Designers & Dragons

A HISTORY OF THE ROLEPLAYING GAME INDUSTRY

'70 '79



SHANNON APPELCLINE

PART ONE OF A FOUR-VOLUME SET!







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- Ten things you might not know about roleplaying in the '70s
- An extensive bibliography and index

Meet the characters behind the characters and the gamers behind the games in **Designers & Dragons: The '70s!**

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Designers & Dragons



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The Magic of Beginnings

The dawn of the gaming industry was magical, like the start of a new year or the birth of a baby. A bright and promising event was occurring as we watched, somewhat wide eyed with amazement and tickled by every new thing that occurred. It was like getting a new game that's so cool that we started to play before we even knew the rules.

I was in that zeitgeist up to my ears. I had just moved to California and my daughter had just been born. There I was, a young father in a new place seeking to establish myself. All options were open. Every act had long-term implications, none of which were known.

Incredibly, magic literally *did* help form Chaosium, which was like another child for me. I had not planned to start a company and help shape an industry. I designed my first game simply to fulfill a passion. My personal magic of the beginnings was a Tarot card reading that commanded me to start a company for an industry that did not yet exist. I dove into it; ignorant of what was needed, riding entirely on that passion. I published my game and went forth to sell it. Details of this courageous and naïve act are contained in Shannon's history of Chaosium, including wonderful facts about how our industry was formed.

Accurate facts and data fail to picture the excitement of the early days. At my first convention, sponsored by Avalon Hill, I discovered I was not alone in this passion. I was giddy from the discovery of other game companies. I knew AH

would be there, and also TSR, and also Archive Miniatures, run by my friend Nevile Stocken who hauled in money literally hand over fist for his line of Star Wars figures. I was especially amused to find a company led by a guy named Bizarre and publishing a game by a guy named Symbolist (actually of course Bizar and Simbolist, being FGU with the monumental *Chivalry & Sorcery* released.) Scott Bizar met my wife and in an exuberant burst of gentlemanship asked, "Do you have a sister?" He would later become my brother-in-law.

Except for a one aloof company and one sinister figure, all was bright and warm friendship. I met more people than I can remember, including a pair of Englishmen who slept on my hotel floor and later founded the first English roleplaying company, Games Workshop. TSR stood aloof, but that was apparently a corporate stand because Tim Kask, publisher of *The Dragon* magazine, the Englishmen and I spent an extremely jolly afternoon sitting under an oak tree, laughing and coughing and swapping hopes and jokes and stories. Those friendships have lasted for years.

One figure stands a generation ahead of all of us, who are now the Grandfathers of the game industry. Lou Zocchi was there, as he has been at every significant game convention ever since. Lou has had some of his own games published, and is known for his world-famous dice. We all bought our dice from him, and for a while I thought that the polyhedral dice might go down in history being called *Zocchis*. But neither his games nor his dice are the reason he's the great-grandfather of gaming. Nor is it due to the fact he sold games out of his car for decades like an itinerant peddler with an endless pack of fun and frivolity. No, it is not because he has entertained us for 38 years with his musical saw, magic tricks and his dear companion Woody. Nor is it due to his virtuous dedication to rid our industry of the aforementioned sinister figure. It is because Lou's heart has always been in the right place. He has been a model for us all with his generosity and willingness to share any and every bit of knowledge we needed to start this crazy business of ours. His benevolent attitude infected us all back then, to share whatever we needed to get into the business.

Other early conventions brought out the other luminaries of the gaming dawn. Rick Loomis was practically as established as Lou, but in the mail-order gaming before his first RPG, *Tunnels and Trolls,* by Ken St Andre. Frank Chadwick and Marc Miller almost shyly brought their first science fiction outer space game, *Traveller*. I particularly remember Pete Fenlon of I.C.E. who released his first RPG, *Rolemaster*, informing me proudly that it had a table for every possible combat interaction. "Small claws against full plate, we got it."

"Cool. Our new RPG doesn't have any tables," I shared. That of course was *RuneQuest*.

In those days everyone gave copies of their latest product to every other publisher. We were small enough to do that, and it was done with a generosity of spirit even if their game was over the top, without much promise of success.

Not everything was fun and perfect, of course. That villain mentioned above? That was Dave Casciano, who I saw at my first Origins convention sitting under a Nazi flag cleaning a firearm. I remember thinking, "Whoa, what have I gotten into!?" He used to advertise games and collect money, but never publish the product. He was ejected before the convention opened. He kept coming back though, the herpes of the gaming industry. Once again it was our hero, Lou Zocchi who got rid of him. He, and I too, were sued by the rotter, but Lou let no expense come between him and his crusade for virtue in gaming. He spent thousands of dollars to fly witnesses to testify at federal court until the judicial system accepted that Casciano was a pirate, thief and "one bad apple among us." Thank you Lou.

After the headlong rush of the 70's, our industry changed. The first wave was nearly all designer-publishers like Chaosium. Afterward, we hired actual business people, like accountants and sales people; and formed a business association. Slowly, the emphasis changed from "gaming" to "industry." Our initial small group of enthusiastic publishers grew.

While I am nostalgic for those early days, I will not complain about the business side. Such transformations are natural and necessary for the industry to thrive enough to become embedded in American culture to such an extent as to appear in such diverse outlets as *X-files* and *Futurama*. We have grown and mutated from that thrilling sprout to be a forest of creativity. We have changed from that wondrous infant into a mature entertainment medium that has withstood the impacts of computer games and collectible card games. We played that new game of "Game Industry" before it had rules, and had a great time. In addition to that glorious past, we also still have a bright future to look forward to.

That pleases me.

Greg Stafford
November 25, 2013

Foreword: The '70s

This is a book about the roleplaying industry as it existed in its most primordial days. It's about hobbyist gaming in the '70s. More specifically, it's about 13 different companies that began publishing roleplaying games in the '70s — from TSR itself, through the wargame companies and the miniatures manufacturers that leapt into the industry, to the companies that were formed specifically to produce roleplaying games.

The roleplaying industry is a very creative one, built on the backs of dreamers able to imagine different worlds. It's also a small industry, which makes it vulnerable to any numbers of disasters. That's what you'll find at the heart of this book, beneath the trends and under the skin of the companies: a story of designers and their dragons.

There are designers aplenty within these covers.

The names from TSR are among the best known: Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax, who together created *Dungeons & Dragons*; Jeff Perren and Dave Wesely, who provided some of its foundations; and Eric Holmes, Tom Moldvay, David "Zeb" Cook, and Frank Mentzer, who each rebuilt the game.

However, the stories of designers from other companies are no less important, among them: Ken St. Andre, who dared to create the second FRP; Greg Stafford, who created a game to depict his long-imagined world of Glorantha; Bob Bledsaw, who believed in RPG supplements; and Dave Hargrave, who was willing to share his own vision of *D&D*.

And the dragons, they're sadly here as well. They roosted upon the eaves of the old Dungeon Hobby Shop.

Ten different legal threats or lawsuits all get some attention within TSR's history, including: *Dave Arneson vs. TSR* (twice), *TSR vs. Heritage Models*, *Elan Merchandising vs. TSR*, *TSR vs. Mayfair Games* (twice), *TSR vs. New Infinities Productions*, *TSR vs. GDW* (twice), and *TSR vs. the whole internet*. And that was just the pick of the litter, ignoring more mundane issues such as Rose Estes and Will Niebling suing TSR for rights related to stock options.

TSR also faced dragons of other sorts, including board fights, ousted presidents, Californian exiles, decade-long vendettas, secret cabals, hysterical media, and a long fight with the moral minority. Dragons come in all shapes and sizes, you see.

Don't think that the rest of the industry was left out. Other publisher histories highlight a veritable flight of dragons, including corrupt printers, abrupt changes of direction, poorly received revamps, massive overprinting, fights over copyright, disagreements over contracts, near bankruptcies, thieving partners, and more.

Of the 13 companies profiled within these pages, only 3 to 4 are still in business (depending on how you count), and one of those is entirely out of the roleplaying business. As for the rest: they're all shadows of companies at their heights. That's because dragons have stamina; they keep wearing away at companies and their designers, like the sea against the shore. In the end, they always win.

The story is not in the victory or the loss, but in the fight.

Come and read the story of the first 13 notable companies to enter the RPG industry — the story of their designers and their battles against the dragons.



About the Icon: Daniel Solis' icon for the '70s is a pair of crossed swords. It represents the origins of the industry in wargaming and the game of *Dungeons & Dragons* itself, which started out as monster-slaying treks through dungeons.

A Future History of Roleplaying

Though this book focuses on roleplaying companies that began publication in the '70s, many of their stories continued beyond that decade. Thus, the trends of later times affected these early publishers. The most important future trends are detailed, in brief, below.

The RPG Boom & Bust (1980–1983). The early '80s saw a boom period for RPGs in the wake of increased media attention. Unfortunately, it turned into a bust in 1982 or 1983. Many early publishers met their end as a result. The ones that remained were forced to increase their quality of production to keep up.

The Storytelling Revolution (1984). Prior to 1984, most RPGs had been about location-based exploration. A variety of publications that year — among them Dragonlance, *Paranoia*, and *Toon* — moved the medium toward story-oriented play. More would follow in the years thereafter.

The Desktop Revolution (1985). The Mac computer appeared in 1984, and within a year personal desktop publishing had become possible. This allowed many new small press publishers to appear, starting around 1985.

The Cyberpunk Revolution (1988). R. Talsorian Games changed the face of science-fiction roleplaying with their publication of *Cyberpunk* (1988). It brought the creation of new space opera games to an end for at least a decade and sent a lot of publishers haring off after their own cyberpunk RPG.

The CCG Boom and Bust (1993–1996). When Wizards of the Coast published *Magic: The Gathering* (1993), they created the collectible card game genre. It was much more lucrative than roleplaying publishing, and thus many RPG publishers created CCGs of their own. Meanwhile, distributors started putting their dollars toward CCGs rather than RPGs. Unfortunately, much of the initial interest was a fad, and publishers who committed too much to the trend ended up sorry.

The D20 Boom and Bust (2000–2004). Wizards of the Coast changed the whole industry a second time when they released *Dungeons & Dragons Third Edition* (2000) under a license that allowed anyone to create supplements for it. Hundreds of new companies appeared to do so, while many old publishers also moved into the new and lucrative space. Existing publishers who didn't do so found it hard to stay afloat. Just as with CCGs, a bust quickly followed the boom.

The Indie Revolution (2001+). Many of the storytelling ideas from the '80s and '90s have been reborn in recent years as the indie game movement. Small

publishers are publishing games that matter to them, and they're often about stories, morality, emotions, or other weighty issues — not just fighting goblins.

A Note to Readers of the First Edition

If you read the previous, black monolith edition of *Designers & Dragons*, you'll find that the information on the '70s in this new edition has dramatically increased. The histories of Judges Guild, Metagaming, and TSR were all vastly expanded, thanks in each case to lots of new material that I was able to access (mostly more magazines from the period).

In addition, the final five histories in this book are brand new: Gamescience, Heritage Models, Grimoire Games, DayStar West Media, and Midkemia Press. The article in Appendix I is new too.

Finally, information has been updated for the scant '70s companies still publishing.

Whether you've encountered an edition of this book before, or are a newcomer to Designers & Dragons, I hope you enjoy yourself while reading many of the earliest histories of the hobbyist industry.

Shannon Appelcline
January 6, 2013



Part One:
Founding Days (1953–1974)

Before 1974 there was no roleplaying industry. The hobbyist game industry existed, but it centered on a different type of game: the wargame. The history of these games of warfare went back to at least the 17th century, but it wasn't until 1953 that they gained a foothold among American gaming enthusiasts, and that was thanks to a man named Charles Roberts.

Roberts created the first mainstream wargame, *Tactics* (1953), and afterward he decided to leverage that game's success into something more: the first wargame company, Avalon Hill. It would be the leader of the industry for many years, and it would attract many followers, including SPI and numerous other publishers that we'll meet as they enter the RPG industry in a series of three successive waves.

In the meantime another trend was overtaking the United States. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was introduced in a few different mass-market editions beginning in the 1960s. It was one of the literary touchstones of the '60s, and buttons that read "Frodo Lives" could often be found at love-ins and peace demonstrations alike.

As much as anything the story of roleplaying games is the story of how these trends came together — of how two miniatures wargamers interested in medieval warfare and fantasy realms created a new game and a new hobby. Those wargaming enthusiasts were Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, and their game was *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). This was the state of the hobbyist industry when the first roleplaying company, TSR, began publishing RPGs in 1974.

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
TSR	1973–1997	*Dungeons & Dragons* (1974)	7

TSR: 1973–1997

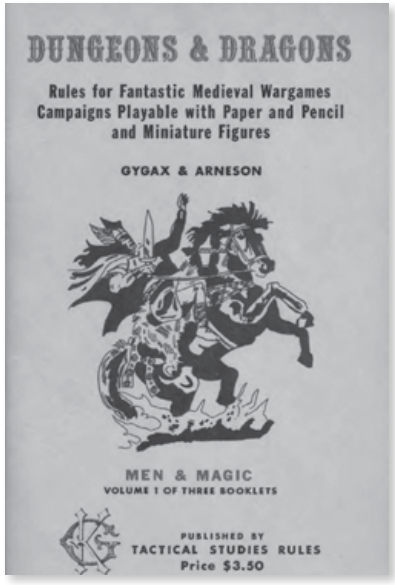
TSR founded the roleplaying industry and ruled it for almost 25 years.

A Brief Introduction: 1958+

The story of TSR begins with the story of two men, Gary Gygax (of Lake Geneva in Wisconsin) and Dave Arneson (of the Twin Cities in Minnesota), who would soon create the world's first roleplaying game. They each came into the hobbyist gaming field through the same publication — Avalon Hill's *Gettysburg* (1958) wargame — and from there they soon advanced to positions of leadership in the wargaming community.

Before we meet these men, though, we should first briefly acknowledge the sources of their stories. Traditionally, the early history of TSR is muddled, primarily because interviews with the principals have diverged and differed over the years. This has resulted in different remembrances, often from the same people.

More recently, Jon Peterson made a heroic effort to detail the earliest years of the hobby in his own *Playing at the World* (2012), a dense tome that primarily covers the miniatures wargaming scene and TSR through 1977.



1974: Dungeons & Dragons

By digging up hard-to-get primary sources from the era, Peterson put many dates on events and otherwise straightened out a lot of facts. This history of TSR mostly follows *Playing at the World*'s chronology for its earliest years, but adds details from many other sources as appropriate.

With that said, let's return to our two creative gentlemen.

Gary Gygax & *Chainmail:* 1967—1971

Gygax's rise within wargaming circles began in 1967, when he helped to reform the International Federation of Wargamers (IFW) — a society that had been formed the previous year to promote the play of Avalon Hill's board wargames. He was soon after contributing to numerous wargaming 'zines.

At the IFW's Gen Con I (1968) Gygax saw a demonstration of a medieval miniatures game, Henry Bodenstedt's "Siege of Bodenberg" (1967). This led Gygax to new interests in both miniatures wargaming and pre-Napoleonic wargame play — at the time the era was largely neglected by wargamer leader Avalon Hill. Meanwhile, Gygax began his own game design work with the *Little Big Horn* wargame (1968), released through the War Game Inventors Guild of the IFW. His revision of Dane Lyons' *Arbela* (1968), an "ancient wargame," may be more notable because Gygax distributed it under his own company name: Gystaff Enterprises.

In 1970 Gygax formed a miniatures gaming group to support his new interest: the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association. At its formation it included seven members: Gary Gygax, Donald Kaye, Rob Kuntz, Jeff Perren, Michael Reese, Leon Tucker, and either Gygax's son Ernie or Kuntz's brother Terry — depending on which source you prefer. That group in turn became the core of a special interest group within the IFW called the Castle & Crusade Society, which focused on medieval warfare.

It was actually Jeff Perren who got the ball rolling for what would become *D&D* with a four page medieval miniatures rule set. When Gygax saw these rules, he decided to edit and expand them — a tendency that we'll see repeated in the future. The results, by Perren & Gygax, were published as the "Geneva Medieval Miniatures" in Don Greenwood's *Panzerfaust* fanzine (April 1970), then expanded as the "LGTSA Miniatures Rules" in issue #5 (July 1970) of *The Domesday Book*, the Castle & Crusade Society's own periodical. This sort of amateur publication of new rules was entirely common for the period, and in general showed how the miniatures hobby was amateur, yet creative. Fortunately, Gygax would soon be able to reach a much wider audience.

This was thanks to Don Lowry, an ex-Air Force Captain who formed Lowrys Hobbies — a mail order store for wargaming — in 1970. He also began publishing some games of his own, including some "Fast Rules" (1970) for tank combat by Tucker and Reese of the LGTSA.

Lowry met Gygax at Gen Con III (1970); it proved to be an important connection when Gygax lost his insurance job just a couple of months later. That's because Lowry was in the process of creating Guidon Games to publish more (and more professional) games. Thanks to his new availability, Gygax was able to sign on with Guidon to edit and produce miniatures wargaming rules in a series called "Wargaming with Miniatures."

Guidon's first book, produced in March 1971, was *Chainmail* (1971) — a further expansion of the medieval miniatures rules by Perren and Gygax. The new rules contained two new sections that are of particular note.

The "man-to-man combat" rules offered the first crucial step on the road to *Dungeons & Dragons*. Whereas Perren's original game had a 20:1 scale and the LGTSA version of the rules had a 10:1 scale, these new rules suggested a 1:1 scale that had previously been used only for army commanders. In other words, it offered up combat rules of the sort that would be at the heart of RPGs.

Chainmail's "fantasy supplement" may have been even more important. Its 14 pages described how to introduce singular heroes, superheroes, and wizards into *Chainmail* play. Wizards even had a variety of spells such as fire ball, lightning bolt, phantasmal force, darkness, and more.

Though *Chainmail* was clearly the most important Guidon publication for the future roleplaying industry, the series would come to include books by many future RPG luminaries, among them Lou Zocchi, Tom Wham ... and Dave Arneson.

Dave Arneson & Black Moor: 1969—1972

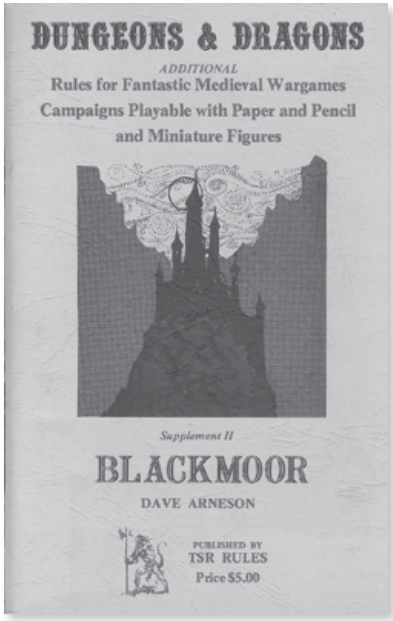
Stepping back to 1969, we find Dave Arneson gaming with Dave Wesely, an amateur game designer who was particularly interested in games that were open-ended, run by a referee, and supportive of more than just two players. Wesely brought these ideas together in his own "Braunstein" Napoleonic miniatures games. Players in a Braunstein rather uniquely took on the roles of individuals who had specific objectives in the game. In fact, there was so much involvement with these various roles that Wesely never got to the actual wargame in his first Braunstein!

Just as Arneson began playing in Wesely's Braunsteins, he also became more involved in the wider wargaming community, attending Gen Con II (1969) — where he met Gary Gygax — and joining the IFW. Toward the end of 1969 Arneson used these new connections to run a game for wargamers scattered across the country — eventually including Gary Gygax, Don Kaye, and Rob Kuntz.

Arneson's Napoleonic Simulation Campaign used Gary Gygax's Napoleonic *Diplomacy* variant for large-scale strategic play, but then used miniatures rules to fight out individual battles. Dave Wesely supplied the rules for land battles, while Arneson and Gygax supplied those for sea battles. The sea battle rules were later published as *Don't Give Up the Ship* (1971) — another of Guidon's *Wargaming with Miniatures* books and also the first collaboration of note for Arneson and Gygax.

Meanwhile, Wesely ran perhaps three more Braunsteins, the last of which was a *Junta*-like game where players were involved in a coup d'état in a banana republic. Then Wesely's Army Reserve unit was called to active duty in October 1970. The Braunsteins, however, continued on: new variants would be run by a number of the Braunstein players in the years to come.

On April 17, 1971 (probably; there's a lot of disagreement on early Black Moor dates), Arneson did something totally new with the idea. He'd by then grown bored with his Napoleonic game and frustrated over arguments about historical details. Thus he decided to run a "medieval 'Braunstein,'" which he called a "Black Moor" — following Wesely's naming convention. The game used Gygax and Perren's brand-new *Chainmail* game for combat, but as in the Braunsteins, players in Black Moor took on the roles of individual characters — themselves, transferred to a medieval world.



Unlike the Braunsteins, the Black Moors were run as a campaign, with players eventually gaining experience from episode to episode. Throughout 1971 Arneson's group fought fairly typical miniatures battles — facing off with the forces of the "Egg of Coot." Then, in late 1971 or early 1972, the heroes moved to a new battlefield: the dungeons beneath and around Castle Blackmoor — a castle that originated in a plastic kit of a Sicilian castle that Arneson owned.

"[S]hortly [Castle Blackmoor] was too small for the scale I wanted. But it was a neat kit and I didn't want to abandon it, so the only way to go was down."

– Dave Arneson, "A Conversation with Dave Arneson," *Kobold Quarterly #9* (Spring 2009)

Miniatures vs. Board Games

Broadly, *Dungeons & Dragons* and the roleplaying industry sprang from the hobbyist wargaming industry that preceded it. However, wargaming in the '70s was actually split into two parts that are easy to conflate.

On the one hand you had *board game wargaming*. This was the professional industry that kicked off in 1958 when Charles Roberts incorporated Avalon Hill and published *Tactics II* (1958). By the '70s board game wargaming was big business for Avalon Hill and their up-and-coming competitor, SPI. There were also a number of semi-professional or small press board game wargaming publishers, of which the original Gamescience was one of the first.

On the other hand you had *miniatures wargaming*. Instead of moving pieces around boards, players moved miniatures across sand tables or other open terrains. Miniatures wargaming got its start around the same time as the board games, with the publication of Jack Scruby's *War Games Digest* (1957–1962) – the first of many amateur 'zines for the hobby. However, the miniatures hobby didn't grow like the board game hobby did. It instead remained small and semi-professional without any big publishers; rules were more likely to be detailed by a fan in a 'zine, rather than by some "authority." There were good reasons that miniatures wargaming remained small: it required more time, more effort, and more creativity. It was a niche within a niche – something that wasn't for everyone.

Though the creators of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) got their start in wargaming through board games, both Gygax and Arneson soon moved over to the more creative miniatures field. TSR was founded as a company intending to publish miniatures games, while *Dungeons & Dragons* grew directly from miniatures wargaming play.

Then, as the initial roleplaying boom grew, manufacturers of board games jumped on the bandwagon. It made sense, as they already had the professional (or semi-professional) infrastructure needed to publish – something that was largely missing from the smaller, more community-oriented miniatures creators. In the '70s you therefore saw the smaller producers of wargaming board games – folks like Chaosium and GDW – coming on board, then in the '80s the giants of wargaming board games – SPI and Avalon Hill – jumped in as well.

In *Designers & Dragons*, "wargame" is often used as a short hand for "wargaming board game" because that was the commercial side of hobby. Ironically by the '70s, it was also too big (and too staid and too conservative) to publish something truly innovative. *Dungeons & Dragons* could only have come from those creative amateurs and fans that were members of the small community of miniatures wargamers.

What's with the Scale!?

Early editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* included rather cryptic notes that said 1" = 10' inside and 1" = 10 yards outside. The use of inches as a measurement showed the game's origin in wargames – it was a standard unit of measure on sand tables.

The differing scales for inside and outside were an artifact of *D&D*'s two-part origin. *Chainmail* had used a 1" = 10 yard scale because Gygax thought it was a good size for fitting a full battle on a 5'x10' table. When Arneson moved *Chainmail* into the dungeons of Blackmoor, he changed the scale to 1" = 10'.

The topic was especially confusing in the early days of *D&D*, requiring Gygax to write an entire article on the topic in *The Dragon #15* (June 1978). Things got cleaned up a *little* bit in *AD&D* (1977–1979).

The immense creativity of the miniatures wargaming community of the late '60s and early '70s is on full display as we consider how these game concepts bounced from one amateur designer to another. Jeff Perren created medieval miniatures rules, which were expanded by Gary Gygax and became *Chainmail*. Dave Wesely created Braunsteins, and then Dave Arneson combined *Chainmail* and Braunsteins to create Blackmoor. In turn John Snider and others ran their own Blackmoor variants while David Megarry condensed the simple essence of Blackmoor dungeon crawling into a board game that he called "The Dungeons of Pasha Cada."

And now we come to the final link in the chain of creativity that would create the modern roleplaying hobby.

Late in 1972 Dave Arneson and Dave Megarry traveled to Lake Geneva to demonstrate Blackmoor (and The Dungeons of Pasha Cada) to Gary Gygax, Rob Kuntz, and other members of the LGTSA. Gygax was impressed and told Dave Arneson that he wanted to collaborate on an expanded version of his rules — much as he had with Perren just a few years before. They tentatively called their collaboration ... "The Fantasy Game."

Publishing the Fantasy Game: 1972—1973

In many ways, it was a perfect time for Gygax to work on a major project. As we're already seen, he lost his insurance job in 1970. By 1971 he was rather famously fixing shoes in his basement ... and editing miniatures rules for Guidon Games. However, by late 1972 Don Lowry moved to Maine. Gygax's work on the *Wargaming in Miniatures* series ended shortly thereafter.

Thus Gygax had plenty of time to work on his newest project. The first draft of his fantasy game rules probably went out late in 1972 at perhaps 50–100 pages. A second draft followed sometime around May 1973, after many months of playtesting both at Lake Geneva and in the Twin Cities. It may have been as long as 150 pages. In both cases the dating and page counts changed over time in interviews, and this has been complicated by the fact that these drafts were long thought lost to the mists of time.

However the recent discovery of the "Mornard Fragments" (1973) and "Dalluhn Manuscript" (1973?) shed a light on what these original drafts looked like, though the authorship of the latter isn't proven.

When Gygax released those two initial drafts of his fantasy rules to friends and designers, they *weren't* called "The Fantasy Game." Gygax *knew* that wasn't a very catchy title, and so he brainstormed better names for the game. He did so by drawing up two columns filled with evocative words, then polling his players about what names they liked. The Fantasy Game could have been called "Swords & Spells" or "Men & Magic" or "Treasures & Trolls," but everyone (or perhaps just Gygax's daughter or perhaps his wife, depending on which interview you prefer) liked "Dungeons & Dragons" best — so this was the name that Gygax and Arneson used.

The second draft of *Dungeons & Dragons* was mature enough that Gygax was ready to sell it (along with Megarry's "Dungeons" game, which he was now representing). He tried Guidon Games first, but they were by now downsizing and not interested in publishing Megarry's board game or the large *Dungeons & Dragons* rule set. Gygax may have offered the games to Avalon Hill too — though this point is in contention. If so, he met with failure there too. This all *might* have discouraged Gygax if a group playing the prototype *Dungeons & Dragons* game hadn't shown up at Gen Con VI (1973). They were very enthusiastic about the game — a fact that Gygax's boyhood friend, Don Kaye, noted with interest. Kaye suggested to Gygax that they form a company to publish the game themselves.

On October 1, 1973, Gygax and Kaye formed Tactical Studies Rules — named in part after the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association — based largely on $1,000 that Kaye raised by cashing in his life insurance policy. That wasn't enough to print *Dungeons & Dragons*, which was organized as a large three-book set. Instead the newborn TSR published *Cavaliers and Roundheads* (1973) — another miniatures game design by Gygax and Perren — as its first release. They hoped to use it to bootstrap themselves up to the more expensive *D&D* production.

Unfortunately, the returns from *Cavaliers and Roundheads* were insufficient; more cash would be needed to publish *D&D*. In December of 1973, Brian Blume made this possible. He was a gamer that met Gygax at Gen Con VI (1973) and then joined the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association. He offered the $2,000

needed to publish the first thousand copies of *D&D* (1974); he was quickly accepted as the third partner in Tactical Studies Rules.

As the company's corporate structure emerged, Kaye took on the offices of President and Treasury, Blume became the Vice President and Sales Manager, and Gygax assumed the roles of Editor and Advertising Manager. Dave Arneson, it should be noted, was not a partner in TSR. Though he was the co-designer of *D&D*, he had no money to contribute to the new company and thus was not offered equity. In fact, he wouldn't even join the company full-time until 1976.

There had already been clashes between Gygax and Arneson during the development process of *Dungeons & Dragons* — as Arneson sometimes felt he was being ignored while Gygax bulled forward on the game. The continued isolation of Arneson following the game's release would result in problems that would haunt *Dungeons & Dragons* for the next 25 years.

Selling the Fantasy Game: 1974—1975

Thanks to Brian Blume, *D&D* became available for sale in January 1974 as a box of three digest-sized books. 150 copies sold in February. Half the print run was gone by summer, and by the end of the year TSR printed 1,000 more copies. Photocopies of the rules heavily supplemented *D&D*'s actual print run in those early days — mostly because there wasn't much distribution for hobbyist games at the time. Slowly the game caught on.

However, it didn't have to happen that way. Blithely describing the upward trajectory of *D&D*'s sales ignores the many challenges it faced in its first year. To start with, it was a totally new and different sort of game. Even Arneson and Gygax were unsure whether their game would be successful — or if it was instead just some crazy whimsy.

The existing communities of wargamers helped *D&D* to get some attention (and some distribution), but that path was also fraught with dangers. Some

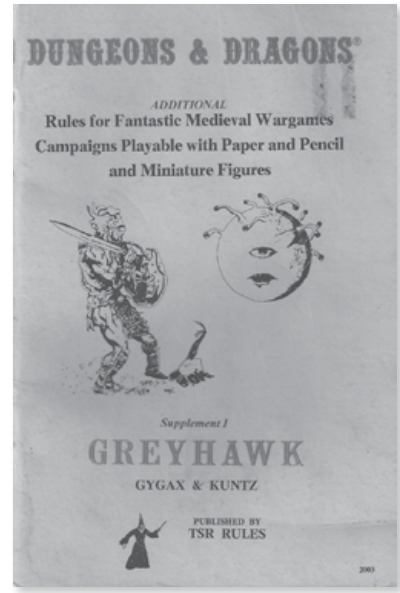
How Much Did That Cost!?

When *Dungeons & Dragons* was released, one of the most common complaints was that at $10 ($45 today) it cost too much. In fact, when photocopies of *D&D* began to distribute, it was only in part due to the fact that the game was hard to find. There were others who just weren't willing to pay the price. However these complaints didn't deter TSR, who the next year published the even *more* expensive *Empire of the Petal Throne* (EPT) at $25 ($103 today).

The cost is widely accepted to have held *EPT* back, but that clearly wasn't the case with *D&D*. If cost had been a real consideration among early players, then Flying Buffalo's *Tunnels & Trolls* – a steal at $3 ($12 today) – might have won them over. *T&T* did pretty well in the '70s, but it was of course *D&D* that dominated the market.

wargaming purists didn't believe that fantasy elements should be introduced into medieval wargames. Others were perfectly happy with Napoleonic wargames and didn't see the need for medieval gaming at all.

Meanwhile, TSR continued to have cash flow problems, and this kept them from purchasing much official advertising for their new game. Still, word leaked out. It went from friend to friend, from gaming group to gaming group, from city to city. Word spread through conventions. Gary Gygax wrote articles about *D&D* in various wargaming journals, while even *The Space Gamer* would diverge from its usual science-fiction coverage to talk about *D&D* in issue #2 (1975). Gen Con VII (1974) might have been the turning point; when wargamers gathered at Lake Geneva, TSR had a captive audience for their new game. When those wargamers returned home, word of *D&D* went with them.



In his own gaming group, Gygax saw a microcosm of the game's success. Gygax's *D&D* group had started off with LGTSA members Gary Gygax, Ernie Gygax, Don Kaye, Rob Kuntz, and Terry Kuntz in 1972, and then had grown to a dozen players in 1973. By 1974 it sometimes included over 20 people, including even more future TSR employees such as James M. Ward. Rob Kuntz became the co-dungeon master of Gygax's "Greyhawk" game, allowing each dungeon master to referee groups of only a dozen players.

> *"Each level [of Castle Greyhawk] was named, the first being the* Vaults*, then came the* Dungeons*, the* Lower Dungeons*, the* Crypts*, and so forth. Past* Catacombs *and* Labyrinth *the daring delver eventually came to the* Lesser *and* Greater Caves*, then the* Caverns*, and finally, at level 13 to* Maze *where the Mad Archmage, Zagig, was manifest."*
>
> – Gary Gygax, "To Forge a Fantasy World: Greyhawk's Creation," *Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Essays on Roleplaying* (2000)

This also caused the first major expansion of what would become the world of Greyhawk. Before, it had been entirely Gygax's creation, but now Rob Kuntz brought in some of the elements of his "Castle El Raja Key," which he'd been

running for Gygax since 1973. Some levels of El Raja Key were incorporated directly into Castle Greyhawk, while others became the source of the TSR module *WG5: Mordenkainen's Fantastic Adventure* (1984).

More than any other reason *D&D* probably enjoyed rapid growth — both within Gygax's gaming circle and elsewhere — for the same reason that its future was initially in danger: it was an entirely innovative game. Creating unique, individual characters and playing them over the course of an extended campaign was largely unheard of in 1974. For wargamers, *D&D* offered a whole new set of more personal tactics, while for fantasy board game players, *D&D* offered an opportunity to interact with fantastic realms in a more intimate manner. *D&D* was the first of a whole new wave — really, a whole new medium — of gaming and there was nowhere to go but up.

Of course, TSR didn't know that back in 1974 and so the rest of their first year was spent on a lot of stuff *other* than *D&D*. Thus their next publication was a return to miniatures wargaming: the *Tricolor* (1974) rules allowed for Napoleonic play. *Warriors of Mars* (1974) — based on Edgar Rice Burroughs' novels — was a bit more in tune with *D&D*. Though predominantly a large-scale wargame, it included rules for 1:1 scale individuals and could even be played with a referee. However, it wasn't exactly what *D&D* players were looking for and it disappeared within a year — apparently due to lack of a license.



As we'll see, unlicensed publication would be a problem for *D&D* too, a few years down the road.

One last product from TSR's first full year is of some note. *Star Probe* (1975) by John M. Snider was scheduled for 1974 but slipped into 1975. It was a science-fiction board game of the sort that was just emerging as its own new field — as could be seen in Metagaming's *The Space Gamer* (1975–1980). *Star Probe* was supposed to be the first game in a trilogy, but by the time TSR released the second game, *Star Empires* (1977), they'd already found their niche,

and it wasn't in science-fiction board gaming after all. They eventually returned the rights to the games to Snider in 1980.

Though TSR didn't publish anything else for *D&D* in 1974, Gary Gygax didn't stop thinking about the game. In May he wrote up a new character class for publication in *Great Plains Game Players Newsletter #9* (June 1974): the thief. Today, we think of the thief as a foundation of the RPG game, but for six months in 1974, *D&D* only included clerics, fighting men, and wizards. Gygax's article was typical of the sort of low-level marketing he was doing in 1974 — writing about *D&D* for various local periodicals. However, nothing else he wrote that year had the scope and importance of a whole new character class.

By January 1975 TSR was clearly in a stronger place because they were printing up the first issue of their own amateur magazine, *The Strategic Review* (1975–1976), which supported *D&D* and *Warriors of Mars* alike. By this time, TSR had also acquired rights to three games from Guidon — *Chainmail*, *Don't Give Up the Ship*, and *Tractics* (1971) — and so there was some support for them as well. Though that first issue only covered TSR products, in the future Gygax said they would "try to cover as much as possible" of the hobbyist scene.

TSR was a company on its way up. Then, on January 31, 1975, everything changed. Don Kaye, aged just 37, died of a fatal heart attack.

A Year of Innovative Products: 1975

Though Kaye's death was a personal tragedy for everyone involved, the *D&D* juggernaut could not be stopped. The young game company relocated from Kaye's dining room to Gygax's basement and it kept creating games — and this year the focus would be more on the fantasy and roleplaying that marked the company's biggest innovations.

> *"Tactical Studies Rules is not a giant company; it is not even a large one. But we are growing now, and in the future we might attain substantial size."*
>
> – Brian Blume, "TSR – Why We Do What We Do," *The Strategic Review v1 #2* (Summer 1975)

TSR's next book, *Supplement I: Greyhawk* (1975), by Gary Gygax and Rob Kuntz, was already under development; it was published later that spring — ahead of schedule thanks to a "surge of income." *Greyhawk* was the first supplement to *D&D*, and thus another innovation because supplements were largely unheard of in the wargaming industry. Though games were frequently revised and reprinted, continually expanding a game was something new.

Greyhawk introduced plenty of rules tweaks, new spells, and new magic items; it also made the thief available to a much larger audience. One of the rules tweaks was an expansion to *D&D's* "alternative combat system"; it helped to show that *D&D* was its own game, not just a *Chainmail* supplement.

Ironically, TSR printed their own third edition of *Chainmail* (1975) around the same time.

TSR's next product, *Boot Hill* (1975), by Gygax and Blume, had been in development for over a year. It was the first game that can (probably) be called TSR's second RPG — and thus the second RPG in existence. It was still heavily based in miniatures warfare — the core being a man-to-man combat system for Old West gunfighting — but each player had individual and unique characters. It would become a more full-fledged RPG, offering more options, in its second edition (1979).

When Did That Appear!?

Though we take a classic set of classes for granted in modern-day *Dungeons & Dragons*, most were actually built up over a series of publications from 1974–1976. Gary Gygax later returned to the topic with a few new classes in *Dragon* magazine in the early '80s, though today they're somewhat less known. Since third edition *D&D*, new classes have become somewhat more common; a few of the most notable ones are listed here:

- *Chainmail* (1971) – heroes, superheroes, wizards
- *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) – clerics, fighting men, magic-users
- *Game Players Newsletter #9* (June 1974) – thieves
- *Greyhawk* (1975) – paladins, reprint of thieves
- *The Strategic Review v1 #2* (Summer 1975) – rangers
- *Blackmoor* (1975) – assassins, monks
- *The Strategic Review v1 #4* (Winter 1975) – illusionists
- *The Strategic Review v2 #1* (February 1976) – bards
- *Eldritch Wizardry* (1976) – druids
- *Dragon #63* (July 1982) – barbarians
- *Dragon #69* (January 1983) – thief-acrobats
- *Dragon #72* (April 1983) – cavaliers
- *Dungeons & Dragons 3E* (2000) – sorcerers
- *Miniatures Handbook* (2003) – marshals
- *Complete Arcane* (2004) – warlocks
- *Dungeons & Dragons 4E* (2008) – warlords

The road to TSR's third RPG began with *War of Wizards* (1975), a game of dueling sorcerers by M.A.R. Barker. It was set in the same world as the actual RPG, *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975), which was published a few months later for Origins. *EPT* was a new RPG designed by Professor M.A.R. Barker in the wake of *D&D*'s success. Its game system cleaved near to *D&D* in some ways, including: its six (slightly different) characteristics, its familiar priestly spells of healing and detecting, and its d20-based combat system that cross-referenced character level and armor class. However it also featured one of the industry's first skill systems and some other variations.

EPT's biggest difference from *D&D* was that it focused on a huge, well-detailed setting, the world of Tékumel. This was at a time when *D&D* had pretty much no setting. Gygax's world of Greyhawk, Arneson's world of Blackmoor, and Kuntz's world of Kalibruhn were dungeons and little more, while Judges Guild's *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (1976) still lay in the future.

Despite the strength of its setting, *EPT* had a few strikes against it. Most notably the boxed game retailed for $25, which would be over $100 in today's money, and was two to five times as expensive as anything else on the market. TSR also offered no roleplaying support for Tékumel except in *Dragon* magazine, though they did put out one more Tékumel strategy game, the miniatures-based *Legion of the Petal Throne* (1977).

Following publication of *Empire of the Petal Throne*, Tékumel roleplaying was largely consigned to limbo for the rest of the '70s. Gary Rudolph tried to fill in the background of Tékumel with his Imperium Publishing (1977–1978), which produced a half-dozen or so generic books on armies, languages, and other topics. Though Imperium was short-lived, its publication of M.A.R. Barker's *Book of Ebon Bindings* (1978) remains a milestone for the industry, as it was an actual (and graphic) manual of demonology. *EPT* roleplaying would not receive a revival until after TSR sold the license to Gamescience in 1980; Tékumel's story gets more attention there.

TSR's last RPG release for 1975 was the second *D&D* supplement, *Blackmoor* (1975), which came out toward the end of the year. By now, TSR was running *late* on its schedule, a change from the start of the year. Then, they'd been buoyed up by unexpected profits, but now they were weighed down by the demands of running a company — pretty much the flip side of the same coin.

Where *Greyhawk* offered up Gygax's extended vision of *D&D*, *Blackmoor* instead present*ed* some of Dave Arneson's thoughts on the game. Arneson had not been able to work with the final proofs of the original game, so this was his first opportunity to comment on it. He introduced the new classes of monks and assassins (ironically the two classes which would be removed years later in *AD&D*

second edition), added more monsters, and presented something entirely unique and innovative: an adventure called "The Temple of the Frog." No one had ever before published an RPG adventure for other people to run: Arneson's "Temple" was a first. It also had another neat feature: science-fantasy elements, including battle armor, a teleporter, and even a scout craft! Science-fantasy of this sort was surprisingly common in early games by Arneson, Gygax, and others.

Two releases very late in the year kept TSR firmly in the wargame industry. Gary Gygax's *Classic Warfare* (1975) had been in development for seven years — since Gygax first became interested in ancient miniatures. Mike Carr's *Fight in the Skies* (1975) on the other hand was a new edition of a classic game, mostly recently published in Guidon Games' board games line; it also brought Carr closer into the orbit of TSR.

A final notable TSR release of 1975 wasn't a wargame or an RPG but instead a board game: Dave Megarry's *Dungeon!* (1975), which we've previously met as "The Dungeons of Pasha Cada." It was published for Origins, alongside *EPT*. Some latter-day sources claim that Megarry got as much as 10% of TSR's stock in exchange for the game, but a letter from October 1975 states that Megarry got a more typical 5% royalty — though some of those royalties might have later turned into stock.

As we've already seen, *Dungeon!* derived from Arneson's Blackmoor playing sessions, but where Arneson had envisioned a more continuous game with characters that grew from session to session, Megarry instead designed a one-off board game where players trooped through a dungeon on a singular basis. *Dungeon!* was the start of another entirely new gaming medium: the adventure game. Although these games have never been as popular as RPGs, they continue now in the modern day, currently spearheaded by Fantasy Flight Games with releases like *Descent: Journeys in the Dark* (2005) and *Runebound* (2004).

In other words, TSR didn't just innovate the gaming industry *once*.

A Year of Innovative Changes: 1975

This wave of innovative publishing in 1975 occurred against the backdrop of a constantly changing company that was evolving and expanding in several ways.

This kicked off with Gygax and Blume reorganizing the company, an unfortunate result of Don Kaye's death in January. It took a few months, but in July 1975 they officially formed TSR Hobbies Inc., a new company controlled by Gary Gygax, Brian Blume, and Brian's father, Melvin Blume. Gygax originally held 60% ownership of the new TSR, but as part of the reorganization the new partners had to buy out Kaye's widow, Donna, and pay other fees. Gygax was unable to

contribute a fair share of these costs, and so his ownership eventually dropped to 30% of the company, leaving him a minority stockholder — an issue we'll revisit down the road.

Simultaneously, TSR was becoming increasingly professional in another way: they were picking up distributors that helped them ship their games worldwide. That summer they announced Models and Figurines as their Australian distributor and Walter Luc Haas as their European distributor. A few months later Games Workshop came on board as an exclusive distributor in the UK, and by the end of the year TSR was also working with Lou Zocchi in the US.

Some of this international distribution was doubtless on a small-scale. Games Workshop, for example, sold just six copies of *D&D* when they initially ordered it from TSR. However, those small-scale orders soon began to ramp up, and doubtless contributed to *D&D*'s increased success throughout the year.

Where that first print run of 1,000 copies of *D&D* sold in about 11 months in 1974, a second print run of 1,000 copies and a third print run of 2,000 copies sold out


The Strategic Review

MILITARY MINIATURES * GAMES * SWORDS & SORCERY

SPRING 1975 Single Copy 50¢ Vol. 1, No. 1

What Was In Those Issues!?

The seven-issue run of *The Strategic Review* (1975–1976) offers an intriguing look at the early evolution of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Here are things of note from those early issues (including some repeated character classes):

- *The Strategic Review v1 #1* (Spring 1975) – mind flayers, solo dungeons
- *The Strategic Review v1 #2* (Summer 1975) – pole arms, rangers, ropers
- *The Strategic Review v1 #3* (Autumn 1975) – lurkers above, naga, piercers, shambling mounds, shriekers
- *The Strategic Review v1 #4* (Winter 1975) – clay golems, illusionists, ioun stones, pole arms
- *The Strategic Review v1 #5* (December 1975) – raksashas, trappers
- *The Strategic Review v2 #1* (February 1976) – alignments (law, chaos, good, and evil), bards, sage advice
- *The Strategic Review v2 #2* (April 1976) – catoblepases, DMing advice for towns

by the end of 1975, putting a total of 4,000 copies of TSR's ground-breaking game into circulation after two years. Year by year, those numbers would continue to climb.

TSR simultaneously started distributing other publishers' games — a pretty common tactic at the time, as the hobbyist industry was pretty fractured. They advertised their first distributed items in *The Strategic Review #3* (Autumn 1975): a set of three fantasy board games. To be precise, they were three fantasy board games based on the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien: Fact and Fantasy's *The Battle of Helm's Deep* (1974), Fact and Fantasy's *The Siege of Minas Tirith* (1975), and LORE's *Battle of the Five Armies* (1975). By the end of the year, TSR was also selling quite a few of Lou Zocchi's Gamescience games, but it's those three unlicensed Middle-earth games that would be of particular note, as we'll see later.

With success on many different levels, it's only natural that TSR started hiring staff. Gygax had long dreamed of becoming a professional game designer. He was hired as TSR's first full-time employee in mid-1975. By the end of the year, there were three more new employees. Tim Kask was brought on full-time shortly after Gen Con VIII (1975) as Periodicals Editor. He would edit the last 3 issues of *The Strategic Review* and the first 35 issues of *The Dragon* — a new magazine we'll get to momentarily. Then Terry Kuntz joined on October 1 as Service Manager, followed by Rob Kuntz.

Just around the corner, however, there was an even more notable hire — and one that seemed long overdue.

A Year of Expansion: 1976

In January 1976 Dave Arneson — the co-creator of *Dungeons & Dragons* — moved to Lake Geneva to join TSR as Research Director. It was part of a general exodus from the Twin Cities, which also brought designer Dave Megarry, editor Mike Carr, and staff artist Dave Sutherland to the company early that year.

> *"The Dungeon is open for business, tho' we won't have our Grand Opening, until April, because we seem to have a problem in receiving the inventory we ordered. When the inventory is complete, it will be the most complete line of wargaming goodies in the Midwest. Y'all stop by, hear?"*
>
> – Tim Kask, "In the Cauldron," *The Strategic Review v2 #2* (April 1976)

Meanwhile, TSR was changing locations once more. Just as TSR opened 1975 by moving into Gygax's basement, it started 1976 by moving into its first professional home, "The Dungeon Hobby Shop." This Main Street building provided TSR with professional office space, but it was part of a larger plan. Back in 1975 TSR began mail order sales to plan for retail sales. Now, The Dungeon Hobby Shop

allowed them to sell their own products to the Lake Geneva public — as well as those from a variety of other small publishers that they were already working with.

As you'd expect, the new year saw more historical publications — but at the same time TSR brought some of its earliest products to an end.

> "The Dragon *will be our magazine of fantasy, s & s, sci-fi, and roleplaying games, including* Diplomacy."
>
> – Tim Kask, "In the Cauldron," *The Strategic Review v2 #2* (April 1976)

That began with *The Strategic Review*, which published its seventh and last issue in April 1976 — but only so that TSR could spin off a new division, TSR Periodicals, and two new magazines, *The Dragon* (1976–2007) and *Little Wars* (1976–1978). TSR claimed that *The Dragon* was the first professional magazine dedicated to the fantasy and science-fiction industry. Though there were existing newsletters such as Games Workshop's *Owl and Weasel* (1975–1977), APAs like Lee Gold's *Alarums and Excursions* (1975-Present), and magazines dedicated primarily to science-fiction and fantasy board games such as Metagaming's *The Space Gamer* (1975–1980+), *The Dragon* was probably the first professional *roleplaying* magazine.

The Dragon was of course better looking and bigger than *The Strategic Review*. Prior to Kask coming aboard, *The Strategic Review* had been just 12 pages long and didn't have a cover. There had been slow improvements since, but when *The Dragon* appeared, it was clearly in a new publishing category. *The Dragon #1* (June 1976) had a full-color cover from the start, and weighed in at 32 pages.

Tim Kask's *The Dragon* was also surprisingly independent. As already noted TSR Periodicals (Dragon Publishing from 1980–1984) was its own division — but Kask was *really* serious about this division. TSR actually had to purchase advertising in *The Dragon* and conversely if *The Dragon* needed a TSR product, they had to go buy it!

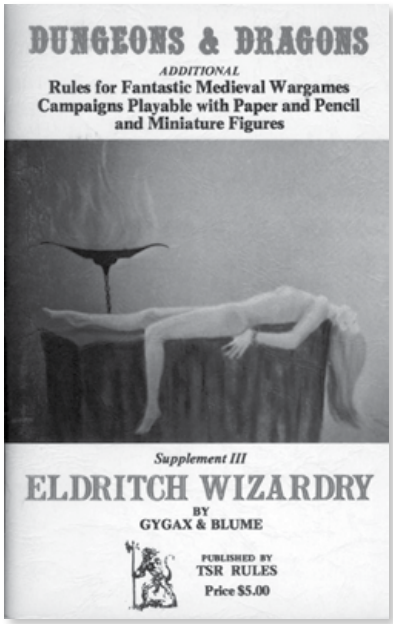
This was all part of Kask's belief that the magazine should *not* be a house organ. As a result games from other publishers — particularly GDW's *Traveller* — got notable coverage in early issues of the magazine; if *The Dragon* still covered TSR products more than anything else that was because, according to Kask: "you can only publish what is submitted."

This belief was also displayed in *how* the early *Dragon* covered TSR's games. Even when Gary Gygax started writing his "From the Sorcerer's Scroll" column (1978–1980, 1981–1983, 1984–1985), it was on Kask's terms and under his editing. *The Dragon*'s early attitude of independence may have come across best

a bit after Kask's tenure in *Dragon #55* (November 1981), which featured some surprisingly tepid reviews for one of TSR's biggest releases for the year.

> *"[W]e have bid farewell to the safe, secure world of the house organ, and have entered the arena of competitive magazine publishing."*
>
> – Tim Kask, "Dragon Rumbles," *The Dragon #1* (June 1976)

TSR's other new magazine, *Little Wars*, showed that the company hadn't left wargames behind yet. One of their most interesting games in the category appeared that year at Gen Con IX: *Lankhmar* (1976), designed by Harry Fischer and Fritz Leiber. It was a hex-based wargame, most notable because the creators of the fictional characters of Fafhrd and Grey Mouser had designed the original game — though Gary Gygax, Rob Kuntz, and Brad Stock then redeveloped it. It also represented the beginning of a long relationship between Leiber and TSR — a major bump in the road would come later.



1976 also saw the publication of two more *D&D* supplements, completing the original *D&D* rule set. Gary Gygax and Brian Blume's *Eldritch Wizardry* (1976) appeared in May. It included the first psionic rules (thanks in part to contributor Steve Marsh), the druid character class (thanks in part to contributor Dennis Sustare), and the classic set of *D&D* demons and artifacts. Next up was *Gods, Demi-Gods, and Heroes* (1976), the first list ever of gods to kill, which was released at Gen Con IX (1976). Rob Kuntz came up with the original idea and James M. Ward — now an English and History teacher — offered to help because of his knowledge in the field of mythology. That very busy Gen Con also saw the release of Gary Gygax's *Swords & Spells* (1976). It was the "grandson" of *Chainmail* and presented a new miniatures system for use with *D&D*.

Though *Gods, Demi-Gods, and Heroes* (and *Swords & Spells*) marked the end of the original *D&D* rulebooks, a few additional supplements did appear. Rather than being rules, these new releases were TSR's first gamemaster's aids: *Dungeon Geomorphs* and *Outdoor Geomorphs* (1976–1977) and *Monsters & Treasures*

Assortments (1977–1978). However, other than these simplistic maps of dungeons and lists of loot and guardians, TSR left the supplement field to others, some of who were already publishing products, as we'll see shortly.

TSR also published a fourth RPG in November, James M. Ward's *Metamorphosis: Alpha* (1976) — a light science-fiction game with some fantastic elements. The game came about after Ward told Gygax that TSR needed "a science-fiction version of the *D&D* game" and Gygax suggested that Ward write it. This led Ward to create a game set aboard a colony ship — which Ward saw as a dungeon in space thanks to its natural confines. Although the game was *D&D*-like, it didn't have an experience system. Players were instead expected to gather tech items to improve their characters. Ironically, one of the few other games ever to exclude an experience system was another SF game: GDW's *Traveller* (1977). With its strong setting aboard the starship *Warden*, *Metamorphosis: Alpha* was a success, selling strongly over the next two years.

Near the end of 1976 Dave Arneson chose to leave TSR over creative differences: he didn't like the more commercial direction in which the company was moving. Despite his departure, Arneson would continue receiving royalties on *D&D*, leading to some problems which we'll get to very shortly. Arneson's departure was unfortunately part of a general exodus, which included Dave Megarry and Rob Kuntz — costing TSR many of its earliest creators.

Plenty of newcomers appeared too, such as Skip Williams, a young resident of Lake Geneva who had been playing *Chainmail* with James M. Ward and Rob Kuntz since 1974. Williams would have quite a varied career: he joined the Dungeon Hobby Shop as a clerk (1976), later directed Gen Con (1980–1983), and was a staff member at the RPGA (1989) before becoming a designer at TSR. He was also the most long-lived "Sage" of *Dragon* magazine (1987–2004). In the far, far future, Williams would be the only member of the old guard working on Wizards of the Coast's third edition *Dungeons & Dragons* (2000) game.

Though Arneson complained TSR was becoming too commercial, that also meant that it was becoming a solid and professional publishing house.

It was also facing something entirely new: competition.

Allies & Competitors: 1975—1982

In later years TSR became widely known as a litigious company that held on to its intellectual property tightly. Therefore it's somewhat surprising that in its early years, while still on its way up, TSR was much friendlier when working with other companies and offered a few different licenses from 1976–1977.

Gygax had been working to license out miniatures as early as 1975. In 1976 he licensed Minifigs of England to produce D&D miniatures, which they initially

used to create a line of demihuman miniatures (1977) — including dwarves, elves, goblins, hobgoblins, orcs, gnolls, kobolds, and hobbits(!). The Old Guard simultaneously licensed rights for *EPT* miniatures.

Around the same time TSR arranged a deal with a small company called Wee Warriors, who was interested in publishing *Dungeons & Dragons* supplements. Though there was never any official use of the *D&D* trademark, four of Wee Warriors' *D&D* supplements were exclusively distributed by TSR.

On a much smaller scale, TSR's Tim Kask gave a young man by the name of Paul (now Jennell) Jaquays a casual license to publish a fanzine named *The Dungeoneer*. It was an amateur publication, but one of the earliest RPG periodicals of any sort, out the same month as *The Dragon #1* (June 1976).

TSR offered their most notable license to Bob Bledsaw, who asked for the right to publish *D&D* supplements. Despite their experience with Wee Warriors, TSR really didn't see much profit in gaming supplements, and so they initially offered Bledsaw's Judges Guild a casual, royalty-free license. After the publication of *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (1976), TSR started asking Bledsaw for money, and in return gave them the right to use the *Dungeons & Dragons* logo.

The stories of both *The Dungeoneer* and Judges Guild can be found in the history of the latter.

Around 1977 TSR also offered up a license to Games Workshop, their exclusive UK distributor. At first GW just produced their own editions of TSR books in Britain. Later, however, they published a few original products bearing the *Dungeons & Dragons* logo, including character sheets (1978), hex sheets (1978), and *Dungeon Floor Plans* (1979).

Meanwhile, *Dungeons & Dragons* (and thus TSR) was picking up competitors too. Flying Buffalo's *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975) was first. GDW's *En Garde!* (1975) — another early game that straddled the line between RPG and miniatures — soon followed. Later that year Flying Buffalo's *Starfaring* (1976) opened up a new genre of space-operatic roleplaying, though GDW's *Traveller* (1977) soon eclipsed it.

None of these other games ever caught up with *D&D* — and in fact no one ever truly competed with TSR in the roleplaying field. However TSR became much more protective of their own rights when they saw the dangers that competition could offer. They dropped Wee Warriors from their distribution in 1977 — or Wee Warriors left because of unpaid money, depending on who you ask. TSR then opted not to renew GW's licenses around 1980 and similarly ended Judges Guild's *D&D* and *AD&D* rights in 1980–1981. Though TSR moved over to Grenadier — an American miniatures licensee — in 1980, they would end that license too in 1982.

After their early deals with Minifigs, Wee Warriors, Judges Guild, and Games Workshop, TSR would withdraw from most licensing in the RPG field. As a result, in the late '70s some publishers began producing "generic fantasy sourcebooks" that were intended for use with *D&D* while others published complete games clearly derivative of *D&D*. The histories of DayStar West Media, Grimoire Games, and Midkemia Press cover some of the earliest examples of this trend.

Meanwhile, TSR began threatening and suing companies that used their trademarks without permission. The earliest of these threats were (not surprisingly) against companies that made use of the phrase "Dungeons & Dragons." Robert E. Ruppert got a letter in March 1976 because he'd published *Dungeons & Dragons* character sheets. *The Space Gamer* and Flying Buffalo got a letter around the same time due to Flying Buffalo's ads that contrasted *Tunnels & Trolls* and *Monsters! Monsters!* (1976) with *D&D*. Heritage Models was another early target for its use of the words "Dungeons & Dragons" in advertising. There would be many more.

The Tolkien Connection: 1974—1977

In talking about TSR's early interactions with the legal world, we should also touch upon their unlicensed use of J.R.R. Tolkien's mythology — and how it earned TSR some nasty legal letters of their own.

In the '60s, the copyright status of Tolkien's books in the U.S. was surprisingly up in the air. Ace Books published a totally unauthorized version of *The Lord of the Rings* (1965), in advance of the authorized edition by Ballantine Books (1965). These books considerably influenced the youth culture of the '60s. This in turn caused gamers to become interested in fantasy gaming. We've already seen this resulting in some unauthorized wargames created in 1974 and 1975 by super small publishers LORE and Fact and Fantasy.

It was against this background that Gygax and Arneson created *Dungeons & Dragons*. As a result, they probably didn't think much about appropriating some of Tolkien's creations and incorporating them into *D&D*. Thus hobbits were a player race and barrow wights, ents, nazgûl, and orcs were all mentioned as well.

Exactly how much Tolkien *really* influenced *D&D* is a different question. In *The Dragon #13* (April 1978) Rob Kuntz wrote, "Tolkien's does not fit well within the *D&D* game style." More famously in *Dragon #95* (March 1985) Gygax himself wrote, "The seeming parallels and inspirations are actually the results of a studied effort to capitalize on the then-current 'craze' for Tolkien's literature." He claimed that Tolkien wasn't a major influence on *D&D*. He further said that if it looked like Tolkien was an influence, it was because they both used the same folklore as sources, and then if that *still* looked like Tolkien was an influence, that's because he was trying to fool people into buying the game.

Mini-History

Wee Warriors: 1974?—1978, 2000—2006

Wee Warriors is a company that got in on the ground floor of the RPG business. They *could* have been another Judges Guild or even GDW, but instead they lasted for just a couple of years and are today a footnote in an RPG history.

The company was founded by Pete Kerestan, perhaps as early as late 1974, the same year that *D&D* itself was released – though there are some doubts about the 1974 date, as the earliest definitive date for a Wee Warriors publication is the September 1975 release of *The Character Archaic*. In 1974 Kerestan was still in the army, but had time to play around with printing character sheets in El Segundo, California. It wasn't until 1975, when Kerestan got out of the army and set up his own hobby shop, that Wee Warriors became available to the public. Kerestan was aided in his endeavors by author/artist Judy Kerestan and artist Brad "Morno" Schenck.

The earliest Wee Warriors supplements were sold out of the trunk of Kerestan's car, a time-honored tradition in the young roleplaying field. However in 1976 TSR picked them up for exclusive distribution. Four of the first Wee Warriors products got more widely sold in this manner: *The Character Archaic* (1975), *Palace of the Vampire Queen* (1976), *The Dwarven Glory* (1977), and *The Endless Dungeon* (1977).

These Wee Warriors products were generally ground-breaking. *The Character Archaic* was the first commercial character record sheet (usable with both *D&D* and *Empire of the Petal Throne*), while *Palace of the Vampire Queen* was the first standalone adventure. *Palace* and *Glory* were both set in the Kingdom of Baylor, which comprised a very early campaign world – one that was further expanded by a later publication, *The Misty Isles* (1977), which set Baylor amidst a series of islands.

The TSR/Wee Warriors agreement ended in 1977. Wee Warriors states that it was due to non-payment on TSR's part. Afterward, Lou Zocchi distributed the Wee Warriors line. Wee Warriors continued to put out a few RPG supplements, such as *The Misty Isles* and the even later *Dungeon Designer's Kit* (1978), but beyond that they moved on to small board games and wargames with *Dogtags* (1978) – a game of "man to man squad actions in the European Theatre 1944" – being one of their last releases.

Another teeny company called Cosmic Frog Productions was associated with Wee Warriors throughout its life. That was the company name for artist Morno. He advertised it as early as 1975, for those looking for "fantasy and legendary illustration." One of Wee Warrior's later wargames, *Dragonlord* (1977), was entirely the work of Morno and thus was listed as a Cosmic Frog co-production.

After a 20-year hiatus, weewarriors.com appeared on the web in 2000 with a promise that it would soon have "Resin products, Paper game aids, Cast miniatures." Though the website disappeared, a "weewarriors" eBay store run by Peter Kerestan soon after started selling miniatures. Some 1717 sales later, in 2006, Wee Warriors was accused of recasting miniatures from both Amazon Miniatures and Shadowforge Miniatures and ordered to cease & desist, casting somewhat of a pall on the company's rich history.

"As anyone familiar with both D&D *games and Tolkien works can affirm, there is no resemblance between the two, and it is well-nigh impossible to recreate any Tolkien-based fantasy while remaining within the boundaries of the game system."*

– Gary Gygax, "The influence of J. R. R. Tolkien on the *D&D* and *AD&D* games," *Dragon #95* (March 1985)

Readers can decide for themselves how much they think Tolkien influenced *D&D*, particularly in its TSR-based iterations. However they should know that by 1978 TSR had reasons to try to minimize the game's connection to Middle-earth — because by then there been legal threats over the issue.

The problems *probably* started with those three Middle-earth wargames that TSR began selling in 1975. By the next year they'd acquired rights to at least *Battle of the Five Armies*. As a result they reprinted it themselves, first in a bagged edition (1976), then in a box (1977).

Meanwhile, Saul Zaentz had purchased the non-literary rights to J.R.R. Tolkien's works, which he would use to produce Ralph Bakshi's animated *The Lord of the Rings* (1978). It was Zaentz — through his Elan Merchandising division — that delivered a cease & desist letter to TSR late in 1977 for their use of material copyrighted by Tolkien.

It's just as likely that the cease & desist letter came about due to TSR's nice new *Five Armies* game as from the Tolkien references in *D&D*. In any case, TSR was forced to retire the *Five Armies* game and also scrub Tolkien references out of future releases of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Around the same time, Fact and Fantasy's games disappeared, as did Minifigs UK's unlicensed "Mythical Earth" line — probably all as a result of Elan's new legal rights.

The rights held by Elan Merchandising, by the by, have shifted around a bit in Saul Zaentz's corporate structure over the years. From the '80s through the '00s you would instead have heard of Tolkien Enterprises — who features in the story of ICE — while more recently you'd hear of Middle-earth Enterprises.

Before closing out the topic of Tolkien entirely, it's worth considering who Gygax attributed as *D&D*'s "real" influences in *Dragon #95*. There he said that the game's major influences were "Robert E. Howard, L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, Fritz Leiber, Poul Anderson, A. Merritt, and H. P. Lovecraft." Of course J.R.R. Tolkien is right alongside those luminaries in "Appendix N" for *AD&D* ... a topic that we're just now approaching.

Basic & Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: 1977—1980

Having spent some time examining how TSR was interacting with the rest of the world in the mid-to-late '70s, we should return now to their actual publications. Here we find something rather surprising: in 1977 TSR's premiere game, *Dungeons & Dragons*, simultaneously moved in two very different directions.

First, J. Eric Holmes — a doctor and professor of neurology, and also the author of a Pellucidar pastiche called *Mahars of Pellucidar* (1976) — approached TSR with an offer to write an introductory version of *D&D*. The original game targeted the college-age crowd, while Holmes wanted to expand the game's demographics to younger players — and possibly to get it into the mass market as well. He also wanted to make it possible to actually learn the game by reading the rules, which had always been a point of contention for the game. This all dovetailed nicely with TSR's desire to unify and clarify *D&D*, which had been a concern since at least early 1976, and so Holmes was brought on to create a simplified game.

Holmes' *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set* (1977) was a revision of Gygax and Arneson's original RPG plus the *Greyhawk* supplement. It was intended to increase access to *D&D* through "maximum availability and minimum difficulty." It only took players through the first three levels of play, with the idea being that they'd then be ready to try out the original *D&D* game. The boxed set originally included geomorphs and monster and treasure lists, so that GMs could easily *create* dungeons, but TSR soon realized things needed to be even easier, resulting in first *Basic Set* adventures, a topic we'll return to.

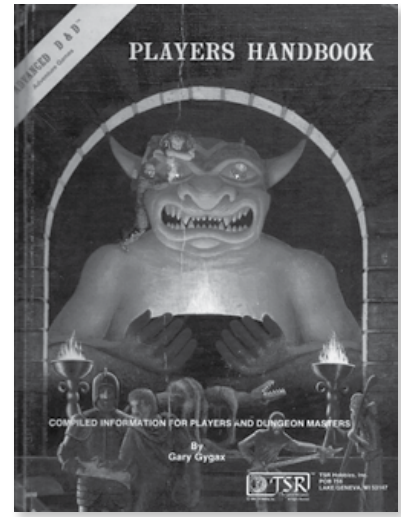


"During a lull in the action, I am apt to receive several notes from those present: 'My thief is going to pick the paladin's pocket.' 'My magic-user is casting a Detect Magic on the staff the gnome just found.' 'My dwarf is going to slip some of the unknown potion into the elf's canteen.' While I do have difficulty, sometimes, deciding (and remembering) who did what to whom, the players never erupt into bloodshed. The characters do, rather frequently."

– John Eric Holmes, "Confessions of a Dungeon Master," *Psychology Today v14 #6* (November 1980)

The result was a best-seller that got out into the mass market, just as Holmes hoped. By the end of 1978, Gygax said it was selling 4,000 copies a month — precisely what *OD&D* had sold in all of 1974 and 1975. Within three years, Gygax would talk about there being "500,000 *D&D* players" thanks to the *Basic Set*.

Meanwhile Gary Gygax was already working on a *more* complex version of *D&D* that he called "Advanced Dungeons & Dragons." Where the original *D&D* (and Holmes' *Basic D&D*) was somewhat freeform and offered referees the opportunity to make their own decisions, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* instead was a more rigorously defined game system intended to codify *D&D*. This was partly done to better support tournament play, but Gygax had also grown increasingly unhappy with how *D&D* was being played differently all across the world. So he wrote a game that was less opened-ended and had "more control over its audience."



AD&D was released in four volumes. That December the *Monster Manual* (1977) was published. It would have been the first collection of RPG monsters if not for Chaosium's publication of *All the Worlds' Monsters* (1977), a "generic" supplement, earlier that year. Regardless, it was the first hardcover roleplaying release. The *AD&D Players Handbook* (1978) and *Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979) followed over the next year and a half (leaving the entire roleplaying industry in suspense throughout much of 1978).

Finally, *Deities & Demigods* (1980) ended the *AD&D* series with another look at gods — just like *Supplement IV* for the original *D&D*. Though today we wouldn't consider *Deities & Demigods* a "core" book, it had been conceived as part of the four-book *AD&D* series from the start. *Deities* author James M. Ward finally joined TSR full-time just before its publication.

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons was a very necessary revision of the original *D&D* game. As the first RPG, *D&D* had no guidelines for *how* to create an RPG. The original *D&D* rules had thus been erratad, modified, and amended as they were spread out among seven books. *AD&D* finally collected all that together, with several years of hindsight available. However, *AD&D* was also the starting point of many controversies and long-term problems.

First, it effectively split the *D&D* line into thirds, with the original *D&D*, *Basic D&D*, and *Advanced D&D* now all in print. People at the time just called them all *Dungeons & Dragons*, but as we'll see the lines would grow further apart, until they were truly different games.

Second, it sparked the trend of rules being more thorough and being required for "official" games. Whether designers were writing "official" *D&D* supplements and whether players were playing "official" *D&D* games caused raging arguments throughout the '80s, many of them seen in *Dragon* magazine. It was also one of the points of contention between TSR and Judges Guild in the final years of that license.

> *"Additions to and augmentations of certain parts of the* D&D *rules are fine. Variants which change the rules so as to imbalance the game or change it are most certainly not."*
>
> – Gary Gygax, "From the Sorcerer's Scroll," *The Dragon #16* (July 1978)

Third, it created a rift between Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson that ultimately put TSR in some legal peril. Gygax claimed *AD&D* as his own property, saying that Arneson was due no royalties from it. This resulted in the 1979 filing of a lawsuit by Arneson that would last two years, before being settled in March 1981. Though the 1981 agreement was confidential, a later 1985 lawsuit over *Monster Manual II* royalties revealed some of the details: under the deal, Arneson earned royalties for some of the *AD&D* books, including the *Monster Manual*, at a rate of 2.5% of the cover price — to a total of no more than $1.2 million dollars.

(Amusingly, Arneson won that second lawsuit from 1985 based on the court coming to the conclusion that the *Monster Manual II* was a "revised edition" of the *Monster Manual*, using the typically tortured legal logic that makes people tell lawyer jokes.)

Looking back from the 21st century, we're likely to think of *AD&D* as being TSR's most successful game, but this wasn't true in the early '80s when *Basic D&D* was selling like gangbusters. In *The Dragon #35* (March 1980), while talking about his work on a *Basic Set* adventure, Gygax had to clarify: "This is not to say that *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* has been abandoned." The idea of *AD&D* being abandoned in favor of a simpler game was clearly a real fear. It would take a number of years for the trend to reverse, as new players decreased and TSR started selling more to its existing base of customers.

Growing Staff, Changing Priorities: 1977—1980

With all of this emphasis on RPGs, it's no surprise that TSR was slowly moving away from wargames. We've already seen some of this, such as the cancellation of the *Star Probe* trilogy after 1977. However, the trend was most obvious in the highs and lows of *Little Wars* magazine.

In 1977, *Little Wars* was doing well enough that Joe Orlowski was brought in to manage the wargame magazine; he was TSR Periodicals' second employee. Just a year later, with *Little Wars #12* (1978), the magazine came to an end. It was theoretically merged into *The Dragon* with issue #22 (February 1979), but extensive wargaming coverage only lasted for a year or two.

Meanwhile, the Periodicals division kept growing *despite* the loss of *Little Wars*. Orlowski became TSR's Convention Director, but was immediately replaced on TSR Periodicals' staff by Gary "Jake" Jaquet. Kim Mohan joined next, during the summer. By the following year TSR Periodicals would have multiple new staff, and would even get into the distribution business for other magazines, including GW's *White Dwarf*.

The rest of TSR was growing as well. Other notable hires in the period include editors Harold Johnson and Frank Mentzer, who joined in 1979 and 1980, respectively. Then there were two entirely new *departments* that were both created *and* filled with personnel.

The Design Department came first and showed TSR's new emphasis on role-playing. Gygax premiered it with Lawrence Schick and Jean Wells in 1979. Once Schick took over as head of the department, he hired David "Zeb" Cook and Tom Moldvay, who would soon prove very important to *D&D*'s next evolutionary step.

A short-lived Development Department appeared around 1980 to supplement the Design Department. It was led by Al Hammack. The developers would take a rough draft from the Design Department, playtest it, troubleshoot it, and generally polish up the manuscript before sending it on to Production. Kevin Hendryx and Paul Reiche III were two of the earliest hires for the department.

> *"It wasn't until Fred 9803 that my character finally lived through more than two adventures. I was on a roll."*
>
> – David "Zeb" Cook, "First Quest: Older than Dirt," *Dragon #207* (July 1994)

Many of these new hires — including Cook, Johnson, Mentzer, Moldvay, and Wells — were a new sort of employee: they'd been players who had enjoyed *Dungeons & Dragons* before they ever came to TSR. Jean Wells, on the other hand, was a different sort of new hire for TSR; she was the company's only female designer.

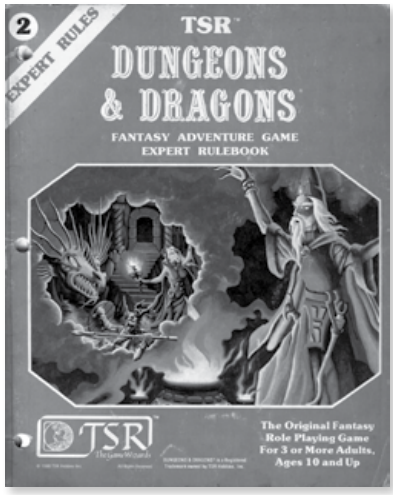
Back to Basics: 1981

With a growing staff — and with *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* now complete — the Design Department was able to work on a new priority: a second edition of Holmes' bestselling *Basic Set* (1981). The new edition, developed by Tom Moldvay, explicitly broke ties between *Basic D&D* and *AD&D*, creating a division that would last for over a decade.

The new *Basic Set* was also simplified over the Holmes version. After the tremendous growth of the previous years, Moldvay said that the majority of *D&D* players were now in junior high or high school, and he wanted to appeal to them. Therefore the new rulebook had fewer spells, fewer character classes, and overall fewer complexities. There was even a new section on how to GM games — which doubtless used lessons hard-won from the two introductory adventures that TSR had published, a topic we'll return to.

Moldvay's *Basic D&D* was also notable for another reason. It said right in the introduction: "The purpose of these 'rules' is to provide guidelines that enable you to play and have fun, so don't feel absolutely bound to them." This was the philosophy of the original *D&D* that had been pushed out by *AD&D*'s new, more rigid mechanics. *Basic D&D* thus remained an island of creativity in the new age.

There was another important reason for the release of the new *Basic Set*. It was created to match a totally new boxed set, *Expert Dungeons & Dragons* (1981), created by fellow new hire Zeb Cook. When Holmes' original *Basic Set* was first released, there was real question as to whether it should direct players toward the original *D&D* or *AD&D*. Though Gygax did incorporate some material from the *AD&D* outlines into the original *Basic Set*, most players were forced to move on to the more complex original game, because that's what was available.



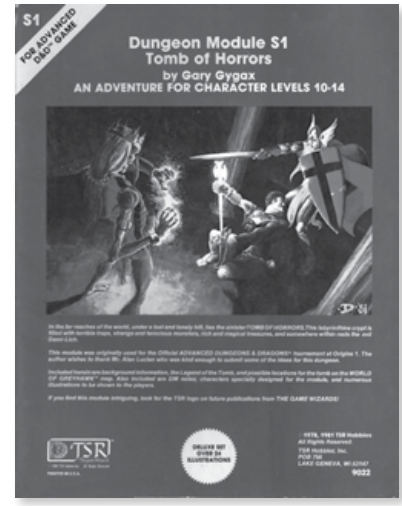
Now, with so many new players entering the game via *Basic D&D*, the question of how to retain them was even more important. TSR had opted to create an *Expert Set* that took them from levels 4–14. Even before the release of *Expert D&D*, Gygax announced that it'd be followed by a "Masters Set" that would take players from levels 15–36, but as we'd see, this follow-up book would never appear in this iteration of *Basic D&D*.

D&D Supplements & Growth: 1978—1981

Having stepped through the major iterations of *D&D* that appeared from 1977 through 1981 — and the changes in priorities and staff that accompanied them — we're now going to see how TSR supplemented those new games. You'll recall that in 1977 they produced just a few supplements, including some geomorphs and some random treasure and monsters lists. However, TSR hadn't yet touched upon two major categories of supplement production, both of which were already been supported by Judges Guild: background books and (more importantly) adventures.

Though TSR didn't publish adventures before 1978, that doesn't mean that they weren't writing them. Adventures, after all, were necessary for games — particularly for the tournament games that *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* would soon be empowering.

Thus Gary Gygax's *Tomb of Horrors* — one of the most infamous dungeons ever, thanks to its traps and high mortality rate — ran at Origins I (1975). It was soon followed by Rob Kuntz's "The Sunken City" at Gen Con VIII (1975). The next year Gygax's *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* — infamous for its science-fantasy elements, including space ship and ray guns — ran at Origins II (1976). Then Gygax's *The Lost Caverns of Tsojconth* ran at Winterfest V (1976). The Metro Detroit Gamers published *that* adventure (with TSR's permission) in an estimated run of 300 copies. It became Gygax's first published adventure, and one of the first published adventures ever — alongside the classics we've already met, "The Temple of the Frog" and *Palace of the Vampire Queen*.



However, tournament adventures and TSR publication didn't come together for two more years. By that time, TSR was likely seeing the success of companies like Judges Guild and Wee Warriors and wanted to get involved in that business. By coincidence, Gygax had some free time in between writing the three *AD&D* volumes, when he needed to clear his head and work on something different.

As a result, TSR ran a series of Gygaxian adventures about giants as the Origins IV (1978) *D&D* tournament, then published them beginning with *G1: Steading of the Hill Giant Chief* (1978), which was their first adventure. TSR followed that up at Gen Con XI (1978)'s *D&D* Open Tournament with a deep delving adventure

that became the "D" *Descent* adventure series (1978). TSR ended the year by publishing the already-classic *S1: Tomb of Horrors* (1978) as their seventh adventure.

The one adventure notably missing from TSR's first year of publication was the finale to the "G" and "D" adventure series. As we'll see, it would take a few years for *Q1* to appear.

Other *AD&D* adventures of note in these early years included: the "A" *Slavers* series (1980–1981), a set of tournament adventures originally run as the *D&D* Open at Gen Con XIII (1980); *S2: White Plume Mountain* (1979), one of the first adventures that required thought, not just hacking and slashing; and *T1: The Village of Hommlet* (1979), TSR's first adventure dealing with a village, not just a dungeon, and thus the first setting book truly detailing a Greyhawk locale. A follow-up to *Hommlet* called *The Temple of Elemental Evil* was promised, but didn't appear for many years.

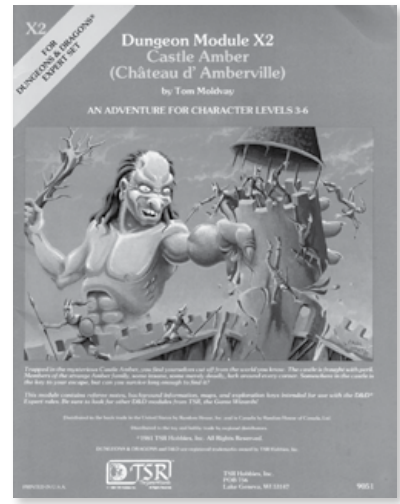


TSR also decided to support *Basic D&D* with adventures. Mike Carr's *B1: In Search of the Unknown* (1979) and Gary Gygax's *B2: The Keep on the Borderlands* (1980) led the way. Each provided tons of GMing advice as well as an introductory dungeon. GMs were expected to fill in the contents of the dungeon themselves in *Search*, but it was ultimately decided that this made things too hard for a new GM. Thus *Keep* offered up a completely filled dungeon. *Search* was packaged with the first edition *Basic Set* for about one year, and then *Keep* filled that slot for the rest of the first edition's run and the entirety of the second edition run. One report suggests that, as a result, over one-and-a-half-million copies of *The Keep on the Borderlands* were eventually printed, making it the most popular RPG module ever.

A few other early *Basic D&D* adventures were of some note as well:

B3: Palace of the Silver Princess (1981), by Jean Wells, was TSR's first adventure by a female designer. Unfortunately, it also became TSR's first adventure that was recalled, allegedly due to issues with the Erol Otus artwork. It was soon after re-released in a second printing by Tom Moldvay *and* Jean Wells. Because of the recall, the first edition *Palace* has become one of the rarest TSR collector items.

X1: The Isle of Dread (1981) was published with the new *Expert Set*. Those rules centered on "wilderness" adventuring, and *The Isle of Dread* was TSR's first adventure about killing monsters in jungles, forests, and other wilderness areas, rather than in dungeons. It was also the first book to really define the campaign setting of *D&D*'s "Known World," though it would be six years before the setting was more broadly expanded.



X2: Castle Amber (1981) continuing right on with that detailing of the Known World by linking it to writer Clark Ashton Smith's province of Averoigne. *Castle Amber* was an early TSR licensed setting as well as an early (but light) Cthulhu connection — released the exact same year that Chaosium was publishing *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) itself.

Meanwhile, TSR was getting into the setting business too — which was one reason that Gygax was having problems finding time for adventures like *Q1* and *The Temple of Elemental Evil*.

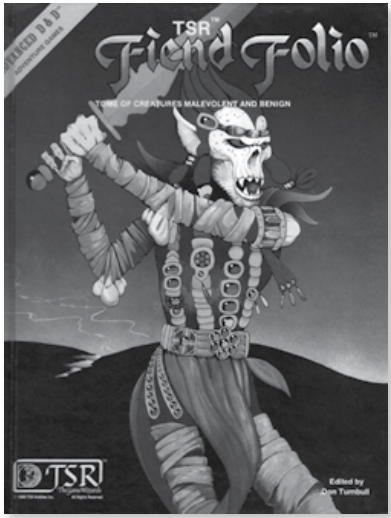
Gygax's *The World of Greyhawk Fantasy World Setting* (1980) was a folio that depicted TSR's first complete campaign world for *AD&D*. Unlike later worlds such as the Forgotten Realms, Greyhawk was somewhat abstract, with broad sweeps of land creating a framework for a campaign world, but offering few specifics. And there was reason for that: Gary Gygax made up much of the world on the spot, drawing it to fit two maps of the precise size that TSR could publish. They were beautiful maps, though, thanks in large part to artist Darlene, who made them the main draw of the folio.

The World of Greyhawk was planned to kick off a new emphasis on the Greyhawk campaign world. Minifigs of the UK was supposed to be working on an "Armies of Greyhawk" set of miniatures rules, while TSR was planning a "City of Greyhawk" folio. Meanwhile, Skip Williams was announced as the author of "Shadowland," depicting Greyhawk's plane of shadow. It would have been a huge explosion of Greyhawk material — but none of it appeared, though Minifigs did create a nice line of Greyhawk miniatures (1980) to go with their existing *D&D* miniatures line. The next year, Gygax would bring in some old friends to better revitalize and expand Greyhawk, but we'll need to wait a bit for the results of that, as much more was going on at TSR at the time.

