serenity? It's not even just that starship dogfights are themselves important to those stories – though they are – but something Rob really pushed is the idea that great starships become characters in their own right, and help give your team a sense of cohesion. You're not just a random adventuring party; you're the crew of a shared starship, and that ship is both the mechanism and in many ways the reason for going out and exploring new worlds. So they pretty quickly convinced me I was wrong. Thank goodness, because the starship combat system turned out to be extremely fun!"

Engaging in spaceship dogfights is a mixture of hex-based movement and the player-driven storytelling that Paizo excels at, as players manoeuvre and position their craft's facing and fire weapons while sticking to the role and duties their characters have been assigned.

"Starship construction and combat are primarily the children of the Jasons – Paizo lead designer



■ ***Opposite: The cover of Starfinder's core rulebook. (Artist: Remko Troost)***

■ ***Below: Keskodai, a mystic from the insect-like race of shirren. (Artist: Remko Troost)***



■ ***Below: Android operative and former assassin Iseph, one of Starfinder's main characters. (Artist: Remko Troost)***

Jason Bulmahn and developer Jason Keeley – and they really knocked it out of the park," Sutter elaborates. ►

"While on the one hand it's a straight-up tactical miniatures engine, drawing inspiration from everything from Fantasy Flight's *X-Wing* to the *BattleTech* of our childhoods, what I think makes it special is that they never lost sight of the fact that this is a roleplaying game. Toward that end, every character in starship combat chooses a role: captain, pilot, gunner, science officer or engineer. In classic sci-fi bridge crew fashion, every role is responsible for a different aspect of the ship's function – the pilot's moving you, the gunners are shooting, the science officer's scanning enemy vessels to learn more about their capabilities and so on. While any character can take on any role, even switching during combat if they run between battle stations, the different statistics that govern each role mean that you can build a character who's specifically talented at one of them, letting you make a character who's legitimately a hotshot pilot. Overall, it really makes you feel like a team, with everyone engaged and supporting each other's actions."

If you're itching to punch it into hyperspace right away, good news: players start *Starfinder* with a ship of their own and can head off immediately. But if you're hoping to call in support from above to blast troublesome foes every time you run into trouble, you're out of luck.

"We very deliberately kept the ship combat and regular combat rules separate," Sutter confirms. "There was a lot of internal turmoil over that decision but, in the end, we had no choice.

"We wanted people to have starships from first level, but letting you bring a starship to a gunfight completely destroys the framework of an RPG like *Starfinder* – suddenly the answer to every conflict is to drop rocks from orbit or strafe the enemy castle without ever emerging from the safety of your ship, and you lose any need for fireball spells and laser swords. So while we may find some novel ways to integrate the two in the future, for now the answer is that the two simply don't mix. While I could give various in-world reasons for it, the truth is that sometimes you need to put the fun of a game above realism."

FINDING YOUR STAR

Starfinder is the biggest step for Paizo since the publisher announced *Pathfinder* nine years ago. The game's launch may also prove to be the start of another monumental era for the roleplaying genre, as Sutter and his team aim to bring the wide-reaching appeal and mainstream recognition of its fantasy magnum opus to not just science-fiction, but countless different settings.

"With *Pathfinder*, we specifically set out to create a world and rules system that would accommodate a wide array of different campaign settings and fantasy flavors," the creative director says. "You want Vikings? We've got that. Gothic horror? Yup. Middle Eastern fantasy? You know it. I sometimes joke that a proposed name for our setting was 'Generica,' because we wanted to be all things to all people, but the patchwork approach of different flavors for different nations let us appeal to a really wide swath of the audience.

"Now, with *Starfinder*, we're trying to do the same thing, but it's inherently easier, as every planet is essentially its own setting. So if you want a gritty cyberpunk adventure, you can have that. If you want to ride dragons on an alien world, you've got that. If you want to fight Lovecraftian horrors, battle an evil star empire, delve into the ancient temple of some extinct alien race – it's all on the table."

This flexibility means that the game's many systems could even be used to supplant other sci-fi staples.

"While that wide scope can make it harder to do a Hollywood pitch for the game, the versatility is really useful, because people can use this one system to play a million different games," Sutter continues. "I'm hoping it can still stand out in the category by hitting a very specific blend of science-fiction and fantasy – it's got more magic than *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*, more space opera than *Shadowrun*, more variation in tone than *Warhammer 40,000* and so on. But at the same time, I like to think that you could play any of those games within *Starfinder* as well."

> *"Every planet is essentially its own setting. If you want to ride dragons on an alien world, you've got that."*

Pathfinder may have given players a vast fantasy world to shape to their whim, but *Starfinder* aims to hand them a potentially boundless universe.

"In *Pathfinder*, there are some stories you can't do because so much of the map has been drawn in already," Sutter says. "But *Starfinder* is all about exploration and, in a galaxy of billions of stars, there's always a new corner you can carve out for whatever crazy idea you have."

Sutter and his team already have plans to offer those needing guidance a helping hand, with the launch of Starfinder Society organised play and the serialised *Starfinder* Adventure Path scenarios that connect to form ongoing campaigns. It's a format that propelled *Pathfinder* to roleplaying renown – but will lightning strike twice?

"Honestly, if this game has even a fraction of the success that *Pathfinder* had, I'll be over the moon," Sutter says. "I'm very cognisant of how lucky we got with *Pathfinder* and, while the early response from fans has been overwhelmingly positive, this is a true experiment for us. We're coming up on ten years of *Pathfinder*, and I'd love to see *Starfinder* get so successful that people are still talking about it in ten years, with hundreds of adventures, setting books, comics, novels… But there's also something to be said for keeping a tight focus and, at least for a while, the plan is to have far fewer supplement releases for *Starfinder*, to make it easier for folks to get in on the ground floor and stay up to date.

"We're trying not to get too far ahead of ourselves. The first step is to release the game, see what folks like best, and go from there." ■

ELITE ENCOUNTERS

The old-school future rises

Designer: David T. W. Hughes

2+

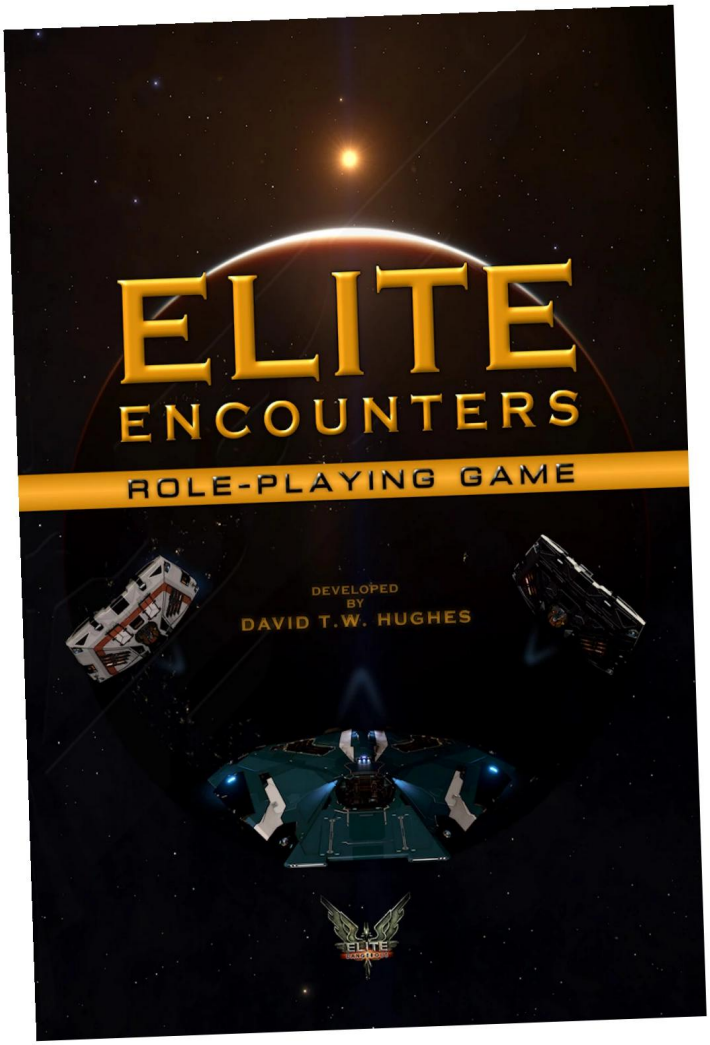
£20

How you feel about *Elite Encounters* will likely be determined by one simple question: does the idea of a game with detailed rules for a bionic liver fill you with glee? If the answer is yes, followed by a barrage of questions on exactly what stats it modifies and how much it can be traded for, this may well be the RPG for you.

Like the video game series that inspired it, *Encounters* plants the players in the boots of explorers, fighters and traders making their way through a rich sci-fi world. It's a setting where grand galactic politics melds with mundane delivery runs and encounters with space pirates and, while it will naturally appeal to fans of either the classic 1984 game or its more modern sequels, the game uses enough sci-fi tropes that even newcomers will feel comfortable in short order.

When it comes to talking about the game itself, the first thing that needs to be established is that this is not the only RPG using the *Elite* licence to come out recently. *Elite: Dangerous*, which has been developed by Spidermind Games, followed hot in *Encounters'* heels and seems to be a rather different experience – arguably a more modern one.

It's worth noting that 'modern' does not necessarily equal 'better'. *Encounters* has a truly old-school feel that permeates everything from the dense typeface and monochrome design to the tables and charts listing different trade goods. Besides a few touches of modern design here and there, *Encounters* wouldn't feel particularly out of place among the RPGs of the '80s and '90s.



The main mechanic is incredibly simple. It only uses a handful of d6s, with the amount being rolled being determined by circumstances and stats and the target you need to beat relating to the difficulty of the task. In order to climb a rocky cliff, for example, a player may need to roll at least one 4+ on two or three dice depending on how they built their 'avatar', while an incredibly difficult task may require them to roll a 6+ or even a 7+.

Where things start to get interesting is all the modifiers that can be added, depending on everything from equipment to experience. That bionic liver, for example, provides you with a bonus to 'sense' rolls when you've been drinking.

Different weapons work in different ways, and these can diverge even further once players start loading up on alternative ammo types that are neatly codified and set out in the rules. Likewise, ships can be completely customised depending on the number of hardpoints and systems available.

There is an incredible amount of depth on display, but *Encounters* is not the easiest RPG to pick up and play. It can be confusing in places and trying to get the entire table caught up on all the rules and options open to them can be an exercise in frustration.

If your gaming group has only ever dallied with modern systems, *Encounters* may come as a shock. It is unapologetically lo-fi and old-school in both design and presentation, with the art on display seemingly culled from the video games themselves. The layout and presentation of vital rules are straight from an older generation of products and can be confusing if your experiences have mostly been with more streamlined RPGs.

The book was almost completely written and designed by just one man, David Hughes, and it shows – again, for better and for worse. It lacks polish but the passion and dedication to the world of *Elite* on display is inspiring. If you and your friends feel like a return to the awe and wonder you felt when the original game came out in 1984 this may well spark happy memories. But if you just want a simple system for roaming about the galaxy, blasting aliens and having a good time it might be worth a miss.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... STAR TREK ADVENTURES

Sometimes exploring the depths of space can be its own reward.



WE SAY

Elite Encounters is an unapologetically old-school slice of space adventure. Whether that's a good or bad thing is up to you and your gaming group.



STARFINDER

Pathfinder takes to the stars, but is its sci-fi sequel interstellar or lost in space?

Designer: Paizo | **Artist:** Various

2+

£65

Starfinder is an evolution of *Pathfinder* in just about every sense of the word. Not only does the sci-fi-soaked follow-up to 2009's influential *Dungeons & Dragons* descendant take place thousands of years later in the same universe – albeit completely transformed by the advent of futuristic technology and unexplained disappearance of *Pathfinder*'s home planet of Golarion centuries before – it also makes significant changes to *Pathfinder*'s roleplaying and combat systems (which were an advancement on *D&D 3.5* to begin with) that result in a game that feels familiar and aware of its legacy, yet distinctly unique and singular.

There's no need to know the wider lore of *Pathfinder* to appreciate *Starfinder*'s interstellar setting – in fact, the designers themselves seem to be making an effort to distance themselves from becoming bogged down in questions of specific links to *Pathfinder* by introducing a mysterious period in time called the 'Gap', which resulted in a galaxy-wide amnesia that means 'only' around three hundred years' of history is known. It's the storytelling equivalent of skipping a chapter while reading a book and could be seen as an overly-convenient way of jumping ahead in time without having to establish how the fantasy world transformed into a galaxy full of lasers and androids – at the same time, it's a way of neatly separating the games instead of feeling beholden to its predecessor's dense lore. For me, it worked.

If you are a fan of *Pathfinder*, there's still plenty to chew on that's been carried across, from the reappearance of deities to the evolved forms of existing creatures. If you can't find something, there's a very good chance you can just bring it across yourself: the core rulebook includes a sizeable chapter detailing how to convert existing *Pathfinder* characters and monsters over to the new game with minimal fuss, as well as explaining how to use the traditional fantasy races in the sci-fi setting and running through what's happened to them in the time since *Pathfinder*.

Replacing the classic races (except humans, who remain a fixture) are six new defaults, leaping from sci-fi staples of androids, four-armed nomads called kasathas and the psychic aliens known as lashunta to anthropomorphised lizards, insects and rats. It's a fun mix for you to craft your guardians of the galaxy from, with each race well established within the in-game universe and presenting plenty of interesting options for player characters. There does remain a feeling that the spaceship could've been pushed a little further out with some slightly more weird and wonderful options – this is something that will likely be resolved by future player guides – but this is a strong starting point.