With successful adventures and sourcebooks under their belt, by 1981 TSR was poised to take advantage of the *D&D* supplement market that was now opening up due to the termination of their long-running licenses with Judges Guild. However, these new supplements were *not* the whole of TSR's *D&D* production.

Following the release of the four core *AD&D* books, TSR decided to keep publishing one hardcover *AD&D* book each year, but their first new release came from a very innovative direction: Britain.

At the time, interest in *D&D* was growing in the British Isles thanks primarily to Games Workshop's *White Dwarf* magazine. Within its pages, one Don Turnbull was editing a regular monster column, called "The Fiend Factory," which collected together reader contributions. It was successful enough that Games Workshop decided to produce a book of these monsters, which was to be called the *Fiend Folio*. GW arranged with TSR for their *Fiend Folio* to be an "official" *AD&D* release, as their earlier gaming accessories had been. Turnbull finished the book for GW around September 1979 ... after which time it sat around for two years! The problem was that agreements over the *AD&D* license fell apart, and it would be two years before a deal was finally made. In the end, it wasn't Games Workshop who published *Fiend Folio* (1981), but instead TSR, as their fifth *AD&D* hardcover.



Though the *Fiend Folio* certainly had some silly monsters (such as the flail snail and the much-satirized flumph), it also was influential in a number of ways. First, it got Don Turnbull directly involved with TSR — a relationship that would only increase in the future. Second, it was the first major British addition to the *D&D* game. Third, it introduced many notable monsters to the game, among them the death knight, the githyanki, the githzerai, and the slaads.

The author of those four greats was none other than Charles Stross, who has since become a *Locus* and Hugo winning novelist.

The Settings of Yore: Greyhawk

When one speaks of the oldest RPG worlds, there are two – Greyhawk and Blackmoor, for within those campaigns lay the genesis of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Greyhawk was the world of Gary Gygax. Perhaps because of its primal origins or perhaps because of the fact that it came to be owned by a company (TSR) rather a person (Gygax), it has been one of the most malleable RPG worlds ever – mutating and changing many times over the years.

The first view of what would become Greyhawk appeared in *The Domesday Book #9* (early 1971) as a "mythical world" for the Castle & Crusade Society. A map showed familiar names such as the Dry Steppes, the Sea of Dust, and (most importantly) the Nir Dyv, a "Lake of Unknown Depth." Jon Peterson – author of *Playing at the World* – surmises that both the city of Greyhawk and the Barony of Blackmoor appear on the map, as it was intended to be a world held in common by the Society's members.

Greyhawk as a roleplaying setting came into existence in 1972 when Gygax began preparing dungeons for play with *D&D*. Outside of Gygax's family, the other earliest travelers to Greyhawk were Don Kaye ("Murlynd"), Rob Kuntz ("Robilar"), and Terry Kuntz ("Terik"). These primordial players mostly stayed within the dungeons of Castle Greyhawk, which became 13 levels deep by late 1973 – but Gygax did have more of the world lightly sketched out. Because Gygax envisioned a sort of "parallel Earth," the version of Oerth (pronounced "Oith," as if you had a Brooklyn accent) looked much like our own Earth, but filled with imaginary cities and countries.

Greyhawk underwent its next metamorphosis when Gygax brought Rob Kuntz in as a co-DM for his campaign (probably sometime in 1974, the same year that *D&D* was actually published). Kuntz had previously run his own *D&D* game, where players (Gygax chief among them) ventured into Castle El Raja Key in the world of Kalibruhn. Now, much of El Raja Key was incorporated directly into Castle Greyhawk. Afterward, Gygax and Kuntz created new levels together. By the campaign's end in 1985, the dungeons beneath Castle Greyhawk would be somewhere between 50 and 70 levels deep, depending on who you ask.

Scant hints of Gygax and Kuntz's earliest Greyhawk can be found in articles that Gary Gygax wrote for *El Conquistador*, *Great Plains Game Players Newsletter*, and *Wargamer's Digest* – largely in an attempt to advertise *D&D* on the cheap. It also shows up in "The Gnome Cache," a serialized story that Gygax wrote under the pen name "Garrison Ernst" from *The Dragon #1* (June 1976) through #7 (June 1977). However it would be years before TSR and Gygax dealt with the world in any depth.

There was another metamorphosis for Greyhawk several years later when TSR produced the *World of Greyhawk Fantasy World Setting* folio (1980). Gygax was

asked to produce a map of the world, and he decided that TSR's readers wouldn't be interested in adventuring upon a map of the real world, so he created something new. To do so, he figured out what size of map TSR could print, and then drew out a new world to exactly fit the two maps that would be included with the game. It still featured many of the locales from his original world of Oerth, but the geography was all new. Looking at a modern map of Oerth, you can just barely imagine that the Nyr Dyv – which Castle Greyhawk sits upon – was once the Great Lakes.

Following the publication of that folio, Gygax and Kuntz published some of their original Greyhawk adventures in products ranging from *WG4: The Forgotten Temple of Tharizdun* (1982) to *WG6: Isle of the Ape* (1985). However Greyhawk was simultaneously incorporating material from a variety of other authors. This began with Lawrence Schick's *S2: White Plume Mountain* (1979) and also included the "A" *Slavers* series (1980–1981), by a variety of writers, and the early TSR UK adventures *U1-U3* (1981–1983), by Dave Browne and Don Turnbull. The most notable addition in this period was the inclusion of Lendore Isle – the home of Len Lakofka's campaign – in *L1: The Secret of Bone Hill* (1981).

An even more expansive addition came with the incorporation of Frank Mentzer's continent of Aquaria – the home of his campaign running since 1976 and also the setting of his RPGA modules, four of which were published by TSR and the RPGA, starting with *R1: To the Aid of Falx* (1982). There's little doubt that Gygax intended Aquaria to be a previously unknown eastern continent in Oerth, but the idea was never really explored following Gygax's 1985 departure from TSR. In fact, after Mentzer's four RPGA modules were reprinted as *I12: Egg of the Phoenix* (1987), some of the characters found therein were then incorporated into *FR5: The Savage Frontier* (1988), a Forgotten Realms(!) supplement – which isn't a surprise, given the speed with which TSR was incorporating *everything* into the Realms at the time, from Moonshae Isles to Bloodstone Pass.

After Gygax left TSR in 1985, the Greyhawk setting *forked*. Gygax himself retained rights to his fictional character, Gord the Rogue – as well as a few characters whose names derived from his, such as Zagyg the Mad Wizard. Over the next several years, Gygax used those rights to publish a series of Gord the Rogue novels ending with *Dance of Demons* (1988) in which Gygax destroyed Oerth (!) and replaced it with the world of Yarth – which may or may not have been the Aerth of *Mythus* (1992).

Meanwhile, TSR responded to Gygax's departure by rolling out the Forgotten Realms.

Greyhawk *did* get some fictional attention when TSR continued Gary Gygax's "Greyhawk Adventures" novels with new books by Rose Estes, starting with *Master Wolf* (1987) and ending with *The Eyes Have It* (1989). However, TSR published only

scattered RPG supplements until *AD&D* second edition, which saw the publication of the beautiful *The City of Greyhawk* (1989) box and the *WGR1: Greyhawk Ruins* (1990) book. Neither of these locales had much in common with the original locations created by Gygax & Kuntz almost 20 years prior, showing how Greyhawk continued to metamorphize and change – though James M. Ward and some of players of those early games did *try* to get the feel right. Around the same time, TSR published Robin Wayne Bailey's *Nightwatch* (1990) novel, which was set in Greyhawk City but didn't feature the "Greyhawk Adventures" trade dress at all – showing the weakness of the setting at TSR.

1992 saw a much more substantive "reboot" of Greyhawk overseen by Carl Sargent. He pushed forward the timeline several years and gave the setting a cohesive metastory: a series of wars, chronicled in the *WGS* adventure series (1991) and *Greyhawk Wars* (1991), led to a darker, grittier state for the world, itself detailed in *From the Ashes* (1992). This new vision of Greyhawk continued until TSR cancelled the line two years later.

Wizards of the Coast opted to reboot the world again, moving the timeline ahead once more through the publication of *Return of the Eight* (1998) and *The Adventure Begins* (1998), both by Roger E. Moore. Sargent's darkness lightened and the setting regained some of its earlier, Gygaxian feel.

Unfortunately, the setting's 1998 renewal quickly fizzled out – at least for *D&D*. After a handful of original adventures (1998), several "Returns" to past Greyhawk adventures (1998–2001), and a new series of novels supporting the "Return" adventures (1999–2002), Wizards of the Coast consigned Greyhawk to being the "default" setting for *D&D* – which is to say the largely undetailed background you see in the rulebooks.

Living Greyhawk (2000–2008) was simultaneously made into the official RPGA campaign (replacing RPGA's ancient Living City Forgotten Realms campaign), but other than a few Wizards publications like *Living Greyhawk Gazetteer* (2000), the Living Greyhawk campaign was considered "unofficial" – though *Expedition to the Ruins of Greyhawk* (2007), a late Wizards Greyhawk adventure, was set far enough ahead in the timeline to accommodate the Living events.

Meanwhile, Greyhawk got a *massive* expansion in another medium thanks to Chris Pramas' work on the *Chainmail Miniatures Game* (2001). It was set in the Sundered Empire, located on a heretofore-unknown subcontinent in Western Oerik. As releases for *Chainmail* progressed, Pramas snuck in an increasing number of connections to eastern Oerik, ending with a society of Drow who had ties to the classic "D" *Descent* series of adventures (1978). Unfortunately, roleplaying supplements never

codified Pramas' work for *D&D* proper, and thus it's largely forgotten today – though his histories and backgrounds can still be found in *Dragon #285* (July 2001) through *Dragon #296* (June 2002).

Nowadays, Greyhawk is "unofficial" all around, for it has returned to the hands of its fans and its earliest creators. The *Oerth Journal* (1995-Present) has long been an online source for fannish Greyhawk material, while *Dungeon* and *Dragon* magazines both gave some attention to Greyhawk while being published by Paizo Publishing, because some of their editors (including Erik Mona, one-time editor of the *Oerth Journal*) were fans; all three of Paizo's *Dungeon* adventure paths (2003–2007) were officially (though lightly) set in the world of Greyhawk.

Gary Gygax returned to writing about Greyhawk in the last years of his life by publishing Castle Zagyg through Troll Lord Games (2005–2008). Those books represented his best attempt to recreate the Castle Greyhawk of 1972–1985, but were far from complete at the time of his death.

Rob Kuntz has also begun republishing his old campaign materials, including some dungeon levels that were either written for Castle Greyhawk or incorporated into it via Castle El Raja Key. This has most notably included *RJK1: Bottle City* (2007) and *The Original Living Room* (2007), both of which were parts of the shared Castle Greyhawk.

The constant reinvention of Castle Greyhawk – the most famous dungeon in Oerth – shows how much the entire campaign world has changed. The actual dungeons that were run from 1972–1985 have never been published. They were hinted at in some early supplements, but those hints and the modern-day Gygax and Kuntz recreations are the only insights we have into those original games.

The first actual printed version of the dungeon was the farcical *WG7: Castle Greyhawk* (1988), which had nothing to do with the original and which was thankfully followed by the more serious *WGR1: Greyhawk Ruins* (1990) a few years later. The latter supplement was recently remade into the 3E-compatible *Expedition to the Ruins of Greyhawk* (2007), published by Wizards of the Coast, but written by some familiar names from Paizo, such as Erik Mona and James Jacobs.

TSR also published three modules that represented extraplanar regions originally connected to the castle back in the original Lake Geneva campaign: *EX1: Dungeonland* (1983), *EX2: The Land Beyond the Magic Mirror* (1983), and *WG6: Isle of the Ape* (1985).

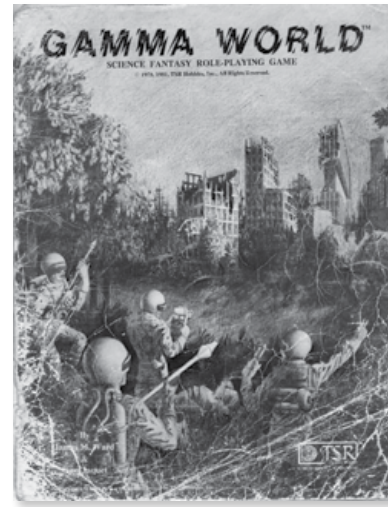
Besides all of these Castle Greyhawk variants, parts of Castle El Raja Key have also been published, as is more fully described in the history of Creations Unlimited.

So which Castle Greyhawk is the real and correct one? As with many things RPG, the answer is, "the one in *your* campaign."

Mutants, Gunfighters, Spies, Gangsters & Knight Hawks: 1978—1983

Another way in which TSR continued to grow in the late '70s — and through into the '80s — was via the publication of numerous additional RPGs. *Boot Hill*, *EPT*, and *Metamorphosis Alpha* were published in 1975–1976 but not supplemented, then TSR took a year off from alternative games in 1977. Starting in 1978 they gave it another shot, releasing five RPGs from 1978 to 1982.

First up was *Gamma World* (1978), a post-apocalyptic game full of mutants that had actually been called "Mutant" in-house. It was authored by James M. Ward and Jake Jaquet and was effectively the second edition of *Metamorphosis: Alpha*, painted on a larger canvas. At the time TSR thought that a planet-based game could offer bigger possibilities for roleplaying, but Gygax later said they thought that they'd damaged the game by pulling it out of its starship setting. Nonetheless it sold well — apparently better than science-fiction RPG leader *Traveller*. It just never got the same attention because TSR had bigger fish to fry. Nonetheless, a second edition of *Gamma World* (1983) would appear a few years later.



Meanwhile, *Metamorphosis Alpha* dropped out of print, because TSR felt it competed with their new *Gamma World* game. There were plans to release "Metamorphosis Alpha to Omega" as a boxed supplement to *Gamma World*, but it never appeared — though many years later it would be published as a supplement to a totally different game.

> *"[I]t's a natural tie, to go from the spaceship 'dungeon' to the wilderness 'world.'"*
> – James M. Ward, Interview, *Polyhedron #3* (Winter 1981/1982)

Boot Hill was revised the next year with a second edition (1979), this time featuring rules for campaigns and a few scenarios, making it more than just a man-to-man combat game of gunslinging (though that would always be its strength).

TSR's sixth RPG, Merle Rasmussen's *Top Secret* (1980) was the first espionage RPG. It had started out as a "programmed" game, with flow-chart-like choices, but had evolved into a full roleplaying experience. Like most of TSR's early games, *Top Secret* showed its *D&D* roots with characters and levels, but it also had a notable

innovation: "Fame & Fortune" points, which players could expend to offset unfavorable events. It was one of the first game mechanics that presented player characters in a heroic light and also one of the first mechanics that gave players some ability to influence the outcome of the game — a general idea that would be the heart of the "storytelling" branch of roleplaying that appeared in the mid-'80s and flourished in the "indie" games of the '00s.

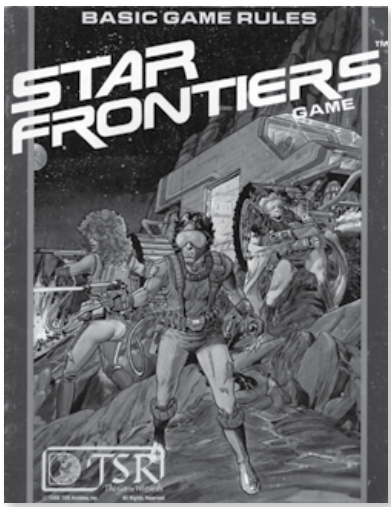


Top Secret was the top espionage game in the industry until the publication of Victory Games' *James Bond 007* (1983).

Top Secret was also the first TSR RPG that was supported immediately upon publication, reflecting TSR's new emphasis on adventures and other supplements. The original set of *Top Secret* supplements ran from 1981–1985. At the same time, supplements also starting appearing for *Gamma World* (1981–1983) and *Boot Hill* (1981–1982, 1984).

TSR spent 1981 retrenching its lines, publishing almost 20 supplements for *AD&D*, *D&D*, *Boot Hill*, and *Gamma World* — but mostly for *AD&D*, which was clearly their top seller. 1982 saw the publication of two more RPGs: Rick Krebs and Mark Acres' pulpy *Gangbusters* (1982) and the staff-created science-fiction game, *Star Frontiers* (1982), TSR's seventh and eighth RPGs.

These games increasingly defined the new TSR model for RPGs: simple games that could capture the introductory market for a genre. They were both well-designed, with *Gangbusters* in particular getting some critical acclaim. *Star Frontiers*, however, was initially dinged for its lack of ship combat rules, a lack that would be overcome by its *Knight Hawks* expansion (1983) — released around the same time that the core game was rebranded as *Star Frontiers: Alpha Dawn* (1983).



The pulp genre has never generated great sales, and so *Gangbusters* faded away after five supplements (1982–1984), including two by Tracy Hickman, who we'll meet in more depth soon. *Star Frontiers*, however, was the first of

the TSR RPGs other than *D&D* to surpass a dozen publications (1982–1985), including two licensed modules set in the world of Arthur C. Clarke's *2001* (1984). As we'll see momentarily, TSR was looking at a lot of licenses by that time.

Though they had published eight RPGs by 1982, TSR had not developed a house system, as was now being done at companies like Chaosium and Hero Games. Instead TSR had eight different gaming systems, and though a number of them had similarities to *D&D* — including classes, levels, hit points, and armor class in various games — others did not. *Star Frontiers*, as an example, used all percentiles.

A Hysterical Interlude: 1979—1982

Before we step fully into the '80s, we must discuss one last '70s event of pivotal importance to the entire roleplaying industry. In 1979 a Lansing, Michigan, college student named James Dallas Egbert III disappeared without a trace. Private detective William Dear correctly determined that Egbert had originally disappeared into the steam tunnels beneath Michigan State University, but incorrectly linked it to *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Even the authorities thought the connection to *D&D* might be legitimate, and so they sent photos of Egbert's bulletin board, full of strangely arranged tacks, to TSR — hoping that they could puzzle out what it meant. Tim Kask later recounted that he, Gary Gygax, and Brian Blume spent three days trying to figure out what this "super-secret map" might mean.

Meanwhile, Dear went public with his suppositions and created a sensation. *Dungeons & Dragons* was suddenly in the news as a result. This was ultimately to the benefit of both TSR and the RPG industry as a whole. *D&D* had already been on an upward trend as it grew increasingly professional with the release of the hardcover *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* books, but this hysterical publicity helped sales to skyrocket as the game was suddenly brought to the public's attention. When cities like Heber City, Utah, tried to ban the game, sales improved.

> *"I had projected growth for the year to go from approximately $4.2 million to $8.5 million for that fiscal year. Because of the 'Egbert Affair,' TSR grossed $16.5 million.*
>
> – Gary Gygax, "An Interview with Gary Gygax," *OD&Dities #9* (February 2003)

Egbert was found in Morgan City, Louisiana not long after all the hoopla kicked off. Unfortunately he took his own life about a year later, in August 1980. A fictionalized novel about the affair, repeating all of Dear's mistakes and misconceptions, was published by Rona Jaffe as *Mazes & Monsters* (1981) and then made into a TV movie starring Tom Hanks (1982).

Though the first hints of anti-*D&D* hysteria had originated way back with the 1976 publication of *Eldritch Wizardry*, and though William Dear was now giving it (much) more attention, it would be later in the '80s — when Patricia Pulling entered the picture — that things hit a fever pitch, as we'll soon see.

Rapid Expansion & Growth: 1980—1983

1980 and 1981 were the years in which TSR — and therefore the roleplaying industry — truly came of age. *D&D* and *AD&D* were now available in new, polished editions. TSR was finally paying attention to supplements — not just for *D&D*, but also for its other games. Public hysteria had put the games into the limelight, which was ultimately great marketing for the company.

1980 also saw three major expansions for TSR.

First, Frank Mentzer formed the Role Playing Game Association (RPGA), based on a proposal from Jake Jaquet. It was an organization primarily intended to create a global community of gamers. In its early years it supported TSR's then top sellers: *AD&D*, *Gamma World*, and *Top Secret*. Much of this focus was directed toward tournaments, including Gen Con's *D&D* Open event, which the RPGA took over. The RPGA would later extend its reach beyond tournaments to run what James M. Ward called a "Living City" campaign, where thousands of people worldwide could be involved in the same massive campaign world. The RPGA was also the producer of *Polyhedron* (1981–2002), a long-lived gaming magazine that was published for over 20 years, until it was taken over by Paizo Publishing in 2002.

TSR Sales: 1975—1982

Thanks to information in *The Dragon #35* (March 1980) and *Inc. Magazine* (1982) we have a good picture of TSR's early growth. In *The Dragon*, Gygax said that TSR's gross sales were $50,000 in 1975, $300,000 in 1976, $600,000 in 1977, almost $1 million in 1978, and over $2 million in 1979. *Inc. Magazine* then reported $9.8 million in sales for the nine-month period ending in June 1981 and $27 million for the year ending in June 1982.

Though the James Egbert affair and the publicity surrounding it are usually offered as the reason for the roleplaying industry's terrific growth at the start of the '80s, TSR was already doing quite well before that – doubling their sales every year. Going from $2 million in sales at the end of 1979 to (to take an average) $20 million by the end of 1981 was an improvement over that – but it "just" represented the company quintupling its sales during one of those years, rather than their usual doubling.

"I was in process of negotiations with Simon & Schuster when the woman who was then the VP of Sub-rights Licensing at Random House telephoned me. Not surprisingly, this was instigated by her two sons, both of who were then avid D&D *gamers."*

– Gary Gygax, "An Interview with Gary Gygax," *OD&Dities #9* (February 2003)

Second, TSR signed an exclusive book industry distribution deal with Random House, beginning with *Deities & Demigods*. This made TSR's games available to many new players.

Third, TSR decided to increase its international presence by founding TSR UK, which opened for business on March 31, 1980. Don Turnbull, editor of the *Fiend Folio* — which at the time was still in legal limbo — led this new venture. TSR UK would shortly become TSR Ltd, which oversaw Europe generally.

For the most part TSR Ltd. was responsible for the distribution of products into Europe, but it also produced a number of British-originated adventures. This included two *AD&D* adventure series, beginning with *U1: The Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh* (1981) — published shortly after the *Fiend Folio* finally made it to print — and later *UK1: Beyond the Crystal Cave* (1983). The series of UK adventures would continue into 1986 and would later include some well-received *Basic D&D* adventures as well.

TSR's international presence blossomed when the first translation of the *Basic D&D* rules appeared in France (1982). Many more would follow, with translations of TSR products eventually available in 16 languages.

TSR's success became more obvious when they were listed as one of the six fastest growing privately held companies by *Inc. Magazine* in 1982.

"'I quit playing the game about two years ago to get some objectivity,' says Kevin B. Blume, 30, chief operating officer. 'I love to play, but it wasn't that difficult to forego. Now I'm playing a much larger game called business. That's why we're intuitively good businessmen – because games are a great way to learn.'"

– "TSR Hobbies Mixes Fact and Fantasy," *Inc. Magazine* (1982)

With sales heading dramatically upward, employee counts started jumping in leaps and bounds too. In June 1981 TSR employed 130, but that became 170 in June 1982, and reached a height of perhaps 374 in early 1983. There were many notables among the newest hires. Designer (and future Manager of Designers) Troy Denning and editor (and future Manager of Editors) Steve Winter joined in 1981. Artist Jeff Easley, artist Larry Elmore, designer Jeff Grubb, designer Tracy

Hickman, *Polyhedron* editor Mary Kirchoff, designer Douglas Niles, artist Keith Parkinson, and miniatures maker Duke Seifried all joined in the busy 1982. Finally, periodicals editor Roger E. Moore came on board in 1983.

As was the case since the late '70s, many new hires were already *D&D* fans — such as Niles, who was introduced to *D&D* by one of his high school students, none other than Heidi Gygax. Others were published *D&D* authors of various sorts. Grubb was hired (after much pestering) because of his great work on the 1981 *AD&D* Open Tournament. Hickman, meanwhile, had run his own *D&D* small press DayStar West Media, which had published two adventures by himself and wife Laura — *Rahasia* (1979) and *Pharaoh* (1980) — as is recorded in that company's short history.

TSR's coming of age was perhaps best represented by *Dragon* magazine and its transformations. Up through the '70s, *Dragon* was still clearly a hobby publication as overseen by Tim Kask. However Kask left TSR following *The Dragon #36* (April 1980) to start his own magazine, *Adventure Gaming* (1980–1982). His new venture was more generalist than *The Dragon*, but otherwise looked a lot like Kask's first magazine with an emphasis on (generic) FRPs, *Traveller*, and wargaming.

Jake Jaquet had already taken over as editor of *The Dragon* a few months previous. Under his regime, *The Dragon* became *Dragon* and began to grow even faster than before — jumping from a circulation of 10,000 in 1980 to 70,000 in 1982. Jaquet would humbly acknowledge that this was more due to the growth of *D&D* than anything he did. Meanwhile, the magazine began to grow up too.

Dragon #49 (May 1981) — the same issue where Jaquet moved up to the publisher role and newspaperman Kim Mohan became the magazine's editor-in-chief — featured the first cover by a big-name artist, Tim Hildebrandt. Three months later *Dragon #52* (August 1981) featured a cover by top fantasy artist Boris Vallejo.

The Blumian Revolution: 1981–1982

Meanwhile, Brian Blume's brother, Kevin Blume, had ascended to the highest levels of TSR after buying out the shares owned by their father, Melvin. As a result, 1981 was The Year of Three Presidents; though Gary Gygax remained the nominal president, Kevin Blume was put in charge of operations (which meant he managed the company day-to-day) and Brian Blume was placed in charge of creative. Together, as the Board of Directors, they discussed any disagreements. Or as Brian Blum explained it: "We have an unwritten working arrangement where we sit down and thrash out major issues."

Increasingly, however, the Blumes were unhappy with Gary Gygax and his conservative approach to the business. It was an issue that had predated Kevin's

rise within the company, seen as early as the release of *Q1: Queen of the Demonweb Pits* (1980) in late 1980.

The long-delayed conclusion to Gygax's epic *GDQ* series was written by Dave Sutherland rather than Gygax himself. Gygax put a good face on it in the preface to the adventure, but years later he revealed that it had been released against his objections. Sutherland had even changed the final antagonist of the series from the servitors of the Elder Elemental God to Lolth — and the result didn't necessarily make a lot of sense.

The newfound power of the Blumes became more obvious during "The Great Purge" of April 1981 when TSR fired a dozen employees for "bad attitude" — said bad attitude apparently including support for Dave Arneson and resentment toward management, who at that time had their own headquarters away from the rest of TSR. Many of these firings were attributed to the new COO, Kevin Blume.

> *"We often felt that the Blumes and Gygaxes and their associates, like Will Neibling, were arrogant and greedy, were in over their heads as businessmen, and treated the company and its employees like NPCs in a big game they were playing."*
>
> – Kevin Hendryx, Interview, grognardia.blogspot.com (June 2009)

Paul Reiche and Evan Robinson were two of the first let go, then artists Bill Willingham and Jeff Dee followed when they complained — resulting in the Art Department dropping down to just two members: new Art Director Jim Roslof and popular artist Erol Otus. As we'll see, Roslof would fill the Art Department with many star artists from 1981 onward. Developer Kevin Hendryx was another victim of the purges, which continued into the summer.

Things came to a head between the Blumes and Gygax in 1982 when the Blumes used their majority stock ownership to effectively take control of TSR. Gary Gygax, who had been CEO since the company's foundation, was forced to step down; Kevin Blume replaced him. Afterward Gygax was either exiled to the West Coast or retreated there (depending on which interpretation you prefer) to deal with potential TV and movie opportunities.

The SPI Takeover: 1982

Around the time of the Blumes' boardroom takeover, TSR acquired SPI, one of the old-time wargame companies. SPI had been trying to break into the RPG industry, most notably with their tactical game design, *DragonQuest* (1980), but now they were facing increasing financial difficulties, as is more fully described in their own history.

By 1982 SPI was looking for buyers, and in lieu of that, asked TSR for a loan. It was secured against SPI's assets. What happened next isn't entirely clear. Depending on who you believe: SPI inevitably wasn't able to pay back the loan, and so TSR foreclosed; or TSR loaned the money *knowing* that SPI wouldn't be able to repay it and foreclosed almost immediately; or SPI took the loan *knowing* that TSR would immediately foreclose, effectively creating a sale that avoided other creditors.

> *"TSR would acquire controlling interest in SPI by obtaining Simonsen's, Wagner's, and Hessel's stock; purchase the note of some $400,000 from the venture capitalists, and then recall it. The note had been secured by SPI's assets, inventory, accounts receivable, copyrights, etc. The result was that TSR would control SPI and its assets, but not its liabilities. In principal a nice plan."*
>
> – Howard Barasch, *The Insider #1* (June 1982)

In any case, on March 31, 1982, TSR announced that they had "initiated a legal and economic chain of events" to buy SPI. The takeover was seen as unfriendly by the staff and thus by April 7, eight former SPI employees had announced that they were leaving the company to form Victory Games — a new subsidiary of Avalon Hill. Here they would create *James Bond 007* (1983), the espionage roleplaying game that would knock *Top Secret* off its pedestal. Redmond Simonsen, the star designer of SPI, was fired by TSR on May 3, 1982, for "management incompatibilities," and from there things went downhill fast. Within a few months there were very few SPI employees left. David Ritchie, the final SPI holdover, left for Coleco in late 1983 — after his wife was laid off from TSR — though he'd return after Coleco's gaming department collapsed a couple of years later.

Meanwhile TSR found the legalities of the SPI acquisition trickier than they'd imagined. TSR had originally declared that they'd "bought assets but not liabilities." However the printers that SPI had owed money to disagreed with this assessment, and refused to release the plates for printing SPI's games until TSR paid $40,000 of SPI's debt a year later — which had an impact upon TSR's immediate plan to get back into the wargaming business by reprinting 40 or so of SPI's games. Likewise readers with subscriptions to SPI's magazines, *Strategy & Tactics* and *Ares*, were very angry that TSR decided not to honor them.

Things got nastier in December when a Chapter 7 bankruptcy petition was filed against SPI in New Jersey, attempting to involve the Federal Government in the matter, and when a suit was filed against TSR in New York regarding salaries for SPI employees. The rumor mill suggests that the Office of Consumer Protection

in Madison, Wisconsin, was also considering a class-action lawsuit against TSR because of the unfulfilled subscriptions.

In the end TSR got very little in exchange for the money it had loaned to SPI. TSR published SPI's science-fiction and fantasy magazine, *Ares*, from issue #12 (1982) through issue #17 (1984), then incorporated it into *Dragon Magazine* from issue #84 (April 1984) to issue #111 (July 1986). They initially thought that SPI's RPGs, *DragonQuest* and *Universe*, might be complementary to *D&D*, but ultimately did very little with them. TSR *did* publish wargames into the '90s, some of them featuring SPI's logo, but this never resulted in a particularly large movement back toward wargaming; the loss of SPI's designers made sure of that.

Meanwhile, TSR earned considerable ill will in the wargaming community, many of whom felt that TSR purposefully killed off SPI.

The Lawsuits, Round One: 1982—1984

This wasn't the only publicity hit TSR took in the early '80s; their relationship with the rest of the industry was also deteriorating. We've already seen that TSR began issuing legal threats as early as 1976. By the early '80s it was increasingly common for other members of the industry to receive threatening letters from TSR's lawyers. Steve Jackson commented on one such incident when TSR threatened him for using a beholder in a cartoon in *The Space Gamer*.

TSR's most notable legal action of the early '80s was the first *Role Aids* lawsuit. As we've already seen, other companies were increasingly presenting *AD&D* supplements as "generic" because of an inability to get a license from TSR. Mayfair Games decided not to toe this line. When they came out with their new *Role Aids* line (1982), the covers clearly stated that they were "suitable for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*."

> *"I strongly advocated arranging a licensing agreement with Mayfair [G]ames for their 'Role Aids' product line, but I was outvoted in the board meeting considering the question."*
>
> – Gary Gygax, "An Interview with Gary Gygax," *OD&Dities #9* (February 2003)

Trademarks — of which *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* was one — are a frequent source of legal disagreement. Mayfair is just one roleplaying company that sought legal counsel to correctly use a trademark without authorization — with Heritage Models, Kenzer & Company, and the early Wizards of the Coast being other examples. Mayfair did their best to make the legally required distinctions obvious by including explanatory text on the front or back covers of their supplements.

Trademark disputes also often go to court, even when legal advice has been followed. TSR thus sued Mayfair over the *Role Aids* products. In 1984, however, the two parties reached an out-of-court settlement. Mayfair was allowed to continue publishing their supplements provided that they followed certain restrictions over the use of *AD&D* trade names and how the *AD&D* trademark was depicted on the cover. The *Role Aids* line continued for many years, though as we'll see this would not be the final lawsuit on the topic.

The Book Explosion: 1982—1983

Though TSR's expansion into wargames didn't work out, the same can't be said for another major initiative the same year. In 1982 TSR pushed further into the book trade after TSR employee Rose Estes came up with an idea for a new sort of game, the "Endless Quest." These were books designed around the same concepts as Bantam Books' popular *Choose Your Own Adventure* books (1979–1998), but with fantasy theming drawn from the *Dungeons & Dragons* game. Estes wrote the first six, beginning with *Dungeon of Dread* (1982).

These books were quite successful, and would eventually expand into a 36-book series (1982–1987), then be revived for a second series a decade later (1994–1996). Though most *Endless Quests* featured *D&D*-style adventures, there were also releases for *Gamma World*, *Star Frontiers*, and *Top Secret* — as well as a few licenses, which we'll meet down the road. The line would eventually sell millions of books.

Realizing that *Endless Quest* was ultimately a fad, TSR worked to diversify its new mainstream publishing. James M. Ward and Rose Estes formed an Education Department intended to sell classroom modules to teachers. Jean Black, an experienced industry editor, was brought on as Education Editor for the new department. However, it ultimately failed due to TSR's decision not to hire educational sales staff; products were ready to produce, but never sold. Black would later push other educational ideas, such as books that combined the history of World War II with wargames, but TSR continued to opt out of educational opportunities.

Despite concerns over the gamebook industry, other gamebook lines did appear. New types of *Endless Quest* books were variously successful. This included: *Fantasy Forest* (1982–1983), a younger kid's line; the *HeartQuest* books (1983–1984), which attempted to jump into the romance market; *Super Endless Quest* (1985–1988), a line of full-fledged gamebooks like the *Fighting Fantasy* books then generating interest in the UK; and the even more complex *Catacombs Solo Quest* gamebooks (1987–1989).

These gamebooks got TSR better noticed by their book trade distributor, Random House.

Meanwhile, Jean Black became the Managing Editor of TSR's new Book Department; she would use the gamebook success to aid in the release of the pivotal Dragonlance novels, which we'll meet shortly. History being a funny thing, TSR's Book Department in turn would lead directly to TSR's downfall, 10 more years down the road.

D&D Soldiers On: 1982—1984

Throughout all of these changes and new initiatives *D&D* of course continued to soldier on. We've already seen the story of *AD&D* through the release of the *Fiend Folio* (1981) and *Basic D&D* through the release of the second edition *Basic Set* (1981) and *Expert Set* (1981). After that, the most notable event for the line came late in 1982, when TSR revamped all of its *D&D* trade dress.

The old bold colors and diagonal banners of old adventures were gone, to be replaced with a new look for adventures that featured horizontal banners, a new *Dungeons & Dragons* logo, improved artwork, and gradiated backgrounds. They showed TSR's new professionalism in the wake of the company's extraordinary growth from 1979–1982.

The redesign spread to the *AD&D* hardcovers the next year with *Monster Manual II* (1983). The new hardcovers shared much of the increased professionalism of the adventures, but are probably best remembered for their orange spines. The entire orange-spine hardcover series featured art by Jeff Easley, giving the line remarkable consistency (and beauty) — something badly needed after the erratic logos and trade dress of the earliest hardcovers.

Before we leave the *Monster Manual II*, we should note that it marked the first deviation from TSR's yearly publication of *AD&D* books. The last hardcover *AD&D* book before it had been the 1981 *Fiend Folio*, while the next wouldn't appear until 1985. We'll discuss possible reasons for this later.

Meanwhile *Basic D&D* got a redesign that went beyond graphics; Frank Mentzer's third edition of the *D&D Basic Set* (1983) was a major revision that was also used as the launching point for a five-box series (1983–1986) that would eventually take *Basic D&D* characters from first level to godhood itself. As with the last couple of *Basic Sets*, this one said it was the one you could *actually* learn from the box, without needing a teacher. This edition, however, made the best argument, as it included solo gameplay — with the idea being that you learned as you read the rulebook. It was part of a teaching trend also being followed by companies like Pacesetter and Yaquinto around the same time.

"And by the time the story ends, you've seen how most of the game system works. You haven't read pages of rules, and you haven't been swamped by charts and tables; you've merely read an entertaining fantasy story."

– Frank Mentzer, "A New Game with a Familiar Name," *Dragon #77* (September 1983)

Although there were many adventures for *AD&D* and *Basic D&D* alike following the revamp, it was *AD&D* that seemed the most revitalized by the changes.

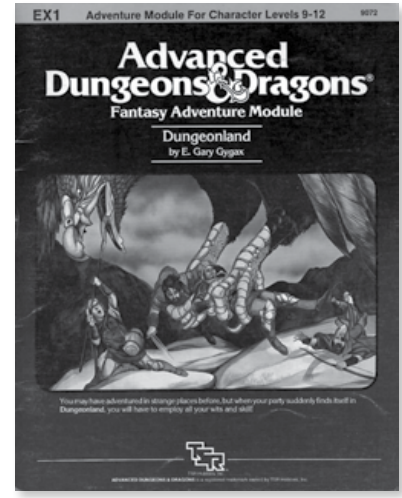
That was in part thanks to Tracy Hickman, who joined TSR in 1982. TSR published both of his old adventures from his DayStar West days. Of those, *Pharaoh* got more attention because it became the first part of TSR's *I3-I5: Desert of Desolation* series (1982–1983), which was quite well-received.



However, Hickman and wife Laura received even more acclaim for a brand-new adventure, *I6: Ravenloft* (1983). This was something entirely new for *D&D*. It was a gothic-style adventure, mixing fantasy with horror. It was also a much more cerebral adventure than the typical dungeon crawl, pitting the players against an intelligent vampire nobleman. *Ravenloft* was an instant hit that would be sold, supplemented, expanded, and sold again for years.

The other notable adventures in this time period came about as a result of Gygax's expansion of Greyhawk, which he'd begun back in 1980. It started out pretty low key, with Rob Kuntz doing editorial work on Gary Gygax's *S4: The Lost Caverns of Tsojcanth* (1982). Greyhawk got increasing attention in *Dragon* too, starting in Gygax's "From the Sorcerer's Scroll" column (November 1981-January 1982).

Then, late in 1982, Kuntz was brought back into the creative fold to kick off a full-on revival of Greyhawk, with help from long-time TSR employee Eric Shook. This began with the publication of Gary Gygax's *WG4: The Forgotten Temple of Tharizdun* (1982), which was somewhat awkwardly a sequel to *S4*. A pair of side-adventures for the much-hyped Castle Greyhawk dungeons — Gary Gygax's *EX1: Dungeonland* (1983) and *EX2: The Land Beyond the Magic Mirror* (1983) — appeared the next year. At the time, Gygax was planning for the actual Castle Greyhawk to appear down the line — following the City of Greyhawk —



so it was a nice teaser. Meanwhile, the Greyhawk focus in *Dragon* continued in Kuntz's "Greyhawk's World" column (July-September 1982), Gygax's "Deities & Demigods of the World of Greyhawk" (November 1982-March 1983), and Len Lakofka's follow-up "Gods of the Suel Pantheon" (June 1984-December 1984).

Much of the initial work was leading up to the release of the *World of Greyhawk Fantasy Game Setting* (1983), a boxed expansion of Gygax's *Greyhawk* folio. After that, new World of Greyhawk adventures began appearing with a trade dress that matched the *World of Greyhawk* box. It was TSR's first derivation from their standard adventure trade dress, and a real departure for '80s marketing. The first of the new adventures was Rob Kuntz's *WG5: Mordenkainen's Fantastic Adventure* (1984), drawn from some of his earliest adventures.

If you're wondering about the missing adventures, *WG1-WG3*, you're not alone; they've been a constant source of confusion over the years. The *World of Greyhawk* box fortunately offers up the answers. *WG1* was to be a new code for *T1: The Village of Hommlet*, while *WG3* was to be a new code for *S4: The Lost Caverns of Tsojcanth* — which certainly made more sense than the *S4*/*WG4* crossover. *WG2* wasn't listed, but it presumably would have been *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, which Gygax had most recently promised for Gen Con XV (1982). It had long been coded as *T2*, so the move to follow *WG2* seems obvious.

Sadly, the Greyhawk revival would begin to fade after 1984, for reasons that we're about to run straight into.

The Bubble Bursts: 1983—1985

Moving back to TSR's newer initiatives, we can now discuss that fact that the expansions into wargames and books were just the tip of the iceberg. They were also expanding TSR into numerous other industries. Their strangest innovation was probably moving into the needlework business — where they planned to sell needlework kits in book format, something that had never been done before.

At the Hobby Industries of America Show in late January 1983, TSR also announced the creation of a new Toys, Hobby & Gift Division, under Duke Seifried. It would produce action figures and other "three-dimensional" products, most notably including metal miniatures — which was what had led TSR to

cancel Grenadier's *D&D* miniatures license in 1982, following a failed attempt to buy them.

Finally, TSR was also expanding into the wider entertainment world as well.

Though Gygax's move to the West Coast might have been seen as an exile, he actually ended up doing a lot of good while there. He'd long hoped for a *D&D* movie, but plans for that fell through. However, he did come to an agreement with the Marvel Comics film division to create a *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon. It premiered on September 17, 1983, and ran three seasons through December 1985. The cartoon was the first RPG television show, and a true sign of how much the industry had pushed into the mass market.

Unfortunately, of the many expansions and revamps of 1982–1983, the *Endless Quest* books and the *D&D* cartoon were rare successes. Meanwhile, the cost of all these new initiatives was starting to add up, especially the ones that never showed any returns, like the needlecraft business. Worse, the entire RPG industry was entering its first bust period, which would cause many publishers to fail.

The D&D Cartoon

Marvel Comics' *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon (1983–1985) featured six kids taken from the real world and transformed into heroes in the *Dungeons & Dragons* world. One of the more interesting aspects of the cartoon is what character classes they were given. As the prologue to every cartoon told you, the Dungeon Master turned them into: a ranger, a barbarian, a magician, a thief, a cavalier, and an acrobat.

The magician and the thief were of course two of *AD&D*'s big four classes, while the ranger was an understandable replacement for the very generic-sounding fighter. However, it seems weird that the cleric was left out. Paired with the absence of a paladin, it seems likely that the cartoon was purposefully avoiding any controversy that might come from using *D&D*'s "religious" characters.

The inclusion of the acrobat, the barbarian, and the cavalier is odd too, because they were all brand-new classes, written up by Gary Gygax for *Dragon* in 1982 and early 1983. It makes one wonder if Gygax wrote up the classes because Marvel wanted some more variety or if he pushed his newest creations on them.

Whichever the case, it probably helped the sales of *Unearthed Arcana* (1985), when the three new classes were presented to a wider audience for the first time.

By late 1982 there were rumors of problems at TSR, and it was soon revealed that the company had missed its growth projections by 30% — which meant that they were no longer doubling in size as they had in years past. Meanwhile, the rumor mill suggested that TSR's failed bid for Grenadier that year had involved *no cash*, which didn't seem like a good sign.

The company's more general failure became evident early in June 1983 when TSR held an employee meeting to announce that they'd lost $250,000 in the previous six months, and to require that all employees write up an explanation of why they should keep their jobs. Then, on June 24, 1983, the Blumes initiated a massive reorganization that split TSR into four companies: TSR Inc. (the product company); TSR Entertainment Corporation (the Hollywood company); TSR Ventures (a research and licensing company); and TSR Worldwide Limited (the aforementioned European branch).

Gary Gygax would later state that the main reason for the split-up of TSR was to avoid taxes. TSR Ventures mainly operated in the Far East while TSR Worldwide Limited was more focused on Europe, and so their income could be kept out of the United States. Whatever the reason for their creation, the spin-off companies weren't terribly viable. TSR Ventures was gone by 1985, in the next major shake-up, while TSR Entertainment Corporation (later Dungeons & Dragons Entertainment Corp.) and TSR Worldwide Limited (later TSR International) would eventually be closed down by Lorraine Williams.

Meanwhile, the reorganization brought with it downsizing. 44 employees were immediately laid off — though that number would soon climb to more than 70. Among those laid off were miniatures master Duke Seifried and Gary Gygax's son, Ernie Gygax. Seifried's layoff was probably the most stunning, as he was in charge of TSR's new miniatures manufacturing — and was someone who really knew the business. Some suggested the reason was political, as Seifried had been among Gary Gygax's top supporters.

> *"When I was instructed by the Blumes to move to the West Coast and head up TSR Entertainment, the first thing I noted out there was a distinct dislike of TSR, this from earlier contact with the Blumes, as far as I could ascertain. Thus I immediately requested the BoD for a name change, and I got my way without any real fight."*
>
> – Gary Gygax, "An Interview with Gary Gygax," *OD&Dities #9* (February 2003)

Unfortunately the downsizing of June 1983 was insufficient. By the end of 1983, after another round of layoffs, the company was down to 150 workers. Stockholder and long-time employee Mike Carr was among those lost. For the first time, the Design Department took casualties. A group of 12 became just 4.

The Gen Con staff took heavy losses too, which impacted Gen Con XVII (1984); turnover would continue to impede that convention for several more years. On April 4, 1984, TSR cut staff one more time. By this point the company only had 100 employees left — a number they maintained throughout the rest of the 1980s — where there had been 374 just 16 months before. Morale was terrible, and even employees who weren't laid off were leaving; one group would form a new RPG company called Pacesetter.

Gary Gygax raced back from California in 1984 when he heard from a friend that Kevin Blume was "shopping TSR on the city streets." He discovered TSR a million and a half dollars in debt — including $1.2 million dollars owed to advertising agencies and television stations and another $300,000 or $400,000 owed to vendors (which probably primarily meant printers). According to gossip at the time, the company was being offered for sale for just $6 million dollars. TSR was also considering withdrawing from the RPGA and may have tried to sell *Dragon* magazine for a million dollars.

Gygax was probably involved with TSR decisions as late as 1983, but he blamed the problems on the financial mismanagement of Kevin Blume. He itemized the biggest issues as:

- The purchase of Greenfield Needlewomen, the aforementioned needlecraft company, apparently owned by a relative of the Blumes.
- The overprinting of later *Endless Quest* books.
- The purchase and lease of systems furniture for hundreds of employees that did not exist.
- The purchase and lease of over 70 automobiles.
- General overstaffing.

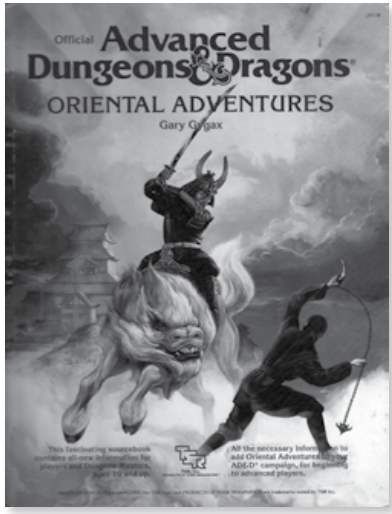
By this time, three outsiders from the American Management Association had joined the two Blumes and Gygax on the TSR board of directors. They were a lawyer, a personnel officer, and the owner of a medical equipment manufacturer. Gygax was able to convince them to remove Kevin Blume from office late in November 1984. The final vote was 4–1, with Brian Blume abstaining.

Gygax was *not* initially reinstated as CEO. Instead a pro-tempore President was hired from the ranks of the AMA: attorney Richard Koenings. However, Gygax still retained some power, because he was acting as an intermediary to a three-man Beverly Hills group interested in buying the company. In March 1985, Gygax was able to take over his role as President and CEO — and end the discussion about selling the company entirely. Though Gygax later said he did so thanks to the success of *Unearthed Arcana* (which we'll get to in a moment) allowing him

to exercise stock options that gave him majority control of the company, period articles suggest that he took back the roles before the release of that book and the exercise of those options.

Gygax was determined to reduce TSR's debt *without* giving up its properties (like *Dragon* and the RPGA), but he did cut slower lines like *Boot Hill*, *Gangbusters*, and even *Star Frontiers*. In another cost-cutting move, Dragon Publishing was closed down and *Dragon* magazine brought fully into TSR. As a result of this, by the late '80s *Dragon* would become the house organ that Kask had feared, with multiple columns all previewing or supporting TSR's releases. TSR also closed down its short-lived miniatures production.

Gygax also put more focus on the hobby market, rather than the mass market opened up by Random House. There would be even less sexy initiatives, like lowering product orders to reduce inventory and writing off 800,000 "discontinued and obsolete games."



To help generate new revenue for the company, Gygax proposed the release of five important new books, four of them to be published under his name. He scheduled a new hardcover book called *Unearthed Arcana* for June 1985 and then provided the concept for Zeb Cook's *Oriental Adventures*, to be released that Fall. (The latter was a natural fit for Zeb, who regularly organized Bad Japanese Movie Parties for TSR.) Gygax also planned two new Greyhawk modules: *The Temple of Elemental Evil* (at last) and *Isle of the Ape*, both for August 1985. Finally, he proposed his first novel — following some fiction written as Garrison Ernst back in the earliest days of *Dragon* — a Greyhawk book to be called *Saga of Old City*. Just a few months later, Gygax would get *D&D*'s other creator to help in the recovery, as he lured Dave Arneson back to the fold to finally detail Blackmoor — a project that had been announced just a short time before for Mayfair.

The hardcovers would assist considerably in TSR's recovery, while the adventures and the novel would all appear to good acclaim. However TSR was also aided by two lines that the Blumes already had in process before the newest boardroom coup: Dragonlance and *Marvel Super Heroes*.

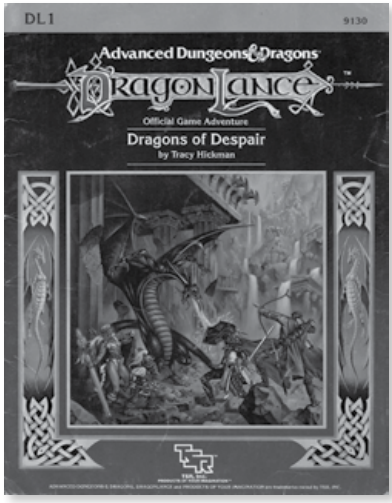
Dragonlance & Other Media: 1984—1985

Dragonlance was ultimately the brainchild of Tracy Hickman, who came up with the idea of a setting that made dragons fearsome once more in 1982 while he was traveling across the country from Utah to Wisconsin to join TSR. At TSR Hickman formed a sort of underground conspiracy of creators who were interested in the Dragonlance project. It was called "Project Overlord."

Harold Johnson was the first one to join the Project; now Director of Game Design and Research, he was a critical member of the team, as he oversaw TSR's staff of designers. It was Johnson who convinced Hickman to expand his initial idea of a three-adventure trilogy. Designer Jeff Grubb joined next — and would soon contribute a pantheon of gods that he'd created for college games at Purdue University — then editor Carl Smith. Larry Elmore provided concept artwork that was used to pitch the idea to higher ups. Eventually this group was able to make the project official and was then joined by other creators, including writer Margaret Weis and adventure author Douglas Niles.

> *"I got assigned to a team that was supposed to develop a line of modules, each featuring a different dragon. But we didn't want it to just be a 'dragon-of-the-month' club."*
>
> – Tracy Hickman, "The Creation of Dragonlance," *Dragon #315* (January 2004)

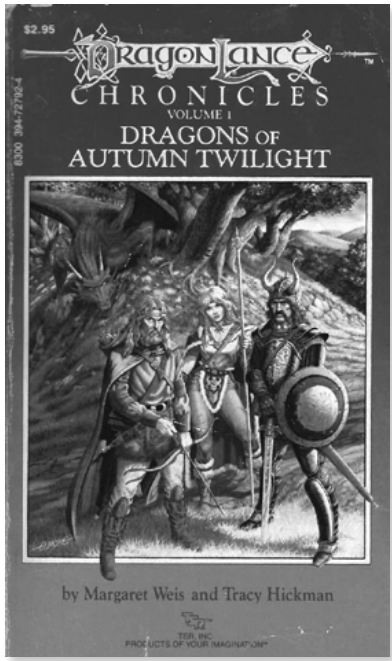
By this time the project had become a 12-adventure epic, laid out in three sets of four adventures, one for each color of dragon. Rather than just being dungeon crawls or wilderness explorations, the adventures would together tell a story with a clear beginning, middle, and end — as a massive war was fought in the land of Krynn. The Dragonlance adventures premiered in March 1984 when TSR published the black-dragon-oriented *DL1: Dragons of Despair* (1984), by Tracy Hickman. The rest of the series would appear over the next two years — supplemented by a small sourcebook and a wargame that expanded it to 14 books total.



However, Dragonlance was envisioned as a complete multi-media experience. By mid-year, TSR was advertising Dragonlance miniatures, a calendar ... and fiction. The latter got started off with a pair of short

stories that helped to give depth to the adventures. "The Test of the Twins" by Margaret Weis appeared in *Dragon #83* (March 1984), then "A Stone's Throw Away" by Roger E. Moore followed in *Dragon #85* (May 1984).

The plan was to embrace fiction more fully by publishing novels that told the same story as the adventures, thus leveraging the book market expertise that TSR had already built around their *Endless Quest* books. TSR's original intent was to hire a published writer for these books, but the Dragonlance team wasn't happy with any of the efforts produced by the authors willing to work for the low royalties that TSR was offering. Meanwhile, Weis and Hickman felt like they could tell the story better than anyone, so in January 1983 they submitted a prologue and five chapters to make their case. On the strength of that, Jean Black picked them to write *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* (1984), which appeared at the end of the next year.



Besides being innovative, Dragonlance was also very successful — particularly in the fiction arena. By the time the next two novels — *Dragons of Winter Night* (1985) and *Dragons of Spring Dawning* (1985) — were published, TSR was happy to announce that a *Dragonlance Legends* trilogy (1985) would quickly follow. Thus one of the first elements necessary to save TSR from the crisis of 1984 was something instituted by the Blumes in their scant years controlling TSR.

Marvel Super Heroes & Other Color-Chart Games: 1984—1986

The Blumes' support of a *Marvel Super Heroes* RPG would be the next element needed to help save TSR in 1985. Before we get there, however, we should first touch upon several other games that the old regime had supported.

Almost all of these new games originated in the Blumes' interest in licensing, which weighed heavily on TSR in the 1984–1985 period. Thus, those years saw the publication of: a new *Indiana Jones* game (1984–1985); a variety of *Conan* materials including *AD&D* adventures (1984), a standalone RPG (1985), and a few *Endless Quest* books (1984–1985); two *Tarzan Endless Quest* books (1985); and of course the *Marvel Super Heroes* game that we continue to dance around (1984–1993).

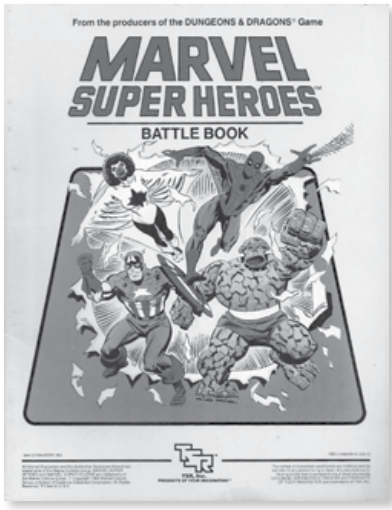
The three licensed RPGs deserve some additional attention, as do two other games from the Blume years: the continuation of the *Basic D&D* game and *Battlesystem*.

Zeb Cook's *The Adventures of Indiana Jones* RPG (1984) appeared very early in 1984, making it TSR's ninth RPG. Unfortunately, it was almost universally panned. That was in large part because there was no character generation system, requiring players instead to play seven characters from the movies. The rest of the game focused heavily on reenacting the movies as well.

The game's mechanics got better acclaim as a simple RPG system. Perhaps most notably it resolved some actions with color-coded tiered charts that provided broad categories of results for various dice rolls. We'll see this tiered chart mechanic again momentarily in a more polished form.

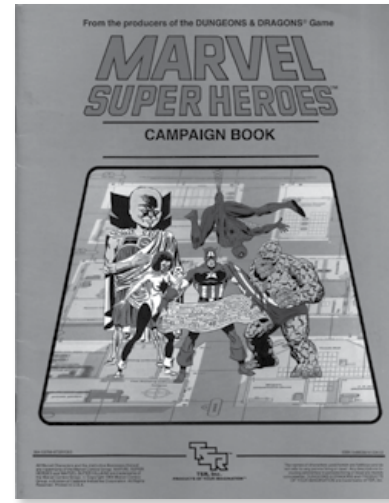
Amusingly, the *Indiana Jones* game lives on in a modern award. When the license came to an end — following the game line's conclusion in 1985 — TSR UK was told to destroy all of their remaining copies of the game. They strategically burned parts of the final unsold copy and then embedded it in a Perspex pyramid. The pyramid was later "liberated" from the TSR offices. The partially burnt game logo within the pyramid simply reads "diana Jones" — hence the Diana Jones awards (2001-Present).

"When I was in college, I ran a homemade super hero campaign called the Junior Achievers, with super heroes like the Scientific Swami, the Crimson Ran, and the ever-popular B.M.O.C. So, when the Marvel *game was up for grabs, I grabbed it."*
– Jeff Grubb, "TSR Profiles," *Dragon #111* (July 1986)



Marvel Super Heroes (1984), by Jeff Grubb and Bruce Nesmith, showed up next, in August, making it TSR's tenth RPG. Various reports suggest that Avalon Hill, Chaosium, FGU, Games Workshop, Hero Games, Ideal, Mayfair Games, and Steve Jackson Games all tried to pick up the license. It appears to have been a near thing for TSR, as rumors about the license first appeared early in 1983, then word got out that Marvel was having some troubles with TSR's lawyers. Nonetheless, TSR was ultimately able to prevail because of their top position in the industry and their pre-existing relationship with Marvel. Knowing that they were

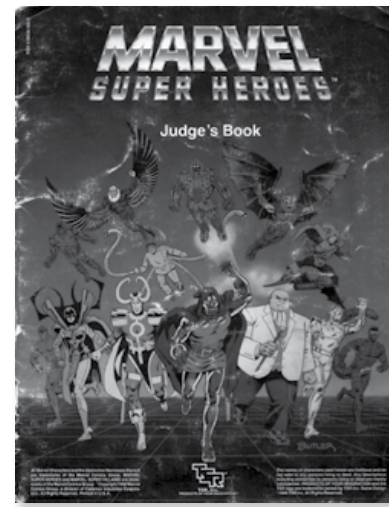
sitting on a potential gold mine, TSR hid the license as long as they could, using the internal codename "Boot Hill revision" to refer to the project up until its release.



Marvel Super Heroes is generally considered one of TSR's best games. Correctly assessing its potential as a game that could introduce newcomers to roleplaying, designers Grubb and Nesmith put together a rule system based on simplicity — much as had been the case with the much less successful *Indiana Jones*. For example, numerical stats were replaced by 10 "ranks" running from Feeble to Unearthly.

The game's combination of all tasks into a single "Universal Table" was even more impressive. You looked up your stat, and then made a roll using percentile dice. The result was one of four levels of success: white failure, or green, yellow, or red success. This idea of combining all task resolution into a singular system was innovative, though FGU, Pacesetter, and Victory Games were all simultaneously doing similar work. *Marvel Super Heroes* also featured another TSR innovation, "Karma Points"; much like the "Fame & Fortune" points of *Top Secret*, they let characters get out of bad situations.

Marvel Super Heroes was well-received, and if there were complaints from roleplayers about the game's simplicity, they were eventually answered by the release of the *Marvel Super Heroes Advanced Set* (1986). Afterward, the line continued to flourish under Project Coordinator Jeff Grubb. It eventually became TSR's all-time best-supported RPG other than *D&D* itself. Publications included around 50 RPG supplements (1984–1992), eight solo gamebooks (1986–1988), three one-on-one gamebooks (1986–1989), and around 100 "Marvel-Phile" columns from *Dragon #88* to *Dragon #198* (1984–1993). The game would not fade until the '90s.

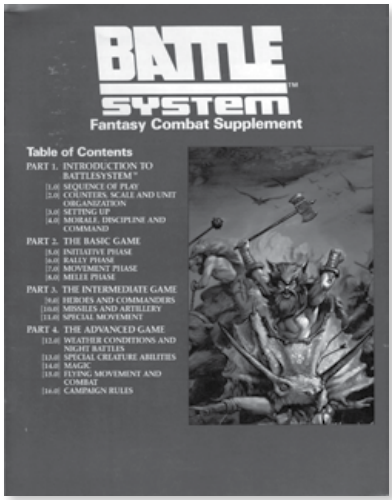


We've already seen that *Basic D&D* got a facelift in 1983, during the Blumes'

early control of the company. It now (at last!) continued past the *Expert Set* when Frank Mentzer's *Companion Set* (1984) of 15th–25th level rules appeared in November 1984.

Two final games that surely had their origins during the Blumes' control of TSR both appeared in March 1985.

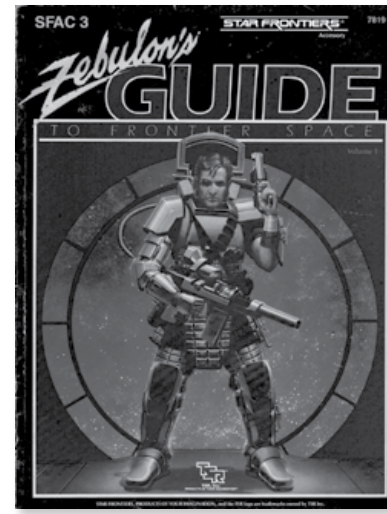
Conan Role-Playing Game (1985), also by Cook, was the conclusion of the Blumes' licensed trilogy of roleplaying games and TSR's eleventh RPG system to date. (It'll also be the last we count, because game variants like *Top Secret/S.I.* and reprints like *DragonQuest* muddy the water from here on out.) *Conan Role-Playing Game* was simple like *Indiana Jones*, but it used a color-coded chart for action success that seems heavily based on the same from *Marvel Super Heroes*. Perhaps, as a result, it was pretty well-received. However, it wasn't supported for long. When Gygax took TSR back, most of the Blumes' licensed products were tossed to the side, and as a result *Conan* only saw three adventures before it ended (1985). More recently, the game has been retro-cloned as *ZeFRS* (2007).



The other game of March 1985 wasn't an RPG at all. Instead, Douglas Niles' *Battlesystem* (1985) — originally called "Bloodstone Pass" — was a mass-combat system compatible with *AD&D*. It was simultaneously advertised as "an exciting new direction" and a way for gamers to "go back to their roots" (in *Chainmail*). There were a number of other contradictions built into the design. It'd been intended as a system that could use miniatures or not; that supported armies in the thousands *and* individual PCs; and that stayed totally compatible with *AD&D* while also allowing for new and simplified combat.

Battlesystem could have been the game that allowed TSR to compete with Games Workshop's *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* (1983), but TSR was never able to cross-market *Battlesystem* or a miniatures line as effectively as Games Workshop did. There was a good reason for that. As we've already seen, *Battlesystem* got caught out by the transfer of power at TSR much like *Indiana Jones* and *Conan* did — and as a result, TSR was shutting down their miniatures production just when *Battlesystem* was produced. Ironically, the *D&D* miniatures license went to Citadel, Games Workshop's miniatures partner.

One other RPG *almost* appeared in this era. A game of robot roleplaying called "Proton Fire" was scheduled for July 1985. It was advertised as "the last word in robot role-playing" — though it might have been the *first* word too, as Traveller's *Robots* (1986) was still a year out. Today, info on Proton Fire almost reads like an early cyberpunk game, with players helping "The University" fight against "The Corporation." At this late date it's unclear if the game had been greenlit by the Blumes or not — but in any case it wasn't one of Gygax's projects.



Though the Blumes' immediate backlog of projects was mostly published by mid-1985, their creative influence continued afterward. We've already seen that *Marvel Super Heroes* lasted for almost a decade. More generally, the idea of colored universal action charts seen in both *Marvel Super Heroes* and *Conan* continued to spread to other games. *Star Frontiers* was converted to colored action charts in *SFAC3: Zebulon's Guide to Frontier Space, Volume 1* (1985), which turned out to be the last supplement for the game. The next year, the third edition of *Gamma World* (1986) appeared with color-coded action resolution; it was unfortunately marred by poor editing, but otherwise led to a minor renaissance of the game. *Battlesystem* similarly held on, but never to any great success. As we'll see TSR tried to revive it again and again over the years, perhaps always watching the success of Games Workshop in the rearview mirror.

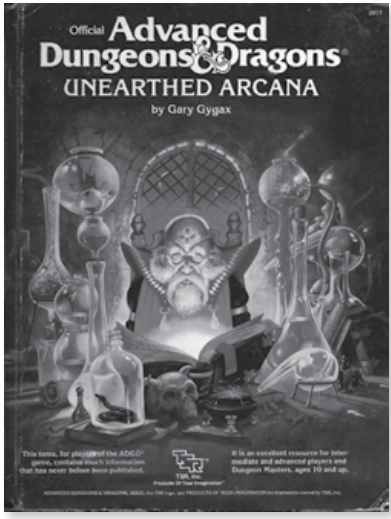
But by 1985, Gygax was once more in charge of the company, and as we move toward June, we find that it was *his* projects that suddenly dominated TSR's production.

The Gygaxian Counter-Revolution: 1985—1986

Looking back, it's somewhat puzzling why TSR slowed their hardcover *AD&D* production following 1981's *Fiend Folio*. Perhaps it was the result of Gary Gygax's 1982 exile to the West Coast, or perhaps it was the result of a focus on *Basic Dungeons & Dragons* from 1983–1986. Whatever the case, as we've already seen, TSR missed publishing new hardcovers in both 1982 and 1984. The importance of these hardcovers to TSR is clearly seen in the fact that Gygax immediately planned for two new hardcover releases following his return to power — but they wouldn't be the first sign of a returned Gygaxian influence at TSR.

Gygax started writing for *D&D* again immediately following Gen Con XVII (1984). The first of that material was seen by the public in *Dragon #90* (October 1984), as part of Gygax's "From the Sorcerer's Scroll" column that had been abandoned over a year before. His first new articles weren't that earthshaking; he gave details of the Hold Person spell, introduced a new monster, and discussed clerics in his first three columns. But then he started writing more revisionary and expansionary articles — looking at higher-level druids, cleaning up rules for rangers, and more. It was a sign of things to come. The Sorcerer's Scroll became irregular after *Dragon #97* (May 1985), but by then it wasn't necessary, as two major releases bearing Gygax's name were published in June 1985.

The first of those was the *Basic Dungeons & Dragons Master Set* (1985), the rules for characters 26th to 36th level. It was listed as being the work of "Gary Gygax with Frank Mentzer," but one has to wonder how much Gygax *really* had to do with it, as the box was the clear continuation of Mentzer's work over the last few years. In any case, the *Master Set* showed that Gygax was happy to continue on with the more popular projects from the Blume era.



The other major release of June 1985 was (at last) the first of the new hardcover *AD&D* rulebooks, *Unearthed Arcana* (1985). The book had a long history, as it had been under consideration as far back as 1982 when it was being called the "Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Expansion." The book was also previewed over four years of From the Sorcerer's Scroll columns, from 1982–1985. Alas, those articles also revealed things that could have been in *Unearthed Arcana*, but were never written up, including the core classes of the mountebank (a thief), the mystic (a magic-user), the savant (a cleric), and the jester (a bard).

Unearthed Arcana as published was a thorough expansion of the *AD&D* game that revised many rules, offered up new magic items, and provided a plethora of new spells. Perhaps most notably it added three core classes to the game — the barbarian, the thief-acrobat, and the cavalier, all of which had previously appeared in *Dragon*.

Unfortunately, *Unearthed Arcana* was poorly playtested. It introduced many off-balanced rules and was filled with errors. TSR started printing pretty massive errata almost immediately, beginning in *Dragon #103* (November 1985).

Mind you, these errors didn't impair *Unearthed Arcana's* sales. In fact, it sold out almost immediately and ended up on some best-seller lists for hardcovers.

The second new *AD&D* hardcover, *Oriental Adventures* (1985), appeared a couple of months later, in November. It was entirely the work of Zeb Cook, based on some of Gygax's ideas. Under development since the spring, it was more polished than *Unearthed Arcana*.

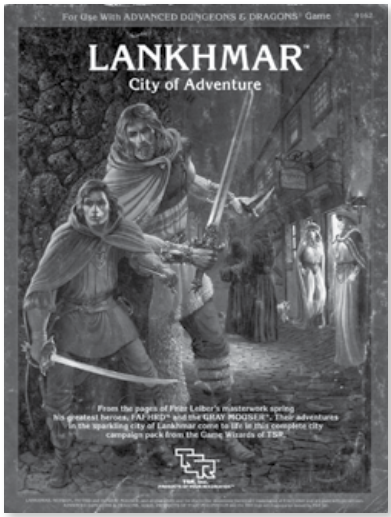
Oriental Adventures took the *AD&D* game into the Asian-influenced world of Kara-Tur. Like *Unearthed Arcana*, it offered new classes and spells, but with a singular, cultural theming. It did even better than *Unearthed Arcana* and was TSR's best-seller for the year.

More than any of Gygax's other new initiatives of 1985, *Unearthed Arcana* and *Oriental Adventures* really helped to save the company — and were at least as important as the Dragonlance and *Marvel Super Heroes* projects that the Blumes had gotten rolling.

Besides supplementing the core *AD&D* game, these two rulebooks also began to change it. The new non-weapon proficiencies that appeared in *Oriental Adventures* were particularly notable. They'd be brought into *AD&D* occidental campaigns through the next two hardcovers, which would appear the next year: Douglas Niles' *Dungeoneer's Survival Guide* (1986) and Kim Mohan's *Wilderness Survival Guide* (1986). *AD&D* had always been a class-and-level system with no concept of skills other than binary weapon proficiencies (which you either had or didn't) and the thief's skills (which you improved regularly through level gain). Meanwhile as far back as *Traveller* (1977) and *RuneQuest* (1978), the rest of the industry had moved on from class-and-level to more dynamic skill-based models. Now *D&D* was finally catching up.

Combined with all of the expansions of *Unearthed Arcana*, the skill systems contained in the *Survival Guides* and *Oriental Adventures* formed an unofficial 1.5 edition of *AD&D*. It would be a few years before it was made official, but *AD&D* was clearly changing.

> *"Lastly I stated that I planned to call a shareholders' meeting soon and at that time there would certainly be a considerable change in the composition of the board. That was an error, certainly, [b]ut I was so full of indignation at how the stooges had facilitated the near-ruin of the company I could not restrain my better judgement. Shortly after this came my downfall."*
>
> – Gary Gygax, "An Interview with Gary Gygax, Part II," *OD&Dities #10* (July 2003)



Gygax's next major release in 1985 was influenced by one of the Blumes' last books. Though Chaosium had announced a license to Fritz Leiber's stories of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser in 1982, TSR picked up the rights in 1982 or 1983 in a somewhat contentious manner that is examined in Chaosium's history. The result, *Lankhmar: City of Adventure* (1985), finally appeared in July 1985 — just as Gygax's own production got going.

Lankhmar's format was a real experiment for TSR, as it was a 96-page square-bound paperback book that also contained a smaller map book. It was this format that would influence Gygax's next project, as we'll see momentarily.

First though, *Lankhmar* deserves a quick mention as a notable city project, not just because it provided an extensive and detailed view of a city — as Judges Guild and Midkemia Press had in years past — but also because it did so using geomorphs and blank city records sheets, which allowed each GM to detail his own city of Lankhmar as their game proceeded. *Lankhmar* kicked off a line of Lankhmar supplements that was occasionally supported by TSR over the years (1985–1986, 1990–1995, 1996).



Gygax used the same "supermodule" format in August for *T1-4: The Temple of Elemental Evil* (1985), in which Frank Mentzer expanded Gary Gygax's original *Village of Hommlet* (and 200–300 pages of notes) into the long-awaited Temple, home of the fungus goddess Zuggtmoy. This was the third of Gygax's major new *D&D* releases, and like its predecessors it was quite well-received, and has since become one of the classics of the genre. Gygax's solo adventure effort, *WG6: Isle of the Ape* (1985), didn't do as well — perhaps because of its basis in *King Kong*.

Finally, we come to Gygax's new fiction initiative: the stories of Gord the Rogue in the World of Greyhawk. Gygax introduced Gord in *Dragon #100* (August 1985) in a story called "At Moonset Blackcat Comes." The first novel, *Saga of Old City* (1985) appeared a couple of months later. Though it wasn't as pivotal as Dragonlance (or the other Gygax releases of 1985), it did well, appearing on some bookstore best-seller lists.

Though *Saga* brought 1985 to an end, it didn't mark the end of Gygax's new influence and ideas. As we've already seen, he also used his restored position to mend fences with Dave Arneson, so that TSR could publish Blackmoor material. By now, it had been almost a decade since the publication of *The First Fantasy Campaign* (1977) by Judges Guild, and thus one of the oldest RPG settings had long languished. *DA1: Adventures in Blackmoor* (1986) gave it new attention, with the Barony of Blackmoor acting as historical background for *Basic D&D*'s Known World.

> *"One of the first things [Gary] did [after the stockholder fight] was approach me about doing a series of modules based on Blackmoor, and that seemed really exciting. He was president, I think, for three months when new people came in, and they suddenly weren't interested in working with me for various reasons."*
>
> – Dave Arneson, "Dave Arneson Interview," Gamespy (2004)

Unfortunately the resurrection of Blackmoor was very short-lived, with only three Dave Arneson supplements — and ultimately only four total — spanning just two years of time. For, as we'll see, Gygax would soon be on his way out again and his particular pet projects quickly extinguished.

Before we get there, however, we should look at TSR's finances one last time. As we've already seen there were many, many initiatives intended to improve TSR's financial viability, of which a variety of products and product lines are the most visible today. Some mass-market board games helped too, particularly (as silly as it sounds) one based on *All My Children* (1985), "a game of romance and intrigue" by Anne C. Gray (aka editor Anne McCready).

The result?

In June 1985 TSR had reported a loss of $3.8 million dollars versus $19 million in revenues — though some of that loss was probably funny money, calculated from product that was destroyed.

In June 1986 TSR was expected to instead show $2 million dollars in profits.

Lorraine Williams vs. Gary Gygax: 1985—1986

It was through an ironic combination of projects initiated by Gygax and the Blumes that TSR had returned to financial solvency. Looking back, that alchemical blend of projects resulted in one of the most creative periods in TSR's history. However, there was a final factor in the company's recovery: a woman named Lorraine Williams. Gygax had met her brother, Flint Dille, while in Hollywood. They'd even collaborated on a quartet of solo gamebooks: the *Sagard the Barbarian* series (1985–1986), which were even then being published by Pocket Books.

During TSR's hard times, Dille introduced Gygax to his sister, Lorraine — both as a potential investor and as a skilled manager. Williams was brought in to TSR as Vice President of Administration. She quickly proved herself quite skilled in this role. Besides bringing her own financial backing — an interesting story we'll return to — Williams was also able to deal with TSR's creditors and get the money flowing again. This was at least as important as the various releases in making TSR healthy again. Even Gygax would later acknowledge that she was "effective" and allowed him to work on creative matters like the production of *Unearthed Arcana*, *Saga of Old City*, and the rest.

However, Gygax grew less enamored with Williams as time went on because she wasn't familiar with the industry, and was more concerned with the company's profitability than the products it produced. She also expressed contempt for gamers, according to Gygax.

Meanwhile, the Blumes were making a new power play. Though Gygax had exercised some stock options following the release of *Unearthed Arcana*, Brian Blume now exercised a stock option of his own, returning Gygax to a minority position in the company. The Blumes then made a "tender offer" for their stock and began negotiations to sell it ... to Lorraine Williams. Gygax tried to block the sale, claiming that it violated the buy-sell agreement of TSR stock. He took it to a county judge, but he failed and ultimately didn't have the funds to appeal the decision. Considerable ill will was generated between him and Williams as a result of this legal disagreement, with results we'll see a few years down the line.

Gygax was forced to acknowledge defeat. He too sold his stock and other interests in TSR to Williams and on the last day of 1985 left the company behind forever (though some disputes regarding stock and other matters lingered into October 1986). Gygax would soon found a new company, New Infinities Productions, which is described in its own history. Other long-term employees such as Frank Mentzer and Kim Mohan joined him there. Mohan was replaced as editor of *Dragon* by long-term Periodicals author and editor Roger E. Moore, who would herald in the magazines' third golden age.

Though TSR lost many of its top designers and writers between 1985 and 1986, they still had many stars, as was revealed in the brand-new "Game Wizards" column in *Dragon #117* (January 1986), which laid out the then-current members of the Games Department — the current incarnation of the Design Department begun back in 1979. By this time Michael Dobson led the group. The Department maintained three on-staff editors — Mike Breault, Anne McCready, and Steve Winter; and three game designers — Zeb Cook, Jeff Grubb, and Douglas Niles. Finally, two staff members dealt with freelancers, game acquisitions coordinator Bruce Heard and freelance editing coordinator Karen Martin.

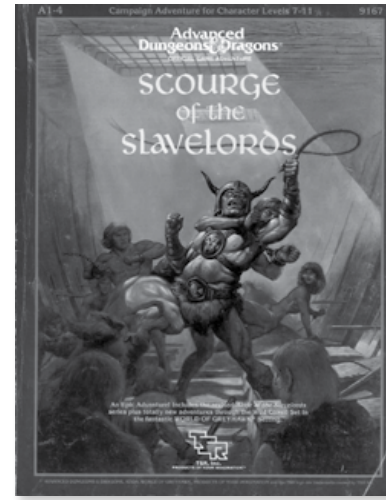
Many of these designers and editors had already made their mark at TSR, but they'd grow even more prominent in the years that followed — as soon as the final projects initiated by Gary Gygax were published.

As we've already noted, Dave Arneson's Blackmoor series ran through 1986 and 1987.

A few more Greyhawk books appeared as well. The first of those was *Artifact of Evil* (1986), Gygax's second and final Gord the Rogue novel for TSR. Two reprint adventures following in TSR's new squarebound format: *A1-4: Scourge of the Slavelords* (1986) and *GDQ1-7*: *Queen of the Spiders* (1986). These Greyhawk "super modules" could be cobbled together with *Temple of Elemental Evil* to form a massive campaign running from level 1–14, effectively forming one of the first RPG adventure paths (though admittedly, one which was *very* loosely connected, unlike the original Dragonlance adventures).

Sadly, these final publications marked the end of the original vision of Greyhawk. After that, it would be a few years before the new powers-that-be rebooted the world into a new form.

The old regime was similarly winding down over in the Periodicals Department — but not without a bang. Kim Mohan's last hurrah at TSR was the publication *Dungeon #1* (September/October 1986). It provided gamemasters with new adventures every other month and though it was never as successful as its sister magazine, *Dragon*, it would be consistently published for 22 years. Roger E. Moore suddenly found himself the editor of not one but *two* magazines when Mohan left late in 1986.



With the slate wiped clean (again), there was now the opportunity for even bigger changes, just around the corner.

Enter the Forgotten Realms (and Mystara): 1987—1989

By 1987 TSR was again in pretty good shape. However, by this time Dragonlance's initial run was coming to an end. The original 12-adventure series was complete and Hickman and Weis were not only done with their two trilogies of books, but had also left TSR to get into fiction writing on their own (as is more fully described in the Margaret Weis Productions history). This left TSR looking for a new campaign world.

In many ways, TSR never had a true campaign world before. Granted, many of the early modules were set in Greyhawk, but other than the overview folio (1980), later expanded into a box (1983) and various articles in *Dragon*, the setting had largely been described through one-off adventures. As for Dragonlance, though that world was more cohesive, it also had been described mainly through adventures. Now, TSR *could* have decided to better define one of these older worlds, but with Hickman, Weis, and Gygax all gone, they instead decided to innovate by presenting an entirely new world that they would have better control over.

Or at least a *sort of* new world.

> *"The first sentence in which the Realms came to life? 'Now in all the lands 'twixt bustling Waterdeep and the sparkling waves of The Sea of Fallen Stars, no men were more loved – and feared – than the stoic swordsman Durnan, the blustering old rogue Mirt, and the all-wise, ancient wizard Elminster.'"*
>
> – Ed Greenwood, "First Quest: Play with Me, She Breathed," *Dragon #218* (June 1995)

Ed Greenwood first conceived of the place that would become the Forgotten Realms in 1967 when — at the age of eight — he began to write stories about this strange land. He carried his fantasy world over to the new medium of gaming when a beautiful young university student named September introduced him to *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*. In 1979 Greenwood started writing for *Dragon* magazine; beginning in *The Dragon #30* (October 1979), as part of an article about a monster called the Curst, Greenwood would sometimes offhandedly mention his fantasy world. This brought the Realms to the attention of TSR.

Jeff Grubb got things rolling in the summer of 1986 when he phoned Greenwood and asked if there was more to the setting that Greenwood was describing in his articles. Greenwood happily told him "yes" and soon began to ship Grubb packages full of maps and background information. Famously, Greenwood's first Realms manuscripts had all of the "t"s written in by hand because that key was broken on Greenwood's typewriter.

The result was the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* (1987). TSR's new setting distinguished itself from what had come before in three major ways.



First, it was the first TSR setting that was truly and exhaustively detailed — thanks to a line of sourcebooks, rather than just adventures. This long series of setting books kicked off with *FR1: Waterdeep and the North* (1987). Though a few worlds, like Columbia's Hârn and ICE's Middle-earth, were already enjoying this type of detail, the general idea of extensive setting detail was still new to the RPG industry.

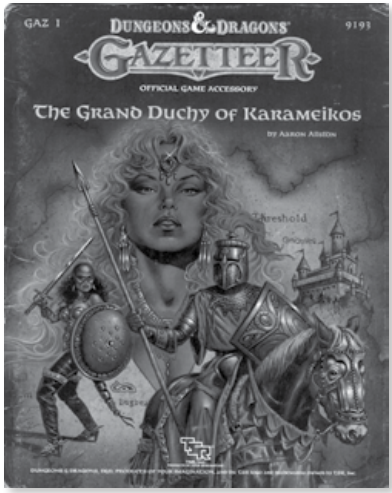
Second, it was the first setting that was truly a collaborative effort — perhaps more so than any other setting, past or future. Douglas Niles' Moonshae, the Hickmans' "Desert of Desolation," and Zeb Cook's Kara-Tur were all quickly subsumed into the Realms. Many more authors would follow in the years to come. The result was a world that was so vast and varied that it could support any type of fantasy subgenre — a factor which might have made it harder for other campaign settings to find their place in years to come.

> *"Zeb had created a setting [for Kara-Tur] that was so big it held two Chinas. It would take months, maybe even years, to travel from one end to the other. So, when we hooked it up to the Realms we just changed the scale on the maps. To this day, very few people have ever said anything about it."*
>
> – Jeff Grubb, "The Creation of Kara-Tur," *Dragon #315* (January 2004)

Third, as with Dragonlance, fiction was an integral part of the Forgotten Realms line, much of it overseen by editor Mary Kirchoff — recently returned to TSR after several years of writing freelance. Douglas Niles had already been working on a trilogy of Celtic-themed novels for TSR Ltd. These were modified to become the first Forgotten Realms books, beginning with *Darkwalker on Moonshae* (1987). R.A. Salvatore — who would soon become one of TSR's top writers with the stories of his drow Drizzt — wrote his first Forgotten Realms novel the next year, *The Crystal Shard* (1988). Ironically, Drizzt was added to *The Crystal Shard* at the last moment, when the adventure was moved away from the Moonshae Islands, where Salvatore had originally set it.

The release of the Realms also gave TSR the opportunity to offer new support for some of their older lines.

First, it gave TSR a new way to publicize *Battlesystem*. To date, TSR supported *Battlesystem* with various *AD&D* modules, including the Bloodstone sequence that began with *H1: Bloodstone Pass* (1985), which had reused *Battlesystem*'s original name. The last two books of this series, *H3: The Bloodstone Wars* (1987) and *H4: The Bloodstone Throne* (1988), were explicitly placed in the Forgotten Realms, giving new attention to the system. *Battlesystem* received a second edition (1989) shortly thereafter, but the line remained relatively stagnant despite this new focus.



Second, the Forgotten Realms offered a model for developing *D&D*'s Known World. TSR thus released *GAZ1: The Grand Duchy of Karameikos* (1987), a book transforming *D&D*'s Known World into the campaign setting of Mystara. Much like the Forgotten Realms supplements, these new *D&D* books looked at the campaign world in a more thorough and detailed manner.

Even Greyhawk got back into the act with *Greyhawk Adventures* (1988), by James M. Ward, a new hardcover volume that provided a rather eclectic set of Greyhawk rules. Unlike the Realms and Mystara, it was *not* followed up with setting sourcebooks, but instead with more adventures, starting in the second edition *AD&D* era that we're quickly approaching.

Meanwhile, the Forgotten Realms did well, though perhaps not as well as expected. Or maybe it was just that the rumors of Dragonlance's decline were greatly exaggerated. The sales figures for both worlds stayed about the same for much of their lifetimes.

Other Media — Books, Computers & Comics: 1988—1993

The Forgotten Realms also acted as TSR's entrance into other types of media. For the first time TSR had a well-developed, evocative campaign world, and they were ready to take advantage of it.

We've already seen how this led to the publication of early Realms books by Niles and Salvatore. By 1988 novels were becoming increasingly important: that was the first year in which fiction books outnumbered game book production at TSR. Afterward synergy between the game and book lines would grow, as we'll see with the "Avatar" project that was part of second edition *AD&D*. The Realms would also lead TSR into hardcover publication, beginning with Salvatore's *The Legacy* (1992).

Meanwhile DC began publishing comics licensed from TSR. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (1988–1991) and *Forgotten Realms* (1989–1991), authored by Dan Mishkin and Jeff Grubb, were both set in the Realms. Dan Mishkin's *Dragonlance* (1988–1991) and Barbara Kesel's *Spelljammer* (1990–1991) highlighted other worlds past and future, while a James Lowder *Ravenloft* comic was in the works before DC decided to end their relation with TSR for reasons we'll return to shortly. 20 years later, these comics still remain relevant thanks to their vibrant settings and characters. IDW Publishing recently re-released the entire *AD&D* and *Forgotten Realms* series as *Dungeons & Dragons Classics* (2011) and *Dungeons & Dragons: Forgotten Realms Classics* (2011).

Finally, Strategic Simulations, Inc. (SSI), a computer game publisher, was publishing the first official *D&D* games for the PC. By 1988 *Dungeons & Dragons* had already *de facto* created several new genres of computer games (CRPGs), but TSR had realized very little profit from them. That changed in 1988 when SSI released the Forgotten Realms-based *Pool of Radiance* (1988), the first in their "gold-box" series. Although the graphics are primitive by today's standards, the gameplay remains excellent and was the main draw of the games.

SSI did a great job of not only adapting *AD&D* to the computer, but also making book-keeping tasks like resting and recovering spells easy. The gold-box game line continued through the release of *Forgotten Realms Unlimited Adventures* (1993), by which time SSI was on the verge of bankruptcy due to delays in the release of their next-generation *D&D* engine, which was eventually published in a somewhat unfinished state as *Dark Sun: Shattered Lands* (1993).

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, TSR remained at the top of their game in multimedia opportunities.

Dungeons, Dragons & Computers

This book is about *Dungeons & Dragons* and the rich field of tabletop roleplaying games that it created. However, TSR had at least as big of an effect in another field: computer games. Both computer roleplaying games (CRPGs) and massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs) directly trace their origins to *Dungeons & Dragons*. Computer adventure games and multi-user dungeons (MUDs) probably had a multitude of influences, but *Dungeons & Dragons* is among them.

Public Games: 1975—1979

The whole field got rolling almost as soon as *Dungeons & Dragons* was released, with all of the initial work being done on public computers – most of them available at colleges and running the PLATO time-sharing system. Programmers dodged system administrators to try and make their secret games available, illicitly stealing CPU cycles to explore their digital dungeons and fight against computerized creatures.

One of the earliest CRPGs was probably *pedit5* (1975), which got deleted pretty quickly. Another called *dnd* (1975) more clearly showed the foundation of the genre. Other early PLATO CRPGs included *Oubliette* (1977), *Moria* (1978), *Orthanc* (1978), and *Avatar* (1979). There was also ongoing development on other platforms, such as Daniel Lawrence's *DND* (1977), which was written for the TOPS-10 operating system. All of these early games tended to feature characters killing monsters for experience points in dungeons. Surprisingly, some of them featured graphics, including wire-frame drawings of dungeon corridors.

Prelude on the PC: 1980—1989

Meanwhile, in the young personal computer industry, games like Origin Systems' *Akalabeth* (1980) and *Ultima* (1980) and Sir-Tech's *Wizardry* (1981) were bringing dungeons to whole new generations of players. In this burgeoning market, TSR licensed a few home console games, but hadn't touched the PC market.

The newly commercial CRPG market happily puttered along for years without licensing any properties from the tabletop RPG world. Origin Systems and Sir-Tech initially dominated it. Later Interplay Productions – the producers of *The Bard's Tale* (1985) – and New World Computing – the makers of *Might and Magic* (1986) – joined in.

The first few licensed games from the hobbyist field started to appear in the mid-'80s, such as a series of *Fighting Fantasy* games (1984–1987) published in Britain by Puffin Books and Adventure Soft UK, and *Autoduel* (1985), published by Origins Systems. Meanwhile, over in the multiplayer world, GEnie was rolling out the *Rolemaster*-based *Gemstone* (1987), though that was only a demo, with

the game not reaching playtesting until *Gemstone II* (1988) and full release until *Gemstone III* (1989).

The Licensing Golden Age: 1988—1993

If you consider choose-your-own-adventure gamebooks, RPG-related board games, and multiplayer releases a bit far afield, then you have to wait until the late '80s to find the first licensed CRPG. Just when *Gemstone* was under development, a dam was breaking, as many professional computer game publishers started going back to the tabletop roleplaying world for inspiration. Among the releases of this heyday were the *AD&D*-licensed *Pool of Radiance* (1988), *Battletech: The Crescent Hawk's* Inception (1988), *Tunnels & Trolls: Crusaders of Khazan* (1990), and a series of GDW games from Paragon Software, including: *MegaTraveller 1: The Zhodani Conspiracy* (1989), *Space: 1889* (1990), *MegaTraveller 2: Quest for the Ancient* (1991), and *Twilight: 2000* (1992). In later years, the CRPG industry would just as quickly lose interest in tabletop games, with the exception of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

The story of TSR's relation with computer games is largely the story of their relation with Strategic Simulations, Inc. Prior to 1988 SSI was mostly known as the publisher of computer wargames. They'd put out a series of somewhat successful CRPGs such as *Questron* (1984), *Phantasie* (1985), and *Wizard's Crown* (1985), but nothing to get them into the club ruled by Origins and Sir-Tech. It may well be because of that positioning – as a competent but lesser maker of CRPGs – that TSR decided to license SSI.

Pool of Radiance was by no means a brilliant game. It largely repeated what was on the market already, centering on a 3-D view of locations taking up a quarter of the screen, with character data taking up the rest of the space. It was a model that went back to at least *Wizardry*. This was combined with the successful tactical combat system of *Wizard's Crown*.

Though there wasn't a lot of innovation, there *was* a lot of expertise. *Pool of Radiance* was well-put-together and fun to play. The *AD&D* gaming system was very well-adapted. With those advantages and with TSR's branding, SSI very soon *did* become a major mover in the CRPG world.

Pool of Radiance was the first in a series of games that all used the same gaming engine, called the "gold-box series" by fans. It included three more Forgotten Realms games, ending with *Pools of Darkness* (1989–1991), a trilogy of Dragonlance gold-box games (1990–1992), two further Forgotten Realms games set in the Savage Frontier (1991–1992), two *XXVc* Buck Rogers gold-box games (1990–1992), and finally *Unlimited Adventures* (1993), a gold-box construction kit. AOL's *Neverwinter Nights* (1991–1997), a multiplayer game that used the gold-box engine, meanwhile brought *D&D* to the online masses.

As the gold-box engine aged, SSI was able to catch lightning in a bottle a second time when they published Westwood's *Eye of the Beholder* (1991), the first of a trilogy of black-box games that upgraded *AD&D* to the full 3-D graphics that were becoming increasingly common at the time. The two later games were *The Legend of Darkmoon* (1991) and *Assault on Myth Drannor* (1993), all again set in the Forgotten Realms. Dreamforge's *Dungeon Hack* (1993) was a final add-on that used the engine to create a more random experience.

Later Days: 1992-Present

Unfortunately SSI's later years largely reflected TSR's trajectory – which is to say downward. In the early '90s, SSI started to flail, publishing games set in a variety of settings using a variety of game engines. Among them were *Spelljammer: Pirates of Realmspace* (1992), *Dark Sun: Shattered Lands* (1993), *Ravenloft: Strahd's Possession* (1993), *Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse* (1994), and finally the Forgotten Realms based *Menzoberranzan* (1994). SSI probably wasn't doing itself any favors by publishing in so many different settings (nor was TSR, for that matter). In addition, many of the games downplayed roleplaying systems, instead replacing them with quick-playing action scenes. Finally, almost all of these later games were beset with gross and frequent bugs. SSI's reputation tanked and TSR pulled their exclusive licensing.

Other companies such as Sierra and Interplay quickly picked up TSR licenses, but not much was released before TSR's demise. The drop in computer gaming revenue may be one of the factors that contributed to the company's death. Nothing notable for *AD&D* really came out until BioWare got into the *AD&D* licensing biz, starting with *Baldur's Gate* (1998). They've since become a sort of SSI for the new millennia, with their most notable games probably being the story-heavy *Planescape: Torment* (1999) and their own *Neverwinter Nights* (2002), which shipped with a toolset that let players create their own content. Unfortunately, when Hasbro granted an exclusive *D&D* license to Atari in 2005, much of the *D&D* CRPG production dried up.

In the modern MMORPG market, tabletop RPGs were ignored for a while, but in recent years that's started to change. *Dungeons & Dragons: Online* (2006), published by Atari, was a forerunner. Following *D&DO*'s release, MMORPG interest in tabletop RPG content increased, as CCP Games, the makers of *Eve Online* (2003), bought White Wolf in 2006 and Cryptic Studios, the makers of *City of Heroes* (2004), bought all the rights to Hero Games' *Champions* universe in 2008. Ten months later, Cryptic was bought by Atari, putting licenses for the top fantasy RPG and one of the oldest superhero RPGs into the same hands. *Champions Online* (2009) has since been released. Unfortunately, both of the major licensed MMORPGs have had troubles

competing in the modern market. *D&DO* was forced over to a freemium model in 2009, and *Champions Online* made the same move in 2011. As such, their futures remain uncertain.

From 2013, it's hard to say whether this MMORPG interest in tabletop properties will continue, or if it'll just be a blip, like that surge of tabletop-licensed CRPGs that ran from 1987–1992.

The Rest of the Hysteria: 1982—1990

Before we finish our look at TSR in the '80s, we should return to a topic that we have previously touched upon: the public backlash and media hysteria directed at roleplaying games in general and *Dungeons & Dragons* in particular. The ignorance of the general public is clearly shown by the fact that *D&D* continued to be the flashpoint for anti-RPG backlash, although by now there were games much more deserving of occult labeling, such as Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* (1981). Nonetheless, *D&D* continued to be at the center of a firestorm throughout the '80s because that was the game that had come into the public spotlight during the James Egbert affair.

The prime advocate against *D&D* in the '80s was Patricia Pulling. Her son committed suicide on June 9, 1982, and she blamed it on the fact that he had been cursed in a game of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

As part of her crusade against *D&D*, Pulling formed a public advocacy group in 1983 called "Bothered About *Dungeons & Dragons*" (BADD). It supplied law enforcement agencies and other groups with published booklets such as a 40-page screed comparing *D&D* to occult books and a 60-page booklet sensationally titled "Witchcraft or Satanism???"

> *"The healthy growth and development of our children is being hindered by violent fantasy role-playing games, rock music …, pornographic literature, violent movies, and last – violent videos. What can be found in these things that build's (sic) character, integrity and high ideals."*
>
> – Mary Dempsey, Pat Dempsey, Pat A. Pulling,
> "Dungeons and Dragons: Witchcraft Suicide Violence" (Mid-'80s)

As evidenced by Pulling's more religious claims, the building hysteria surrounding *D&D* centered more and more on it being a dark, occult pastime. Fringe religious leaders became increasingly involved in this witch-hunt.

Evangelist Jack Chick famously published a comic called "Dark Dungeons" (1984). It depicted *D&D* players being introduced to real witches' covens as they gained levels, casting real spells, and then killing themselves when their characters died. It underlined the ignorance surrounding much of the anti-*D&D* movement (and has since been repeatedly parodied).

Then there was a supervillain team-up in January 1985 when Patricia Pulling, BADD, and The National Coalition on Television Violence jointly appealed to the FTC to put warnings in front of every *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon to say that the game "has caused a number of suicides and murders." They had further complaints too, saying the cartoon "averages over 50 acts of violence per hour. It promotes fantasies of violence and teaches the use of violence as normal problem-solving behavior."

Remarkably TSR chose to do very little about the *D&D* hysteria — though the topic was a touchy one inside the company, especially under Lorraine Williams. Instead the prime defender of *Dungeons & Dragons* (and roleplaying in general) was a man who never had worked for TSR: Michael Stackpole, a veteran of Flying Buffalo and author of several RPG-related novels. Stackpole began his defense of the roleplaying field in Flying Buffalo's own *Sorcerer's Apprentice* magazine, but he really took on the mantle of RPG Defender on July 14, 1987, when he debated the Western Regional Director of BADD (another woman whose son had committed suicide) on KFYI radio in Phoenix, Arizona.

Over the next few years Stackpole was at the forefront in defending *Dungeons & Dragons* and the rest of the roleplaying community. At one point he turned BADD's pseudo-science against them by comparing BADD's count of roleplaying suicides to the general rate of teen suicide in the culture; according to his interpretation of BADD's statistics, 500 *D&D* players should have been committing suicide each year, where BADD only recorded seven, thus suggesting that *D&D* should be adopted as a public health measure. This argument appeared in one of Stackpole's more prominent defenses, an article called "The Truth About Role-Playing Games," which was published in *Satanism in America* (1989) — a book later credited by the FBI with stemming the general hysteria about Satanism that swamped the country in the '80s.

In 1990 Stackpole published "The Pulling Report," a document that generally demolished Patricia Pulling's stand against roleplaying games. After that, the anti-RPG hysteria slowly faded. There was now a new bogeyman for parents to panic about: video games. BADD dissolved in 1997 following the death of its founder.

Though TSR generally ignored the hysteria about *D&D*, as we'll see it had some minor effects on the second edition of their game.

AD&D 2: 1984—1989

Gary Gygax first suggested a second edition of *AD&D* in *Dragon #90* (October 1984), just as he was returning to power. It was to be designed by Gygax and Frank Mentzer, with help from François Marcela-Froideval and Roger Moore. It got put on hold for a year while Frank Mentzer was finishing up the *Basic D&D* series — and Gygax was saving the company — then Gygax offered more details in *Dragon #103* (November 1985).

Gygax saw a second edition mainly as an opportunity to reorganize all of the core rule books — which then included the *Players Handbook*, the *Dungeon Masters Guide*, *Deities & Demigods*, three books of monsters, *Unearthed Arcana*, and *Oriental Adventures* — into four polished (but massive) volumes — matching the original four *AD&D* books from 1980. He also remained intent on adding a few missing character classes: the mystic, the savant, and the jester.

However, the Gygaxian version of second edition never came to be, due to his departure from the company. Afterward, designer Zeb Cook and senior editor Steve Winter volunteered to take on the second edition project, supervised by Game Department Head Michael Dobson and aided by researcher and playtest coordinator Jon Pickens.

> *"When we got the green light to start working on 2nd Edition, the first thing I did was grab spare copies of the* PHB *and* DMG*, slice them into pieces, and start taping them back together the way they belonged."*
>
> – Steve Winter, Interview, grognardia.blogspot.com (August 2009)

The new 2e team agreed with Gygax about some of the problems with *AD&D*. Much as had been the case in 1977, before the current iterations of *D&D* were created, rules were spread across numerous books, with some of them being contradictory.

However, they also saw that the roleplaying industry had evolved another 10 years since the release of *AD&D*, while TSR's premiere game was still a clunky, old machine, full of non-intuitive mechanisms such as armor classes that ran from 10 to -10 and a combat system that was thoroughly rooted in miniatures wargames. Early rulebooks like the *Players Handbook* and *Dungeon Masters Guide* were obtuse and poorly organized, while later rulebooks like *Unearthed Arcana* were unbalanced and heavily erratad. Though the new second edition of the game started out as a re-organization under Gygax, the new 2e team was able to convince management to turn it into a true revision.

Editor Steve Winter laid out four criteria for the new project:

- The rulebooks should be treated as references. Winter considered the alternate idea of having the books be instruction manuals, but decided that reference books would be more useful for existing players. On the downside, this meant that *AD&D* would remain hard to learn, which would result in a flurry of introductory releases in the '90s, as we'll see.
- All information on a topic was to be organized in one place.
- All of the players' information was to be in the *Players Handbook* and all of the DM's information in the *Dungeon Masters Guide* — without any overlap.
- The new books had to have good value over the first edition books.

Many of these ideas seem pretty basic now; that they had to be thought about back then suggests that even the *AD&D* books had been constructed pretty haphazardly (in what Winter would call a "stream of consciousness" manner).

TSR (re)announced the new edition of the game in *Dragon #117* (January 1987). In the next issue, project lead Zeb Cook famously penned a column titled "Who Dies?" It mentioned that part of the revision would involve deciding which character classes to throw out. The column was remarkably prescient, spotlighting the two classes that were eventually removed from the game — saying that assassins had always been bad for party unity while monks had been better covered by *Oriental Adventures*. However it also threatened many other favorites, from clerics and thieves to illusionists and druids. The result was a huge outcry, thousands of letters, and a lot of debate about the new edition.

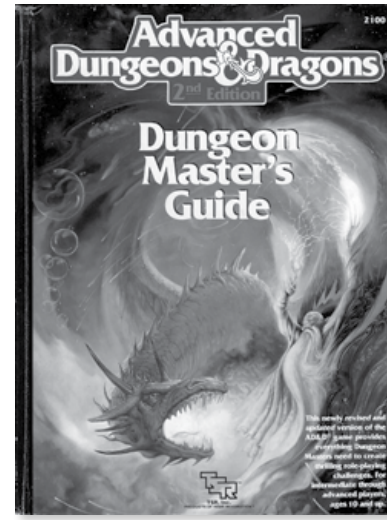
Cook would later say that he was *trying* to evoke a reaction. Whatever the purpose, it allowed players to have a real hand in the revision of the game, first through their letters, then through a massive questionnaire. Players even saved the bard, another class that Cook had marked for extinction. Of course, feedback didn't stop there. Pickens also coordinated with 20–30 gaming groups over eight months of playtesting, ending around the fall of 1988.

The second edition of *AD&D* was finally released in early 1989.

Many of the changes turned out to be cosmetic. One of the biggest was that the sizes of the *Player's Handbook* (1989) and *Dungeon Master's Guide* (1989) were reversed. Back in 1978 Gygax had decided that it was best if the players did not know the rules, and so the original *Player's Handbook* was a skeleton that didn't even detail combat. Now the entire roleplaying industry had accepted the fact that players and gamemasters were united in games — not adversaries — and the new rules reflected this. As another presentation change the new rules were printed in

two colors, black and blue, showing a continued growth in TSR's professionalism. Finally the new *Monstrous Compendium* (1989) was released in a loose leaf binder format — though this change was eliminated a few years later.





The new rules were also rewritten from scratch. More than anything, this was probably the largest benefit of the new edition, since it made the game much more accessible than Gygax's original prose had been.

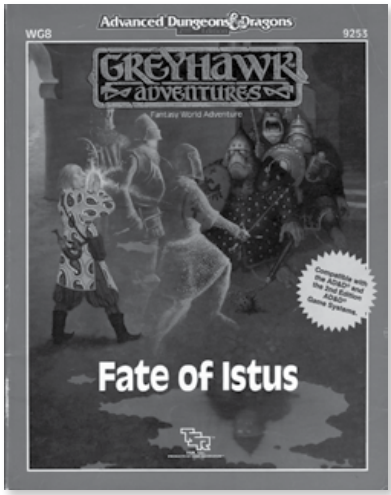
Beyond that, more was changed than some hoped and less than most feared. Many of the clunky rules, such as *AD&D*'s decreasing armor class, stuck around. On the other hand, non-weapon proficiencies were added to the core rules, and the schools of magic were fully split, providing magic-user characters with a bit more depth. Perhaps most surprisingly, the rules were once again presented as "guidelines" — a reversal from Gygax's original goal for the *AD&D* lines. Finally, the character classes were indeed cleaned up, with Arneson's assassin and monk eliminated.

Though Cook had said that assassins were removed due to problems of party unity, their excision has always been seen by the public as part of TSR's well-documented attempt to make *AD&D* more public friendly — TSR's only allowance to the religious hysteria that had shadowed the game throughout the 1980s. Half-orcs were similarly removed as player characters, and demons and devils were eliminated entirely.

James M. Ward, who had instituted the removal of demons and devils, explained in *Dragon #154* (February 1990) that "[a]voiding the Angry Mother Syndrome has become a good, basic guideline for all of the designers and editors at TSR, Inc." Apparently, TSR had received one letter a week complaining about the demons and devils since the original *Monster Manual* was printed, and those 624 letters, or what Ward called "a lot of letters," had been the reason he'd removed the infernal races.

The readers were not amused, and to his credit Ward printed many of their replies in *Dragon #158* (June 1990). One reader stated that the decision "becomes censorship when an outside group dictates to you ... what you should print." The release of the *Outer Planes Appendix* (1991) for the *Monstrous Compendium* assuaged some of the anger because it restored demons as "tanar'ri" and devils as "baatezu," but some fans left *D&D* entirely as a result of this decision.

Despite these issues, the release of the second edition was generally a success. To explain the changes, TSR also kicked off major events in both of their active game worlds, Forgotten Realms and Greyhawk.



In Greyhawk this came about through a single adventure book, *WG8: Fate of Istus* (1989), whose prime goal was to eliminate monks and assassins from Greyhawk.

The event in the Forgotten Realms was much more sophisticated. It centered on a story of the gods of the Realms being thrown out of the heavens and the changes that this wrought. It began in *FR7: Hall of Heroes* (1989) and then spread out into a three-adventure "Avatar" series (1989), a three-novel "Avatar" series (1989), and even some of the comic book stories. Unlike the "underground conspiracy" of Dragonlance, this event was planned from the top-down by management. It was very successful, but as TSR's first concerted foray into the area it was a nightmare to manage, primarily due to the simultaneous creation of the three novels, the three adventures, and many of the other elements. Limited authorial control of plots and connections to a rule system that was also changing at the time caused further problems.

The synchronized launch of the Realms' "Empires" event (1990) would go better and from there book-game synergy would increase.

TSR West: 1989—1992

The new edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* wasn't the only major expansion for TSR in 1989. At the same time, TSR was heading back to the West Coast to restart the work that Gygax had abandoned in 1984 when he was forced to return to the Midwest. The goal was to get *D&D* back onto the television, and maybe (finally) into the movies.

This was to be done through a new department called TSR West that was run by Flint Dille, Lorraine Williams' brother (who we've already met) — who indeed had some experience in Hollywood via *American Tail 2* and the *Transformers* and *G.I. Joe* TV shows. TSR West under Dille was a small operation, never totaling more than eight employees, but it was nonetheless an expensive one because of the effort (and cost) expended to schmooze Hollywood.

A few publishing projects originated from TSR West, including the timely *A Line in the Sand* board game (1991), designed by Douglas Niles and Paul Lidberg, which depicted the first US-Iraq War; it was published the very day the US bombing began, thanks to Dille's ability to convince the president of the company to make things move fast. A Buck Rogers roleplaying game called *XXVc* also began its life at TSR West, but it was shipped back east when Dille couldn't finish it, where we'll meet it again shortly.

TSR West's most notable achievement was their publication of a series of "comic modules." These were standard comic books, but because TSR's comic book license was still exclusively held by DC, four pages of game material were added to each book by new hire Scott Haring (formerly and later of Steve Jackson Games), thus turning them into "comic modules." One of the lead comic modules was a *Buck Rogers: XXVc* comic — and we'll talk about why *that* name keeps popping up at this point in TSR's history. Others included *13 Assassin*, *Intruder*, *R.I.P.*, and *Warhawk*.

Production of these comics by TSR West caused friction with DC Comics, and is cited as one of the prime reasons for DC not renewing their TSR license in 1991. Meanwhile TSR West came to an end in 1992 because of its cost, and thus the TSR West comics were all terminated as well. It would be years before *Dungeons & Dragons* received any coherent comic support again, beginning with Kenzer & Company's *Dungeons & Dragons: In the Shadow of Dragons* (2000–2002).

Dungeons, Dragons & Comics

Dungeons & Dragons has a long history with the comics industry. Some of it appears within the histories of TSR and Kenzer & Company. But, there's more to the story than that.

The First Comics: 1981–1982

The comic book history of *D&D* begins in either 1979 or 1980 within the Art Department of TSR. Inside that group, artists Jeff Dee and Bill Willingham were both interested in comics. In fact, Dee had already produced his own comic book superhero RPG, *Villains and Vigilantes* (1979), as is described in the history of FGU.

Because of their comic book interest, Dee and Willingham approached Gary Gygax about the possibility of starting a line of TSR comics. It was an idea whose time had probably come, as underground fantasy comics like *The First Kingdom* (1974), *Cerebus* (1977), and *ElfQuest* (1978) were coming of age and in the next decade would lead to comics more explicitly derived from *D&D*, such as Arrow Comics' *The Realm* (1986). However, Gygax turned the idea over to the *Dragon* magazine editor – perhaps because the magazine had usually included some comics – and it died there.

Meanwhile, TSR's Ad Department was thinking about comics too. They decided to produce a series of full-page ads in both black & white and color that were designed as comic strips. The first nine-page strip, probably drawn by Keenan Powell, featured a group of three adventures – an elf, a fighter, and a magic-user – exploring a dungeon, fighting a shadow, and then facing green slime. It appeared in Marvel Comics in 1981.

When Dee and Willingham saw the ad, they didn't like it. Looking back, it does have issues. The art style is crude, and the panels aren't separated like they would be in most modern comic books. Besides that, the *D&D* continuity is somewhat poor. The wizard chases away a Shadow with a Hold Monster "charm" that also lights up the dungeon. Worse, the party doesn't even have a cleric! Dee rushed off to tell the Ad Department about the problems with the strip … and was promptly given the job of continuing it.

> *"Jeff saw [the first comic strip] before I did and went storming to the other building, pointing out, panel by panel, everything that was wrong with how they did what they did. And rather than fire him, they said, 'Well, that all makes sense. Why don't you do it from now on?'"*
>
> – Bill Willingham, Interview, *The Comics Journal*, 2006

Jeff Dee drew the second strip (which includes a cleric suddenly stepping out of the shadows), and then Bill Willingham drew at least six more. Steve Sullivan did the writing. These strips largely focused on the *Dungeons & Dragons Basic* and *Expert Sets* of the era. A second series of strips that ran simultaneously in 1981–1982 is less well-known. They appear to have been published in *Dragon Magazine*, *Epic Illustrated*, and/or *Heavy Metal* and may have been the work of a different creative team.

For several years, those 14 pages of comic ads would be the sum total of the TSR comic corpus.

The Dragonlance Expansion: 1987–1991

By the mid-'80s, TSR was growing increasingly sophisticated with its expansion into other media. They'd pushed into the book trade in 1982 with their *Endless Quest* (1982–1987) books and onto television screens with their *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon (1983–1985). Much of this new sophistication culminated in the Dragonlance project, which TSR simultaneously released as adventures (1984–1986) and novels (1984–1985). TSR opted to use *Dragonlance* to break into comics as well, with adaptations of the three *Dragonlance Chronicles* novels.

The Dragonlance Saga: Book One (1987), an 80-page graphic novel that adapted the first half of *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* (1984) was scripted by Roy Thomas, who at the time was best known for his long run on Marvel's *Conan the Barbarian* (1970) and his golden-age superhero comics, such as the *All-Star Squadron* (1981). His *Dragonlance* comic was well-reviewed, and could have been a classic if given the right support. Unfortunately, TSR mainly distributed it using their existing connections – which put it primarily into game and book stores, *not* comic stores.

While TSR did publish four more *Dragonlance* graphic novels (1988–1991), advancing the storyline into *Dragons of Spring Dawning* (1985), they never finished the storyline. The fifth and final volume is one of the rarer TSR collectibles, regularly earning prices over $200 online.

The DC Explosion: 1988–1991

Just as TSR was getting started with their *Dragonlance* graphic novels, they were also negotiating with one of the top two US comic companies – DC. Perhaps because of the success of the existing *Dragonlance* graphic novels, DC and TSR came to a deal; the result would be 126 different comics published in four years, spread across five major series and a few specials. They would include (for the first time ever) totally original comics based on the *Dungeons & Dragons* game and its major settings.

The *D&D* comics line kicked off with *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (1988–1991), initially written by industry writer Michael Fleisher. It portrayed a fairly typically *D&D*

adventuring party and was most notable for its location in Waterdeep, making it the first comic book depiction of the Forgotten Realms. After its initial four-issue arc, the comic would be taken over by Dan Mishkin, who then wrote the majority of its 36-issue run.

However, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* had one other writer: Jeff Grubb, TSR's "engineer" of the Forgotten Realms, who was also no stranger to fiction, having co-authored *Azure Bonds* (1988) – one of the first *Realms* novels – with his wife, Kate Novak. He was able to carry all of that experience over to a four-issue run on *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, which was considered a success. Though Mishkin then took the comic back over, Grubb wasn't ignored. DC was happy to have a TSR employee write what they figured would be "pre-approved" scripts. The result was a second comic, *Forgotten Realms*, which ran 25 issues itself (1989–1991).

> *"I always say that Ed is the architect of the Realms, I'm just the engineer. The Realms are first and foremost his creation, and predate* D&D *itself. My role was to translate his work into a usable and playable setting for games and books. He's the superhero, I'm the sidekick."*
>
> – Jeff Grubb, Interview, glgnfz.blogspot.com (September 2009)

Together the two series formed the spine of DC's extensive *D&D* comics production. Two other *D&D* comic series ran at DC during the same time period: *Dragonlance* (1988–1991), a 34-issue comic primarily by Dan Mishkin; and *Spelljammer* (1990–1991), a short 15-issue series created by Barbara Kesel that marked the first appearance of the *Spelljammer* universe in comic books.

The comics apparently did well and there were plans for more. James Lowder was tapped to write a *Ravenloft* comic, while *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons #36* (December 1991) promised an issue #37 the next month. But they were not to be.

The reasons for this abrupt ending are already described in the history of TSR. In short: TSR West began publishing comic books while claiming they were "comic modules" because they included four pages of gaming material. This new line of comics caused friction between DC and TSR, and as a result, DC's line of TSR comics came to a very sudden end.

For almost two decades afterward, those four years of *D&D* comics from DC would be the high point of *D&D*'s penetration into the comic medium – both by quantity and (in this writer's opinion) creativity.

The Lean Years: 1992–2000

During TSR's final years in the '90s, comic production was very limited. Comics were also treated differently. Instead of offering big licenses to comic publishers, TSR

primarily used the medium as a new way of marketing their games – calling back to those very first *D&D* comic strips. As a result, just five more comics were published before TSR expired.

Jeff Grubb's *Dragon Strike #1* (1994) was produced by Marvel to support TSR's then-newest introductory product. A few years later TSR produced a set of four "limited edition" comics that were distributed as promotions. They were: Jeff Grubb's *Forgotten Realms: The Grand Tour* (1996), Tom and Mary Bierbaum's *Dragonlance: Fifth Age* (1996), Mike Baron's *Labyrinth of Madness* (1996), and Ed Stark's *Birthright: The Serpent's Eye* (1996). A fifth comic, Jeff Grubb's *Planescape: The Unity of Rings* (2003), was produced at the time, but not released until Wizards of the Coast put it on the web seven years later.

After Wizards took over TSR in 1997, they were pretty busy for a few years getting things back in order. Therefore it's no big surprise that they didn't do much with comic licensing. Interplay issued a *Baldur's Gate* comic (1998) to introduce characters in the video game, then in 2000, 21st Century Comics, an Italian company, offered up the only original creative content of the period.

Forgotten Realms: The Forbidden Sands of Anauroch (2000) was meant to be a series of six handsome 48-page hardcover graphic novels, released in the European style. It ended after just two issues, however, due in part to bad reviews.

Kenzer & Comics: 2001–2004

It wasn't until the '00s that *D&D* made its return to the world of comics. Two major companies would license the brand during that decade.

The first of these comics publishers was Kenzer & Company, who received several *Dungeons & Dragons* licenses after the release of 3E – as described in their own history. They used this license to publish four comic series over a four-year span: the eight-issue *In the Shadow of Dragons* (2001–2002); the four-issue *Tempest's Gate* (2001–2002); the six-issue *Black & White* (2002–2003), indeed published in black & white; and the five-issue *Where Shadows Fall* (2003–2004).

All four comics were set in Greyhawk, the first time the setting had appeared in comic form. This was doubtless due to the setting's new importance as the "default" *D&D* world for 3E.

The Devil Has Its Due: 2004–2008

D&D's next comic publisher of the era came about when licensed comic creators Dabel Brothers Productions got together with a new publisher called Devil's Due Publishing. As part of their new line, the Dabel brothers licensed *The Legend of Huma* – a historic Dragonlance novel (1988) originally written by Richard A. Knaak.

In the early months of 2004, Devil's Due published five out of the six issues intended to form the first arc of *The Legend of Huma*. Unfortunately, before the sixth issue of *The Legend of Huma* went to press, the Dabel Brothers decided that they were unhappy with their publisher. The result was an embarrassingly public spectacle, full of arguments and recriminations. The Dabel Brothers *did* end up going their own way. However, when they left Devil's Due, the Dabels were forced to leave *The Legend of Huma* behind. Devil's Due, meanwhile, had been happy with the comic's reception, so on March 30, 2005, they announced a new license from Hasbro to Devil's Due, covering the entire *D&D* library.

Afterward Devil's Due published the sixth issue of *The Legend of Huma*, but not the rest of the adaptation. However, they *did* use their new-fangled *D&D* license to publish *lots* of additional *D&D* material.

The rest of the story of Devil's Due's publication of *D&D* comics is both more notable and less exciting. For the most part, they adapted two series: *The Legend of Drizzt* and the *Dragonlance Chronicles*. For Drizzt, they fully adapted seven books – *Homeland* (2005), *Exile* (2005), *Sojourn* (2006), *The Crystal Shard* (2006), *Streams of Silver* (2007), *The Halfling's Gem* (2007), and *The Legacy* (2008). They also completely adapted the *Dragonlance Chronicles*, with *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* (2005–2006), *Dragons of Winter Night* (2007), and *Dragon of Spring Dawning* (2007–2008) – retreading books previously adapted by Roy Thomas, by now newly reimagined for a different generation.

Starting in 2006, Devil's Due looked to expand its publications. The first of their new books was *Eberron: Eye of the Wolf* (June 2006), Devil's Due's only original *D&D* story and the first Eberron comic. It was written by Eberron creator Keith Baker, but ended up being a one-shot.

After licensing the *Dungeons & Dragons* trademark itself, Devil's Due also began publishing *The Worlds of Dungeons & Dragons* (2007–2008), an anthology comic that adapted short stories taken from *Dragon Magazine* and various short-story collections, such as *Realms of Valor* (1993) and *Tales of Ravenloft* (1994).

Unfortunately, that brings us to 2008. At the time, Devil's Due was publishing *The Worlds of D&D*, *Time of the Twins* (2008) for *Dragonlance Legends*, and *Starless Night* (2008) for *The Legend of Drizzt*. Though Devil's Due finished *Time of the Twins*, they only got a single issue into *Starless Night* (2008), while *The Worlds of D&D* ended with issue #7 (2008).

"We're still dealing with hundreds of thousands of dollars in book store returns that rocked us in late 2008 and into 2009, right in the middle of an already aggressive restructuring."

– Josh Blaylock, Press, bleedingcool.com

The problem was generally the economic downturn of 2008, but more specifically the same problem that once almost brought down White Wolf and contributed to the death of TSR: book store returns. Devil's Due managed to publish some comics through 2010, but their *D&D* books would never advance past those final issues in 2008.

The Rest of the Story: 2002, 2004, 2010-Present

During the years that Kenzer & Company published books under the *Dungeons & Dragons* trademark and Devil's Due was publishing adaptations of TSR and Wizards of the Coast novels, other *D&D* comic books appeared.

The first of these was *Vecna: Hand of the Revenant Book One* (2002), by Modi Thorsson, published by Iron Hammer Graphics. Like the comics then being published by Kenzer & Company, it was set in Greyhawk. Thorsson ended the story on a cliffhanger because he'd planned for more volumes, but that never came to be. Today, *Vecna* is another very hard to get rarity.

The second was *Crisis in Raimiton* (2004), an "Adventure Guide to *D&D*" that Wizards gave away on Free Comic Book Day '04. It told the story of gamers playing *D&D*, and then the story of the characters they created. Wizards' interest in the free giveaway foreshadowed the industry's interest in a free giveaway day of their own: Free RPG Day.

More recently, IDW Publishing has picked up the *D&D* license.

IDW's main *D&D* book was John Rogers' *Dungeons & Dragons* (2010) ongoing comic, set in the Points of Light world. It was the first ongoing *D&D* comic to be published since DC lost the license 20 years ago. Unfortunately, Rogers' comic went on hiatus after just 16 issues.

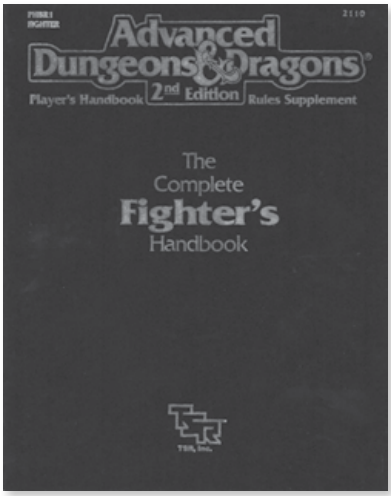
IDW has also published multiple *D&D* miniseries, including: Alex Irvine's *Dungeons & Dragons: Dark Sun* (2011); R.A. Salvatore's *Dungeons & Dragons: The Legend of Drizzt: Neverwinter Tales* (2011); Paul Crilley's *Dungeons & Dragons: Eberron* (2012); and Ed Greenwood's *Dungeons & Dragons: Forgotten Realms*.

IDW has been doing one other thing of note: reprinting the best *D&D* comics from the past. To date, they've published complete sets of DC's *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* and *Forgotten Realms* comics, as well as Devil's Due's *Legends of Drizzt* stories.

If DC Comics offered the Golden Age of *D&D* comic publishing, IDW may be the Renaissance.

Early Second Edition Lines: 1989–1991

We now return to the Midwest, where we find that following the release of *AD&D* second edition, TSR was also looking at new models for selling supplements. Although adventures and setting books continued, TSR began working to sell not just to gamemasters, but also to players — a much wider demographic. The result was the *Player's Handbook Rule Supplements* (1989–1995), which was one of the industry's first series of splatbooks — each detailing a different class or race, primarily for use by players.



Starting with *PHBR1: The Complete Fighter's Handbook* (1989) each book used "kits" to better define various *AD&D* classes and races. The first four were designed in tandem, but after that, an unbalancing power slowly found its way into the series. Nonetheless the books were great sellers for TSR for many years.

Other generic sourcebooks released by TSR in the second edition era included the "DMGR" *Dungeon Master Guide References* (1990–1997) and the "HR" *Historical References* (1991–1995), which were well-acclaimed historical books — starting with *Vikings* (1991) and *Charlemagne's Paladins* (1992), which were laid out as a matching pair. Neither of these series had the broad appeal of the player books, and they slowly trailed off as a result.

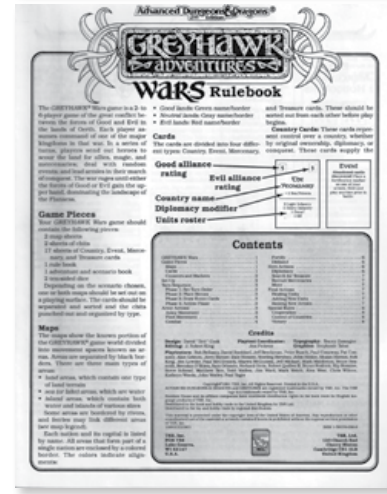
Meanwhile, TSR was also looking at revising and expanding their classic campaign settings.

Dragonlance revealed the new continent of Taladas (1989–1991) on the other side of Krynn in what would later be called "the first official spin-off campaign." This new campaign largely rose out of a desire to have another boxed set for release in 1989. Given the mercantile reasoning, it's perhaps no surprise that the new realm was ultimately unsuccessful; fans would welcome a return to more familiar lands in 1992, though the Dragonlance line would only run until 1993.

Greyhawk needed little revision, but did expand in two notable ways. First, two long-awaited supplements appeared. The *City of Greyhawk* (1989) box was an extraordinary in-depth look at one city, while *WGR1: Greyhawk Ruins* (1990) at last tackled the dungeons under Greyhawk Castle in a serious way. New adventures also appeared, beginning with *WG9: Gargoyle* (1989) and the

trilogy of *WGA1: Falcon's Revenge* (1990), *WGA2: Falconmaster* (1990), and *WGA3: Flames of the Falcon* (1990). They tended not to have the larger-than-life feel of Gygax's originals, and thus are largely forgotten today.





A more creatively unified third wave of Greyhawk products would kick off with the *Greyhawk Wars* board game (1991) and Carl Sargent's *From the Ashes* (1992) supplement. They pushed the world into a more conflictive period. This led to the first regional sourcebooks for the setting in Carl Sargent's "From the Ashes" era — before the line was also abruptly cancelled in 1993. After that no more Greyhawk supplements were published under TSR.

Meanwhile, the Forgotten Realms — which required little retooling — received the star treatment. That led off with Ed Greenwood and Jeff Grubb's *Forgotten Realms Adventures* (1990), the first non-core hardcover for 2e. A few other notable products were published around the same time. *LC1: Gateway to Ravens Bluff, the Living City* (1989) detailed the city owned by the RPGA, at the heart of their current "Living" campaign. *The Ruins of Undermountain* (1991), located under the City of Waterdeep, was one of the first real "mega" dungeons — though it trailed Greyhawk's own offering, *Greyhawk Ruins*, by a year. Events such as the aforementioned "Empire" trilogy kept the setting hopping as well. Other than that, the main focus on the Realms was on its geographically oriented supplements, which continued through 1993.

With all this growth in supplements and settings alike, it's no surprise that TSR — well past the trauma of the mid-'80s — was now hiring the next generation of star creators. Editor Wolfgang Baur, artist Brom, and designer Troy Denning (the latter making a return to TSR) joined in 1989, designer Steven Schend in 1990, designer Richard Baker in 1991, and designer Bill Slavicsek in 1993. As we'll see momentarily, some of these designers would be very important to the *next* expansions at TSR.

New Settings: 1989—1994

Because TSR was not content to rest on their laurels, they continued to publish new worlds as well — ultimately too many of them, it would turn out.





The first of these new settings was Jeff Grubb's innovative science-fantasy *Spelljammer* (1989), which introduced a universe of magical starships traversing the "crystal spheres" that contained all the earthbound *AD&D* campaign worlds. It offered a method to connect together all of TSR's settings, and at the same time introduced fun new Jules Verne-esque technology that had never before been seen in the game. It was innovative and popular.

Bruce Nesmith's *Ravenloft: Realm of Terror* (1990) was next. It extended the ideas behind the Hickmans' original adventure (and follow-ups) into an entire "demi-plane" of gothic horror that sought to make *AD&D* competitive with games like *Call of Cthulhu* and *Chill*.

Following the creation of Ravenloft, TSR developed a new model of approaching world designs with a more artistic sensibility. The results were often stunningly beautiful.

Dark Sun was the first of these artistic world designs. Designers Troy Denning and Timothy Brown led the project, alongside fiction editor Mary Kirchoff. *Some* of the setting's innovation came from the fact that two of its creators were veterans of the game industry with experience far beyond TSR: Denning had worked at TSR in the early '80s, but had since managed Pacesetter and worked for Mayfair; while Brown had come over from GDW.

However artist Gerald Brom also added a lot to the setting's unique artistic sensibility through his contribution of unique illustrations, which helped to set Dark Sun apart from the other TSR settings, with their more typical fantasy drawings.

Brom also contributed to the setting itself, as he would often create weird drawings of people, places, and things, which Denning and Brown would then incorporate into the game.



"We included Brom from the very beginning. He wasn't there just to paint what we told him. … He would bring us sketches of ideas he had, and we'd design rules and story details to fit them."

– Timothy Brown,
"The Creation of Dark Sun,"
Dragon #315 (January 2004)

Dark Sun was introduced because of the desire for a new "high level" *AD&D* setting intended for "experienced DMs." TSR also wanted to try (one more time) to make their *Battlesystem* game successful, as Games Workshop was really nipping at TSR's heels by this point. The importance of *Battlesystem* was highlighted by the setting's original name, "War World," but it was finally released as the *Dark Sun* box (1991). A third edition of TSR's mass combat game, called *Battlesystem Skirmishes* (1991), was published at the same time. However, as had been the case before, *Battlesystem* didn't take off, and the tie-in was soon removed — though Dark Sun continued on.

Dark Sun was generally well-respected for its dark themes — describing a world faced with ecological disaster — its unusual races, and overall its new look at an *AD&D* world. It was much later re-released as *Dark Sun Campaign Setting: Expanded and Revised* (1995), which advanced the timeline 10 years, as was popular to do in the metaplot-heavy '90s.

The next year saw the release of Jeff Grubb's *Al-Qadim* (1992), an Arabic setting that ended up placed in the southern Forgotten Realms. Like the other games of this period it had a strong artistic design, here overseen by Andria Hayday. The "cultural book" as Grubb called it — suggesting that it was an *Oriental Adventures*-like release, rather than a full-blown campaign — was well-received. Grubb would later say that was because they'd managed to hide the setting's potential from "the suits."

TSR's fifth second edition campaign world, *Planescape* (1994), was released to replace Spelljammer, whose run had just ended. TSR wanted a new world-spanning setting, and Slade Henson came up with the answer by suggesting a new

setting built on Jeff Grubb's first edition *Manual of the Planes* (1987). The idea sat dormant for a year until Zeb Cook picked it up and ran with it.

Cook's Planescape ended up being much more than just "adventures in the outer planes." It once again was built around a strong artistic concept, thanks to Dana Knutson's conceptual art and to Tony DiTerlizzi's final drawings, which gave the setting a "worn, rusted, organic look." Unlike Spelljammer this new setting had a strong geographical center, the City of Sigil, resolving a flaw in the Spelljammer setting that denied players a good home base.



Planescape also developed its own slang and in many ways changed the face of *AD&D* even more than Dark Sun had before it. Some members of the Planescape team would later say that it was so successful because upper management was focusing their attention on other things — which mirrored Jeff Grubb's similar comments about *Al-Qadim*, and showed a continuing rift between "corporate" and "creative," just as had been the case back in the Blume and Gygax days.

From Dark Sun to Planescape (and beyond), TSR distinguished itself as a company that *wasn't* still caught in the traditional fantasy designs of the '80s. The new settings of the '90s were adult, mature, and original.

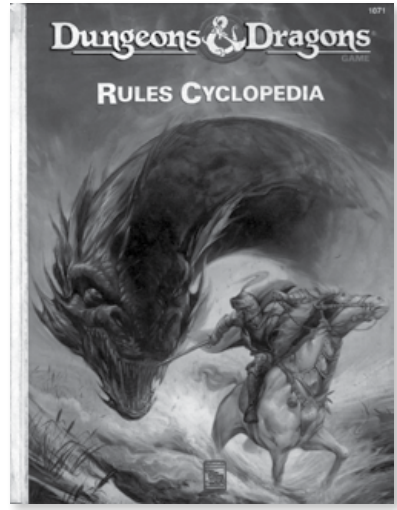
Basic D&D Ends (Triumphantly): 1989—1996

Meanwhile, TSR was continuing to support its *Basic D&D* game. Mystara's *Gazetteers* slowed down — with the last two published in 1990 and 1991 — but they followed by an even more well-received "Hollow World" line (1990–1992). The Hollow World revealed the pulpish lands under the surface of Mystara — but it didn't do as well in sales as it did in critical acclaim.

> *"We should have promoted them as one big world. People playing in Mystara should have had adventures in the Hollow World every now and then."*
>
> – Bruce Heard, "The Creation of Hollow World," *Dragon #315* (January 2004)

In 1991 TSR also published two revisions to *Basic D&D*.

The first was the *D&D* black-box (1991), which was called "fifth edition *D&D*" internal to TSR (counting original *D&D*, and the Holmes, Moldvay, and Mentzer *Basic Sets* as the previous editions). Black-box *D&D* was an attempt to relaunch *D&D* as an introductory product (again). It featured "dragon cards" which made learning the game easy — based on an educational format established by Science Research Associates — and used miniatures and maps to make the game even more appealing. The game was put together by Dark Sun alumni Timothy Brown and Troy Denning and would be a top-seller for TSR, selling a half-million copies in the next six years.



The second *Basic D&D* revision was Aaron Allston's *Rules Cyclopedia* (1991), a hardbound book that combined the rules previously released by TSR as the first four boxed sets, from "Basic" to "Masters," taking characters from level 1 to 36, all in one package. It also included some of the best info from the *Gazetteers*. The result was a nice compilation that was appreciated by the fans that were going mad trying to find info scattered across four boxes and numerous books.

However, the *Basic D&D* line was by then on its way out, except as an introductory game through the "black-box" project. A few final adventures were released from 1992–1993 to support the low-level characters at the heart of black-box *D&D* and then in 1993 all new production of *Basic D&D* came to an end after a 16-year run.

It was at first replaced with games like William Connors' *Dragon Quest* (1992) and Bruce Nesmith's *Dragon Strike* (1993), each of which was a board game requiring a dungeon master. *Dragon Strike* had actually started out as a revision of the black-box before morphing to its final form, showing how quickly and totally TSR's priorities had changed in a very short time.

There was another abrupt change the next year when TSR put out *First Quest* (1994) by Richard Baker, Zeb Cook, and Bruce Nesmith. It was an introductory *AD&D* game with an example of play on a CD; after two years of introductory board games, the company was now back to introductory roleplaying, though no longer under the *Basic D&D* brand. *First Quest* was re-released as the *Introduction to Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Game* (1995), then as *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: The Complete Starter Set* (1996).

Astonishingly, this means that TSR put out a new introduction to *D&D* every year from 1991 to 1996, which sounds like an inefficient use of resources and might be an early foreshadowing of problems in the time period. It also suggests that TSR was growing increasingly desperate to bring new roleplayers into the hobby.

Despite the death of *Basic D&D*, Mystara was not immediately forgotten. It made the jump to *AD&D* in 1994 through several Mystara supplements and later a short-lived campaign setting called *Red Steel* (1994), but after that one of TSR's oldest campaign worlds died as well.

A Buck Rogers Interlude: 1988—1995

Having caught up on all of the *D&D*-related goings-on of the early '90s we now must take a step back and look at a very odd obsession which TSR was wrestling with in this same period — Buck Rogers — which we already met briefly at TSR West.

Lorraine Williams, who had taken over TSR in 1986, inherited the money she used in the takeover from her grandfather, John Dille. Dille had been the syndicator of the *Buck Rogers* comic strip, and its ownership had passed into the Dille Family Trust. Now with TSR also under her control, Williams decided to use the game company to increase the value of her family's other property.

Doing so was clearly a conflict of interest, but at the same time, an above-board one. There was no secret that Williams' family owned Buck Rogers, and when TSR started paying royalties on the character, there was no secret that some of that ultimately went back to Williams herself. On the other hand, licensing this character and continuing to publish it was probably not beneficial to TSR or its other stockholders.

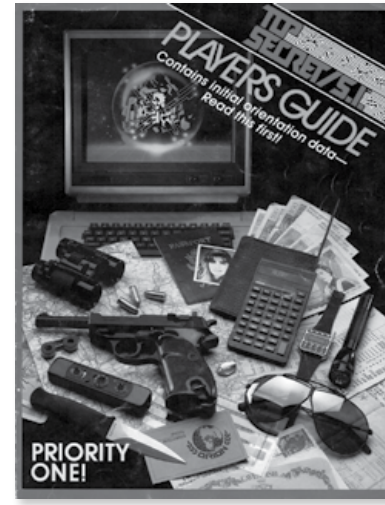
TSR kicked off their *Buck Rogers* line with a Jeff Grubb board game (1988), which was sufficiently overprinted that it can still be found in large quantities today. After that they began to focus on a new setting called "XXVc," which was a reboot of the classic *Buck Rogers* universe designed by Flint Dille.

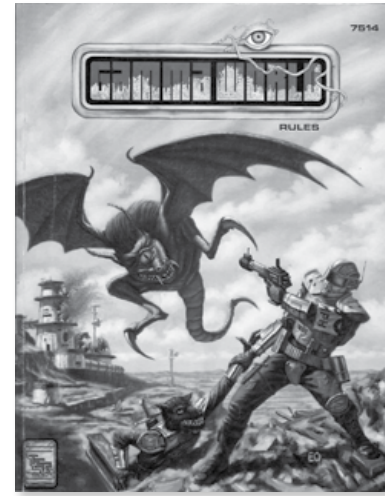
XXVc dominated *Buck Rogers* production throughout the next four years. Initial releases included the aforementioned TSR West comics (1990–1991), a series of 11 novels (1989–1993), and two SSI computer games (1990–1992). The TSR West roleplaying game, *XXVc* (1990), was finished up in Lake Geneva. It was supported by over a dozen supplements, however it didn't do that well. Besides being burdened by an obtuse name, *XXVc* was also closely inspired by the second edition *AD&D* rules, and that class-and-level system had never been well-received in science-fiction circles.

After the failure of the *XXVc* line, the original *Buck Rogers* universe returned with a new *High Adventures Cliffhangers Buck Rogers Adventure Game* (1993) and a final novel (1995).

Today, it's hard to assess how much the *Buck Rogers* publications might have contributed to the eventual downfall of TSR, but it is instructive to note that all production was halted just as TSR entered its troublesome late phase, from 1995–1997, suggesting the products were not moneymakers.

Other Games: 1987—1994



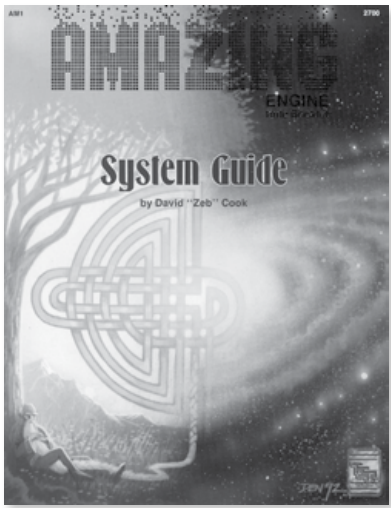


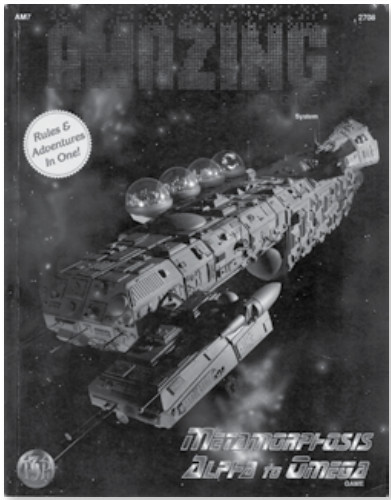
XX*Vc* and *Buck Rogers Adventure* were of course not TSR's only non-*D&D* games in this time period. When we last checked in with TSR's other roleplaying product lines in the late '80s, they were generally influenced by simpler play and colored charts, but now that was poised to change.

TSR's next RPG release was *Top Secret/S.I.* (1987) — written by Douglas Niles and edited by Steve Jackson Games alumnus Warren Spector. It offered a new look at spies, focusing on TV and movie espionage rather than "realistic" spying. *S.I.* kept with the simpler design of the color-chart games, but did away with the actual charts. As a result, it was allowed a more varied design that really played to the genre's strengths. The result was fast playing and exciting, though the line only lasted until 1989.

New editions of SPI's *DragonQuest* (1989) and TSR's own *Boot Hill* (1990) appeared next. However, they were not supplemented, so the productions were probably intended only to maintain those trademarks.

The third edition of *Gamma* World faded away in 1988, but now *Gamma World* enjoyed a fourth edition (1992). It too shed the color-coded charts that had been in vogue in the '80s and — like *XXVc* before it — featured a design more closely based on *AD&D* second edition. As with





each of the previous editions, this one was supported by a handful of supplements. This time support dried up in late 1993.

Generally 1993 was the year when TSR closed down its subsidiary roleplaying lines, from *Gamma World* and *Marvel Super Heroes* to *Basic D&D*. But they were soon replaced by something entirely new — a universal game system released via the *Amazing Engine System Guide* (1993).

Zeb Cook's *Amazing Engine* was another simple beginner's system. After the initial rulebook, which condensed basic rules into just 32 pages, TSR started publishing setting books, each of which presented a different milieu for playing the game. It was a clear adaptation of the strategy that Steve Jackson Games was using to publish *GURPS* (1987). Unfortunately, TSR's settings were original but somewhat lackluster, and there was nothing driving players to the new system. The only publication of particular interest was (at last!) *Metamorphosis Alpha to Omega* (1994), a return to the *Starship Warden*, the setting of TSR's original science-fiction game.

After 1994 *Amazing Engine* was cancelled as well, as part of a new period of belt-tightening at TSR that we'll discuss shortly.

The Lawsuits, Round Two: 1987–1994

Though we haven't mentioned TSR's litigiousness since the first *Role Aids* lawsuit of 1982–1984, TSR continued to threaten and sue its competitors throughout all of the later years of its existence. If anything, their lawsuits increased after Lorraine Williams took the helm. Many of these new lawsuits were against interests that Gary Gygax was involved in, post-TSR. This led to speculation that Williams was pursuing a vendetta against Gygax because of his failed attempt to prevent her from taking over the company.

The first suit of note was filed in 1987 against Gygax's new company, New Infinities Productions. It concerned an adventure written by Frank Mentzer for

TSR called "The Convert." TSR had decided that they didn't want to publish it, and so Mentzer got permission to publish it at New Infinities ... but the permission wasn't in writing, which allowed TSR to sue anyway. The lawsuit would make its way through the courts, hemorrhaging money from New Infinities, until the company declared bankruptcy in 1989.

The next lawsuit kicked off in 1991, a revival of the old Mayfair *Role Aids* dispute. The importance of this dispute increased when Mayfair began publishing a line of supplements about demons (1992–1993), which was at odds with TSR's new "mom-friendly" game. TSR convinced a judge that Mayfair was in violation of the 1984 agreement, though the judge noted that he felt the violation was probably accidental. Afterward TSR reached an agreement to purchase the entire *Role Aids* line from Mayfair and even published two supplements originally intended for that line: *Chronomancer* (1995) and *Shaman* (1995).

> *"Absent Mayfair's joinder in AD&D's prayer for rescission, it is assumed here that Mayfair is willing to continue to live with the specific ground rules set out in the Agreement, rather than having both parties relegated to the principles of law (such as fair use) that would apply in the absence of contract."*
>
> – TSR v. Mayfair Games Memorandum Opinion and Order (March 1993)

Though the main target of this suit had been Mayfair, Gygax was also mentioned because he had penned an introduction to Mayfair's version of *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (1987). TSR thought the cover, which said, "With an introduction by E. Gary Gygax creator of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*," was a violation of their 1984 agreement with Mayfair. They were probably right, as Mayfair had signed away considerable rights that would have been allowed to them under fair use, including the ability to print the words "Advanced Dungeons & Dragons," except in very specific ways. However, the judge ruled that in this matter TSR waived their rights by accepting ads for publication in *Dragon* magazine that clearly showed the so-called "Gygax statement."

TSR went after Gary Gygax yet again in 1992 when GDW announced a new Gygax-designed fantasy game called Dangerous Dimensions. TSR promptly issued a cease & desist on May 13, 1992, citing trademark confusion with their own *D&D*. GDW agreed to change the name of Gygax's game to *Dangerous Journeys* (1992) and published ... at which point TSR sued them *again*.

This time the claim was that the *Dangerous Journeys* game was derivative of *D&D*. Based on the broad claims made in the lawsuit, if *Dangerous Journeys* was derivative, then so was every roleplaying game in existence. But specious claims rarely keep lawsuits from being heard in the United States.

By 1994 GDW's attention to the court case had hurt their publication schedule badly, and as a result GDW was nearly bankrupt. On March 18, 1994, GDW and TSR arrived at a settlement where TSR bought all rights to *Dangerous Journeys* — which was a familiar tactic. By April 1, 1994, truckloads of *Dangerous Journeys* books were being shipped to TSR. Here the property joined the dusty dungeons inhabited by other RPGs that TSR had purchased, such as SPI's *DragonQuest* game. TSR made a brief attempt to sell *Dangerous Journeys* through the book trade, but after that the game was never heard from again.

More information on these lawsuits can be found in the histories of New Infinities, Mayfair, and GDW, respectively.

By 1994 TSR had also gone online, and now extended their new policy of aggressive lawsuits to another category of people ... their fans. They began to go after anyone who wrote online *AD&D* articles, demanding that they be taken down. This book's author was even served with notice ... for a collection of files about *FUDGE* and *Ars Magica*, neither owned by TSR.

I wish I still had copies of their letter and my response. Suffice to say, I was furiously angry and very nasty in what I wrote back to them. I don't think I played any TSR game for years thereafter, until long after TSR was dead and buried, and I'm sure I wasn't the only person on the nascent internet who was so angered.

This new controversy stretched on for years with no good resolution until Wizards of the Coast came into the picture.

AD&D's Nadir: 1993—1996

By 1993 TSR's market was dropping dramatically — with results that we've seen, such as the termination of the Dragonlance, Greyhawk, Spelljammer, *Basic D&D*, *Marvel Super Heroes*, and *Gamma World* lines. TSR's decision to spend money to purchase both *Dangerous Journeys* and *Role Aids* probably didn't help anything. Then Wizards of the Coast came out with *Magic: The Gathering* (1993), creating more discombobulation in the market.

However, *Magic* and questionable purchases weren't the only reasons for TSR's shrinking market. Another possible cause of TSR's problems was the fact that the *D&D* rules were a mess (again) — and for the exact same reasons at the heart of the 1977 *Basic D&D* revision and the 1989 2e revision. Rules (again) spread out across numerous books, and again there were game balance problems. The *Player's Handbooks Rule Supplements* were the main cause.

Therefore TSR released revised copies of their two core books — the *Player's Handbook* (1995) and the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (1995). The changes were mostly editorial, but new Player's Option books overseen by Richard Baker quickly

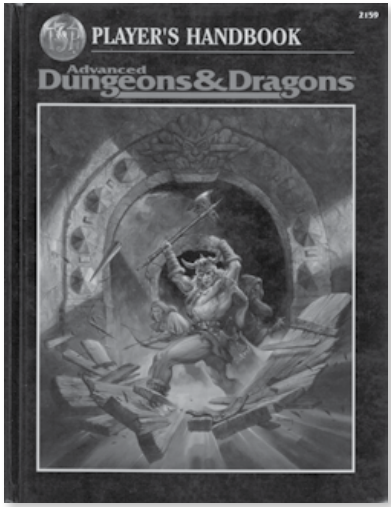
followed them: *Skills & Powers* (1995), *Combat & Tactics* (1995), and *Spells & Magic* (1996).

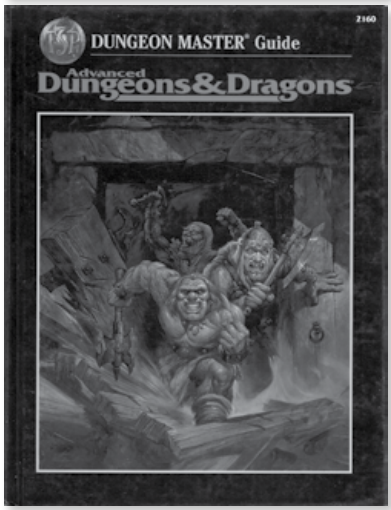
Though these books' new rules — which included point-based character creation, critical hits and other tactics, and piles of new spells and other wizardly rules — were all optional, they were nonetheless sufficiently big enough changes to earn the name "AD&D 2.5" from many fans. Some fans also suggest that many of these new ideas came from the *Dangerous Journeys* line, though that derivation is undocumented, if true.

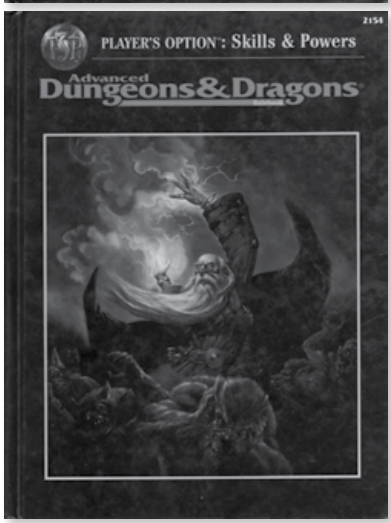
In many ways the *Player's Options* releases were remarkably like *Unearthed Arcana*, put out 10 years before. They were released during a time of deep financial instability in order to boost sales through publication of core books, and the rules in the books themselves were fairly unbalanced, poorly playtested, and highly controversial as a result.

As part of these updates, TSR also updated their marketing. In 1994 they dropped the letter/number module codes that had been used on their products since 1978 (with *G1*), and then in 1995 they dropped the phrase "2nd edition" off of their products. These were both maneuvers that the company thought would make their products more approachable.

Through all these changes, there was only one line that remained remarkably stable at TSR: the Forgotten Realms, which had survived the creation of any number of other settings, some of which had come and gone. Nonetheless, the line had evolved over the years.







The biggest change was that the geographical setting books had faded away starting in the early '90s. They were replaced by a number of other lines. The "FOR" books instead looked at organization in the Realms — much like the splatbooks of White Wolf and others. They ran from *FOR1: Draconomicon* (1990) to *Giantcraft* (1995). The *Volo's Guides* (1993–1996) offered in-character looks at the Realms. There was also a proliferation of adventures, often laid out in trilogies, and finally a number of more player-oriented books — doubtless intended to sell like the *PHBR* volumes. Some of these volumes, like *Wizards and Rogues of the Realms* (1995) and *Warriors and Priests of the Realms* (1996) even shared the same trade dress.

Of course, the Realms alone wouldn't be enough to save TSR. The same year that TSR was putting out their new 2.5 edition, *Magic* publisher Wizards of the Coast dropped its own roleplaying lines. That's when word started getting around that even industry giant TSR was now struggling to sell RPGs. However, when questioned, the principals of TSR stood strong. Chief Operating Office Willard Martens said, "Our roleplaying game revenue increased twenty percent in 1995 — as it has annually for the last six years." Lorraine Williams stated, "We wish Wizards of the Coast well as they divest roleplaying and other products from their company, however their inability to produce successful RPG lines does not necessarily reflect the state of the industry — and certainly not TSR!"

Those words would ring ironically false before year's end.

Innovation to the End: 1994–1996

Despite financial problems, TSR remained innovative to the end. At the same time that TSR was shutting down old lines they were also kicking off new products.

One of the first was *Spellfire* (1994), TSR's own collectible card game, and their answer to *Magic*. Though it was the design of several of TSR's stars — including James M. Ward, Timothy Brown, Zeb Cook, and Steve Winter — it got off to a bad start due to a mandated six-month development period, which was incredibly short.

Spellfire grossed $35 million in its first year and was successful enough to see 13 expansions over a two-year span, but it never received any critical acclaim and ultimately its sales didn't keep up with its production. The Gameological Society later analyzed the game's failure and offered up four main reasons: it used piles of recycled TSR art; it didn't have enough interesting cards; an oversupply of cards impacted rarity; and (ironically) it was too different from *Magic* to encourage crossover players.

Dragon Dice (1995) was an even more innovative approach to the collectible industry. It consisted of collectible dice, each of which had unique faces that

offered unique powers. At first *Dragon Dice* seemed like a hit, though as we'll see that changed dramatically within the year.



The *Birthright Campaign Setting* (1995), by Richard Baker and Colin McComb, was a product line more oriented toward TSR's existing strengths (which is to say, *AD&D*). It was a pretty typical fantasy campaign world, but the rules supported players becoming regents of great domains, thus allowing them to engage in war, diplomacy, and trade. It introduced a new strategic aspect to the *AD&D* game that had rarely been seen previously or since.

In 1995 TSR decided to revive the Dragonlance setting — perhaps remembering the role it had played during TSR's downturn of a decade earlier. Weis and Hickman returned to write new fiction, but the process was handicapped by TSR's decision to cram their intended trilogy into a single book, *Dragons of Summer Flame* (1995). The book itself didn't do TSR any favors: it alienated fans by destroying much of the classic Dragonlance setting.

TSR started to turn this discontent around by releasing a new game called *Dragonlance: Fifth Age* (1996). It was built on their new *SAGA* storytelling game system, which centered on resource management (through cards) rather than die rolls, thus giving players much better control over their game. One review highlighted this idea of "delegation" by suggesting that by giving some GM tasks to players, it gave the GM more time to worry about the story. Though there was still controversy over the setting, many people found the game system interesting and innovative.



At the same time, TSR was pushing another universal system, this one directed only toward science-fiction games, with the hope that this tighter emphasis might produce better results than *Amazing Engine* had. The game, called *Alternity*, was to be released in 1997.

Unfortunately it was too little, too late.

TSR's Demise: 1996—1997

Ryan Dancey, when later writing about the reasons behind TSR's demise, would say that he thought that their biggest problem was that they didn't listen to their fans. Though that's a pretty simplistic statement that could be applied to many business failures, and though we know that there was extensive discussion with fans while 2e was in process, a kernel of truth probably lies behind Dancey's statement. Lorraine Williams had never been in touch with the gaming field, and she had little interest in learning more about it.

> *"In all my research into TSR's business, across all the ledgers, notebooks, computer files, and other sources of data, there was one thing I never found – one gaping hole in the mass of data we had available. No customer profiling information. No feedback. No surveys. No 'voice of the customer.' TSR, it seems, knew nothing about the people who kept it alive."*
>
> – Ryan Dancey, DND List Serve, (March 2000)

Altogether, there were numerous problems that led to TSR's demise. CCGs were continuing to shrink the RPG industry. Distributors were going out of business. TSR had unbalanced their *AD&D* game through a series of lucrative supplements that ultimately hurt the long-time viability of the game. Meanwhile they developed so many settings — many of them both popular and well-received — that they were both cannibalizing their only sales and discouraging players from picking up settings that might be gone in a few years. They may have been cannibalizing their own sales through excessive production of books or supplements too.

It was the book trade, however, that was the final straw. Random House had been fronting TSR loans against book sales for some time. Meanwhile, TSR's book sales had sunk over the years. They were seeing less and less actual cash from the book trade because more money was going to pay off their unpaid loans. Trying to get ahead of this debt was the main factor behind TSR making a big push into the book trade in 1996. This push included sending massive reorders of Dragon Dice into book stores and increasing hardcover publication from 2 books a year to 12.

Both of these expansions flopped, and because bookstore sales are ultimately returnable, TSR was the one left holding the bag. As 1996 ended Random House informed TSR that they'd be returning about a third of TSR's products — several million dollars' worth.

With increasing cash flow problems, TSR also fell behind on its payment to freelancers and other external parties. Unfortunately this included the logistics company that did TSR's printing, warehousing, and shipping. As a result the logistics company locked down all of TSR's products, refusing to print anything more.

This left TSR in deep debt with no way to produce more products to get out of the situation. However, Martens hadn't been lying when he said sales were great. They were better than ever in 1996, with total revenues topping $40 million. But that said nothing of actual profits — nor of the problem of returns.

Thirty staff members were laid off in December 1996. Other staff such as James M. Ward, by now the VP for Creative Services, left over disagreements about how the crisis was being dealt with. The spectre of lawsuits began to rise due to unpaid freelancers and missing royalties. Nonetheless TSR continued to fumble along through the first half of 1997. Enough money came in from products already on the shelves to pay remaining staff, but that was clearly a short-term solution. TSR needed a buyer.

"I was asked by the then president of the company to fire 30 of my editors and designers and I refused as the president wanted her company books to look better and it had nothing to do with the working ethics of those 30. I left TSR and never looked back."

– James M. Ward, Bio, eldritchent.com (2012)

Salvation initially came via Ryan Dancey and Bob Abramowitz, principals of Five Rings Publishing, a CCG firm spun off of Alderac Entertainment Group. Abramowitz met with Williams and was able to negotiate and secure an option to purchase TSR. Now he just needed the money.

For this he went to Wizards of the Coast, the aforementioned publishers of *Magic: The Gathering*. The CCG business had given Wizards the ability to purchase and resurrect TSR, and President Peter Adkison agreed to get involved.

Including payment of debts, Adkison paid about $30 million for TSR. The deal was announced on April 10, 1997. Adkison bought Five Rings Publishing too, as part of the deal. It took a few more months to get product going once again, but Wizards was able to revive the old behemoth.

"We grew to fear the phone calls from angry readers who demanded answers we ourselves did not have. We played a lot of Lunch Money *until the cards creeped out the book department. … Eventually we just kind of sat around and hoped for a miracle."*

– Dave Gross, "The Terrible Two-Hundreds," *Dragon #300* (October 2002)

In the next years Wizards of the Coast would continue with TSR's aborted schedule from 1997, publishing books already in process for *AD&D* and the new *Alternity* and *SAGA* lines. It would take until 2000 for Wizards of the Coast to really make TSR their own. That's the year when they retired the TSR logo from their RPG books, then published their own *Dungeons & Dragons* third edition and its wide-reaching d20 license.

However, discussion of that lies within the history of Wizards of the Coast itself.

Thoughts on a Rise & Fall: 1997

Although not the first hobbyist company, TSR was the first roleplaying company. From the publication of *Cavaliers and Roundheads* in late 1973 to their last printed product in late 1996, TSR survived almost, but not quite, 25 years.

In that time they were always the top roleplaying company. *D&D* was their only unequivocal success, but *Top Secret*, *Marvel Super Heroes*, and *Top Secret/S.I.* each rose up to rule their respective genres for a while. TSR was more successful in its ability to spread out into new publishing mediums, and their book division continues to be a major focus of Wizards of the Coast as well.

As the top roleplaying company, TSR overshadowed past hobbyist giants like Avalon Hill and SPI. However in turn they were eventually overshadowed by two companies who opened up new mediums of entertainment — both companies who had started out as roleplaying producers and then innovated in a way TSR could not. Games Workshop and Wizards of the Coast, who created new industries for miniatures games and collectible card games, are discussed in their own histories.

Although TSR was sometimes professionally managed, by many accounts it was never well-managed, with the rocky transition from the Blumes to Williams just being the largest example of that. More than any individual publishing decision, it was probably this long history of poor management that ultimately cost TSR its business.

Thoughts from the Future: 2013

Any history of the creative roleplaying industry is ultimately a history of those creators as well. Though TSR died in 1997, its biggest creators lived on for over a decade more. Sadly, they have departed now, truly consigning the story of TSR to the mists of the past.

> *"I do stuff that I like. The books I write because I want to read them, the games because I want to play them, and stories I tell because I find them exciting personally."*
>
> – Gary Gygax, "Gary Gygax Interview – Part 2," Gamespy (2004)

Gary Gygax was the co-creator of our industry who drove its growth through its first decade, before he was unceremoniously unseated from his position at TSR, first by the Blumes, then by Williams. However, his history continues to thread its way across the industry, most notably: in the story of New Infinities Productions, his next company; in the story of GDW, who he inadvertently helped to bring

down as part of the *Dangerous Journeys* lawsuit; and in the story of Troll Lord Games, for whom he wrote Greyhawk and gaming material until the end of his life. Gary Gygax died on March 4, 2008, at the age of 69.

Following Gygax's death, two new companies stepped up to carry the torch for him. Gygax Games was created by Gygax's widow, Gail, in 2008. Thus far all Gygax Games has done is pull rights to Gygax's works from other publishers. TSR Games — a new company with an old name — was formed by Ernie Gygax, Luke Gygax, Tim Kask, and others in 2012. They have begun publishing *Gygax Magazine* (February 2013).

"I remember 30 years ago we were playing this game, which wasn't even called a role-playing game back then, and we thought we were crazy when we published it."

– Dave Arneson, "Dave Arneson Interview," Gamespy (2004)

Dave Arneson was the co-creator of our industry who quietly went about his own business after professional disagreements caused him to leave TSR. Because of his lack of capital, he never got to see the most lucrative awards for his creativity and because of his business style he only worked at TSR proper for part of 1976. Though he published books with Heritage Models and Judges Guild in 1977 and then started his own hobbyist company, Adventure Games Incorporated, he ultimately decided not to work in the industry, and eventually sold AGI to Flying Buffalo in 1985. His story continues briefly in the histories of those companies.

After TSR's publication of several Dave Arneson Blackmoor adventures in 1986–1987, the setting was largely unheard from until Arneson founded Zeitgeist Games with Dustin Clingman in the '00s. They published more Blackmoor material, some of it through Goodman Games, until the end of Arneson's life. In those last years, Arneson also gained much of the recognition from fans and conventions that he had long deserved. Toward the end of his life, Arneson turned his game design skills to the education world when he taught at Full Sail University. Dave Arneson died on April 7, 2009, at the age of 61.

Following Arneson's death, Full Sail University honored his legacy by naming a building on the campus for him. It is the only known honor of this sort for a member of the roleplaying profession.

None of the histories in *Designers & Dragons* would have occurred without the two of them. They literally changed millions of lives. May they both have found their places in the Great Wheel, perhaps Gary Gygax in the Clockwork Nirvana of Mechanus and Dave Arneson in the Olympian Glades of Arborea.

What to Read Next

- For TSR's UK connections, read ***Games Workshop***.
- For TSR's first supplement licensee, read ***Judges Guild***.
- For more on Minifigs, *D&D* miniatures, and an early TSR lawsuit, read ***Heritage Models***.
- For the origins of Tracy Hickman and a few *D&D* adventures, read ***DayStar West Media***.
- For other companies that created products directly derived from *D&D*, read ***Grimoire Games*** and ***Midkemia Press***.
- For one of the staunchest defenders against the *D&D* hysteria, read ***Flying Buffalo***.

In Other Eras

- For an indie FRP conceived of as the anti-*D&D*, read about *Houses of the Blooded* in ***John Wick Presents*** *['00s]*.
- For what pushed SPI into its death throes, read ***SPI*** *['80s]*.
- For other perspectives on TSR's later legal threats and lawsuits, read ***Mayfair Games*** *['80s]*, ***New Infinities Productions*** *['80s]*, and ***GDW*** *['80s]*.
- For later *Conan* and *Lankhmar* licenses, read ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]*. For a later *Indiana Jones* license, read ***West End Games*** *['80s]*. Strangely, there have been no additional *Buck Rogers* RPG licenses.
- Many other stories continue more directly in ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For another viewpoint of the TSR purchase, read ***AEG*** *['90s]*.
- For the other half of the history of *D&D*, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]* with a diversion into ***Paizo Publishing*** *['00s]*.

Luminaries and Personalities

For the later careers of *D&D* luminaries, you'll need to consult a variety of articles:

- For Gary Gygax, read ***New Infinities Productions*** *['80s]*, ***GDW*** *['70s]*, ***Hekaforge Productions*** *['90s]*, and ***Troll Lord Games*** *['00s]*. For Dave Arneson, read ***Heritage Models*** *['70s]*, ***Judges Guild*** *['70s]*, ***Flying Buffalo*** *['70s]*, and ***Goodman Games*** *['00s]* (which has extensive notes on Blackmoor).
- For Rob Kuntz, read ***New Infinities Productions*** *['80s]* and ***Creations Unlimited*** *['80s]*.
- For Frank Mentzer and Kim Mohan, read ***New Infinities Productions*** *['80s]*.

- For Margaret Weis, Tracy Hickman, and Larry Elmore, read ***Margaret Weis Productions*** *['90s]*, which also contains some details on the future of Dragonlance.
- For James M. Ward, read ***Margaret Weis Productions*** *['90s]* and ***Troll Lord Games*** *['00s]*.
- For Troy Denning, read ***Pacesetter*** *['80s]* and ***Mayfair*** *['80s]*.
- For Scott Haring, read ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*.
- For Kevin Hendryx, read ***Metagaming*** *['70s]*.
- For Tom Moldvay, read ***Avalon Hill*** *['80s]*.
- For a group of ex-staff members, who largely aren't mentioned in this article, read ***Pacesetter*** *['80s]*.

Or read onward to the second RPG company, ***Flying Buffalo***.



Part Two:

The Floodgates Open

(1975–1976)

When *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) was released, no one knew that it would be a success. It was a weird game that combined fantasy gaming with miniatures gaming — and both genres were pretty small press at the time. It took almost one entire year for TSR to sell its first print run of 1,000 copies.

That all explains why it took more than a year for a second roleplaying company to appear. There *wasn't* a gold rush yet. It *wasn't* obvious that roleplaying was going to be a big deal — that it was going to create a hobbyist boom that would make some publishers wildly successful. Thus the publishers who got into the roleplaying business in 1975 and 1976 were a motley group of people who loved *D&D* (or who hated *D&D*), but who generally ... *believed*.