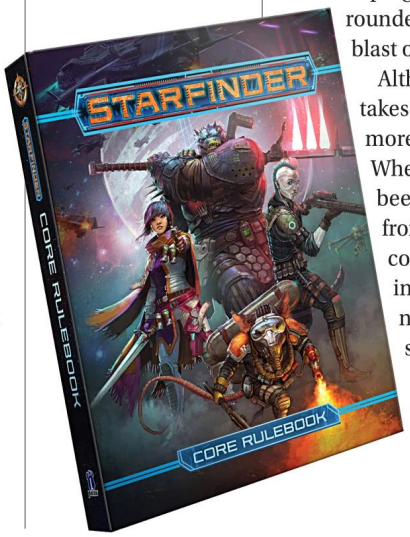
The races are expanded by seven classes, which do a good job of evolving things beyond the classic RPG clichés yet remain recognisable enough to be easily understood – among the more interesting picks are the Jedi-esque solarians, who can summon weapons and armour out of energy; mechanics and their versatile drone companions; and technomancers, who operate using a blend of technology and magic, compared to the more traditional spell-wielding mystic. Of course, there's nothing stopping a non-magic character from installing a body augmentation that allows them to breathe fire, either – one of the highlights of character progression is discovering the quirky tech-infused talents available for the right price.

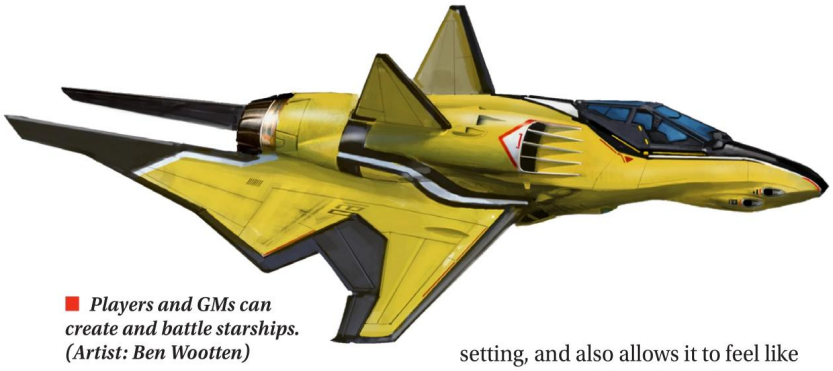
Completing each character is a theme, providing a general focus – from ace pilot or bounty hunter to the galaxy-wide celebrity of an icon. The themes are general personality traits but, more importantly, lend extra depth and narrative thrust to characters, as well as bonus abilities, helping them to feel more fully-rounded from the moment they blast off into the universe.

Although magic is present, it takes a backseat to *Starfinder*'s more tech-focused abilities. When magic is used, it's been massively simplified from the preparation and components required to cast in *Pathfinder* – now, casters need only concentrate for a set amount of time to fire off an enchantment, although they can be interrupted

■ ***Above: Absalom Station is the cultural melting pot of the galaxy. (Artist: Leon Tukker)***

■ ***Below: The core rulebook includes a chapter explaining how to convert Pathfinder creations for the new game.***





Players and GMs can create and battle starships. (Artist: Ben Wootten)

Although magic is present, it takes a backseat to *Starfinder*'s more tech-focused abilities. When magic is used, it's been massively simplified from the preparation and components required to cast in *Pathfinder* – now, casters need only concentrate for a set amount of time to fire off an enchantment, although they can be interrupted and fail the spell if attacked. Similarly, while each class gets its own list of spells, gone is the division between arcane, divine, psychic and so on. It makes for a more straightforward system that aligns with the less prominent role sorcery plays in *Starfinder*'s setting, and also allows it to feel like a more natural fit with the futuristic weaponry and skills of characters, instead of feeling like a hang-on from its fantasy forebear.

A similar philosophy of simplification has been applied to the combat. Natural 20 rolls on a d20 now score instant critical hits for extra damage and effects – no secondary confirmation check required – and players can perform two simultaneous attacks off the bat (with a hit penalty to both) instead of needing to scale up their attack strength as in *Pathfinder*. Flat-footed has been relegated to a condition and fixed roll penalty rather than a dedicated armour class, while attacks of opportunity now only affect three specific actions (moving, ranged attacks and casting) to stop enemies striking out every time a player does so much as scratch their nose. The small changes chime perfectly with *Starfinder*'s increased focus on ranged combat – although laser swords and other melee weapons are just as viable and effective – and add up to give combat more of the cinematic speed and thematic feel of a *Star Wars* lightsaber duel or *Star Trek* phaser shootout.

Adding to this is the decision to divide health into HP and stamina, with the latter serving as a form of rechargeable shield that is lost before characters are damaged directly. Stamina can be recovered by resting briefly and spending resolve points, a successor to the hero points handed out by *Pathfinder* GMs that allowed players to pull off special abilities.

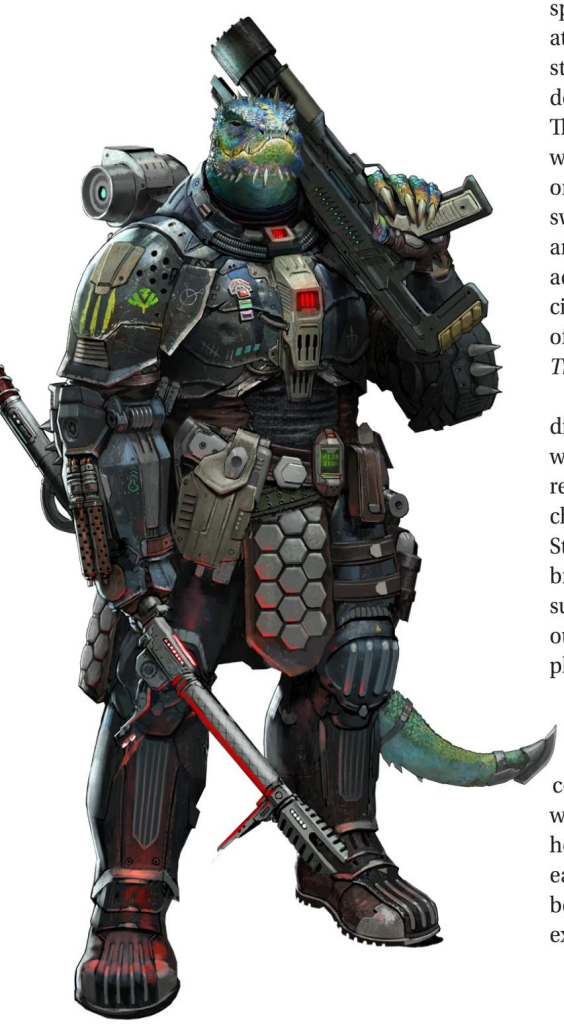
RP can similarly be used to re-roll certain checks or recover when dying (as well as counting as extra HP when mortally wounded) but, unlike the single-use hero points, are calculated based on each character's makeup and can be recovered with a long rest. The expanded recovery options mean that casters aren't quite as integral to a party as before, while RP presents more ways to help turn fights in the players' favour – plus offer a way to counteract frustrating dice rolls, albeit at a cost.

The single biggest addition to *Starfinder* is space combat, which comes complete with its own set of rules and character-specific abilities. It's by no means mandatory, and slightly awkwardly requires a separate hex map in addition to the standard square grid used for ground missions, but fully delivers the atmosphere of a living, breathing universe.

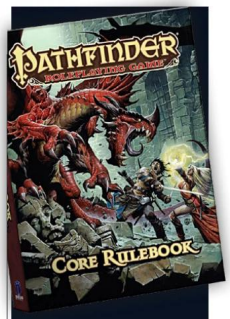
Ships are created and upgraded by GMs and players much like characters, with speed, maneuverability and armaments dictating the way they fly around and fire at any attacking vessels. Players' characters take on the various roles onboard – from captain and pilot to gunners and engineers – and can lend their skill to each round of combat, boosting systems and their crewmates before moving, pulling off *X-Wing*-style stunts and attacking. There are a number of different talents for each role (characters can swap positions mid-battle), yet they are largely specified by the role rather than the character – you wouldn't necessarily want to have a space combat-only campaign or scenario, as it does feel more limited than fighting on the planet surface, bwhen it comes to presenting a different style of combat and storytelling.

Starfinder isn't quite the quantum leap away from *Pathfinder* some might expect or desire – if anything, it feels more like *Pathfinder 2.0*. If you didn't enjoy the crunchier aspects of the fantasy game's roleplaying recipe, the mechanics here are significantly streamlined but stay true to supporting a complex and potentially overwhelming amount of options for more casual players. In tightening *Pathfinder*'s gameplay, though, *Starfinder* improves in almost every way on the older game, while managing to successfully bring to life a universe with established history that also feels fresh and ready to be explored anew. I can't wait to head back in. ▪

MATT JARVIS



The lizard-like vesk are just one of the new races inhabiting the universe. (Artist: Remko Troost)

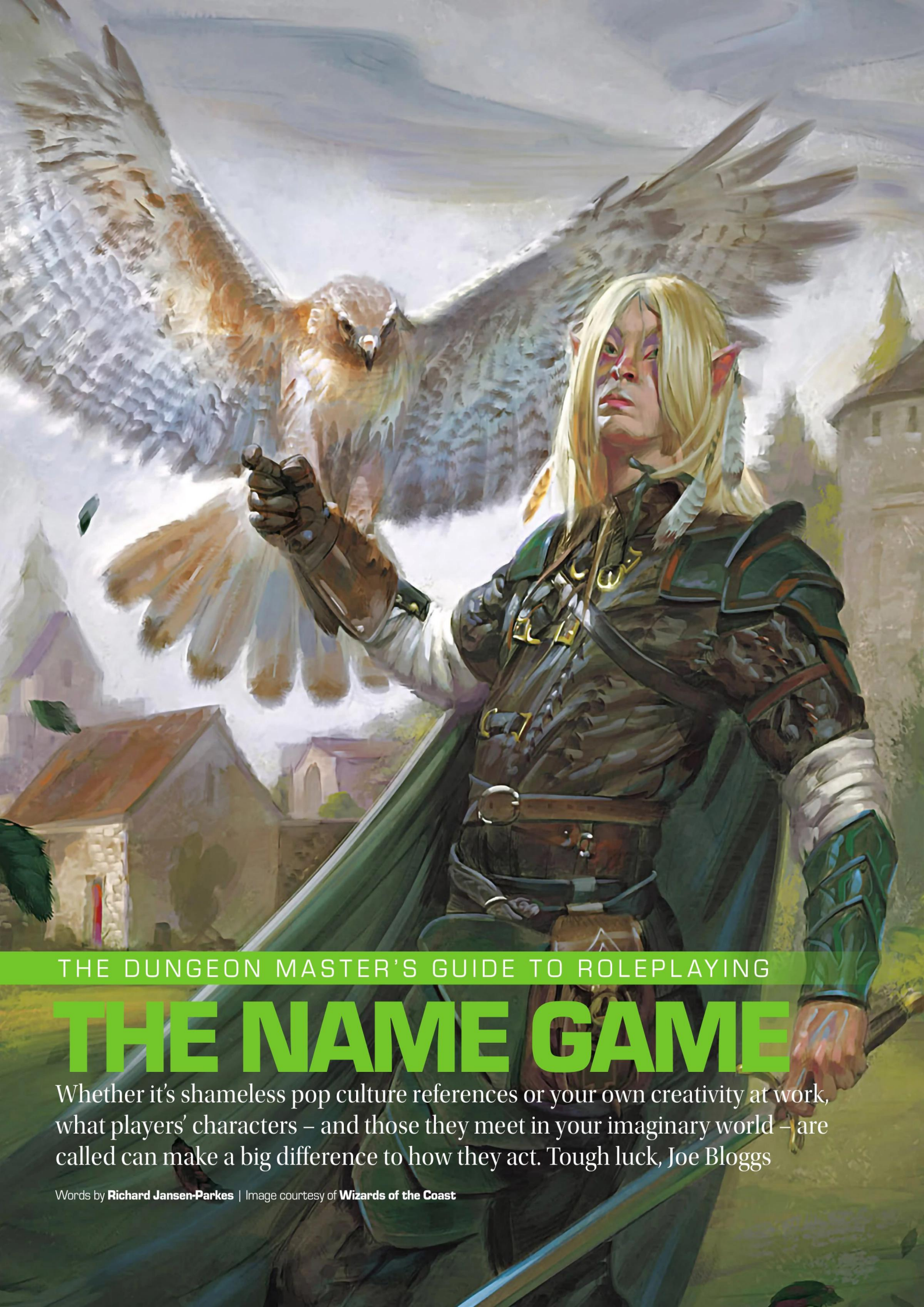


IF YOU LIKE PATHFINDER... TRY STARFINDER

The Pathfinder sequel is much more than a simple reskin of the fantasy RPG, with both expanded and tightened-up roleplaying rules.

WE SAY

Starfinder does a fantastic job of translating Pathfinder's gameplay to a sci-fi setting, refining the classic d20 RPG mechanics while introducing smart additions that fit with the game's greater scope. It won't change your mind if you're not already a fan but, if you are, it's a joyous next step.

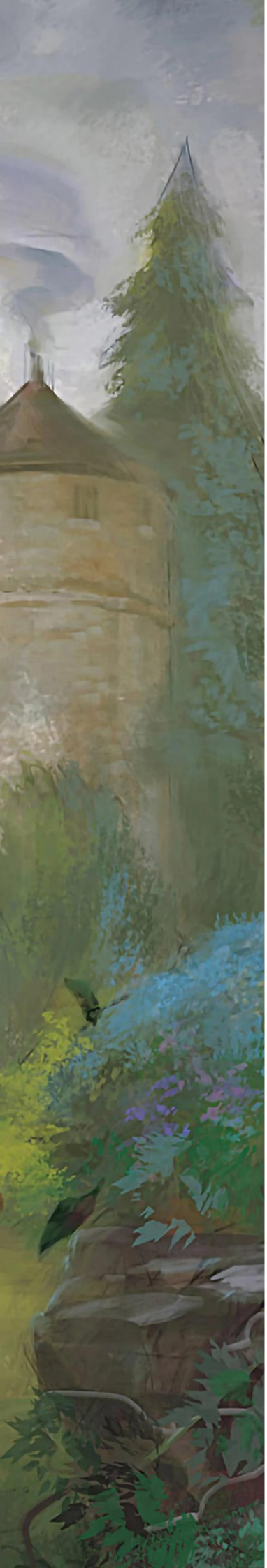


THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

THE NAME GAME

Whether it's shameless pop culture references or your own creativity at work, what players' characters – and those they meet in your imaginary world – are called can make a big difference to how they act. Tough luck, Joe Bloggs

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Wizards of the Coast**



The party had an idea. While sneaking through an orcish warcamp they'd uncovered a letter from the mysterious Mr. Nightshade, revealing that not only had he masterminded a series attacks on nearby settlements but also that he'd arranged a trade deal with a local mine. If they went to the mine and found their records, they reasoned, it would be easy to apply a little bit of forensic accountancy and find a paper trail that led back to their shadowy foe.

It was a clever plan, but once they 'obtained' the ledgers and picked out the most likely culprit our heroes ran into a stumbling block. The deal, it appeared, was being handled by a third-party – a broker who called himself 'Trustworthy Bill'.

None of the adventurers had heard of him before that moment, but they all agreed that they shouldn't trust a single word he said. After all, as far as they were concerned anybody who feels the need to put 'Trustworthy' in their name probably isn't.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Names can be much more important to the RPG experience than you might think. So much of the story and world we weave is based around the characters that inhabit them, and the names they're given always affects the way we remember them – and occasionally whether we can remember them at all.

What feels appropriate and what works will always vary from table to table, after all, but I'd be willing to stake a few sessions' worth of snacks on players remembering an Ezekiel over a Phil. This can be an important factor in preserving a GM's sanity, as it avoids the players referring to their carefully sculpted and well-rounded NPCs as "the one with the weird hat".

More than this, the shape and sound of a name often offers a window into a character's personality and position in the world. This isn't always quite as obvious as it was with Trustworthy Bill, of course, but some names just sound villainous and nasty the moment you hear them.

It's hard to imagine Morgoth, from Tolkien's *Silmarillion*, as anything other than a monster. At the same time, it would be hard to take a dark lord seriously if they introduced themselves as Bilbo Baggins.

This relation between names and personality isn't some kind of metaphysical law, of course. Some of the worst atrocities in human history have been carried out by people whose names would be considered everyday – possibly even dull – if you dropped them into a campaign.

Rather, it's a handy tool that can give players an easy way to understand the world we're creating with them. If you want to make it clear that the tribe that roams the plains is violent but proud, you can speed the process along by giving them names that would feel appropriate for a *Star Trek* Klingon or the orcs from *World of Warcraft*.

One of the great things about building up these expectations and assumptions, of course, is that we get to subvert them too. How would the heroes react if the dark lord really did have a cute halfling name and carried out massacres with a friendly smile on their blood-spattered face?

THE POWER OF PREP

In an ideal world, we GMs would have the name of every single shopkeeper, town guard and pickpocket noted down before the first player even arrived at the table. If one of the characters decided to strike up a conversation with the barmaid we would be able to casually and confidently tell them that they're talking to Daze Rockskipper, or that the chap giving them a bit of side-eye from his gloomy little table in the corner is Old Man McCreary.

Alas, that is not the world in which we live. In fact, most of us tend to make an awful lot of things up as we go.

There are plenty of fantasy and sci-fi name generators a mere Google search away, but not all of us are able to pull these up quickly at the table or willing to take the few seconds' break needed to track one down and hunt through for a suitable candidate.

That doesn't mean that you need to be able to simply pull fully-formed and appropriate names from the ether, however. There are plenty of tricks to coming up with appropriate NPC names at the table.

The first, and easiest, is to just have a page in your GMing notebook – or a file in your GMing folder if you work from a laptop – where you write down interesting and cool names as and when you think of them.

You can sort them into sub-sections for different species or cultures and pluck something out when you need a quick NPC. Just remember to cross them off when you use them, as accidently handing out the same name to a half-dozen dwarves can be a little embarrassing (especially if you try and cover by claiming they're actually all related).

Sometimes, however, you find yourself placed on the spot and don't have anything to hand. In this case I tend to grab whatever conventional names are floating about in my brain and give them a little twist to make them fit the setting. In a fantasy campaign 'Brian Johnson' may become a gnome called Brin Jozzum, or if I need a half-orc they could be Ban Jawbone.

For example, the creation of Taliyah Swiftwood, halfling songstress extraordinaire, owes a lot to 'Shake It Off' getting stuck in my head just before we started a session. And if nothing else that's a great example of how a good name – even if it is a shameless reference – can help to build a personality, though it didn't do anything for keeping Taylor Swift songs from worming their way into my subconscious.

THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

AN OPTIMAL SITUATION



Does min-maxing your character's fighting prowess suck the fun out of the tale you're telling? We weigh up the challenge of juggling story and skill

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Wizards of the Coast**

When you looked at Wrath, it was hard to see anything beyond a warrior – a creature built for the beating, bloody heart of battle and very little else.

His skills and training were all guided by the need to excel in combat, and his natural abilities were further enhanced by a carefully curated selection of equipment. Enchanted armour boosted his strength to superhuman levels, while the maul he wielded crackled and fizzed with magical force.

This image of the consummate fighter was only enhanced when he entered the battlefield, with every attack, manoeuvre and charge dictated by cold, tactical logic. Wrath would ignore the taunts of armoured brutes in favour of closing to close quarters with spellcasters and leaders, crashing through their paltry defences like a half-tonne of steel thunder.

He was, quite obviously, a creature optimised for battle.

And yet there was more to him than that. He lacked the silver tongue that some of his fellow party members used to talk rings around their foes, but that didn't stop him from letting his voice be heard. It was a blunt tool that relied on plain logic and simple honesty rather than cunningly crafted combinations of flattery and threat, and it was well-respected by those that knew him.

Though at first glance he seemed fierce frosty as a mountain, over the course of Wrath's adventures he grew to become the grudging leader of his band of misfits – in large part because he was a solid point of sense in a tide of chaotic schemes. He reconnected with friends who had once thought him dead, regained a shattered sense of honour and after many battles took down the wizards who had once bought his pride with gold and magic.

Yes, he was an optimal warrior. But he was also a leader, a lover and an all-round incredible character.

THE STORMWIND FALLACY

In RPG circles people occasionally talk about something known as 'The Stormwind Fallacy', named after the person who got the idea down in digital ink on an old *D&D* message board.

The fallacy revolves around an assumption that many people seem to hold – namely that roleplaying and character optimisation are somehow mutually exclusive. It's the belief if you create a mechanically effective character, they'll be boring when it comes to the story, and vice versa. Like the two aspects sit at opposite ends of a see-saw, with one naturally falling as the other rises.

Like all fallacies, the point of the Stormwind Fallacy is that once you examine it for any time at all it quickly reveals itself to be absolute nonsense.

There is no reason, for example, that a player's ability to piece together the rulebook should somehow be linked to their storytelling skills. We aren't RPG characters ourselves, after all, with only so many skill points to assign. It's entirely possible to craft a world-boiling hero one minute and play out a nifty conversation with a shopkeeper the next.

This becomes even more obvious if we consider the counter-example. Just because someone insists on playing that negative-INT wizard or the Jedi who refuses to use Force powers, for example, they don't instantly become the most nuanced, fascinating character going.

And yet there still seems to be a feeling among many RPG communities that character optimisation is anathema to creativity.

Which is weird, because people don't seem to mind heroes in other forms of media. Nobody looks at Aragorn from *The Lord of the Rings* or Luke from *Star Wars* and rolls their eyes at they way they put so many points into swordsmanship. When John Wick blasts his way through an entire nightclub of gangsters we don't get huffy because he trivialised what should have been a deadly encounter.

No, we clap and cheer and nod appreciatively. Because it turns out that characters kicking ungodly amounts of arse is *fun*.

OPTIMISED FOR FUN

This is the point in the tale where I have to admit that I have skin in the game, so to speak. While I wouldn't like to think of myself as a win-at-all-costs, nothing-counts-but-damage kind of player, I will freely admit that when I'm on the far side of the GM's screen I love playing mechanically powerful – or at least interesting – characters.

Whether in video games, card games or RPGs, few things bring a smile to my face quite so reliably as having a meticulously planned combo go off just the way I want it. In *Diablo III* this might mean crafting equipment that causes enemies to explode the moment they attack me, while in *D&D* it first manifested in a warlock who endlessly exploited their ability to see in magical darkness using a spell that summoned an inky sphere of night.

Even when I'm not pushing the boundaries of balance, I still struggle with the idea of controlling a character who isn't at least effective at what they set out to do. If I'm playing a pilot in *Star Wars* I want to be good at flying ships. If I'm the muscle in an ill-fated band of *Call of Cthulhu* investigators I want to be able to at least glance over at a cultist without losing my mind.

And if I'm being entirely honest, sometimes I have to bite my tongue when folks I'm playing with don't feel the same way. No matter how much I try to bury it, there's always part of my brain that knows that their character could be so much more effective is they just picked this feat over that one, or that they wouldn't be complaining about missing so much if they just boosted their core stats instead of fiddling with minor alterations to things that only crop up once every nine sessions and... well, as you can see, I find it rather hard to switch it off.

ALL FOR ONE

Over the years, however, that's exactly what I've made myself do. Because I also know that people play RPGs for different reasons; I know that people find their enjoyment in different aspects of the games.

Some folks get their kicks from taking out entire rooms full of bad guys in one move, others couldn't care less about whiffing every roll so long as their death scene is on point. Part of playing RPGs with other people is recognising the fact that other people are there to have fun too and trying to enable that.

So, the next time that someone turns up at your table with a shiny new character sheet with more numbers than words, try to avoid dismissing them as some kind of fun-sucking munchkin. Instead, try and work with them to craft an experience that everyone can enjoy.

And if you're like me, try to bear in mind the fact that not everybody is so invested in the mechanical aspects of RPGs, and that unsolicited advice often comes across as patronising rather than helpful.

Finally, remember Wrath – living(ish) proof that just because you're a sleekly designed slab of murder there's nothing stopping you from being a fascinating character too.

THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

NEW CHARACTER, WHO DIS?



Introducing a new player character into the fold of a tight-knit roleplaying group isn't always easy, but there are simple steps that can make it work without breaking the story – or friendships

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**
Image courtesy of **Chaosium**

The small team had been investigating the murder of Jackson Elias, a friend to some and a rival to others, for maybe a week when they ran into Maj. (Ret.) Prendergast. Almost literally.

They'd been hunting through a set of creepy old buildings occupied by a particularly nasty cult when the old English soldier stumbled through a hidden doorway and crashed right into them. Prendergast could barely stammer out a warning before the knife-wielding toughs he'd been fleeing burst in through the battered portal and leapt to attack everyone in sight.

The fight lasted only a few moments, thanks to the brass knuckles and weighted umbrellas the investigators carried for moments just as these, as well as a few stout crotch-kicks from the Major's army-issue boots. Once the dust had cleared it was time for a few introductions and – to nobody's surprise, for some reason – it soon transpired that Pendergrast was an old friend of Elias, and had launched his own investigation after the writer failed to attend a long-planned night of drinking in Manhattan.

With very little fanfare, the group of investigators accepted the Major into their fold, shared what information they had and made their way deeper into the building.

It was, all in all, a very polite affair.

MEETINGS ON THE ROAD

In an ideal world, RPG campaigns would begin with one set of adventurers/investigators/meat-puppets, and finish things up with the exact same crew – a bit wiser, a bit stronger and a bit more cybernetically-enhanced, but still that same team.

However, the vagaries of fate, real-life commitments and unlucky dice rolls means that this is very rarely the case. As stories move forward so do their casts, with some characters fading out of view and others moving in to take their place. In novels, movies and TV series it's easy enough to introduce new faces. The author is in control of every moving piece, after all, so finding the appropriate time and place to have someone show up isn't too tricky.

When it comes to RPGs, however, things get a little bit harder. For one thing, the new character can't just hang about in the background while establishing themselves – no, they need to leap right in as one of the main cast, given just as much prominence as the heroes who've been slogging away at the story for months or even years.

> "Set some expectations and ask folks to allow a little bit of narrative convenience to carry them away."

On top of this, the timing might not always be ideal. Getting a new character into the team can be hard enough if they're enjoying some downtime or travelling to a new location, but what happens if they're stuck deep within a dungeon or out in the inky vastness of deep space?

The final major factor in all this can be the unpredictability of the other player characters. In fact, sometimes this can be the hardest thing to deal with.

MAKING IT WORK

Is the case of Maj. (Ret.) Prendergast we found ourselves in a rather tricky position. We had known we'd probably be having a new player joining the Sunday-night game for a while, but a string of illnesses and commitments meant that when the time came for them to pull up a chair and grab some dice, the investigators were deep within an enemy stronghold.

Considering the duplicitous nature of our foes and the horror of the situation, by far and away the most sensible thing to do with the bumbling soldier would have been to bonk him on the head, tie him to something sturdy and not let him free until he answered some rather probing questions. However, that would have also been an absolutely terrible experience for the incoming player.

Whether it makes sense in the world of the story or not, there are few things more irritating than having a player shut a newcomer – or an existing player who's had to replace their character – out of the game because "it's what my character would do".

Yes, we all prefer to arrange things so that the story is utterly watertight and each character acts completely in line with their personality, but having a new character join is just one of those places where we need to accept a little flexibility in return. Of course, as much as this applies to the existing characters, the newcomer might also need to make a few concessions. A 'brooding loner' shtick only goes so far when the purpose of the session is to get everyone onboard and roleplaying as soon as possible.