The story of the second RPG publisher, ***PBM*** moderator Flying Buffalo, is almost as unique as that of the first. Ken St. Andre wrote a totally new game, *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975), because he thought *D&D* was kind of broken. Rick Loomis then sold it at Origins because he was a nice guy. As with *D&D*, *T&T*'s success was unexpected.

Several of the earliest RPG companies were ***licensees*** of various sorts. They got into the business because they were enthused by *D&D*, not because they were thinking about games of their own. Thus Wee Warriors started out creating *D&D* character sheets, Judges Guild began by publishing *D&D* settings and adventures, and Games Workshop got into the roleplaying business mainly to sell *D&D* in Britain. TSR would pretty quickly decide that they didn't want to share their game with anyone, and thus there wouldn't be more licensees after this initial batch. Instead, publishers of unofficial supplements and *D&D* variants would fill the niche; we'll meet them in the mid-to-late '70s

Of the companies who entered the roleplaying field in 1975 and 1976, GDW stands out as a harbinger of the future. They were one of many professional (but small) ***wargame*** publishers existing at the time — members of a fairly young industry. As such, they were the most prepared (and able) to shift their focus over to roleplaying. Though many more would join the industry as part of three major waves, GDW was the first mover.

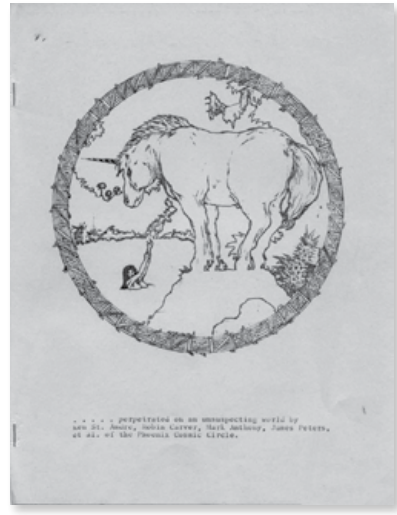
Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Wee Warriors	*1974–1978+*	*The Character Archaic (1975)*	28
Flying Buffalo	1970-	*Tunnels & Trolls* (1975)	115
Games Workshop	1975-	*Owl & Weasel #6* (1975)	134
GDW	1973–1996	*En Garde!* (1975)	156
Judges Guild	1976–1983+	*City State Map* (1976)	184

Flying Buffalo: 1970–Present

Flying Buffalo Games, which began life as a Play-By-Mail company, is today the oldest roleplaying company still in existence — as well as being the publisher of the first roleplaying game not by TSR.

PBM Beginnings: 1970—1975

PBM stands for Play By Mail. It's a medium of games that isn't played around a table, but instead through the mail system — or more recently over the Internet — with games taking months or years to complete as a result. In the 1960s there was a little bit of PBM going on, but it wasn't an industry. People had played PBM chess for ages, while some wargamers played games like PBM *Stalingrad*. The only game of the sort for more than two players was *Diplomacy*, which had to be moderated. John Boardman was one of the early entrepreneurs in *Diplomacy* PBMs, charging a small fee as he copied everyone's turns and sent them out to the other players in the game, but he was a lone semi-professional voice.



1975: Tunnels & Trolls

Enter Rick Loomis.

At the time, Loomis was in the US Army, serving out his one tour of duty at Fort Shafter on Oahu, in Hawaii. He'd been a gamer since the 1960s when he'd stumbled upon Avalon Hill's *Gettysburg* (1958) in a toy store — the exact same game that got both Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax into the industry. By 1970 he'd invented a game of his own called *Nuclear Destruction*, but it wasn't your average tabletop game because it included hidden movement. As such, it was a perfect design for PBM play. A moderator could send each player different turns, and therefore no player would know what the overall board looked like.

In January of 1970 Loomis started sending mail to readers of Avalon Hill's *The General* who had advertised for PBM opponents. He offered to moderate multiplayer *Nuclear Destruction* (1970) games in return for a self-addressed stamped envelope each turn. He would eventually raise that fee to 10 cents a turn, or 2 cents more than the cost of postage at the time.

> *"One might wonder why I was wasting time with computers instead of hanging out on the beach watching babes in bikinis, but I really wanted to be able to play these games myself and if the computer did the moderating,* I could play too!"
>
> – Rick Loomis, "History of Flying Buffalo Inc.," flyingbuffalo.com

The response was good and Loomis soon had more than 200 players in multiple games, making the whole enterprise too large for him to manage by hand. He asked fellow soldier Steve MacGregor to write a program to moderate the games. They then began renting time on a Control Data computer near the base. When they rented time they did so under a distinctive name: Flying Buffalo. It was a shortening of "Flying Buffalo Stamps & Coins," a name that Loomis had intended to use for a new retail store when he got out of the army. He'd come up with the name from "Flying Eagle" pennies and "Buffalo" nickels.

However, with a successful gaming business in hand, Loomis and MacGregor instead founded a PBM company when they mustered out in 1972. They incorporated it as Flying Buffalo, Inc., or FBI for short. (Amusingly another PBM publisher and a FBI licensee would — years later — call themselves Conflict Interaction Associates, or CIA.)

Over the next few years Loomis turned Flying Buffalo into a real business. He and MacGregor immediately pooled their savings to make the down payment on a Raytheon 704 minicomputer to run PBM turns. It was probably the first computer ever purchased exclusively to play games. The computer cost $14,000 and came

with 4k of memory, a teletype input, and a tape reader and punch for mass storage. For years afterward games were saved as rolls of paper tape hung from nails on a wall.

At first Flying Buffalo only ran *Nuclear Destruction*, but other PBMs followed.

Many players expressed interest in a science-fiction setting, so Flying Buffalo released *Starweb* (1976) next. It notably included the robotic Berserkers from Fred Saberhagen's novel series. They weren't used with permission, but when Saberhagen noticed, he allowed Loomis to continue using the term. As thanks Loomis let him play a free game of *Starweb*. This interested Saberhagen enough that he wrote a novel about *Starweb* called *Octagon* (1981).

Starweb was soon followed by Flying Buffalo's third PBM, *Heroic Fantasy* (1982) — a game that Flying Buffalo uniquely made available not just as a PBM, but also as an early turn-based computer game on a commercial network called "TheSource." Even in that environment, however, players only got to play a few turns a week.

By the mid-'70s PBMs were doing well enough that Flying Buffalo kicked off a yearly convention dedicated to them. It continues to run to this day: the 40th Annual Flying Buffalo Convention occurred in July 2012, with *Heroic Fantasy* and *Starweb* tournaments alike.

There is no doubt that Flying Buffalo was entirely pivotal in the creation and growth of the PBM industry. One of their slogans states, "We created the Play By Mail industry," and it's entirely accurate. There have been competitive games, such as Schubel & Son's *Tribes of Crane* and GSI's award-winning Middle-earth game, but Flying Buffalo has outlasted just about all of them. After Flying Buffalo expanded into RPGs — as we'll see momentarily — PBM always remained at least half of their business (though it won't get much attention in this history).

Even in these early days Flying Buffalo was looking toward tabletop publication. Their first success was Doug Malewicki's *Nuclear War* (1972) card game. *Nuclear War*, a game of global destruction, had been independently sold starting in 1965. It was quite popular on college campuses and a casual influence on Loomis' own *Nuclear Destruction* PBM. Now, Loomis found that people were confusing the two games, and so he set out to add *Nuclear War* to his catalog. Through some hard work he was able to track Malewicki down, and in 1972 he started publishing *Nuclear War* through Flying Buffalo — making it much more accessible that Malewicki's original printing had ever been. It would soon become one of Flying Buffalo's best-sellers.

Then a brand-new opportunity for expansion suddenly appeared on the scene: roleplaying games.

Enter *Tunnels & Trolls:* 1975

Now we must turn to another important player in Flying Buffalo's early history: Ken St. Andre. By late 1974 St. Andre was a swords & sorcery fan, ex-wargamer, and sometime game designer. That December postal correspondents started mentioning rumors of a strange new game called *Dungeons & Dragons*. St. Andre tried to find the game locally, but several months of searching for it in Scottsdale, Arizona, were fruitless ... until someone brought the original boxed set to a gaming gathering in April 1975. No one knew how to play the game, so Ken St. Andre decided to sit down with the rules and give them a read.

> *"I read for about an hour and a half, alternating between feelings of 'this is nutty' and 'this is great.'"*
>
> – Ken St. Andre, *Heroic Worlds* (1991)

When he finally finished, St. Andre decided that the rules — or at least as much of them as he could understand — did not make that much sense. There were redundant characteristics (like Intelligence and Wisdom), a demand for impossible-to-find dice (like 4-siders and 20-siders), and many other seemingly nonsensical elements. He decided that the only reasonable thing to do was to design a new game of his own.

Over the next three days, working from dawn to dusk, St. Andre put together his own version of *Dungeons & Dragons*. When later describing the game he created, St. Andre would say that it was "deliberately designed to be simpler in its basic concepts and game mechanics, less expensive, faster to play, and more whimsical." It included lots of innovations:

- It got rid of all those weird dice, substituting regular six-siders.
- It got rid of alignments.
- There were no clerics because St. Andre didn't like the game being "dominated by some pseudo-Christian religion."
- It introduced armor that absorbed damage rather than making things harder to hit.
- It introduced a magic system full of silly (and humorous) names like "Take That You Fiend!" and "Too Bad Toxin."
- It let characters improve their characteristics as they gained experience, pointing toward the skill-based game systems that would follow.

When St. Andre was done he had 20 pages of rules that he copied and handed out to his first players. Soon Jim "Bear" Peters, Steve MacAllister, Mark Anthony, and Greg Brown were adventuring through the Gristlegrim dungeon. The group called the new game "Dungeons and Dragons," but clearly that name couldn't stand. Finally St. Andre proposed an alternative, "Tunnels and Troglodytes." It eventually became "Tunnels & Trolls" instead.

St. Andre printed 100 copies of the first edition of *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975) at the Arizona State University print shop that June. (Total cost: $60.) The rules were now 40 pages typed up on his Remington typewriter. He headed off to WesterCon 28 (1975) — held in Oakland, California, on the July 4 weekend — to sell his new game, but he may have sold as few as 10 copies there. It wasn't a great start. Here Rick Loomis and Flying Buffalo re-enter the story, because St. Andre asked Loomis to take the last 40 copies of *Tunnels & Trolls* to Origins late that July to sell. Where the remaining 50 copies went, interviews and other records don't say, but one can guess local sales or gifts to players as possibilities.

Now Loomis knew perfectly well that *Tunnels & Trolls* wouldn't sell. After all, it was just a rulebook, without board or counters; it didn't even have a winner at the end of the game. Nonetheless, he decided he could just stick it on a corner of a table, so he humored St. Andre.

Every copy sold.

"When I sold all the copies, I figured out that maybe there was something to this game after all!"

– Rick Loomis, Interview, *The VIP of Gaming Magazine #4* (July/August 1986)

Besides the fact that *Tunnels & Trolls* featured some innovative game elements, it was also important in the history of RPGs because it was the third RPG ever, following Boot Hill, out earlier that spring, and *D&D.* TSR's *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975) and GDW's *En Garde!* (1975) were the fourth and fifth, both going on sale at that same Origins in late July of 1975 — though *The Strategic Review* suggests that *Empire of the Petal Throne* might have been available a short time earlier. *Tunnels & Trolls* is also one of the very few RPGs from the dawn of the industry that remains in print today — and in much its original form.

Other Roleplaying Beginnings: 1975—1980

Flying Buffalo licensed the rights to *T&T* later that year and published a second edition of the game (1975) under their own brand in December. They followed that up by publishing Ken St. Andre's *Starfaring* (1976), the first science-fiction roleplaying game. It beat TSR's *Metamorphosis Alpha* (1976) to press by a couple of months, further predated Gamescience's *Space Patrol* (1977), and would be entirely eclipsed by GDW's *Traveller* (1977). Notably, St. Andre retained *ownership* of both of his games, unlike most early RPG creators. Even today, they remain his, though *T&T* is still licensed to Flying Buffalo.

Though Flying Buffalo published St. Andre's first two RPGs, they couldn't keep up with his creativity. His third game, *Monsters! Monsters!* (1976), went to another company — Metagaming Concepts — instead. It was a variant of *T&T* where you played the monsters. Flying Buffalo would get the rights a few years later to print a second edition (1979) of the game.

Meanwhile Flying Buffalo was determined to support *Tunnels & Trolls*, and they did so in a rather unique way. After a Phoenix science-fiction convention, Rick Loomis, Ken St. Andre, and several of St. Andre's friends were talking at a restaurant. Steve MacAllister suggested that someone should make a dungeon adventure like a "programmed text" math book — where you picked an answer among four solutions, then went to another page to see if your selection was correct. Loomis liked the idea, and when he got home he wrote *Buffalo Castle* (1976), "*T&T* Solo Adventure #1."

By writing *Buffalo Castle*, Loomis created a whole new genre of publication, the solo adventure. Other early RPG companies such as Metagaming Concepts and Steve Jackson Games followed in Flying Buffalo's footsteps by creating solo adventures of their own, but the most notable sequel appeared in England in 1982, where the principals of Games Workshop created the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks. These were more successful than the books produced by Flying Buffalo or any of the other early publishers, and were imitated by dozens of others, a story more fully detailed in Games Workshop's history.

At Flying Buffalo, St. Andre followed *Buffalo Castle* with solos of his own, including *Deathtrap Equalizer Dungeon* (1977), Solo Adventure #2, and *Naked Doom* (1977), Solo Adventure #4.

Another early release — *City of Terrors* (1978), Solo Adventure #9 — was written by newcomer Michael Stackpole, who got into gaming through *Starweb* and from there learned about *Tunnels & Trolls*. After writing his inaugural *T&T* adventure, Vermont native Stackpole went out of his way to attend a convention

in Ottawa, Canada and meet Loomis, St. Andre, and others. He ended up riding home with them to Arizona, ran a game for the group, and before long had a full-time job at Flying Buffalo. He would work there for several years thereafter — minus a short stint at Coleco from 1980–1981.

Stackpole's temporary Coleco job shows how small the RPG industry has often been. It was the result of a meeting between Loomis, Stackpole, and the president of Coleco at a gaming and pinball convention. This meeting also resulted in the licensing of a *Tunnels & Trolls* game for the Colecovision computer — though it was never produced. Flying Buffalo would instead have to wait another decade to see that possibility fulfilled.

In another gaming industry connection, Stackpole brought friend and fellow RPG designer Paul Jaquays over to Coleco. The two worked together and even roomed together for a short while. Though Stackpole returned to Flying Buffalo, Jaquays stayed at Coleco through 1985. Over the years Jaquays hired many other tabletop game designers to work with him at Coleco, including Lawrence Schick of TSR, freelancer Dennis Sustare, John Butterfield of Victory Games, Arnold Hendrick of Heritage Models, and David Ritchie of TSR. One wonders if *any* of that would have happened if Michael Stackpole *hadn't* attended that Ontario convention.

Returning to Flying Buffalo, we find that they *were* publishing some standard multiplayer *T&T* adventures as well, beginning with the *Dungeon of the Bear* (1976–1977), by Jim "Bear" Peters. They didn't sell as well, however, so the solo adventures quickly became the main focus of the *T&T* line.

Flying Buffalo also supported their star RPG by starting their own magazine — just as many other RPG companies were doing at the time. It replaced *Supernova* (1971–1975, 1977–1978) — originally created by Lewis Pulsipher as a fanzine for science-fiction and fantasy members of the IFW and then sold to Flying Buffalo in 1975. Ken St. Andre had published the 'zine in 1977 and 1978, but was now closing it down. For the new magazine, St. Andre was given a co-editor in Liz Danforth, Flying Buffalo's newest staff artist and production person. Her vision would largely define *Sorcerer's Apprentice* magazine (1978–1983), which ran for 17 issues.

> "Sorcerer's Apprentice *will attempt to carry the* T&T *philosophy of FRP gaming to a wider audience: namely that role-playing is fun.* Dungeons & Dragons, *despite its inherent silliness (especially in monster names and types), has somehow taken on the quasi-serious aspects of a religion."*
>
> – Ken St. Andre, Editorial, *Sorcerer's Apprentice #1* (1978)



St. Andre positioned *Sorcerer's Apprentice* as Flying Buffalo's answer to TSR's *Dragon* and Metagaming's *Space Gamer* — a glossy magazine that could help advance the interests of the company. Though it was for the most part a *Tunnels & Trolls* magazine, it also featured industry news and reviews by Michael Stackpole as well as pulp fiction by notable authors such as Manly Wade Wellman and Karl Edward Wagner — both of whom saw their best-known books published in the '70s and '80s, exactly when they were being published in *Sorcerer's Apprentice*.

Loomis, meanwhile, was taking a larger part in the industry. He was participating in the Association of Game Manufacturers, an organization created to oversee the Origins gaming convention. At the first meeting, on August 19, 1978, Loomis was elected as a temporary officer of AGM (which soon became the Game Manufacturers Association or GAMA). Loomis was President that first year and Treasurer for longer. He has since been a board member, then was President for nine straight years and is now President again. Today he is probably the most recognizable face of GAMA — an organization that today runs both the Origins Game Fair and the GAMA Trade Show and does its best to educate and advance the hobby games industry.

Death, War, Traps, and Retail: 1980—1981

By the time 1980 rolled around, *Tunnels & Trolls* was well-supported at Flying Buffalo. The core game was in its fifth edition (1979), which had been revised by Ken St. Andre and extensively rewritten and developed by Liz Danforth. Solo adventure production continued, with 12 out, the latest being St. Andre's *Arena of Khazan* (1979). The game was also doing well overseas. After a short-lived British license to Strategy Games Limited, *T&T* rights went to Chris Harvey, who was reprinting many *Tunnels & Trolls* books for the UK market — all in digest-sized books that further set the stage for the Games Workshop-related *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks.

Despite the volume of Flying Buffalo's production, its quality was somewhat low, with spiral binding and monochromatic covers appearing on many products. In 1980 this began to change. Flying Buffalo retrenched its core RPG line. Older books were reprinted, newly edited, and with better binding and covers.

At the same time, Flying Buffalo began to expand into broader areas of roleplaying.

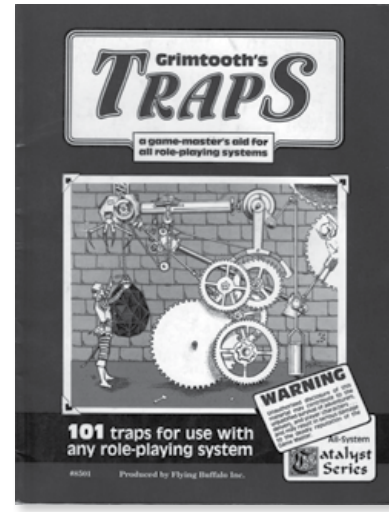
Curiously the first of these expansions was dice. In 1980 Pat Mueller — one of the editors and staff members working on *Sorcerer's Apprentice* — and Rick Loomis came up with the idea of printing dice with something other than pips on the faces. They eventually settled on "Death Dice," which would have a large skull on the "1" face. After finding a company that could print pips on five sides and silkscreen an image on the remaining side, Flying Buffalo printed up 3,000 of the dice, which sold very well. These Death Dice were probably the first of their kind. Flying Buffalo continues to market Death Dice today, as well as Pizza Dice, Monster Dice, Dice of Doom, and several others.

When the first *Nuclear War* card game expansion, Rick Loomis' *Nuclear Escalation* (1983), came out a few years later, it would also feature a special silk-screened die: this six-sider was glow-in-the-dark and had a nuclear explosion rather than the "1" digit.

To further show the new breadth of the company, Flying Buffalo also went into retail (just as Loomis had dreamed of, 10 years earlier). By the '80s, they already had a storefront, thanks to the last of several office moves over the years. Then in 1980, when they moved into their sixth (maybe seventh) office — this one in Tempe, Arizona — they set up their largest storefront ever, and the first with a gaming area.

Flying Buffalo was also beginning work on what would become one of their best-known RPG products: *Grimtooth's Traps* (1981). The idea for the book was Loomis'. He'd seen books of magic items, spells, and monsters, and he wanted to do a unique collection all his own. Thus Grimtooth's first collection of 101 traps was born.

Grimtooth himself was an iconic troll that had been appearing in Flying Buffalo books for some time. He was first seen on the cover of *Tunnels & Trolls* fifth edition, where he was the target of several adventurers' wrath, and then was adopted by Liz Danforth as the cartoon icon for her "Trolltalk" editorial column in *Sorcerer's Apprentice*. His name had been selected through a reader contest in that same magazine. Now he got his revenge through a book of traps that he narrated.



In many ways *Grimtooth's Traps* was barely an RPG book. The traps were

sometimes deadly and sometimes silly. They were often Rube Goldberg-esque, and not the sort of thing you could really use in an adventure. However they were beautifully diagrammed and often very funny. The book was a joy to read — as much a satire of roleplaying dungeons as a game aid itself.

Grimtooth's Traps was also a system-independent book — the first of Flying Buffalo's system-free "Catalyst" books. Unlike most books of its sort, it wasn't just a façade to hide behind while producing *D&D* books. *Traps* was genuinely systemless, with great ideas broadly offered, and the exact details left up to the gamemaster.

Grimtooth's Traps was released for Origins 1981, which was held that year on the West Coast. It was generally a poor performing show, with manufacturers complaining about bad sales. Flying Buffalo was one of the few companies who actually did quite well that year, and that was due to the release of *Grimtooth's Traps*.

(The other company that did well at Pacific Origins 1981 was Hero Games, who released *Champions* at the same show.)

Blade Appears: 1982

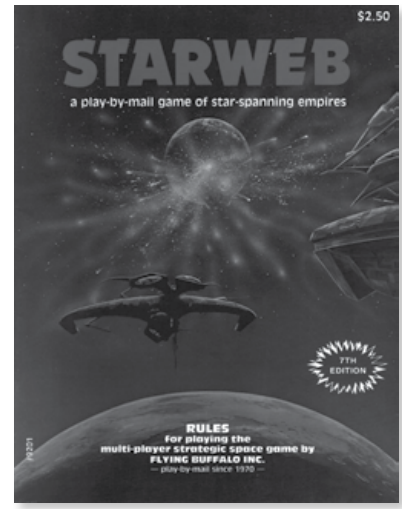
Meanwhile the Flying Buffalo staff continued to grow. It would reach a height of over 21 employees — including retail staff — in 1983. By this time Stackpole was back from Coleco. Another notable new hire was Larry DiTillio — a TV writer who was out of work due to a strike. Both Stackpole and DiTillio were talented writers who would do great work for Flying Buffalo, then go on to notable success afterward. They also helped to push out lots of new product.

Grimtooth's Traps Too (1982) quickly followed up on the success of the first. It included more traps — 102 this time — and was also full of pictures of Flying Buffalo staff and friends amidst the trap diagrams. Stackpole and DiTillio, for example, can be found on page 18 in a diagram showing a fountain. The female sales rep from Flying Buffalo's printer, Associated Litho (who we'll return to shortly) is within the fountain. Michael Stackpole stands there with a short sword, while Larry DiTillio is nearby.

This second traps book was also the first book released with a new "Blade" logo. Blade was an imprint for Flying Buffalo's RPG products that helped to differentiate them from the PBM offerings. It also helped to distinguish Flying Buffalo's newer releases, written and edited by stars like Danforth, DiTillio, Mueller, and Stackpole, from the earlier, less professional releases of the '70s.

Flying Buffalo further expanded their Catalyst line with the publication of *Citybook I: Butcher, Baker, Candlestickmaker* (1982). This tome offered

details for cities, but in a generic way: 25 different city establishments were fully detailed, including armories, guilds, taverns, temples, and more. NPCs were also presented, all with cleverly linked backgrounds. Like *Grimtooth's Traps*, it proved a strong seller. It also won Flying Buffalo's first Origins Award. It was the first notable recognition that Flying Buffalo had received as a producer of quality RPG books — and an immediate feather in the cap of the new Blade imprint. Meanwhile Flying Buffalo was planning to finally expand their core RPG lines beyond *Tunnels & Trolls*. They decided to release two more game systems. *Mercenaries, Spies & Private Eyes* would be set in the modern day while "WEB" would be set in the future. Both would be built on variants of the *Tunnels & Trolls* game system; WEB would also draw on the background of the *Starweb* PBM, spiced with the insane computers of Fred Saberhagen's Berserker universe — for which Flying Buffalo had now received an official license.



"With a little imagination, players should be able to combine all three systems into 'Tunnels & Thompsons' or 'Swords & Supernovas' games if they wish."

– Michael Stackpole, "Arcane Graffiti," *Sorcerer's Apprentice #12* (Fall 1981)

Flying Buffalo was able to plan such a major expansion because of a unique agreement that they'd reached with their local printer, Associated Litho. Associated Litho had extended Flying Buffalo a $50,000 line of credit, with the provision that they be paid back out of 60% of Flying Buffalo's receipts. This allowed Flying Buffalo to get numerous books ready for market without needing the upfront cash to fund them.

As a result Flying Buffalo's publishing schedule was very ambitious. It included *Mercenaries, Spies & Private Eyes*, *Citybook II: Port O' Call* (which included an all-star set of contributors such as Dave Arneson, Charles De Lint, and Rudy Kraft — as well as the FBI staff), the Catalyst book *Treasure Vault*, and multiple *T&T* solo books (which were up to #17 by late 1982).

Unfortunately the bottom was about to fall out of Flying Buffalo's business.

A Hysterical Interlude: 1979—1982

First, however, we must take a brief look at a problem that was beginning to intrude upon the whole RPG industry. As is more fully detailed in the history of TSR, anti-RPG hysteria began to ramp up in 1979–1981 thanks to the disappearance of a student at Michigan State University and subsequent books written by William Dear and Rona Jaffe. This would be the start of an ignorant hysteria that spread through the '80s as the public media connected RPGs not just to a few suicides, but also more generally to Satanism.

> *"What really annoyed me was the shoddy research and reliance on innuendo to castigate games. This is the hallmark of the forces who were arrayed against us, and has continued to be their main tactic to this day."*
>
> – Mike Stackpole, Interview, pc.gamespy.com (August 2004)

TSR was ultimately the company most affected by this, but Flying Buffalo also had a unique intersection with the RPG hysteria through the person of one of their employees: Michael Stackpole. Stackpole published one of the first diatribes against this media misinformation in *Sorcerer's Apprentice #14* (Spring 1982) in an article called "Devil Games? Nonsense!" In later years he would become one of the biggest advocates and protectors of RPGs when speaking to the media — a role that began with his Flying Buffalo article in 1982.

Which brings us back to Flying Buffalo at the brink of disaster, though they didn't know it.

The Crunch: 1983—1985

Flying Buffalo came out with Michael Stackpole's *Mercenaries, Spies & Private Eyes* (1983) as planned. Unfortunately it was published the same year as two other RPGs in the same genre: Hero Games' *Espionage* (1983) and Victory Games' *James Bond 007* (1983). Rather than competing against both of the other games, Flying Buffalo formed an alliance with Hero Games thanks to a chance meeting between Stackpole and Hero's George MacDonald at a 1982 convention. The first two *Mercenaries, Spies & Private Eyes* scenarios, *The Adventure of the Jade Jaguar* (1983) and *Stormhaven* (1983), were thus dual-statted for *MSPE* and *Espionage*.

Unfortunately, shortly after the publication of *MSPE*, Associated Litho changed ownership. The new owner told Loomis that he had no interest in continuing with the previous owner's deal. Suddenly Flying Buffalo was forced to pay for all their books COD, and was *also* continuing to pay 60% of their receipts to Associated Litho for older books. Though the new management of Associated



Litho was hurting Flying Buffalo's bottom line, the Associated Litho staff — who loved Flying Buffalo's products — still offered their best support, such as printing the cardboard heroes for *Stormhaven* in the margins of the covers.

About six months later the reasons behind Associated Litho's sudden desire for quick payment became obvious when the new owner of the company absconded with all of his company's cash, driving it into bankruptcy after months of not paying bills or payroll taxes.

Meanwhile Litho's decision to cut off Flying Buffalo's line of credit — while still requiring payment of the old receipts — had already put an extreme crimp in cash flow at Flying Buffalo. One staff member described it as "the economic equivalent of the movie *Speed*." The products had to keep flowing at a very fast rate to keep Flying Buffalo afloat. Ultimately Flying Buffalo couldn't keep up the pace. As a result they had to start laying off staff. Their production came to an utter standstill, exacerbating a problem from which Flying Buffalo would never entirely recover.

Besides letting staff go, Flying Buffalo also cancelled *Sorcerer's Apprentice* with issue #17 (1983). Like most gaming magazines, it hadn't been a good money maker compared to the rest of the company's lines. It was reportedly purchased by a "New Hampshire publisher," who never did anything with the rights.

Meanwhile, the rest of Flying Buffalo's planned products were notably delayed. It was a year before Flying Buffalo was able to produce *Citybook II* (1984). *Treasure Vault* (1985) wasn't released until two years after it had first been announced. A few *T&T* solo books were slowly released over the same period, as was Larry DiTillio's *The Isle of Darksmoke* (1984) — Flying Buffalo's last multiplayer *T&T* adventure ... despite the fact that it was labeled as "I: The Nameless Village and the Dome Level" with "II: The Lower Level" scheduled for later in the year.

Despite printing problems at home, Flying Buffalo was still doing well with its foreign licensees. French versions of *T&T* and the *Grimtooth* books helped Flying Buffalo's cash flow in late 1984, then Corgi Books picked up the UK *T&T* rights in 1986 and began publishing gamebooks that combined rules and adventures. A Japanese edition of *T&T* was by now doing quite well — and would eventually sell more copies than the American game ever did.

However, none of this helped Flying Buffalo's bottom line enough. Eventually Loomis decided that he needed to concentrate on the company's core roleplaying competence, *Tunnels & Trolls*. As a result Flying Buffalo's newer roleplaying lines were licensed out: *Mercenaries, Spies & Private Eyes* went to Sleuth Publications, who was then collecting RPG lines as described in the Chaosium history, while the Catalyst books went to Task Force Games, best known for their *Star Fleet Battles* games, and now moving into RPG production.

In 1985 Flying Buffalo's lease on their headquarters ran out, and Loomis moved the offices to a farmhouse he'd inherited in Scottsdale, Arizona. The retail store was moved, and then sold to a manager, which cut down on Flying Buffalo's own staff requirements. Further staff left after the move, including luminaries like Stackpole and Danforth.

> *"[M]y old friend Bear refuses to get into [World of Warcraft] because you have to kill the monsters instead of being clever and witty; he says he'll only play an MMORPG when you can wheedle a dragon out of its gold."*
>
> – Liz Danforth, "An Interview with Liz Danforth," grognardia.blogspot.com (April 2009)

Just a few years later, Michael Stackpole — along with Flying Buffalo alumni Ken St. Andre and Liz Danforth — would make a bit of a splash in the computer roleplaying (CRPG) world with the publication of Interplay's *Wasteland* (1988), a very well-regarded post-apocalyptic game. Though Flying Buffalo was faltering, the same could not be said of some of the employees who had passed through its doors.

Flying Buffalo was still around after the cuts of 1985, but well down from their height of 21 employees. Many companies would have gone out of business after a downturn of this magnitude, but Flying Buffalo was able to keep going thanks to their PBM business, their foreign licenses, and the success of their existing stock. However, the company would never return to the heights it had known from 1979–1983.

Curiously, the company did see one growth in 1985. That year it picked up the rights to Adventure Games — a company previously run by Dave Arneson and best known for publishing Arneson's own vision of *D&D*, *Adventures in Fantasy* (1979, 1981), co-authored by Richard Snider. Because Dave Arneson owned a portion of Flying Buffalo, he decided to let Flying Buffalo take care of the rest of Adventure Games' stock and IP when he shut the company down. According to press releases at the time Adventure Games was now a "division" of Flying Buffalo, but Flying Buffalo never did much more than sell old stock. Adventure Games' *Pentantastar* board game (1983) still remains available through Flying Buffalo today.

RPG Endings: 1986—1997

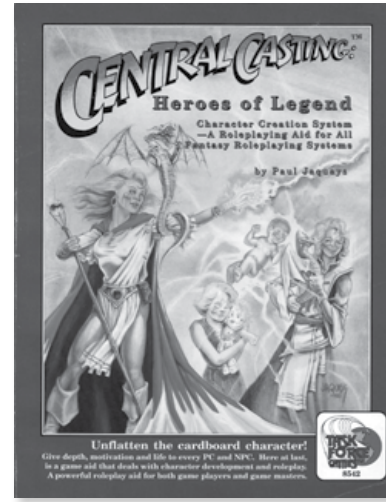
After 1985, Flying Buffalo was never again able to put much focus on RPGs, not even *Tunnels & Trolls*. The last four Flying Buffalo full-sized solo adventures were published over the next several years: *Red Circle* (1987), *Caravan to Tiern* (1989), *Dark Temple* (1991), and *When the Cat's Away* (1993). By the time they were published, some of the adventures had been waiting for years.

Surprisingly Flying Buffalo was able to recover the rights to both of the lines it had licensed.

Sleuth Publications went out of business after publishing just one *MSPE* expansion. This returned the line to Flying Buffalo who was able to publish two more supplements, *Mugshots* (1991) and *Mugshots 2* (1992) before the line was entirely closed down.

The Catalyst line was given much more attention by Flying Buffalo, even when it was licensed out. Task Force Games reprinted several out-of-print books while Flying Buffalo prepared new releases for them including *Grimtooth's Traps Fore* (1986), *Citybook III: Deadly Nightshade* (1987), a new comic book-based Catalyst series called *Lejentia Campaigns* (1989), and *Grimtooth's Traps Ate* (1990).

One "almost" Flying Buffalo series appeared from Task Force Games as well. Paul Jaquays prepared a series of character-creation supplements called *Central Casting* (1988–1991) for Flying Buffalo, who in turn prepared them for publication under the Catalyst logo. However, Task Force Games decided to publish the books on their own, without the Catalyst logo, so that they wouldn't have to pay royalties. As a result of this change, the Central Casting books would *not* return to Flying Buffalo when the rest of the Catalyst books did, and have since been lost to the industry.

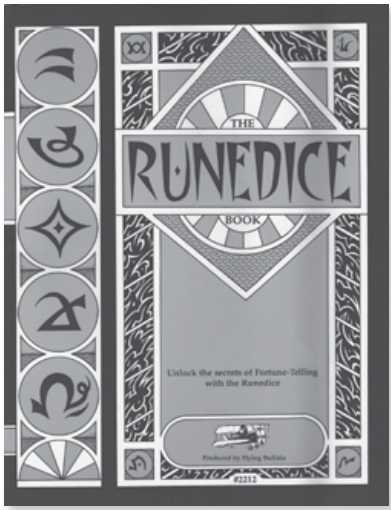


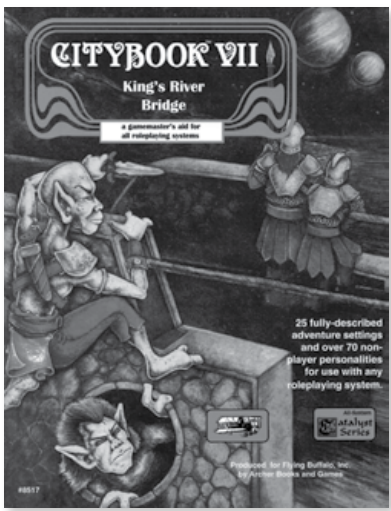
In 1988 Task Force Games was (briefly) sold to New World Computing, just as the computer industry was becoming aware of the licensing opportunities in the tabletop industry. This offered an opportunity for Flying Buffalo to get two of their products made into computer games: *Nuclear War* (1989) and *Tunnels & Trolls* (1990). Shortly thereafter Flying Buffalo retrieved the Catalyst rights when the original license expired.

Unfortunately Flying Buffalo was no longer in a state to publish RPG books.

After years of reducing staff and packaging books for out-of-house publication, their infrastructure was much more closely oriented toward PBMs and board games.

Flying Buffalo published what would be their penultimate RPG releases between 1990 and 1994. Three more *Citybooks* (1990–1994) were released, though they were all prepared out-of-house by Paul Jaquays. There were also three more *Grimtooth* books (1992–1994). *The Runedice Book* (1993) was an odd release that combined Flying Buffalo's continued interest in weird dice with the setting of Lejenta; the guide to interpreting the dice was written by Nancy Loomis. Finally, a new series of *Maps* (1993–1994) for use with any fantasy game was well-received but short-lived.





By 1994 the RPG industry was changing yet again, just as it had been when Flying Buffalo starting having problems in 1983. The newest cause was the release of CCGs. Flying Buffalo hopped onto this bandwagon by cleverly releasing collectible sets of cards for their *Nuclear War* game (1994). However the CCG craze also further tightened the RPG market and made the likelihood of a Flying Buffalo RPG revival that much less likely.

Flying Buffalo's last original RPG book for almost a decade was *Citybook VII: King's River Bridge* (1997), published after a three-year hiatus in the line and again prepared out-of-house, this time by Archer Books and Games.

Quiet Years: 1995—2004

As Flying Buffalo was winding down its RPG production, it continued on with reprints, with PBMs, and even with a few new board and card game products. During this period, they also licensed Nova Games' one-on-one combat *Lost Worlds* game system and published a series of *Tunnels & Trolls* heroes (1995–1996). More recently they published books for Jolly Blackburn's Knights of the Dinner Table as well (2003).

Nuclear War has continued on with smaller bonus packs (1996, 1999) and more recently the boxed *Weapons of Mass Destruction* (2002).

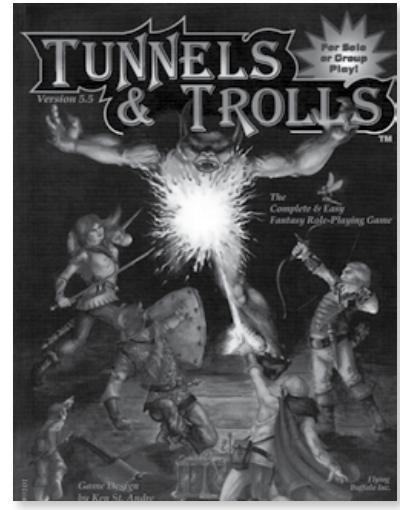
One of Flying Buffalo's more notable innovations during these quiet years was *The Origins Metagame* (2002) — a trading card game distributed at Origins wherein each card represented an industry personality, company, or product line. In more recent years, Loomis has printed Poker decks for the con, with the four kings being four famous game designers. In 2008, Gary Gygax was featured as the king of spades and Dave Arneson as the king of hearts.

It looked for a while like the idea of new Flying Buffalo RPGs was entirely dead, but more recent times suggest that the desire for new releases is still there.

The RPG Revivals: 2005—2009

In 2005, something surprising happened: two of Flying Buffalo's most popular RPG lines saw revivals.

The first revival was thanks to the surge of interest in the RPG hobby generated by d20. Necromancer Games, one of the big d20 movers, published a licensed *Grimtooth* book called *The Wurst of Grimtooth's Traps* (2005). It contained 200 of Grimtooth's best traps in a beautiful d20 edition.



The second revival had nothing to do with d20: it was all about Ken St. Andre's 1975 RPG, *Tunnels & Trolls*. No less than three notable publishers put out totally new *T&T* product over the next several years.

First, *Tunnels & Trolls* was published in a new 5.5 edition (2005) by Flying Buffalo, with new rules, background, and variants by Ken St. Andre. Given that the previous edition had been published in 1979, the new release was certainly due.

Flying Buffalo has more recently put together quick-start editions (2007, 2008, 2011) of *T&T* for three of the Free RPG Days. Adventures like "Riverboat Adventure" (2007), "Take the Money" (2008), and "Rescue Mission" (2011) — all by Ken St. Andre — were Flying Buffalo's first original RPG publications in a decade.

While Flying Buffalo was putting out the 5.5 edition of *T&T*, Fiery Dragon Productions published a more heavily revised seventh edition (2005), again with revisions done by Ken St. Andre. It was followed a few years later by 7.5 (2008).

And then there was Outlaw Press. They were strictly a small press, putting out books in very small print runs. They had been publishing since at least 2000, but really came to prominence in 2006 when they started publishing *lots* of new adventures and other supplements for *Tunnels & Trolls* — a few even by Ken St. Andre, such as *Hot Pursuit* (2007).

When Outlaw Press published *Mazes & Minotaurs* (2006, 2007) — a Greek-themed *D&D* parody/retroclone — without the author's permission, it didn't get much attention. Then in late 2009 a reader at RPGnet discovered that the art on the cover of *Hot Pursuit* was being used without the artist's permission. Over the next week or two, RPGnet readers discovered dozens, perhaps hundreds of pieces of Outlaw Press art that had been used without permission, plus one old *Dungeon Magazine D&D* adventure that had been turned into a *T&T* adventure without permission.

Upon this discovery, St. Andre cut off his relationship with Outlaw and Loomis revoked their license. Since, Outlaw Press has returned to the internet at least three times and been pretty quickly shut down each time by companies like Lulu and RPGnow.

It's very sad that the only particularly prominent publisher of "new" *T&T* material over the last 15 years appears to have printed much of their material illegally, without license. Because — as has been largely the case for over a decade — *no one else is doing it*.

But, that might be changing.

Flying Buffalo Today: 2010-Present

For the last 15 years, Flying Buffalo's new RPG production has been minimal. Even the resurgence of the late '00s largely occurred out-of-house (and is unlikely to be repeated).

Since the messy death of Outlaw Press, however, Flying Buffalo has been encouraged to publish a few new *T&T* solo adventures by Ken St. Andre: *Khara Kang's Random Rainbow Maze* (2010), *Deep Delving* (2011), and *A Traveler's Tale* (2011). In large part because of the ease of POD and PDF publication in the

modern day, Flying Buffalo and Rick Loomis seem dedicated to the continued release of adventures like these. Meanwhile, Kickstarter seems to be offering them an even bigger opportunity: *Deluxe Tunnels & Trolls* (2013?), which is supposed to be the best *T&T* ever, blew through its $26,000 funding goal in just one day and raised a total of $125,440.

The advent of the Internet knocked most PBM publishers out of business, but Flying Buffalo continues with their PBM games, undeterred. It is probably once more their largest business.

As already noted, two of Flying Buffalo employees from the early '80s have found considerable success since they left the company:

Michael Stackpole went on to fulfill his original dream of becoming a science-fiction writer. His first novels were for GDW and FASA. He is probably best known for his *Star Wars* books.

Larry DiTillio went back to the TV industry. He has worked on numerous cartoons, but is probably best known as the story editor for season one of *Babylon 5*.

Meanwhile Flying Buffalo today is a small but healthy company with two full-time employees and a host of part-timers and freelancers. Rick Loomis is again President of GAMA, and is one of the distinguished gentlemen of the industry, always ready to lend a hand, as he has for a full 40 years.

What to Read Next

- For Ken St. Andre's lesser-known RPG work, read ***Chaosium***.
- For much more successful solo gamebooks which might have been influenced by Flying Buffalo, read about *Fighting Fantasy* in ***Games Workshop***.
- For a publisher of a *T&T*-compatible game, read ***Metagaming Concepts***.
- For more on the hysteria, read ***TSR***.

In Other Eras

- For Michael Stackpole's novels, read ***FASA*** *['80s]*.
- For Flying Buffalo's late '80s partner, read ***Task Force Games*** *['80s]*.
- For Sleuth Publications, read ***Different Worlds Publications*** *['80s]*.
- For Flying Buffalo's d20-era partner, read ***Necromancer Games*** *['00s]*.
- For the publishers of seventh edition *T&T*, read the ***Fiery Dragon Productions*** *['00s]* mini-history.

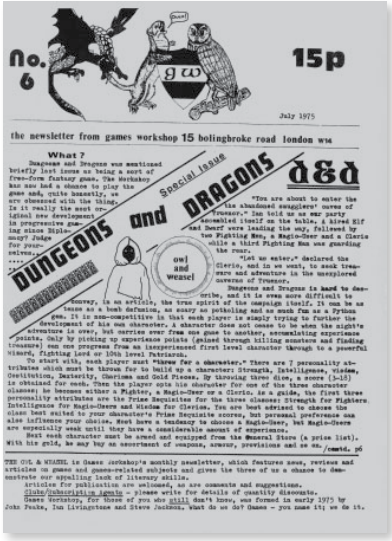
Or read onward to our first British publisher, ***Games Workshop***.

Games Workshop: 1975-Present

Games Workshop brought roleplaying to Great Britain and was very successful in that field for a decade before new ownership turned them into a miniatures company.

Before the Dwarf: 1975—1977

In early 1975, three British school chums — Ian Livingstone, Steve Jackson, and John Peake, who all shared a "grotty" flat in London's Shepherd's Bush — decided that they wanted to make games. They needed a name for their company, of course, and they had plenty of ideas, among them "Games Garage" and "Galactic Games." They finally settled on "Games Workshop" because it reflected the fact that they'd be crafting their games by hand.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July 1975

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Special Issue

d&d

DUNGEONS and DRAGONS

owl and weasel

What ?

Dungeons and Dragons was mentioned briefly last issue as being a sort of free-form fantasy game. The Workshop has now had a chance to play the game and, quite honestly, we are obsessed with the thing. Is it really the next original new development in progressive gaming since Diplomacy? Judge for yourselves....

"You are about to enter the Caverns of Trouser." Ian told us as our party assembled itself on the table. A bleed Elf and Dwarf were leading the way, followed by two Fighting Men, a Magic-User and a Cleric while a third Fighting Man was guarding the rear.

"Let us enter," declared the Cleric, and in we went, to seek treasure and adventure in the unexplored caverns of Trouser.

Dungeons and Dragons is hard to describe, and it is even more difficult to convey, in an article, the true spirit of the campaign itself. It can be as tense as a bomb defusion, as scary as potholing and as much fun as a Python game. It is non-competitive in that each player is simply trying to further the development of his own character. A character does not cease to be when the night's adventure is over, but carries over from one game to another, accumulating experience points. Only by pitting up experience points (gained through killing monsters and finding treasure) can one progress from an inexperienced first level character through to a powerful wizard, fighting lord or 10th level Patriarch.

To start with, each player must "throw for a character." There are 7 personality attributes which must be thrown for to build up a character: Strength, Intelligence, wisdom, Constitution, Dexterity, Charisma and Gold Pieces. By throwing three dice, a score (3-18) is obtained for each. Then the player suits his character for one of the three character classes; he becomes either a Fighter, a Magic-User or a Cleric. As a guide, the first three personality attributes are the Prime Requisites for the three classes: Strength for Fighters, Intelligence for Magic-Users and Wisdom for Clerics. You are best advised to choose the class best suited to your character's Prime Requisite scores, but personal preference can also influence your choice. Most have a tendency to choose a Magic-User, but Magic-Users are especially weak until they have a considerable amount of experience.

Next each character must be armed and equipped from the General Store (a price list). With his gold, he may buy an assortment of weapons, armour, provisions and so on. /contd. p6

THE OWL & WEASEL is Games Workshop's monthly newsletter, which features news, reviews and articles on games and games-related subjects and gives the three of us a chance to demonstrate our appalling lack of literary skills.

Articles for publication are welcomed, as are comments and suggestions.

Club/Subscription Agents - please write for details of monthly discounts.

Games Workshop, for those of you who still don't know, was formed in early 1975 by John Peake, Ian Livingstone and Steve Jackson. What do we do? Games - you name it; we do it.

1975: Owl and Weasel #6

The newsletter's name was a nod to the Owl and Weasel pub in London's Kings Cross, where the trio would meet to discuss their plans. The publication was initially a single-page affair, but it grew to eight pages by the time the fifth issue was published in November 1975. Each issue featured a mix of game reviews, articles, and letters from readers.

Handcrafting games took a real craftsman — which was what Peake contributed to the company. He started out making backgammon games with inlaid mahogany and cherry veneer and soon expanded into crafting sets for mancala, nine men's morris, go, tower of

Hanoi, and other games. Ian was the marketer who sold the games to local stores, while Steve was the office manager who also drew artwork for *Games & Puzzles* magazine — a contract that was the young GW's main source of revenue. Together the three of them soon had a small business going.

To support their newfound games business, Jackson, Livingstone, and Peake decided to start publishing a monthly newsletter, *Owl and Weasel* (1975–1977), largely written by Jackson. They sent copies of their first issue (January 1975) to the subscribers of a recently defunct fanzine called *Albion* (1969–1975) — which had been run by Don Turnbull, who we'll soon meet again.

One of those blind mailings, sent out into the void, happened to go to an American named Brian Blume. He was one of the founders of a young company called TSR that had just a year earlier published a ground-breaking game called *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). On such coincidences multi-million dollar companies are built.

The first issue of *Owl and Weasel* included a call for "progressive games" and that's probably what got Blume's attention. He sent Games Workshop a letter praising *Owl and Weasel*. He also told them about *D&D*, stating that a copy was on the way for their review. Two weeks later, it arrived. Jackson and Livingstone tried it out, and they were immediately hooked.

> *"When in early 1975 Steve Jackson and I got our hands on a copy of* Dungeons & Dragons *that was it. We became overnight converts to fantasy games."*
>
> – Ian Livingstone, Interview, fightingfantasy.com (2003)

Jackson and Livingstone felt that *D&D* was more "imaginative" than anything being produced in the UK at the time, and so they wanted to sell it there. They responded to Blume's letter asking if they could order copies for sale. After some back and forth, Blume and the GW lads came to an agreement: they ordered the princely sum of *six* copies of *Dungeons & Dragons* for resale.

Seeing Double?

It should clearly be noted that the British Steve Jackson of Games Workshop is absolutely *no* relation to the American Steve Jackson of Steve Jackson Games. They are each a notable contributor to the roleplaying hobby, but each a separate and distinct person. The British Steve Jackson's story lies entirely here, in Games Workshop and *Fighting Fantasy*, while the American Steve Jackson's story is spread out across the histories of Metagaming and Steve Jackson Games.

In order to help sell those six copies of *Dungeons & Dragons*, Games Workshop dedicated *Owl and Weasel #6* (July 1975) to the game. The orders immediately started to roll in, and Jackson and Livingstone realized they had a hit on their hands. They reordered from TSR and started repositioning Games Workshop to regularly sell the new game. Either at the time of the initial sale or (more likely) a few months later, Blume also gave GW a three-year exclusive to sell *Dungeons & Dragons* in Europe. TSR was officially advertising Games Workshop as their UK distributor by *The Strategic Review #4* (Winter 1975).

Meanwhile Jackson and Livingstone were looking to increase their games business even more. In late 1975 they organized a convention, the first Games Day, which included a full-day "exhibition" of *D&D*. *Owl and Weasel #13* (February 1976) moved them further into the *D&D* business by announcing the formation of a *D&D* society; thereafter one page in each issue of *Owl and Weasel* was dedicated to the society. Somewhere in 1976, Peake — who had no interest in this new fad — saw the writing on the wall and decided to leave GW.

Though GW's business was trending upward throughout 1976, Jackson and Livingstone continue to sell their products directly out of their flat. Increasingly, people showed up there hoping to find an actual store — much to their landlord's annoyance. This resulted in the two getting kicked out that summer. Unworried, they headed out to the United States for a vacation — and a chance to visit the mecca of gaming, Gen Con IX (1976). Here they talked to more manufacturers — including Chaosium FGU, GDW, and Judges Guild — and ordered games from them as well. They thus had plenty of parcels waiting for them, each full of games to be sold, when they returned to the UK.

Over the next year, Games Workshop worked first out of Livingstone's girlfriend's flat and then out of a tiny office at the back of an estate agent's premises in Uxbridge Road, Shepherd's Bush. They still had no flat to live in and Livingstone's girlfriend couldn't have overnight guests during the week. Undeterred, the two slept outside the office in the back of Jackson's van — and joined a squash club so they could shower every morning. Meanwhile, their business was booming.

By the middle of 1977 GW had published 25 issues of their *Owl and Weasel* newsletter as well an introduction to *Dungeons & Dragons* (available for a self-addressed envelope). They'd run two Games Days and a *D&D* Day. They were also selling an extensive library of over a hundred games, including products from TSR, Avalon Hill, Chaosium, Fantasy Games Unlimited, Flying Buffalo, Game Designers' Workshop, Little Soldier Games, and SPI.

Increasingly the story of Games Workshop was not that of just one company, but rather the story of the growing hobbyist gaming industry in Britain. If it hadn't been Games Workshop, perhaps someone else would have done it — but

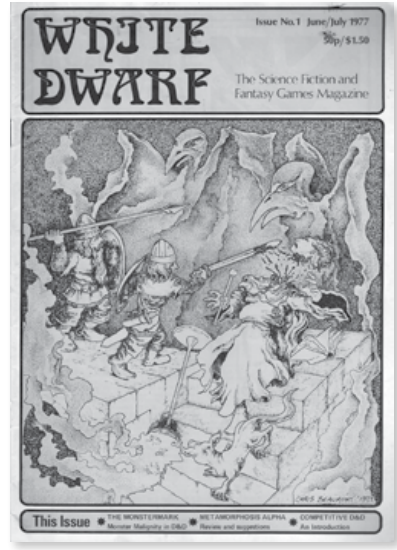
it *was* Livingstone, Jackson, and their young company who successfully introduced hobby games into Great Britain and helped the industry to grow over the next decade.

However, they were starting to face growth problems. Though Games Workshop welcomed "trade enquiries," retail stores were largely unwilling to sell the strange RPGs and other games that the company was importing. Fortunately Livingstone — ever the marketer — had an idea for what to do next: Games Workshop needed to publish a *professional* magazine. If they could manage a big step up from the *Owl and Weasel* newsletter, they could get the word out on their games in an even bigger way.

So that's what they did.

The Birth of *White Dwarf*: 1977—1978

White Dwarf #1 (June/July 1977) was the first professional British magazine dedicated to roleplaying, and one of the earliest for the entire industry. It was published about the same time as TSR's *The Dragon #7* (June 1977). Most other 'zines, such as *Judges Guild Journal*, *Alarums and Excursions*, *News from Bree*, and *The Dungeoneer* were still being published as fanzines or newsletters while notables like *The Space Gamer* had a heavier emphasis on board games.



Issue #1 of *White Dwarf* was a 20-page magazine printed on glossy stock with a two-color cover. It was edited by Ian Livingstone, and it was almost entirely dedicated to *Dungeons & Dragons*, though it featured an article on *Metamorphosis Alpha* too. It marked Games Workshop's true beginning as a professional publisher. Pulling a number out of a hat, Games Workshop printed 4,000 copies of that first issue. They sold remarkably well.

> *"Over the past two years the state of the art of wargaming has seen dramatic change. Until then only tanks, French Hussars and Ancient Britons were to be seen roaming the wargaming tables."*
>
> – Ian Livingstone, Editorial, *White Dwarf #1* (June/July 1977)

In later years Livingstone would often be asked what the name meant; the answer was quite clever. From the start *White Dwarf* was dedicated to science-fiction *and* fantasy games; at the time the hobbyist gaming industry was more defined by those genres than by "roleplaying." So Livingstone picked a title that had meaning for both fantasy and science-fiction readers. A *White Dwarf* was both a type of stellar phenomenon and a fantasy character.

Just as Games Workshop was at the center of the roleplaying invasion of Britain, *White Dwarf* was at the center of Britain's creative community of RPG writers. Many notable writers would pass through the pages of *White Dwarf* during its early days, including Graeme Davis, Oliver Dickinson, Roger E. Moore, Lew Pulsipher, and others far too numerous to mention. Numerous features in *White Dwarf* were further centered on reader contributions, among them "Treasure Chest" — a varied collection of materials for *D&D* — and "Fiend Factory" — a monster column. The latter was edited by Don Turnbull, who we've already met.

In *White Dwarf #4* (December 1977/Jan 1978) Ian Livingstone somewhat ironically bemoaned the lack of British game manufacturers — an irony because he was already on the way to eventually become the biggest hobbyist manufacturer in the country.

That move toward manufacturing started at about the same time as that editorial was published, late in 1977. That's when Games Workshop began producing their own editions of American RPGs, rather than just importing them. This new trend began with a British edition of the new *Basic Dungeons & Dragons* rulebook (1977) and continued with softbound editions of the *AD&D Monster Manual* and *Player's Handbook* (1978). Unlike their later work in the '80s, these early Games Workshop editions were all straight reprints of the American editions. However, printing them in the UK was much cheaper than importing them from overseas, making the entire hobby that much more approachable. As an example the TSR edition of *Monster Manual* was selling for £6.95 (which would be about $53.00 today) while the GW softcover reduced that cost to £4.50 (or a much more reasonable $34.50 today — almost exactly what Wizards of the Coast sold their hardcover *AD&D Monster Manual* reprint for in 2012).

By this time, the estate agent that Games Workshop shared offices with decided that they were taking up far too much room. The cheeky Games Workshop lads told him that he should find them a store. He did, and on April 1, 1978, the first actual Games Workshop storefront opened up in Hammersmith, London. More oriented toward RPGs than ever, it advertised TSR's *Dungeons & Dragons*, FGU's *Chivalry & Sorcery*, GDW's *Traveller*, TSR's *Metamorphosis Alpha*, and Metagaming's *Wizard* among the items for sale at its opening. A line of over 100 people queued up in the morning, waiting for that first store to open for the first time.

With *White Dwarf #7* (June/July 1978), the cover of the magazine went full color. The number of ads also started increasing, generally showing the growth of the entire industry in Britain. Jackson, Livingstone, and Games Workshop were clearly on their way.

Citadel & Explosive Growth: 1978—1982

In 1978 Games Workshop received a license that allowed them to manufacture Ral Partha miniatures in the UK. It would prove as important and fateful as that original license to distribute *D&D* that they'd received three years earlier.

Early the next year Games Workshop formed a partnership with Bryan Ansell — the founder and designer of Asgard Miniatures — to found a new company called Citadel Miniatures. They kicked off their production with two lines. The first was a British line of Ral Partha miniatures, and the second was a set of "Fiend Factory" miniatures, based on the monsters that appeared in *White Dwarf*. It was the start of a close relationship that would tighten over the years as Citadel began to carefully coordinate their miniatures releases with Games Workshop's products. A few years down the line GW would even put out a rulebook called *Spacefarers* (1981), which offered gameplay for one of Citadel's miniatures lines. We'll return to Citadel when they become more important to GW a few years down the line.

> *"Outside of the US, we published the first FRP mag (*White Dwarf*), organised the first convention, started the first major miniatures company, opened up the first dedicated FRP shop and so on. And no one, not even TSR, had such an 'integrated' games company."*
>
> – Steve Jackson, Interview, rpgvaultarchive.ign.com (1998)

Over the next several years Games Workshop saw tremendous growth.

They picked up several new licenses to import and sometimes reprint various game lines. The next few were GDW's *Traveller* (licensed in 1979), FGU's *Gangster!* (licensed in 1979), and Chaosium's *RuneQuest* (licensed in 1982). These licenses were often supported by increased coverage in *White Dwarf*, including "Starbase" (beginning August/September 1980), a *Traveller* column edited by Bob McWilliams, and "RuneRites" (beginning April/May 1982), a *RuneQuest* column originally edited by Oliver Dickinson, also known for his Gloranthan Griselda stories.

GW also finally expanded its publishing arm beyond *White Dwarf* and reprints of American products. Among their first original products were a pad of character sheets (1978), a pad of hex sheets (1978), and the *Dungeon Floor Plans* (1979) gaming accessory, each of which carried the *Dungeons & Dragons* trademark;

they were some of the few licensed *D&D* products ever authorized by TSR. The *IISS Ship Files* (1981) were another rare RPG original, this one complementing GDW's *Traveller* imports.

Games Workshop followed up their new RPG products with new board games. A series of four kicked off the line: *Apocalypse* (1980), *Doctor Who* (1980), *Valley of the Four Winds* (1980), and *Warlock* (1980). These high-quality professional productions showed that GW really knew what they were doing as a publisher — though it would be years before they fully embraced manufacturing. Nonetheless, they would put out a few more board games in the coming years — including *Judge Dredd* (1982) and *Battlecars* (1983).

All of this required more staff. Among the new hires was Peter Darvill-Evans, who was brought on as GW's Trade Sales Manager and later became their General Manager. He was just one of many as GW very rapidly ramped up.

Games Workshop was also expanding their shops, the third element of their corporation. They opened a second store in Manchester on October 4, 1980, and then a third in Birmingham on September 5, 1981. More would follow.

At the same time, Games Workshop was gaining prestige in the wider world of roleplaying. In 1979 Games Workshop negotiated a deal with TSR to put together a book of monsters from the "Fiend Factory" and other British sources, to be edited by *White Dwarf* writer Don Turnbull. This became the *Fiend Folio* (1981), one of TSR's hardcover *AD&D* books. By the time it was published, TSR had hired Turnbull to found TSR UK (later TSR Ltd.), the European arm of TSR — a topic more completely discussed in TSR's own history. Turnbull's articles were gone from *White Dwarf* by 1980, though Albie Fiore would take over the Fiend Factory, editing it for several more years.

Meanwhile, Games Workshop was facing major changes starting in 1982 and 1983.

Fighting Fantasy: 1980–1995

Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone weren't content to rest on Games Workshop's laurels. They'd come up with a new idea, the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebook. This was a solo game adventure with a bare-bones rule system. It was clearly based on the mainstream success of Bantam's *Choose Your Own Adventure* books (1979–1998), crossed with the solitaire adventures that Flying Buffalo had been creating for *Tunnels & Trolls* (1976–1993) and which two different publishers had distributed into the UK by the early '80s.

Jackson and Livingstone saw the potential for *Fighting Fantasy* to be a big success, so they went to a mass-market publisher rather than selling it through Games Workshop. They first tried to sell "The Magic Quest" to Puffin Books in 1980. It took a year and a half before it was finally published as *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (1982).

Puffin really didn't know what to do with the books, and so they didn't bother to market them much. Fortunately this was a problem that Jackson and Livingstone could solve with their own resources. They began to use *White Dwarf* and Games Workshop to push their new game line.

And *Warlock* exploded. Soon Puffin was begging Jackson and Livingstone to turn it into a series. *The Citadel of Chaos* (1983) and *The Forest of Doom* (1983) thus followed. Over the next 13 years, up through 1995, a total of 59 *Fighting Fantasy* books were published. There were also a *Fighting Fantasy* RPG (1984), an *Advanced Fight Fantasy* RPG (1989), and a spin-off series called *Sorcery!* (1983–1985), all published by Puffin. There was even a series of computer games (1984–1987), originally published by Puffin Books itself, but later by Adventure Soft UK. These games were probably the first hobbyist-licensed computer games, demonstrating the popularity of the series.

Several other authors got involved, most notably the American Steve Jackson who ended up authoring three books in 1984–1986. Carl Sargent, later the architect of TSR's "From the Ashes" Greyhawk rebirth, also wrote books from 1988–1995 under the pseudonym Keith Martin.

Within a year the first three books were the top three items on the *Sunday Times* best-sellers list and had sold over 350,000 copies. (Compare that to *White Dwarf*'s monthly circulation, by this time at 20,000.) 3 million total *Fighting Fantasy* books had sold by 1985. Translations and foreign editions of the books began to proliferate. In 1986 a Japanese edition of *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* sold a quarter of a million copies, bringing the lines' total to four million. Today, over 15 million *Fighting Fantasy* books have been sold in 21 languages.

Some of the printings of the *Fighting Fantasy* books have even been quite recent. Wizard Books brought 29 books back into print (2002–2007), then recently revamped and revived the series (2009-Present) — starting each time with *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*. Along the way, they've published a few new books, most recently Ian Livingstone's *Blood of the Zombies* (2012). Some books have also made it to the iPhone, starting with *Deathtrap Dungeon* (2009) and *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (2009). Even the *Advanced Fighting Fantasy* books have returned with new editions produced by Arion Games and published by Cubicle 7 Entertainment (2011).

> *"In 1982–83 the* Fighting Fantasy *books we had been writing had been topping the UK book charts and a dozen foreign publishers had signed them up. So apart from being directors of a company with around 200 staff turning over around $7.5m a year, we found ourselves cast in secondary roles as best-selling authors. We were spending 10 hours a day in the office, then going home and typing (on typewriters!) until midnight and all weekend."*
>
> – Steve Jackson, Interview, rpgvaultarchive.ign.com (1998)

In creating *Fighting Fantasy*, Livingstone and Jackson didn't just create a successful line of books, but rather a whole new medium for gaming. There were scores of imitators.

Just among Games Workshop employees, similar book series included: *Dragon Warriors* (1984–1986) by Dave Morris and Oliver Johnson, an attempt to sell an RPG in mass-market paperbacks*; The Way of the Tiger* (1985–1987) by Mark Smith and Jamie Thomson; *Fabled Lands* (1995–1996) by Dave Morris and Jamie Thomson; and most successfully *Lone Wolf* (1984–1998) by Joe Dever. *Lone Wolf* had been intended as Games Workshop's own solo RPG system before Dever got a better deal from Beaver Books.

Other roleplaying companies tried to get into the new gamebook industry too, including TSR, who published books called first *Super Endless Quest* and later *AD&D Adventure Gamebook* (1985–1988), and ICE, who put out several different gamebook lines — and nearly went out of business due to problems arising from them. The story of those travails is more completely discussed in ICE's own history.

Though Games Workshop was peripherally involved with *Fighting Fantasy* — such as when they took over the *Fighting Fantasy* periodical *Warlock* magazine (1983–1986) — for the most part *Fighting Fantasy* exists outside of GW's history ... and that's how it ultimately impacted Games Workshop. It was much more successful than Games Workshop under Livingstone and Jackson, and so it would ultimately distract them, with results we'll see in the mid-'80s.

The End of the Beginning: 1982—1985

That isn't to say that Games Workshop stagnated over the next few years while *Fighting Fantasy* was getting off the ground. Indeed, it actually continued to grow and change.

White Dwarf went monthly with issue #32 (August 1982) and then underwent a facelift with issue #39 (March 1983). After that the magazine expanded its focus by including book reviews, board games, and some new comics, including the two for which *White Dwarf* is probably best known, Carl Critchlow's "Thrud the Barbarian" and Bil Sedgwick's "Gobbledigook."

TSR tried to horn in on the British magazine market in 1983 with *Imagine* magazine, but they folded it just two years later. Gary Gygax would much later claim that *Imagine* had usually been operated at a loss and was kept around mainly for its useful marketing of TSR's lines. *White Dwarf*'s lead in Britain was pretty much unassailable.

Meanwhile, over at sister company Citadel, something exciting and new was appearing: *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* (1983) — a new miniatures game designed by Citadel's Bryan Ansell, Rick Priestley, and Richard Hailliwell. That first edition of *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* included rules for roleplaying and even a sample campaign, but they were underdeveloped and would fade away as *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* quickly revved through second (1984) and third (1987) editions.

Despite that, *Warhammer Fantasy Battle*'s future *did* lie with RPG publisher Games Workshop; even in the early '80s, its effect was felt at GW. This was because the two companies were slowly becoming intermeshed. Thus the release of *Warhammer* was quickly followed by a nice review in *White Dwarf #43* (July 1983), and then the first of several scenarios in *White Dwarf #45* (September 1983).

The clear importance of *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* to the future of Citadel (and Games Workshop) can be seen by Citadel's short-lived relation with TSR in the mid-'80s. In 1985 TSR shut down their own attempt to manufacture miniatures and instead licensed Citadel to create official miniatures for the *D&D* game. The result was some of the most detailed and well-produced *D&D* miniatures to date. Just 18 months later, Citadel decided to end that license, because (as we'll see) *Warhammer* was really on its way up and things were changing.

While Citadel was working on *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* Games Workshop was working just as hard on their own non-magazine releases. A reprint of their *Dungeon Floor Plans* (1982) — no longer sporting the *D&D* logo — was the first of several gaming supplements. Three more mapping sets plus two "dungeon planners" — which included both floor plans *and AD&D* adventures — followed it.



Shortly thereafter, Games Workshop kicked of the adventure game revival of the mid-'80s with *Talisman* (1983), a competitive board game that enjoyed several editions and expansions (1983–1993) and may have been the best-selling adventure game ever until Fantasy Flight Games came on the scene.

Not content to stay in the RPG and board game fields, Games Workshop also published a number of computer games. The licensed *Apocalypse* (1983) was soon followed by Games Workshops' own *Battlecars* (1984), *D-Day* (1985), and *Tower of Despair* (1985), all for the ZX Spectrum.

Around the same time, Games Workshop also expanded into the US, founding Games Workshop US in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

Most important to a history of the roleplaying industry, however, was Games Workshop's decision to finally jump into the deep end of RPG production.

Golden Heroes (1984), by Simon Burley and Pete Haines, was their first set of RPG rules. This superhero game had previously been produced in a small press edition. GW now hoped to pair it with a Marvel superheroes license to turn it into a top-rate game, but with several other RPG companies competing for the Marvel license in 1983, GW was finally forced to give up. They instead put out *Golden Heroes* as is, and the result was somewhat uninspiring.

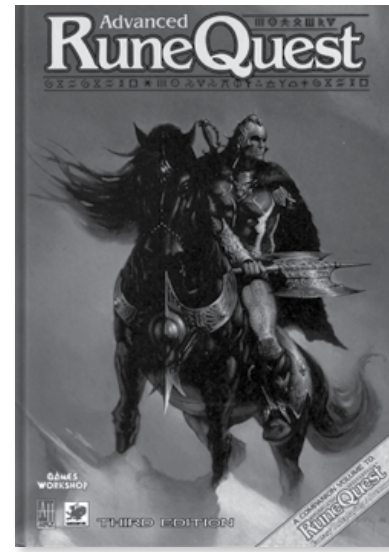
With a complex system and unpolished rules, *Golden Heroes* had no chance of competing in a by-then crowded superhero market. It's notable mainly as GW's first RPG offering. It also provided the incentive for GW to get involved in one of its first legal actions, when they tried to keep Mayfair's *DC Heroes* (1985) game out of the country.

Long after the fact, *Golden Heroes* was reprinted by Burley as *Squadron UK* (2006), then revised and revamped (2012) when he discovered that GW still held rights to the original.

GW's second RPG, *Judge Dredd* (1985), by Marc Gascoigne and Rick Priestly, did better. It was based on a strip from the popular British comic, *2000 AD* (1977-Present). GW had already acquired a license to put out a board game (1982), and so it was a natural extension to put out a roleplaying game as well. The system design was ultimately based on *Warhammer Fantasy Battle*. It was well-themed with appropriately cartoony violence that played fast. The result went over well. *Judge Dredd* quickly became Games Workshop's top seller in their now numerous stores.

These new RPGs once more highlighted the cross-promotion between Citadel and Games Workshop. For example, when *Golden Heroes* came out, Citadel published superhero figures. Citadel molded a few miniatures of notable *White Dwarf* characters too, including Gobbledigook, Griselda, and Thrud.

Throughout all of this, Games Workshop *was* continuing with the business that made them originally successful: exclusively licensing RPGs for distribution and reprinting in the UK. *Call of Cthulhu*, *MERP*, *Star Trek*, and *Paranoia* were some of the new licenses that they picked up in 1984–1986.



However Games Workshop was also beginning to see the dangers of these licensee arrangements. In 1984 Chaosium made a deal with Avalon Hill for the publication of new *RuneQuest* books. By this time Games Workshop had been working to make *RuneQuest* successful in the UK for years. They'd not only published the core *RuneQuest* rules, but also notable supplements like *Cults of Prax* and *Griffin Mountain*. At recent Games Days, *RuneQuest* had been ranked as the #1 RPG in the country.

Chaosium's new and exclusive deal with Avalon Hill suddenly cut Games Workshop out of the loop. GW's license was revoked and the new Avalon Hill editions *quadrupled* the game's cost in England. The Avalon Hill agreement largely crippled the game in England for the next two years and undid a lot of GW's hard work.

Though these problems wouldn't cause any immediate changes, three other trends were coming together at Games Workshop that would shake the company to its core:

First, *White Dwarf* was increasingly becoming a marketing tool thanks to GW's new position as a major producer of games. This wasn't commented on much at the time, since Games Workshop was working with so many different companies that supporting the industry and supporting their import business looked like much the same thing. However, in retrospective it's obvious, such as when reviews of *MERP* and *Star Trek* products suddenly appeared in *White Dwarf*, just as GW signed agreements to publish and import those RPGs.

Second, over at Citadel, *Warhammer* was doing very well. *White Dwarf* soon reported it as the UK's best-selling hobbyist export to the United States.

Third, Livingstone and Jackson were increasingly focused on *Fighting Fantasy*, not *White Dwarf* or Games Workshop.

Because of Jackson and Livingstone's changed focus, in 1985 their Citadel partner Bryan Ansell was appointed Managing Director of Games Workshop. Given the other trends, it begged the question, "What if *White Dwarf* was suddenly to become a marketing tool for *Warhammer*?"

The Move to Nottingham: 1986

The next year was one of upheaval for Games Workshop. In October the company underwent a "top-down reorganization" and slowly began to merge with Citadel. Parts of GW moved out of London for the first time ever: distribution moved to Citadel's factory in Eastwood and production moved to Nottingham. Only *White Dwarf* remained in London. Some non-*White Dwarf* employees wanted to stay in London and left GW immediately. Among them was General Manager Peter Darvill-Evans, who would later write a trio of *Fighting Fantasy* books (1987–1991) and would eventually gain more renown as the creator of Virgin Books' popular "New Adventures" *Doctor Who* series (1991–1997).

Darvill-Evans wasn't the only talent that GW lost as they settled into Nottingham. With *White Dwarf #74* (February 1986) Ian Livingstone stepped down as the editor of the magazine after a nine-year term. That same issue saw the magazine start to dramatically change when it dropped all its old game-specific columns — which by now included columns for *AD&D*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Golden Heroes*, *RuneQuest*, and *Traveller*. Even the old, venerable "Fiend Factory," one of *White Dwarf*'s trademark series, was lost.

Ian Marsh succeeded Ian Livingstone as *White Dwarf*'s editor, but he only lasted for four issues. In issue #77 (May 1986), it was confirmed that *White Dwarf* too was moving to Nottingham. This alienated and angered even more staff members. Ian Marsh and Albie Fiore were just a few of the GW staff members who opted not to move with the magazine.

Ian Marsh's last issue as *White Dwarf* editor included a secret message. Encoded on the contents page, in the descriptions of the articles, is the easy to read phrase, "Sod Off Bryan Ansell," inches away from a more conciliatory editorial statement by Marsh. With issue #78, a new editorial team took over *White Dwarf*. Ironically they were led by editor Paul Cockburn, formerly of TSR's *Imagine*.

> *"For reasons of our own, I, and the other staff of the magazine, have decided not to accompany it on this move; there'll be a fresh team working on the magazine from next issue."*
>
> – Ian Marsh, Editorial, *White Dwarf #77* (May 1986)

In many ways *White Dwarf* and its influence on the RPG industry died in May 1986 with issue #77. The magazine became more colorful over the next several issues, and the graphic design increased in quality, but at the same time *White Dwarf* began to distance itself from the rest of the industry. It ceased publishing articles about anything other than GW's own games. The magazine's classic

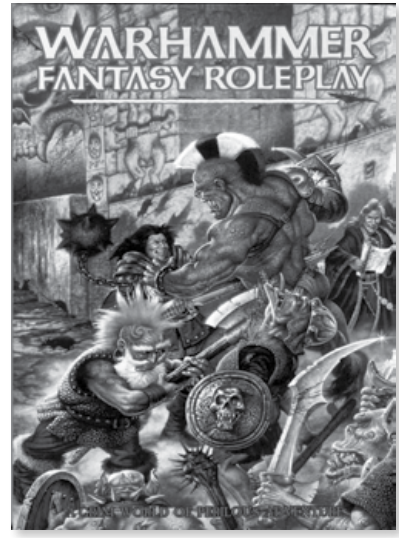
"Open Box" review section lost much of its objectivity and soon began printing puff pieces about GW's newest products. By *White Dwarf #94* (October 1987) Games Workshop stopped pretending they were anything but advertisements and renamed the old game review column "Marginalia," positioning it as a preview of things to come.

The Last Years of Roleplay: 1986—1988

Nothing changes over night, and for the first few years, Games Workshop under Bryan Ansell offered some real benefits to the RPG industry.

First, the new graphic design sense seen in *White Dwarf* also extended to GW's licensed reprints. Under license from Chaosium and Avalon Hill, GW put out a set of beautiful new editions of *Call of Cthulhu* (1986), *RuneQuest* (1987), and *Stormbringer* (1987) — all of which are still highly sought by collectors. Some original *Call of Cthulhu* adventures and a few additional *RuneQuest* books also appeared around the same time.

In addition, Games Workshop published a third RPG of their own, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (1986). It was based on *Warhammer Fantasy Battle*, but intended for singular characters, not armies. Stats were pretty simply converted over, with most *Battle* stats of 1–10 becoming *Roleplay* stats of 1–100 — though Strength and Toughness both remained in the original *Battle* range, resulting in a somewhat inconsistent game system, which really wasn't that unusual in the early days of RPGs.



Roleplay's "careers" were its main innovation. Like standard character classes, careers limited characteristics and skills that could be increased as a character improved. However, they rather uniquely contained "career exits," which represented ways that a character could finish with one career and begin another.

The game was also well-loved for its brutal combat system, but where it really excelled was in its background, shared with *Warhammer Fantasy Battle*. It was not only uniquely set in a world at the edge of the Renaissance, but it was also dark and cynical — and thus very different from anything else being done in the fantasy roleplaying industry.

The main complaint that players had with *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* was its overly simplistic and stale magic system. GW long promised a "Realms of Sorcery" book to correct this problem, but they rejected the complete manuscript they received from Ken Rolston, and so the book instead became one of the roleplaying industry's great vaporware projects. GW would never actually publish a new magic book for first edition *Warhammer*, though Rolston's manuscript circulated on the Internet for years.

Despite this one issue, the new game was very well-received, and is today widely considered a classic. A set of linked scenarios called *The Enemy Within* (1986–1989) also received notable acclaim as a well-detailed campaign that told a real story, something that the industry was just learning to do in the mid-'80s, thanks to Dragonlance and others.

GW also increased its board game publication during its last years as a roleplaying company and many of those new games skirted genres loved by roleplaying companies. *Dungeonquest* (1987) — a reprint of a Swedish game (1985) — continued GW's strong support of the adventure game genre. *The Fury of Dracula* (1987) probably deserves more attention because it was a very early cooperative game — though one where the players worked against a single opponent, rather than against the game system, as was the case in Chaosium's *Arkham Horror* (1987). GW combined the two ideas when they worked with Milton Bradley to produce *HeroQuest* (1989) — an adventure game where the players cooperated against a single adversarial gamemaster.

However, Games Workshop was putting even *more* focus on their new miniatures games, inherited from Citadel. The third edition of *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* was soon supplemented by *Warhammer Armies* (1988), *Realm of Chaos: Slaves to Darkness* (1988), and *Realms of Chaos: The Lost and the Damned* (1990). A group of ex-GW employees including Ian Bailey and Gary Chalk tried to oppose the growing goliath with their own *Fantasy Warlord* (1990) miniatures game, but it disappeared quickly.

GW also released a second miniatures game in the late '80s, *Warhammer 40,000: Rogue Trader* (1987), which detailed a science-fantasy future full of orks, elves, and space marines — all prowling the dark and grim spaceways. Like the original *Warhammer Fantasy Battle*, *Rogue Trader* flirted with roleplaying ideas. It was even centered on three players: two opponents and a gamemaster. However, just like *Warhammer Fantasy Battle*, *40k* moved away from roleplaying with its second edition (1993), underlining the new direction of GW.

As the market share of GW's miniatures grew, their roleplaying games faded away. Their gaming accessories, licensed books, and *Judge Dredd* RPG all faded

away after 1987 (though the last would see a final reprint in 1989). That left *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* as the final RPG standing. Meanwhile, *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* and *Warhammer 40k* were increasingly the core of the company, and it showed — particularly in the pages of *White Dwarf*. By issue #100 (April 1988), *White Dwarf* was almost entirely a magazine about miniatures, its roleplaying origins erased by two years of changes.

Beyond Roleplaying: 1989—2004

The abrupt change in priority at Games Workshop and *White Dwarf* between 1986 and 1989 is something that continues to cause resentment and acrimony in the industry among those people who still fondly remember the "good" *White Dwarf* of its first 90 issues and the Games Workshop that cared about the RPG industry. Even staff members were surprised by the changes, which in some cases resulted in the cancellation of projects that had been commissioned just days before. On the face of it, there was no reason for Games Workshop to kill its existing lines. By that time, *White Dwarf* was up to a circulation of 50,000, proving its early success.

However Ansell had a very different vision and it was about miniatures, not RPGs. After he took over GW he was willing to revolutionize what the company stood for, and that total and unexpected change is what led to so much upset among consumers — especially since the company never exactly acknowledged what they were doing.

GW's departure from its roleplaying origins ended in 1989 when Games Workshop spun off its sole remaining RPG line, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, into a new subsidiary called Flame Publications. This new company — staffed by Graeme Davis, Mike Brunton, and artist Tony Ackland, and aided by freelancers like Carl Sargent — was cut down to the bone in an attempt to make it more profitable. Ultimately that — along with the personnel changes — made it unsuccessful. Flame published only a handful of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* books over the next couple of years, including the *Doomstones* campaign — a *Warhammer* conversion of an *AD&D* campaign published by a small UK publisher, Integrated Games, in the '80s.

Jackson and Livingstone truly marked the end of an era when they sold off their stake in Games Workshop in 1991. It's probably no coincidence that Flame Publications was dissolved entirely in 1992. *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* would have been entirely dead if James Wallis hadn't licensed it for his own Hogshead Publishing in 1995. As is detailed in that company's history, he would keep the line alive until 2002, when he closed Hogshead down, and the license returned to GW.

Meanwhile Games Workshop was becoming a giant. Though its abrupt move into miniatures was unpopular with its original (and now former) customers, it was *very* successful. In its new niche, the company was soon doing better than former hobbyist leader TSR. This allowed them to cut distributors out of the loop by selling directly to retail stores, without the discounts that a distributor would have required. Meanwhile, clean, well-lit Games Workshop stores intending to sell miniatures to kids sprouted up everywhere. Some of these new GW stores put older game stores out of business, and many felt this was purposeful, as GW's direct-to-retail sales had allowed them to identify the best-selling retail stores, which were excellent targets for competition.

When GW tried the same trick in the US in late 1995, they were sued by three distributors — The Armory, Greenfield Hobby Distributors, and Wargames West — for "improper interference in business relationships, fraud, and violation of the Federal Anti-Trust Act." The distributors also claimed that this was the first step in GW establishing stores in the United States, forming the same vertical integration here that they enjoyed in the UK, where they manufactured, distributed, and sold all their products.

The distributors received a temporary restraining order, but Games Workshop successfully appealed to have it thrown out, and then began selling under their new agreement. There are now over 50 Games Workshop stores in the United States. GW's direct relationship with other retailers has allowed them to maintain strict "Terms of Trade." In 2000 they went after discounters (which resulted in cries of "price fixing") and in 2003 they outright forbade anyone but them from selling online. GW always claims that they're trying to help local stores, but it generally hasn't gotten them much good attention in the RPG industry over the last decade.



However, the story of Games Workshop in the '90s and early '00s isn't all corporate leverage. They continued making miniatures; *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* continued to evolve, going from fourth (1992) to sixth (2000) edition; *Warhammer 40k* moved from second (1993) to third (1998) edition. The company even looked into new games — the most successful of which was their new skirmish miniatures game, *The Lord of the Rings Strategy Battle Game* (2001). However, following the closure of Flame Publications, they made no roleplaying games for over a decade, and so largely exit our history.

Worlds of *Warhammer*

Warhammer has enjoyed a few computer games over the years, including Mindscape's *Shadow of the Horned Rat* (1995) and *Dark Omen* (1998) and Black Hole's *Mark of Chaos* (2006). However, Games Workshop seems to have perpetually missed out on the best opportunities.

Most famously, Blizzard Entertainment burst onto the scene in the '90s with *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans* (1994), the game that blew open the multiplayer real-time strategy genre. Blizzard has openly admitted that GW's *Warhammer Fantasy* inspired their game. For years, the internet rumor mill has suggested that *Warcraft* might have been a *Warhammer* game that lost its license, though that's never been substantiated. A few years later, Blizzard put out the science-fiction game *StarCraft* (1998), a game that looks equally inspired by GW's *Warhammer 40k*. Whatever the precise origins of the games, they clearly represent a missed opportunity for GW in the then-young RTS field.

GW's missed opportunity to produce an influential *Warhammer* MMORPG is better documented. In 2002 a computer game developer named Climax Online began working with GW to produce *Warhammer Online*. Two years later, GW decided that the $30 million dollars required to finish the game was excessive and pulled out. Climax funded the game's development through the end of the year, but at the end of 2004 lost the license entirely.

In 2005 Mythic Entertainment – the makers of the once-popular *Dark Age of Camelot* (2002) game – kicked off a new *Warhammer Online* with GW. It took them three years to publish *Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning* (2008). Though subscriber numbers soared past Mythic's *Dark Age of Camelot*, by 2009 it was obvious that Mythic and their new game were in trouble. In March 2009 Mythic dropped the number of *Warhammer Online* servers from 56 to 13; they've since engaged in massive layoffs and are now down to just 3 servers.

It seems likely that the biggest problem with *Warhammer Online* was the release several years previous of *World of Warcraft* (2004), the *Warcraft* MMORPG that is currently the biggest English-language MMORPG in the world. The last time numbers were released, *World of Warcraft* had about 10 million players, while *Warhammer Online* had dropped below 100,000. The similarities between the two game worlds were once more highlighted in 2008 by *World of Warcraft* players who saw the new *Warhammer Online* game and began angrily deriding it as a rip-off of Blizzard's own offering.

For years, word was circulating about a *Warhammer 40k* MMORPG, but the latest word is that publisher THQ has turned it into a single-player game. As such, it seems unlikely that it'll give GW the large-scale computer success that has eluded them in the past.

The Black Library: 1997-Present

Despite their size and the success of their current lines, Games Workshop has remained amiable to employee innovation. They've constantly created new divisions to try out new ideas, and on occasions — such as with Rick Priestley's large-scale combat game, *Warmaster* (2000) — have even brought a project back into Games Workshop proper after it had proven itself.

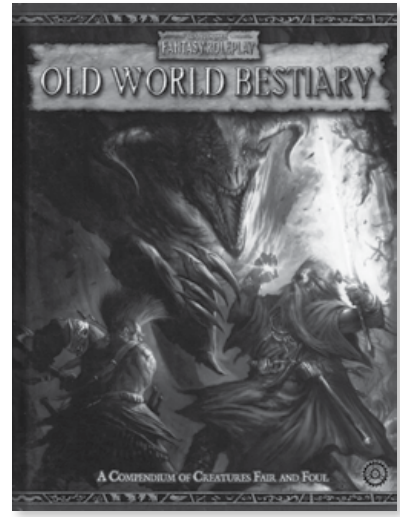
One of GW's first experimental projects of this type was the Black Library. This new division grew out of a long-time interest of many employees to create a "Games Workshop Annual" — the Annual being a format popular in Britain that was usually used to highlight a media property (like *Blue Peter* or *Doctor Who*) by creating a (yearly) book full of short stories and comics. The idea slowly evolved under the guidance of *Warhammer* experts Rick Priestley and Andy Jones along with *Fighting Fantasy* and fiction author Marc Gascoigne. The result was *Inferno!*, a new magazine previewed in *White Dwarf #210* (June 1997) and then published the next month (July 1997) by the Black Library.

> "Inferno! *fulfilled, to some extent, this dream to do a GW annual, but it also did a lot of other things very quickly. The most important thing was that it taught us how to deal with freelance writers.*"
>
> – Marc Gascoigne, Interview, blacklibrary.com (2007)

The Black Library had been named for the place in the *Warhammer 40k* universe where "all the knowledge of the universe is held" and it soon began to aspire to that title, as the amount and variety of product that the division produced multiplied. *Inferno!* continued successfully through issue #46 (January 2005). It quickly spawned a comic book, *Warhammer Monthly* (1998–2004), which was similarly successful. However, the Black Library really found its niche when it began to publish novels, the first of which were *Trollslayer* (1999) by William King and *First & Only* by Dan Abnett.

Though the core mandate of the Black Library was always fiction, it spawned many other "experimental" projects over the years, including: a resin modeling division, a "specialist game" division (for smaller press games), the *Warhammer* Historical Wargames division, and two other books lines, Black Flame and Solaris Books. There were so many subdivisions of the Black Library that GW eventually rolled them up into a new division called BL Publishing. This new "publishing arm" of Games Workshop became the parent of the Black Library and many of the projects that it had spawned.

This was the situation in early 2003 when Games Workshop found itself with *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* back in hand thanks to James Wallis closing down Hogshead Publishing. It took a year, but Games Workshop eventually decided to publish a new edition of the game through their BL Publishing division. To do so, they created a new subdivision called "Black Industries." This roleplaying imprint would publish a second edition of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* designed by US publisher Green Ronin — who would also line edit additional *WFRP* books following the release of the core rules.



Chris Pramas' second edition *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (2005) was well-accepted. Set after a "Storm of Chaos" introduced in the miniatures game, it detailed a *Warhammer* world that was darker and grimmer. Beyond that the game was polished but still fundamentally the same, complete with the brutal combat and the detailed career system that were among the unique aspects of the original game.

The new *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* was supported with a full dozen products in 2005, but year by year the product count dropped — leading up to 2008. That *could* have been a huge year for roleplaying at Games Workshop, as it saw the release of *Dark Heresy* (2008), a long-promised *Warhammer 40k* RPG, produced directly by Black Industries.

The *Dark Heresy* collector's edition sold out in a reported six-and-a-half minutes. When the mass-market version was released on January 26, 2008, the fans went wild and it sold out from distributors almost immediately. Two days later, on January 28, 2008, Games Workshop announced that they were shutting Black Industries down. It was a question of "comparatives"; the RPG products didn't sell as well as the Black Library fiction, and Games Workshop wanted to concentrate on what was most profitable.

> *"As a result of the continued and impressive success of our core novels business, which we have built around* 40K *and* Warhammer*, we have decided to focus all of our efforts on growing this part of our business. Black Industries has seen fantastic success, most recently with* Talisman *and* Dark Heresy*. This change does not take away from that achievement rather it allows BL Publishing to focus on producing the best novels we can."*
>
> – Kevin Rountree, Press Release (January 2008)

Dark Heresy came to a quick end, but was just as quickly picked up by Fantasy Flight Games. Though Games Workshop developed *Dark Heresy*, its actual history lies with FFG. Green Ronin's *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* second edition was also cancelled; unlike *Dark Heresy*, it didn't really get a second lease on life. When that license also went to Fantasy Flight, they opted to produce a dramatically different third edition (2009), as is more fully described in their own history. A potential DC Heroes RPG also died on the vine; Games Workshop had been holding the license, but it's since moved on to their old partner, Green Ronin.

And that was the end of Games Workshop's three-year return to roleplaying.

Back to Miniatures: 2008-Present

You can find the reasoning behind Games Workshop's rather abrupt (second) cancellation of their roleplaying lines in a financial report that they released a few days earlier. The company reported a loss before taxes of £192,000 for the previous six months, versus a profit of £127,000 the year before. Because Games Workshop is now very big business, they had to offer a sacrifice to their shareholders. Thus the axe fell not just on Black Industries, but also Black Flame — one of their less successful fiction lines. Another fiction line, Solaris Books, was sold off to Rebellion Group a year later. Games Workshop's own line of Black Library *Warhammer* novels continues, as (of course) do their miniatures games. *Ultramarines* (2011), a licensed direct-to-DVD *Warhammer 40,000* movie, has even appeared in recent years.

It's now obvious that the experiment of 2005–2008 was just a short interlude that doesn't really change the fact that since 1992, Games Workshop has been peripheral to the roleplaying industry. Though some old fans may regret the fact that Games Workshop is no longer an RPG producer, they can appreciate the fact that the company has done a good job of getting their RPGs back into print over the years, first licensing them to Hogshead Publishing, then subcontracting them to Green Ronin, and now licensing them to Fantasy Flight Games.

It's through those other companies that GW's RPG history truly continues.

What to Read Next

- For the early days of *D&D* and TSR UK, read ***TSR***.
- For other companies focused on distributing RPGs in the early days of the hobby, read ***Judges Guild*** and ***Gamescience***.
- For what happened to *RuneQuest*, read ***Chaosium***.
- For other early GW licensors, read ***FGU***, ***GDW***, and ***Metagaming Concepts***.

In Other Eras

- For the modern publishers of *Advanced Fighting Fantasy*, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** *['00s]*.
- For a more catastrophic interaction with choose-your-own-adventure books, read ***ICE*** *['80s]*.
- For GW's first edition *Warhammer* licensee, read ***Hogshead Publishing*** *['90s]*.
- For the design of second edition *Warhammer*, read ***Green Ronin Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For the design of third edition *Warhammer* and the *Warhammer 40k* RPGs, read ***Fantasy Flight Games*** *['90s]*.
- For a British company that continued the legacy of many of the RPGs that GW reprinted in the '80s, read ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For another company that did well in miniatures, read ***Privateer Press*** *['00s]*.
- For that *other* Steve Jackson, read ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*.
- For a history of major UK RPG publishers, read the mini-history of ***Nightfall Games*** in ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*, ***Hogshead Publishing*** *['90s]*, ***Pelgrane Press*** *['00s]*, ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]*, and ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to the first wargame publisher to enter the field, ***GDW***.

GDW: 1973–1996

GDW quickly hit it big in the RPG field with the first successful and supported science-fiction roleplaying game, Traveller. However the passage of time and any number of problems would eventually drag them down after 20 years of publication.

Wargaming Beginnings: 1972–1975

In 1972 Marc Miller returned to school at Illinois State University, fresh out of the army and now on the GI Bill. There he discovered the ISU Game Club, which consisted of Frank Chadwick and Rich Banner. Through the club he became involved in wargaming, even learning how to play Avalon Hill's *D-Day* (1961) — a game bought 11 years earlier, but never played.



1975: En Garde!

Miller, Chadwick, and Banner also started designing games for fun; they soon convinced the university to fund this, via a new program called SIMRAD — which stood for "SIMulation Research And Design." This program was intended to help instructors, who would produce specifications for simulation games that SIMRAD would then create. These three designers — along with other SIMRAD members — produced eight games

over the next year and a half, about half of them educational roleplaying games. However after 18 months ISU stopped funding SIMRAD, and the young designers no longer had a commercial outlet for their creativity.

As a result the core SIMRAD members decided to form their own commercial game company: Game Designers' Workshop. Marc Miller, Frank Chadwick, Rich Banner, and Loren Wiseman officially founded GDW on June 22, 1973, headquartered out of Miller and Chadwick's apartment.

The team already had a project in mind for GDW: the "East Front Trilogy," which they intended to be a series of three massive wargames that together would simulate the entire Eastern Front of World War II. The first — *Drang nach Osten* (1973), by Banner and Chadwick — was already complete and was published for sale at Gen Con VI (1973). This monster game depicting the 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union was well-received and may have been one of the reasons for GDW's early success. Small publisher GDW had beaten top wargame publisher SPI to the punch by designing a game about this push *first*.

Unentschieden (1973) — the second game in the trilogy — quickly followed, but the third game was never finished. Instead the trilogy expanded into the massive "Europa" series, a well-lauded wargaming series that covered the whole European front. GDW would publish a total of 11 *Europa* (1973–1985) games over the next 15 years.

GDW also published wargames of many other sorts beginning in 1973. Most were historical wargames, but one was different: *Triplanetary* (1975) was a science-fiction game of vector-based starship conflict. This design by John Harshman and Marc Miller — which was sold into a science-fiction board gaming market that was emerging around Metagaming's *The Space Gamer* — would prefigure GDW's future as a major science-fiction producer.

In later years, GDW would continue publishing wargames — over 130 total by 1996. By 1975 they were also expanding. With a dozen successful wargames on the market, GDW established a real office in their long-term home of Normal, Illinois. More notably, they also began work toward what would be their best-known game, *Traveller*.

The Path to *Traveller*: 1975—1977

Though GDW was a wargaming company, many of the principals had some roleplaying experience. Miller had played in a roleplaying simulation way back in 1968 in a PoliSci class. As SIMRAD, the soon-to-be GDW members had also designed several classroom roleplaying games. Then they discovered something new: a recently published commercial roleplaying game called *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974).

"My introduction to role-playing took the form of a hypothetical political nominating convention, with the students taking the roles of candidates and political aides. (I came within a hair's breadth of getting a Barry Goldwater type conservative nominated as a democratic presidential candidate.)"

– Marc Miller, "My Life in Role-Playing," *Different Worlds #1* (1979)

The next year GDW decided to get into the RPG field themselves with *En Garde!* (1975), a swashbuckling game by Frank Chadwick. Much as with TSR's early publication *Boot Hill* (1975), it was a hybrid game, part RPG and part strategy: a combat simulation formed the core of the game. There also wasn't any gamemaster; instead, charts and tables determined the facts of an adventure. Despite these factors, the players played individual characters and the rules included campaign guidelines, thus making it a borderline RPG.

En Garde! was one of the first RPGs out after *D&D*. TSR's *Boot Hill*, their *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975), and Flying Buffalo's *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975) probably all predated it — but *EPT*, *T&T*, and *En Garde!* all made their first real public appearance at Origins that year. *En Garde!* was also one of the first games to prove that roleplaying could be extended to other genres. Though GDW never supported the game with expansions, its publication was nonetheless a milestone.

Meanwhile, GDW was still playing with science-fiction designs. In 1975 and 1976 they worked on the prototype of a wargame called *Imperium* (1977). They finally published it in 1977 in a very different form, but in its original incarnation *Imperium* imagined a war between humans and many alien races, among them the lion-like Aslan, the bee-like Hivers, the dog-like Vargr and the mercenary Dorsai. *Imperium* also provided rules for individual characters — the sons of the leaders of the war — who progressed through individual careers and provided bonuses to armies based on the careers selected.

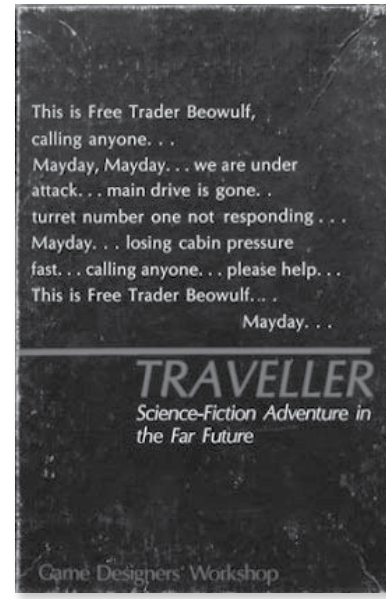
Both the alien races and the careers would be incorporated into GDW's second and most notable RPG: *Traveller*.

Traveller the RPG: 1977

The first science-fiction RPGs were Flying Buffalo's *Starfaring* (1976) and TSR's *Metamorphosis Alpha* (1976). Gamescience's *Space Patrol* (1977) was also released that fall. However GDW's *Traveller* (1977) was the first SF roleplaying game to truly catch the attention of the roleplaying public, probably thanks to its professionalism and to the release of the movie *Star Wars* that same year.

"Many of the working titles we considered had the word Star or Space prominently featured. … But I also have a contrary streak in me, and the non-Space, non-Star candidate on the list kept drawing my eye."

– Marc Miller, "The Classic *Traveller* Canon,"
Horsemen of the Apocalypse (2000)



Traveller was designed by Marc Miller, with help from Frank Chadwick, John Harshman, and Loren Wiseman. It was published in 1977 in a very familiar format — a small box with three digest-sized books: Characters and Combat, Starships, and Worlds and Adventures. It was an identical format to the original *Dungeons & Dragons*, which was then also being sold as three digests in a box.

Despite the similar packaging, *Traveller* distinguished itself as its own game, and not just by its SF theming. *Traveller*'s most notable innovation was its expansion beyond class-based characters: you still chose a basic character role (career) when you created your character, but that character was then defined by skills, making *Traveller* the first major skill-based system.

The character creation rules for *Traveller* were fairly innovative too. After choosing a class, a player "played" his character through years of character generation. Each year he faced danger, including the possibility of death, and then earned specific skills (if he survived).

Unlike most other RPGs created in the wake of *D&D*, *Traveller* didn't feel derivative. The fact that GDW was starting from a clean slate was made most obvious by the fact that *Traveller* had no experience system. Characters were set once they were created. As with *Metamorphosis Alpha*, they were assumed to progress by acquiring equipment and knowledge. It wasn't actually a popular innovation, but it nonetheless exemplified *Traveller*'s (relatively) unique genesis.

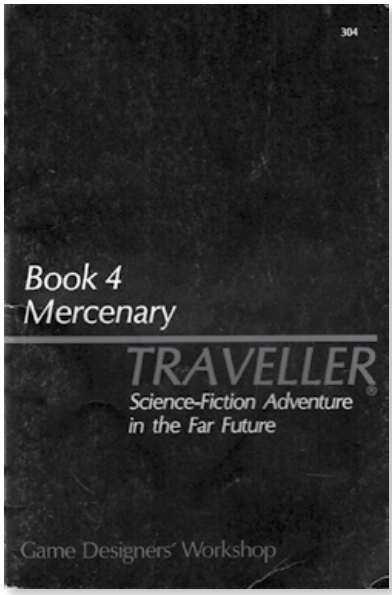
(Miller later stated that experience had been left out because that sort of skill growth wasn't realistic in real life; nonetheless the history of the RPG industry has aptly shown that players want their characters to improve — and not just by collecting stuff — no matter how unrealistic it might be.)

Little Black Books All the Same: 1978—1984

GDW wasn't thinking about expansions when they put out *Traveller*. They saw it as a toolkit that players could use to create their own games. There wasn't any published background for the game, nor was there any plan to put out additional products. In-house at GDW the *Traveller* authors *did* create their own background for their own games. They called it the "Imperium" and it included many of those races that they'd originally designed for their *Imperium* board game. They assumed that around the world, as people bought *Traveller*, they'd be doing the same thing.

> *"I found I had a reluctance to detailing every possible fact about the* Traveller *universe. Game masters and players should have the freedom to create what they want (or need) as they adventure."*
>
> – Marc Miller, "The Classic *Traveller* Canon," *Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (2000)

However GDW soon realized that not all players had the time to design their backgrounds (or even to generate NPCs for use in their games). After a slow start GDW began publishing expansions, beginning with *1001 Characters* (1978) and *Mercenary* (1978). These were both digest-sized black books, published in the same format as the *Traveller* rules — and also the same format that GDW would use for its supplements and adventures through 1984. *1001 Characters* was just a book of pre-generated characters, but *Mercenary* was a fourth rulebook for *Traveller* that was also something more: a mirror to how TSR released *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) as a set of core rules followed by rulebook supplements *and* a precursor to gaming trends that wouldn't reach the rest of the industry for almost 15 years.



In the '90s two notable trends would emerge in roleplaying: splatbooks and metaplots. Splatbooks were player-oriented books that highlighted one or more occupations, organizations, or roles within a game. Metaplots generally advanced the plotline of an RPG setting through new publications. Uniquely, GDW explored both of these avenues in the late '70s. They weren't imitated, and the trends didn't

become popular until over a decade later when White Wolf came onto the scene. Nonetheless, GDW was there first.

Mercenary kicked off GDW's splatbook line. It was a set of rules expansions that provided rules for in-depth character generation for one class of characters. It was followed by three other books in the same mold: *High Guard* (1979), *Scouts* (1983), and *Merchant Prince* (1985).

Each of these books additionally provided in-depth simulations of various game systems. *Mercenary* just provided more combat equipment, but *High Guard* included extensive ship construction mechanics, *Scouts* introduced star system generation rules, and *Merchant Prince* featured a trading system. These heavily simulative systems highlighted GDW's strengths — inherited from their simulative wargame designs.

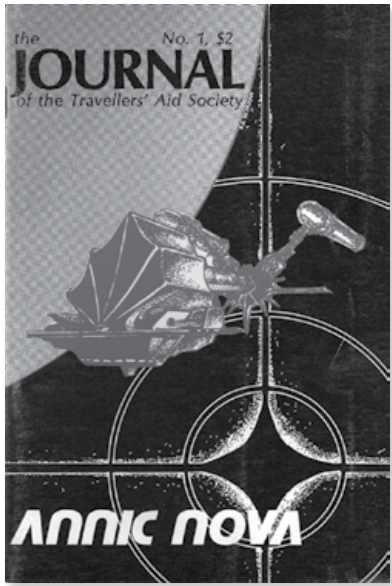
Miller would later write that these systems also gave *Traveller* one of its prime drawing points. The character generation systems, the ship building system, and the universe building system could all be "played" solitaire. A gamemaster could find hours of enjoyment rolling up characters, systems, or ships — and then use those items in actual games when he got together with his friends. Very few other multiplayer RPGs have ever allowed for this degree of solitaire activity.

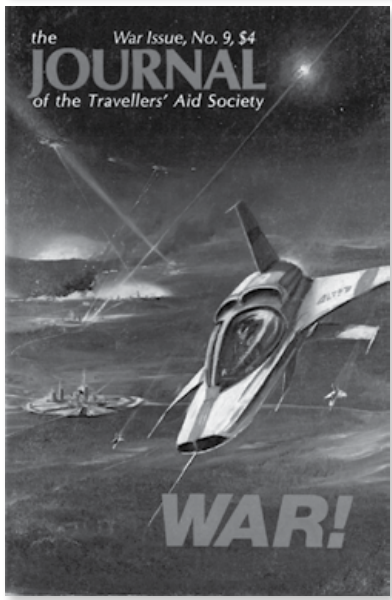
After their initial career splatbooks, GDW continued the trend with a series of alien splatbooks which ran from 1984–1987 — which we'll return to.

GDW's metaplot came about entirely accidentally in another early publication. In 1979 GDW decided to start publishing a magazine to support their game: *The Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society* (JTAS), which would be edited by Loren Wiseman over its history. Miller knew the magazine needed to be dated, but he didn't like the idea of including modern dates, so instead he dated each issue based on the then-gelling Imperium's calendar. The calendar advanced about 90 days every quarterly issue.

> *"Dates in this issue of the Journal are given in accordance with an arbitrary imperial calendar of 365 days. The expression of date consists of a three digit day number (indicating the current day of the year), followed by a dash and a four digit year number (indicating the current year of the Imperium).*
>
> *"The date of this issue is 183–1105; the 183rd day of the 1105th year of the Imperium."*
>
> *– The Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society #1* (1979)

JTAS #2 (1979) took the next step by printing excerpts from the "*Traveller* News Service" — which provided information on "current" event in the Imperiums.





That issue, dated 274–1105, offered two news excerpts from Regina sector, dated 097–1105 and 101–1105. At the same time the universe of the Imperium was slowly coming into focus. *The Spinward Marches* (1979) provided data on Regina and other nearby worlds. It was the start of a campaign background which would be further detailed in adventures and supplements published by GDW and others.

A couple of years later, in *JTAS #9* (1981), GDW really showed the power of their metaplot. That issue described the start of a war with an alien species named the Zhodani. A 187–1107 news item read, "The Duke of Regina ... announced in an emergency press conference that as of 12:01 AM this date a formal state of war has existed between the Imperium and the Zhodani Consulate." This event was quickly detailed with a wargame called *The Fifth Frontier War* (1981), and the repercussions of the conflict would be felt for years thereafter. It was probably the first multimedia metaplot event in the industry, published years before TSR's *Avatar* story set in the Forgotten Realms.

The little black book period of *Traveller* lasted from 1978 to 1984. Thereafter two final rule books — the aforementioned *Merchant Prince* (1985) and *Robots* (1986) — appeared in the little black book format, just to keep the lines consistent. In all, GDW published 39 little black books: 8 *Traveller* rulebooks (including the original three in the box), 13 supplements, 12 adventures, and 6 double adventures. *JTAS* was likewise published in a digest format through 1985.

By 1984 the industry was becoming bigger and more professional, and that would be reflected in an updated look for the *Traveller* line. However, before we reach that point we should look at some another early GDW trend: licensing.

The Early Licensees: 1979—1984

A few years after the release of *Traveller*, GDW granted Judges Guild a license to publish supplements to their game. As more fully described in their own history, Judges Guild was at the time a young RPG publisher who produced licensed "gaming aids" for *Dungeons & Dragons*. Now they wanted to expand and GDW's hot new RPG seemed an excellent choice. GDW's position as Judges Guild's second license highlights the role of *Traveller* as a rising star in the RPG heavens.

Judges Guild published *Traveller* supplements from 1979 until 1982 — the year Judges Guild ceased all publications. Their initial game aids were somewhat forgettable, including a log book, a gamemaster screen, and various deckplans. However their later releases were more notable, as they began detailing full sectors of GDW's Imperium.

The result was a set of four publications: *Ley Sector* (1980), *Glimmerdrift Reaches* (1981), *Crucis Margin* (1981), and *Maranatha-Alkahest Sector* (1981). Together these sectors comprised the Gateway Quadrant; along with complementary adventures published by Judges Guild, they offered the most comprehensive and cohesive view of any part of the *Traveller* universe, with the possible exception of the Spinward Marches. Unfortunately, they would later be "non-canonized." The sectors were rewritten by GDW in *The Atlas of the Imperium* (1984) and then fully fleshed out in a new form in DGP's *The MegaTraveller Journal #4* (1993) and QuikLink Interactive's *Gateway to Destiny* (2004). This is a danger of being a licensee.

Judges Guild was not GDW's only licensee. In the early '80s, just when TSR was cutting off early partners and pulling the TSR properties entirely in-house, GDW was taking the opposite tack. Over the next few years they picked up an impressive number of licensees, many of whom entered the industry solely to publish *Traveller* books. These early licensees included: FASA (1981–1983), Gamelords (1983–1984), Games Workshop (1981), Group One (1980–1981), Marischal Adventures (1981), and Paranoia Press (1980–1981).

With so many licensees, GDW had to set tight controls on how the *Traveller* universe was being described. John Harshman — who had already been overseeing the direction of the Imperium in-house — became the contact man for these various publishers. To help coordinate this in a manageable way, GDW also began what have been called the "Great Land Grants." Various publishers were given specific sectors that they were allowed to detail, much as Judges Guild concentrated on the Gateway Quadrant. For example, FASA was given the Far Frontiers sector, and the High Passage Group got the Old Expanses — both of which are more fully described in the history of FASA.

The huge amount of *Traveller* material being published provided a unique opportunity for two brothers — J. Andrew Keith and William H. Keith, Jr. — who had seen ads in *JTAS* that stated that GDW was seeking authors. Loren Wiseman brought them in to begin freelancing for GDW in 1978 or 1979. Together the three would end up setting much of the early tone for the *Traveller* universe.

J. Andrew Keith's writing for *JTAS* over the next years was so extensive that he had to also use the pseudonyms John Marshal and Keith Douglass. (He was later "caught" when a reader did a word-use analysis of his articles and determined that they were all written by the same person.) William H. Keith, Jr., meanwhile, helped to define the graphical vision of an entire era of *Traveller* books.

When the licensees started to appear, the Keiths' work multiplied. They came into FASA on the ground floor and were invited to help define that *Traveller* line because of their existing connections to Harshman. They later worked for Gamelords too, while Marischal Adventures was their own imprint — for which they received their own land grant to Reavers' Deep. Because of the huge amount of *Traveller* work that they were doing for so many different

Edu-Ware's Space Games

In 1978 the computer roleplaying (CRPG) industry didn't exist. The ground-breaking fantasy games *Akalabeth* (1980), *Ultima* (1980), and *Wizardry* (1981) were still in the future. That's the environment into which Edu-Ware's *Space* (1979) was released, making it a true trailblazer.

Unfortunately Edu-Ware – largely a publisher of educational software – ripped off an existing game – GDW's *Traveller* (1977) – rather than coming up with their own game system or licensing the rights. The "borrowing" was very obvious. You created a character and then took him through a career path in the Army, Navy, Scouts, or several other services. The game was soon followed by an expansion pack, *Space II* (1979).

The conservative minds of GDW probably weren't that happy about the content of the games either; *Space II*, for example, involved a scenario that allowed the players to explore recreational drugs.

Whatever their reasoning, GDW was successfully able to sue and stop distribution of the games, though Edu-Ware later revamped the titles as the *Empire* trilogy (1981–1983) by removing GDW's intellectual property. Meanwhile Edu-Ware continued releasing other games of questionable legality, such as their best-known release, *The Prisoner* (1980), which reports also suggest was not officially licensed.

companies, the Keiths were able to freelance full-time starting around 1979. They may have been the earliest full-time freelancers in the industry. Their early work for GDW, FASA, Gamelords, and FGU practically forms an early history of the industry on its own.

Despite their welcoming attitude to licensees, GDW still had to contend with an unwelcome rip-off. In the early '80s GDW sued a company called Edu-Ware for making two computer games, *Space* (1979) and *Space II* (1979), which were derivative of *Traveller*. GDW won a consent judgment dated May 20, 1982, which required Edu-Ware to pay a settlement and transfer both the copyright and existing copies of the *Space* games to GDW. Officially licensed computer games would take another decade to appear, as we'll soon see.

The Rest of Classic *Traveller*: 1982—1987

By the early '80s roleplaying games were starting to mature into a real industry. Some of the less professional publishers began to disappear (which unfortunately included some of GDW's licensees) and new professionals were taking their place. In this new market place GDW realized that they needed to change the look of their classic line.

The original *Traveller* little black books actually looked quite good. They were an elegant and attractive design that made great use of two-color cover printing and the smaller digest-sized design. However, because of their small size and the lack of color covers, they didn't stand out on gaming shelves that were growing crowded. Starting in 1982 GDW began publishing some of their books at larger sizes — though it took them a couple of years to settle on a new format for the line.

The first of these larger publications was *The Traveller Book* (1982), a 160-page revision of the rules, available in both hardcover and trade paperback formats. The *Traveller Adventure* (1983) — a series of connected Spinward Marches adventures that at 160 pages was also GDW's largest supplement for *Traveller* — soon followed. Prentice-Hall helped to distribute these books by putting them into the book trade, dramatically increasing GDW's reach. The series was to include additional books called "The Traveller Alien," "The Traveller Encyclopedia," "The Traveller (Star)Fleet," and "The Traveller Soldier," but GDW must have decided that the large books didn't work for them, as they quickly shifted their focus.

> *"Is it just my small world, or is it true that most science-fiction gamers don't really read science-fiction?"*
>
> – Marc Miller, "My Life in Role-Playing," *Different Worlds #1* (1979)

Their next experiment with higher-quality publications involved boxed releases. This kicked off with yet another rule revision, this time the slightly simplified *Starter Traveller* (1983). It was followed by GDW's first boxed adventures, *Tarsus* (1983) and *BeltStrike* (1984) — each of which described richly detailed locales in the Spinward Marches.



In 1984 GDW finally settled upon a permanent new format for their *Traveller* line: saddle-stitched books that tended to run 40–48 pages long. This included a series of eight alien splatbooks (1984–1987), *The Atlas of the Imperium* (1984), and a new iteration of *The Spinward Marches Campaign* (1985). These books also reflected a new direction for *Traveller* that had kicked off with *The Traveller Adventure* and those boxed modules: they offered much more detailed information on the setting, which had only been lightly sketched out before.

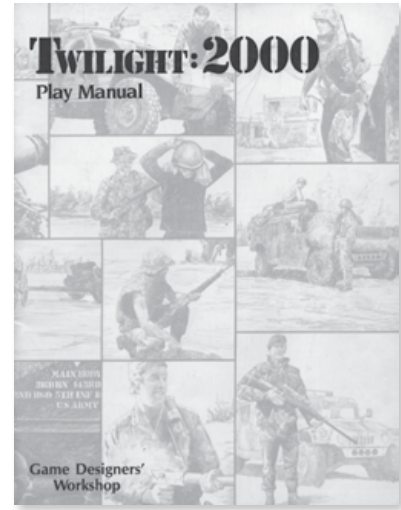
Though GDW was pushing to keep up with the changing industry, by 1987 they were facing serious challengers. Up to that point *Traveller* had been the lead science-fiction RPG. There had always been other SF games — including FGU's *Space Opera* (1980) and former licensee FASA's *Star Trek* (1982) — but it wasn't until the early '80s that real dangers to *Traveller*'s preeminent position in the genre appeared. By 1987 there were two. The first was TSR's *Star Frontiers* (1982), while the second was ICE's *Spacemaster* (1985).

Because of these competitors GDW realized that they needed to revamp their original SF game. As we'll see they would make two attempts to revive the line, in 1986 and 1987. Before we get there, though, we should talk about GDW's third RPG: *Twilight: 2000*.

Wargames and *Twilight*: 1977–1987

GDW's original love of wargames did not stop when they released *Traveller*. Indeed, over the 10-year span of the original *Traveller* line — from 1977–1987 — GDW published about 75 wargames, exceeding their RPG output for the era. This included lots of historical games plus some well-received *Traveller* wargames including the *Striker* (1981) miniatures game.

By the mid-'80s the wargame market was dramatically weakening. It reached its peak in 1980 and five years later was selling less than half its peak units. Computer games and RPGs themselves were the two biggest causes for this drop. Though GDW would continue publishing wargames throughout their history, the medium was in a decline. Even GDW's famous *Europa* series ended publication in the '80s — and would eventually be sold to Game Research/Design, who continued to publish it until 2000. It's perhaps not a surprise that by the mid-'80s GDW was looking to expand their roleplaying portfolio.



GDW's third RPG was Frank Chadwick's *Twilight: 2000* (1984), a post-apocalyptic military RPG. In a *Space Gamer* review, Rick Swan wrote, "*Twilight: 2000* is the most successful bridge between conventional wargames and roleplaying published to date." And it seems likely that was exactly GDW's intent. Given the weakening of wargames in the face of RPGs, why not try to bring old fans into the new market?

Twilight: 2000 also gave GDW entry to the poorly served military niche of RPGs. There had been some previous attempts, such as Timeline's *The Morrow Project* (1980), but *Twilight: 2000* was the most successful to date. It was also a great match for GDW's expertise; not only did the GDW principals have wargaming experience, but several had served in the military has well.

The first edition of *Twilight: 2000* was released on November 26, 1984, just in time to capture the lucrative Thanksgiving-to-Christmas sales market. It was well-publicized in *Dragon* magazine and elsewhere. The initial print run of 10,500 units sold out within four months, and the game was quickly reprinted. After the line got going, Loren Wiseman took over as line editor. Much as with his work on *JTAS*, Wiseman did much of the day-to-day editing, production, and development required for an RPG company, freeing up Miller and Chadwick to do more revolutionary creative tasks. The original edition of *Twilight: 2000* would be well-supported through 1989.

However *Twilight: 2000*'s publication also marked the end of an era. GDW's original magazine ended with *The Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society #24* (1984). It was soon replaced with a new magazine, *Challenge*, which continued *JTAS*' numbering with issue *#25* (1986), but covered all of GDW's games, not just *Traveller*.

It was also a sign that, for *Traveller*, the times were a'changing.

The First New *Traveller*: 1986—1989

Thus we return to the question of revamping *Traveller*. Miller was aware by this time that *Traveller* was a 10-year-old game system, but at the same time he was wary of doing more than just polishing up the rules. He came up with a novel solution: creating a brand-new science-fiction game.

> *"So, after resisting a revision of* Traveller *for some time, we finally came to the conclusion that we should do a new science-fiction role-playing game which is not dealing with the Imperium or any of the concepts that we had before."*
>
> – Marc Miller, "The Future of *Traveller*," *The Travellers' Digest #7* (1986)

In order to accomplish this, GDW turned to their *other* RPG setting, *Twilight: 2000*. In order to expand this setting into the future, the members of GDW began to play what they called "The Game." Eight players, each with three countries, gamed for the fate of the world over the next 300 years of game time and thus got to see the world change and evolve. When they were done they had a new science-fiction background that was the basis of their new game *Traveller: 2300* (1986), designed by Marc Miller, Frank Chadwick, Lester Smith, and Timothy Brown.



The decision to call the game "Traveller" was a somewhat odd one, given that it had nothing at all to do with the original *Traveller* game. Miller had thought that "Traveller" could be used as a brand name that might be applied to any SF game — but the decision was ultimately too confusing. The game was eventually released in a second edition as *2300AD* (1988).

Traveller: 2300 was built on the idea of "realistic playability." Rather than using the original *Traveller*'s space-opera style, *2300* instead focused on hard science-fiction. The universe of *Traveller: 2300* centered on "the most accurate star map ever made," according to early GDW ads. It was based on W. Gliese's *Catalog of Nearby Stars* (1969) and was also made available in computer form. More attention was given to real stellar events and real scientific fact than in any other SF RPG to date.

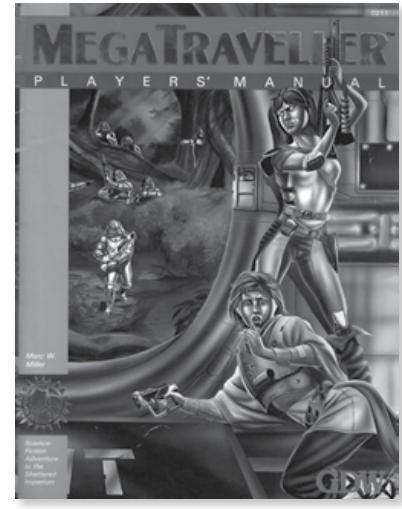
Traveller: 2300 also incorporated a new "task resolution system," which codified ideas that had previously been proposed by another company called Digest

Group Publications, who was just then getting into the RPG business as one of GDW's licensees. The history of DGP covers these topics in more depth, but as we'll see they also had quite an impact on GDW itself.

DGP and *MegaTraveller*. 1985—1987

Digest Group Publications — run by Gary Thomas and Joe Fugate, Sr. — got into the *Traveller* business with a digest-sized magazine called *The Travellers' Digest* (1985). Marc Miller liked their work, and the next year he invited them to write what would turn out to be the last little black rulebook for classic *Traveller*, *Robots* (1986).

After the success of that project — and DGP's successful release of several notable supplements of their own — Miller invited the DGP crew to do something even bigger. He asked them to reorganize the existing corpus of *Traveller* material — a project that would eventually become a second edition of the *Traveller* rules, called *MegaTraveller* (1987). It was every bit the revision of *Traveller* that Miller had decided not to do just a year before, and so it's all the stranger that it was handed off to an out-of-house source, but GDW's focus was now on *Traveller: 2300* and DGP seemed uniquely skilled (and interested) in revising the original *Traveller*.



DGP pulled together a number of different supplements to create the new *MegaTraveller* books. They also revised everything into a more cohesive and modern whole. Just as GDW had done with *Traveller: 2300*, DGP introduced a task system that was the biggest innovation of the game. It laid out how long tasks took, what the target for success was, and whether they could be repeated. This system was then used throughout the game — even in the combat system — making it one of the first unified task and contest resolution systems in the industry.

> *"The simplicity and the universality of the task system give it its power. After just a few minutes, a referee can have at his fingertips a way to bring any situation to life instantly."*
>
> – Gary L. Thomas & Joe D. Fugate Sr., "*MegaTraveller* Designers' Notes," *Challenge #31* (1987)

Unfortunately the mechanics of *MegaTraveller* were beset by many problems. Some systems weren't playtested enough due to the quick turnaround required by GDW. Computer incompatibilities between DGP and GDW also caused numerous errors to slip into the text. When *MegaTraveller* was released it would be derided for its numerous and serious errors, which resulted in over 30 pages of errata.

The *Traveller* setting also changed with the new edition. That work was almost entirely directed by GDW, and it was the most controversial change in the new edition. Traditionally *Traveller* had a staid background. The Third Imperium was a regimented, well-organized society. Except at the fringes, where things like the Fifth Frontier War could occur, there really wasn't a lot of opportunity for adventure.

With the release of *MegaTraveller* GDW punched their metaplot into high gear. The emperor of the Imperium was assassinated (or so it appeared), and the Imperium suddenly split into numerous warring factions fighting a huge Rebellion. As a GDW staff member would later write, "[the GDW staff] decided to open up the *Traveller* background so that players could unleash mayhem *legally*."

Unfortunately, GDW didn't know what to do with the Rebellion once they had it. They were afraid of undercutting individual campaigns by describing too much of the civil war, and so they didn't. Thus *MegaTraveller*'s metaplot was beset by a lack of direction and a curious stasis, where not a lot was actually happening despite the ongoing war. Worse, many fans were angry at the destruction of their well-known and well-loved background — exactly the reaction that Miller had hoped to avoid when he'd originally decided to develop *Traveller: 2300* rather than revise the original *Traveller*.

Even if GDW had wanted to heavily support the Rebellion, they would have found it difficult. There were over a half-dozen factions, each of which demanded description — and so at least a sourcebook each. DGP originally considered releasing these sourcebooks beginning with "The Black Duke," but neither they nor GDW ever did. Under classic *Traveller*, the Spinward Marches had always been the main region for adventure, but now the entire, massive Imperium was up for grabs. It was unsupportable.

What could have been a huge revival for GDW instead became a disaster. Between the heavily errataed rules for *MegaTraveller* and the stalled (and sometimes unpopular) backstory, GDW was taking their top RPG in a very dangerous direction ... and doing so at a very bad time.

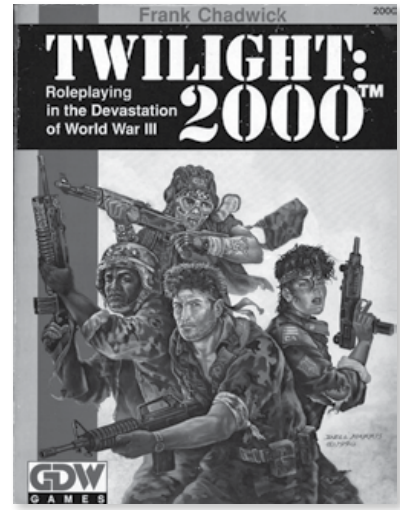
Hard Times: 1987—1991

In the next two years these problems worsened when *Traveller* was permanently unseated as the leading SF RPG thanks to the release of two new games: *Star Wars* (1987) by West End Games and *Cyberpunk* (1988) by R. Talsorian.

Cyberpunk was in some ways the worse of the two because it represented an entirely new direction for science-fiction RPGs. Within just a year or two everyone was producing cyberpunk games and in turn fans were looking back at *Traveller* — with its humongous computers and its lack of 'net technology — as quaint. However *Star Wars* was the game that ultimately usurped *Traveller*'s position; it was the start of GDW's earliest hard times.

Over the next years, GDW's cash flow got increasingly bad, but GDW kept supporting all of their lines — at least for a bit longer.

Twilight: 2000 continued publication throughout this period and even enjoyed a second edition (1990). The new edition of the game revised its future history to account for six years of real-world changes and also polished up its rules. As we'll see this new edition of *Twilight: 2000* would prove critical during GDW's final years.



Traveller: 2300 never became as popular as GDW had hoped, and definitely never replaced the original *Traveller*. As already noted GDW released a second edition called *2300AD* (1988), which was an attempt to renovate the game. That wasn't enough, so GDW next put out the *Earth/Cybertech Sourcebook* (1989), which introduced cyberpunk into the *2300AD* background. The last few *2300* books supported this darker cyberpunk future, but it wasn't enough to sustain the line, which came to an end in 1990. It was GDW's first casualty during this darkening era.

GDW's support of *Traveller* in this period was very curious because licensee DGP was publishing as much as GDW themselves. GDW did put out several rulebooks and short adventures, but DGP produced most of the notable *MegaTraveller* books, including two new alien volumes and a couple of more exhaustive campaigns — one of which, *Knightfall* (1990), was actually published by GDW.

Meanwhile, GDW continued to branch out its roleplaying lines with Frank Chadwick's *Space: 1889* (1989), a game that was quite notable because of its background, which would later be called "steampunk." *Space: 1889* was the first



RPG to feature a science-fantasy background featuring 19th century gentlemen colonizing space with steam technology in the manner of Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and Arthur Conan Doyle.

This background was colorful and evocative, a pretty surprising departure from GDW's militaristic and mechanistic games. The game system made some attempts at simplification, but it was still clearly a GDW design, and that meant it was pretty complex. The poor match of casual background and simulation systems is probably what eventually doomed the *Space: 1889* line — which just ran from 1989–1990 before being cancelled as part of the period's turbulence. Despite its failure, the game's evocative steampunk ideas would be reimagined by others in the industry, most notably by R. Talsorian in *Castle Falkenstein* (1994).

Meanwhile *Challenge* magazine had a few notable events of its own. First, in *Challenge #35* (1988), GDW expanded its coverage beyond the GDW games to the entire SF genre. It's quite common for a generalist RPG magazine to become a house organ, but it's almost unprecedented for the opposite to occur. *Challenge*'s expansion was reflective of the sudden growth of the science-fiction RPG genre beyond GDW's own games.

However the magazine continued to give the greatest bulk of its coverage to GDW's own games. Starting with *Challenge #39* (1989), it began a big push for *MegaTraveller*. That issue featured "The Hinterworlds," the definitive description of a sector of space in the Imperium. GDW promised that future adventures and articles would be set in that area. Unfortunately with so many freelance submissions, *Challenge* wasn't cohesive enough to provide that sort of directed support for a game. Charles E. Gannon took advantage of the Hinterworlds in many later articles, but he was nearly the only one.

For the most part, the *Challenge* of the late '80s and early '90s was an opportunity missed. It no longer supported GDW's games as it had in years past, and its only hope of success was in bringing other science-fiction players over to GDW's games.

Another potential opportunity of this era also failed to bear fruit. After a decade of thinking about computer games — even going as far as to create a computer division called GameSoft in 1982, in the wake of the Edu-Ware debacle

— GDW finally broke into the field in the late '80s. This was thanks to a deal with Paragon Software Company — better known today for their Marvel comics games — who licensed a wide swath of GDW's properties. The following years saw the production of four computer games: *MegaTraveller 1: The Zhodani Conspiracy* (1989), *Space: 1889* (1990), *MegaTraveller 2: Quest for the Ancients* (1991), and *Twilight 2000* (1992). The games offered superb adaptations of GDW's dense, tactical systems ... and thus were way too complex for most players. Paragon got bought up in 1992 and Paragon's successor, Microprose, didn't have any interest in continuing the GDW relationship — perhaps because of the lack of success for Paragon's games. Ultimately what could have been a lucrative computer deal never did much to help GDW out in its dark times.

By 1990 things were looking quite bleak for GDW. *Traveller* had fallen from grace, *2300AD* and *Space: 1889* were commercial failures, and wargame sales were now down 80% from their 1980 peak. With all these problems, some members of GDW were ready to close up shop.

And GDW might have failed right there, in 1990 or 1991, if not for the fact that they were working on an ever-increasing number of projects, and a very surprising one would bring them new success.

The New Era Dawns: 1990—1991

As we've already seen, GDW released *Twilight: 2000* second edition in 1990. That same year they decided to turn the *Twilight: 2000* game system into their "house system" — a framework that they'd use as the basis for all future games. This allowed GDW to develop new properties more quickly, and also offered more interoperability — and therefore crossover — between their game lines.

Cadillacs and Dinosaurs (1990) was the second game released using GDW's new house system. It was a licensed game based upon an indie comic book, and it was ultimately unsupported by GDW. As such it isn't very important to their history, except for the fact that it showed GDW's new direction — and their capability to quickly prototype a new game using their core system.

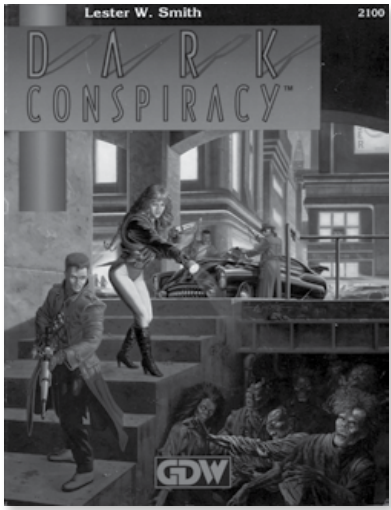
While GDW was considering closing up house in 1990, they also had a potential model for future success. They could have gone either way. Then something unexpected happened that ultimately benefitted GDW quite a lot.

On August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. Five days later the United States started deploying troops to Saudi Arabia as part of "Operation: Desert Shield" — a prelude to the larger conflict that was to follow. GDW decided to put together a book that highlighted the troops and weapons of the coming war. Frank Chadwick wrote *The Desert Shield Fact Book* (1991). It was rushed to press and appeared in stores in the first week of January 1991.

A few weeks later, on January 17, Operation: Desert Storm — the true war against Iraq — began. *The Desert Shield Fact Book* soared onto the New York Times best-seller list where it remained for quite some time. A non-RPG book that depended upon the company's military expertise thus saved GDW.

This sudden influx of money allowed for a total revival of GDW. They hired new staff, purchased new computers, and even talked about buying a new building. And, they kept publishing.

Their next game — Lester Smith's *Dark Conspiracy* (1991) — again used the new house system. It also showed off GDW's new cash with beautiful artwork and interior color. *Dark Conspiracy* was a near-future game of dark horror, one of many such games of horrific conspiracies in development at the time — a list that would come to include Atlas Games' *Over the Edge* (1992) and Pagan Publishing's *Delta Green* (1997). Shortly after the release of the core game GDW published a trilogy of *Dark Conspiracy* novels (1992) by Michael Stackpole. They generated a lot of initial interest in the game, but unfortunately it would end up being short-lived.



Meanwhile there was an even bigger shake-up happening at the company: in 1991 Marc Miller left GDW. This had major repercussions for the *Traveller* line. Miller had always been the biggest fan of DGP and their work on the *MegaTraveller* project. Without him, the rest of the GDW crew decided that they really needed to take *MegaTraveller* away from DGP, so that they could figure out *themselves* how to save their flagship game.

Whatever it took.

The New Era Emerges: 1991—1995

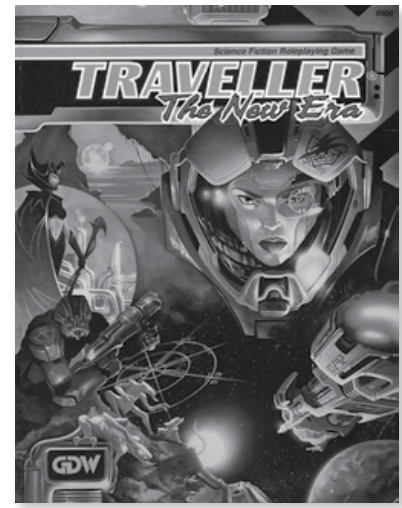
Dave Nilsen, one of GDW's new hires, headed the final attempts to correct *MegaTraveller*'s problems. He began work with *Hard Times* (1991), a *MegaTraveller* book by Charles Gannon that moved the *Traveller* timeline from the year 1122 to 1128. It was an attempt by GDW to start actually moving *MegaTraveller*'s metaplot, rather than leaving it in stasis. Though some thought it a great supplement because it *did* something, others thought that it made the once optimistic background of *Traveller* brutal and hopeless.

"While I applaud GDW's decision to convert Traveller *to the* Twilight *system, I am concerned that the conversion will also bring to* Traveller *a* Twilight *background. I see Hard Times as a possible precursor for such a background."*

– Mark "Geo" Galinas, "Hard Spot with Hard Times," *Terra Traveller Times #37* (First Quarter 1992)

The new timeframe was supported by a few adventures over the next year, but ultimately GDW determined it was too little too late. Deciding that a much bigger change was required, GDW gave the old *Traveller* universe a final send-off with a book called *Arrival Vengeance: The Final Odyssey* (1992), which depicted a final grand tour of the shattered Imperium. Then Nilsen began work on the new, third edition of *Traveller — Traveller: The New Era* (1993).

There were many changes in the new game.



First, *Traveller: The New Era* (*TNE*) was rewritten to use the GDW House System. Some of *Traveller*'s old mechanics — such as the unique term-based character creation — still existed, but everything was notably revamped. The result felt more militaristic and more complex than its predecessors, not a surprising result given the system's ultimate origin in *Twilight: 2000*.

Second, GDW did something very surprising: they destroyed the Imperium. A book called *Survival Margin* (1993) artfully detailed the transition from *MegaTraveller* through *Hard Times* into the *New Era* in prose form. It described how in 1130 a "final weapon" was accidentally unleashed: a high-tech computer virus. It ripped through technological systems across the Imperium, effectively shutting down civilization and star travel alike. Now in the *New Era* — dated 1200 on the Imperial calendar — mankind was slowly reaching back for the stars.

Nilsen tried to learn the lessons of what had gone right and wrong with *MegaTraveller*. He liked some things — like the more free-wheeling environment that *MegaTraveller* had created — and so he kept that in a new, unexplored galaxy. But he knew the core idea of a massive metaplot failed and so instead tried to create a new model for *Traveller* backstory that moved past historical changes rather than concentrating on them.

> *"The lesson of* MegaTraveller *and the Rebellion is that if you want a watershed event to change the campaign, the game is about the new world after the change, not the change itself. Make the change and move on. And whatever you do, don't look back. Don't leave the Rebellion as an open wound."*
>
> – Dave Nilsen, "Whither (NOT to be confused with 'Wither') *Traveller*?" *Challenge #77* (1995)

The *TNE* design also, for the first time ever, allowed real exploration in the *Traveller* universe, since planets were now being rediscovered. And though Nilsen envisioned a metaplot for *TNE*, it was on a smaller scale than that of the Rebellion, and designed from the start to be told through product releases.

TNE also reintroduced mystery to the *Traveller* universe. The first edition of *Traveller* had been full of mysteries. The two greatest had been why mankind was found all across the stars and who the ancients were — both questions that were answered in the adventure *Secret of the Ancients* (1982). *The New Era* introduced the mysterious Black Curtain that surrounded Capitol, the oncoming Empress Wave, and the strange Vampire Highway that cut across space. Ultimately GDW would never be able to provide the answers to these mysteries, but in their creation, Nilsen showed a good understanding of what had made *Traveller* successful in the first place.

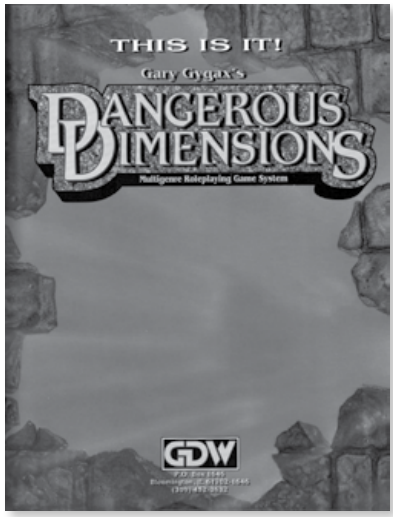
Traveller: The New Era won the 1994 Origins Award for Best Roleplaying Rules. As the Origins Awards are usually a popularity contest, this suggested considerable fan interest in the game. However, there were at least as many fans who were furious over the changes (and who remain furious to this day). Their game had essentially been destroyed, replaced by a new game system and a new setting.

The staff members at DGP were among the *Traveller* fans who felt left behind. With the release of *TNE* they decided to end their support for GDW's games; given that DGP had produced some of the best products for *Traveller*'s brief second edition, this would leave a notable gap in support in the years to come.

Looking back, one can only say that GDW made a brave leap of faith when they published *Traveller: The New Era*. Surely they must have realized that it wouldn't be popular with many old fans. Whether the decisions behind *TNE* could ever have been successful or not is hard to say, because by this time GDW was coming to another very dangerous place in their history.

The Dangerous Journey: 1992—1994

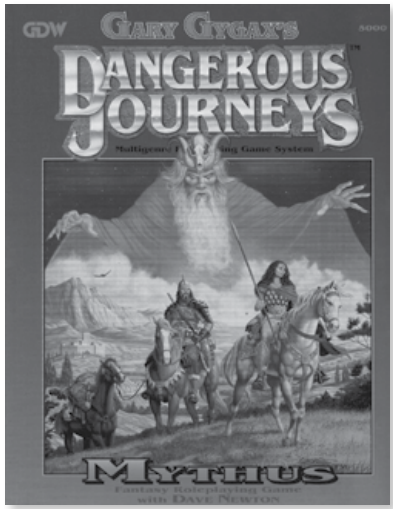
Traveller: The New Era wasn't the only game that GDW had brewing in 1992. They were also working on "The Carpenter Project" with Gary Gygax. This new game, which Gygax called "Infinite Adventures," was a project that Gygax had begun at his former company, New Infinities Productions. It was envisioned as a multi-genre RPG that supported different genres with different gamebooks. The first was to be "The Unhallowed," a horror RPG that was nicely distinct from Gygax's previous work in fantasy gaming.



GDW saw huge opportunity in this new Gygax game, and so they planned a multimedia blitz. Roc would do fiction publication, while JVC would produce a computer game. However, JVC had a few requirements of the own. They didn't like Gygax's product name, and so they suggested "Dangerous Dimensions" instead. Whether the similarity to *D&D*'s name was intentional or not is anyone's guess. They also thought the system should start off with a fantasy game, and so "Mythus" was born.

> *"It presented a rather well-detailed world in which unknowns lay in subterranean places, its hollow interior, and in a linked parallel mirror-image world where faeries ruled."*
>
> – Gary Gygax, "To Forge a Fantasy World," *Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (2000)

Unfortunately for GDW, TSR really didn't like the name and setting of the new game; they served GDW with a cease & desist on May 13, 1992, citing the possibility for confusion between the product names (and logos) of Dangerous Dimensions and their own *D&D*. Not wanting a court fight, GDW agreed to change the name of their game to "Dangerous Journeys." *Dangerous Journeys: Mythus* (1992) was soon published. It would be followed by a few supplements and a magazine over the next year.



Mythus offered an impressive "first" in GDW's history. After years of science-fiction and near-future games, this was GDW's first fantasy roleplaying game. They'd always said that if they were going to produce a fantasy game, it would be big: the newest fantasy RPG by Gary Gygax certainly fit that bill.

Unfortunately, shortly after the game's publication, TSR followed up with a second lawsuit where they claimed that *Dangerous Journeys* was derivative of first edition *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*. TSR made very broad claims which, many felt, could be used to show that almost every RPG was derivative of *AD&D*. GDW strongly felt that they were in the right so they fought TSR's suit, but the cost to the company began to add up as staff members spent much of their time giving depositions. For over a year the case crawled onward in court.

By early 1994, GDW staff felt like things were turning in their favor (though TSR staff claimed otherwise). However, GDW's finances were growing dire. TSR offered GDW a deal to settle out of court in return for TSR buying up all rights to *Dangerous Journeys*. On March 18, 1994, a settlement was reached where TSR gained all rights to *Dangerous Journeys*. GDW stopped sales of the game as of April 1, 1994, and all remaining inventory was given to TSR.

JVC finished up their computer game a few months later — and a few months too late.

As a final caveat, even if it had survived, *Dangerous Journeys* would probably not have been a massive hit for GDW. It was a classic game — full of complex simulations — that could have been written in the '70s or early '80s, not an innovative game of the '90s. GDW, with its closer connections to wargaming than to roleplaying, hadn't seen this issue.

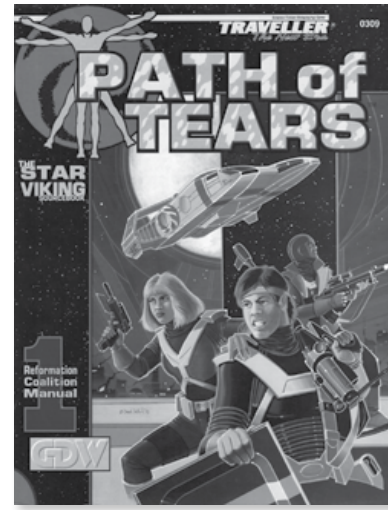
Final Days: 1991–1995

The *Dangerous Journeys* lawsuit was very damaging to GDW — perhaps fatally so. However, as is often the case with a company going out of business, the reasons behind GDW's final fall were many and varied.

First, we should remember that GDW was already having troubles in 1990, and they were only saved by the very lucky publication of *The Desert Shield Fact Book*. This pointed to a core weakness in GDW's business that was primarily the result of the collapse of the wargame market — of which GDW was one of the last full-time publishers — and the weakening of the *Traveller* market.

The Desert Shield Fact Book meanwhile led to a second, even bigger problem. GDW followed up the success of their original publication with *The Gulf War Fact Book*, which hit shelves in late spring of 1991. This second book backfired on GDW. It went straight into book stores in huge quantities, but later that year it started coming back — because books sold to book stores are ultimately

returnable. This cost GDW huge amounts of money in printing costs that were never recouped. Worse, GDW wasn't able to pay for their returns, and so their book distributor cut them off. No longer able to sell into the wider book market, GDW lost a chunk of their potential cash flow.



The third major factor in GDW's demise *may* have been the release of *The New Era* — though there is considerable disagreement over this possibility. GDW staff are adamant in saying that they were trying to revive *Traveller*, and that the new game had nothing to do with GDW's fall. Fans are equally adamant in stating that it totally alienated the fanbase and because of the destruction of *Traveller*'s setting, ultimately decreased interest in the game. Ironically, fans may have been part of the problem, as the rise of the Internet increasingly allowed them to criticize GDW's products, thus putting GDW staff on the defensive, and giving later GDW products a bad reputation that may or may not have been warranted.

It seems likely that, if done right, *Traveller: The New Era* could have brought in a whole new generation of players, even if it drove old players away. However, whether it was done right or not is impossible to say, because *The New Era* never had a chance to flourish. This was a factor from 1993 onward.

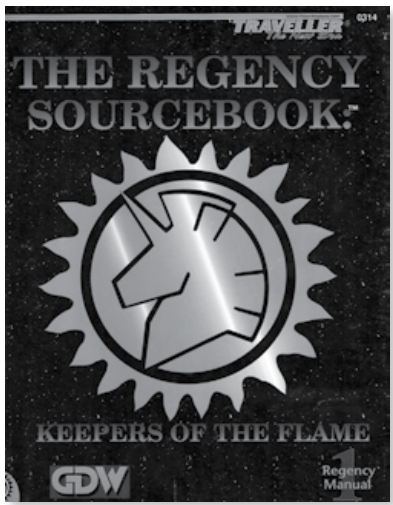
We've already seen the fourth factor in depth. In 1993 and 1994 GDW was losing production time to TSR's ongoing court case over *Dangerous Journeys*.

The fifth and final factor in GDW's demise was the growth of the CCG industry. By 1994 GDW was seeing decreased restocks from retailers and hearing that their customers were having increased problems finding their books. This was because retailers were spending much more of their money and attention on CCGs. This made 1994 a lean year for roleplaying publishers all around, and that was particularly critical for a company already on the edge like GDW. Worse, because of the tightening market, *The New Era* had no chance of finding a new audience — which was fundamental to the product's success, given the direction in which GDW had taken the line. CCG-related problems would only intensify in 1995 as the fad began to crash.

Over its last three quarters GDW had very bad sales. During their last three months sales abruptly dropped 35% for no good reason. It was the final straw.

Challenge magazine aptly showed the rise and fall of GDW in these last years. With *Challenge #51* (1991), the magazine went monthly, a large commitment that was suddenly possible due to piles of *Desert Shield* money. Two years later, with *Gulf War* coming back, *The New Era* trying to find a place in the market, and the TSR lawsuit begun, the magazine dropped back to bimonthly with *Challenge #68* (1993). They were just four issues published in 1994, and then the magazine came to an end with *Challenge #77* (1995).

From 1993 onward, GDW's product lines slowly disappeared too. *Dark Conspiracy* was the first product line to be shut down — or "retired" as *Challenge* said — due to the fact that customer interest had "declined." It ended production in 1993. GDW was also trying to figure out where to go with *Twilight: 2000* in the increasingly optimistic era of *glasnost*. They talked about a major revision, but otherwise treaded water with no publications in 1993 and just a single book each in 1994 and 1995. Wargame production also closed down in 1994.



The brand-new *Traveller: The New Era* game ended up being GDW's last line standing. GDW published over a dozen books for it from 1993–1995, including a lot of background for the Reformation Coalition, a return to the Spinward Marches in *The Regency Sourcebook: Keepers of the Flame* (1995), and a return to the fertile ground of alien sourcebooks with *Aliens of the Rim: Hivers and Ithklur* (1995). GDW even got a *Traveller* fiction line started with Paul Brunette's *The Death of Wisdom* (1995), the first official *Traveller* fiction (though some unofficial books were published several years earlier by Jefferson P. Swycaffer at Avon Books and later New Infinities).

In these final years GDW also tried to integrate *Challenge* magazine more closely with *Traveller* by including previews and complementary materials for their supplements, as well as publishing an all-*Traveller Challenge #75* (1994). Perhaps it was a last minute realization of the advantages of a house organ over a generalist magazine.

"It's not because the market failed. We failed the market. We didn't adapt to the changes."

– Frank Chadwick, quoted in "GDW Go Down," *Arcane #3* (February 1996)

Just as GDW was losing game lines, they were losing game designers too. As people like Marc Miller and Lester Smith left the company, it became even harder to support their game lines, which intensified the core problems. By the end of 1995 they were down to just two staff.

On January 5, 1996, GDW publicly announced that they were shutting down. They did not declare bankruptcy, but instead did their best to close up house in a professional manner. They paid off outstanding debts, and then they returned the rights for various games to their designers. Few other roleplaying companies have ever closed their doors as gracefully.

Latter Days: 1996-Present

The high quality of the GDW properties is made evident by the fact that many of their games have since been published by other companies.

Marc Miller received the rights to *Traveller*, *Twilight: 2000*, and *2300AD* and formed a new company called Far Future Enterprises to hold those rights. Information on the creation of FFE and immediate licensing of *Traveller* to Imperium Games can be found in the Imperium Games history. *Traveller* was simultaneously licensed in a variant edition to Steve Jackson Games, who published *GURPS Traveller* (1998). More recently, QuickLink Interactive published a d20 derivative (2002), ComStar Games published *Traveller Hero* (2007), and Mongoose Publishing gained the rights to publish a fifth edition of the game (2008). Some of these topics are described in the histories of Imperium Games, Mongoose Publishing, and Steve Jackson Games. Meanwhile, Miller has raised almost $300,000 through Kickstarter to publish *Traveller 5* (2013).

Twilight: 2000 sat unused for many years, but was licensed in 2006 to 93 Games Studio. Two years later, they released *Twilight: 2013* (2008). It replaced the game system and updated the timeline to the modern day, offering a new explanation for a Twilight War not involving the Cold War.

2300AD was first licensed to QuikLink Interactive, who released a new edition of the game called *2320AD* (2007), which followed the original *Twilight: 2000/2300AD* timeline. It was a supplement to QLI's *Traveller 20* (2002) game. Though a print copy of the book was promised, it only appeared as a PDF. More recently the game was relicensed to Mongoose Publishing, who released *2300AD* (2012) as an expansion to their own *Traveller* game system. It updates the Twilight War by offering terrorism as a probable explanation rather than the Soviet Union.

Dark Conspiracy Enterprises picked up the rights to *Dark Conspiracy*. They have since licensed a second edition to Dynasty Publications and a third edition to The Gamers' Conglomerate.

The rights to *Space: 1889* went to Frank Chadwick. Heliograph Inc. acquired a license to reprint the original material and Noise Monster Productions has been producing audio dramas since 2005. More recently Untreed Reads Publishing began producing *Space: 1889* eBooks in 2011 — a few of which have been coauthored by Frank Chadwick. The game also got a *little* new attention on the gaming frontier when Pinnacle Entertainment produced *Space 1889: Red Sands* (2010), a *Savage Worlds* version of the game.

The staff of GDW has scattered.

Some still work in gaming. Marc Miller remains as the head of Far Future Enterprises, which is licensing a lot of projects nowadays; he also consults for gaming companies. Timothy Brown went to TSR in 1989 where he eventually became Director of Game Development. He later went on to found Destination Games and work with Imperium Games; today he continues to freelance. Lester Smith too went on to work at TSR then Imperium Games. He is now an educational writer for a Houghton Mifflin company and president of the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets. Loren Wiseman edits the *GURPS Traveller* line. Frank Chadwick still works on miniatures games.

Others have moved on. John Harshman earned a doctorate in zoology and now lives in California. J. Andrew Keith died a few years ago, but William Keith, Jr., is today a successful novelist. David Nilsen is a civilian contractor for the Department of Defense.

GDW lasted for 23 years before they finally decided they'd had enough; it's an impressive length of time in the RPG world. At the time of its dissolution, only a few gaming companies could claim a longer track record, among them Avalon Hill, Chaosium, Columbia Games, Flying Buffalo, and TSR. Within three years of GDW's departure both Avalon Hill and TSR were gone as well.

It was the end of the old era.

What to Read Next

- For the early SF board gaming market that games like *Triplanetary* and *Imperium* were sold into, read ***Metagaming***.
- For the first SF RPGs, read about *Metamorphosis Alpha* in ***TSR***, *Starfaring* in ***Flying Buffalo***, and *Space Patrol* in ***Gamescience***.
- For the earliest *Traveller* licensees, read ***Judges Guild*** and (to a lesser extent) ***Games Workshop***.
- For a bit more of the history of J. Andrew Keith and William H. Keith, Jr., read ***FGU***.
- For the past of Gary Gygax and the other side of the *Dangerous Dimensions* lawsuits, read ***TSR***.

In Other Eras

- For later *Traveller* licensees, look to the histories of ***DGP*** *['80s]*, ***FASA*** *['80s]*, and ***Gamelords*** *['80s]*.
- For the rest of J. Andrew Keith and William H. Keith, Jr., read ***FASA*** *['80s]*, ***Gamelords*** *['80s]*, ***Task Force Games*** *['80s]*, and (much later) ***DGP*** *['80s]*.
- For more on military RPGs, read ***Leading Edge Games*** *['80s]*.
- For the creation of *MegaTraveller*, read ***DGP*** *['80s]*.
- For other RPGs that effectively destroyed their core setting as part of an edition change, read about *Cyberpunk v3* in ***R. Talsorian*** *['80s]* and about the 4E *Forgotten Realms* in ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For the rest of Gary Gygax's history, read ***New Infinities Productions*** *['80s]*, ***Hekaforge Productions*** *['90s]*, and ***Troll Lord Games*** *['00s]*.
- For the future of *Traveller*, read ***Imperium Games*** *['90s]* – which picks up the very day that GDW announced its closing – ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*, and ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For a brief look at the future of *Space: 1889*, read ***Pinnacle Entertainment Group*** *['90s]*.

Or read on to the first major *D&D* licensee, ***Judges Guild***.

Judges Guild: 1976–1983, 1999–Present

Judges Guild, one of the oldest RPG companies, produced a number of innovative supplements beginning in 1976. Though it fell victim to the RPG bust of the early '80s, it later reappeared as a licensor on the d20 RPG scene.



1976: City State Map

The Founding of the City State: 1974–1976

The story of the Guild begins at Gen Con VII (1974). A young Bill Owen of Decatur, Illinois — already a fan of Guidon Games' *Tractics* (1971) — managed to get to the con thanks to his friend Marc Summerlott. There he found a strange new game called *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974).

After his return home, Owen was soon ready to run a dungeon. He invited Summerlott and another historical

wargaming friend, David Petrowsky, to the session. Petrowsky wasn't interested in *D&D*'s fantasy elements — a pretty common prejudice that *D&D* faced in its first years. However Petrowsky did suggest another player, his cousin: Bob Bledsaw.

Owen's initial dungeon wasn't successful, but not everyone was ready to give up on the game. Depending on who you talk to, either the group asked Bledsaw if he would try to run a *D&D* session, or Bledsaw asked if he could borrow the rules. In either case, Bledsaw was soon looking over Owens' *D&D* rules. He thought they needed some work, but he was ready to give them a shot.

By late 1974 or early 1975 Bledsaw was running the players through an adventure set in a dungeon near Weathertop, for what would be the start of a fantasy campaign set (mostly) in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth. The players later explored Erebor, journey to Rhûn, and once even went to Mars(!). Bledsaw's group responded positively and soon the initial gathering of 5 people grew to 20, sometimes supplemented by that many spectators as well.

"While massacring his bad guys Bob would often say, 'Oh my poor monsters.'"
– Bill Owen, *Judges Guild's Bob & Bill: A Cautionary Tale* (2008)

Bledsaw tried to be true to the low-magic feel of Tolkien's world. However many of his players were interesting in playing with the more "Vancian" magic found in the *Dungeons & Dragons* rules. Rather than sacrificing the integrity of Tolkien's world, Bledsaw created a magic portal near Weathertop that led the players to a realm of his own design: the City State of the Invincible Overlord. It was the setting that Judges Guild would found its business upon.

Eventually.

For now, the Bledsaw and Owen group was trying to create a game of their own. "Martian America" was a tactical RPG where you could fight against Martians in your own hometown. The group wrote up the rules and gave it a play. That playtest went *very* badly. That might have been the end of the group's publishing aspirations but then — in December 1975 — Bledsaw was laid off from his job at General Electric. With free time on his hands, he started thinking again about forming a gaming company. This time he had a new idea: creating supplements for *D&D* players — or more specifically for *D&D* gamemasters. However for this he'd need permission from TSR himself.

Owen by this time was working on a Civil War game. He agreed to split gas money with Bledsaw and go with him to TSR's headquarters in Lake Geneva, so that they could both make their pitches. Owen told Bledsaw that if the Civil War game fell through, he'd join with him in what would become Judges Guild.

> *"After all this time, it now occurs to me that maybe the Civil War rules was a 'soak-off' (diversionary attack in Avalon Hill games) and we thought we'd just throw the D&D aids out as a 'oh by the way.'"*
>
> – Bill Owen, *Judges Guild's Bob & Bill: A Cautionary Tale* (2008)

At TSR headquarters, Owen went in to see the TSR staff first and show off his design. Later he would write that that the only thing he remembered was Dave Arneson telling him that his soldiers moved too slowly. Shortly he returned crestfallen and told Bledsaw, "I guess you've got a partner." Afterward the two went out to their car to get two boxes worth of City State stuff to show to the TSR staff — including Dave Arneson, Gary Gygax, and others.

Bledsaw told them about his ideas for gamemaster supplements ... and the result was *laughter*. The TSR staff explained to Bledsaw and Owen that gamers wanted games, not supplements, and told them that they were more than welcome to publish their *D&D* supplements (and lose money) if they wanted to. There was also the question of whether royalties would be required, and TSR told Bledsaw and Owen that they couldn't collect royalties because game mechanics weren't copyrightable.

And thus the meeting was over.

TSR's reaction to the idea of game supplements is somewhat understandable because at the time there was really no such thing. TSR's supplemental production had been confined to a set of variant rulebooks for *D&D* — starting with *Greyhawk* (1975) and *Blackmoor* (1975) — while other companies like FGU, GDW, Flying Buffalo, and Metagaming were just getting their core game rules out. There had just been one professional adventure, "The Temple of the Frog," which appeared in *Blackmoor*. Wee Warriors had produced some accessories, but it's possible that TSR didn't even know about them until later in 1976. Therefore, when Bledsaw and Owen suggested regularly publishing supplements that would make it easier for gamemasters to run their games, they were truly suggesting something new and different.

With a license (sort of) in hand, Bledsaw and Owen formed Judges Guild on July 4, 1976. They invested somewhere between $350 and $400 total to become equal partners, shaking hands over a kitchen table. Though the initial goal was to sell subscriptions to gamemasters, they needed a real product to get things going, so they began work on a large map of Bledsaw's *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (1976).

They got it done just in time for Gen Con IX (1976) and Owen set out at once for the convention. He didn't have a dealer's table, but he was able to place a card table and a banner in the convention hall. He talked to people and gave out fliers and if they were interested, he took them out to the alley behind the Horticulture Hall and sold them a map straight out of the trunk of his Mustang. He also sold subscriptions to Judges Guild's bimonthly play aids publication. The subscriptions alone more than paid back the duo's initial investment, and Judges Guild was in business.

The Initial Subscriptions: 1976—1977

Judges Guild chose a subscription model because they weren't sure what reception their products would receive in the marketplace. Subscribers gave them a great alternative: a certain audience, and one that would continue buying their products over time. The idea of sending out games to readers on a regular schedule, as Judges Guild did, was pretty innovative. Paizo is an example of a modern company that's done a great job of organizing their product lines into subscriptions that they can regularly sell to consumers, but they're also a rarity. Judges Guild was doing it about 30 years earlier.

The physical format of Judges Guild's early products was even more unusual: each release came in a large envelope containing loose leaf sheets and the occasional stapled booklet. Shortly after Gen Con IX, subscribers got the *Initial Package* (1976) in a plain, unmarked envelope.

The *Initial Package* was most notable for Bill Owen's *Dungeon Tac Cards* (1976), one of the first *D&D* references of any sort. These combat action cards are similar to those used much more recently by *Dungeons & Dragons 4th Edition* (2008) and *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* 3rd Edition (2009). They contain info for lots of weapons and even new combat tactics like "jump" and "punch."

The *Initial Package* also included more City State maps, some larger combat reference charts, and the creatively named *Initial Guidelines Booklet I* (1976). This 16-page booklet featured actual background information for running games set in the City State including: encounters; lists of inns, taverns, and temples; crime and punishment tables; and more. Finally, the *Initial Package* also contained a *Judges Guild Journal*, which mainly featured news and notes from the Guild.

"All the material contained herein is intended to spark your imagination, O Magus Mediator, so take what you want and leave what you don't want in your campaign."
– "Jocular Judgements," *Judges Guild Initial Issue* (October 1976)

Amusingly, since the *Initial Package* was labeled "I," Judges Guild continued on from there with "J," then "K," then "L," and so on, as they released new subscription packages. They came out on a bimonthly schedule. *Installment J: Thunderhold* (1976) and *Installment K: City State Campaign* (1977) were similar to the *Initial Package*, but somewhat smaller. Each included some new maps and a new *Booklet* with yet more information on the City State. A *Judges Guild Journal* rounded out each package and would gradually expand to have more gaming material. It appeared as a broadsheet newspaper through issue #11 (T), but as we'll see it thereafter transformed into an actual magazine.

Eventually Judges Guild published 26 installments of their subscription, up through 1981. That's the *Initial Package* (1976), then *Installments J-W* (1976–1979) and *Installments 15–25* (1979–1981). As we'll see, the contents of the *Installments* very quickly transformed from the early, somewhat chaotic compilations found in *I*, *J*, and *K*, but we'll return to that topic when we see how the company started to change itself in 1977. Before we get there, we should look at the *importance* of these early releases.

Though the various game aids found in the initial subscriptions were innovative, it was the increasingly dense collection of information on the City State that was truly ground-breaking. By 1976 the worlds of Greyhawk and Blackmoor had already been hinted at in their eponymous *D&D* supplements, but there wouldn't be any in-depth information on Blackmoor until 1977 (which we'll return to shortly) and nothing on Greyhawk until 1980. M.A.R. Barker's world of Tékumel had received somewhat more attention in TSR's *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1976), and that could probably be called the first RPG campaign world. The initial City State information, however, offered a much more cohesive (if poorly organized) view of a campaign setting — one which Judges Guild would continue expanding through supplements for several years. If Tékumel was the first RPG campaign world, the City State was the first *supported* RPG campaign.

When Judges Guild released these first subscriptions in late 1976, TSR realized that their fledgling licensee had great potential. This was probably buoyed by the fact that TSR was now distributing Wee Warriors' adventures and game aids, and so saw the sales their supplements were generating. Whatever the reason, TSR demanded royalties after all, forcing Judges Guild to renegotiate their casual contract.

Judges Guild did get benefits out of this new deal too, possibly including an exclusive license for *D&D* supplements that promised that no one else (even TSR) would publish them and definitely including the right to actually use the words *Dungeons & Dragons* on their books. Owen immediately realized the power of using TSR's trademark and headed right out to print up "created and approved for

use with *Dungeons & Dragons*" stickers, so that even Judges Guild's *older* products could start advertising the connection.

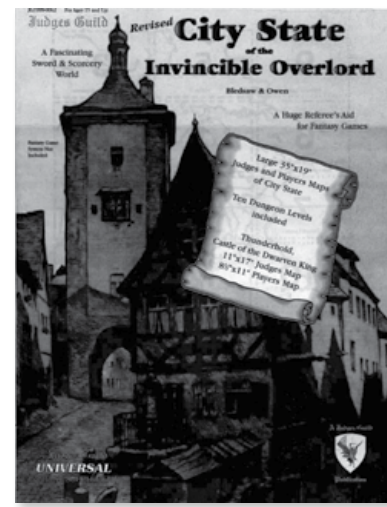
TSR was quite right about Judges Guild's potential; it would quickly be realized. Norma Bledsaw came on board as Judges Guild's first paid employee in December 1976. Meanwhile, the Guild was slowly upgrading its headquarters. Prior to 1977, storage and work was done at Owen's wargaming suite, then at Bledsaw's house, but around the turn of the year, the Guild moved some of its operations to three rooms in Franklin Mall — the oldest covered mall in Illinois, which was owned by Owen's parents.

Despite the familial connection, Judges Guild was paying rent on their three-room suite, showing the increasing professionalism of the business.

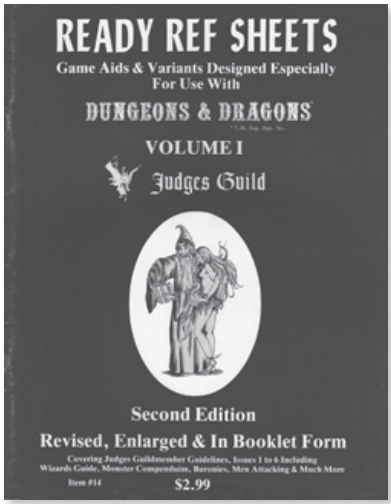
Becoming a Business: 1977—1978

The next year would be one of great change for Judges Guild. Bledsaw and Owen notably marked them by coming on to Judges Guild full-time. For the next year, Bledsaw would be the Guild's main creator and Owen its publisher and "game aid" designer. They would soon be joined by even more employees — including Marc Summerlott and Bob's sister, Debi. Meanwhile, the company was also making large-scale changes to how it produced and sold supplements.

By 1977 Judges Guild had made a name for itself with its subscription sales. Meanwhile, an increasing number of retailers, mail order shops, and small-scale distributors were selling roleplaying products — even if overall distribution remained somewhat fractured. As a result of these two facts, Judges Guild saw more opportunity to sell to retailers than they had the previous summer. Unfortunately, their envelope-packed subscription packages were poorly organized for retail sale.



Judges Guild solved this problem that January by producing the *City State of the Invincible Overlord Playing Aid* (1977). This poly-bagged release contained reprints of all the City State material from *Installments I*, *J*, and *K*, as well as a brand-new 56-page *Guide to the City State* (1977) book by Bledsaw and Owen, surely the first large-scale campaign book for the RPG industry. A cover sheet finished off the release, carefully listing everything it contained, and *voila* a mish-mash of material had been turned into a product ready for sale on a game store shelf.