As with so many aspects of roleplaying the ideal solution to all of this is to sit down and talk to the players before the game begins – set some expectations and ask folks to allow a little bit of narrative convenience to carry them away.

BONDING EXERCISES

There are no hard-and-fast rules on getting characters to mesh with new parties, but there are at least a few things that seem to help:

- Work with the players to establish some common goal – if the party is going to slay a dragon, maybe the newcomer is too!
- A quick combat encounter (if that's a focus of your game) is a great way to get the new characters and the old working alongside one another
- Help the incoming player craft a character that fits in with the existing party. If the group is made up of Rebel Alliance spies, perhaps a die-hard Empire loyalist isn't the best addition...
- Get the new character in the action nice and fast. Sitting around, watching other people play for two sessions isn't a wonderful way to spend one's evening.



STAR CROSSED

The tower of love

Designer: Alex Roberts | **Artist:** Jess Fink

43 | 11+ | £39

With just two players, a couple hours and a tower of wooden blocks, *Star Crossed* manages to conjure up unparalleled stories of romance, tragedy and comedy – as long as you're able to relax and shrug off the awkwardness that can come from in-character flirting.

The box describes it as "a game of forbidden love" and, while that sounds a little vague, that's exactly what it is. There are no presumptions about what setting you might use or what tone you should work towards, because the only hard-and-fast requirement *Star Crossed* imposes on its player characters is that A) they feel a powerful attraction to one another, and B) they have a very good reason for not acting on that attraction.

Everything else – the genre you want to riff on, how silly things are going to get and how grounded you're going to be in reality – is decided by the players when they kick off a session. One game could drop you into the realistically grimy shoes of two soldiers sharing a mud-slicked trench in a time when a love affair could lead to prison or worse, while the next may propel you into a wacky sci-fi setting where a starship science officer establishes a relationship with a sentient gas cloud.

Many games claim to only be limited by the players' imaginations, but in the case of *Star Crossed* it's completely accurate. For some people, picking from a functionally infinite list of scenarios can be a rather daunting prospect, but once you get used to the idea and learn to go with the flow you'll be scribbling potential pairings as you sit on the bus or lie in bed.



There's more to the game than smashing characters into each other, though, and while the rules are feather-light they do manage to elegantly capture a feel of rising tension and anticipation. This is achieved through the teetering tower of wooden blocks – think *Jenga* – that acts as a rough stand-in for the sensible part of them that knows the relationship can't work.

As scenes play out and the characters grow closer by revealing intimate secrets or accidently brushing hands/tentacles/mind-probes, the players must draw bricks from the stack and place them on top. If the tower topples to the table then the characters' resolve breaks and they act on their emotions, with the exact consequences depending on how many bricks were placed over the course of the session – a representation of how close they grew.

Watching your wooden edifice sway and teeter as your characters bare their hearts is an electrifying, tense experience, with the blended fear and anticipation of the crashing of wood and spraying of blocks across the floor managing to provide a real link between the in-game world and reality. Making the decision to throw out a hand and intentionally sweep the tower to the ground at a story-appropriate moment is one of the most satisfying moments found in all of roleplaying.

All of this does come at a cost, however. *Star Crossed* is a game of intense emotion and intimate moments and, while this makes for great stories and excellent roleplaying, it can sometimes be hard to play.

In many ways this isn't a fault of the game, but rather an issue with the entire concept. Indeed, *Star Crossed* does an incredible job of making sure that every player stays safe and comfortable, with plenty of encouraging words about setting boundaries and avoiding uncomfortable topics.

This doesn't change the fact, however, that playing out an intense romantic relationship can be, well, embarrassing.

Not everyone will feel this way, of course. There are plenty of folks comfortable enough in their skin and sexuality to laugh off any awkward moments, but if the idea of reading love poetry out loud sends flushes of anxiety across your cheeks you might struggle to find the detachment needed for comfortable play.

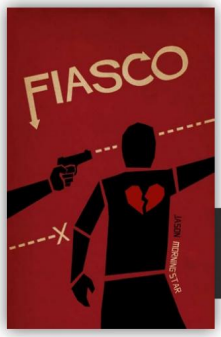
This all raises the question: is it worth shelling out for a game system that you might hesitate to pull out for the local games night or a session with your friends or family?

If this was a review for something practical – a washing machine or a car – then the answer might well be no. But it isn't. It's a review for a game that can be awkward, embarrassing and beautiful all at the same time. If you're the least bit interested in its sweetly simple concept and have a couple folks to play with, *Star Crossed* is well worth taking a gamble on.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

Despite the simple rules, *Star Crossed* isn't always the easiest game to play – but when it works it's a truly wonderful experience.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... FIASCO

Star Crossed comes to us from Bully Pulpit, the same publisher as *Fiasco*, and shares a similar love of GM-less storytelling and off-the-wall improvisation.



SEA OF THIEVES ROLEPLAYING GAME

A pirate's life for meh

Designer: W.J. McGuffin | **Artist:** Uncredited

291 | 7+ | £60

When most video games get adapted to the tabletop they bring acres of fiddly rules with them, so it's refreshing to see this take on Xbox One and PC game *Sea of Thieves* ditch the complexity in favour of a light and breezy storytelling game. Once you get playing, however, it's hard to imagine its appeal extending too far beyond existing fans who are happy to accept some of the setting's quirkier mechanics.

Both the video game and RPG drop their players into the titular Sea of Thieves, a magical realm stuffed with every piratical trope imaginable. The desert islands are packed full of buried treasure, the seas are teeming with scurvy knaves and you can't swing a cutlass without having it bonk off the bones of a cursed skeleton or two.

It's delightfully silly stuff, but when you begin exploring it some of the ideas that we simply accept when they're in a video game become a little awkward when it comes to a tabletop RPG. If you find a buried treasure chest, for example, you can't actually open it yourself – instead, you need to take it to a specialised in-game faction who will trade it for a reward.

Want to fire a cannon at it? Drop it off a cliff and retrieve the gold from its smashed remains? Nope, not going to work. The game says only Gold Hoarders can open treasure chests.

This is far from the only example of having game logic clash with the do-anything nature of tabletop roleplaying, but it can be a shade disconcerting if you've not already bought into the setting.

Perhaps these blips in common sense only stand out because the core of the game is so committed to rules-lite storytelling. Every single problem in the game, whether finding a missing chicken or duelling with a skeleton lord, is solved by having piratical party members roll a handful of dice against the clock.

If the party accrue enough successes they solve the problem at hand and move on, but if they don't manage to hit the goal within a certain number of rounds they fail and have to deal with the consequences. On top of this, particularly bad rolls can either injure players – taking dice away from their pool – eat through resources or cause further spiralling problems that need to be dealt with.

It's a workable enough system that can be made incredibly flexible with a bit of thought, though it does come with a couple of quirks. As players start rolling more dice things can get very swingy, generating either oodles of success or a tide of horrible failures in a single go, and failing to make much distinction between different characters.

The reason for this second factor is that, rather than a long list of stats, players' pirates are made up of a pair of weapon cards, a personality card that can be flipped from a calm side to a stressed side and a pool of dice. That's it.

This has the advantage of making character creation near-instantaneous and allows you to play to your personalities rather than your stats, but the chance for making one pirate mechanically distinct from another is pretty much nil. When you finish an adventure you get to add another dice to your pool, but that can easily be taken away the next time you die.

There's a pretty solid chance that death won't be too far away as, while most storytelling games have a fairly light touch when it comes to killing off characters, *Sea of Thieves* is positively lethal. Character death can be a consequence for failed tasks and even standard enemies have abilities that can kill multiple party members off outright.

However, this doesn't mean that the game is particularly punishing, as it takes its cues for dealing with dead heroes straight from the video game, allowing them to respawn somewhere nearby after a brief wait. Even sunken ships will appear in the nearest bay after a few minutes on the bottom of the ocean. The biggest impact by far is that dying takes away one of your precious dice – effectively stripping away levels away each time you fall.

This is a fascinating game, but maybe not a great one. The tone and style are charming, some of the ideas are clever, but overall there are a lot of holes, annoyances and logical gaps to contend with, If you're already a big fan of the *Sea of Thieves* video game you're likely to get a kick from all the references, but if you aren't invested this is unlikely to sway you over.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? MAYBE

A brave approach to adapting an online RPG to the tabletop, but not the cleanest or most exciting one.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... 7TH SEA

If you love piracy and magic, but want something with much, much lighter rules, *Sea of Thieves* could fill that gap for you.



THE EXPANSE RPG

A soft route into hard sci-fi

Designer: Various | **Artist:** Various

253 | 13+ | £40

For a series so enamoured of the complex realities of life beyond our atmosphere, the tabletop adaption of *The Expanse* is a surprisingly manageable package. It's still packed with all the hard sci-fi that fans of the books and TV series could want, but blending this with the flexible AGE system has produced something capable of capturing anyone looking to geek out in space without drowning in rules and charts.

Set a few hundred years into the future, *The Expanse* is a rough-and-ready sci-fi universe dominated by tensions and lingering conflicts spread across our own solar system. Though futuristic, the tech on display is comparatively grounded in reality – think super-efficient engines rather than warp drives, fancy guns rather than lasers – as are the conflicts you're likely to run into while playing the RPG.

This doesn't mean that there isn't plenty of scope for action or adventure, however. The void holds many dangers for players to stumble into and plenty of paths for a campaign to head down.

In fact, one of the greatest strengths of *The Expanse* is the sheer range of different genres you can explore with it. A standard campaign might set the players up as the crew of a freelance spaceship roaming the solar system, just trying to keep their bellies full and the engines fuelled, but the ruleset could just as easily shift over to a military adventure, a tense political drama. You could even switch over to an action-packed run-in with some of the setting's more exotic elements, such as the zombie-like creatures created by an alien molecule.



While this is incredibly liberating, it does sometimes leave the book feeling a little vague when it comes to expectations. Should you lean into the sci-fi tropes and start the players off with their own ship, for example, or take a more realistic but slightly confining approach and make them part of a crew or unable to travel freely?

Once things get off the ground – possibly literally – the game is easy to manage without being simplistic. It's comfortably mid-weight in terms of complexity, combining a very straightforward core mechanic with plenty of scope for players to customise their characters and pull off exciting 'stunts' if they roll well enough.

There's a fairly long list of these abilities for players to pick from, ranging from a ricochet shot that tags a foe hiding behind cover to a chance to take out a ship's engines. While this is potentially going to slow down your first few battles (or chases, or social encounters) a table will probably have their favourites nailed down within a couple hours and from then on it becomes second nature.

Even with these stunts to hand, however, combat can be a deadly affair. Rather than any abstract HP system, *The Expanse* keeps track of damage by eating into a character's luck and applying conditions to them. While a single shot isn't likely to take down an uninjured character, two or three solid hits from a decent marksman are likely to leave them in a pool of blood on the floor.

Of course, sci-fi games rarely restrict their battles to taking potshots with rifles, and a solid chunk of *The Expanse* is taken up with rules for ship-to-ship combat in the depths of space. This is perhaps the most involved and complex encounter you're likely to encounter in a game, with several phases involving several members of the party each round, but it's also incredibly tense. In all honesty it's not a wildly deep system, but it's one that does a pretty great job of achieving its goals.

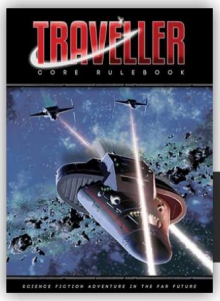
The presentation and design of the rulebook – often something left as an afterthought in more hardcore sci-fi games – is generally impressive, as is the art. As a minor annoyance it runs afoul of a few more typos and errors than is entirely comfortable, but only a handful of these could cause actual confusion over rules.

When all this is accounted for, *The Expanse* is a thoroughly solid system for exploring the setting, and is flexible enough that with a bit of tweaking it could easily be modified to work with a dozen other mid-tech sci-fi universes.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

Flexible sci-fi with a focus on guns and engineering instead of laser-swords and future-tech. Worth a look, even for newcomers to the setting.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... TRAVELLER

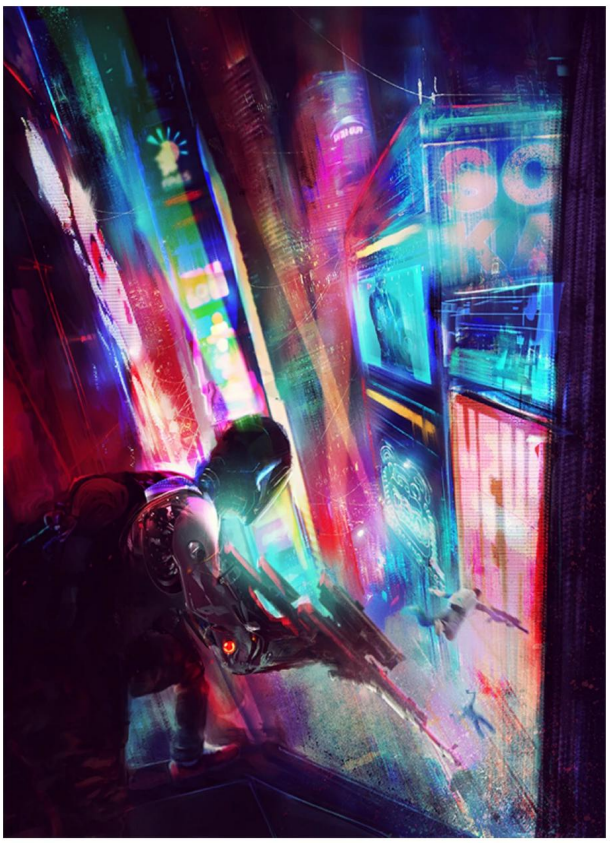
The Expanse is a little more grounded than the granddaddy of sci-fi RPGs, but it pushes many of the same star-gazing buttons.

SHADOWRUN: SIXTH WORLD

Smoother, but still ragged

Designer: Catalyst Game Labs team | **Artist:** Various

309 | 13+ | £40

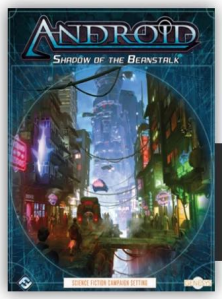


The latest take on *Shadowrun* bills itself as a relatively streamlined take on the classic cyberpunk 'n' fantasy formula that has captured so many imaginations but, while the game is certainly fun to play around with, the distinctly unfinished state of the core rulebook still makes it a hard game to recommend to newcomers.

This is, frankly, one hell of a shame. *Shadowrun* is a game that people have always been desperate to love – and it's not hard to see why.

For one thing, the setting is a wonderful, weird mash-up of neon-haired hackers and immortal dragons that shouldn't really work but somehow comes out feeling genuinely unique. There are few games where 'troll with wraparound shades and an assault cannon' is a viable character concept, but in *Shadowrun* they're likely to be one of the more normal party members.





There's always been something tantalising about the ruleset itself, too – a dice-heavy system with rules for almost every madcap idea a party could dream up. Unfortunately, this has traditionally been the double-edged sword that kept players at bay, with some elements of earlier editions being legendarily unwieldy at the table.

Sixth World has made a valiant attempt to streamline and simplify where possible, slicing away plenty of skills, eliminating some of the more pedantic stats and generally shaving off superfluous details. What's left is a game that's still complex enough to appeal to players who love tricking out their characters with all the gear, cyber-mods and powers possible, but doesn't require any advanced maths to actually play.

Indeed, the core mechanics are pretty straightforward to grasp. Tests involve rolling handfuls of six-sided dice based on your skills and raw attributes – we really mean handfuls, it's easy to be chucking over a dozen at a time – and trying to hit as many fives and sixes as possible. Easy tasks require a couple of successes, while tougher ones demand more and more high rolls from you.

It's a nice, intuitive system to work with and there's something rather wonderful about having to borrow all the dice at the table to throw when things are going your way. However, once you want to do something more complex than sneak past a guard or bonk a would-be-mugger over the head, things quickly start gaining layers and layers of complexity.

Just in the realm of combat you have specialised systems for gas attacks, grenade launchers and flamethrowers, for shooting through doors and using explosives for precision demolition work. On top of this you have rules for several different schools of magic, for hacking computers using tech, hacking computers using innate powers and taking control of vehicles with your mind.

Of course, these are all vital parts of the *Shadowrun* experience and it would be a real shame to see them cut. But when you're jamming so many ideas into just one game you desperately need the rules text to be clear, concise and obvious.

Unfortunately, this is perhaps the biggest issue with *Sixth World*. Honestly, it seems as though a fairly significant chunk of the rules have been written under the assumption that readers are already familiar with earlier *Shadowrun* systems. Concepts as important as assigning attributes aren't explained in any great deal, examples hop through steps with the assumption that some bits are obvious and it seems far too easy to make an incredibly weak character if you don't already know what you're doing.

This is only compounded with what seem to be a significant amount of outright errors; when a company puts together a few hundred pages of rules you can expect a few mistakes to creep in, but the core rulebook is riddled with so many blunders that it's hard to see how it got published. Some of these are minor things, like the table that implies that you can install a grapnel launcher in your ear, but others are much more serious, such as the absence of any rule for dealing unarmed damage despite there being a skill for it.

There's a good chance that many of these will be fixed over the next few months or years. However, just as you can only buy what's available, we can only review what's in front of us right at the moment – and at the moment it's a bit of a mess.

Sixth World looked to be the game that would finally get *Shadowrun* off the shelf and onto the table. Perhaps we'll have to wait a little longer.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? MAYBE

There are some great ideas here and the world is as awesome as ever – but maybe wait for the errata to come out.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED...
GENESYS: SHADOW OF THE BEANSTALK

If nothing else, the world of *Shadowrun* and some of its ideas make for incredible inspiration for your cyberpunk campaigns.



PUTTING YOUR NAME ON THE MAP

Maps are often powerful and evocative tools used in games to express location, but what about games where you make the map? We explore the furthest reaches of the cartography genre

Words by **Anna Blackwell**

A map, even the most hastily scrawled, bursts with information and questions. Why is there a windmill in the woods? What purpose does it serve, who built it? In most RPGs this is the sole purview of the games master. And while that works, it limits the world to one person's imagination. Take that same situation into a cartography game however and a conversation starts, the questions are discussed and answered and eventually its more than just an old windmill, it's the pragmatic tower of the wizard Hob who bakes enchanted bread for the wild people of the forest. Which is why map making games are absolutely magical.

HOW DO YOU PLAY?

The idea of a mapmaking game worries a lot of people because of the assumption that they need to be an artist and make a masterpiece, or need to make great creative leaps and come up with the next *Lord of the Rings*. But the truth is your map doesn't have to look great, it doesn't even have to look good, as long as you have fun making it. Leave your worries at the door and just focus on creating and discussing.

While all games differ in the specifics, map making and cartography games tend to focus on the same few key elements. You have a shared piece of paper that where you will draw your chosen location which can be anything from an entire world to a small village. Then, working as a group (or, occasionally solo) you discuss the things you'd love to have in the setting and create a melting pot of ideas that eventually coalesces into something completely unique to your group. And these pitches can be as high concept as you like, 'a fantasy world but with firearms' is great as you want to leave room for others to expand upon it.

Then, using prompts provided by the game or the other players, you work together to draw details onto your communal map and discuss the reasons and ramifications of your choice. In some games you'll even get to play out scenes in your collaborative history, each taking on characters and letting history unfold through your actions, which can have unexpected turns and effects without being any harder than a chat in *D&D*. After a few hours, you're left with a one-of-a-kind map and the history behind it.

But what makes cartography games so good is the care taken to make sure each player gets their voice heard and giving players the ability to nudge but not outright veto every idea other players offer. Some games use tokens that ensure everyone gets a turn to create something while others put players in charge of specific domains like geography, culture, or magic and require their input whenever a detail needs to be included. So even if you're a naturally shy person, these games have got your back.

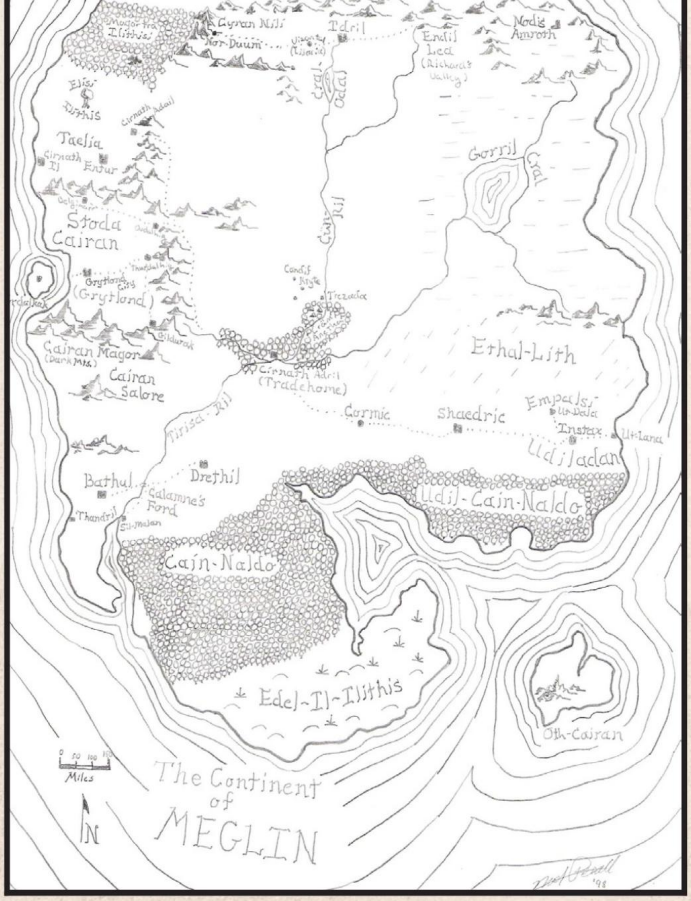
So what cartography games are out there? And where should you start?

PLOT A COURSE

The best place to start is the world of free games and there are some great options floating around the web.

DAWN OF WORLDS

This is actually one of my favourites. The thematic element of each player being a god and using their power to change the world fits the gameplay fantastically and makes a great stepping stone for those unfamiliar with less structured games. Starting with a large



OPPOSITE *The Witch King's Horde*

LEFT *Dawn of Worlds*

BELOW *How to Host a Dungeon*

landmass, players work their way through the ages of the world, spending points to make geographical features, form new races and create cities and orders.

The more structured gameplay aspects of *Dawn of Worlds* makes it a lot more competitive than the other games in the genre which can be a bit off putting. Though, if you're happy to detach from your creation and play as petty and fickle gods, it becomes a very organic experience. "Oh, your new race breeds quickly and lives forever? Sounds like a fantastic food source for my new race of dragon-tigers!"

The three age structure focusing on geography then races then politics helps to create a broad history where the world is built up gradually and creates a world rich with conflict. Which, with every player having control of every race, creates a very interesting map and history.

ATLAS

Where *Dawn of Worlds* is more structured around points and gamified creation, *Atlas* embodies the more common theme of cartography games: cooperation. And it does it so well that this little tidbit from the rules is the best piece of advice for any game in the genre: "This is the part of the game where the rules I have written become irrelevant. Bounce and riff and create to your heart's content with each other. When you're done, and the moment has passed, pick the rules back up and carry on."

Atlas is a pared down map making game that focuses more on what you need to do as a group to facilitate enjoyable collaborative creation than the specifics of what you will create. If you're new to the genre and want something to help ease you in, this is a great launchpad.

THE WITCH KING'S HORDE

In this collaborative civilisation crushing game, you work together to create a civilisation, filling it with landmarks and institutions that represent different aspects of its culture. Then, you roleplay as the Witch King's generals as they sit around their campfire and brag about how they're going to ransack said civilisation. If another player likes your idea, you move on and collaboratively tell the story of what happens.

Once you've wet your feet with the free games and found that you like the genre, there are tonnes of options to progress to.

THE QUIET YEAR

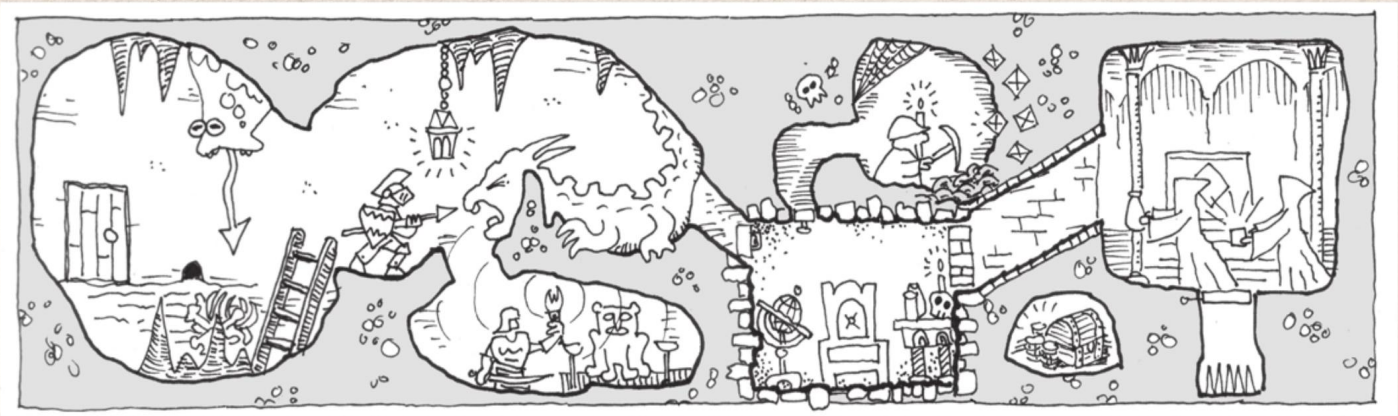
Chances are if anything on this list rings a bell, it's this one. *The Quiet Year* caused quite a stir when it dropped in 2013. This one is a lot more structured than the other entries on this list as it takes players through a single year with the inevitable end delivered by 'The Frost Shepards'. Each round the active player draws a card and answers one of the two questions on it, building the story of the community and detailing the map as they do.

What really sets *The Quiet Year* apart though is that communication is restricted. Players can hold a discussion in which each player gets to say a single sentence but that's it. It's meant to be part of the theme but personally this and the depressing end has always, unfortunately, put me off but I am very outnumbered in that opinion.

X MARKS THE SPOT

There are a number of great options out there including *Companions' Tale* which builds a map and a hero's journey from the point of view of their companions; *Eden* which takes place in a literal paradise where naive humans learn how to interact through the help of animals; and even solo games like *How To Host A Dungeon* which takes you through the formation of a dungeon across several ages.

Much like finding the perfect RPG, it'll take some experimentation to find what fits best so good luck and don't be afraid to create the weird things your heart desires.



YES AND NO

Two simple words can make your adventures much more exciting – and your players much happier. Should you give it a go? There's only one answer…

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Wizards of the Coast**



Xit and Okno were in trouble. What had started off as an off-the-books assassination job for the local devil-worshipping shopkeeper had somehow spiralled into a madcap scheme involving kobold mech-suits and a battle with a dragon – a young one, to be sure, but a dragon nonetheless.

Against all odds the duo managed to bring down their scaly foe, but even in their moment of victory they could hear dozens of clawed kobold feet bearing down on them. Both were badly injured and pretty sure that the clan wouldn't be too happy with all the death and destruction they'd brought to their home.

The chamber around them was sparsely decorated and didn't present too many hiding places. It seemed as though there was no way out.