Judges Guild also started selling *Dungeon Tac Cards* to stores, then repackaged many of the charts that had appeared in *Installments I*, *J*, and *K* as the *Ready Ref Sheets* (1977) — making the rest of their early subscription material available in a retail form. Moving into retail only *after* they'd proven their product worked out quite well for Judges Guild. Within four years their premiere product, the *City State Playing Aid*, would sell 40,000 copies through a couple of different incarnations.

Around the same time, Judges Guild began doing a bit of distribution of its own. This began with the sale of a collection including both their *Initial Package* and TSR's three-book *D&D* set; a second collection paired the new *City State Playing Aid* and *D&D*. By summer Judges Guild was reselling much of the TSR catalog, a few products from Metagaming Concept, and GDW's *En Garde!* (1975). Miniatures publishers like Archive, Garrison, Grenadier, and Heritage would help swell Judges Guild's "booty list" through the end of the '70s, by which time larger-scale distribution was starting to catch up. A lot of publishers in the '70s sold *some* products from other publishers, but Judges Guild more fully embraced the idea than anyone else, except Gamescience and Games Workshop. They were a major source for all sorts of roleplaying products in the period, not just their own.

After repackaging their initial subscriptions installments for retail sale, Judges Guild revamped the content of later subscriptions to better match their retail future. Thus *Installment L: Tegel Manor* (1977) was much more cohesive than the previous subscriptions. It included one of the first RPG dungeons — following *Blackmoor*'s "The Temple of the Frog" (1975), some Wee Warriors releases (1976–1977), the Metro Detroit Gamers' *Lost Caverns of Tsojoconth* (1976), and the first *Tunnels & Trolls* adventures (1976+), but not much else. Following their new model, Judges Guild soon after released *Installment L* with a new cover sheet as the *Tegel Manor Fantasy Game Play Aid* (1977), which was available for retail sale. *Installments N* (1977) and *O* (1977) were also of note, because they comprised the *Wilderlands of High Fantasy* (1977) supplement, which opened up the world of the City State.

From here on out, the subscription service increasingly became a way to get all the major Judges Guild releases quickly and automatically. At first, Judges Guild would have to print cover sheets when the material was released for retail sale, but pretty soon subscribers were getting complete books with cover and all.

Though the content of the subscription packages changed pretty dramatically in 1977, in two ways it kept to its original ideals. First, the packages continued to extensively detail the world of the City State, with those *Wilderlands of High Fantasy* installments being just two of the best examples. Second, for at least a year or two more, they usually included a few different loose leaf pages — such as more maps detailing new sections of the world of the City State.

Early in 1977 Judges Guild also began producing non-subscription items. Where the subscription packages by now were focused entirely on adventures, backgrounds, and maps for the City State, these non-subscription items covered other ground. Several of them deserve some additional note.

The *Judges Shield* (1977) was the first entirely original non-subscription item — following the *City State* and *Ready Ref* reprints that we've already encountered. It was also the first GM reference shield in the industry. In 1977, it'd become Judges Guild's second best-selling product, after the *City State* itself, though it would eventually be eclipsed.

The First Fantasy Campaign (1977) was written by none other than Dave Arneson. It was written as part of his attempt to get back into the RPG business following his departure from TSR — a brief renaissance where he also worked with Heritage Models to produce the *Dungeonmaster's Index* (1977). Not only did *The First Fantasy Campaign* offer a new fantasy campaign setting, but the setting was Dave Arneson's Blackmoor. Unfortunately, Blackmoor wasn't quite presented as its *own* world, because it connected to the Wilderlands along one map edge — a theme that would continue through all of Blackmoor's appearances for the next 25 years. Sadly, Arneson and Judges Guild never released anything beyond this first book.

The *Campaign Hexagon System* (1977) was another clever gamemaster aid, this one a set of blank hex maps that gamemasters could use to portray large wilderness areas. It pushed Judges Guild's ideas of large-scale campaigns — something that they alone in the industry were concentrating on at the time — and matched the campaign hexes that they used to depict the lands around their City State.



By 1978 the line between subscription and non-subscriptions items would grow increasingly vague. Thus Judges Guild's innovative *Village Book I* (1978), which featured 48 village maps and various random tables for filling in those villages, appeared as part of *Installment R* (1978).

However their *Castle Book I* (1978), which had 50 castle maps, couldn't be found among the subscription packets at all. From here on, the subscription installments represented *some* of the Judges Guild books for those months — not necessarily the best or the worst — and so we'll largely leave them behind until Judges Guild shuts them down entirely in 1981.

As Judges Guild grew, it began to strain the time of Bill Owen. He was working full-time both for Judges Guild and for his family travel business, sometimes putting in 70–80 hours a week. This eventually became too much, especially when combined with differing visions for the company: Bledsaw wanted to dramatically expand, while Owen was increasingly exhausted.

As a result, Owen dissolved his partnership with Bledsaw in March 1978. Owen effectively sold his shares to Bledsaw, though he remained on a consultancy contract for a few years so that Bledsaw could spread out the payment. During this time, Owen authored Judges Guild's *Treasury of Archaic Names* (1979) and prepared a few documents for Bledsaw, so he wasn't *entirely* gone from the company — but he mostly was. Owen also created his own board game, *Going Places* (1978), through his own Game Design business before going back to work for his family's travel agency.

Today Owen is running a tour business out of the Franklin Mall. He recently wrote a short booklet on the early days of Judges Guild called *Judges Guild's Bob & Bill: A Cautionary Tale* (2008) and published it through Game Design; it was used as an ancillary reference for this history.

In the wake of Owen's departure, Judges Guild continued to grow. In March 1978 it would move to its biggest offices ever, on University Avenue in Decatur — leaving behind Bledsaw's house and Owen's mall.

The Settings of Yore: The Wilderlands

Judge's Guild's Wilderlands – the area surrounding the City State of the Invincible Overlord – was one of the earliest settings created specifically for the *Dungeons & Dragons* game. Though its heyday is a few decades gone, it has received considerable new attention since the rise of d20.

Judges Guilds' publication of the "Wilderlands of High Fantasy" occurred from 1976–1983. During this timeframe, most RPG settings remained pretty poorly defined – more framework than detail – and the Wilderlands tended in this direction, but had more detail than most of its contemporaries. There were tons of maps: of the City State, of its sewers, and of the many areas around the City – the latter all laid out in neat hexes. You could find lists and lists of shops in the City State. There were other

nearby places of note, such as the dwarven stronghold of Thunderhold. But they were all more outline than description.

That isn't to say that the Wilderlands of the '70s wasn't a colorful setting. It was very colorful, in the over-the-top manner that only old-school gaming could be. The Overlord, for example, had beholder and mindflayer bodyguards. High-tech artifacts proliferated, much as they did in Blackmoor, hinting of a technological past. And then there were those gates scattered about the world – like the ones that Bledsaw's players had originally used to enter the Wilderlands. They were the source of people from many different lands – and even more high-tech artifacts, such as a crashed MIG fighter jet.

If you want to concentrate on Bob Bledsaw's personal view of the Wilderlands, you should constrain yourself to those original Judges Guild supplements from 1976–1983. However, many other people have expanded (and branched) the Wilderlands setting.

The first alternate view of the Wilderlands was presented by Mayfair Games (1987–1989). It actually might be overly generous calling it "Wilderlands" because they changed everything quite a bit. They remapped the City State (now called Briarwood), making it neater and cleaner. They then placed that city on a big plateau in the middle of an island, the whole land now called Calandia. Despite the fact that this new setting was much better detailed than the original – with eight handsome boxes being published over three years – it was not well-received at the time, earning a scathing review in *Dragon Magazine*, nor is it well-accepted now.

The rest of the Wilderlands publications over the years have been truer to the original setting details, but each has a somewhat different focus.

The Wilderlands published by Necromancer Games (2003–2005) is the truest to Bledsaw's original. However, it has been expanded quite a bit, and much of the detail did not originate with Bledsaw.

When James Mishler started publishing Wilderlands books (2007–2010), he specifically wanted to put his own stamp on the setting, so he named it the "Wilderlands of High Adventure." Besides expanding the campaign setting, Mishler said that he also wanted to change the focus from swords & sorcery to epic high fantasy.

Similarly Robert Conley changed the name of his Wilderlands, calling it "The Majestic Wilderlands." He intended to create a Wilderlands that is more realistic – like the settings of Hârn or Tékumel, where the designers really worked to create cohesive cultures.

Whether any of these new Wilderlands will continue to influence the setting in the future, or whether they'll fall by the wayside as Mayfair's version did, is still to be seen.

A *Dungeoneer* Interlude: 1975–1981

Let's take a step back to Spring Arbor College and a young art major by the name of Paul Jaquays. He discovered *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1975 and thereafter formed the Fantastic Dungeoning Society with several friends at college, including Mark Hendricks. Together they decided that it would be fun to create a fanzine that could provide adventures for other gamemasters, and thus *The Dungeoneer* was born. It was authorized by Tim Kask at TSR, and like Judges Guild's original deal, it depended on a pretty casual license.

> *"[T]here was this little gaming 'zine called* The Space Gamer *… that contained three articles that were to change my life. The first two were reviews of the new fantasy game* Dungeons and Dragons *… . The third said 'Sf and sf conflict art is needed for our word heavy pages. We pay up to $5 for an illustration.' 'Nuff said!! I was hooked."*
>
> – Paul Jaquays, "My Life and Role-Playing," *Different Worlds #1* (1979)

The first issue of *The Dungeoneer* was released in June of 1976 — at the same time as TSR's *The Dragon*. It was mainly drawn and written by Jaquays, with some contributions from other FDS members. Its most original feature was probably the fact that it promised to include a dungeon in every issue — a pretty revolutionary idea when you could still count the dungeons published by TSR, Wee Warriors, and others on one hand. Copies of it were blindly mailed to fans who had written in to other gaming magazines, and soon some of those people wrote back asking for subscriptions.

In all FDS produced six issues of *The Dungeoneer*, from 1976–1978. By late 1977, however, Jaquays was approaching graduation, and needed to spend more time in the art studio. He could no longer do all the work required to keep the 'zine running. *The Dungeoneer*, meanwhile, was moderately successful by this time, with 500–600 copies of each issue being sold — 200 to subscribers, and the rest through game and hobby stores. As a result the FDS was able to sell *The Dungeoneer* itself. Their buyer was Chuck Anshell of Anshell Miniatures, who was then selling (though not manufacturing) lead miniatures for use in gaming; the magazine seemed like a nice, complementary venture.

Anshell produced two issues of *The Dungeoneer* in 1978, but then had to shut down Anshell Miniatures. Shortly afterward he joined Judges Guild, bringing us back to the main topic of this history. When Anshell came over to the Guild he brought the magazine with him. Judges Guild immediately produced *The Dungeoneer Compendium* (1978), collecting the best of issues #1–6.

Anshell then took over as the editor of *The Judges Guild Journal* with issue #12 (U) (December 1978/January 1979) — the letter referring to the subscription that it was distributed with. *The Journal* was notably revamped; where it had before been a 16-page broadsheet, now it was a 64-page magazine. Judges Guild finally began publishing *The Dungeoneer* a month later with issue #9 (January/February 1979).

Both magazines depended heavily on reader content, for which Judges Guild paid shockingly low rates. In some early issues they offered rates from $0.30 to $0.50 a column inch. Later they changed over to flat rates, running from $2 for a handwritten fair-quality article to $10 for a camera-ready high-quality article.

The editing, first by Anshell and later by Penny Gooding and Bryan Hinnen, was erratic. Most notably, standard columns morphed and changed without reason from issue to issue. For example, though "Tips from the Tower" was usually about Judges Guild happenings, in *Judges Guild Journal #14* (February/March 1979) it instead became either a letter column or a column for reader submissions — it often being hard to tell the difference between the two. Similarly, "Omniscient Opinions" was usually used for player submission but became the editorial column in *Judges Guild Journal #19* (February/March 1980). "Under Toe," a listing of columns usually found in *The Dungeoneer* even made one mysterious appearance in *Judges Guild Journal #14*.

As we'll see, Judges Guild would publish these two magazines for about two years, one appearing each month. In mid-1979 they increased the quality of the magazines somewhat, going to full-color covers (or at least fake-color covers, a topic we'll talk more about), then cardstock covers; they also increased the page count along the way. Still, the magazines don't really compare to *The Dragon*, *White Dwarf*, *Different Worlds*, or even *The Space Gamer*. They instead fell much closer to the fanzine side of things.

There are two interesting codas to the story of *The Dungeoneer*'s acquisition.

First, Chuck Anshell was friends with one of J.R.R. Tolkien's sons. Bledsaw had hoped to use this connection to acquire a license to Middle-earth, and thus publish his *original* campaign world. Unfortunately Bledsaw waited too long — out of respect for Tolkien who had passed away in 1973 — and ICE acquired the license instead.

Second, Paul Jaquays ended up at Judges Guild too, as a staff artist and designer. He joined in October 1978 and worked with them for a year as an illustrator and adventure designer before eventually resigning to go freelance.

In the meantime the Judges Guild was hitting its first major problem, in the form of disagreements with its licensor, TSR.

Meeting the Competition: 1978–1980

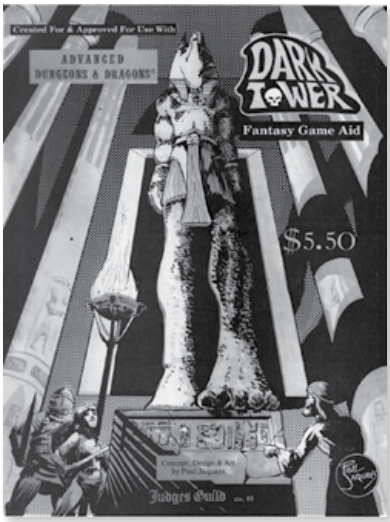
Ever since TSR had renegotiated their initial agreement with Judges Guild in late 1976, the relationship had been on slightly rocky grounds. However in 1978 things took a turn for the better. Bob Bledsaw sent Gary Gygax — who was then working on *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* — hundreds of pages of notes about campaigns; some of those were incorporated into the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (1979) as appendices. TSR even extended Judges Guild's license to include *AD&D*, which resulted in many more products starting with the *Character Codex* (1979).

Unfortunately this new state of cooperation did not hold. Also in 1978, TSR started publishing adventure supplements of their own, including the "G" Giants series (1978), the "D" Drow series (1978), and *S1: Tomb of Horrors* (1978). According to Bledsaw, this was in violation of their previous agreement with Judges Guild. Worse, TSR's approval of Judges Guild's books began to slow, as TSR grew pickier about Judges Guild toeing the "official" line, now that they had more firmly codified their rules in the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* rule set.

As we'll see, this uncomfortable state lasted for two or three years.

Judges Guild's first reaction to the more direct competition from their licensor, TSR, was simply to follow upon TSR's new-found success. They started publishing a *lot* more adventures (and thus fewer game aids). Chuck Anshell, as the Project Coordinator of Judges Guild, oversaw many of them. Some of them turned out quite good. In particular, Paul Jaquay's *AD&D* adventure, *Dark Tower* (1980), is considered an early masterpiece. However an increasing number were mediocre.

The mixed quality of Judges Guild's products was partially due to the increasing speed of Judges Guild production. A 1980 ad stated, "by the time you have read this the fantasy specialists at Judges Guild will have created at least six more fantastic playing aids for your raucous roleplaying rollicks aside from what's listed here." In *The Dungeoneer #10* (March/April 1979) Chuck Anshell reported that there were an amazing 60–70 projects in planning or development.



The *physical* quality of their products was mixed too, as Judges Guild *still* hadn't climbed beyond the level of amateur publishing that had been common in the '70s. Their books were being published on low-quality pulp paper with the magazines being among their few publications that actually had glossy,

cardstock covers; most of the rest of their products used pulp paper for their covers too. We've already noted that many of their covers were now full-color, but most of those were printed using a "fake color process." As Paul Jaquays explained in *The Dungeoneer #12* (July/August 1979), Judges Guild didn't use process separation for their color covers, but instead did their color separation *by hand* — basically created a masked layer for each color used on a page.

As part of Judges Guild's increased production, they also began a new series of City State-related supplements. *The Mines of Custalcon* (1979) kicked off their "Wilderness Series" which mapped the areas around the City State using Judge Guild's *Campaign Hexagon System*. There would eventually be five, all by Bryan Hinnen, running through *Witches Court Marshes* (1982).

What Judges Guild Did for *Dungeons & Dragons*

In *The Dragon #27* (July 1979), Bob Bledsaw wrote a guest editorial describing what Judges Guild had brought to *D&D* over the previous three years. Although any article of that sort will of course be personal opinion, Bledsaw's article offers interesting insights to the state of *D&D* play before and after Judges Guild's appearance.

He listed Judges Guild's biggest contributions using six bullet points:

- Playing aids like the *Judges Shield*, the *Ready Ref Sheets*, and various backgrounds books reduced the time gamemasters spent creating things.
- Guidelines that helped to make *D&D* more playable.
- A focus on wilderness adventuring rather than just dungeons.
- Emphasis on a more "humane" relationship between gamemasters and players, rather than the very adversarial player-killing focus of many early RPGs.
- Imaginative and original approaches to campaign design.
- Suggestions for speeding up play, especially by shifting responsibilities from gamemasters to players.

Bledsaw said one other thing of particular note in the article: "Judges Guild has benefitted greatly by it's [sic] association with this popular game and we in turn have benefitted *Dungeons & Dragons* by publishing sorely needed complementary playing aids. The net effect has been to create a larger economic pie for all concerned and boost the sales of all fantasy role playing systems."

The idea that the publication of fantasy supplements could help the FRP industry leader was, of course, the exact same logic used by Ryan Dancey 20 years later when he pushed out the d20 Trademark License for *Dungeons & Dragons* third edition.

Increased production wasn't Judges Guild's only plan to compete with TSR: they also started to diversify by moving into computer game production — though not to great effect. *Trek-80* (1979) was their only computer game.

Meanwhile, much more extensive diversification was just around the corner ...

Licenses, Licenses, Licenses: 1978—1982

Judges Guild wasn't entirely at TSR's mercy. Other companies had begun to ask Judges Guild to publish supplements for *their* games, just as Judges Guild was doing for TSR. As a result, Judges Guild began to take on more licenses.

The first of these licenses was for GDW's *Traveller* game. Following their original methodology of publishing gaming aids, Judges Guild rapidly put out a referee screen (1978), a character creation aid (1979), and a book of deck plans (1979).

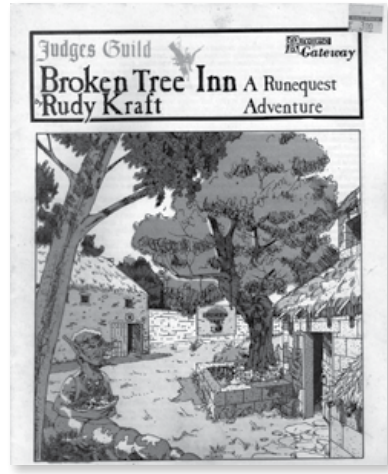
Afterward the *Traveller* publications were — as with the rest of Judges Guild's books — more adventures. These adventures helped to define a setting thanks to the vision of Design Manager Dave Sering, an ex-Navy man who had joined the Guild in 1978.

> *"This series of products forms a complete Science Fiction Role Playing Campaign with detailed material published at all levels from individual ships and crewmen up to sector-spanning empires."*
>
> – Dave Sering, "Gateway Quadrant," *Pegasus #5* (1982)

To complement the adventures and further describe the setting, Sering published four different background books that outlined a broad section of *Traveller* space called the Gateway Quadrant, from *Ley Sector* (1980) to *Maranatha-Alkahest Sector* (1981). The result was one of the most coherent settings in the game industry at the time — unfortunately a setting which was later non-canonized by GDW.

The *Traveller* products unfortunately illustrated a major problem with Judges Guild expanding out to other licensed game systems. Even top SF game *Traveller* wasn't nearly as popular as *D&D*. A few years down the line, Bledsaw would say that *Traveller* books autoshipped about half of what Judges Guild's fantasy roleplaying supplements did. Worse, Judges Guild produced its first *Traveller* adventures and background books very rapidly, and they really began to stack up before Judges Guild realized that they didn't sell nearly as well. Lou Zocchi would later recount visiting Judge Guild's final warehouse, where he saw six-foot tall stacks of *Traveller* supplements that he estimated covered a 30 by 50 foot area. If Zocchi's recollections are accurate, that would be 9000 cubic feet of *Traveller*

inventory that Judges Guild was sitting on — a pretty major investment in printing costs.



Chaosium's *RuneQuest* was Judges Guild's next license — and the only other one they gave much support to. These books were centered on adventures from the start. Their first publication was Rudy Kraft's *Broken Tree Inn* (1979), a notable supplement because it featured material cut from Chaosium's own *Snake Pipe Hollow* (1979) — though the Glorantha references were removed in the Judges Guild publication. Around the same time, Rudy Kraft ended up working for Judges Guild, though just for a few months. Gigi d'Arn later reported that his resignation after such a short term "had something to do with JG's attitude toward firearms and heroic deeds." Whatever that means.

Rudy Kraft's books would continue to be published by Judges Guild for three more years, well after his departure from full-time work. However his and Paul Jaquays' "Adventures Beyond the Pass," originally intended for Judges Guild, wasn't published by them; Glorantha author Greg Stafford liked it enough that Chaosium published it as *Griffin Mountain* (1981). Judges Guild published *RuneQuest* supplements from 1979–1981; there were a total of six, including five adventures and a *Judges Screen* (1980).

Though *AD&D*, *D&D*, and *Traveller* were Judges Guild's largest lines, the company also published numerous other licensed products from 1978–1981, including a *Chivalry & Sorcery Gamemaster's Shield* (1979) and the first of a few *Tunnels & Trolls* adventures (1980–1983).

By 1980 and 1981, Judges Guild seemed to be flailing with their licensed releases. Before that they would have produced full series of books, like the extensive *Traveller* line and the six or so books for *RuneQuest*. Now they started publishing one-off products, including releases like: *Hazard* (1980), the only adventure ever for Gamescience's *Superhero: 2044* game; a single *Empire of the Petal Throne* adventure (1981), for Gamescience's then-upcoming second edition of the game; and a single adventure for *Villains and Vigilantes* (1981). They were even planning support for GDW's *En Garde!* and FGU's *Starships and Spacemen* — which suggests that they were throwing everything at the wall to see what stuck. Only *DragonQuest* got more attention in these latter days, through a series of three adventures (1982).

"[In five years, Judges Guild will be in] the forefront of the field – after all, we took the first risks which justified doing game aids and, as long as we remain flexible and responsive to gamer's needs, we should stay on top of the new developments."

– Bob Bledsaw, "An Interview with Bob Bledsaw," *Pegasus Magazine #2* (June/July 1981)

As it happens, Judges Guild's work toward finding new product lines and new licenses was really well-advised because they were going to start facing some really big challenges as 1980 came to an end.

Guilded Heights & A Fall: 1980—1981

Things were looking good for Judges Guild as 1980 dawned. They moved into yet another new headquarters, trading a 2400 square foot headquarters for a new one that clocked in at 14,000 square feet — still in Decatur. Around the same time, Judges Guild topped out their employee count at an impressive 42.

The RPG business was generally booming, thanks in part to the new attention brought to it the previous year by the James Egbert affair. It seemed like there was boundless opportunity, so a group of employees — led by Bob Bledsaw's sister, Debi, and her now-husband, Marc Summerlott — split off to form their own company, Group 1. They published over a dozen *Traveller*-licensed books, but the company lasted for only a year or so, and some employees would return to Judges Guild thereafter.

Meanwhile, the quality of Judges Guild's publications began to improve. Their magazines led the way with improved layout, more attractive typesetting, and better (non-pulp) paper stock. Ads for a variety of publishers and occasional

Judges Guild Sales

A listing of cumulative sales from 1981 shows how well some of Judges Guild's early products did:

- **40,000 units.** *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (1977).
- **25,000 units.** *Tegel Manor* (1977), *Village Book I* (1978).
- **20,000 units.** *Campaign Hexagon System* (1977), *City State of the World Emperor* (1980), *Ready Ref Book* (1978), *Wilderlands Hex Sheets* (1978).
- **15,000 units.** *Castle Book I* (1978), *Citadel of Fire* (1978), *Dark Tower* (1979), *Modron* (1977), *The Thieves of Fortress Badabaskor* (1978), *Wilderlands of High Fantasy* (1977)

articles for the *other* RPGs that Judges Guild was licensing even made them look increasingly like generalist magazines.

However, by the end of the year, things started to head in a dangerous direction. The biggest problem was TSR, who opted not to renew Judges Guild's license for *D&D* when it expired in September 1980. *The Book of Treasure Maps II* (1980) and *The Unknown Gods* (1980) were among Judges Guild's final products that bore the older *D&D* logo.

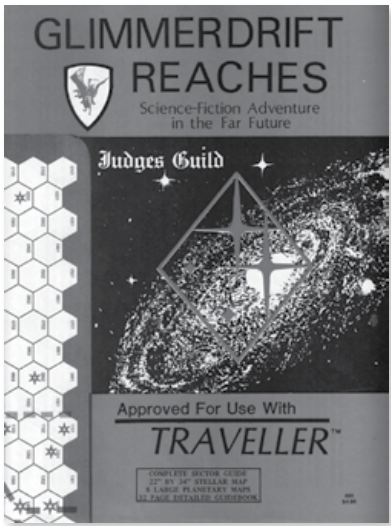
It appears that the Guild managed to hold onto their *AD&D* license for one more year — probably because it had been a newer contract. Adventures like *The Illhiedrin Book* (1981), *Zienteck* (1981), *Trial by Fire* (1981), and Rudy Kraft's *Portals of Twilight* (1981) would finish off that line.

Following the loss of the *D&D* mark, Judges Guild began advertising that they were seeking "projects usable with any FRP system." Thus they joined the crowd producing "generic fantasy" adventures. Though some of their map books like *Castle Book II* (1980) and *Temple Book I* (1981) had opted not to use TSR's trademarks, the *Ravenscrag* (1981) adventure marked the official beginning of Judges Guild's "universal fantasy" line. It was published *before* the end of the *AD&D* line, showing that the Guild was by now planning for its loss.

Later reports indicate that the new universal fantasy supplements tended to sell as well as the older *D&D* and *AD&D* books, probably because Judges Guild was so thoroughly associated with the TSR lines. Unfortunately, TSR wasn't willing to let things be. They took increasingly aggressive steps against Judges Guild, allegedly even telling distributors that they shouldn't carry Judges Guild products if they wanted to continue doing business with TSR.

Meanwhile, the magazines — so recently upgraded — offered the second sign that Judges Guild was down from its heights at the start of the year. Over the course of 1980, both *The Judges Guild Journal* and *The Dungeoneer* had grown somewhat erratic in their publication schedule. Now, Judges Guild revealed that the cost of printing both magazines at full-size was too expensive for them.

Though the Guild considered dropping the magazines down to digest-sized, they ultimately went a different route. *Judges Guild* and *The Dungeoneer* were combined into a special *The Dungeoneer #19/The Judges Guild Journal #22* (August/September/October 1980), which then became *The Dungeoneer Journal #23* (October/November 1980) with its next issue. This combined magazine would only last two more issues, to #25 (February/March 1981), with all these later issues edited by Mike Reagan. Amusingly, that final issue was called *The Dungeoneers Journal* on the cover and *The Dungeoneer's Journal* on the inside. Given Judges Guild's previous inconsistency with column names, it seems as likely as not that these slight name changes for the magazine were accidental.



Long-time creators Chuck Anshell and Bryan Hinnen left around the same time, early in 1981 (leaving the magazines entirely in Reagan's hands). As much as the unification of the magazines, this was a sign that not all was well in Guildland.

Judgement Day: 1981—1983

By mid-1981 Judges Guild had a lot of problems lining up. They'd lost their *D&D* and *AD&D* licenses, and thus had gone from being TSR's right-hand man to just another publisher of "generic fantasy" — though one with a considerable reputation and history. Heavy-handed threats from TSR may have made the success of these generic lines even more difficult.

As we've seen, Judges Guild tried to license other games, but that hadn't worked well either. *Traveller* was getting massively overprinted and not selling well enough, a problem made worse by the fact that Judges Guild guaranteed returns to its distributors. The company's experiment with *RuneQuest* was already over, and they would never commit to more than three products for another licensed line.

They'd also tried to sell a single computer game, but that hadn't worked out well enough to continue.

To be fair, when the new licenses and computer games didn't work out, Judges Guild kept trying different things. Next up, they rebooted their magazines — which by now had a confusing and convoluted history — with *Pegasus #1* (April/May 1981), again edited by Mike Reagan.

It clocked in at 96 pages, which was larger than Judges Guild's old magazines. However it also returned to the pulp-quality pages and even to the pulp covers; the upgrades of the last years were all lost. It was a dangerous direction for Judges Guild; TSR was upgrading their adventures to full-color covers in 1980 and GDW would similarly renovate their "little black book" line in 1982.

> *"Each issue will stress one main theme of Role Playing and permit an indepth [sic] look at the opinions and innovations of Designers and Judges around the world.*
> – Mike Reagan, "Horse Feathers: An Editorial," *Pegasus #1* (April/May 1981)

Pegasus #1 also offered up another big change: it included a "36-page city-state campaign installment," "The Black Ring" by Dan Hauffe. They replaced the old

mailed subscription installments that the company had been founded upon. Now a Guild membership just got you a subscription to *Pegasus*. With issue #3 (1981), that'd be upgraded to also include a 10% discount on *some* products, highlighted in each issue of the magazine. It was clearly the end of an era.

Continuing the trend begun in 1980, *Pegasus* would, over its lifetime, feature articles for not just *D&D*, but also *Arduin Grimoire*, *Champions*, *The Fantasy Trip*, *The Morrow Project*, *RuneQuest*, *Skull & Crossbones*, *Stormbringer*, *Traveller*, *Tunnels & Trolls*, *Villains and Vigilantes*, and even the super small press *Ysgarth*. It was a who's who of RPGs from the time period, no longer just a listing of Judges Guild's licensees. Though most RPG magazines have moved from being generalist to becoming house organs, *Pegasus* went in the opposite direction, doubtless hoping to draw fans of a variety of game systems to their own products — just as they were doing with their more widespread licenses of the '80s.

Judges Guild's most interesting publication in its final years may have been the *Field Guide to Encounters* (1982), essentially a house ruled *D&D* system — not unlike the *Arduin Grimoire* or others of its ilk — produced by a Detroit gaming group called Dragon's Byte. Though incomplete as a roleplaying system, it included many interesting classes like the Astrologer, the Demonist, the Ninja, the Shadow Walker, the Translator, and more. There was an emphasis on psionics and characters were even *expected* to become gods when they reached 20th level.

The game had originally been announced as the "Marvelous Mystic Missive of Mighty Meek and Magical Monsters" and could have been intended as a monster manual in its first incarnation. In any case, the emphasis on monsters was still present, with over 600 appearing in the book, including mythical monsters, monsters from fiction, and really weird stuff too. It was gonzo and like many of Judges Guild's initiatives of the '80s, something they hadn't tried to do before.

Unfortunately, the company was now in full decline. This became obvious first in the pages of *Pegasus*, which saw an ever-changing staff. Chuck Anshell returned to edit it with #3 (1981) then was almost immediately replaced by Edward Mortimer in #5 (December 1981). With issue #9 (August/September 1982), Mark Holmer took over. He was then replaced by Mike Maddin for the final issue, #12 (1983).

"The rumors of our death have been greatly exaggerated."
– Mark Holmer, "Horse Feathers," *Pegasus #9* (August/September 1982)

Judges Guild's need for money became obvious in mid-1982 when they started packing up older supplements in "value packs." The overprinted *Traveller* accessories got the treatment first, with the Guild producing no less than four *Traveller*

value packs, each one discounting $20–25 of products to $15. *Dungeoneer*, *The Judges Guild Journal* and *Pegasus* soon got value packs as well — probably suggesting that magazine backstock didn't sell as well as regular supplements. Many of these value packs have remained available 20 or 30 years after the fall of Judges Guild, showing how big of a problem overprinting was — particularly for the *Traveller* books.

Then one of the worst danger signs of all lit up when Judges Guild missed the Origins convention in late July. Simultaneously, word of layoffs at the company got around. This in part explained the constant turnover at *Pegasus*. Dave Sering was another of the victims.

By the end of the year, Judges Guild was having increasing problems meeting its production schedules. Mid-1982 products like "Lurid Lairs," "Inns & Taverns," and "Falconraid" were advertised but then disappeared entirely. *Tarantis* was first advertised mid-year, but wouldn't appear until 1983. After the staff exodus toward the end of the year, *Pegasus* publication began slipping as well; the editor acknowledged that production problems were (unsurprisingly) arising from lack of staff.

Judges Guild stumbled into 1983 before publishing their final products: *Jungle of Lost Souls* (1983) for *Tunnels & Trolls*; the massive *Tarantis* (1983) FRP supplement, describing another City State in the Wilderlands; and *Pegasus #12* (February/March 1983).

Pegasus #13 was allegedly sent to the printers, but is said to have disappeared somewhere along the way. Judges Guild's next product would probably have been "Supra Sentinels," a superhero RPG that was advertised in both *Pegasus* and *Dragon*.

Judges Guild survived as an enterprise into at least 1984 and possibly 1985. However by then all of the staff had been released. Bob Bledsaw also lost his wife and Judges Guild's accountant to divorce in this time period, leaving him on his own.

Without staff and new product, the company was inevitably doomed. Lou Zocchi helped out Judges Guild by wiring $350 to Bledsaw five times during this time to pay taxes and other bills. He got the rights to five Judges Guild products as a result, as is described in Gamescience's history Similar deals might have been arranged with Mayfair.



At some point, Bledsaw said enough was enough, and turned off the light. By this time much of Judges Guild's extensive inventory was warehoused in a storage place usually used for

boats during the winter. It was eventually sold off in large part to Different Worlds Publications.

We've already seen many of the reasons for this slow decline, from overprinted *Traveller* books to the loss of the *D&D* licenses and the lower quality of Judges Guild's production compared to the rest of the industry. We must add to that the bursting of the initial RPG bubble. 1982 and 1983 were hard times to be a role-playing publisher, especially a holdover from the '70s that was focused (now) on "generic fantasy." Judges Guild was just one of many that died during those years.

Rebirth: 1999—Present

Judges Guild did not declare bankruptcy. Instead they went into hibernation. Though much of their inventory was sold to Tadashi Ehara of Different Worlds, Judges Guild maintained all of their rights. This offered them a unique opportunity for rebirth.

In the meantime, a short-lived *City State of the Invincible Overlord* line (1987–1989) was licensed to Mayfair Games. With permission from Mayfair, Lou Zocchi's Gamescience was also able to publish a new expanded edition of *Tegel Manor* (1989). That was the extent of Judges Guild's influence on the industry, from their initial death until their rebirth 10 years later.

Early in 1999 Judges Guild, led by Bob Bledsaw, returned on the web with a site at judgesguild.com. They began selling original Judges Guild products (warehoused for 15 years) and also started taking new subscriptions for *Pegasus* magazine. The intent was to use the cash flow of the classic sales to fund new products.

> *"The growth of the Internet allows us to reach the customers directly. It is now possible to run Judges Guild without having to depend on a big building and a lot of people in the same place. And, looking at the state of the roleplaying games industry, we think that people need what we do."*
>
> – "Frequently Asked Questions about Judges Guild," judgesguild.com (1999)

Pegasus #14 (1999) appeared along with Judges Guild at the 1999 Gen Con Game Fair. The new Guild also published a new printing of their *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (1999), but that would be it for the Judges Guild as a separate entity. Afterward Judges Guild took the same path as many other first-generation RPG publishers in the d20 age: they became a licensor.

Their first partner was RPGRealms / QuickLinkInteractive. QLI reprinted just two books during the two years that they held the license — *Dark Tower* (2001) and *The Treasury of Archaic Names* (2001) — then got too busy on *T20*, their d20 *Traveller* project, to continue with Judges Guild.

In June 2002 Judges Guild announced a new partnership with Necromancer Games, who would release Judges Guild products starting in 2003. The Necromancer folks — known for their motto of "3rd edition rules, 1st edition feel" — were clearly eager to work with the Guild; they started advertising the upcoming publication of *Wilderlands of High Fantasy* and *City State of the Invincible Overlord* almost immediately. Clark Peterson of Necromancer even ran "Return to the Caverns of Thracia," based on an old Judges Guild adventure, as a tournament at the 2002 Gen Con Game Fair.

Necromancer held the Judges Guild license from 2003–2006 and was the most successful d20 publisher of Judges Guild material. They released huge, professional editions of *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (2004) and *Wilderlands of High Fantasy* (2005) that have already become collectors' items. Besides a *Player's Guide to the Wilderlands* (2003), Necromancer also put out their revamped *Caverns of Thracia* (2004), but that was the extent of Necromancer's publication before *their* license lapsed.

Starting in 2007, production became much more scattered.

Goodman Games put out two more Judges Guild adventures (2007), but those largely marked the final professional print publication of Judges Guild books, also marking the end of the rebirth.

Afterward, Adventure Games Publishing, a new company formed by James Mishler (of *Comics & Games Retailer*) and Bob Bledsaw, put out about two dozen books, most of them small press home-printed digests which were later made available as PDFs. Rather than using the traditional Wilderlands, these were set in the "Wilderlands of High Adventure," a variant of the classic setting created by Mishler. Rather than straight d20, these books used Troll Lord Games' *Castles & Crusades* system. Adventure Games Publishing closed on March 8, 2010, following the publication of *100 Street Vendors of the City State* (2010), which Mishler said sold only 2 print copies and 13 PDF copies.

Simultaneously, Bat in the Attic Games created another variant of the standard Wilderlands setting in *Supplement VI: The Majestic Wilderlands* (2009), which was released as a PDF and a print-on-demand book.

As Judges Guild was moving toward small press status, another event occurred which probably marked the true end of the Guild. Bob Bledsaw died on April 19, 2008. Though his son, Bob Jr., said he would be taking over the company, only one product has been produced since: *Lost Man's Trail* (2010), a generic sourcebook produced directly by Judges Guild. It was described as Bob Bledsaw's final contribution to the world of the Wilderlands.

More recently, Judges Guild has been playing with various ways to reenter the market. First, they tried licensing: *City-State of the Sea Kings* (2013), produced by

Chris Bernhardt, was a semi-professional book set in the classic Wilderlands and released with Judges Guild's approval. Then, they turned to Kickstarter: they raised $85,130 from 965 backers to produce a new version of the original *City-State of the Invincible Overlord* (2014?). Either path could offer a viable future for the company.

Bob Bledsaw was kind enough to read and comment on the first edition of this history prior to his death.

What to Read Next

- For the company that got Judges Guild its start, read ***TSR***.
- For other companies that distributed RPG products, read ***Games Workshop*** and ***Gamescience***.
- For other Dave Arneson work of the '70s, read ***Heritage Models*** and (of course) ***TSR***.
- For other early Judges Guild licensors, read ***Chaosium***, ***FGU***, ***Flying Buffalo***, and ***GDW***.
- For some later work by Paul Jaquays, read ***Flying Buffalo***.
- For even more gonzo *D&D* house rules, read ***Grimoire Games***.
- For another house organ that went generalist, read about *Challenge* from ***GDW***.
- For more on Lou Zocchi's loans and the products he got, read ***Gamescience***.

In Other Eras

- For a future company with a subscription-based sales model, read ***Paizo Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For the company that bought most of Judges Guild's stock, read ***Different Worlds Publications*** *['80s]*.
- For future publishers of the City State, read ***Mayfair Games*** *['80s]* and ***Necromancer Games*** *['00s]*.
- For a d20 Judges Guild licensee, read ***Goodman Games*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to the center of the science-fiction board gaming genre, ***Metagaming***.



Part Three:

The First Wargaming Wave

(1976–1977)

The wargaming industry of the '70s was broadly split into two parts. On the amateur side, you had miniatures enthusiasts. They shared game systems via numerous fanzines but didn't generally engage in mass-market publication. On the professional side, you had board game publishers who put out chit-driven games on actual boards. Avalon Hill and SPI led this pack. Over time it would be the fully professional producers of wargaming board games who would most frequently move to the roleplaying industry, but in the first wargaming wave, things were a bit more scattered.

Gamescience, which got into the hobbyist industry in 1965, was one of the earliest small press producers of ***wargaming board games***. Their entry into the roleplaying field was similar to GDW's a few years previous and would be much more typical of the next two waves.

A surprisingly large number of ***wargaming miniatures*** companies also jumped into the roleplaying business during this first wargaming wave — surprising because there were so few professional publishers in the niche. Two were of particular note: Heritage Models, primarily a producer of actual miniatures, and FGU, who initially modeled themselves after the miniatures-focused publication of TSR's first year.

Finally, you had ***fantasy and science-fiction board game*** publishers. This was a new trend of the '70s, where small press companies might publish not just historical wargames, but also science-fiction or fantasy wargames — the latter usually based on battles from *Lord of the Rings*. Metagaming Concepts was at the center of the movement with their *Space Gamer* magazine, while Chaosium and Little Soldier Games were both newcomers with just a few publications under their belts.

The small size of the wargame publishers who initially moved over to the roleplaying industry was indicative of the small size of the hobby to that date ... but it was growing.

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Metagaming Concepts	1975–1983	*Monsters! Monsters!* (1976)	211
FGU	1975–1991+	*Bunnies & Burrows* (1976)	234
Little Soldier Games	*1975–1978*	*The Book of Monsters (1976)*	299
Chaosium	1975-	*All the Worlds' Monsters* (1977)	253
Gamescience	1965-	*Space Patrol* (1977)	288
Heritage Models	1974–1983	*Dungeonmasters' Index* (1977)	310

Metagaming Concepts: 1975–1983

Metagaming Concepts — better known simply as Metagaming — was primarily a board game publisher. However in the roleplaying industry they're well-known for the early best-selling RPG, The Fantasy Trip, which came about almost by accident.

Board Game Beginnings: 1975–1976

Metagaming was founded in Austin, Texas by Howard Thompson in 1975. At the time he was working on "Stellar Conquest," which was what's now known as a 4X science-fiction wargame — where you eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, and eXterminate. It had simple technological development and limited fog of war, such that other players didn't know your capabilities until they encountered you. Thompson also claims that it was "among the first science fiction simulation games ... [and] the first simulation at the society level."



1976: Monsters! Monsters!

Despite its innovations, no one was interested in publishing Thompson's game — so he decided to start his own company, Metagaming, to do so. *Stellar Conquest* (1975) was Metagaming's first release.

Early SF&F Games

In its early issues, *The Space Gamer* offered up ratings of the most popular science-fiction and fantasy games then on the market. Today these game listings provide an intriguing window on the nascent "space gamer" market of 1975 that existed just as *Dungeons & Dragons* appeared and spread.

The following listing notes all the tabletop games mentioned in the ratings in *The Space Gamer*'s 1975 issues. All ratings are on a nine-point scale and appear to be cumulative over the three 1975 issues.

- *Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR, 1974 – rated 8.46)
- *Stellar Conquest* (Metagaming, 1975 – rated 8.33)
- *Lensman* (Spartan International, 1969 – rated 7.28)
- *StarForce* (SPI, 1974 – rated 7.17)
- *Assassin! The Game of Time Travel* (SDC, 1972 – rated 7.14)
- *Triplanetary* (GDW, 1973 – rated 6.89)
- *Chainmail* (Guidon, 1971+ – rated 6.86)
- *Star Probe* (TSR, 1975 – rated 6.81)
- *Starlord* (Self-published, 1972 – rated 6.64)
- *Alien Space Battle Manual* (Lou Zocchi, 1973 – rated 6.35)
- *Siege of Minas Tirith* (Fact & Fantasy, 1975 – rated 6.20)
- *4000 A.D.* (Waddingtons, 1972 – rated 5.49)
- *Empire I* (Third Millennia, 1973 – rated 4.83)
- *The Battle of Helm's Deep* (Fact & Fantasy, 1974 – rated 4.77)
- *Battle of the Five Armies* (LORE / JMJ, 1975 – rated 4.74)
- *Second Galactic War* (Third Millennia, 1973 – rated 4.30)
- *Rigelian Wars* (Jagdpanther, 1974 – rated 3.50)

Most of these publishers were small press, with SPI being the only "big" wargame company to jump into the market. Many of these small press companies would follow TSR into the roleplaying market, including Gamescience, GDW, Metagaming, and Jagdpanther (the last in its next incarnation, as Task Force Games).

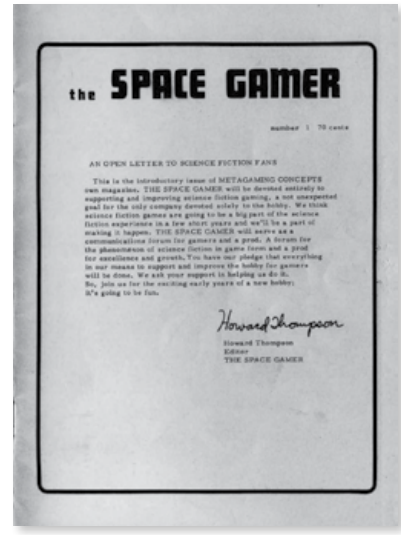
TSR's publication of *Star Probe* – the first of what was to be a trilogy of games – was also notable. At the time it got a lot of attention, but TSR only ended up publishing two of the three planned games, by which time they'd realized what a big deal *Dungeons & Dragons* actually was.

Stellar Conquest was clearly a success. TSR themselves published several articles about the game in *The Dragon #10* (October 1977) through *The Dragon #36* (April 1980). Metagaming meanwhile shepherded the game through three editions (1975–1979); it was later reprinted as an Avalon Hill bookcase game (1984).

Over the next two years, Metagaming published two more big-box games. The next was Thompson's *The Ythri* (1975) — based on Poul Anderson's science-fiction novel, *The People of the Wind* (1973). Metagaming's third game started off with the somewhat difficult name "Wars of the Narym" but was eventually published as *Godsfire* (1976). This 3-D space conquest game was designed by Lynn Willis, who would later go on to great acclaim at Chaosium.

> *"Charles Roberts, founder of the Avalon Hill Co., will always hold a high place in my regard. I remember finding my first wargame, a shelf worn* Tactics II*, in an Austin discount house at age fourteen."*
>
> – Howard Thompson, Editorial, *The Space Gamer #20* (November/December 1978)

Metagaming's other major creation of its early years was its own science-fiction and fantasy gaming magazine: *The Space Gamer* (1975–1980, under Metagaming). Initially a house organ, *The Space Gamer* was able to considerably boost Metagaming's early growth — and was pretty successful on its own terms as well. It gained enough subscribers within six weeks of the publication of its first issue to justify its publication. Circulation may have been as high as 500 by the time *The Space Gamer #2* (1975) appeared. By the publication of *The Space Gamer #5* (March-May 1976), the three part-time staff members of Metagaming were having trouble keeping up with the correspondence generated by the magazine, resulting in Thompson splitting the company up between business and creative staff. Increasing circulation let the magazine go bimonthly with *The Space Gamer #6* (June/July 1976) and by *#7* (August/September 1976), Thompson was talking about hitting 2,000–3,000 subscribers in 1977.


the SPACE GAMER

number 1 75 cents

AN OPEN LETTER TO SCIENCE FICTION FANS

This is the introductory issue of METAGAMING CONCEPTS own magazine, THE SPACE GAMER will be devoted entirely to supporting and improving science fiction gaming, a not unexpected goal for the only company devoted solely to the hobby. We think science fiction games are going to be a big part of the science fiction experience in a few short years and we'll be a part of making it happen. THE SPACE GAMER will serve as a communications forum for gamers and a prod. A forum for the phenomenon of science fiction in game form and a prod for excellence and growth. You have our pledge that everything in our means to support and improve the hobby for gamers will be done. We ask your support in helping us do it. So, join us for the exciting early years of a new hobby; it's going to be fun.

Howard Thompson

Howard Thompson
Editor
THE SPACE GAMER

However, Thompson's goals for Metagaming were much greater than just the production of a few games and a house mouthpiece. The creation of his company

has been part of a general move toward science-fiction board games. Small publishers printed them throughout the early '70s, leading up to SPI's publication of *StarForce* (1974) — the first fully professional science-fiction board game. Meanwhile, small press board games based on *The Lord of the Rings* were opening up the fantasy side of the equation as well. Thompson was thinking about this small but growing subgenre of gaming when he announced Metagaming's primary goal: "to develop a sustainable market for SF&F games."

As a result, *The Space Gamer* would rapidly expand beyond its origins as a house organ. Though early issues focused on Metagaming's *Stellar Conquest* and *The Ythri*, Thompson also published reviews of other publishers' games, news about the industry, and general articles speculating about the scientific future. This coverage exploded in *The Space Gamer #6* (June/July 1976), the first issue to offer up substantial articles on other publishers' games — including discussions of McEwan Miniatures' *Starguard!* (1974) and SPI's then-forthcoming *StarSoldier* (1977). There was even a brief article about introducing monsters from outer space into *any* board game. It was by a new contributor by the name of Steve Jackson, who we'll be meeting in more depth shortly.

By the end of 1976 Metagaming also had a third goal for *The Space Gamer*. They were using it as a marketplace to sell the products of other companies, such as TSR. This sort of thing was pretty common in the '70s, when the hobbyist market was still severely fragmented. Though Metagaming never sold other products as more than a sideline, for a short time it was an important aspect of their business.

Because of its origins as a house organ, Metagaming remained able to use *The Space Gamer* as a conduit to its fans, constantly querying them as to their likes and dislikes. In #7, they asked about several product lines that they were considering. Looking back, it seems like Thompson really wanted to produce computer games, which he'd talked up several times in previous issues. However, he also mentioned the possibility of something he called "MicroGames" — and that mention would result in a totally new direction for Metagaming as 1977 dawned.

Roleplaying Beginnings: 1975—1977

Metagaming's premiere publications — *Stellar Conquest* and *The Space Gamer #1* — suggested that the company's focus was science-fiction, not fantasy. It seems likely that was Thompson's greatest interest as well, as his earliest editorials all focused on the science-fiction side of things. However, *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) was making waves in the miniatures and board game hobbies, and Thompson couldn't ignore that. Therefore *D&D* and other early roleplaying games got surprisingly good attention, starting with *The Space Gamer #2*.

Much of that support came about through reviews. Reading through those issues of *The Space Gamer* today is like marching through the earliest days of the gaming industry. *Dungeons & Dragons* got two reviews in *The Space Gamer #2*, and then *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975) got reviews in *The Space Gamer #3* and *#4*. *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975) got some love in the latter issue as well. Though there was no roleplaying coverage in *The Space Gamer #5*, Chaosium's first Glorantha product, *White Bear and Red Moon* (1975), was featured. After that, *Eldritch Wizardry* (1976) was reviewed in *The Space Gamer #7*.

That's Not an RPG!

In 1975 and 1976, *The Space Gamer* featured early fantasy and science-fiction roleplaying games in its ranking lists, among them *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975), *Monsters! Monsters!* (1976), and *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975). Early pseudo-RPGs such as TSR's *Boot Hill* (1975) and GDW's *En Garde!* (1975) are notably missing, presumably because Howard Thompson thought the genre of science-fiction and fantasy more important than the medium of roleplaying games when deciding what to include.

Those early *Space Gamer* ratings lists also included three "RPG" products that would never be considered such today: *Chainmail* (1971+), *Citadel* (1976), and *Royal Armies of the Hyborean Age* (1975). It shows that the RPG industry was so new that people hadn't yet developed a common definition for what it included.

TSR's *Chainmail* was of course the immediate precursor to *Dungeons & Dragons*. Because its combat rules were used in the first version of *D&D*, it was sort of a supplement – which is probably why it was included.

FGU's *Citadel* was a dungeon crawl board game, where one player set up the dungeon and the other tried to fight his way in. Unlike true roleplaying games, each game was a one-off experience, but given how competitive the early RPG industry was – where games really were *battles* between gamemaster and players – it's easy to see why this game was included.

FGU's *Royal Armies of the Hyborean Age* is the most puzzling inclusion, as it's a unit-level wargame. It might have snuck in due to its inclusion of heroes and superheroes, but then Chaosium's *White Bear and Red Moon* (1975) had the same thing and was listed as a fantasy board game rather than an RPG.

By the time *The Space Gamer #8* (October/November 1976) closed out the magazine's 1976 run, these three games had the lowest ratings of the magazines "fantasy roleplaying games" – which was probably the readers' way of saying that the games didn't meet *their* expectations of RPGs either.

Though no RPG reviews appeared in *The Space Gamer #6*, that doesn't mean that Metagaming neglected RPG coverage. As we've already seen, that was the issue that expanded *The Space Gamer* beyond being a house mouthpiece. That issue *also* featured Metagaming's first original roleplaying content. "The Emperor is Dead," by Robert Large Jr., was fiction set in the world of *EPT* while "Tips for Diabolical Dungeon Masters" was a *D&D* article full of advice from Stephen Dorneman on how to deal with troublesome PCs — and troublesome in that era meant players who tried to "beat" the DM by doing things like mapping the dungeons.

That issue also announced that Metagaming was expanding into the nascent RPG field in a much bigger way: through the publication of their own roleplaying game. *Monsters! Monsters!* (1976) was a design by Ken St. Andre that was closely related to his popular *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975) game. According to St. Andre, the name for the game came from his own players: "At the least sign of trouble, people would bolt for the exits screaming, 'Monsters! Monsters!'" In the new game, players could actually take on the roles of those monsters — a first for the roleplaying industry.

St. Andre — who had rather famously designed *Tunnels & Trolls* in just three days — had created *Monsters! Monsters!* almost a year earlier, in November 1975. The next January, Thompson could already see the hobbyist industry trending toward RPGs, and thus agreed to publish the game. Once the game got to Metagaming it was developed by Steve Jackson — a young game designer that we've already met in passing. According to *The Space Gamer*, it was scheduled to be shipped to the public on August 5, 1976.

> *"I was sitting around the Metagaming office, trying to recover from two months of working on* Monsters! Monsters! *I still twitched every time someone said 'old piece.'"*
>
> – Steve Jackson, "Producing *Godsfire*,"
> *The Space Gamer #11*(April/May/June 1977)

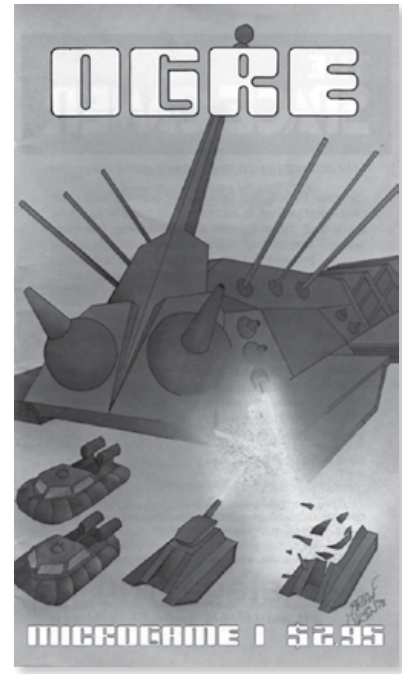
Monsters! Monsters! could have been Metagaming's big entry into roleplaying. However the game was unsupported after its initial release — which was not too uncommon for RPGs in that time period. Today we can only speculate as to why: perhaps it was because St. Andre was busier with *T&T* work for Flying Buffalo, and perhaps it was because Metagaming was about to find more success with their *next* big thing. In any case, the license for *Monsters! Monsters!* would pass on to Flying Buffalo in 1979, by which time Metagaming would be deep at work on an RPG that would be all their own — and based on that same breakout product that we've touched upon a few times.

MicroGames.

The MicroGame Breakout: 1977—1982

In late 1976, things were changing at Metagaming, and those changes were first hinted at in the pages of *The Space Gamer #8* (October/November 1976). To start with, Howard Thompson announced that he was stepping down from editorship of *The Space Gamer*, handing over the reins to C. Ben Ostrander. Thompson's other announcement in that issue was of much more importance to the future of the company. That's where he talked about the popularity of his *MicroGame* idea, saying that readers were particularly enthusiastic about "[the lower] price and the shorter playtime."

Thompson was able to satisfy these requirements by creating the *MicroGames* each as a very small game with a compact map, a limited set of components, and a short set of rules. The whole thing was packaged in a small Ziploc bag and initially sold for $2.95. The games were quite cheap for the market at the time — about $11 in modern money — but nonetheless allowed for a good amount of enjoyment and replay-ability. Thompson did well to listen to his fans, because the result was Metagaming's big breakout.



The first *MicroGame* was a game of futuristic combat, where a monster tank fought against hapless infantry. It was called *Ogre* (1977) and was the first design by now-experienced developer Steve Jackson. *Ogre* was one of two games set in a futuristic universe that Jackson created for Metagaming, the other being *G.E.V.* (1978), *MicroGame #8*.

Having gotten the idea off the ground, Thompson was publishing *MicroGame*s fast and furious. Lynn Willis even returned to do a few of these designs: *Olympica* (1978), *MicroGame #7*, and *Holy War* (1979), *MicroGame #13*. Over a five-year period, Metagaming produced a total of 22 *MicroGames* in their original fantasy and science-fiction series, the last being *Helltank Destroyer* (1982), *MicroGame #22*. They also published a shorter series of five *Historical MicroGame*s beginning with *Rommel's Panzers* (1978) and ending with *Fire When Ready* (1982).

The *MicroGame*s also led to Metagaming's first licensee. They gave Martian Metals the right to produce miniatures for their *MicroGame*s. This immediately led to beautiful *Ogre* minis, but would also result in miniatures for many of

Metagaming's other *MicroGame*s, such as "chitin" miniatures for *MicroGame #2*, *Chitin: I* (1978) — a game that featured art by Paul Jaquays, yet another RPG personality, and one better known for his work with Judges Guild and Flying Buffalo.

While the MicroGames generally did well, two of them would soon lead to something much bigger for Thompson's company — and much more important to the history of roleplaying.



A Fantasy Trip Begins: 1977—1978

By 1977 Metagaming developer and designer Steve Jackson was becoming increasingly involved with RPGs, including *Dungeons & Dragons*. However, he had two notable issues with *D&D*. First, he found the various-sized dice "irritating," and second, he found the combat rules "confusing and unsatisfying." In particular, he didn't like the lack of tactics. So he set out to design something different.

To aid in his research for his own combat system, Jackson went to the SCA. He wanted to gain a more visceral understanding of actual combat — or at least the next best thing — but he soon became more interested, and started fighting in SCA as Vargskol the Viking-Celt. Meanwhile, he continued work on his game.

The result was *Melee* (1977), *MicroGame #3*. It was an arena combat game where each player generated a character by purchasing Strength, Dexterity, and equipment. Then these characters fought via a tactical combat system that used six-sided dice rather than all those weird dice found in *D&D*.

Even in its original state as a tactical combat game, *Melee* offered some innovative ideas for the roleplaying industry, notably:

- It was built on a point-based character creation system. Until that point (and for quite some time afterward) random character generation was the core of almost every RPG system.
- Its combat was indeed tactical, a style of combat that was rarely exploited by the roleplaying mainstream in the next 20 years. The tactical combat of *Melee* worked because it was also very playable; it was simple, yet allowed for thoughtful play, all without paging through charts and tables.

When designing *Melee*, Jackson realized that it could become something larger; he saw the possibility to expand it into a full fantasy roleplaying game that could compete with *D&D*. Even before *Melee* was released, Metagaming started advertising that full RPG system, calling it alternatively "The Fantasy Trip" (*TFT*) and "In the Labyrinth."



"The overall name for the system is The Fantasy Trip. *We think it'll be the next evolutionary step in fantasy gaming … bringing Order to Chaos, one might say."*

– Steve Jackson, "Designer's Notebook," *The Space Gamer #12* (July/August 1977)

The next step in the creation of *TFT* came that year when Jackson put together the magic rules, which were published as *Wizard* (1978), *MicroGame #6*. This new game contained better components than *Melee*, featured a higher price point of $3.95 (compared to the standard *MicroGame* price of $2.95), and was published in a huge first edition of 30,000 units.



Jackson now thought he was halfway done with his roleplaying game.

Shortly thereafter, Metagaming published *MicroQuest #1*, *Death Test* (1978). This was a short adventure for use with *Melee* or *Wizard*. It was intended for solo play — an area already pioneered by Flying Buffalo's *Tunnels & Trolls*. Though *Death Test* was successful, additional *MicroQuests* would have to wait for the full release of *The Fantasy Trip*.

And that, unfortunately, took a long time. Though *The Fantasy Trip* was originally scheduled for February 1978, the design and development were much more work than Jackson expected. It would be March 1980 before the full game was finally released ... and ultimately not quite in the form that Jackson had hoped.

The Metagaming/Jackson Split: 1980—1981

The Fantasy Trip was nearing publication in late 1979. Jackson and Thompson planned for it to be released as a boxed set with a $20 retail price. However as 1980 dawned, that quickly fell apart.

Thompson decided that the $20 price point — which would be about $54 in today's currency — was too high, and so he split the product into four books: *Advanced Melee* (1980), which had the combat extensions to the *Melee* system; *Advanced Wizard* (1980), which had the magic extensions; *In the Labyrinth* (1980), which had the gamemaster rules; and *Tollenkar's Lair* (1980), which was a "stocked labyrinth" (or GM adventure). The four separate books summed to $18; it was $2 cheaper than the box would have been, and the books could be purchased individually if desired. A second *MicroQuest*, *Death Test 2* (1980) shortly followed; it would end up being Jackson's last publication for his original RPG.



"TFT: In the Labyrinth is finally out. After two years … Whew. I'm not overly pleased with the way it finally was produced – neither am I ashamed of it. It is definitely not everything I wanted, but it's still (at least) an improvement in the state of the art."

– Steve Jackson,
"Where We're Going,"
The Space Gamer #27
(March/April 1980)

While *TFT* was being prepared, Thompson also changed his production methods, and Jackson was no longer able to check the final proofs of the game, as he had with earlier releases. Jackson was unhappy both with this and with *TFT*'s split release. As a result, he left Metagaming. Then in 1980 he formed Steve Jackson Games, where he could have the final say on production without having to worry about someone else's oversight.

At first the split seemed entirely amicable. Jackson bought *The Space Gamer* from Metagaming and used it as a cornerstone of his company. He began publication with *The Space Gamer #27* (March/April 1980). There was continued coverage of Metagaming products, including a company report by Howard Thompson.



This coverage continued through *The Space Gamer #28* (May/June 1980). In May, Jackson and Thompson also came to an agreement wherein all of the rights for *The Fantasy Trip* were sold to Metagaming. Conversely, somewhere in this time period *Ogre* and *G.E.V.* were sold back to Jackson — or so Jackson thought.

Unfortunately things went downhill from there. The Metagaming company reports abruptly stopped with *The Space Gamer #29* (July/August 1980). Then in early October, as Steve Jackson Games was getting its first set of board games ready for distribution, Thompson claimed that he owned the rights to one of them — a short wargame called *One-Page Bulge* (1980) — because Jackson had previously pitched it to him.

Thompson got a restraining order that temporarily stopped Jackson from selling *any* of his new games. It was quickly put aside, but Thompson's lawsuit against Jackson lasted for another year. In the end an agreement was reached on November 26, 1981 that gave Jackson full rights to *One-Page Bulge* as well as *Ogre* and *G.E.V.* — whose ownership had been called into question during the proceedings.

By early 1980 Jackson already stated that he was not planning to have much more to do with *The Fantasy Trip*, and after the year-long lawsuit by Thompson, that was assured. Thereafter his story is found exclusively in the history of Steve Jackson Games.

TFT after Jackson: 1980—1981

At first it looked like Metagaming would continue strongly following Jackson's departure. They kept publishing *MicroGames*, but more notably they pushed hard on *TFT*. Initially this consisted of two or three more *MicroQuests*, including Guy McLimore's Arthurian *GrailQuest* (1980) and Howard Thompson's *Treasure of the Silver Dragon* (1980). Around June of 1980, following *GrailQuest*'s publication, McLimore also became *TFT*'s new line editor

Silver Dragon deserves a bit of additional comment because it was uniquely marketed by a link to a real world treasure hunt: if readers figured out the clues in the book, they could discover a real-world treasure and receive a $10,000 check from Metagaming. It was perhaps the earliest of a few major contests that appeared in the '80s in the roleplaying industry. However, there must have been some

disappointment when Thomas Davidson — a chemical physics student at the University of Texas — found the Dragon after just six weeks. It had been hidden near a solar research facility in Sunspot, New Mexico.

> *"The best story was the young man who talked to me at Gencon. Seems his father works at the Solar Observatory at Sunspot. He had* Treasure of the Silver Dragon. *He never recognized the vacuum tower for what it was. He played the game and tried to figure out the clues. But, his mind set was such that he couldn't recognize the familiar for what it was. The Dragon was two miles down the road."*
>
> – Howard Thompson, "Designer's Notes: *Treasure of Unicorn Gold*," *Interplay #3* (September/October 1981)

Unfortunately by 1981 cracks began to appear in Metagaming's façade — most of them the result of the upheaval of 1980.

To start with, the company decided that selling off *The Space Gamer* had been a mistake, and they were forced to begin publishing a new periodical: *Interplay: The Metagamer Diaries #1* (May/June 1981). Unfortunately, it wasn't up to Metagaming's previous standards. The magazine's black & white covers were a clear step down from the glossy full-color covers of *The Space Gamer*. Its interior also looked a lot more like the fannish magazines then being produced by Judges Guild than *Interplay*'s more distinguished predecessor. Indeed, the content was mainly fan produced, with editor Trace Hallowell admitting, "Your work will hardly be edited at all" in the second issue (July/August 1982).

Meanwhile, *TFT* lost its second line editor when McLimore stepped down on July 1, 1981, after just a year at the helm. He'd been editing from afar — instead of at the Metagaming home base in Texas — and this was his stated reason for leaving. McLimore went on to co-found Fantasimulations Associates with Greg Poehlin and David Tepool, who are best known as the creators of FASA's *Star Trek* RPG (1983) — though they also published the only official *TFT Character Record Sheets* (1982).

Later that year, Metagaming brought on Kevin Hendryx — a former freelancer, who had since been "trained" at TSR — as their Product Development Manager and the third line editor for *TFT*, but he only stuck around until 1982. This quick turnover of line editors would probably be one of the major reasons that *TFT* never reached its considerable potential — and why Metagaming increasingly seemed to be flailing from 1981 onward.

The Rest of *The Fantasy Trip:* 1981—1982

Metagaming published four more *TFT MicroQuests*, for eight total. John W. Colbert's *Security Station* (1981), *MicroQuest #5*, was probably the oddest, because it combined science-fiction and fantasy. Meanwhile, *Master of the Amulets* (1981), *MicroQuest #7*, showed an attempt to push the solo adventure envelope, as it wasn't built around the typical numbered paragraphs of the genre.

Thompson also returned to the treasure hunt idea with his *Treasure of Unicorn Gold* (1981), *MicroQuest #6*. He said that it was a "harder treasure hunt" and that it required "a more holistic approach." He was certainly right about the "harder" part, as month after month in *Interplay*, Thompson reported that people were still looking for the treasure, but that no one was close.

By the early '80s the RPG solo adventure market was starting to fade, in part due to the ease of finding real opponents in the growing RPG world, and in part due to the release of much simpler solo game books such as *Fighting Fantasy* (1982). This put a crimp in *TFT*'s publication plans. Fortunately Thompson had already come to a realization that *TFT* was being held back by a lack of "campaign adventures" (meaning GM adventures). Even better, he learned that the staff of small RPG publisher Gamelords were fans of *TFT* — and thus a source of possible adventures. In 1982 Thompson signed an agreement with Gamelords to create a campaign world for *TFT*. Metagaming and Gamelords jointly published the first two campaign/adventure books, *The Forest-Lords of Dihad* (1982) and *The Warrior-Lords of Darok* (1982). However Thompson terminated this agreement before any further work was done; two later books — originally intended for *TFT* — were instead published by Gamelords as supplements for their own *Thieves' Guild* game system. Alongside *Orb Quest* (1982), *MicroQuest #8*, those adventures were the final publications for the *TFT* system proper.

However, Keith Gross' *TFT*-related games also deserve some attention. Gross got the ball rolling with *The Lords of Underearth* (1981), *MicroGame #18*. It was a larger-scale tactical warfare game for portraying battles between dwarves and orcs. Though *not* a *TFT* game, *Lords* did include rules for converting *TFT* characters into *Underearth* counters (and vice-versa).

Gross then began work on a design he called "Conquerors of Underearth," which used the larger-scale maps (and numerous units) of *Lords of Underearth*, but with regular *TFT* characters. He found the results a little slow, and thus began simplifying the *TFT* rules to allow for this sort of unit combat. The result was *Dragons of Underearth* (1982), essentially a simplified version of *The Fantasy Trip* — though one that didn't offer either credit or royalties to Steve Jackson. Unfortunately,

Conquerors was never published and as a result *Dragons of Underearth* is now a weird appendix to Metagaming's *TFT* production.

Oddly, Gross wasn't the only designer working on a new iteration of *TFT* in those final years of Metagaming's game production. William Gustafson, the author of the *Fantasy Master's Codex* (1981) — an index to *The Fantasy Trip* — started work on a second edition of the game in late 1981. By 1982, following Kevin Hendryx's departure, Gustafson was increasingly becoming Metagaming's *TFT* guy. He started answering the official Q&A for the game, and continued working on his revision of the game. But it was another project that would not appear.

Generally, Metagaming announced *lots* of *TFT* projects that never showed up. They talked up "In the Name of Justice," a superhero *TFT* game for over a year. They also mentioned "High Noon," which would have been a Western *TFT*, and a science-fiction *TFT* at various times. Unfortunately, none of these *TFT* projects appeared either.

In its day *The Fantasy Trip* did very well. Various sources rank it as the second or third most popular fantasy RPG of the period, following *Dungeons & Dragons* and (possibly) Chaosium's *RuneQuest*.

The Fantasy Trip was also somewhat influential. We can see its ideas of tactical combat reflected in SPI's *DragonQuest* (1980) and Heritage USA's *Swordbearer* (1982). Likewise the idea of point-based character generation soon came into much broader use in the industry, with Hero Games' *Champions* (1981) being the next notable entrant. Finally, Steve Jackson's own *GURPS* (1986) game would feature many of the same elements as *TFT*, beginning with the tactical combat system presented in *Man to Man* (1985).

Unfortunately, *TFT*'s potential was soon to be lost beneath Metagaming's own problems.

Final Trends: 1981—1983

By the early '80s there were many publishers putting out *MicroGame*-like releases including Heritage USA, Mayfair, Steve Jackson Games, Task Force Games, and TSR. The niche was getting very crowded, and many of the games being produced by other publishers were nicer and better designed than Metagaming's later publications. Fortunately for Metagaming, they were moving heavily toward *TFT* by this time. It was about half of the company's production, and it filled the vast majority of each issue of *Interplay*. There was even talk of a new *TFT*-only magazine.

Despite this, Metagaming was still doing *some* innovative work in the *MicroGame* industry. Greg Costikyan's *Trailblazer* (1981), *MicroGame #20*, was

probably Metagaming's biggest breakout success in their final years of publication. It was essentially a space trading game built on a supply-and-demand simulation. It got fair attention in the roleplaying community and was soon being adapted by players as a trading system for GDW's *Traveller* (1977).

More often, Metagaming seemed to be working to recapture past glory. For example, when they'd tried to hold onto Steve Jackson's *Ogre* and *G.E.V.*, it was because they wanted to produce a whole series of *Ogre* games. When Jackson reclaimed all his rights in late 1981, Metagaming instead produced *Helltank* (1981), *MicroGame #19*, and soon followed that up with *Helltank Destroyer* (1982), *MicroGame #22*.

Metagaming also began work on a totally new SF RPG that followed the successful formula used by *TFT*. They kicked off the game by publishing its man-to-man tactical combat system as *Starleader: Assault!* (1982), *MicroGame #21*. It was to be followed by "Starleader: Warships," the ship combat system, and eventually a full RPG — but that was another unfulfilled promise.

1982 — Metagaming's final year of production — opened somewhat optimistically with the official incorporation of Metagaming Concepts Inc. Prentice-Hall also began distributing some *TFT* books to the book trade. Overall, it looked like Metagaming was stepping up to the new level of professionalism required of RPG publishers in the '80s.

Metagaming had simultaneously incorporated Games Research Group Inc. Then on April 16, 1982, Howard Thompson laid off his two remaining wargame designers from Metagaming. They immediately began working for Games Research Group as freelancers rather than employees. Thompson tried to spin all of this as a division of labor, with Metagaming taking on publishing, marketing, sales, and distribution while Games Research did product development and licensing. In retrospect, that employee layoff actually looks like the first sign of a failing company.

> *"Adventure gaming has expanded to games marginally related to traditional appeals. Some of it has been in bad taste."*
>
> – Howard Thompson, "Coming Distractions," Interplay #8 (September/October 1982)

Things came to a head in summer when Metagaming "moved offices," apparently due to their lease expiring. Because they didn't immediately rent new space, their phone lines were down for two full weeks. The industry gossip mill wrote Metagaming off as dead. The appearance of *Interplay #8* (September/October 1982) was therefore somewhat surprising. Within its pages, Howard Thompson said that he was going to "plan for the future" now that weaker companies had

been killed by the RPG bust of the early '80s. He also highlighted Metagaming's big three series — *TFT*, *Helltank*, and *Starleader* — and promised the impending release of products like "Starleader: Warships," "Conquerors of Underearth," and "In the Name of Justice."

But as we've seen, none of those actually appeared.

> *"Effective right now, Metagaming Inc. has ceased marketing and production services. It's basically a decision on my part. It hasn't been fun for me for a couple of years."*
>
> – Howard Thompson, Press Release (April 1983)

It took several more months — until April 1983 — for Metagaming to *officially* cease operations. The underlying reasons were not explained, but we can surmise that the loss of Jackson, the resulting lawsuit, the crowded *MicroGames* market, the bursting of the first RPG bubble, and decreasing solo game sales might all have contributed.

Also, as Thompson said, "It hasn't been fun...for a couple of years." Generally, Thompson seemed to resent the increasing commercialization of the roleplaying hobby — a topic he wrote of at length in an essay called "Requiem for a Golden Age" in *Interplay #6* (March/April 1982). He didn't like the attention to style over game design and he didn't like the fact that roleplaying games were becoming mass-market. Though at the time Thompson claimed that Metagaming would be a "profitable survivor," it seems likely that he ultimately was unwilling to engage in the "consumerism" of the maturing roleplaying field and so due to any number of problems, Metagaming was shut down.

Some rights were transferred out of Metagaming before Thompson left the industry:

- *Stellar Conquest*, Thompson's original game, had already been sold in 1982 to Avalon Hill, who published a new edition (1984).
- *Interplay* magazine was sold to Genesis Gaming Products, who also picked up Heritage USA's *MicroGames*-style line, Dwarfstar Games (1981–1982).
- *The Journal of 20th Century Wargaming*, another Metagaming magazine, went back to its editor.

- Steve Jackson tried to purchase *TFT* from Thompson, but when told the selling price was $250,000 he declined. Afterward, *TFT* slowly faded away, and is now entirely lost to the industry. It has two spiritual descendants, the aforementioned *GURPS* and the publications of Dark City Games, who offers a variety of mini-adventures compatible with *The Fantasy Trip*.

Many of Metagaming's designers, authors, and artists went into the roleplaying industry, but only a few of its principals did. Steve Jackson's future with his own game company has already been noted as has Guy McLimore's future with Fantasimulations. As for Howard Thompson, he originally promised to return to the field to produce computer games and in the meantime said he'd pay the $10,000 reward for the "Unicorn Gold" to a random entrant if the prize wasn't found by September 1, 1984. However by 1984 Thompson was no longer returning phone calls, and subsequently disappeared entirely.

The Unicorn Gold was never found.

What to Read Next

- For the future of Lynn Willis, read ***Chaosium***.
- For *Tunnels & Trolls*, the predecessor of *Monsters! Monsters!*, read ***Flying Buffalo***.
- For *Fighting Fantasy*, the gamebook series that impacted the RPG solo market, read ***Games Workshop***.
- For a company that did well with a *MicroGame*-like line late in its life, read ***Heritage Models***.

In Other Eras

- For a company that got its start in a *MicroGame*-like product line, read ***Task Force Games*** *['80s]*.
- For the other half of the story of Steve Jackson and *The Space Gamer*, read ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*.
- For the future of Guy McLimore, read ***FASA*** *['80s]*.
- For Metagaming's short-term partner for *The Fantasy Trip*, read ***Gamelords*** *['80s]*.

Or read onward to one of the most prolific publishers of RPG systems ever, ***FGU***.

Fantasy Games Unlimited: 1975–1991

Fantasy Games Unlimited was a notable RPG company in the '70s and '80s that published piles of RPGs, but ultimately its effect on the industry was limited when its games became locked up in an intellectual property dispute.



1976: Bunnies & Burrows

Scattered Beginnings: 1975–1976

In the earliest days of the hobby, we find company founders brought into the roleplaying industry thanks to games from Avalon Hill. Scott Bizar was instead a member of a second-generation of hobby entrepreneurs who came to game publication via the works of TSR. His first purchases were TSR's *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) and *Warriors of Mars* (1974).

Like some other members of this second generation of designers and publishers

— Ken St. Andre most notable among them — Bizar got his purchases home and realized he could do better. In a later interview he would state that the *Mars* rules were "infantile" and that *Dungeons & Dragons* "never explained how to play" and "missed the entire point of most fantasy."

> *"With wizards not carrying swords and buying spells with gold in some kind of supermarket of magic, and the simplistic combat system, we could not balance [D&D] with our knowledge of fantasy and the fantasy tradition."*
>
> – Scott Bizar, "My Life in Role Playing,"
> Different Worlds #5 (October/November 1979)

This led Bizar to found his own company, Fantasy Games Unlimited (FGU), which soon published its first two products. *Royal Armies of the Hyborean Age* (1975) was the more notable because it was a first-of-its-kind professional wargame set in the world of Conan. It was not, however, the first time the Hyborean Age had been considered as a wargaming setting. Early enthusiast Tony Bath had been writing about his personal Hyborean games since 1957, while Gary Gygax himself penned "Wargaming and the Hyborean Age" for *IFW Monthly v2 #5* (May 1969). *Royal Armies of the Hyborean Age* was co-designed by Bizar's roommate, Lin Carter, who was an editor for the Ace series of Conan novels alongside L. Sprague de Camp — making it feel that much more authentic and official. FGU's other premiere release was Hugh McGowan's *Gladiators* (1975), a man-to-man miniatures combat system.

For the rest of its life FGU would be a constant (but slow) producer of wargames and board games of various sorts — with approximately 30 such games published from 1975 to 1981, when FGU's focus would shift much more toward roleplaying games. However, after these first few publications, FGU's wargames aren't that relevant to the history of roleplaying. Before moving entirely on from FGU's primordial publications, we should first comment upon Scott Bizar — for even more than with most small RPG companies, the story of FGU is truly the story of its owner.

People who knew Bizar well have commented that he is an "excellent friend," the sort of person who "would give you the shirt off his back." However Bizar had a more uneven reputation among people who only knew him professionally. In *Different Worlds #5* (October 1979) the editor introduced an essay by Bizar by calling him "one of the more controversial personages in our hobby." This "controversy" seems to stem largely from two things.

First, Bizar was outspoken, particularly in his dislike of TSR and *Dungeons & Dragons*. As already noted, he didn't like their early games, and he didn't mince

words in saying so. He would later offer strong opinions on Dave Arneson's dispute with TSR over royalties.

Second, Bizar seemed to treat roleplaying as more of a business proposition than most early publishers. This was largely reflected in the structure that FGU took. Whereas most roleplaying companies in those early days were centered on design teams eager to produce their own games, FGU was instead almost exclusively a development house that took freelance submissions from external designers and published them.

This resulted in one important difference between FGU and most roleplaying companies: FGU's contracts were not the "work-for-hire" contracts common in the industry. Instead FGU allowed designers to maintain their copyrights and reclaim the rights to their games if FGU ever stopped publishing them — though as we'll see this process became messy when FGU did actually close down.

This was the landscape at FGU when they got into the RPG publication field with *Bunnies & Burrows* (1976).

Dennis Sustare's *Bunnies & Burrows* remains one of FGU's best-known products, despite the fact that it was never supported by supplements or other releases. Its reputation instead comes largely from its setting. *Bunnies & Burrows* was based on Richard Adams' novel *Watership Down* (1972), and thus gave players the unique opportunity to roleplay rabbits — a pretty natural fit for zoology student Sustare.

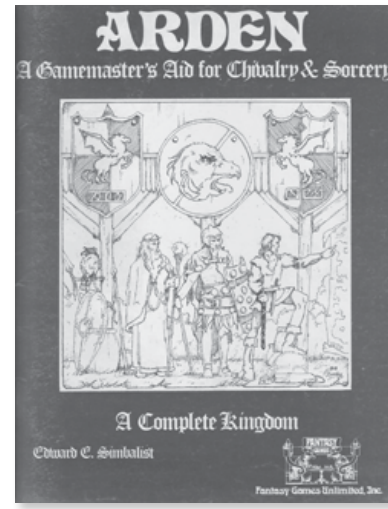
(It should be noted that *Bunnies & Burrows* wasn't an official *Watership Down* game. Instead it made the specific concepts in the novel into more general ideas that usually aren't protectable.)

Bunnies & Burrows also included some unique gameplay. Sustare felt strongly that roleplaying games should be about more than fighting monsters and so he did his best to incorporate "puzzles" into the game, such as having characters experiment to figure out what herbs did.

> *"If the main difficulty in acquiring a treasure is figuring out how to find it, or how to recognize [if] you've found it, or how to make use of it once you've acquired it, rather than how to kill the guardian of the treasure, then you are basing the game primarily on the ingenuity of the players."*
>
> – B. Dennis Sustare,
> "The Design and Solution of Puzzle," Different Worlds #1 (1979)

Though many players today remember *Bunnies & Burrows* fondly, in the '70s it was looked down on as being *beneath* most wargamers. And that was the entirety of FGU's roleplaying output until August 1976.

A Chevalier Rides Through: 1976—1979



Canadian Designers Wilf Backhaus and Ed Simbalist entered FGU's story when they arrived at Gen Con IX (1976) with their *Chevalier* roleplaying game. The two had created this *D&D*-derived game after seeing *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975), which helped them realize that they could publish a roleplaying game with a strong setting. Though they'd self-published about 20 copies of *Chevalier* (1976?), they now hoped to sell it to TSR as an "Advanced" *Dungeons & Dragons*.

However after watching Gary Gygax chew out a staff member, Simbalist decided that he didn't like the "vibe" of TSR, and so he left without mentioning his game, and promptly ran into Scott Bizar, who proved to be interested in the game himself. After Backhaus and Simbalist spent about four months stripping *D&D* from the manuscript, Bizar published it as the first of FGU's three big-name RPGs, *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1977). It was one of the first roleplaying books ever published as a single trade paperback, rather than as a hardcover or in a box.

Chivalry & Sorcery — which changed a bit from *Chevalier*'s early *D&D*-based design — was a notable early RPG for several reasons:

To start with, it was very complex. Today FGU has a reputation for having published complex — sometimes unplayable — games, and *C&S* was the forerunner in the area. The game systems themselves weren't that innovative, but they featured piles of tables and charts intended to provide very "realistic" results.