At least, it seemed that way until Xit started wondering aloud about the size of the dead dragon's gullet, especially in comparison to himself.

"Do you think," he asked, "we could hide in there?"

Behind my DM's screen I had to take a few moments to compose myself and contemplate how we had gotten to this point.

"Yes, you probably can."

BUILDING BRIDGES, SHUTTING DOORS

The principle of "Yes, and…" is an idea – or possibly a philosophy – that crops up in improv, comedy and a few dozen other places. If you've never encountered it before, it essentially means that you shouldn't shut down other people's ideas or story threads but rather accept and build on them.

For example, if you're putting together a scene revolving a sudden fortune appearing and someone mentions it came from an inheritance, you shouldn't cut that line off by insisting that it was a lottery win. All that does is squash the other person's contribution and suck the energy out of the room.

Instead, you should take the idea they presented and run with it. If there's a great line about the lottery you want to work into things maybe you can mention that it was the source of the sadly departed great-aunt's wealth a little further down the line.

There are some pretty major differences between improv classes and roleplaying, but the principle of "Yes, and…" can easily be applied to both DMing and playing RPGs, for much the same reason.

CASCADING CREATIVITY

It's a little harder to spot when someone is presenting an idea to the gaming table, and as such it's also easy to squash them. If you've already worked out exactly who's in the smoky alien cantina it feels natural to say no when the smuggler asks if there are any shady-looking underworld types that she might be able to fence her haul to.

Imagine, however, if you said: "Yes, there are some evil-looking fellows in a booth at the back of the room and they seem to be watching you like a hawk." Suddenly the character has something to do and a connection to the game world, while you have a great little plot hook to work with. Perhaps the scoundrels were watching the smuggler because they saw her face on a bounty poster or because they supply arms to the rebel cell the party's here to meet.

This can work wonders in action scenes and combat as well. If it makes even the slightest scrap of sense, I always say yes to players asking if there are any chandeliers overhead – and add that the rope holding it up happens to be right next to them…

The same principles can apply just as well when you're playing games. When the DM drops an NPC that could be linked to your backstory it's almost always better to pick up the thread and agree that you've seen them before, rather than sit there and keep the world at arm's length.

However, while saying yes is great, sometimes this gets translated into a philosophy of "always say yes" – an idea that you should always allow the players to do and succeed at what they want. So, if you've



brewed up a magical door that is impregnable to all but the pure-hearted, you should let the barbarian smash it in with a chair leg if they want to.

And this is where we come to the fastidious cousin of "Yes, and…" which goes by the name of "No, but…"

NO PROBLEM

Sometimes the things players want to do just don't make sense or fit the tone of the world you've been building. Perhaps the cantina the players strolled into is run by an ex-cop, and his buddies scare away the shadier side of the clientele. Perhaps all the criminals in town are keeping their heads down because of the harsh penalties being meted out by the new governor.

In that case, it just wouldn't feel right for the smuggler to spot an underworld contact the moment she walks in. But she might find that the waiter passes a note inviting her to a meeting in the back room, or possibly run into an old crook who's out of the game but can provide some background information.

Similarly, if the party are in a dirty sewer there may not be any chandeliers for the bard to ride into the rafters, but they may well spot a chain holding up an old cage.

Not every wild suggestion or idle thought needs to be chivvied along with a "No, but…", of course. If the barbarian asks whether they can jump the canyon while standing next to the perfectly serviceable bridge, nobody is going to be too upset if you shoot his plan down with a simple no.

The possibilities for this neat little approach go beyond worldbuilding and can easily be applied to failed skill checks and attacks – no, your shot doesn't hit the mob boss, but you do notice that one of his underlings looks almost disappointed when you fail to bring the gangster down. The lockpick snaps in your fingers, but as you lean down to clear the mechanism and try again you begin to hear booted footsteps coming from the far side.

"Yes" and "no" are simple words and work wonderfully most of the time, but the next time you use them in your game try sticking something else on the end. You'd be amazed where it takes you – such as trying to work out how long two small creatures can survive inside a recently deceased dragon.



IRONSWORN

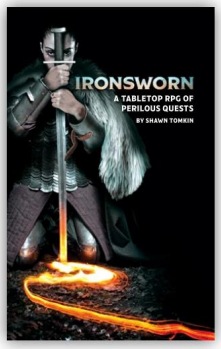
Ironclad solo adventure awaits

Designer: Shawn Tomkins | **Publisher:** Shawn Tomkins

270 | 1-5 | FREE

While *Ironsworn* can be played like a regular role-playing game complete with other players and a GM, its real defining feature is its solo mode. And boy what a solo mode that is. Initially the 200+ page rulebook can be intimidating, especially if you're just looking for something to while away the quarantine with but once you wrap your head around the novel mechanisms in play, *Ironsworn* reveals a simple and rather elegant core.

The concept is that you are an "ironsworn", an adventurer who has made an unbreakable vow and must travel throughout the Ironlands to see it done. Along the way you'll make Moves which is just a short hand way of saying, make a specific roll and see what happens. Want to have your character travel somewhere? You 'Undertake A Journey' and roll to see what happens. You either succeed well, succeed with some complications, or fail. If you've played *Powered by the Apocalypse* or *Forged in the Dark*, you're already familiar with this. This simple Moves system, where each action is encompassed under a wide umbrella, gives you just the right amount of freedom to tell the story you want while challenging you every step of the way. From introducing unexpected locales along the way when travelling to separating you from companions, getting you hopelessly lost, or luring you into a cairn which didn't have graverobbers like you initially thought but bonewalkers armed with magical weapons! All thanks to the Oracle, a selection of tables with things like names, locations, and complications as well as a handy decision making tool that lets you decide without feeling like you're just making it up.



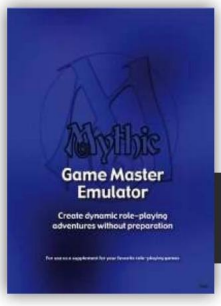
As you progress through your vow, you'll pick up sidequests, make bonds with NPCs, and make new vows. All of which help you to gain experience which can be used to buy new assets like weapon powers, rituals, and companions. And while progression feels a little stingy, it does allow for long term investment. Though that is a bit Marmite-ish.

Experienced role-players may find that *Ironsworn* has a few design decisions that require some deprogramming. Combat, for example, has initiative but not in the way we all know it. At the start of a fight, you perform the 'Enter The Fray' Move which determines who has initiative. After that you either Strike (if you won) or Clash (if they won), with each Move having different results for if you win or lose. So, if you have initiative, you attack. If you win, you keep the initiative and can attack again. Or try something else entirely. Like searching for a weapon after the enemy breaks yours in half with their magical axe.

For the forever GM, *Ironsworn* is an amazing opportunity to experience life on the other side of the screen. Even if you've never ran an RPG in your life, *Ironsworn* has your back. Each ability, enemy, and locale has quest prompts with it to help guide you onwards and most of that intimidating page count is taken up with world building prompts, examples of play, and a campaign guide to help you structure your own.

But most importantly, it's refreshing to see a pseudo-Norse setting that explicitly states: "You can envision your character and those you interact with however you like, unbound by considerations of geography, lineage, sexual orientation, and gender." If you're looking for something to scratch the itch while we're in lockdown, then *Ironsworn* is a fantastic way to spend an afternoon or a week or every Friday from now on. Oh, and as its definitely worth mentioning, the digital version of *Ironsworn* is completely free through their website.

ANNA BLACKWELL



PLAY IT? YES

Ironsworn is a great introduction not only to solo RPGs, but becoming a DM of a world of your own.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED MYTHIC...

Both provide non-intrusive settings that can be used with groups or alone. Mythic's GM Emulator is considered one of the best Solo RPG tools.

IRONSWORN

We talk to Shawn Tomkin, creator of Ironsworn about his first published tabletop RPG, why solo gaming is so good

Interview by **Christopher John Eggett**

How did *Ironsworn* come into existence?

It started as a hack leveraging inspiration from a few existing games. Most notably, ones that were built on the Apocalypse World engine. Apocalypse World is a narrative RPG by Vincent and Meguey Baker that has inspired many game designers to create their own ruleset or setting based on that engine. My own game went pretty far afield from that foundation, but there's definitly Powered by the Apocalypse (PbtA) DNA at its core.

PbtA games use a mechanic called moves, which are self-contained systems to resolve a particular situation or action. Moves tend to have non-binary results, and help drive the fiction forward. While playing with my own hack, I realized that moves offered some natural benefits to play without a GM, since they had obvious triggers and outcomes and ensured that something always happened in the story.

What's so good about solo RPGs?

The most obvious benefit is the convenience of being able to play when you have time, without having to coordinate a group. When playing a solo RPG, you can play as the mood strikes you, and you don't have to devote several hours to it. Grab a few minutes, make some progress in your story, and put it away until next time.

It's also nice to have more control over the tone of the game and the types of stories you find interesting. You don't have to try to match the diverse tastes of several other gamers.

And finally, focusing on a single protagonist helps ensure character-driven goals and stories. You don't need to figure out how to give everyone a stake in a particular storyline. Just define what is important to your character, introduce a problem that they can't ignore, and play to see what happens.

What would you say to someone who has never tried a solo RPG to get them to try it?

Something I hear a lot is: "Isn't that just writing a novel?" And the answer is no. Playing a solo RPG is different than a traditional roleplaying experience, but it has many things in common. You still immerse yourself in a character and world. You can still face challenges as your character and through the mechanical decisions you need to make as a player. You can still be surprised and delighted by the story.

What setting and tools have you given players to have fun in *Ironsworn*?

Ironsworn includes a default setting called the Ironlands. It's a harsh, rugged peninsula at the edge of the known world. The people who live there now are refugees, cast out of their homes a few generations ago. By default, it matches my own preferences for fantasy settings, which are a bit more grounded and gritty.

But I've given the player plenty of options to tune the setting to their liking. The setting details are relatively light, because I personally tend to zone out a bit with massive setting books. I prefer just a bit of evocative information, with options to adjust. In *Ironsworn*, there's a workbook to define the people, cultures, and dangers for your version of the Ironlands. The specific parameters I used for this are largely based on the questions I ask myself when I do worldbuilding. How far has civilization advanced? How do people defend themselves? What is the prevalence of magic and supernatural creatures? You can adjust those dials to emulate an iron age setting without any fantasy characteristics, or turn up the fantastical stuff to fit more traditional fantasy.

If people liked Ironsworn, what should they move on to, or integrate it with?

There's a broad array of solo RPG's to fit your tastes. You can play a traditional RPG and use a GM emulator. The most well known of these is the Mythic GM Emulator by Tana Pigeon. There are also lighter solo games that are more of a journal-writing or creative exercise. I've recently been impressed by *Thousand Year Old Vampire* by Tim Hutchings and *Artefact* by Jack Harrison.

What have you been playing during lockdown?

Honestly, I've been playing *Ironsworn*. I have a campaign I'm playing with my son on the Ask the Oracle podcast, and I started up a co-op campaign with my wife. I've also been working on the sci-fi expansion for *Ironsworn*, which involves lots of play testing.



BAND OF BLADES

We are Legion

Designer: Stras Acimovic, John LeBoeuf-Little | **Artist:** Michela Da Sacco, Tazio Bettin, Maxim Kostin

450 | 13+ | £36

Wrapping your head around *Band of Blades* isn't the easiest thing. At first glance it looks like yet another dark fantasy RPG with a couple of neat ideas, but once you get it to the table you realise that the twists and turns just keep coming until you're spiralling into an entirely new kind of game altogether – one that ditches the soft edges of the sandbox in favour of razor-sharp storytelling.

The first of these quirks is the fact that *Band of Blades* neatly straddles the line between game system and campaign. Every time you kick off a campaign, you're going to playing out the same rough scenario – the desperate retreat of The Legion in the face of an undead horde led by warped divine warriors.

This doesn't mean that every game is going to be exactly the same, of course. Different tables will make different choices, dream up different characters and play events out in different ways, but the general goals and themes are always going to be the same. While it may seem a little limiting, this narrow focus allows every aspect of the game to work together in a way that simply wouldn't work if things were fully freeform.

For example, the simple fact that you're always playing as The Legion rather than the traditional party of wandering adventurers means that you'll always have a broad cast of characters to play around with. This is important because in *Band of Blades* you don't just play as just one hero, but rather The Legion as a whole. Kind of.

There's likely to be a small group of specialist fighters who function as the main characters, but over the course of a campaign the players will probably jump into the shoes of a half-dozen other legionnaires as missions (and drama) demand. On top of this every player takes the role of one of the Legion's top officers, who don't go head into the field at all, instead overseeing things like supplies, intelligence and mission selection from the relative safety of the camp.

This can be a confusing concept to grasp, and one that requires every player to be comfortable with multiple roles, but when it clicks into place it creates



something rather wonderful. Between the ensemble cast, shifting perspectives and episodic structure *Band of Blades* campaigns feel like they could be directly pulled from slick TV series like *Battlestar Galactica* or *Game of Thrones*.

This is only heightened by the rulebook's almost fanatical devotion to cutting out any moment that isn't exciting or relevant to the plot. If a session's primary mission involves raiding an occupied village for supplies of black powder, the squad's travel and initial approach are covered with a quick 'engagement roll' and the actual action picks up as they first engage with the garrison of gloomy, crow-masked monsters.

When those moments of conflict do arrive – whether they come in the form of a fight, an attempt to sneak past sentries or smash down a poorly-guarded door – they're all handled by the same core mechanic used in other Forged in the Dark games, such as *Blades in the Dark*. At a base level this is a simple check involving a handful of d6s and a conversation with the GM about what the consequences might be, but there's a lot of details floating around that can make things surprisingly complicated.

Judging a single roll requires you to consider whether the character's position is controlled, risky or desperate, whether they have potency, what their scale is relative to the task and the threat of any foes. None of the individual parts are too hard to handle, but there's a lot of systems to keep track of and the rulebook doesn't do a great job of neatly presenting its ideas.

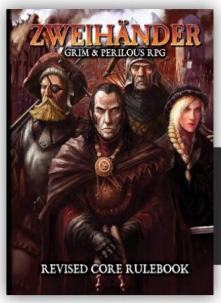
Checking the rules on making a slightly complicated check may send you hopping across entries separated by hundreds of pages of text, which is far from ideal in a game where pacing is so key. After a while the factors involved become second nature, but the GM's first few steps into the game feel more complicated that they really should be.

Once you do get rolling, however, there really is something special about *Band of Blades*. Where so many games can be described as "like X but..." it stands entirely alone, sharp as a knife and dark as gunpowder. Its limited scope can be a little off-putting to those who want just one system to play for years at a time, but if you want something built with a single, sublime goal in mind you need to get your hands on this book.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

A genuinely fascinating slice of dark military storytelling that can easily hook a group into months of gritty adventures.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED...
ZWEIHÄNDER: GRIM & PERILOUS RPG

The feel of these two games is about is different as you can get, but both share the same tone of horror, desperation and damn good stories.

INFINITY: THE ROLEPLAYING GAME

Find your character in the Human Sphere

Designer: Justin Alexander, Jay Little and others | **Artist:** Pierre Droal, Corvus Belli, Linggar Bramanty

2+ £20



When you pick up an RPG set in a well-established universe, it can be a little intimidating to find that the core rulebook is packed with around 200 pages of lore. In this case the universe is *Infinity*, home to a long-running sci-fi wargaming series from Spanish developer Corvus Belli, and whether the prospect of sifting through the solid slab of setting fills you with joy or dread is probably a good indication of how you'll feel about the game itself.

Appropriately enough for a game that bills itself as unashamedly cinematic, the setting is a manga-flavoured mishmash of pulpy action and hard sci-fi. It sets up a universe where humanity has spread across the stars but found itself pressed by conflict on every side, both from hostile aliens and good old-fashioned factionalism. Across a dozen worlds mech suits level battlefields with volleys of missile fire, while corporate-backed hackers battle with robotic guards to splice their way into computer systems.

There's plenty of room for GMs to drop their players into their favourite parts of *Infinity*, and the scope of missions and adventures open to the players is impressive. As you would expect, this is reflected in the rules themselves, which are both broad-ranging and incredibly dense.

The core mechanics are based on the 2d20 system that will be familiar to those who have played Modiphius-published RPGs such as *Star Trek Adventures* and is simple enough to wrap your head around.

When a player attempts to achieve something tricky, whether shooting a particle cannon or hacking a military firewall, they attempt to roll beneath a target number determined by their innate physical and mental attributes as well as their learned skills. Tougher challenges require more successful rolls, with particularly good results being able to generate 'momentum' that can be used to activate various bonuses that range from critical hits to extra dice for a future check. Conversely, particularly terrible failures give the GM a point of 'threat' that can be used to make things even trickier for the party down the line.

While the basic interactions aren't too complicated, *Infinity* isn't shy about adding in layers of complexity. Different attacks have varying damage types and defence reactions and cause different sorts of harm and stress. While this becomes more fluid and intuitive over time, most gamers are going to spend a fair bit of their first few sessions flicking through the rulebook in search of the appropriate tables to consult.

This is a game that isn't shy about its wargaming roots and delights in random effects and results. Some players will love seeing the world build itself around them without relying on the GM's quick thinking, but if the idea of rolling on a table in order to determine which sub-table you need to roll on next fills you with horror you should stay well clear.

There is perhaps no better example of this than the character creation process. Unlike most RPGs, *Infinity* isn't designed around each player creating their own character exactly the way they imagine them. Rather, it requires you to roll randomly to determine everything from their home life as a child to which languages they speak.

You can nudge things here and there, but your capacity to do so is severely limited and for the most part the character you'll be inhabiting throughout the campaign is decided by the roll of a die – or, rather, about 20 of them.

The process of seeing your character's life develop before your eyes can be surprisingly rewarding and a great storytelling exercise – why did they run away from their happy home as a teenager? What was it that led them to join the police? – but it can also be frustrating if you have a preferred play style or an archetype in mind that is wrenched away by the hand of fate.

If you're already a fan of the *Infinity* wargame then this might be exactly the dense and uncompromising RPG you're looking for. But there's so much that the GM needs to have at their fingertips (as a side note, it's irritating that a rulebook released in 2018 uses exclusively male pronouns when discussing players) that it's hard to recommend to the casual gamer looking for something new to pick up.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

The *Infinity* universe is appropriately vast, and long-term fans of the setting will love the depth of both its story and the rules. Getting a solid grip can be hard for newcomers, but if they dig deep enough you might hit gold.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... WARHAMMER 40,000 ROLEPLAY

If you can find room in your hearts for two sci-fi universes spawned from a popular tabletop wargame, this could be something you learn to love.



VOICES OF COMMAND

Cor blimey, guv'nor! Learn how'ta make yer non-player characters come ter life with a lemon squeezy addition: their own distinct voices

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**





As far as my regular players are concerned, the Fey Lord of Winter speaks with a thick Yorkshire accent.

I never really planned for things to work out that way. Before he actually arrived on the scene I'd expected him to speak with cold, imperious tones that befit a powerful and inhuman being. After the party freed him from an icy prison guarded by hordes of monstrous snowmen, however, I realised that a nameless NPC earlier on in the session had spoken in a very similar way. Suddenly I was searching for a voice while a tableful of players watched on expectantly.

And, for some reason, the only one that seemed appropriate was a somewhat sketchy impression of English cricket legend Geoffrey Boycott.

It turns out it's hard to sound haughty and indifferent when you talk like that. Indeed, the rather bizarre choice of tones began to shape the Lord of Winter's character. Instantly, he began obeying all of the Yorkshire stereotypes, becoming down-to-earth and forthright with a workmanlike approach to spreading snow and ice across the mortal realms.

Just like that, a single choice of voice transformed him from a distant, morally-ambiguous contact to a trusted ally. One inclined to make obscure cricket references, for some reason.

BROAD STROKES

When it comes to introducing a new character to your gaming table, few things can shape their first impressions as thoroughly as their voice. This can be intimidating to new DMs, but personally I like to think of it as a blessing. After all, around 90% of what we do at the table involves speaking in one way or another.

Think of encountering a guard who speaks with the slow, purposeful tones of Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator. Now imagine the same meeting, only the guard is channelling Dick Van Dyke's inspired take on cockney from *Mary Poppins*. They could say the exact same things but still give completely different impressions – one cold and militaristic, the other friendly, cheerful and definitely not from anywhere near London.

Now, getting really good at creating voices can be the work of a lifetime, but most people should be able to at least take a stab at it. I certainly wouldn't rate my own skills too highly at all, but on a good day I can probably hit a dozen stereotype-laden accents with some degree of reliability. Most of them are what I like to think of as 'movie accents.' The Russian is pulled straight from an early Steven Seagal villain while the Australian would disgrace Crocodile Dundee, but they get the job done well enough.

Not every NPC needs their own unique voice. A throwaway merchant talking about problems at the local space station will probably do just fine with a slight spin on your own voice, for example, but when you're dropping in a major villain or ally it can be worth making them sound distinct.

If you are playing around with different voices, however, make sure you remember which character spoke with which voice. I can tell you from personal experience that it rather breaks your players' immersion in the game when you have to ask if the friendly paladin sounded more Spanish or French.

THE KING'S SPEECH

There's more to how a person speaks than their accent, of course. There's the speed with which they speak, the volume, the way they choose to emphasise certain syllables. Choosing the right combination of pauses and patterns can speak volumes about a character's attitude and bearing.

Again, this is somewhere you'll want to borrow liberally from popular culture. Plenty of necromancers from my past games have had the loose-lipped, arrogant drawl of *Star Wars'* Emperor Palpatine, for example. Other memorable characters are voiced with the clenched jaw and cold gaze of Alan Rickman or the unpredictable staccato. Of Christopher. Walken.

It would be a waste to tell you when to use a slower voice or when to make it faster and higher, because you almost certainly know all that already. Just be speaking a voice – trying it out in a whisper, even – you can get a feel for the character it projects.

Sometimes you'll have to come up with a voice right there at the table, in which case you more or less have to roll with what comes out. When possible, though, I find it best to at least try and have a general idea in advance. Usually this comes up when I'm sketching out general notes for a session, listing potential NPCs that may or may not crop up. As I imagine characters I try out their voices – which can attract rather weird looks when I'm doing some last-minute planning on the train.

Of course, winging it doesn't always produce bad results. Just ask t' Lord of Winter, by 'eck.

Not every single character needs to have a unique accent or speaking style, but giving major allies or villains a distinct tone can add to the immersion of an adventure *(Wizards of the Coast)*



THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

HEAVY META

Can knowing too much take away from your immersion in a fantasy world or suck the drama out of an encounter? We weigh up whether it's worth taking a bite of forbidden RPG knowledge

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Wizards of the Coast**



Zapap the Younger was a well-educated, well-trained wizard whose only failing was an unfortunate tendency to start throwing magical fire whenever he felt threatened, intimidated or slightly bored. However, this flaw seemed like it would be a blessing in disguise when his party ran into a band of trolls – foul creatures who could regenerate from almost any wound unless they were doused with acid or toasted with flames.

Just at the elven mage prepared to send off his salvo of arcane fireballs he was struck by a moment of hesitation. Was he well-educated enough to know about the trolls' weakness? Did it even matter if he didn't, as burning death was his response to everything from tree-people to a bunch of demons who were already on fire when he met them? Should he dust off his long-neglected ice beam so that the troll's powers would get a chance to shine?

The entire universe seemed to hesitate for a moment, unsure if Zapap's potential link to knowledge from the great beyond would cause all sense of realism to drop out of reality for good.

He let rip with the fireballs. The trolls screamed as their regenerative powers were thwarted, and Zapap's comrades charged into the burning maelstrom to seal the deal.

The universe continued to spin on regardless, entirely unaffected by the possibility of a little meta-knowledge seeping through the foundations.

OUTSIDE KNOWLEDGE

Wherever people play any kind of game or sport, they'll inevitably create a metagame – a set of customs, knowledge and strategies that exist beyond the strict boundaries of the rules.

Knowledge of this metagame is why chess players know all the common openings and have counterplans at their fingertips, why MMO guilds instruct members to level-up the characters that are best on the current patch and why wily football managers play to draw if it boosts their chances in a league or tournament.

Most of the time this is just another part of the game and doesn't cause much of a problem beyond online grumbling over players jumping on bandwagons and following trends. It only really starts to get controversial when it's applied to roleplaying games.

This is because in RPGs we aren't actually playing as ourselves, but rather Zapap the wizard or Kremlaz the space pirate. While we may be fully aware of the metagame and all the information that goes along with it, our characters aren't. Stephanie may have read the rulebook and know that unloading her tommy gun into a shoggoth won't do much beyond tickle it, but her character probably wouldn't.

When we take that real-world knowledge and use it to inform our characters' in-game actions, we break down the barrier between the two and leave a little crack in the narrative, a frayed wire in our suspension of disbelief. The easy response to this is to just tell people not to use that knowledge unless it makes sense, but that's easier said than done.

This is a problem that has haunted GMs and players alike for decades, and people have been hunting about for the ideal solution for just as long.

Personally, however, I just ignore it.

FUN AND FICTION

One of the great things about RPGs is the fact that you're very rarely playing to win. In fact, most of the time there isn't really any way to win at all. Instead we play to have fun.

And, in my experience, roasting trolls with a fireball is fun. Crisping vampires with radiant light is fun. Lopping off a zombie's head is fun.

Spending 20 minutes plinking away at them with ineffectual attacks until you feel that it's an appropriate time to 'accidentally' stumble across their weakness isn't fun. It's frustrating and awkward and – ironically – brings the whole metagame aspect that you're trying to avoid to the front and centre of the session.

Honestly, that should be enough to shrug off the shackles of metagaming anxiety by itself, but if you're still concerned about breaking your suspension of disbelief it's not too hard to think up a reason for things to work in-universe.

Every term and factor in an RPG's rules is designed to reflect something that's happening within the game universe. While your fighter may not know that the paladin's last attack is giving them a +2 bonus to hit, they will be able to see that the orc is off-balance, shining with holy light or however else you feel like flavouring the mechanics.

Even if things aren't super obvious, such as the trolls' weakness, there's no reason why professional adventurers won't have learned simple facts about fairly common monsters at some point during their travels.

The recent *D&D* adventure *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist* even outlines a Halloween-esque holiday called Trolltide, where children are taught this valuable lesson by burning effigies of their historical foes. Wouldn't it make sense for wary parents to weave similar lessons about vampires and werewolves into childhood fables and nursery rhymes?

TAKE IT TO THE LIMIT

Not everybody will agree with me, of course. Different people play their games in different ways, and for some folks completely ditching all traces of player knowledge is a vital part of getting into character and truly experiencing the world.

There's something to be said for this approach when it comes to the story rather than mechanics. Even my fairly liberal approach to metagaming would probably be strained by a player who had read the adventure I was running and confidently strolled through every riddle by reading the result off a bit of paper.

In general, when people around the table are engaging in a little bit of metagaming my approach is to ask myself whether it would make the game we're playing more enjoyable or less enjoyable. If it comes out as a net positive, who cares if it momentarily stretches the bounds of common sense?

Because I don't know about you, but it takes a lot more to end my universes than someone pointing out that a knight in plate mail probably had pretty good defence stats.

LABYRINTH: THE ADVENTURE GAME

No bowie, but plenty of magic

Designer: Ben Milton & Jack Cæsar | **Publisher:** River Horse

296 | 6+ | £35



Art by Brian Froud

Caught somewhere between an RPG and a choose-your-own-adventure book, *Labyrinth: The Adventure Game* is a curious experience that lets you dip a toe into the ocean of roleplaying without worrying about rules or preparation. In places this can make it feel a little awkward, but much of that is neatly countered by the bucketful of charm that splashes out of every single page.