> *"Some readers will approve of the completeness of the game, while others are frightened by the huge size and seeming complexity of the rules."*
>
> – Scott Bizar, "Company Report: Fantasy Games Unlimited," The Space Gamer #37 (March 1981)

Fortunately, that complexity went hand in hand with realism, something that *C&S* was lauded for — in particular for the realistic *setting* that *EPT* helped Simbalist and Backhaus to envision. The game provided a very thorough simulation of medieval feudalism and the economics that underlay it. Though Simbalist would later acknowledge that it wasn't necessarily a simulation of *real* feudalism,

the product felt truthful (and thorough) enough that it was nonetheless widely accepted as such.

(Columbia Games would probably provide the next step up in actual medieval realism with the 1983 launch of their Hârn line.)

Finally, *C&S* fairly dramatically took RPGs out of the dungeons when few others were doing so. This resulted in the need for actual plots, and allowed *C&S* gamemasters to tell real stories when most other gamemasters were still running glorified miniatures games. Of course, many of those plots involved raiding "places of mysteries," hideouts, castles, and other locations that were dungeons in all but name.

From 1977–1979 FGU supplemented *C&S* with more than half-a-dozen books. The game innately appealed only to a very sophisticated group of the most serious roleplayers, but amongst these players several of the supplements were quite well-received, including *Bireme & Galley* (1978) — which contained naval combat rules — and *Swords & Sorcerers* (1978) — which contained rules for the Norse, Picts, Gaels, Britons, and Mongols.

Campaign worlds were still quite rare in the late '70s, and so it's somewhat surprising that *C&S* supported not one campaign world, but three: the "real" Earth of *Swords & Sorcerers* (1978), a mythical England described in *Arden* (1979), and a dinosaur-era world detailed in *Saurians* (1979). This division of attention into so many different settings probably didn't help *C&S* get off the ground, but the whole roleplaying industry was so much in its infancy that no one knew better.

The other notable thing about the early *C&S* line was what it was missing: adventures. Though Judges Guild kicked off the professional adventure market in 1977 — and had since been followed by other publishers — FGU would stubbornly hold the line against adventures for two more years because Bizar thought them little more than scams. He instead believed that players would want to create all the content for their games. Such a belief might seem bizarre today, but it was certainly not unusual in the '70s; TSR and GDW were two other large companies that thought they only needed to provide rules and the players would do the rest.

> *"Perhaps our biggest mistake is leading to the major change in our future direction. This relates to my personal refusal to market 'scenarios.' I had always believed that such products were a marketing gimmick as players were fully capable of creating their own scenarios and many would feel almost obligated to buy such products from us since they carried the logo of the game they were playing."*
>
> – Scott Bizar, "Company Report: Fantasy Games Unlimited," The Space Gamer #37 (March 1981)

After 1979 *C&S* was largely put on hiatus until — as we'll see — 1983.

Around the same time, Wilf K. Backhaus — *C&S*'s co-creator — ended his relationship with Ed Simbalist (and thus FGU). One of the reported problems was that Simbalist was moving toward more complex games while Backhaus preferred simplicity.

Backhaus went on to create his own game company, Archaeron Games. Much like Gamelords, ICE, Leading Edge Games, and other publishers of the early '80s, Backhaus kicked off his production with plug-in game systems that could be used with "generic" fantasy RPGs, but which were intended to eventually form their own complete game system. He got only as far as publishing *Mage* (1980) and *Warrior* (1981).

Simbalist would be much more successful staying with FGU — at least for a time.

Other Early Publications: 1978—1980

The story of FGU is the story of a constant influx of new RPGs. Most of these games were supported with — at best — a supplement or two, and then the line would entirely disappear. Ed Simbalist would later recount that this was a result of Bizar's belief "that a game should be 'complete' — meaning one product, not a series of supplements and support product." It was also a result of the development of the games remaining with the original designers. If they did not create new products — or at least approve them — FGU had nothing to publish, which was the case with most of FGU's games. Therefore, of all of FGU's early products, only *C&S* got much attention beyond its original publication.

After *C&S*, FGU's next notable RPG was Leonard Kanterman's *Starships & Spacemen* (1978). It was designed to be a *Star Trek* game, but much as with *Bunnies & Burrows*, it was written without the use of trademarked terms that would require a license. Nonetheless it was one of the two first *Star Trek* RPGs in the industry — put out about the same time as Heritage Model's *Star Trek: Adventure Gaming in the Final Frontier* (1978) and years before FASA's entry into the field.

Much like *Bunnies & Burrows*, *Starships & Spacemen* took a different look at roleplaying adventures. It was more about problem solving than personal combat. It also *could* have been the first science-fiction RPG if it had been published promptly, as it was designed by Kanterman before Flying Buffalo's *Starfaring* (1976), Gamescience's *Space Patrol* (1977), or GDW's *Traveller* (1977) hit the market. However, FGU was always an extremely small operation, and so years passed before it came out. As with many of FGU's unsupported games, *Starships & Spacemen* had very little impact on the industry, and is notable primarily for the historical precedent it set.

FGU's next game of note was *Villains and Vigilantes* (1979), by Jeff Dee and Jack Herman. It followed Gamescience's *Superhero: 2044* (1977) into the superhero genre, but where *2044* had envisioned a futuristic setting, *V&V* was instead set in a modern four-color era, making it the first true comic book RPG. It also had a fun character generation system that was true to the comics: players played themselves, but after they had gained (random) super powers.

V&V could have broken open the superhero roleplaying genre and dominated it for years, as Hero Games' *Champions* (1981) later would. Unfortunately it was held back by two notable factors.

First, it was a very clunky game, full of holes and things that just didn't work. This was a result of the fact that Dee and Herman were very inexperienced game designers. They started out statting superheroes in TSR's *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975) and only came around to their own system afterward.

> *"Back in 1979, when Villains and Vigilantes was first released, Jack Herman and I were pleased to discover that we were the youngest published RPG designers in the land … at least as far as anyone knew. Trouble was, it showed in our work."*
>
> – Jeff Dee, "Villains and Vigilantes Designer's Notes," Different Worlds #23 (August 1982)

Second, it faced the early FGU problem of no support — and no adventures. Though Judges Guild produced a single *V&V* scenario in 1981, it was 1982 before FGU itself returned to the line.

Other early RPGs which appeared from FGU in this time period included the era-spanning crime game *Gangster!* (1979), co-designed by a New York police officer, and *Skull and Crossbones* (1980), an unnotable pirate game and the first of a few swashbuckling RPGs produced by FGU. Both of these games were produced by designers who had very little more to do with the industry — a fairly common outcome of these early FGU games, and the general result of accepting so many unsolicited manuscripts.

Though the industry was hungry for *any* new RPG in the late '70s, by the early '80s the RPG market's first glut was occurring. This would have likely resulted in the downfall of FGU if they'd stuck to their initial tactics, but fortunately Bizar was coming around to the changing realities of the industry. He was realizing that gamers could better accept rules scattered across several supplements rather than reading a huge book all at once — and he was discovering that no matter what *he* liked, gamemasters very definitely wanted adventures. In 1981 he would announce a major revamp that would move FGU in those directions.

Before we close out the '70s, however, we should note a few other FGU initiatives.

First, they started a house organ magazine for their wargames called *Wargaming*. It was quite short-lived, running just four issues in 1978. The last couple of issues included a scant few roleplaying articles by Ed Simbalist and Dave Arneson.

Second, FGU became the American distributor for Philmar/Ariel Games during this period — which let them distribute two notable early adventure games, *Mystic Wood* (1980) and *Sorcerer's Cave* (1978) — though *Mystic Wood* would be better distributed when a new edition was published by wargame leader Avalon Hill two years later.

The *Wargaming* magazine and the Philmar distribution deal were some of FGU's last major pushes into the board game industry. Starting in 1980 their role-playing production became their main focus — and it positively exploded.

Space Opera & The Rest of Simbalist: 1980—1984

With *Starships & Spacemen* having gone nowhere, by the late '70s Scott Bizar was looking for a new science-fiction roleplaying game to act as one of FGU's flagships, just as *Chivalry & Sorcery* was doing on the fantasy side of things. He contracted Ed Simbalist and Phil McGregor to produce the game. This was a somewhat odd combination given that Simbalist lived in Canada and McGregor in Australia; Simbalist would later recount once having to wait 20 days for a reply to an urgent design question, as a letter slowly made its way around the world and back. However, they *did* manage to give Bizar his SF game.

It was published as *Space Opera* (1980). At Bizar's request, it used the same setting as a recently released FGU wargame, *Space Marines* (1980) — which could have been a clever marketing ploy, except there was no way to mix the two game systems.



The rules of *Space Opera* itself were to industry leader *Traveller* what *Chivalry & Sorcery* was to *Dungeons & Dragons* — which is to say extremely complex and full of charts and tables. This trend wasn't unusual in the '80s, when publishers like GDW, Leading Edge Games, and Timeline joined FGU in producing some of the industry's most complex offerings. However, it wasn't a good direction for a science-fiction RPG, as *that*

genre was soon to be beset by simpler RPGs like FASA's *Star Trek* (1982) and West End's *Star Wars* (1987).

Though the line did well, competition with yet another SF RPG led to FGU parting ways with the industry's top convention. At Gen Con XV (1982), TSR was promoting their own *Star Frontiers* (1982) with a remote controlled "robot" that wandered the con talking to people. For a while it stopped at FGU's booth, suggesting that people should buy *Star Frontiers* rather than *Space Opera*. Bizar was offended and demanded an apology; when he didn't receive one, he opted not to return to the show.

Space Opera was also FGU's first line that was extremely well-supported, with over 20 supplements from 1980–1985, nine of which were adventures (1980–1983). This was almost double FGU's total output for *Chivalry & Sorcery*, and just a few books less than their all-time best-supported line — which would end up being *Villains and Vigilantes*, despite its lack of support to date. Some of *Space Opera*'s releases showed the results of FGU's peculiar, designer-driven product schedule. Most notably FGU put out a series of *StarSector Atlases* (1980–1984), which described the background of the *Space Opera*/*Space Marines* universe. In the end six were published, numbered 1, 2, 3, 5, 11, and 12. FGU's catalog is full of gaps like that in the stock numbers and product titles of various lines.

> *"We now realize that scenarios assist gamers to fully understand what is intended by a set of rules, and helps a new gamemaster to launch a campaign."*
>
> – Scott Bizar, "Company Report: Fantasy Games Unlimited," The Space Gamer #37 (March 1981)

Much of *Space Opera*'s expansion was at the cost of *Chivalry & Sorcery* production. As we've already seen, the fantasy product line all but died out after 1979. One of the few bright spots was *Land of the Rising Sun* (1980), a Japanese RPG which used the *C&S* system authored by Lee Gold — best known as the editor of the very influential Amateur Press Association *Alarums & Excursions* (1975-Present).

When a second edition (1983) of *Chivalry & Sorcery* finally came out it was generally lauded as a simpler and better-written version of the game. It could have been a successful way to restart FGU's by-then classic fantasy line. However very little was published for *C&S* after the second edition and when old books were reprinted, no changes were allowed. Instead, they were reprinted with first edition stats and all errors intact.

Though Simbalist continued supervising his two RPG lines until FGU became unable to release new products — a point that we'll soon be approaching — *C&S* ended its run after a few J. Andrew Keith adventures in 1984. *Space Opera* supplements similarly became sparser following 1985. Afterward Simbalist would largely leave the industry for a decade.

Picking Up Other Lines: 1981—1983

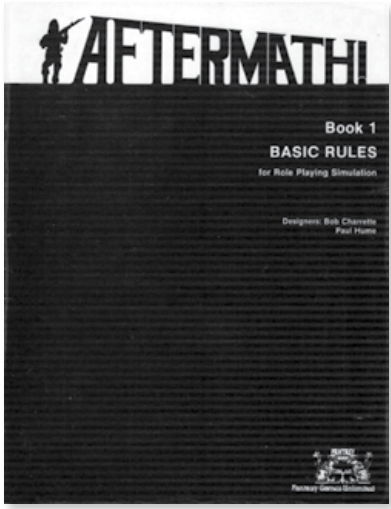


As the RPG market tightened in the early '80s, Scott Bizar was increasingly looking for professional RPGs rather than unsolicited manuscripts. In 1981 he started picking up product lines from defunct publishers.

The first of these new game lines came from former publisher Phoenix Games — a recent incarnation of an older game publisher named Little Soldier Games. At the time Phoenix already published a game by Paul Hume and Bob Charrette called *Bushido* (1980) and was getting ready to publish another called *Aftermath!* (1981). FGU purchased *Aftermath!* and *Bushido* — as well as an unrelated mystery game called *Elementary Watson* (1978). They quickly reprinted *Bushido* (1981) and stickered over the "Phoenix Games" logo on *Aftermath!* boxes with their own. Amusingly, some or all of the stickering job was done by future *Shadowrun* (1989) co-creator Tom Dowd, in his first professional work in the gaming industry. Though FGU planned to publish a new edition of *Elementary Watson* that would have focused more on roleplaying, it never came about.

Bushido, the first of three collaborations between Hume and Charrette, was one of the few games of the '80s set in Asia; FGU's own *Land of the Rising Sun* was perhaps its only true competition until TSR came out with *Oriental Adventures* (1985).

Bushido was complex — though that becomes increasingly redundant to say when talking about FGU games — but it was also colorful and thematic and had an interesting task resolution system where a d20 was rolled against a Base Chance of Success. The system was universal and thus allowed for many different in-game activities, from using weapons to painting a scroll — though the Base Chance of Success used could be pretty difficult to calculate. The task resolution system also



measured level of success, a game design philosophy which would become more common in the mid-'80s.

Aftermath!, the second Hume and Charrette collaboration, was a military role-playing game set in a post-apocalyptic future. It was much the same setup as seen in Timeline's *The Morrow Project* (1980), but neither that (nor any other game) had yet taken over the military niche. Much like with their first game, Hume and Charette's *Aftermath!* was set in a relatively untouched genre.

(In fact no military game *would* be particularly successful until GDW's release of *Twilight: 2000* in 1984. That game was also set in a post-apocalyptic future, suggesting that Hume and Charrette were looking in the right direction.)

As with most early military RPGs, *Aftermath!* was much closer to the industry's wargaming beginnings, with rules largely focusing on accurately and minutely depicting combat. The result was unfortunately difficult to manage, with sums being multiplied and divided on the fly, and details simulated not just minutely, but to a ridiculous level — such as the 27 hit locations found on a dog, including 2 distinct tail hit locations.

Bushido and *Aftermath!* were both lightly supported. *Bushido* saw just a single supplement, much like FGU's early releases, while *Aftermath!* received five, widely scattered from 1981–1987.

FGU's other major pickup of the early '80s was *Tradition of Victory*, an "Age of Sail" wargame that had an associated swashbuckling RPG, *Promotions and Prizes*. FGU reprinted these as *Heart of Oak* (1982) and *Privateers and Gentlemen* (1983), but would only support them with a few supplements.

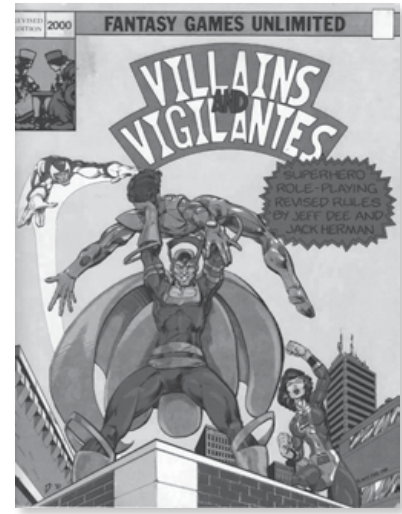
Though both the naval game and its tight integration with an RPG were well-received, the games are most notable for their designer, Jon Williams, who is better known as science-fiction writer and cyberpunk innovator Walter Jon Williams.

The Good Times: 1981–1986

With all of FGU's major or most notable RPG lines now accounted for, the rest of their history is largely that of rise and fall.

1981 saw the big explosion of FGU into RPGs. This was mainly due to *Space Opera* supplements, though a military RPG called *Merc* (1981) was also published. FGU even considered putting out some magazines to support this expansion: one

for *Space Opera* and a generalist roleplaying magazine that would have been called "Role-Playing Guidebook." Records don't show us what happened to those magazines; it seems likely though that FGU's developer-focused model would have made in-house magazines troublesome.



The next year FGU reprinted *Villains and Vigilantes* (1982) in a second edition. Jeff Dee and Jack Herman had long seen the need for a revision and had finally convinced Scott Bizar of the same. Second edition *V&V* was generally a cleaned-up version of the original rules that kept all of its advantages, fixed many of its problems, and was therefore a much better game.

This upward trend was generally reflective of FGU's improvement in professionalism. Their untested designers from the '70s were now publishing revised games (like *V&V* and *C&S*) and second games (like *Space Opera*). Meanwhile, FGU was also cherry-picking games from other publishers. All of these new games were inevitably better polished than FGU's older first-time offerings.

Thanks to the new interest in the heroic genre, *Villains and Vigilantes* was very heavily supported with what would eventually be over 20 supplements from 1982 to 1986. Rather than just sticking with the game's designers for supplements — as FGU did with most of their other games, to their ultimate detriment — *V&V* was supported by lots of writers, including later industry notables Ken Cliffe and Tom Dowd.

Another *V&V* writer of note was a young man named Bill Willingham, who wrote a pair of adventures called *Death Duel with the Destroyers* (1982) and *The Island of Doctor Apocalypse* (1982). The art in the book was done by Willingham and another artist, Matt Wagner.

Willingham went on to become the writer/artist of *Elementals* (1984–1988), which guest-starred the Destroyers from these *V&V* adventures. Today he is the author of the well-received fantasy series *Fables* (2002-Present) and has done considerable work beyond that for DC Comics. Wagner is best known for his Comico and Dark Horse comic, *Grendel* (1982-Present), as well as his work on *Batman* comics.

"Despite all its problems, the first edition [of V&V] wasn't totally bad – some of it we didn't even change. But the new edition is better by one thousand percent."
– Jeff Dee, "Villains and Vigilantes Designer's Notes," Different Worlds #23 (August 1982)

Meanwhile, Bizar was working on creating comic field connections of his own. In the early '80s he thought he was close to a licensing deal with Marvel, but it ended up being offered to TSR instead. He is reported to have completed licenses for some smaller superhero comics, such as *THUNDER Agents* and Bill Willingham's *Elementals*. In the end, however, FGU produced only one licensed sourcebook, *The DNAgents Sourcebook* (1986), based on an Eclipse comic. It was clearly less notable than the Marvel license, but it tied in nicely with other work that FGU was doing with Eclipse at the time, as we'll see.

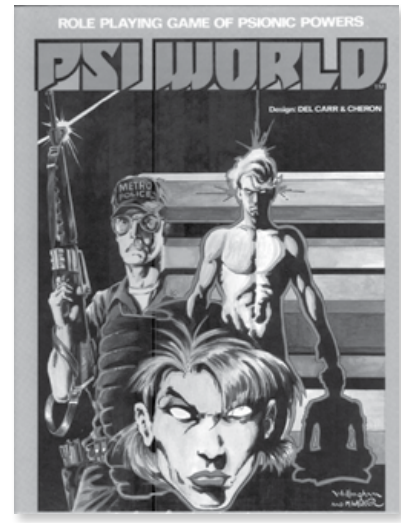
As was ever the case at FGU, new games continued to come out as well.

Wild West (1981) was one of the company's now less frequent unsolicited manuscripts. It was one of the few games to try and compete with TSR's largely unsuccessful *Boot Hill* (1975, 1979). It also included another early universal task resolution chart, where you cross-referenced skill with action to determine chance of success. Unfortunately the rest of the system was mixed at best, with some poor organization and no background.

Daredevils (1982) was the third Hume and Charrette collaboration. As was their wont, it was another game in a previously untouched genre. Put out two years before Hero Games' *Justice Inc.* (1984) or TSR's *Adventures of Indiana Jones* (1984), *Daredevils* should have been able to capture the lead among pulp adventure RPGs. Though the game was derived from *Aftermath!* it was vastly simplified — to the benefit of the genre — but nonetheless it never caught on; it was probably still a bit too awkward, and it was only supported with four supplements.

Lands of Adventure (1983), a second game by Lee Gold, featured a system intended to run historical fantasy games. It included two "culture packs" for Mythic Greece and Medieval Europe and could evolve into any intriguing *GURPS*-like line (with a narrower focus) — but as was too often the case at FGU, the game was never supported.

Other Suns (1983) was an anthropomorphic science-fiction game that author Niall Shapero had originally intended for Chaosium, but contractual problems led him to publish it with FGU instead. The game is most notable for its mechanics, which are very clearly based upon Chaosium's house system, *BRP* — the only such product published by someone else until recent years.



The next year saw the publication of Mark Pettigrew's *Flashing Blades* (1984) — yet another swashbuckling game. This one was quite well-received, mainly due to excellent attention to the themes of romantic literature and its (unFGU-like) flexible game system. *Psi World* (1984), by Del Carr and Cheron, also appeared that year. It is probably the only professional RPG to ever center on the topic of near-future psionics, though that also limited the system quite a bit. Both *Flashing Swords* and *Psi World* received some support during FGU's dwindling final years.

Though FGU was by now publishing lots of supplements, they were still being held back by their developer model. Except when they expended extra effort (as they did with *V&V*), their lines only got supplemented when the original designers had time to do so.

FGU got a bit of a reprieve from this problem when two of the industry's most prolific freelancers, J. Andrew Keith and William H. Keith, Jr., started working for them. The brothers got their start at GDW, then moved on to FASA and Gamelords, but with FASA's *Traveller* support ending and Gamelords on its way out of business, they were losing several of their clients. We've already seen that they did some work in the *C&S* line in 1984. In 1985 they expanded into FGU's other lines including *Aftermath!*, *Daredevils*, *Flashing Blades*, and *Psi World*.

Meanwhile FGU was in the process of picking up yet another RPG — a fantasy game called *Swordbearer* that had been produced by Heritage USA (1982) before the FGU edition (1985). More on the game itself can be found in Heritage's history. The same time FGU purchased the rights to the game, they also bought Heritage's old stock, something that Bizar felt was a necessary part of such a deal, a topic we'll return to.

FGU headed into 1986 with things looking pretty good. There were plenty of *Villains and Vigilantes* and Keith brothers releases keeping the company looking healthy. They even licensed the publication of a *Villains and Vigilantes* series by Eclipse Comics (1986), who was then experimenting with comics based on RPGs.

However, that year FGU also published what would be its last new RPGs. They were both military RPGs about the invasion of the US and were probably inspired by the movie *Red Dawn* (1984). The first was the Keith brothers' *Freedom Fighters* (1986) while the second was Martin Wixted's near-future *Year of the Phoenix* (1986).

FGU's Waterloo: 1987—1988

Unfortunately things weren't going well financially. FGU had always been located in New York, where warehouse space was quite expensive. Worse, despite a decade of trying, FGU's games were at best either second-tier (like *Space Opera* or *Villains and Vigilantes*) or else top-tier in second-tier genres (like *Bushido* or *Daredevils* — though even these were now moving toward entire second-tier status). The whole roleplaying market had seen some contraction in the early '80s, and now there were new roleplaying games like *Star Wars* (1987) and *Marvel Super Heroes* (1984) that would overshadow FGU's successes even more.

In 1987, Scott Bizar was considering new locations that could offer him reduced warehousing costs. One possibility was Pittsburgh, where the Keith brothers were located. However, Bizar instead decided on Arizona, the home of friend Rick Loomis and *his* gaming company, Flying Buffalo. Cheaper warehouse costs and a good availability of services cemented the deal.

Bizar rented office space and a warehouse in Tempe, with the intention of keeping FGU going. Unfortunately, the company was already on the verge of collapse and the move made things worse, as distributors lost track of how to get ahold of FGU, resulting in missing checks and reorders.

Scott Bizar took jobs first as a car salesman then a school teacher, but he was intent on staying in the hobbyist industry. He founded a game shop in Gilbert, Arizona called Waterloo, using stock from his parents, who were running their own Waterloo game stores in New York. The FGU offices and warehouse were soon moved to the new location. In a game industry coincidence, Paul Lidberg of Crunchy Frog Enterprises and Nightshift Games worked at the Arizona Waterloo for about six months while Bizar was teaching.

Unfortunately Bizar's game stores ended up very troubled. After founding a second store in Phoenix, Arizona, Bizar was hit by massive employee fraud at the Gilbert store. An employee took out credit cards in Bizar's name, opened fake bank accounts, and fraudulently offered up Bizar's stores as collateral. Bizar lost money due to the fraud and was also forced to fight lawsuits originating from it. He eventually had to close down the Phoenix store in 1996. Even after that things never totally recovered. The last Waterloo in Arizona was closed in 2007.

At the time that the game store problems were beginning to snowball, Bizar was getting some older FGU books back into print, while preparing new books for publication. Unfortunately, the fraud put an end to all that. Relations also deteriorated between Bizar and his designers, as their royalties were among the monies that the employee had embezzled.

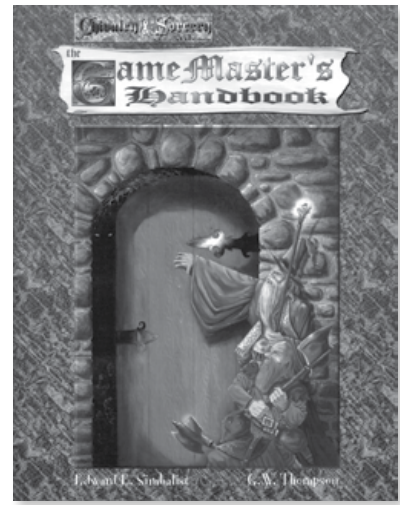
A few final supplements were published for *Aftermath!*, *Space Opera*, *V&V*, and *Year of the Phoenix* in 1987 and 1988, and then the company largely shut down. FGU never declared bankruptcy. However, there appears to have been a coda to this story in 1991, though it wasn't revealed until recently.

Aftermath (Not the Game): 1988-Present

After FGU stopped publication, some of their books slowly made their way back into print from other companies. An online second edition of *Other Suns* (1989) appeared from author Niall Shapero, while Steve Jackson Games put out *GURPS Bunnies & Burrows* (1992). However questions over ownership rights began when Dinosaur Games tried to get *Aftermath!* back into print. After the publication of a sourcebook called *Aftermath! Technology!* (1993), their efforts came to an abrupt end.

Since the games all actually belonged to their authors, those authors expected the rights to revert to them. However, despite FGU's disappearance, Bizar claimed that the products remained in print because he continued to sell backstock through his own store. This would later be supplemented by low-volume print-runs when games slipped out of print. Bizar also claimed ownership over all of the FGU trademarks — which he stated did not revert, even if the rest of the game rights did.

> *"My principal trade is now teaching not publishing. When you're over 50 and married with a child you cannot allow yourself the same delirious adventures as when you're 20 or 30. I don't have the same perspectives as before but I'm still in control of FGU."*
>
> – Scott Bizar, Interview, space-opera.net (2000)



In the mid-'90s the authors of *Chivalry & Sorcery* freed their game up from FGU, but only after the new publisher, Highlander Games, paid Bizar for the trademark and the limited inventory that remained for the game. *Chivalry & Sorcery* was thereafter returned to the gaming world in a third edition (1996). It has since been revised and rereleased by Brittania Game Designs as *Chivalry & Sorcery: The Return* (2000). For a while word circulated that Brittania was working on a fifth edition. They've most recently released the *Chivalry & Sorcery Essence Core Rules* PDF (2012), with Chronicle City planning a print edition.

Separate from this, Wilf Backhaus produced his own *The C&S Red Book* (2000) — essentially an update of first edition *Chivalry & Sorcery* — through Gamestuff Inc. The legalities of the books seem to be in question. Nonetheless the *Red Book* has been continuously updated by fans over the years and is currently available as a PDF in its seventh edition (2012).

Though their game lives on as one of the best survivors of FGU, Ed Simbalist died on March 12, 2005, and Wilf Backhaus on October 14, 2009.

Bushido was soon the subject of a much more public fight. In 1996 Gold Rush Games prepared to publish a third edition of *Bushido* under license from the authors. Bizar rushed the original game back into print and notified Gold Rush Games he'd sue if the new edition was released.

Mark Arsenault of GRG strongly felt that he and the *Bushido* authors were in the right, and that due to non-payment of royalties, lapse of trademark, termination of contract, and/or any of a number of other issues, FGU no longer held any rights to the game. However he realized that a legal battle to reprint a 15-year-old RPG wasn't worth the trouble. Instead, he published a new Fuzion-based Asian game called *Sengoku* (1997).

Through the general means of threatened lawsuits, Scott Bizar has managed to keep almost all of the FGU properties off of the market for nearly 20 years. He generally seems willing to sell rights, but the costs — because they include the purchase of all backstock — are greater than almost anyone considers worthwhile. As a result, any value these properties might have had 20 years ago is all but gone now.

Many authors feel that whether the letter of their contracts has been violated or not, the spirit definitely has. Most of the FGU creators in the industry have accepted the loss of their original games and moved on to other projects. For example, Jeff Dee created a new superhero roleplaying game called *Living Legends* (2005), a project that was originally called "Advanced Villains and Vigilantes."

In 2000 Scott Bizar reappeared on the Internet with a web site that sells the extensive FGU backstock that still exists. He also made many FGU books available through online PDF sites. When core rulebooks sell out, Bizar has occasionally published reproductions of these old FGU releases, most of which reprint FGU's boxed games as one-volume books.

More surprisingly, Bizar printed a few new books late in the decade after he appeared on the 'net, including a second edition of Dinosaur Games' *Aftermath! Technology!* (2008) and two other David Harmer supplements that hadn't been previously printed: *Aftermath! Magic!* (2010) and the *Aftermath! Survival Guide* (2008). Bizar similarly published a number of original PDFs for *Villains and Vigilantes* for free through the website (2010).

However, Jeff Dee and Jack Herman — the authors of *Villains and Vigilantes* — have raised the question of whether any of this latter-day work is actually coming from FGU. According to their attorney, FGU Inc. was dissolved way back in 1991 for failure to pay state taxes. Since Dee and Herman had contracted with FGU Inc., not Bizar, they say that this means that Scott Bizar no longer had the rights to publish *V&V* (or, it seems likely, most of the other FGU properties).

> *"Our latest edition of Villains and Vigilantes is called V&V 2.1. My original idea was to the call it either the 'Hostage Rescue Edition' or the 'Amazing Deathtrap Escape Edition.' But we call it 2.1 to indicate that it was essentially a reprint of the second edition with a few minor tweaks."*
>
> – Jack Herman, Interview, aintitcool.com (January 2011)

The two sent Bizar a cease & desist letter in June of 2010 telling him that he was no longer allowed to sell their games. Afterward, Dee and Herman published version 2.1 of *Villains and Vigilantes* (2010) under their new Monkey House Games brand. Several adventures followed, with a 3.0 version of the game also in process. Though these books were originally published through Lulu, Monkey House has since inked a distribution deal with Cubicle 7, which resulted in mass-market reprints of *Villains and Vigilantes 2.1*, *Living Legends*, and a few new adventures.

Monkey House has also licensed some partners of their own: Superhuman Games is producing a *V&V* card game, while Zenith Comics has already started publishing *V&V* material, beginning with *Supervillains!* (2011), a superhero supplement also available for Adamant Entertainment's *Icons* (2010) and Basic Action Games' *BASH*! (2005).

Bizar, meanwhile, seems undeterred. As of early 2011, Bizar refused a license from Dee and Herman that would have given him the right to continue publishing *V&V* material. He also refused arbitration with Dee and Herman — though the two creators say it's required by their contract. This resulted in a full-fledged lawsuit for copyright infringement: *Jack Herman, Jeffrey Dee, and Monkey House Games vs. Scott Bizar*, filed on July 27, 2011, in Florida, then refilled on November 11, 2011, in Arizona. This history's author was asked to write an affidavit for it, to offer up my researched opinion on FGU's status between 1988 and 2000. The judge issued a ruling on January 15, 2013. It said: "The Court concludes that, as a matter of law, Plaintiff [Scott Bizar] abandoned any right to the use of the trademark Villains and Vigilantes" due to lapses in sales from 1990–1994 and 1999–2004. It further stated that though Bizar had rights to the original two rulebooks, he had no rights to sell PDFs or licensed *V&V* material. Bizar has since appealed the decision.

While this has been ongoing, the scattered "FGU" publications from 2008 and 2010 have turned into a full revival. Bizar printed a few *Giant* volumes that collected old *V&V* books as well as some brand-new releases such as *Escape from the Micro-Universe* (2011) for *V&V*, *The Gauntlet* (2011) for *Aftermath!*, and *Nefarious Plots* (2012) for *Daredevils*. However, none of these products have entered distribution and instead are available primarily through PDF sellers and FGU's online store.

The output of recent years certainly suggests that FGU is back after a 20-year hiatus, at least in a very limited, online form. However, the apparent closure of the FGU corporation 20 years ago casts a pall over not just these recent publications, but all FGU activities since 1991.

It seems likely that the situation will come to a head soon, as Dee and Herman's court case proceeds.

What to Read Next

- For the first licensed *Star Trek* RPG and for the origins of *Swordbearer*, read ***Heritage Models***.
- For the first superhero RPG, read ***Gamescience***.
- For more on ***Phoenix Games***, read their mini-history in ***Gamescience***.
- For info on the *BRP* system used by *Other Suns*, read ***Chaosium***.
- For the start of the Keith brothers' story, read ***GDW***.
- For Arizona's other gaming persona, and friend of FGU, read ***Flying Buffalo***.

In Other Eras

- For other publishers of particularly complex games, read ***Leading Edge Games*** *['80s]*, the mini-history of ***Timeline***, and (to a lesser extent) ***ICE*** *['80s]*.
- For *Champions*, the game that took over the superhero RPG category following *Villains and Vigilantes*, read ***Hero Games*** *['80s]*.
- For the rest of the story of the Keith brothers, read ***FASA*** *['80s]*, ***Gamelords*** *['80s]*, ***Task Force Games*** *['80s]*, and ***DGP*** *['80s]*.
- For Monkey House Games' new partner, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to the publishers of Cthulhu and Glorantha, ***Chaosium.***

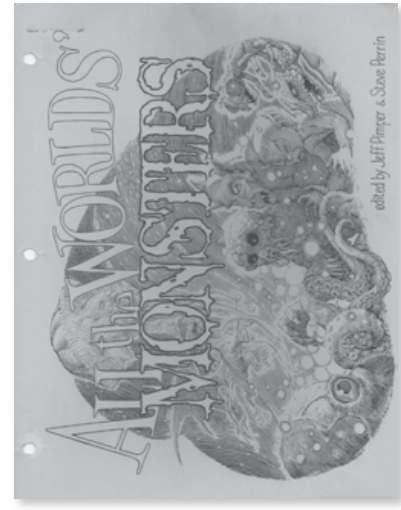
Chaosium: 1975-Present

Chaosium is one of the oldest RPG publishers still alive, but like other old-time survivors such as Flying Buffalo and Columbia Games, today they're a small operation mainly publishing a few old-time hits.

Board Game Beginnings: 1975—1981

As with many early game designers, Greg Stafford — soon to be the founder of Chaosium — came into the industry through wargaming. He picked up a copy of Avalon Hill's *U-Boat* (1960) in — of all places — a hardware store, and a lifelong interest in games was born.

However, Stafford would also bring a second hobby into the young company he was creating. In 1966 — during freshman days at Beloit College in southern Wisconsin — he started writing about the fantasy world of Glorantha, beginning with the story of a Prince named Snodal. At first Stafford thought that writing could be a career in itself, but when he attempted to publish his



1977: All the Worlds' Monsters

Glorantha stories he found himself on the receiving end of a rude rejection letter that stated "all S&S [Sword & Sorcery] is the same hackwork."

"At first I began writing because I'd run out of material to read and I just let my imagination run for my own entertainment and a few friends that I told stories to."
– Greg Stafford, Interview, White Dwarf #17 (February/March 1980)

That's when Stafford decided to combine his interests in fantasy writing and gaming by creating a "do-it-yourself" novel set in the world of Glorantha — which is to say a wargame full of thematic details that highlighted the magical creativity of the setting itself. He called it *White Bear and Red Moon*.



Stafford hadn't intended to publish *White Bear and Red Moon* himself, but after he sold it to three different companies — each of which went out of business or failed to get off the ground — he finally decided that he had to do so himself, a decision guided by an auspicious reading of Tarot cards. And thus "The" Chaosium was born — the name derived partly from Stafford's then-home, which was near the Oakland Coliseum in California. Combining "coliseum" and "chaos" resulted in the name "Chaosium."

Stafford funded Chaosium with $10,000 saved away from a year's work in surgery at Providence Hospital in Oakland. Greg Stafford's *White Bear and Red Moon* (1975) was Chaosium's first game. Steve Swenston and William Church — who had worked with Stafford on a fiction fanzine called *Wyrd* — provided the art while Bill Johnson offered editing. The rules were run off on a mimeograph machine in Stafford's basement; it would be the source of many of Chaosium's early publications.

Stafford sold the first copies of *White Bear and Red Moon* at a science-fiction convention in Los Angeles. He'd been invited as a guest thanks to his work with *Wyrd*, but quickly went to work finding distributors for his game. When distributor Tony Pierro ordered the first few dozen copies of *White Bear and Red Moon*, he asked what Chaosium's terms were — and Stafford had no idea what he was talking about. Fortunately, Pierro was able to help out and things improved from there.

White Bear and Red Moon was a success, probably primarily due to its vivid setting and its unique and colorful units. When *The Space Gamer* began featuring it in their game polls, it regularly appeared as the #1 fantasy board game, beating out releases like TSR's *War of Wizards* (1975) and *Dungeon!* (1975). It also led to Chaosium's first license when Neville Stocken of Archive Miniatures — located in nearby Burlingame, California — agreed to make Gloranthan miniatures related to *White Bear and Red Moon*. Soon some of the counters from *White Bear and Red Moon* such as the darkness witch Cragspider and the centaur Ironhoof were represented in lead. Some of Archive's existing miniatures also got incorporated into the Gloranthan series, so that Stocken would have more licensed miniatures to sell immediately. Most notably, Archive's existing "Pumpkinhead" figure became the infamous Gloranthan Jack O'Bear.

Chaosium quickly followed up on *White Bear and Red Moon*'s success with *Wyrm's Footnotes #1* (1976) — the first issue of a small press magazine that offered not only variant rules for the game, but also histories of the setting itself. As we'll see, this Gloranthan magazine would run for a total of seven years. *White Bear and Red Moon* also got a reprint (1976) and a larger revamp and expansion as *Dragon Pass* (1980) during those years.

More notably, Stafford continued work with what was to be a trilogy of Gloranthan board games. The second was *Nomad Gods* (1977), set on Gloranthan's Praxian plains — which would soon become the best-described locale in the game. There was to be a third game in the trilogy, called "Masters of Luck & Death," but it never appeared.

Chaosium published several more board games and a couple of miniatures rules in the next years. For the most part these games exist outside of our history of roleplaying, with a few exceptions:

- *Elric* (1977), by Greg Stafford, was a wargame based upon a license from Michael Moorcock. As we'll see, it was a license that later helped Chaosium expand their gaming lines.
- Greg Stafford's *King Arthur's Knights* (1978) was part of the second wave of adventure games that combined roleplaying and board gaming sensibilities in the wake of Dave Megarry's *Dungeon!* (1975). We'll meet the genre again in 1984 when Chaosium released their (perhaps) most notable board game. The Arthurian setting would also be important to Chaosium's roleplaying future.
- Although *Lords of the Middle Sea* (1978) was a wargaming design without any direct influence on the RPG industry, the same can't be said of its designer, Lynn Willis. He had previously published board

games with Metagaming Concepts, but they weren't interested in this post-apocalyptic offering. Thus he'd approached Stafford about the game. Though *Lords of the Middle Sea* would be Willis' only solo board game published by Chaosium, he'd soon become critical to their roleplaying games.

- *Stomp!* (1978) and *Panzer Pranks* (1980) were both humorous "minigames," probably influenced by Metagaming's *MicroGames* — as so many others were in that era.

The rest of Chaosium's early strategic releases were mostly wargames — some light and others heavy — following the trend of early pioneers like Avalon Hill and SPI. They came to a halt in 1981 because of a new force that had by then been building at Chaosium for four years.

Roleplaying.

Roleplaying Beginnings: 1977—1980

Years earlier, by strange chance, Greg Stafford received what may have been the first copy of the original *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) ever sold. Jeff Platt, an ex-partner of Stafford's who lived in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin was picking up catalogues from a printer and there he ran into a young man named Gary Gygax who was himself picking up the first printing of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Stafford's ex-partner knew that Stafford was working on a fantasy game too, and so he purchased a copy of *Dungeons & Dragons* from Gygax — straight off the press — and mailed it to California.

Despite that early introduction, Chaosium didn't start publishing RPGs until 1977 and even then it only came about through the intervention of two other role-players: Steve Perrin and Jeff Pimper. Perrin was an influential gamer in California: in 1966 he had been a founding member of the SCA — a live-action medieval combat group — and more recently he had compiled *The Perrin Conventions* (1976), a set of alternative rules for *D&D* combat. Now he was interested in getting more involved with the RPG industry.

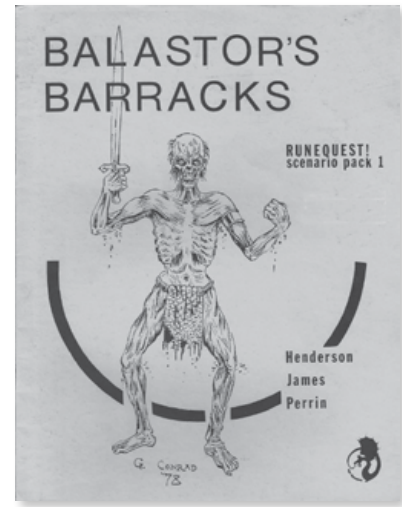
Perrin would eventually fulfill that dream by becoming a staff member at Chaosium and working on many of their major projects, but for now he and Pimper talked with Chaosium about just one publication, a *D&D*-based monster manual that they called *All the Worlds' Monsters* (1977). They'd once hoped that TSR would publish it, but instead got the obligatory nasty lawyer's letter, so they went looking for other publishers instead. Three years after the publication of *D&D*, putting out unofficial third-party supplements for the game was all the

rage, so Stafford intelligently agreed to give the book a shot. It beat TSR's *Monster Manual* (1977) to market and put Chaosium on the map as a publisher of RPGs.

Chaosium would publish two more volumes of *Monsters* (1977, 1980). *All the Worlds' Monsters II* notably contained a reprint of *The Perrin Conventions*, which had previously only been released in small numbers at the first DunDraCon convention (1976).

The Birth of *RuneQuest*: 1977—1983

Though Chaosium got its RPG start with those *D&D*-oriented *Monsters* volumes, they were also looking for a game of their own. Their first RPG could easily have been *The Arduin Grimoire*, submitted by Dave Hargrave to Chaosium around 1976. However Stafford ultimately found it too derivative of *D&D* and too complex and rejected it. Dave Hargrave would go on to self-publish (1977, 1978). Afterward *Arduin* was published by a variety of small presses, as is documented more completely in the history of Grimoire Games.



Meanwhile, Stafford already decided that Glorantha should be introduced to the roleplaying world. Hendrik Jan Pfeiffer, Art Turney, and Ray Turney made the first attempt. Using *White Bear and Red Moon* as a basis, they created a very *D&D*-like game. However Stafford wanted something more original, resulting in the failure of this design. Steve Perrin was introduced to the gang on July 4, 1976 — possibly at one of Paul Zimmer's Greyhaven parties — and he immediately started coming up with more far-flung ideas like omitting character classes. Under this revamped mandate, the members of the original team began to fade away until only Ray Turney remained, while Perrin's friend Steve Henderson and his housemate Warren James joined up. Shortly thereafter an original gaming system for Glorantha began to gel.

The next year Chaosium's two core businesses — roleplaying games and Gloranthan board games — naturally merged when Chaosium published Perrin's *RuneQuest* (1978), set in the world of Glorantha. *RuneQuest* followed on the heels of the first wave of fantasy RPG designs — including TSR's *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), TSR's *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975), Flying Buffalo's *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975), Metagaming's *Melee* (1977), and FGU's *Chivalry & Sorcery*

(1977). In turn it would be quite influential to second-wave FRP designs like SPI's *DragonQuest* (1980) and ICE's *Rolemaster* system (1980).

> *"Without Greg Stafford hovering over us and saying, 'gonna be ready for Origins?', we'd still be sorting through mounds of paper and trying new slants on things."*
> – Steve Perrin, "My Life is Role Playing," Different Worlds #3 (June/July 1979)

RuneQuest's contributions to the industry included:

- It was the first game to introduce a fully skill-based character system. *Traveller* (1977) previously introduced skills to the roleplaying mainstream, but with two major caveats. First, initial skills were limited to what was available in a character's class ("career"). Second, there was no experience system. *RuneQuest* resolved both of these issues.
- It offered up one of the earliest deeply detailed fantasy worlds. This was an emerging trend in roleplaying, with other early contenders including M.A.R. Barker's Tékumel (1975), Judges Guild's City State of the Invincible Overlord (1976), GDW's Imperium (1979), and Midkemia Press' Midkemia (1980).
- It was the earliest serious look at religion in RPGs. Before that, clerics had been present, but their religion was mostly glossed over. Even *Gods, Demi-Gods, and Heroes* (1976) treated deities more as monsters than as important cultural forces.

With board games, *RuneQuest*, and *All the Worlds' Monsters* all taking up Chaosium's time, it was natural that the company started to expand. Tadashi Ehara, the buyer for San Francisco game store Gambit, became Chaosium's second employee. Lynn Willis, author of *Lords of the Middle Sea*, was hired shortly thereafter to lay out his own wargame's rules, but would stay long beyond that. A young Charlie Krank, also a Gambit employee, started volunteering to help Chaosium playtest in 1978 and became a paid employee two years later. Around the same time — on February 7, 1980 — Chaosium officially incorporated, with The Chaosium becoming Chaosium Inc.

Many, many other staff members would move through Chaosium's offices in the years afterward (including, in the late '90s, the author of these histories). The company would average five to seven employees during some of its good times and would have no one officially on its payroll during some of the bad.

For now, the increases in manpower at Chaosium helped to ensure that *RuneQuest* was a well-supplemented game. It got immediate support from



Chaosium's Gloranthan magazine, *Wyrm's Footnotes*, which ended up running 14 issues total (1976–1982); the later issues were focused on *RuneQuest* rather than the Gloranthan board games. Chaosium also published a second edition of the *RuneQuest* rules (1979) and almost two-dozen supplements over the next six years.

Though some of *RuneQuest*'s first supplements were simple dungeon crawls and stat books, many others were groundbreaking. *Cults of Prax* (1979) and *Cults of Terror* (1981) gave precise details on the worship of a few dozen gods within the world of Glorantha, further delving into the depths of *RuneQuest*'s sophisticated religions. *Griffin Mountain* (1981) provided 200 pages of background on a single realm in Glorantha; it would remain one of the best-detailed RPG lands for many years. *Pavis* (1983) and *Big Rubble* (1983) provided even more detail on a single city and the ruins it was built upon. Though the *Cults* books were arguably two of the earliest splatbooks — providing detail on a variety of character organizations — *Trollpak* (1983) came even closer to the model that would be used by White Wolf and others in the '90s by offering an extensive look at a single culture.

> *"At that point Chaosium's growth was about 100 percent per year. It seemed like we could do no wrong. Even though we were talking very small numbers."*
>
> – Charlie Krank, 40 Years of Gen Con (2007)

All said, there was considerable innovation in the *RuneQuest* line during the years it was published by Chaosium — but it was far from the company's only interest during those years.

Other Supplemental RPGs: 1979—1987

When Chaosium published *RuneQuest* in 1978, Greg Stafford didn't know that it — and its successors — would become the cornerstone of Chaosium's business. Thus, he continued with business as usual. We've already seen that he published board games through 1981. In addition, he kept producing generalist supplements for the roleplaying industry, building on the interest in the *Worlds' Monsters* books.

Chaosium's next venture in this vein was a generalist roleplaying magazine called *Different Worlds* (1979–1987), which was overseen by Tadashi Ehara.

Magazine History

Different Worlds: 1979-1987

Different Worlds was one of the dozen or so most influential magazines in the roleplaying industry. It ran 47 issues, from 1979–1987, under three different publishers. It shared with Steve Jackson's *Space Gamer* (1980–1985, in that form) the distinction of being one of the magazines that truly chronicled the history of the RPG industry during the '80s, while it shared with White Wolf's *White Wolf* (1986–1995) and AEG's *Shadis* (1990–1998) the distinction of being one of the great "independent" magazines of the industry.

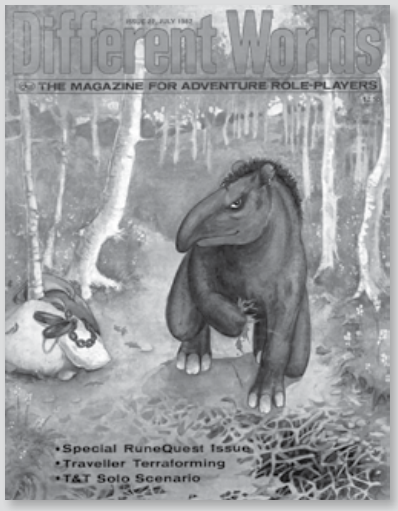
Chaosium founded *Different Worlds* in 1979. Its first editor was Tadashi Ehara, who remained the editor-in-chief throughout the magazine's history – though fellow Chaosium staffer Yurek Chodak was managing editor for the latter part of the magazine's Chaosium run.

When Chaosium premiered *Different Worlds* in 1979, they already published their own RPG, *RuneQuest* (1978), but were also publishing supplements for other companies' games, including the *All the Worlds' Monsters* series (1977–1981) and the groundbreaking *Thieves' World* (1981) box, which is likely one factor that led *Different Worlds* to be a generalist magazine. However, the staff of Chaosium also had numerous friendly connections to the rest of the industry, and that's what really shows in the magazine.

Many issues of *Different Worlds* featured a "My Life and Role-Playing" column in which some of the early contributors to the roleplaying field wrote about their experiences in the gaming field. Among the contributors were Dave Arneson, Greg Costikyan, Lee Gold, David Hargrave, Steve Jackson, Ed Simbalist, Ken St. Andre, and Michael A. Stackpole. The magazine also occasionally benefited from designer notes or unique adventures offered up by some of the industry's most notable authors. These became standardized in later issues, each of which tended to feature an eight-page pullout adventure, the most notable of which was probably "Garbage Pits of Despair" – a two-part Blackmoor scenario by Dave Arneson, which appeared in *Different Worlds #42* (May/June 1986) and *#43* (July/August 1986).

Different Worlds stayed with Chaosium for almost six years, until *Different Worlds #38* (January/February 1985). Though Chaosium was increasingly a publisher of their own RPGs by the end of that period, they did a remarkable job of keeping the magazine independent and generalist. Issue #19 (February 1982) was the only exception, with its heavy focus on Chaosium's brand-new *Call of Cthulhu* game. Though issue #22 (July 1982) was labeled a *RuneQuest* issue, it actually spent as much space on *Traveller* and *Tunnels & Trolls*. Issue #22 also saw a notable revamp in *Different Worlds*' graphical design and content. Later issues tended to be thematic,

starting with #23's "Special Superhero Issue" (August 1982) and running through #36's "Special Magic Issue" (September/October 1984).



Both Tadashi Ehara and *Different Worlds* left Chaosium in 1985 due to financial difficulties. There was a small gap before the publication of *Different Worlds #39* (May/June 1985) through Ehara's new partner, Sleuth Publications. The magazine was largely unchanged, but the magazine's schedule began to waver as Sleuth's enthusiasm for the roleplaying field diminished. Only eight issues were published by Sleuth over a two-year period, the last being *Different Worlds #46* (May/June 1987).

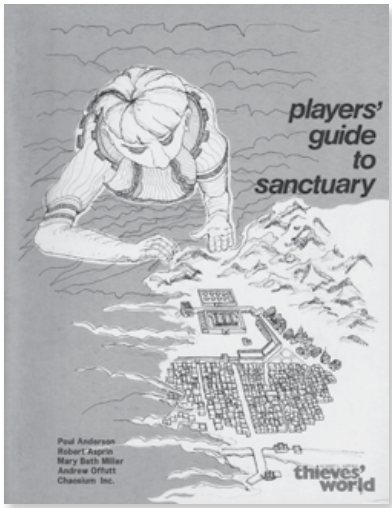
Afterward, Ehara used *Different Worlds* as the basis of a new company, Different Worlds Publications. Though he had some limited success with the production of *other* products, he only put out one more issue of *Different Worlds*, #47 (Fall 1987). Just as *Different Worlds* chronicled the history of the RPG industry in the '80s, the last issue pointed toward its future. It featured an article called "Egyptian Magic for *Call of Cthulhu*," which was written by an up-and-coming RPG author named Jonathan Tweet – who would one day be a lead author for *Dungeons & Dragons* itself.

For many years, it seemed like a new issue of *Different Worlds* was just around the corner, but over 20 years later, it now seems likely that the magazine is gone forever.

By 1981 the magazine was doing well enough that Yurek Chodak was brought on as an assistant editor. Today *Different Worlds* continues to be upheld as one of the best "independent" industry magazines ever.

Then in the early '80s, Chaosium published a product of a scope not seen before in the industry, and probably not seen again until Wizards of the Coast's *The Primal Order* (1992). This was *Thieves' World* (1981), a roleplaying supplement based on Robert Asprin's shared-world series of the same name.

Thieves' World was notable not for its license — for as we've already seen, Chaosium got into that business with *Elric* — but because it was the earliest massively multi-statted RPG supplement. Stafford wanted to make the RPG supplement as cooperative as the original shared-world books, so *Thieves' World* included rules for TSR's *AD&D*, Adventure Games' *Adventures in Fantasy*, FGU's *Chivalry*



& Sorcery, SPI's *DragonQuest*, TSR's *D&D*, Metagaming's *The Fantasy Trip*, Chaosium's own *RuneQuest*, GDW's *Traveller*, and Flying Buffalo's *Tunnels & Trolls*. The credits page is a pretty amazing who's who of the period's gaming personalities, including Dave Arneson, Eric Goldberg, Rudy Kraft, Marc Miller, Steve Perrin, Lawrence Schick, Richard Snider, Greg Stafford, Ken St. Andre, and Lynn Willis.

Thieves' Worlds was one of the few early RPG products that could *legally* use TSR's *AD&D* trademark. This came about due to TSR's unauthorized uses of the Melnibonéan and Cthulhu mythos in their *Deities & Demigods* (1980) book. Chaosium held licenses to both settings for games that they were then in the process of developing, but they nonetheless offered to make an exchange. Chaosium got the rights to use the TSR trademarks in *Thieves' World* and in exchange TSR was allowed to continue using the licensed works — which they ironically dropped almost immediately due to fears of Satanism that were then heating up in the industry (and which are discussed more in the respective histories of TSR and Flying Buffalo).

Curiously, *Thieves' World* was not exclusively licensed to Chaosium. FASA licensed the right to produce *Thieves' World* adventures (1982–1984) while Mayfair received the rights to include some *Thieves' World* characters in their *Wizards* sourcebook (1983) and to produce a board game based on the series. Much more recently Green Ronin published the newest set of *Thieves' World* role-playing books (2005–2006).

Chaosium planned a follow-up to *Thieves' World* called "Lankhmar." It was based on a license from Fritz Leiber and would have been another boxed setting featuring contributions from lots of different game companies. The release was being talked about in 1982 and 1983, but then hit a major snag: TSR announced that they had a license from Fritz Leiber as well.

It turned out that Leiber had indeed licensed both companies. Chaosium pointed out that their license was earlier, but TSR replied that if that was the case, they would sue Leiber. Chaosium decided to back down rather than get the author involved in a lawsuit, and thus it was TSR who produced *Lankhmar: City of Adventure* (1985) — also a ground-breaking city book, but alas not one that included contributions from the rest of the industry.

"Fritz was one of my literary heroes in those days, and also a terminal alcoholic, and I just imagined the havoc that would ensue for him, so I just dropped it and let them do it."

– Greg Stafford, Personal Email (2012)

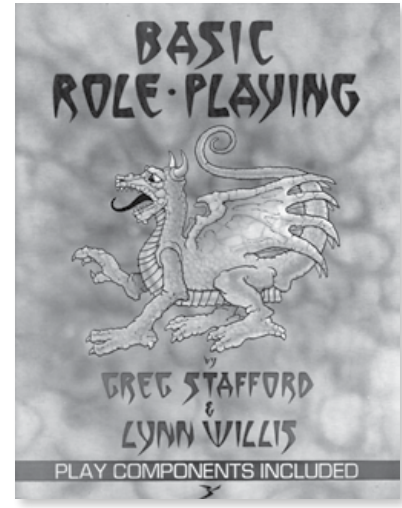
After *Thieves' World*, Chaosium's early era of producing generic supplements of use for other games came to an end. They'd briefly revive the idea five years later when they reprinted Midkemia Press' *Carse* (1986), *Cities* (1986), and *Tulan of The Isles* (1987), but for the most part Chaosium's time as a supporter of other publishers was done, because by then the *RuneQuest* system had really taken off.

The Birth of *BRP*: 1980—1982

By the late '70s, *RuneQuest* was doing great for Chaosium, and so they decided to expand their roleplaying catalog with new games. Their second RPG *could* have been a Dave Arneson samurai RPG, which he was working on in 1979 and 1980. Unfortunately, that possibility disappeared around the time Arneson set up Adventure Games. That second RPG also could have been *Dark Worlds* (originally *Dark Shadows*) by Kurt Lortz, which would have been a 19th century game of Gothic horror with Lovecraftian undertones. Though Chaosium acquired a license to Lovecraft's writings from Arkham House in preparation of this game, the (late) manuscript turned out to be unsatisfactory and was rejected.

Kurt Lortz, by the by, was the brother of Steve Lortz, who played in Dave Arneson's Blackmoor games — showing once more how tiny the roleplaying community is.

The mechanics that those early and unfinished games would have used are undocumented. However by the start of 1980, the Chaosium staff had realized that Steve Perrin's *RuneQuest* system had the potential to do much more than just simulate the world of Glorantha. They saw that it could become a "house system," where one set of game mechanics could be used for multiple games. Greg Stafford and Lynn Willis proved that theory by boiling down the *RuneQuest* rules into a thin 16-page *Basic Role-Playing* (1980) book. Two years before the *Hero System* expanded beyond *Champions* and six years before *The Fantasy*



Trip became *GURPS*, Chaosium offered the first example of a gaming system that could be used across multiple platforms. And *that* would be the basis of Chaosium's actual second RPG, which was now just around the corner.

Stormbringer (1981) actually preceded the publication of *Thieves' World* that same year and thus was Chaosium's first licensed roleplaying game. Ken St. Andre — most notable as the creator of the first non-TSR RPG, Flying Buffalo's *Tunnels & Trolls* — was the author. He had already been a friend of Stafford and a fan of *RuneQuest*, so when he heard that Chaosium had the rights to Moorcock's Elric stories, he submitted a proposal for the game, which Chaosium decided to accept.



Though *Stormbringer* was Chaosium's entry to the field of licensed RPGs, it wasn't the first licensed RPG ever: both Heritage's largely unknown *Star Trek: Adventure Gaming in the Final Frontier* (1978) and SPI's one-off *Dallas* (1980) beat Chaosium to the punch. Unlike those early releases, however, *Stormbringer* was supported — and thus is remembered today.

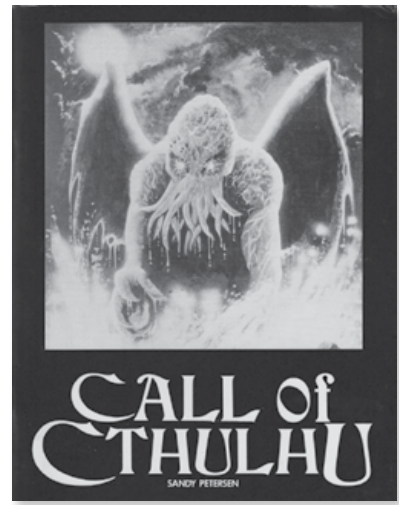
> *"The task of a game like Stormbringer is to transcribe the essence of someone's imagination into numerical and descriptive form so that it can be easily manipulated in the form of rules. The task of the gamers is to take those numbers and flesh them out in their own imaginations, to recreate the storytelling experience in their own minds while playing."*
>
> – Ken St. Andre, Heroic Worlds (1991)

The first edition of *Stormbringer* was fairly similar to *RuneQuest*, with its main differences showing up in various magical systems. There were rules for summoning and binding both elementals and demons and for creating demon weapons and demon armor. In addition, the game tried to improve upon the religious systems of *RuneQuest* by offering rewards for emulating the gods and their roles. Overall, there was just enough difference between *RuneQuest* and *Stormbringer* to show the strong possibilities that a generic *BRP* system could offer.

Stormbringer wasn't well-supported until 1985, and even after that, supplements mostly featured dungeon delves, puzzles, and other early-era RPG adventures. It would take a while for Chaosium's second fantasy RPG to really find its creative niche.

Meanwhile, there was another roleplaying game constantly getting shunted down the road throughout 1981. It got delayed from an Origins release because *Stormbringer* took priority, then it missed a release at Gen Con XIV (1981) because *Thieves' World* was deemed more important. Finally, *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) stumbled out the door in November. The irony is — of course — that *Call of Cthulhu* would eventually eclipse its two predecessors to become Chaosium's top RPG for much of the rest of the company's history. But back in 1981 it was a new RPG in an untried genre, and so Chaosium's prioritization seems sensible.

Sandy Petersen, the author of *Call of Cthulhu*, had actually approached Chaosium about designing a Lovecraftian RPG a few years earlier. At the time, Chaosium was committed to *Dark Worlds*, and thus Petersen's offer was turned down. When *Dark Worlds* fell by the wayside, Chaosium wanted to use that license they'd already acquired to Lovecraft's work, so Petersen got his chance. Apparently Chaosium liked what they got, because Petersen was a full-time staff member at Chaosium by the time his game was published. And the game *was* a good one. It excelled in theming and became an icon of the roleplaying world, remaining the top horror roleplaying game for over a decade, until White Wolf's *World of Darkness* overshadowed it in the '90s.

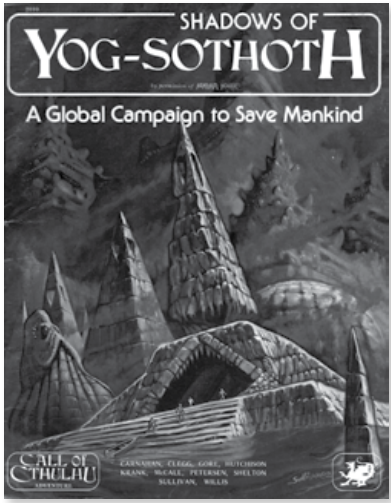


"When I first approached the project, I thought that it would be ridiculously easy; all I would have to do is put the RuneQuest rules in a different time period, add some new monsters, and have different cults than those in Cults of Prax."

– Sandy Petersen, Call of Cthulhu Designers' Notes, Different Worlds #19 (February 1982)

Call of Cthulhu also changed the way that people thought about roleplaying — not just because of its adaption of a new genre, but also because it suggested a whole new sort of adventure, where players investigated mysteries rather than just blindly hacking and slashing their ways through dungeons.

Call of Cthulhu's introduction of a mental landscape to gaming was just as notable. A simple "sanity" system caused characters to experience shocks when



they encountered otherworldly blasphemies (or even terrestrial horrors!) and could doom them to succumb to phobias and other madness. Though more modern RPGs like Atlas Games' *Unknown Armies* (1998) contend that they offer more realistic visions of mental illnesses, *Call of Cthulhu* remains the foundation upon which they all were built.

As we'll see, Chaosium would return to the world of emotional and mental traits when they published *King Arthur Pendragon*. More recently, the concept of emotional traits has become a touchstone for the entire indie community.

Call of Cthulhu also brought one more innovation to the world of roleplaying: player aids. Though they're much more common now, in the early '80s TSR was one of the few companies who had experimented with the concept. Their S-series of modules — beginning with *S1: Tomb of Horrors* (1978) — each included a book of pictures to show to players. Chaosium took the next step with the first *Call of Cthulhu* supplement, *Shadows of Yog-Sothoth* (1982), which had an eight-page centerfold full of textual player information sheets meant to be handed out to the players. These were actual clues that players could puzzle out, taking the mysteries of this first horror game up to the next level. Today textual player info is much more common, but it ultimately derives from Chaosium's 1982 publications.

Shadows of Yog-Sothoth set the adventure as the dominant form of *Call of Cthulhu* supplement. Many more would follow in the years to come. Some of them were linked adventures like *Shadows*, but others instead featured collections of short adventures, beginning with *The Asylum & Other Tales* (1983). Larry Ditillio and Lynn Willis' *The Masks of Nyarlathotep* (1984), a huge world-spanning campaign, is generally seen as the most successful adventure in the linked-scenario style and is still considered one of the best roleplaying adventures of all time today.

BRP Growth & Change: 1982—1987

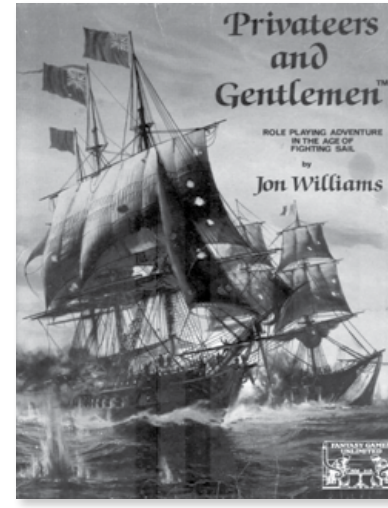
Steve Perrin joined the Chaosium staff full-time in 1981. It's no surprise that Chaosium's next RPG, *Worlds of Wonder* (1982), was by him. It presented three worlds of adventure — fantasy, science-fiction, and superhero — each as a 16-page

book. Whereas 1980's *BRP* was probably the first house system, this new publication was arguably the first universal system. House systems usually change a bit from one game to the other, and that was the case with *RuneQuest*, *Call of Cthulhu*, and *Stormbringer*. Contrariwise universal systems usually presented an identical system for use in several different settings, and that was the case here. However you define it, *Worlds of Wonder* was Chaosium's best-selling RPG for a brief time.

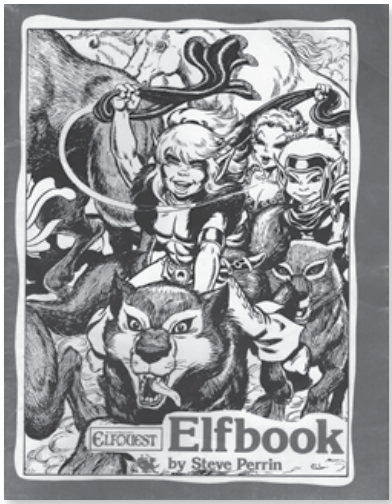


The initial plan was to release more 16-page booklets to make *Worlds of Wonder* truly universal. That never came about, but one of *Worlds of Wonder*'s worlds soon became its own game: *Superworld* (1983). Chaosium's new superhero game was only moderately successful, and author Perrin would later acknowledge that it was too similar to Hero Games' *Champions* (1981). However it did have a notable spin-off: an Albuquerque, New Mexico, *Superworld* campaign led by author George R. R. Martin would eventually become a well-known series of superhero novels and anthologies known as *Wild Cards*, most of which were published from 1987 to 1995.

Meanwhile over in Sweden, *Worlds of Wonder*'s Magicworld became its own game too, *Drakar Och Demoner* (1982). Not only was it the first Swedish-language RPG, but over the next decade it was also a best-seller, with over 100,000 copies sold. However from the third edition (1985) onward, it started deviating largely from its *BRP* roots, even throwing out the d100 for a d20.



That wasn't the only *BRP*-ish game to be published by someone other than Chaosium in the early '80s. The system was so popular that the company just couldn't keep up. Two projects that had been considered by Chaosium ended up instead at FGU: *Privateers and Gentlemen* (1983), an Age of Sail RPG that's a somewhat distant relative of *BRP*, and *Other Suns* (1983), a science-fiction RPG with an original background that's clearly *BRP*-derived.



Back at Chaosium, two more licensed products soon joined the *BRP* lineup. Richard Pini of WaRP Graphics directly approached Chaosium to ask them to produce an RPG based on WaRP's black & white fantasy comic book. The result was Steve Perrin's *Elfquest* (1984), which was Chaosium's next best-selling RPG following *Worlds of Wonder* — before *Call of Cthulhu* finally settled into the role for the long haul. Meanwhile, Chaosium had decided that they wanted a science-fiction game for their *BRP* line, so they produced Sherman Kahn's *Ringworld* (1984), based on Larry Niven's award-winning novel.

In the scant four years since Stafford and Willis released that 16-page *BRP* book, the gaming system had become the basis for no less than nine games, scattered across the genres of fantasy, horror, and science-fiction, printed by three publishers and in two languages. And Steve Jackson's *GURPS* was still two years away.

After 1984, Chaosium turned away from new *BRP* games, but they didn't stop creating new settings for their *BRP* rules. Later years instead brought new venues for their existing games — most notably for *Call of Cthulhu*, whose publications included: *Cthulhu by Gaslight* (1986), set in the Victorian Age; *H.P. Lovecraft's Dreamlands* (1986), set in a fantasy world; and *Cthulhu Now* (1987), set in the modern day.

> *"When Chaosium became successful with rpg's we decided that we couldn't spend any more energy on boardgames. They took twice as long to create as an rpg, cost twice as much to publish, and sold half as much."*
>
> – Greg Stafford, "Q&A with Greg Stafford," acaeum.com (2006)

With that much roleplaying success, it should be no surprise that Chaosium was trying to figure out what to do with their old board game line. The company stopped publishing new board games in 1981, but Chaosium didn't want their board games to die entirely. Stafford had always wanted to have a board game published by Avalon Hill, so he and Ehara went to the publisher and asked Avalon Hill to produce new versions of *Dragon Pass* and the *Elric* board game.

However, Avalon Hill was by then getting ready to roll out their own roleplaying line, and they were interested in *RuneQuest*. Chaosium wouldn't sell it (not for less than one million dollars, that is) but Avalon Hill convinced Chaosium they could do a *great* job in publishing a new edition of the game, so Chaosium did agree to a license. Avalon Hill would do manufacturing and marketing while Chaosium would do acquisitions, design, development, and layout. Each company played to its strengths.

Chaosium held the rights to Glorantha a bit closer, so when Avalon Hill's new third edition of *RuneQuest* (1984) came out, it was instead based in a "Fantasy Earth." This turned out to be a good decision for the future of Glorantha, because there were problems with the partnership from the start, when Avalon Hill opted out of including the designers' credits on the front of the box. Chaosium's "dream" deal would turn worse as the years went on.

Many additional details on this publishing deal and the future of the *RuneQuest* line can be found in the history of Avalon Hill, but we'll soon return to the topic here, as it impacted Chaosium in the mid-to-late '80s.

A Licensing Interlude: 1979—2000

Though Chaosium's licensing deal with Avalon Hill would ultimately turn bad, it's easy to understand why they agreed to it. Chaosium had already been in the licensing business for years — ever since that miniatures deal in the mid-'70s — and most of their licenses had been beneficial. In fact, over all, Chaosium is probably one of the most prolific licensors in the industry ever, trailing only the Open Gaming Licenses of the modern day and (perhaps) GDW's very frequent licensing of *Traveller* in the '70s and '80s.

One of Chaosium's earliest licensees was Judges Guild, who put out a half-dozen non-Gloranthan *RuneQuest* supplements (1979–1980). One of them, *Broken Tree Inn* (1979), contained an adventure originally intended to be set in Glorantha, while an adventure originally intended for Judges Guild instead became Chaosium's popular *Griffin Mountain* (1981). FASA picked up a license to publish *RuneQuest* adventures shortly after Judges Guild stopped. They planned a scenario called "Vengeance of Maksheesh" for Christmas 1982, but it never appeared. Chaosium even managed to license a *RuneQuest* movie in 1982, but alas it never appeared either.

Chaosium's licensing deal with Reston Publishing was more successful. It resulted in a nice hardcover *RuneQuest* rulebook (1981) and some other mass-market publications (1983–1984). Chaosium was also a long-time licensor to Games Workshop, who reprinted *RuneQuest* books for the UK market, generally popularizing the game in the country. In their last days as an RPG publisher,

Games Workshop also put out some beautiful full-color editions of *Call of Cthulhu*, *RuneQuest*, and *Stormbringer* (1985–1987), at least six or seven years before *anyone* was doing full-color RPG books.

Most of Chaosium's licensees were only interested in publishing books for *Call of Cthulhu*, and Chaosium was happy to oblige. Grenadier Models (1984) and Theatre of the Mind Enterprises, or TOME, (1984–1986) were two early licensees. Later publishers included the much-respected Pagan Publishing (1992-Present), who is covered more completely in their own history, and Triad (1990–1996). Fantasy Flight Games is another important modern company who got their roleplaying start with *Call of Cthulhu* adventures (1997–1999). There's been a new resurgence of Chaosium Cthulhu licenses in recent years, as we'll see toward the end of this history.

The Emergence of *Arkham Horror*: 1984

Lots of people were thinking about their own takes on *Call of Cthulhu* in the early '80s, including a board game designer named Richard Launius. He submitted several *Call of Cthulhu* themed board games to Chaosium, one of which was *Arkham Horror* (1984). Though Chaosium had ended their board game production three years previous, *Arkham Horror* was original and innovative enough that they reconsidered their decision.

Arkham Horror was part of a '80s resurgence of adventure games that included Games Workshop's *Talisman* (1983) and Milton Bradley's *HeroQuest* (1989). Even more than the adventure games of the '70s, *Arkham Horror* really modeled the RPG experience. Though the game had a definite goal — to close the gates opening into Arkham — players could spend quite a bit of time wandering Arkham, finding items, gaining skills, and really developing their characters. A booklet full of possible encounters, many of which required skill rolls, added to the feeling of a roleplaying adventure.

More notably, *Arkham Horror* was perhaps the earliest fully cooperative game, which allowed players to work together to defeat a common foe controlled by the game system. The genre really exploded in the '00s — beginning with Reiner Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* (2000) and including classics like *Shadows Over Camelot* (2005) and *Pandemic* (2009) — but it was *Arkham Horror* that got things rolling.

By today's standards, the original *Arkham Horror* is a pretty creaky game, but Fantasy Flight Games has since published a revision of the game (2005) that does a great job of reviving it and incorporating 20+ years of industry growth and new game design know-how.

It still feels like a roleplaying game in board game form.

The Waking of the King: 1985—1987



Though *Arkham Horror* was an innovative adventure game, the release of Greg Stafford's *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985) — a game that Greg Stafford regularly calls his masterpiece — was much more important to the roleplaying industry. It had been in development for a *long* time, dating back to at least 1981 when Stafford had been talking about the project with Ken St. Andre. St. Andre eventually decided to leave roleplaying behind (for a while), so when Stafford began work on the project in earnest in 1983, he was flying solo.

Pendragon was one of the earliest instances of the "storytelling" branch of roleplaying games, which was also then being developed by Greg Costikyan (at Steve Jackson Games and West End Games), Jonathan Tweet (at Lion Rampant and Atlas Games), Robin D. Laws (at Atlas Games), and others. Like those other games — which presaged some of the ideas of the modern "indie" movement — *Pendragon* placed storytelling and epic plot above individual characters.

> *"By 'story-telling games' I mean a game which engages the entirety of the players' creative capacity, not just his ability to understand the rules. Its emphasis is on participating in the story, not on memorizing rules."*
>
> – Greg Stafford, Interview, Tales of the Reaching Moon #5 (Spring 1991)

This was accomplished in a few ways.

First, a massive 80-year campaign was imagined in the *Pendragon* rules and then outlined fully in *The Pendragon Campaign* (1985). This idea of a long chronology filled with events went far beyond a setting like *RuneQuest*'s, which was poised on the edge of a conflict that never quite emerged, and even beyond the slow forward motion of GDW's *Traveller* News System. In *Pendragon*, a gamemaster could see the entire flow of a campaign and decide how to adapt it to their own game.



In order to make such a large-scale campaign work, *Pendragon* had to expand its emphasis beyond individual characters — who would rise and fall over the course of 80 years. The game introduced family trees to roleplaying, with a player inhabiting several members over the course of a campaign.

Pendragon's other notable innovation was its system of personality traits and passions, expanding on the ideas of emotional traits that had been introduced by *Call of Cthulhu*. These traits could guide roleplaying and in some occasions even control it. Highlighting ideals of "chivalry," "romance," "Christianity," and others also helped *Pendragon* to link more deeply to its game setting. Today, it still serves as an example of the power of tightly connected mechanics and setting in a roleplaying game.

Pendragon was the only major Chaosium RPG ever released that wasn't truly *BRP*-based. There are numerous similarities, but also a lot of unique systems — and it used a d20 rather the percentile dice of Chaosium's other games. This first edition of *Pendragon* would be supplemented by just a handful of adventures and other supplements over the next few years.

In 1985 Chaosium seemed poised on the edge of great success. They had a half-dozen game lines, including *RuneQuest*, *King Arthur Pendragon*, and *Call of Cthulhu*. Despite initial problems, the Avalon Hill deal seemed good, since they already put out six boxes of *RuneQuest* material, including a return to Glorantha with *Gods of Glorantha* (1985).

Within a year this success would turn, and Chaosium would teeter on the edge of bankruptcy.

The First Downturn: 1985—1988

The seeds for Chaosium's first downturn had been planted in 1983 with the licensing of *RuneQuest*. The hope had been that Avalon Hill would massively market the game in a way that Chaosium had never been able to, thus raising it to the next level of success. The reality was quite different. If *RuneQuest* sales changed, it wasn't by much. This was a big problem for Chaosium.

> *"We've had a very difficult relationship with Avalon Hill. The expectations which each of us had of the other have not been met and were not clearly communicated at the beginning of the relationship."*
>
> – Greg Stafford, Interview, Tales of the Reaching Moon #5 (Spring 1991)

Previously, *RuneQuest* sales had been a notable part of Chaosium's cash flow. Now instead of receiving 40% of the retail price from distributors, they were instead receiving a much smaller portion of sales as royalties. Worse, they were



diverting considerable creative resources toward Avalon Hill's *RuneQuest*, and so weren't developing their own lines. If Avalon Hill had been able to double or triple sales, everything would have worked out, but without that Chaosium started heading toward serious fiscal problems.

The first sign of the impending problems was seen in 1985. Tadashi Ehari left Chaosium early in the year, taking *Different Worlds* magazine with him. Steve Perrin exited the company around the same time to focus on freelancing. That same year, *Superworld* and *Ringworld* stopped production (admittedly, amidst the release of *Pendragon* and continued support for *Call of Cthulhu*, *Stormbringer*, and even *Elfquest*). It's perhaps no surprise that *Superworld* ended with the departure of "super" fan and designer Perrin — but for *Ringworld* Chaosium admitted that "sluggish sales" were the issue.

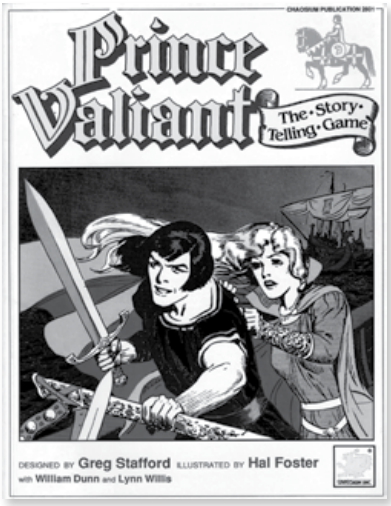
Shortly thereafter Chaosium published their final boxed RPG, *Hawkmoon* (1986), a companion game to *Stormbringer* featuring another of Michael Moorcock's Eternal Champions. It was authored by Kerie Campbell and one was on the earliest RPGs designed solely by a woman — with Lee Gold's *Land of the Rising Sun* (1980) being one of its few predecessors.

However, it also marked the end of an era. Because of their worsening finances Chaosium could no longer afford to hire labor to collate boxed games. Much of their staff had been laid off, and if Chaosium were an ordinary corporation, they probably would have folded — but because the owners of Chaosium truly loved roleplaying games, not just running a business, they held on, doing everything themselves.

Unfortunately, things wouldn't get better for a while. RPGs had already been on a downtrend in the early '80s. Then in 1984 an explosion occurred in the black & white comic market, thanks to speculators becoming interested in low-print-run comics like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (which is discussed in the history of Palladium) and *Elfquest* (which Chaosium of course held a license for). By late 1986 and early 1987 that bubble had burst, much like the initial RPG bubble had several years earlier. Some retailers went out of business as a result, and then some distributors did too. Since the comic and roleplaying markets are adjacent, this inevitably saddled RPG companies with some unpaid bills and lost futures. It was another disaster that Chaosium, already in bad shape, did not need.

Looking at publication records it's obvious that Chaosium's downward spiral reached its nadir in 1988 and 1989. In 1988 Chaosium ceased the publication of every gaming line except *Call of Cthulhu*, and they published very little of even *Cthulhu* that year. In 1989 *Elfquest* reappeared, for one final publication. But after that, things would slowly get better ...

The Second Golden Age: 1989—1992



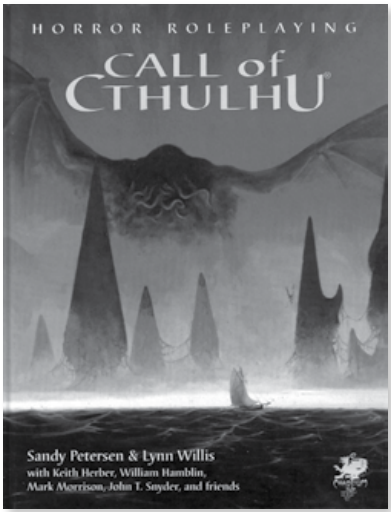
The first sign that Chaosium was emerging from its slump was the publication of a brand-new game, *Prince Valiant* (1989). It was a one-off roleplaying game designed by Greg Stafford. Some of its highlights were a strong storytelling basis, the use of a coin as a randomizer, a one-page game system, matched player and character reward systems, and an early troupe style system that allowed players to become storytellers for brief scenes.

Prince Valiant was unsupplemented, but if it had received more attention, it probably would have become a pivotal storytelling game, as important for its new roleplaying ideas as other releases of the time like Chaosium's own *Pendragon* (1985), Lion Rampant's *Ars Magica* (1987), and White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991). Even without that, some "indie" designers of the modern day note its influence.

> *"Experienced gamers are almost always put off the Prince Valiant system unless they are trying to teach new gamers what role-playing is about."*
>
> – Greg Stafford, Interview, Tales of the Reaching Moon #5 (Spring 1991)

Meanwhile, Chaosium kicked its three biggest lines — *Call of Cthulhu*, *Pendragon*, and *Stormbringer* — back to life, restarting each line with a new edition of the rules.

The fourth edition of the *Call of Cthulhu* (1989) rules was the first Chaosium edition that wasn't boxed. It also marked the appearance of a new name at Chaosium — Keith Herber, who would be the face of *Call of Cthulhu* for the next five years.