The game throws its players into the world of 1986's cult classic *Labyrinth*, setting them the task of retrieving some stolen treasure from the Goblin King – played by a tight-trousered David Bowie – within a 13-hour time limit. What the missing object is and who the players control is up to them, but the general shape of the quest is going to be the same each time.

Once things get going, this rescue mission plays out through the pages of the gamebook, with every spread spelling out the details of some location for the party to explore. Depending on how they overcome the obstacles and encounters thrown at them, which can range from simple patches of quicksand through to weird goblin birthday parties, the players may be sent to different locations or simply propelled further into the book.

What separates the game from an elaborate choose-your-own adventure book, however, is the way in which the players are given free rein to roleplay and dream up their own clever solutions to the puzzles placed before them. There are plenty of guidelines in the book about what might happen under certain circumstances, but for the most part the GM – or, rather, the Goblin King – is left to rule on possibilities and set tests.

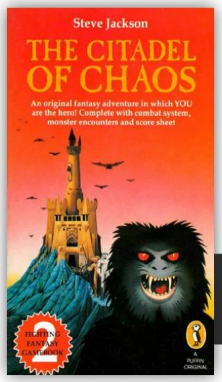




This is, of course, exactly what you expect to happen in a more conventional RPG, but that doesn't make it any less exhilarating or terrifying when the players seize on some wacky idea and you're suddenly forced to play out the consequences. Indeed, the safe, guided nature of the rest of *Labyrinth: The Adventure Game* can make it even more intimidating when a table of friends or family members start throwing round ideas that will turn the game on its head.

Fortunately, while prospective Goblin Kings might worry about overenthusiastic knights challenging every other goblin to duels, there's very little reason to be anxious about managing the rules. Really, it says a lot that the rules for using the book's coloured place-markers are about as length as the game's core mechanics.

There are no hit points or magic spells to track, nor any fancy systems for handling stress or fatigue. Instead, every single challenge in the game is handled by having the players rolling one or two six-sided dice and trying to beat some target value get by the Goblin King.



It really is that simple, which is both a blessing and a curse.

On the one hand, you can explain the rules in mere seconds, and because there are very few worries that the you might mess up on some point of order. However, this also helps to keep the gameplay puddle-deep, and though the circumstances might regularly switch up it can all get a little samey once you get a few hours in.

This means that the entirety of your enjoyment is going to come from exploring, building stories and generally having fun in *Labyrinth*'s weird world. In turn, this kind of relies on you and your players being the kind of people who get on with the setting's style and sense of humour.

One early puzzle for example, might see the players dumped in a dungeon – or more accurately, an oubliette – and presented with a cape embroidered with the letter 'S'. The trick to getting out is realising that what they are holding is, in fact, an s-cape.

An escape.

If this truly awful pun does nothing for you, that may be a sign that *Labyrinth: The Adventure Game* would start grating on your nerves within the first few pages. If, however, it made you groan and grin at the nonsense of it all, you're probably going to be fine.

Indeed, one of the most appealing things about the game is the prospect of unleashing it on your children, younger cousins or even classroom. The rules are simple enough for kids to grasp with ease, and while the preteens of today might not know who David Bowie is or why you keep singing *Dance, Magic, Dance*, the twisted fairytale world of *Labyrinth* is still packed with charm.

PLAY IT? PROBABLY

If you're after a wholesale *Labyrinth* RPG you're going to be disappointed, but this makes for a great first step into the hobby for fans of the film, or an easy game to play with slightly older children

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED FIGHTING FANTASY BOOKS...

Both conjure up fantasy worlds through the pages of a book, and though the handle things differently the magic is still the same.



TALKING TABLETOP

LABYRINTH: THE ADVENTURE GAME

We chat to Ben Milton about puzzle solving in a maze. Plus, advice for fledgling Goblin Kings

Interview by **Christopher John Eggett**

Introduce yourself?

I'm Ben Milton, the primary adventure writer for *Jim Henson's Labyrinth: The Adventure Game*. I'm also the author of the *Maze Rats*, *Knave RPG*s and the creator of the Questing Beast YouTube channel, which reviews new books coming out of the old-school RPG scene.

And Labyrinth?

The Labyrinth Adventure Game is an RPG that puts you into the world of the 1986 Jim Henson film. It's packed with weird creatures, puzzles and challenges to overcome as you and your friends make your way to the castle at the centre of the Goblin King's labyrinth.

What's the attraction of the world of Labyrinth for you?

The imagination and craftsmanship on display in the Labyrinth film was a huge draw, as well as Brian Froud's design work. But the thing that struck me the most was how gameable the setting was. If you watch the movie closely, it's already structured like an RPG. The characters go from room to room, meeting new NPCs and thinking their way past the obstacles in each encounter.

There's a real 'choose-your-own-adventure' feel to the game, tell us how you captured this?

That impression probably comes from the way that each encounter or scene uses 'control panel' formatting, meaning that it is designed to fit on a two-page spread. Whenever you travel to a new scene you simply flip to the correct page and everything you need is right there in front of you. You never have to flip around to find things. It's not like a choose-your-own-adventure in that there isn't a specific sequence of scenes you have to go through to get to the end. Instead, there's a near-infinite number of possible paths to reach the game's conclusion, and most journeys through the labyrinth will be very different from one another.

Each adventure is a kind of puzzle, tell us about setting these up?

Most of the obstacles in the Labyrinth adventure game were designed to be 'OSR-style problems' – a movement dedicated to a style of play found in very early D&D. One of the principles of this style is that players should usually overcome difficulties with player skill rather than character skill. "The answer is not on your character sheet," as the saying goes. A good OSR-style problem rewards caution, cleverness and lateral thinking rather than brute force, which fits perfectly with the challenges in the movie. Arnold Kemp (of the Goblin Punch blog) articulated this best when he said that these types of challenges should A. have no easy solution, B. have many difficult solutions C. require no special tools, and D. be able to be solved with common sense. When I was writing the scenes for *Labyrinth* I didn't worry about coming up with an intended solution most of the time. I just put a wide variety of obstacles in the players' path and trusted them to think up a way around them.

There's a lot of wordplay in the adventures, sometimes leading to the solution – how did you approach these non-combat resolutions?

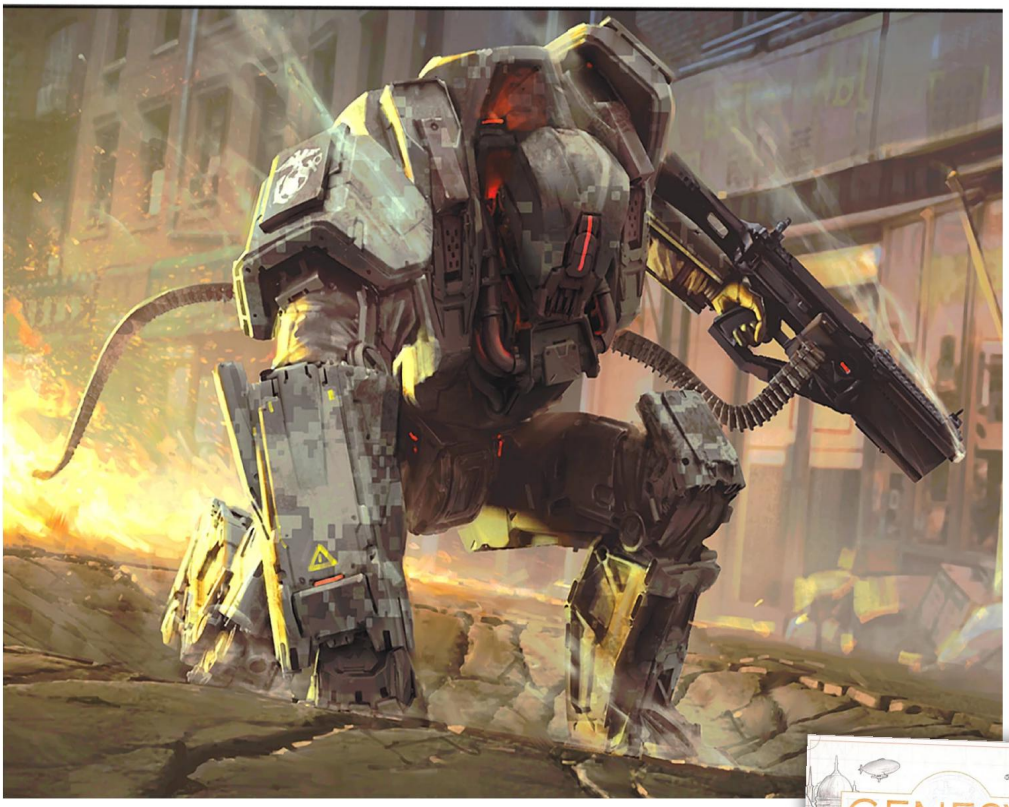
I'm pretty lenient with that sort of thing. If the players come up with a solution that seems plausible, I let them proceed. As long as they're thinking, I'm happy. Also, there aren't really any dead ends in the labyrinth. If you get stuck in one scene you can always backtrack and try to explore in a different direction, at the cost of maybe losing an hour, the principle resource in the game's race against the Goblin King's clock.

Got any advice for new Goblin Kings?

Don't get fixated on one solution that you want the players to use. Challenge them, but learn to enjoy and reward them for the unexpected strategies they invent. That's one of the unique pleasures of running RPGs.

What have you been playing in lockdown?

I've been running a great dungeon adventure by Gavin Norman, *Winter's Daughter*, for the 5th graders in my after-school RPG club.



GENESYS

A blank slate to build on

Designer: Sam Stewart | **Artist:** Various

2+

£34

Creating a system-agnostic RPG that flows neatly and feels at home with both fireballs and flamethrowers is an incredibly lofty ambition, but one that *Genesys* has come tantalisingly close to achieving.

The game is designed as almost a blank slate – a simple platform that settings and systems can be bolted onto with little effort or rules conflicts. Though a first glance through the core book's pages may leave you thinking it feels shallow, there's plenty of depth just waiting to be explored with a bit of effort.

One of the reasons for this, perhaps, is that publisher Fantasy Flight has created the game on the sturdy chassis of its recent *Star Wars* RPGs. This means it uses the same 'narrative dice' system that does away with virtually all the maths and number-crunching traditionally involved with tabletop RPGs. Instead, it relies on a handful of symbols etched into specialist dice to determine success and failure.

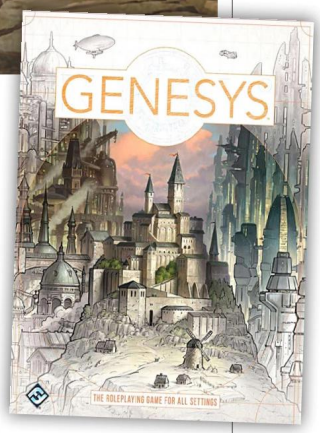
Succeeding on a task simple requires you to have more successes and failures. Skills allow you to roll more positive dice, while the difficulty of the task ups the number of negative dice added to the pool. Circumstances can also add in their own dice, such as in situations where the rattle of incoming fire can distract from an adventurer's efforts to pick a lock.

The system is elegant and easy to understand and, though it may sound simple, the real depth comes from the fact that there symbols on the dice beyond mere success and failure.

For example, rolling a handful of advantage symbols on top of an already successful check to hack a starship's computer system may mean that not only do you take control of the system, but you also stumble across the captain's personal log in the process.

The most interesting examples of how this system can work, however, come when you roll threats on a success or advantages on a failure. This can lead to situations where you successfully track your prey across the savannah but in the process attract the attention of some hungry-looking lions, or lose an arm-wrestling contest with the brawny thug but impress him enough to make a new friend.

It soon becomes impossible to predict exactly how things a given situation may work out, with the right combination of rolls creating some truly wonderful scenes that feel all the sweeter because they were shaped by the dice and by the players' actions, rather than simply being pulled from the GM's notebook. The only downside to this is that it does require a reasonably high amount of improvisation and confidence in order to run smoothly.



More than that, the lack of an established setting for the game means that the GM will already need to be flexing their creative muscles from the get-go. The core rulebook contains detailed and extensive guidelines on creating worlds to drop your players into, with almost half its pages occupied by general outlines and modified rules for a host of popular genres ranging from classic fantasy to space-opera and even a Lovecraftian 'Weird War'.

It's entirely possible that full explanations and rules for using these worlds will come in their own books further down the line but, for the time being, *Genesys* stands alone. Honestly, the biggest impression that you get when flicking through the elegantly designed pages of the core rulebook is that *Genesys* feels like an RPG toolkit that – with a bit of effort – can be shaped and trimmed to fit the needs of any campaign.

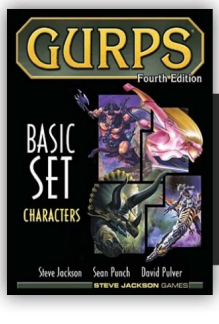
To some people this will be instantly appealing, as it gives them a chance to flex their creative muscles in a system simple and robust enough to take a few knocks. Others may find the freedom overwhelming and grow frustrated at needing to fill in the blanks themselves.

Ultimately, *Genesys* trades specialisation for adaptability, and will likely lose out in direct competition with the well-established masters of certain genres. However, if you want to buy one rulebook for your gaming group and run half a dozen weird and wonderful worlds without learning new rules, it may well be the new top dog of setting-free RPGs.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

Genesys represents a highly polished and elegant set of rules that can be applied to just about anything you want, though sometimes it crosses over from 'adaptable' to 'generic'.



IF YOU LIKE GURPS... TRY GENESYS

Like *GURPS*, *Genesys* allows you to play around in any world you want, albeit with a greater focus on storytelling over crunch.

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