(1998 edition)

Following that new rulebook, Herber spearheaded a very successful set of Lovecraftian setting books beginning with *Arkham Unveiled* (1990). The series, which detailed the locales of "Lovecraft Country," would run through *Escape from Innsmouth* (1992) — though they've been reprinted many times since in many different forms. *Horror on the Orient Express* (1991), another classic mega-adventure, also appeared during these years. The modern *Cthulhu Now* setting even got some love with the *At Your Door* (1990) adventure anthology — best known for its introduction of disguised Shoggoth "Mr. Shiny," who became a sort of Chaosium mascot for several years.

A fifth edition of *Call of Cthulhu* (1992) bookended this new Golden Age and was changed substantively enough that for the first time Lynn Willis' name appeared beside Sandy Petersen's on the byline. Willis would replace Herber as the line editor of *Cthulhu* when Herber left Chaosium in 1994; afterward Willis would be the strong and creative guiding hand behind the game for another decade.

By this time, Cthulhu was increasingly the core of not just Chaosium's business, but also its image. The company began playing this up at Gen Con with their vibrant and lively "Cthulhu for President" rallies — with the first rally even featuring *Spawn of Azathoth* (1986) author Jeff Carey as Vice Presidential candidate Mr. Shiny. It was immortalized in Chaosium's first *Cthulhu for President* (1992) supplement, featuring various bumper stickers, pins, and posters.

A boxed second edition of *King Arthur Pendragon* had been planned — but then scrapped during the downturn. A "third edition" (1990) of that game appeared now. Like the other books of this period it was the first version of the game that wasn't boxed. It also marked a massive expansion of the game, allowing for the inclusion of many different types of knights through its companion book *Knights Adventurous* (1990).

Even more notable was Chaosium's release of *The Boy King* (1991), which expanded upon the earlier *Pendragon Campaign* by fully detailing the first half of that 80-year campaign. That same year, Chaosium published *Savage Mountains* (1991), an in-depth description of Cambria and the first of numerous sourcebooks detailing the lands and peoples of Britain.

By 1991 Sam Shirley had been brought on to line-edit *Pendragon*, a role he'd keep through the rest of the game's production at Chaosium — though only a book a year was published after 1992. Sadly, the details of the second half of the *Pendragon Campaign* chronology were never published so long as Chaosium owned the game.

> *"Truth is, working with the authors on these books was a lot like teaching a college course in how to write Arthurian roleplaying fiction. I wrote a lot of mail explaining how to structure the narrative & often ended up rewriting large portions myself."*
> – Sam Shirley as quoted by Greg Stafford, gspendragon.com (2008?)



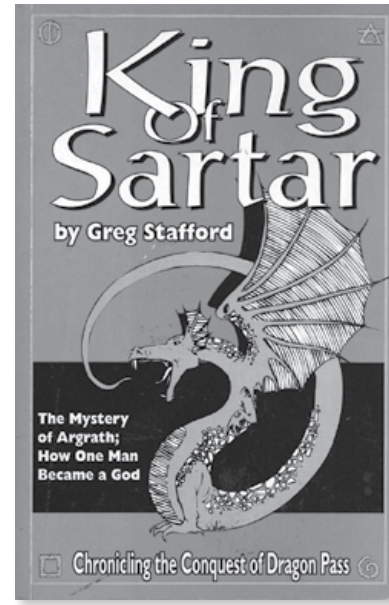
Stormbringer's fourth edition (1990) was revised and polished just like the other new rule books of this period. Afterward, the best books to date for the line were produced first by Keith Herber, then by Mark Morrison. They were thick, well-written books of background — such as *Sorcerers of Pan Tang* (1991) — and colorful adventures — such as *Rogue Mistress* (1991).

Part of the reason for the new creative surge at Chaosium was that after 1989 they finally decided to stop writing material for *RuneQuest* at Avalon Hill. As a result Avalon Hill first published non-Glorantha products, and then dropped the line entirely for two years. When *RuneQuest* returned in 1992 under editor Ken Rolston, Chaosium would have little more to do with the line (and indeed was already working on Gloranthan projects of their own). At this point the history of *RuneQuest* lies almost entirely in the history of Avalon Hill, which talks of the game's last days (in this incarnation), and in the histories of Issaries and Mongoose, which talk about its modern resurrection.

Fiction Lines: 1992–1997

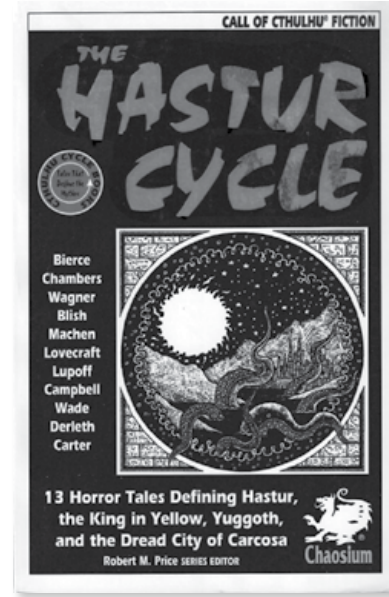
With the downturn behind them, in late 1992 Chaosium struck out in an entirely new area of publication: fiction. *King of Sartar* (1992) was Chaosium's return to Glorantha and also the first Chaosium work of fiction. This collection of "in-world" source material was very well-received by fans, despite clearly being an entirely niche product. Penelope Love's *Castle of Eyes* (1992) was a curious second choice for the fiction line, as it was "a novel of dark fantasy" with no connection to any

game line. These first two publications can probably best be considered "test runs"; Chaosium's more successful fiction lines were still to come.



Things really got rolling when Greg Stafford attended NecronomiCon (1992?) — a Lovecraftian convention held in Massachusetts — and realized that the Lovecraft community of the early '90s was made up of two classes of people: those who had come to Lovecraft through the fiction and those who had come to it through Chaosium's game, *Call of Cthulhu*. There was little overlap. The epiphany that most of the Cthulhu players hadn't actually read the fiction was what caused Chaosium to take the lessons learned from their first fiction publications and to use them to create a *Call of Cthulhu* fiction line.

Most of the early Cthulhu books were overseen by Robert M. Price, the editor of the long-running 'zine *Crypt of Cthulhu*. His first book was *The Hastur Cycle* (1993), a collection of short stories that traced the development of a single Lovecraftian element — here Hastur. It was followed by *Mysteries of the Worm* (1993), a collection of Robert Bloch's Mythos fiction. Price's encyclopedic understanding of the Mythos and its authors would make these and many other "Cthulhu Cycle" books a success. Meanwhile *Cthulhu's Heirs* (1994) was a different type of book: a new collection of Mythos fiction. Thematic collections, authorial collections, and new fiction collections would comprise Chaosium's Cthulhu fiction output over time.



Publishing literary collections was an excellent choice for Chaosium because so many of their games were themselves based on fiction, and there was probably no better option than Lovecraftian fiction, which had a huge pool of stories to draw from — many of them well out-of-print. However, Chaosium also faced a serious problem in its fiction line: though they

were publishing collections that might have been well-received by the mass market, they faced the stigma of being a gaming publisher, and thus having their fiction collections relegated to that niche. This was particularly a problem in specialty science-fiction, fantasy, and horror book stores, who were wary of stocking the books due to the gaming connection. As a result the "*Call of Cthulhu* Fiction" label slowly shrank on Chaosium's books as the years passed. It went from a top cover position in 1993 to a smaller, bottom cover position in 1995, and was entirely removed from the cover in the more recent *Arkham Tales* (2006).



(It has since been restored, showing that no marketing decision is absolute.)

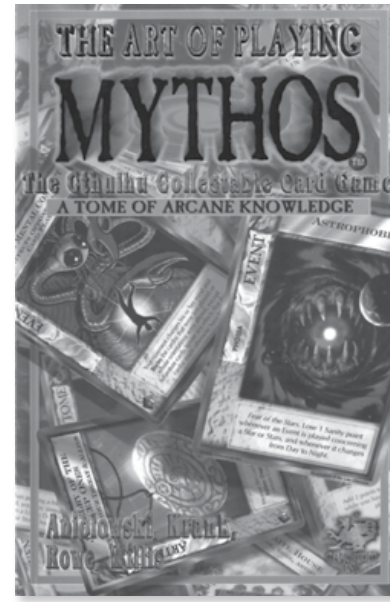
Despite the stigma of being published by a game company, the *Call of Cthulhu* fiction line was successful. By 1995 the early black & white covers were replaced with photographic constructs by H.E. Fassl, and a few years after that the fiction was selling better than most of the game books themselves.

In 1997 Chaosium introduced a second line of fiction, this one for *Pendragon*. If anything, this genre offered up even more possibilities to reprint out-of-print genre classics, since Arthurian fiction dated back hundreds of years. The line led off with *The Arthurian Companion* (1997) and the short novel *Percival and the Presence of God* (1997).

The Arthurian Companion deserves a bit of extra attention. It was an encyclopedia of all things Arthurian that had first been compiled by author Phyllis Ann Karr way back in the '70s to help Greg Stafford make his *King Arthur's Knights* board game authentic. Stafford was so impressed by Karr's work that he asked if Chaosium could publish it. Karr agreed, but not before she considerably expanded the material. The result was *The King Arthur Companion* (1983, 1986) — originally one of Chaosium's hardcover publications through Reston. The newest *Arthurian Companion* was yet another expansion of material that by now had spanned a full 20 years of Chaosium's history.

Though the *Call of Cthulhu* fiction line continues today, the *Pendragon* fiction line would rather abruptly switch hands in 1997 as the result of changes ultimately caused by Chaosium's other gaming interests.

Another Boom & Bust: 1993—1998



At the same time as it was entering the fiction field, Chaosium also started working on major new roleplaying systems for the first time in almost a decade.

The first was *Elric!* (1993), a totally new *BRP* vision of the Young Kingdoms, meant to replace the venerable *Stormbringer*. Richard Watts and Lynn Willis — the latter fresh from a major overhaul of the *Call of Cthulhu* rules — were the new game's creators. The new system was cleaner and more balanced. It also downplayed demons and increased the role of common magic — perhaps making it more accessible, particularly in Middle America.

The next year Chaosium published Sam Shirley's *Nephilim* (1994), a modern occult game system originally designed by French licensee Multisim. This was part of the first wave of foreign-language RPGs translated into English, following Metropolis' *Kult* (1993) and Target Games' *Mutant Chronicles* (1993), and was the first French RPG translated into English. More French games — most notably Steve Jackson's *In Nomine* (1997) — would follow.

Unfortunately, *Nephilim* would stand as an example of how *not* to release a roleplaying line. It was rushed out for Gen Con — as roleplaying products often are — and that may have killed the line. The rulebook was sloppy. The magic system was wonderfully thematic, but required complex calculations. Furthermore, because of the rush job, Chaosium wasn't ready to support the line afterward — another cardinal error of roleplaying releases — and so the only supplements published in the same year as the initial release were a gamemaster screen and a pad of character sheets. The first real supplement followed the game's release by some eight months.

Worse, *Nephilim* wasn't an easy game to figure out, and the rulebook didn't offer sufficient guidelines for what a campaign might look like. The lack of adventures just made this problem worse. Chaosium would only ever publish one adventure book for *Nephilim*, *Serpent Moon* (1995), a full year after the original game release. The *Nephilim Gamemaster's Companion* (1996) tried to correct the problem by devoting almost 40 pages to *Nephilim* campaigns, but with its release almost two years after the original game, it was too little, too late.

The *Nephilim* line closed down in 1997, three years after it got started, amid another rough spot in Chaosium's finances, which we'll return to shortly. Its half-dozen publications included some early work by some industry notables, such as John Snead — who has since freelanced all across the industry — and Ross Isaacs and Kenneth Hite — both of whom ended up at Last Unicorn Games shortly thereafter.

In the meantime there was a new fad in town, collectible card games, and everyone was jumping on the bandwagon. Chaosium's entrant to the field was *Mythos* (1996), a *Call of Cthulhu* CCG that was quite innovative in its emphasis on stories told through the cards. The CCG industry was already starting its downward trend by 1996, but there was still room for a new and interesting design, and *Mythos* fit these criteria. The initial releases sold like gangbusters, allowing for a period of dramatic expansion at Chaosium.

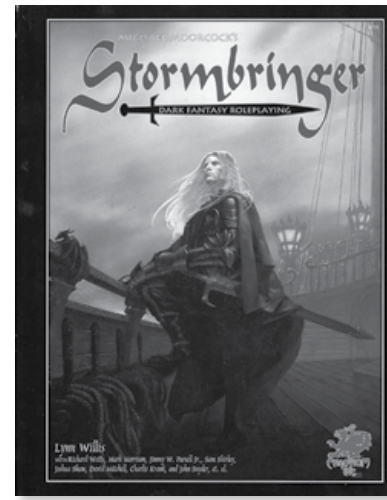
Unfortunately, the good fortune turned around almost immediately with the release of *Mythos Standard Game Set* (1996). It was a non-collectible set of two decks, meant to be an entry-point to the game. However, it was a non-collectible game printed at collectible card levels. Years later there were still pallets of the game in the Chaosium warehouse, and more immediately retailers were now newly wary of Mythos sales levels. Expansions for *The Dreamlands* (1997) and *New Aeon* (1997) trickled out over the next couple of years, but they were never enough to offset the massive *MSGS* losses; afterward Chaosium permanently got out of the CCG business.

CCG losses usually run at a scale much higher than RPG losses. Hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of inventory were tied up on the warehouse floor and the result was devastating for Chaosium. Most of the staff was let go. This author was working at Chaosium during that time period, and when I left in late 1998 there was no one remaining who was actually taking a paycheck. Again, Chaosium responded by shutting down several of its lines, this time *Pendragon*, *Elric!*, *Nephilim*, and *Mythos* itself. By 1997 Chaosium once more cut back to being solely a *Call of Cthulhu* publisher.

The Chaosium Split: 1997—2000

As a result of this second major downturn for Chaosium, the company actually split apart, with three debtors each gaining some of the company's properties while Chaosium continued on with *Call of Cthulhu*.

Green Knight Publications was the first. Peter Corless gained the rights to *Pendragon* — including the fiction line — as the result of a defaulted loan. Chaosium's last *Pendragon* book was a reprint of *The Boy King* (1997), then Green Knight began publication with a *Pendragon* fiction novel, *Arthur, the Bear of Britain* (1998). Its history continues (briefly) in the '90s.



Issaries was the second heir to Chaosium. In the years surrounding the *Mythos* releases Greg Stafford had found a new interest in Glorantha, separate from *RuneQuest*. After the successful release of *King of Sartar*, he had begun publishing "unfinished works" about Glorantha and had also commissioned a new roleplaying game from Robin D. Laws. With this newest Chaosium downturn, Greg decided in 1998 to part ways from the company he'd founded, taking all Gloranthan rights with him. He'd later use them to form Issaries, Inc. Its history continues in the '00s, first and as a publisher and more recently as a licensor.

Wizard's Attic, a distributor of Cthulhu goods, was the third Chaosium spin-off. It had been created by Eric Rowe while he was involved in marketing and sales at Chaosium, and went to him around 1997 as a result of debts owed. Its history also continues in the '00s, where it'd have the biggest effect on the roleplaying industry of any of the spin-offs — unfortunately due to its failure.

At the same time as it was splitting up, Chaosium also gave away the rights to one of their other product lines. Just as they were headed into trouble, Chaosium published *Cthulhu Live* (1997), a live-action roleplaying game based on *Call of Cthulhu*. After the downturn, Chaosium was no longer in any shape to publish this less-popular line, so they transferred it to Fantasy Flight Games, who was then — as we've seen — publishing licensed *Call of Cthulhu* adventures. Fantasy Flight supported the game through several supplements from 1999–2001.

Modern Chaosium & The Third Downturn: 1999—2003

With the foundation of Issaries, Greg Stafford had officially left the company that he had created 25 years earlier. Long-time Chaosium employee and part-owner Charlie Krank stepped up as the new president of Chaosium. Lynn Willis, whose additional investments had helped the company survive this second downturn, stayed on as editor-in-chief. For the next several years, through the split and into the 21st century, Chaosium mainly treaded water, mostly working on their single surviving product line, *Call of Cthulhu*.

Though times were bad, Chaosium was still able to put out some high-quality products, mainly thanks to loans from friends that paid for printing. Their releases included the well-received adventure *Beyond the Mountains of Madness*

(1999) — at 440 pages, one of the largest roleplaying campaigns published to that date — and a special pseudo-leatherbound 20th anniversary edition of *Call of Cthulhu* (2001).

Chaosium also participated in the d20 explosion, though in a fairly minimum way. While re-releasing the *Elric!* rules as *Stormbringer* fifth edition (2001), they also published a d20 version of the game called *Dragon Lords of Melniboné* (2001). Chaosium supported the latter with a few adventures, but the real intent was clearly to draw people into the fold of *BRP*.

Meanwhile Chaosium licensed Wizards of the Coast to create a d20 edition of *Call of Cthulhu* (2002). Chaosium supported this line themselves with new editions of Keith Herber's classic Lovecraft Country books (2002–2004), now featuring dual stats. A new d20 campaign background, Pulp Cthulhu, was originally planned for 2003, but was delayed for years afterward. In 2005 Chaosium announced that when *Pulp Cthulhu* was eventually published, it would not feature d20 stats, pretty much sounding the death knell of their d20 experiment.

Though Chaosium was largely insulated from the d20 crash due to their minimal exposure, the same wasn't true for Wizard's Attic. That company was already on rocky ground, as is described more fully in their own mini-history. When d20 fell, it knocked Wizard's Attic the rest of the way out of business.

Chaosium — by now starting to recover a little bit from their second downturn of 1997–1998 — was set notably back due to the loss of its warehouse and office space and the potential loss of money owed by Wizard's Attic (though the two parties couldn't actually agree on who owed what to whom). Chaosium ended up leaving the Albany/Berkeley/Oakland area for the first time in their history. Charlie Krank and Lynn Willis reestablished the company in Hayward, California.

Mostly Monographs & Reprints: 2003-Present

Chaosium almost went out of business in 2003. For a time afterward it was run out of president Krank's house with no paid staff. In the years since, it has returned to real offices in Hayward, California, but neither its publishing schedule nor its creative output has entirely recovered.

Much of Chaosium's production since 2003 has been in the form of semi-professional monographs in the spirit of Greg Stafford's "unfinished works." These tend to be books written and laid out by fans, with various levels of professionalism. The first was the *ParaPsychologist's Handbook* (2003) by Chris Jerome. It was printed at a local copy center and bound with cloth tape. In more recent years Chaosium has found local printers who can professionally squarebind the books, but they're still below the quality of a professional release.

With that said, the monographs have allowed a level and variety of fan input that's unheard of in most of the industry. The majority of monographs have featured long, standalone adventures, but those have been supplemented with products like *Halloween Horror* (2005), which collected together the best entries for what became an annual Halloween scenario contest. Other monographs have detailed ambitious settings, including: *Cthulhu Invictus* (2004), set in ancient Rome; *Cthulhu Rising* (2005), a SF near future; *Queensgard* (2009), set in an alternate America; and *End Time* (2004). *Cthulhu Invictus*, it should be noted, was reprinted as a fully professional Chaosium book a few years later (2009) and even received a *Companion* thereafter (2011).

Though most monographs are related to *Call of Cthulhu*, Chaosium also published four for their "fifth" edition *Stormbringer* game: *Gods of Chaos* (2004), *Hawkmoon: Adventures in the Tragic Millennium* (2006), *Old Hrolmar* (2006), and *Gods of Law* (2007). These were the only *Stormbringer* books that Chaosium published following the fifth edition's appearance. Afterward Chaosium released the perpetual license that they'd signed with Michael Moorcock in the '70s, so that Mongoose Publishing could license Elric and Hawkmoon for its own *RuneQuest* game.

Chaosium's monographs have all been sold directly to consumers — a business model that has similarly been adopted (to various degrees) by Columbia Games, Paizo Publishing, and Steve Jackson Games, which largely cuts out retail stores. Selling direct to consumers also encouraged Chaosium to recreate the success of Wizard's Attic, by adding Cthulhu-related CDs, decals, and t-shirts by other publishers to Chaosium's website. Dustin Wright, who has been with Chaosium since the mid-'90s, oversees much of this.

Chaosium's expanded website also allowed them to create a clever new business model. Rather than exclusively requiring money from their *Call of Cthulhu* licenses, Chaosium now takes some of their payments in the actual products produced, which they then sell through chaosium.com. This may have been one of the factors in a recent renaissance in licensed Cthulhu products.

Atomic Overmind Press was one of the first new licensees, publishing a few Cthulhu books by Kenneth Hite (2008). Goodman Games created an "Age of Cthulhu" adventure line (2008-Present), intended to diversify their output beyond the somewhat treacherous shoals of *D&D* 4E. OtherWorld Creations also put out a variety of well-received Cthulhu adventures (2008–2009) before they became more interested in Paizo's *Pathfinder*. John Wick's Wicked Dead Brewing Company published a few high-quality PDF adventures related to the Yellow Sign (2009–2010). Even Pagan Publishing — not-dead-but-sleeping for nearly a decade — has returned to publish new *Cthulhu* and *Delta Green* books, some

of them in conjunction with Arc Dream Publishing (2008-Present). Miskatonic River Press is a new Cthulhu publisher founded by *Call of Cthulhu* legend Keith Herber. Though Herber passed away shortly after the company's first publication, his press continues on (2009-Present). Cubicle 7 has published a series of *Cthulhu* supplements set in England (2009-Present), starting with their *Cthulhu Britannica* (2009). Most recently, Open Design published a licensed adventure anthology, *Red Eye of Azathoth* (2011).

Chaosium has even signed off on some Cthulhu licenses not related to the actual *Call of Cthulhu* game system. They allowed Fantasy Flight Games to publish both the *Call of Cthulhu Collectible Card Game* (2004) and the second edition of *Arkham Horror* (2005).



Though much Cthulhu material published since 2003 has appeared as monographs or as licensed material put out by other publishers, Chaosium has continued to publish a handful of fully professional books each year. Many have been updated *Call of Cthulhu* reprints, running the gamut from classic adventures like *Shadows of Yog-Sothoth* (2004) to classic settings like *H.P. Lovecraft's Dreamlands* (2011) and *Cthulhu by Gaslight* (2012). There was also a sixth edition (2004) of the rules as well as various anniversary editions.

One of Chaosium's newest reprints, *Horror on the Orient Express* (2013?), was the result of a very successful Kickstarter that raised $207,804 versus a $20,000 goal. That sort of thing could do a lot to revitalize Chaosium — and even allowing for two of Chaosium's staff to travel to Istanbul to conduct photo research, an unheard of luxury for any roleplaying company.

The monographs surely came about in 2003 from the opposite problem: insufficient cash flow to publish professional books. However both they and the reprints had another advantage: they didn't require much (if any) editorial work. The reason for Chaosium's declining editorial ability was revealed in late 2008 when editor-in-chief Lynn Willis was forced to leave Chaosium due to health issues. At the time, Willis was the most long-serving Chaosium employee — with 30 years' experience under his belt — and also the brilliant light that had held the *Cthulhu* line together for over a decade. He passed away in January 2013.

"Lynn's guidance and effort have been a cornerstone of Chaosium over the years. Everyone here appreciates his skill and sense of humor, and the work he did to develop Call of Cthulhu and hundreds of other books for Chaosium.

Whatever the future might bring, he will always be part of Chaosium."

– Charlie Krank, "An Open Letter to the Chaosium Community," chaosium.com (September 2008)

Despite editorial changes, Chaosium's *Cthulhu* lines *have* received a few totally new and professional releases in the years since the last downturn.

Most of those releases have been for the *Call of Cthulhu* fiction line — probably because it's always depended on external editors. The series continues to feature the same sorts of books that made it work in the first place, including Robert M. Price thematic collections such as *The Yith Cycle* (2010), single author collections like Lois Gresh's *Eldritch Evolutions* (2011), and totally new collections like *Cthulhu's Dark Cults* (2010). Chaosium's strangest fiction release of recent years was probably Terry McInne's *A Long Way Home* (2012) — a science-fiction novel that had previously been released as a *Traveller* story in different forms in the '90s and '00s.

Chaosium has also published a scant few totally new *Call of Cthulhu* RPG books, including: *Cthulhu: Dark Ages* (2004), one of Cthulhu's first takes on a new setting in many years; the long-awaited *Arkham Now* (2010); and the long-delayed *Pulp Cthulhu* (2011). Combined with the reprints and fiction, it's certainly enough to keep the *Call of Cthulhu* line alive.

Meanwhile, Chaosium *may* have a way to freshen up *Call of Cthulhu* — to bring it fully into the 21st century. *Cthulhu* designers Paul Fricker and Mike Mason have been working on a seventh edition of the game that promises to be the biggest overhaul since Lynn Willis' fifth edition. The draft they were talking about in early 2012 brings in various indie ideas, but the actual release was still a ways away.

On June 28, 2013 Chaosium took the next step: a Kickstarter for seventh edition that raised $561,836 from 3,668 backers. It was one of the most successful tabletop RPG Kickstarters to date, showing the strength of the old system. The game was scheduled for publication in October 2013.

In the meantime, Chaosium has already seen an old game system notably revamped in recent years: their old and beloved *BRP*.

A *BRP* Renaissance: 2008-Present

The first hints of the *BRP* renaissance were seen in 2004 when Chaosium started printing *BRP* monographs that were essentially reprints of the old *RuneQuest 3* rule books. Their success encouraged Chaosium to contract Jason Durall to produce *Basic RolePlaying: The Chaosium RolePlaying System* (2008). In many ways, it represented the promise that Chaosium made back in 1980, when they first put out a 16-page *BRP* booklet. Durall's 400-page extravaganza took the final step in the evolution of *BRP* as a universal system.

This new book opened the door for continued development of *BRP* of the sort that Chaosium did in the '80s, but seemed to be beyond the company's manpower in the late '00s. Not only has Chaosium published numerous *BRP* monographs, they've also licensed other companies to publish their own *BRP* games. Alephtar Games — formerly a licensee for Mongoose's *RuneQuest* — most enthusiastically embraced *BRP*, publishing no less than three *BRP* games in the course of a year: *Rome: The Life and Death of the Republic* (2009), *Dragon Lines: Guardians of the Forbidden City* (2010), and *Crusaders of the Amber Coast* (2010). More recently Chaosium has been publishing professional *BRP* settings including the western *Devil's Gulch* (2010), the SF *Chronicles of Future Earth* (2010), and the 9th century *Mythic Iceland* (2012).

Based on their last decade of production, one might guess that Chaosium's future lies mainly with licensees and monographs. However, the revised *BRP* and the possibility of a *Call of Cthulhu* seventh edition suggest that there's still some capability for the company to produce major works. Which of these two models is the true map for Chaosium's future is still to be seen.

What to Read Next

- For some of Lynn Willis' earliest work, read ***Metagaming.***
- For Chaosium's competitor for Lankhmar, read ***TSR.***
- For what could have been Chaosium's first RPG, read about *Arduin* in ***Grimoire Games.***
- For the better-known work of Ken St. Andre, author of *Stormbringer*, read ***Flying Buffalo.***
- For the licensed publisher of multiple Chaosium lines in the UK, read ***Games Workshop*** and for another earlier licensee, read Judges Guild.
- For those unlicensed *BRP*-like games, read about *Privateers and Gentlemen* and *Other Suns* in ***FGU.***
- For more on the "universal" books that Chaosium picked up in the mid-'80s, read ***Midkemia Press.***

In Other Eras

- For the first company to turn a house system into a generic system, read ***Hero Games*** *['80s]*, for another early house system, read ***Palladium Books*** *['80s]*, and for the first company to create a really comprehensive generic system, read ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*.
- For other notable independent RPG magazines, read about *The Space Gamer* in ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*, *White Wolf* in ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*, and *Shadis* in ***AEG*** *['90s]*.
- For lots more on *Drakar Och Demoner*, read ***Metropolis*** *['90s]*.
- For the future of Tadashi Ehara and *Different Worlds*, read ***Different Worlds Publications*** *['80s]*.
- For the return of *Arkham Horror*, read ***Fantasy Flight Games*** *['90s]*.
- For *Call of Cthulhu* licensees, read ***Pagan Publishing*** *['90s]*, ***Fantasy Flight Games*** *['90s]*, ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** *['00s]*, ***Goodman Games*** *['00s]*, ***Wicked Dead Brewing Company*** *['00s]*, ***Kobold Press*** *['00s]*, ***Arc Dream Publishing*** *['00s]* and the mini-history of ***OtherWorld Creations*** in ***Paizo Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For modern takes on investigative games, read about *Trail of Cthulhu* in ***Pelgrane Press*** *['00s]*, *and Inspectres* in ***Memento Mori Theatricks*** *['00s]*.
- For the future of *Pendragon*, read ***Green Knight Publishing*** *['90s]* and ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*.
- For the future of *RuneQuest*, read ***Avalon Hill*** *['80s]* and ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]*, including the mini-history of ***The Design Mechanism.***
- For the future of Glorantha, also read ***Issaries*** *['00s]*, including the mini-history of ***Moon Design Publications*** under ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** *['00s]*.
- For new games about Elric and Hawkmoon, read ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For one of the first foreign games to enter the US market, read ***Metropolis*** *['90s]*.
- For modern-day *BRP second edition* licensees, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to find out about Lou Zocchi in ***Gamescience.***

Gamescience: 1965–1969, 1974-Present

Though Gamescience's production of roleplaying books over the years has been slow, owner Lou Zocchi has nonetheless made pivotal contributions to the hobby.



1979: Space Patrol

Wargaming Beginnings: 1965–1969

The story of Gamescience begins around 1965. At that time, Avalon Hill was just starting to come into its own (following a crash two years earlier) and the wargaming market was beginning to appear. It would be the start of 15 years of upward growth. Even in those early days, small press publishers were eager to jump in. One of the first was Gamescience, created by a young student Philip E. Orbanes.

As Gamescience was just a casual, part-time concern, production was slow. Two wargames appeared in its first three years.

"Avalon Hill's success in its early years helped to develop a circle of fans who enjoyed playing these kinds of board strategy games. AH's troubles in the mid-60s then helped to develop alternate sources of the games. Probably earliest among them was Phil Orbane's Gamescience Corporation …"

– John Prados, "Simulation Corner," The Dragon #35 (March 1980)

Viet Nam (1965) was a two-player wargame of the Vietcong versus government forces. It's probably the most notable for its publication date. Produced square in the middle of the war, it was one of the earliest wargames on the topic.

Confrontation (1967) has been called the first "giant war game." It included about 2,000 pieces — all packaged in a giant tube — that could be used to decide the fate of the whole world. Notably, more than two players could play, which was rare for wargames of the era.

However, it was Gamescience's third wargame that would (eventually) lead to the company's interactions with the roleplaying industry. *That* story begins with Lou Zocchi, who had been serving with the US Air Force since 1954.

In his spare time, Zocchi was working on a wargame design of his own called *The Battle of Britain*. He finished the original design in 1967 or 1968 and began looking for playtesters. At that time, the best connections in the wargaming hobby could be made through the gaming magazines, so Zocchi sent a query to Chris Wagner — the publisher of *Strategy & Tactics* (1966-Present) — to ask if Wagner would help playtest Zocchi's new game.

Wagner agreed, but more importantly he introduced Zocchi to Phil Orbanes and Gamescience — who were then advertising in *Strategy & Tactics* magazine. Zocchi learned that Orbanes had always wanted to publish a Battle of Britain game, so he sent Gamescience a copy of his game. It turned out to be an ideal match; after looking over Zocchi's prototype, Orbanes agreed to publish it if Zocchi could supply the $2,000 needed to get it to press.

Zocchi did, and *The Battle of Britain* (1968) was soon being distributed to the young wargaming hobby. It was the third major publication for Gamescience and the first for Zocchi. By Zocchi's estimation, somewhere between 500 and 1,000 copies of the game were published, a number which we'll quickly put in perspective.

Orbanes brought his new *Battle of Britain* game to the Chicago Hobby Show late in 1968, and there he ran into a Mr. Casey, from All State Investors. They owned Renwal, which primarily produced various sorts of models, but Casey saw a new opportunity with *Battle of Britain* — it could allow them to produce a game full of plastic aircrafts.

After various negotiations, Renwal choose to buy both *The Battle of Britain* and GameScience itself. Besides offering Phil Orbanes a lump sum, they also promised him a job as a game designer when he finished college. *The Battle of Britain* was rereleased a short time later with an estimated production of 25,000 copies — a pretty big step up from those 1,000 or less that Gamescience had produced.

Sadly, we can assume that *Battle of Britain* didn't do that well for Renwal, because shortly thereafter they had Gamescience move into the family game business, producing Sid Sackson games like *Take 5* (1969) and *Tam-Bit* (1969). Afterward Gamescience's game production came to a sudden end.

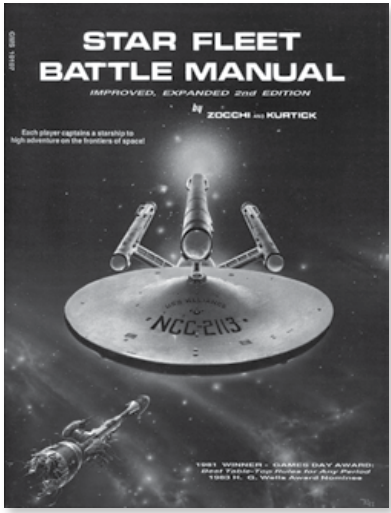
Orbanes stayed at Renwal for a short time before moving on to A Gamut of Games, then joining Parker Brothers in 1979. He became the Senior Vice President of R&D at Parker Brothers and is now the President (and co-founder) of Winning Move Games. Orbanes has designed many family games over the years and also published several books. This author found his *The Game Makers* (2003) to be particularly interesting, as it's a history of gaming company Parker Brothers.

However, following his departure from Renwal and Gamescience, Phil Orbanes leaves our history of the hobbyist industries — though he's made a pretty big impact on the mainstream gaming industry in the years since.

That could have been the end for Gamescience as well, as it entered half a decade of quiescence when Renwal returned to what it was good at: modeling. It *could* have been the end if not for the continued creative enthusiasm of one Lou Zocchi, who would soon become Gamescience's third owner.

Lou Zocchi, Independent Author: 1971–1973

Though Zocchi lost Gamescience as a creative outlet in the late '60s, he still wanted to design games. He published *Hardtack* (1971) — one of the first Civil War miniatures games — as part of Gary Gygax's "Wargaming with Miniatures" series at Guidon Games, *Luftwaffe* (1971) through Avalon Hill, and *Minuteman* (1972) in SDC's *Conflict Magazine #2*.



If Zocchi had continued publishing wargame designs through other publishers, Gamescience would never have been resurrected — but then in 1972 he opted to move in a different direction. That's when he self-published the *Star Trek Battle Manual* (1972), a game of spaceship battles.

Zocchi's *Star Trek Battle Manual* wasn't the first *Star Trek* game; Ideal had published a mass-market *Star Trek* (1967) board game some years' previous. However, it was the first appearance of the TV setting in a hobbyist game. Unfortunately, it wasn't licensed, as Zocchi had no idea that sort of thing was required. He found out about copyright when he gave a few copies to friends, to be sold at a *Star Trek* convention. Paramount saw it there and promptly sent Zocchi a cease & desist letter.

> *"The first game [Star Trek Battle Manual] was sold without any license from Paramount, a situation the production company quickly remedied by threatening to sue if any more copies were sold. (This, incidently, made the game something of a collector's item.)"*
>
> – Tony Watson, "Spaceship Miniatures & Rules," The Space Gamer #21 (January/February 1979)

Paramount also offered to sell Zocchi a license for a few thousand dollars, but he was still in the Air Force and decided he couldn't afford it, as the cost amounted to a year's salary. Instead Zocchi rereleased his game, without all the *Star Trek* space ships, as the *Alien Space Battle Manual* (1973).

At the time Zocchi was friends with Russell Powell, who ran the Spartan International Competition League — a nationwide wargaming group of the '70s. Powell introduced Zocchi to Daniel Hoffbaurer — the editor of the League's magazine, *The Spartan*. Thanks to this introduction, Hoffbaurer did the graphical production work for the *Alien Space Battle Manual*. When Hoffbaurer finished up his work, he found that he had three blank pages at the end of the book. He told Zocchi that *something* should go on those pages and suggested that they could feature ads for Spartan International's wargames — by then numbering over half a dozen total, the best-known of which may be Philip Pritchard's *Lensman* (1969). Since Zocchi had nothing more to sell himself, he agreed.

That decision would directly set Lou Zocchi on his path to impact the roleplaying industry.

Lou Zocchi, Independent Distributor: 1973—1975

Somewhat to Zocchi's surprise, he began to get orders for those Spartan games. He also started to get letters from other small press publishers asking him to carry their games. Zocchi was game, so whenever he reprinted the *Alien Space Battle Manual* — which he did at least three times through 1975 — he added products from other publishers and shrank down the space for Spartan International.

In 1975 Zocchi also mustered out of the Air Force after 21 years' service (or, if you want to be more precise, 20 years and 6 months — the minimum amount required by the Air Force to give him *benefits* for 21 years of services). This gave him more time for his mail order sales (and other ventures that we'll soon be coming to).

For a start, Zocchi began publishing his own mail order catalog. He created a mailing list of readers of Avalon Hill's *The General* (1964–1998) who had advertised for opponents and expanded from there. Zocchi's 1975 catalog also suggested his future influence on the roleplaying industry, as it included TSR's *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) and FGU's *Royal Armies of the Hyborean Age* (1975). Zocchi's own games appeared in his catalog as well, including recent products like *Battle Wagon Salvo* (1974) — but they were just a few amongst a much larger selection. Metagaming Concept's *The Space Gamer #3* (1975) praised Zocchi's catalog by claiming that he sold "almost every wargame, s-f included, in print."

Today, distributing games (as that's what Zocchi was doing) might not seem like a big deal, but in the '70s it was a game changer. At the time, the wargaming, miniatures, and RPG markets were all badly fractured. It was very hard to find new products, which often were known only in certain parts of the country. Don Lowry of Guidon Games began offering some mail order of games early in the '70s — prior to Zocchi's entrance to the field — but that had largely ceased toward the end of 1974, following a very disruptive move of Lowrys Hobbies from Illinois to Maine. Now, Zocchi was able to pick up the baton.

Zocchi's position as an early distributor gave him a surprising amount of power in the industry. For example, when a local game store owner complained about the plain brown paper envelopes used to hold many wargames of the era, she suggested that his manufacturers change over to zip-lock bags. Zocchi passed this suggestion on. The result? Lots of manufacturers began using clear bags, and consumers could look at games without opening them, reducing wear and tear at gaming stores.

Zocchi's position as an early distributor also had a *big* impact on the gelling RPG industries. As we've already seen, his catalog included TSR's *Dungeons & Dragons*. Zocchi was one of the first people to bring roleplaying games to a larger audience. That would be his first major impact on the roleplaying field.

As for his second major impact, that would spin directly out of his distribution work.

The Early Dice Chronicles: 1975—1980

Ken St. Andre and Steve Jackson were just two of the early RPG designers who decided to avoid the polyhedron dice used by *Dungeons & Dragons*. There was a good reason for this: not only were they hard to find in those early days of the

hobby, but they were also pretty low quality. Many a *D&D* player from the early days of roleplaying can recount how the soft plastic d20 from their first *D&D* game quickly rounded into a lopsided ball as it was rolled and rerolled.

Though Zocchi would return to the topic of quality, as an early distributor of *D&D* his biggest issue was simply that of dice supply. Whenever he bought *D&D* games to distribute, he also had to buy polyhedron dice from the only source in the US — Creative Publications in Palo Alto, California, who in turn imported them from Taiwan. This caused Zocchi a few different problems.

First, he sometimes found himself in contention with TSR for dice. If they ordered first, he might have to wait months for new ones to arrive.

Second, he found that Creative Publications had very specific rules about how they were willing to package dice. They insisted on selling Zocchi individual packs of dice (each containing a d4, a d6, a d8, a d12, and a d20) and refused to sell him the individual dice in bulk.

After one argument over these sales units, Creative Publications owner Dale Seymour told Zocchi that he should go make his own dice if he didn't like their terms. And so, Zocchi did. He went to a local friend who was a tool and die maker, showed him the Taiwanese dice, and asked him if he could make similar ones. The friend agreed.

However, Zocchi wasn't content to duplicate the Taiwanese dice. He also wanted to step up the quality by making them with a "high impact" plastic that was much harder and stronger than the dice then being used for *D&D*. Here Zocchi ran into what could have been a showstopper: though he could make better quality dice, the result would be more expensive than the Taiwanese ones. He'd have to charge at least a dollar a die, when packs of all five of the lower-quality dice were going for $2.50. Zocchi decided to give the project a shot anyway.

Since Zocchi didn't have a lot of money available, he made the molds for his dice one at a time. He started with the d20, very likely in 1975. After that he moved on to the shapes for the d4, the d8, and the d12, one at a time. The last die he made was the d6 — under the theory that anyone could find a six-sided die if they really wanted to.

> *"Improbable as it may seem, dice – just like plastic model airplanes and plastic model tanks and plastic model cars – are cast on a casting runner and you have to clip it off the casting runner in order to get it separated …"*
>
> – Lou Zocchi, "Game Science," Video (August 2008)

A modern gamer would note the d10 was notably missing from Zocchi's list. In those early days of the hobby, the d20 was actually numbered 1–10 twice. In

order to use it as a 20-sider, it had to be inked with two different colors. As the hobby matured, probably in the late '70s, TSR made a proper d20 numbered 1–20, then followed that up with an actual d10. Zocchi followed suit, first making a d20 where half the faces had "+"s on them, then (when he realized that players wanted more) making a proper d20 numbered 1–20.

Zocchi also hired Cliff Polite to design a new d10. You can easily recognize a Polite d10 because it has little empty triangles around the equator — as opposed to typical d10s where the faces all reach across the equator. That's because Cliff Polite's d10 is actually a d20 that's been squished down, with those tiny triangles being all that's left of the extra ten faces.

(Zocchi's d4 is also distinctive — it doesn't have any sharp corners. If you're a roleplayer who has ever stepped on a d4, you know why, and if you're a roleplayer, you've probably stepped on a d4.)

Zocchi likely finished up his d10 — and thus his classic set of polyhedron dice — in 1980. He was definitely selling it by the start of 1981. By that time he was also expanding his original line of opaque dice to include translucent dice in a variety of gemlike colors such as sapphire and topaz. These clear, sturdy, sharp-edged dice would quickly become Zocchi's trademark product — and within a decade or so the vast majority of his production. More precisely, they were *Gamescience*'s trademark product, for as we'll see Zocchi had acquired the name by 1980.

> *"TEN-SIDED DICE. Not 20-sided with two sets of numbers … actual ten-sided polyhedra dice."*
>
> – Zocchi Distributors, Ad, The Space Gamer #31 (February 1981)

That same year, Zocchi produced one other dice product of note: the licensed *Traveller Dice* (1980), a set of d6s that show the numbers 1–6 in Traveller's Imperial sunburst. The dice were also different in a second way: where most dice are left-handed (meaning that if you hold the die with the number "1" up, you can read the "2" through "5" counter-clockwise around the die), the *Traveller Dice* were instead right-handed, at GDW's request. They'd wanted something unique.

GDW going to Gamescience to get their dice produced clearly shows Lou Zocchi's second major influence on the roleplaying industry — as the first US manufacturer of polyhedron dice.

Around 1980, six of Zocchi's former customers entered the US market as dice manufacturers. Zocchi has never agreed with the way they make their dice and so has also become the industry's biggest proponent for *quality* dice. These new dice manufacturers all use polishing machines to clear away the scar left from the injection molding and to wear off the paint used for inking. Zocchi says this causes

the dice to become asymmetrical and biased. He doesn't use either process in his own dice manufacture, as you can hear about on Youtube, where Zocchi gives a great explanation of how hobbyist dice manufacturing works.

For now, we leave Lou Zocchi's dice-making enterprise in 1980 with a six-pack of polyhedrons. Before we get to the weirder shapes of dice that Zocchi made in the '80s, '90s, and '00s, we must first return to 1974 — to see how Zocchi got the name of Gamescience, which had been lost to Renwal and removed from the hobbyist industry some five years previous.

The Return of Gamescience & The Start of Roleplaying: 1974—1977

Around 1974, just when Zocchi was really getting his mail order sales going, he was also alerted to another interesting new opportunity. Model maker Renwal was going out of business, and they had lots of Zocchi's *Battle of Britain* left. Zocchi was able to purchase the backstock for pennies on the dollar, paying just $2500 for 25,000 copies of his first wargame. He of course added them to his catalog for sale.

When he purchased the *Battle of Britain* stock, Zocchi also asked for the Gamescience company name. This let him give new attention to the Gamescience brand, and so within a year products like *Rules for the Conduction of Skirmish Wargames in Miniature: 1850–1900 Period* (1976) — one of a series of UK miniatures rules — were being published with the Gamescience logo. From here forward, Zocchi would slowly move his dice and his own games to his new company name.

In 1976, upon returning from Origins, Lou Zocchi found that his wife had left him. A short time later, at a Salt Lake City convention, he ran into *Star Trek* fan Michael Scott Kurtick — who Zocchi already knew thanks to Kurtick's interest in the *Alien Space Battle Manual*. That's when Zocchi opted to turn his recent troubles into a new opportunity. He offered Kurtick a job working out of his house and filling orders — making him the second employee of the always small and casual Gamescience company.

Zocchi theorized that this would let him return to game design, something that had taken a back seat as Zocchi continued to ramp up his distribution business and started to publish products from other designers through Gamescience. Unfortunately, Zocchi was stymied in this hope, as he soon found he was publishing designs from Kurtick instead. These designs would quickly push Zocchi (and Gamescience) back into the science-fiction and fantasy field, and then more fully into the roleplaying field itself.

One of the first results of Kurtick's work at Gamescience was the *Star Fleet Battle Manual* (1977), the third incarnation of Zocchi's starship combat game. This one restored the *Star Trek* ships thanks to a license from Franz Joseph, the

author of the *Star Fleet Technical Manual* (1975). The story of this *Technical Manual* and its "Star Fleet Universe" is more fully described in the history of Task Force Games — who also licensed the *Technical Manual*, thanks to Zocchi.

Gamescience's other major release for that year was (at last) their entrance to the roleplaying field proper: Michael Scott Kurtick and Rockland Russo's *Space Patrol* (1977) — which had actually been commissioned by Zocchi two years earlier as "Star Trek D&D."

Though it took two years to finish, *Space Patrol* was still one of the earliest SF RPGs, following Flying Buffalo's *Starfaring* (1976) and coming out the same year as GDW's *Traveller* (1977) — and it showed its heritage as an early RPG. Characters are built around six stats, each generated with 3d6; they look a lot like the *D&D* stats, except Intelligence and Wisdom have been replaced by Mentality and Luck. The characters are also class-oriented. Combat is focused on a highly tactical system that practically requires miniatures. Somewhat surprisingly, there was no ship combat system, perhaps under the theory that the *Star Fleet Battle Manual* could be used.

Though *Space Patrol* had started out as a *Star Trek* RPG, Kurtick and Russo had ultimately decided that was too limiting. So as they worked on it they added elements from other SF settings, including the *Flash Gordon* serials, Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, and Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* novels. The completed RPG was sent to the printers a day before the release of *Star Wars* (1977); after seeing the movie Kurtick and Zocchi added a single sheet of information that detailed storm trooper armor, light sabers, the Force, and more.

> *"Zocchi's modest Gamescience operation was not yet able to financially support major graphics work, and Space Patrol showed it with a generally cheap appearance."*
>
> – Michael Scott Kurtick, "Designer's Notes: Star Patrol," The Space Gamer #51 (May 1982)

Space Patrol didn't make a big impact on the industry. Some reviewers cite problems with presentation and organization as major issues and say it shared an unfortunate characteristic with *OD&D* — an inability to (easily) play the game straight from the rules. Others note the "gonzo" nature of the game, which included cyborg parts, psionics, and other high-powered elements. As a result, the more detailed and serious *Traveller* won the day, taking over the SF genre of RPG games for the next decade.

Despite that, *Space Patrol* had a considerable afterlife past its first printing at Gamescience. It began when Zocchi learned that Heritage Models had acquired a license to make *Star Trek* miniatures. He contacted them and pitched the idea

of including the *Space Patrol* game system with those miniatures. Heritage agreed, but told Zocchi he had just four days to get them the game. Kurtick spent a weekend ripping out all those elements he'd added from other SF series. The result was Heritage's *Star Trek: Adventure Gaming in the Final Frontier* (1978), the first official *Star Trek* RPG — and the first licensed RPG.

Gamescience printed a revised and expanded version of the original a few years later as *Star Patrol* (1981). The new edition was boxed and featured lots of new rules, including those missing starship combat rules (and lots of other stuff that was *expected* in SF RPGs, post-*Traveller)*. Kurtick self-published one more edition of the game through his own Terra Games Company. That was *Starfleet Voyages* (1982), which returned to the *Star Trek*-only theming of the Heritage book. Each variant of the game was a bit more polished and playable than the one before it, but by the time that last edition came out, *Star Frontiers* (1982) and *Traveller* were ruling the roost of SF gaming.

Nonetheless, it wasn't a bad legacy for Gamescience's first RPG offering.

Just as Zocchi had converted his self-publishing to the Gamescience company between 1975 and 1976, he did the same with his catalog business in 1976 or 1977, when he rebranded it as Zocchi Distributors. Though Zocchi had gotten into the gaming industry pretty casually in 1968, he was now officially joining the ranks of full-blown businesses. The hobbyist industry was maturing and so was Zocchi's place in it.

The First Superhero RPG: 1977—1978

Lou Zocchi's greatest impact on the roleplaying industry has always been through his distribution and his dice manufacturing. He published *Space Patrol* early on — back in 1977 — but since then Gamescience's roleplaying publication has been sporadic, and it's been almost entirely focused on games that Zocchi acquired and then reprinted. Though these later games weren't original to Zocchi, they were often important to the industry, and as often as not Zocchi made them available to a much wider audience.

The first and most influential of Zocchi's reprints was *Superhero: 2044* (1977 or maybe 1978), which had previously been self-published by author Donald Saxman as *Superhero '44* (1977). It's notable as the first superhero roleplaying game, predating big names like *Villains and Vigilantes* (1979) and *Champions* (1981).

> *"As I understand, roughly 1,000 copies of [Dungeons & Dragons] were sold in the first year followed by about 4,000 in 1975. If this is true, the IU Conflict Simulations Club must have bought ten of the first run, or one percent."*
>
> – Donald Saxman, Essay, grognardia.blogspot.com (February 2011)

Saxman had begun playing *Dungeons & Dragons* at Indiana University when his friend and future SF writer, John M. Ford, introduced him to game. He enjoyed it, but was disappointed by a later TSR game, *Warriors of Mars* (1974). He said that he could do better, and then gave it the old college try.

Though Saxman at first considered creating a pulpy 1930s game, he finally settled on a futuristic supers game that owed at least something to DC's *Legion of Super-Heroes* (1958). He did his best to stay away from *Dungeons & Dragons*' tropes when he wrote *Superhero: 2044*, but the result was a pretty thin game. It didn't even include rules for powers — in part because Saxman was concerned about infringing on the rights of DC and Marvel. Instead, gamemasters and players had to figure out powers for themselves. The game system was also mystifying to some players. On the flip side, *Superhero: 2044* did have some nice campaign aspects. The island of Inguria in the year 2044 was well-detailed, and there were even rules for hero patrols.

Saxman printed up and sold 250 spiral-bound copies of his original book, but before he could reprint it, Lou Zocchi purchased the rights to the game. If he had his way, Saxman would have published two more books to help fill out the *Superhero: 2044* rules. He also envisioned it as the first of a series of RPGs that would have included the post-apocalyptic "Ruin War '90", the heavy-armor-based "Armor '20", the space-based "Asteroid '74", and (finally) the interstellar "Hundred Suns".

None of these would appear, though, as *Superhero: 2044* was too opaque to break out. It received a single supplement, *Hazard* (1980), from Judges Guild. In the meantime Saxman had finished "Ruin War '90" and also sold that to Zocchi — who retitled it "Nuclear Survivors" but never actually published the game. With that, Saxman largely leaves the history of the hobbyist industry — though he did eventually published a text-based online game called *Strange World* (1991) through US Videotel. It included some concepts from *Superhero: 2044*.

Soldiers & Martians: 1978–1980

Over the next couple of years, Gamescience aimed its sights even higher, buying up not just single games, but instead entire catalogs or companies. They *could* have become one of the biggest movers in RPGs, if that had been Zocchi's priority.

This new series of acquisitions began when Gamescience bought Little Soldier Games' catalog in 1978. At the time, the company was in a transition with the original owners of Little Soldier getting out of publishing, while a new (closely related) company called Phoenix Games was replacing them. Phoenix wanted to publish a freeform deduction game called *Elementary Watson* (1978) by Ed Konstant — one of Little Soldier's owners — but needed funds to do so.

To support the new company and the publication of the new game, Gamescience ponied up $2,000. In return they got Little Soldier's back catalog, which included

Mini-History

Little Soldier Games: 1975—1978

Little Soldier Games was one of many small press publishers created in the mid-to-late '70s due to increasing enthusiasm for both fantasy board games and wargames. It was the creation of Ed Konstant and David Perez and was named for their Rockville, Maryland, hobby store, The Little Soldier.

Little Soldier's first publication was Dan Bress and Ed Konstant's *The Ringbearer* (1975), a board game that was one of several unlicensed products from the time period that sought to build on the interest in Tolkien's work. It went through two editions before a cease & desist from United Artists appeared.

Meanwhile, Little Soldier also got into the roleplaying field with a series of generic fantasy roleplaying supplements, beginning with *The Book of Monsters* (1976), which contained descriptions of 124 monsters by mythological scholar Phil Edgren. Edgren would end up being Little Soldier's most prolific author.

Besides a few other generic books Edgren also authored Little Soldier's only standalone RPG, *Knights of the Round Table* (1976). It was a very early RPG and like most of those early RPGs, fairly primitive. There were individual characters, but each was defined by just a single stat. The game centered on three styles of combat: hand-to-hand, jousting, and melee. These combat systems all were based on a unique card system where players selected maneuvers from a set of ten.

Little Soldier Games published about a half-dozen RPG books and a half-dozen board games during its short period of existence. It faded away in 1978. It appears that this may have been as a result of The Little Soldier itself moving to Alexandria, Virginia. To mark the close of the company, Little Soldier Games sold its back catalog to Lou Zocchi's Gamescience. Zocchi paid $2,000 for the rights, which were used to support the publication of one of the first books from Little Soldier's immediate successor, Phoenix Games, which was also located in Rockville, Maryland.

several board games and a half-dozen "generic" fantasy supplements of very early pedigree. (Little Soldier had published them starting in 1976.) Gamescience expanded its roleplaying line almost immediately with reprints of Little Soldier's *Book of Demons* (1978) and *Book of Monsters* (1978). Zocchi had originally planned to publish more, but the rest of the Little Soldier FRP books would have to wait until all six appeared as part of the *The Fantasy Gamer's Compendium* (1983).

Two years later, in late 1980, Zocchi announced an even larger acquisition when he put out word that Gamescience, Zocchi Distributors, and Martian Metals were all combining under the unlikely name of the "ZocMarZ Corporation."

Martian Metals, a small miniatures company run by Forest Brown, had gotten its start in 1976 making military miniatures. Over the years, they'd picked up

Mini-History

Phoenix Games: 1978—1980

The line between Little Soldier Games and successor Phoenix Games is somewhat hard to see from this late date because some transitional books such as *The Book of Shamans* (1978) were published under the Little Soldier Games label, which was itself listed as a division of Phoenix Games.

The two companies *were* closely connected; Phoenix Games was a partnership between Dan Bress and Phil Edgren, both of whom contributed to Little Soldier Games before it shut down. In addition, Ed Konstant of Little Soldier Games wrote a few products for Phoenix Games, including *The Book of Fantasy Miniatures* (1978) and *Elementary Watson* (1978). The latter was a very open-ended deduction game whose printing was paid for by Gamescience in return for rights to the Little Soldier back catalog.

Phoenix Games continued on with Little Soldier's generic FRPG publications, one of which was *The Mines of Keridav* (1979) by newcomer Kerry Lloyd. However they also did broader work in the RPG field than Little Soldier had, supplementing their generic fantasy supplements with generic science-fiction supplements. Phoenix Games' *Spacefarer's Guides* to alien monsters, races, and sectors (1979) were all the work of Ed Lipsett. These books had repercussions beyond Phoenix Games, as they led to Ed Lipsett's *Star Quest* (1983)—Japan's first entirely original RPG, following *Enterprise* (1983) and other licensed works. For a small company with a short history, Phoenix Games made some notable RPG contributions.

Phoenix Games' most memorable contribution to the industry, however, was their publication of the second edition of *Bushido* (1980), an Oriental RPG by Paul Hume and Bob Charrette. It had previously been released to limited distribution by Paul Hume's even smaller press Tyr Games. Charrette himself was connected to the Little Soldier/Phoenix family through his illustrations of many of the original covers for Little Soldier's generic FRPG supplements.

After publishing a GM screen for *Bushido* (1980), Phoenix Games too closed up shop. However the chain of early RPG designers continued on. Bob Charrette went on to work for FGU, producing three different games, the first of which was *Aftermath!* (1981)—a post-apocalyptic RPG originally intended for Phoenix. Meanwhile a third RPG company appeared in Maryland. Gamelords, centered in Gaithersburg—just 11 miles northwest of Rockville—was the creation of Kerry Lloyd. Like Phil Edgren before him, he got a taste of RPG publication and wasn't done yet.

licenses for Metagaming's *MicroGames*, GDW's *Traveller*, Chaosium's *RuneQuest*, and more. They were also well-known for their magazine ads, which typically ran upside-down.

When Zocchi agreed to the merger, he thought that a single company that produced both miniatures and dice could be very strong in the hobbyist market. So Forest Brown — then stationed at Fort Hood in Texas — moved his operations out to Biloxi, Mississippi, where Gamescience was located.

Unfortunately, the partnership lasted less than a year. The Gamescience staff soon learned that Martian Metals was costing them money, and the companies separated.

Though one opportunity was lost, an even larger opportunity appeared that same year: the chance to publish TSR's *second* fantasy roleplaying game.

The Empire Strikes Back: 1980—1987

Gamescience's new roleplaying opportunity was M.A.R. Barker's *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975). As described in the history of TSR, it was originally published in the mid-'70s then largely neglected. *EPT*'s game system was a somewhat interesting extension of *D&D* that included skills. However, it was the setting that made *EPT* truly interesting.

Tékumel was a world that made strong use of the science fantasy trends of the early RPG industry. It was set 60,000 years in the future, where man — along with many of their (very) alien allies — colonized the planet of Tékumel. Then some event took the world outside of the universe, resulting in a slow decline of technology in the millennia that followed. Despite its scientific foundation, Tékumel also had gods — who were in truth vastly powerful alien beings — providing another of the foundations for an FRPG. Twenty years before FASA released *Earthdawn* (1993), Barker similarly used a SF background to explain many of the tropes of the *D&D* game.

Tékumel had two other strengths. First, it had a strong military basis, thanks to Barker's interest in wargaming. Second, it benefited from Barker's training as a professor, which led him to detail the world in a meticulous and consistent manner.

Though TSR entirely neglected Tékumel after 1977, Barker was able to showcase these strengths elsewhere when Gary Rudolph founded Imperium Publishing (1977–1978) to publish non-gaming material on the world of Tékumel. Military books like *The Armies of Tékumel Volume I: Tsolyánu* (1978) and detailed setting books like *The Tsolyáni Language Part I* (1978) and *Part II* (1978) — all written by Barker — soon followed.

That was the state of Tékumel in 1979 when Lou Zocchi received a call from TSR, offering to sell him all rights to *Empire of the Petal Throne*. The reasons vary, depending on whom you ask. It could be that TSR decided that *EPT* had "run its

course" or it might be that they had problems working with Barker. Whatever the case, TSR wanted to sell, and Zocchi agreed to buy.

> *"The rights to produce and market [EPT], which were originally held by TSR Hobbies, Inc., were sold to Gamescience recently. Further word from the versatile Mr. Zocchi on plans for the 'new EPT' should be forthcoming."*
>
> – "Eye of the Dragon," The Dragon #37 (May 1980)

A minor Tékumel revival occurred the next year. Because of their close relationship with Judges Guild — a topic we'll return to — Gamescience licensed them to publish an *EPT* adventure, *The Nightmare Maze of Jigrésh* (1981). Meanwhile, Dave Arneson's Adventure Games began reprinting the non-RPG material published a few years before by Imperium Publishing — and even added some new books to the Tékumel corpus such as Barker's *The Armies of Tékumel Volume II: Yan Kor and Allies* (1981).

However Gamescience proper was nowhere to be seen in this new era of production, not even as Adventure Gaming ended its Tékumel production, to be replaced by a *third* producer of non-roleplaying Tékumel material: The Tékumel Journal (1982–1984). They continued right on with Barker's *Armies* series as well as a few other publications.

EPT roleplaying finally got back on its feet in 1983, when Gamescience published a new edition of *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1983). Zocchi said he was able to do it because he had a guy who could speak Tsolyáni, and so knew where to put all the accents.

The game was still priced at $25 — as it had been at TSR — but due to the massive inflation of the late '70s the price was actually halved. It would be about $54 today. Nonetheless, it was Gamescience's first truly expensive RPG book, and Zocchi was happy to discover that it sold very well.

What followed was even more notable for the world of Tékumel.

That same year, Gamescience published *Swords & Glory Volume 1: Tékumel Sourcebook* (1983), a systemless background book with over 100 pages of information on Tékumel. It was the biggest and most impressive Tékumel book ever. Even today, it remains the most exhaustive description of the world.

Swords & Glory Volume 2: Tékumel Player's Handbook (1984) quickly followed. Though it was described at times as a redesign of *EPT*, *Swords & Glory* was actually a new game system — one that had at least four years of hard work embedded in it. Much as *EPT* has cleaved near to *OD&D* — the only RPG on the market when it was designed — *Swords & Glory* in turn reflected the gaming trends of the '80s. It was considerably more complex than *EPT* and considerably more simulationist.

Meanwhile, Tékumel was expanding in two other ways.

First, Barker had begun writing novels for publication with DAW. *The Man of Gold* (1984) appeared simultaneously with the *Swords & Glory* rules and *Flamesong* (1985) was published a year later.

Second, yet another Tékumel publisher appeared: Tékumel Games (1983–1986). Like predecessors Imperium and Adventure Games, it was located in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul, which meant it had direct access to Barker. Tékumel Games started off publishing Tékumel's third set of miniatures rules, *Qadardalikoi* (1983) — following TSR's *Legions of the Petal Throne* (1977) and Imperium Publishing's *Missúm!* (1978). However, they soon were more directly supporting Gamescience's production with *Swords & Glory* adventures.

All that was needed to complete the Tékumel renaissance was the third volume of *Swords & Glory*, which would have been the Referee's Handbook. It was to include vital information like monster and magic item statistics. Unfortunately, it never came to be.

Hurricane Elena (1985) tore the roof off of Zocchi's main warehouse. The result was the destruction of the *EPT* stock and the *Swords & Glory 3* manuscript — plus a pretty serious distraction for Lou Zocchi. While Zocchi was getting things under control, Gamescience's license for the game expired. It was then relicensed to Different Worlds Publications, who supported Tékumel from 1987–1988.

For a brief moment, Gamescience was poised to give Tékumel the extensive support that it never received during the industry's first decade. The sourcebook and the first half of the *Swords & Glory* rules could have been the foundation for a line that might have contended with richly detailed FRPG worlds like Glorantha, Hârn, and the Forgotten Realms.

Whether Gamescience could ever have actually offered that support is a different question, as Zocchi's focus on dice and distribution often left roleplaying a distant third priority. In any case, even in its truncated form, *Swords & Glory* was Gamescience's other truly historic RPG release, following *Superhero: 2044*.

In the years since Gamescience, Tékumel publication has unfortunately been as scattered as it was in the early years. Different Worlds Publications reprinted *EPT* (1987), then broke the *Swords & Glory* sourcebook up into three parts, of which they only published the first two (1987–1988). Theatre of the Mind Enterprises was the world's most ambitious publisher (1991–1994), eventually publishing the third Tékumel RPG, *Gardásiyal: Deeds of Glory* (1994) — but the system was never well-received, in part because character creation and the bestiary each appeared in separate books, making it even more expensive than some of its predecessors. In more recent years Tita's House of Games reprinted numerous older books (1997–2002), Zottola

Publishing published three new novels (2002–2003), and Guardians of Order put out a Tékumel RPG using their own game system (2005).

Since then, Tékumel has been largely quiescent. M.A.R. Barker died in 2012. Prior to his death, he formed the Tékumel Foundation, to preserve his writings and manage the rights of Tékumel in the future.

The Rest of the Roleplaying: 1987—1995, 2010

In 1987, Lou Zocchi was inducted into the Charles Roberts Hall of Fame for excellence in the historical wargaming hobby. He was the 12th such inductee, following many others also associated with the roleplaying hobby, such as James Dunnigan, Redmond Simonsen, Gary Gygax, Marc Miller, Steve Jackson, Dave Arneson, and Frank Chadwick. By that time Zocchi had been actively working in the hobby for almost 20 years.

It's perhaps not a surprise that in later years, Zocchi's new production slowly decreased — particularly for the roleplaying side of things. Still, Gamescience would publish one last major roleplaying product, a series that would be longer (but smaller) than any before it.

That new game was called *TWERPS* (1987), which had originally been produced by small press Reindeer Games. "The Worlds Easiest Role Playing System" was created by Jeff Dee (of *Villains and Vigilantes* fame) and 'Manda Dee. It was a reaction to the increasingly complex and increasingly expensive games of the '80s.

Though the name was a parody of Steve Jackson's *GURPS* (1985, 1987), *TWERPS* was influenced more by a tiny self-published game called *Dinky Dungeons* (1985). After reading that 32-page fantasy RPG, Dee wanted to see just how small an RPG could be. He bettered *Dinky Dungeon*'s three stats with a mere one stat for *TWERPS*. The game itself came in at eight pocket-sized pages. Printed in black & white, it sold for just $2.



The Dees supplemented *TWERPS* a bit over the next two years, then Gamescience purchased the rights to the game and reprinted it (1989). Afterward, Gamescience published many more pocket-sized supplements, eventually leading to a second edition (1995) that moved the line from black & white to full color. Though jokes and puns increased in the newer Gamescience books,

they were otherwise as the Dees had imagined them: cheap and pocket-sized. In the end, Gamescience published about a dozen *TWERPS* books, making it the company's only well-supported RPG line — but buying all of those books still might have been cheaper than Gamescience's two impressive *Swords & Glory* volumes.

> *"I was fascinated by the question: just how small COULD an RPG be, and still give you enough rules & background so you could play?"*
>
> – Jeff Dee, "The ABC's of Game Design," gamegrene.com (August 2001)

A few more RPG books appeared during Gamescience's final period of new roleplaying activity. They included Lou Zocchi's *Book of Tables* (1988), a corrected *Fantasy Gamer's Compendium* (1990), and an unofficial *AD&D* accessory, *The Tome of Mighty Magic* (1992) — the last previously printed by North Pole Productions (1982), a tiny Alabama publisher from the final days of the original *D&D* boom. Though these books showed that Gamescience was still occasionally publishing new RPG books in the late '80s and early '90s, they were relatively minor to the overall history of the company.

Gamescience's last *major* publication was probably *The Original Tegel Manor, Revised & Expanded* (1989). This book resulted from Zocchi helping out Judges Guild as the company was in the process of going under in the '80s — giving them $350 at five different times to help meet expenses. Gamescience in exchange ended up with rights to five of Judges Guild's books, one of which was *Tegel Manor*.

However, there's more to the story, because Mayfair Games had been working with Judges Guild toward the end too. As a result Mayfair ended up with the rights to publish Judges Guild's *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (1987), a line that they supported extensively for a couple of years. Mayfair ended up with rights to one other book too: *Tegel Manor*.

Mayfair and Gamescience could have caused trouble for each other over what remained of Judges Guild due to the confused rights over the adventure. Instead they decided to compromise and work together. That's why Gamescience produced "The Original Tegel Manor, Revised & Expanded," whereas Mayfair was to produce "The Totally New Tegel Manor" — though they never actually did.

As the new name suggests, Gamescience's *Tegel Manor* was a rarity among their reprints — for the fact that it *was* expanded. Since the original *Tegel Manor* (1977) came from the dawn of roleplaying — when it was Judges Guild's first adventure — it's no surprise that Gamescience's *Revised* edition got some good attention as a nice update of a primordial release. However, the book was probably more important for the fact that it reminded a new generation of gamers about Judges Guild — just as Mayfair's *City State* was doing at the same time.

When Judges Guild returned to life in the '00s, there was a bit of disagreement with Gamescience over the rights to *Tegel Manor*. Zocchi agreed to return the book in 2004. Judges Guild had plans to publish a new d20 edition of the adventure through Necromancer Games, but those eventually fell through when Necromancer lost its publishing partners and got caught in the d20 boom. To date Gamescience's *Tegel Manor* is the last edition of the dungeon to have seen print. It's a nice remembrance of things past.

As the '80s turned into the '90s, Zocchi began reducing his work in the hobbyist industry. This is the main factor in Gamescience stepping back from new roleplaying production after 1995 or so. Still, they've occasionally reprinted some of their classics for sale at cons, such as a recent printing of *Superhero: 2044* (2010). Realizing that he'd never nailed down rights to the other four Judges Guild books, Zocchi also reached an agreement with the new owners of the Guild that let him reprint Judges Guild's *Campaign Hexagon System* (2010) and publish compiled editions of their *Castle Books* (2010) and *Village Books* (2010).

However, if anything, one other element of Lou Zocchi's production has increased since 1995: dice.

The Rest of the Dice: 1983-Present

When we left off with Gamescience's dice production, back in 1980, Zocchi had put together what we now recognize as a traditional set of a polyhedrons: the d4, the d6, the d8, the d12, the d20, and (finally) the d10. Since then he's created a lot of wackier dice.

Zocchi's best-known die is probably his d100 (1986), which is now called the Zocchihedron. It cleverly encapsulates a plastic die within a shell. Zocchi completed the design in 1983, but it took three years to create the tool to actually make the die. As it neared completion, Zocchi was getting considerable interest from hobby shops, but he made the mistake of sending out prototypes that didn't include a "braking" mechanism to stop the nearly spheroid shape from rolling. Though modern Zocchihedrons *do* stop, they've still retained a reputation from those prototypes.

Of all of Zocchi's dice, the Zocchihedron is the most obviously useful for roleplaying, as percentile rolls are required for many games, most obviously Chaosium's *BRP* systems. The price of the Zocchihedron has probably kept it from wider appeal, as it retails for $12 today, which is 5 to 10 times the cost of most Gamescience Precision dice.

Zocchi's next original die was the d16 (1994), a diamond-shaped die with eight faces on the top and on the bottom. It was the last new die for a while ... until Zocchi entered a period of strong die production in the early 21st century.

The d5 (2002) was Zocchi's first die with a shape that wasn't fully symmetrical. It wasn't the first die of that type though, as Bernard Bereuter — a Canadian professor of mathematics — had previously created a similar d7 (1988). Bereuter's d7 was shaped like a cross-section of a long pentagon, while Zocchi's d5 is shaped like a cross-section of a long triangle (or a Vicks Cough Drop, if you prefer).

The problem with such a die is, of course, making sure the various sides come up an equal number of times. When designing his d5, Zocchi reached out to another Canadian for help. This Doctor of Mathematics had a dice-rolling machine that could easily a roll a die thousands of times a day to check for bias. Zocchi sent him sample d5s with varying thicknesses — from 10mm to 20mm — and asked him to determine which rolled a triangular "end" face of the d5 three times for every two times that it rolled a rectangular "edge" face. Zocchi got back a surprisingly precise answer for what width his d5 should be: 13.85mm. After rolling the various dice actually supplied, a simple graph had shown where the sweet spot for the d5 was.

Given their odd shapes, it's not surprising that Zocchi has gotten a lot of push-back on both his d5 and Bereuter's d7 (which Gamescience has sold for years). In his early days of selling the d7, Zocchi would put up a sign offering to pay someone $2 for each "end" that they rolled if they paid him $1 for each "edge," because of all the flak he got from people who didn't believe that the die was fair. In more recent years, Zocchi has similarly seen folks who want to buy his d10 numbered 1–5 twice instead of his d5.

Zocchi created his d24 (2002) about six months later. It's essentially a cube where each face has a four-sided pyramid on it (6x4 = 24). He found that shape in a book of polyhedrons.

Zocchi's d3 (2004) started life as a wooden football. He ground three of the sides flat to create a polyhedron that comes to rest in one of three distinct states. The die not only includes the numbers 1–3 on its tips but also the letters "R," "P," and "S" on its faces — for "rock," "paper," and "scissors," useful to players of *Vampire* LARPs.

The d14 (2005) is pretty similar to the d16 — a diamond with seven faces to the top and to the bottom. It can also be used to generate days of the week as well as night and day.

Gamescience's most recent die, the d-Total (2009), came from a pretty unique collaboration of three international contributors. Its genesis began when Zocchi received two packages in the mail during the same week.

One package came from Franck Dutrain of France and offered a sample of a new d24. It was a different shape than Zocchi's own d24, featuring diamond faces as its sides. Dutrain had already produced a mold for his die.

The other package came from Dr. A.F. Simkin of England. It contained a hand-crafted prototype of a d24 that was printed with a variety of numbers on each face, so that it could be used to generate the results of many different dice.

Simkin's die was exactly the same size and shape as Dutrain's mold. Zocchi decided to buy Dutrain's mold and produce Simkin's die — after doing some artful rearrangement of the information on the faces to make them more easily readable. Gamescience advertises the result as being "seventeen dice in one," saying that you can produce results from a d2 to a d80 (though some of these require ignoring out-of-bound results). Most obviously, the d-Total can be used to generate the results for dice that 24 can evenly be divided by — the d3, the d4, the d6, the d8, the d12, and (of course) the d24.

There's a nice epilogue for Zocchi's final die to date: it won the Origins Award for Game Accessory of the Year in 2009. Zocchi sent one copy of the award to England and another to France.

Winding Down: 1997-Present

In recent years, Zocchi has slowly been winding down his work for his various businesses. We already saw the start of this in the late '90s, when new roleplaying production at Gamescience ended.

In February 1997 Zocchi sold Zocchi Distributors (later: Zocchi Distribution) to Mike Hurdle of Holly Springs, Missippi. Hurdle ran Zocchi Distribution for four years, reportedly increasing sales from half-a-million dollars a year to three million dollars a year. When he shut it down in 2001, he gave a number of reasons, including: loss of the right to sell Wizards of the Coast products, the increasing instability caused by d20, and economic problems brought about by 9/11.

When Zocchi sold his distributorship, he also moved Gamescience into his Biloxi home. More recently, in 2009, Zocchi sold Gamescience to Gamestation — an online dice store founded in 2001 in Leitchfield, Kentucky.

Despite that, he still stays quite involved with the company at its trade shows, preaching the benefits of well-produced Gamescience dice.

What to Read Next

- For another view of how the early wargaming industry turned into a science-fiction and fantasy industry, read ***Metagaming***.
- For another company that got its start in distribution, read ***Games Workshop***.
- For more on *Star Trek: Adventure Gaming in the Final Frontier*, read ***Heritage Models***.
- For the future of Phoenix Games' *Bushido*, read ***FGU***.
- For brief notes on the origins of Tékumel, read ***TSR***.
- For Jeff Dee's better-known RPG, read about *Villains and Vigilantes*, also in ***FGU***.
- For the origins of *Tegel Manor*, read ***Judges Guild***.

In Other Eras

- For a modern-day game distributor, read about IPR in ***Galileo Games*** *['00s]*.
- For more on the *Star Fleet* universe, read ***Task Force Games*** *['80s]*.
- For a superhero RPG directly influenced by *Superhero: 2044*, read about *Champions* in ***Hero Games*** *['80s]*.
- For the next successor of Little Soldier Games and Phoenix Games in Maryland, read ***Gamelords*** *['80s]*.
- For the future of Tékumel, read ***Different Worlds Publications*** *['80s]* and ***Guardians of Order*** *['90s]*.

Or read onward to an actual miniatures producer, ***Heritage Models***.

Heritage Models, 1974–1983

Heritage Models is a rare miniatures company that crossed over into roleplaying book publication. In doing so, it produced a few books of particular note to the industry, and so is highlighted here.

Separate Paths: 1964–1976

The story of Heritage Models begins in England with Neville Dickinson's Miniature Figurines (MiniFigs), founded in 1964 and incorporated in 1968. MiniFigs' goal was to manufacture miniatures for wargamers. Notably, they also produced the first fantasy miniatures of note: an unlicensed Middle-earth line called *Mythical Earth* (1973).

Around 1972 Jim Oden — operating out of his home base in Dallas, Texas — decided to start a miniatures company to import MiniFigs into the US. He was joined by friends Cleve Burton and Jack Hays, but Hays pulled out pretty soon due to time constraints — leaving Oden to purchase his third of the company. As we'll see, however, Hays would stay important to Heritage's story. Because of their connection to MiniFigs, Oden and Burton's company began doing business under the name "Miniatures Figurines — USA."

Oden wasn't content to produce just one miniatures line, so he was soon talking with Hinchliffe Figures — a British company that had gotten into the business a few years

First RPG Publication:
1977: Dungeonmasters' Index

earlier with Napoleonic figures. Unfortunately, MiniFigs of England wasn't happy with this new partnership, and ended their relationship with Oden and Burton's young company.

After MiniFigs of England set up an actual foundry in New York, late in 1973, Oden decided to create his own miniatures manufacturing company: Heritage Models. Oden's new company kicked off manufacture late in 1974 with miniatures licensed from Hinchliffe. More relevant to the history of roleplaying, the newborn Heritage soon had a fantasy line of their own: *Earthe of Olde* (1975).

Heritage received some of its initial funding through a bank recommended by Jack Hays, who was himself a banker. Most banks weren't willing to finance a hobbyist company at the time, so this was a lucky connection. As time went on, Heritage's finances improved, and the bank suggested that they "factor their receivables" — essentially selling the company's future income for an advance of money. Heritage decided to go with this factoring, as they needed it to support the growth of the company (and the late payments of hobby stores). As it happened, this was the sort of banking that Hays was now doing at First National Bank; since he understood the hobby, he was willing to take on Heritage's account — though he put it through at least the same scrutiny he would for any other client.

Though not yet associated with Heritage, one other person doing miniatures work in the '70s would be critically important to the company's future: Duke Seifried. He began making "Der Kriegspielers" Napoleonic figures for retail sale in 1971, and then founded the Custom Cast company in February 1972 in Dayton, Ohio. A few years later, he released his own fantasy figures: the *Fantastiques* (1974) line. This line is typically said to contain the first commercial 25mm fantasy figures made in the US — though US miniatures maker Jack Scruby beat Seifried to the fantasy punch with a 30mm line that he sold at Gen Con VII (1974).

Seifried requires a bit of additional attention, as he's one of the most influential people in the early hobbyist miniatures market. He created the idea of blister packs, to sell sets of infantry rather than individual figures, and later came up with the idea of including figures with slightly different poses in those packs. More importantly for the RPG industry, he came up with the phrase "adventure gaming" — which was used to differentiate RPGs from "wargaming" in the earliest days of the hobby.

> *"Seifried is a one-man hive of activity. He's a show by himself – promoting, painting, pestering all at once in his best sideshow barker style: 'Hurry, Hurry, Hurry. . . . in five minutes the most exciting new adventure gaming developments will be demonstrated right before your very eyes.'"*
>
> – "Paradise for Painterly People," *The Dragon #33* (January 1980)

Around 1976 Seifried was joined at Custom Cast by sculptor Max Carr, who would be lead sculptor for the company in the years that followed. Carr may be best known for the sculpting technique known as "maximation," where he exaggerated features and sculpted figures in deep relief to make them easier to paint. Because of the use of these techniques, *The Space Gamer #54* (August 1982) later called the figures overseen by Carr "the most paintable ones on the market."

As 1976 came to an end, Heritage Models and Custom Cast were drawing ever nearer; their separate paths would soon converge.

The Boom Years: 1977—1979

Jim Oden and Duke Seifried were both facing the same problem in January 1977: their companies were having problems with cash flow. Each thought the other's company was doing better, and so they arranged to merge. Custom Cast, Heritage Models, and Jim Oden's retail store The Royal Guardsman (founded in 1974) all came together under the Heritage Models name. Seifried even moved to Dallas to support the new company. Unfortunately, everyone soon discovered that *neither* company was that well off — something that would cause problems a short ways down the road.

Nonetheless, Heritage managed lots of expansion in the next few years.

Part of that was a push into the growing board game market. Heritage purchased Steven Peek's Battleline Publications around 1978, and ended up producing some of their most famous games, such as *Circus Maximus* (1979) and *Naval War* (1979). At the same time Heritage published many science-fiction and fantasy-oriented games in their short-lived Gametime Games line (1978).

More notably to these histories, Heritage also expanded into roleplaying.

Heritage's first roleplaying book of note was Dave Arneson's *Dungeonmaster's Index* (1977), which listed all the monsters, spells, and magic items found in *OD&D* (1974), its first four *Supplements* (1975–1976), *Chainmail* (1971+), *Swords & Spells* (1976), and the complete run of *The Strategic Review* (1975–1976). It was clearly a first publication for Heritage, as they didn't even list themselves as a publisher. You had to look in the credits under "Graphics and Layout" to discover their involvement.

At the time, Arneson described the *Dungeonmaster's Index* as a trial balloon, apparently intended to see if he could publish *Dungeons & Dragons* material separate from TSR. Jon Peterson's *Playing at the World* (a history of the early industry) suggests publication of the book might have resulted in legal threats from TSR. Whether that's the case or not, Arneson certainly didn't follow up on the idea of publishing more *D&D* supplements — though he did still release his Blackmoor campaign as Judges Guild's *The First Fantasy Campaign* (1977) later that year.

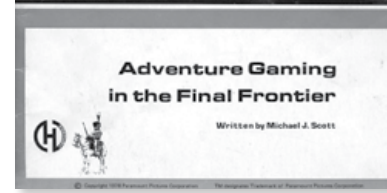
Arneson maintained a relationship with Heritage afterward, doing some editing and acquisitions for them and offering them a first look at his work. He was apparently planning to publish his second RPG, *Adventures in Fantasy* (1979), with them, but ended up releasing it through Excalibre Games.

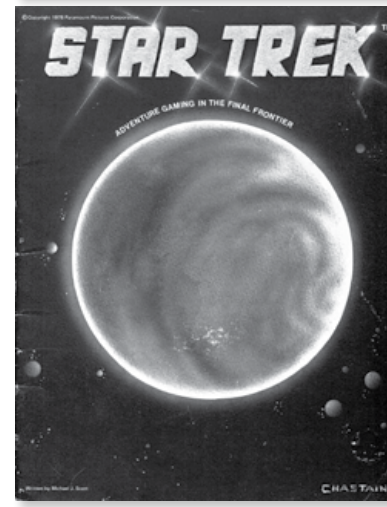
"My agreement with Heritage is only a right of first refusal and nothing more. Mostly they have refused."

– Dave Arneson, Interview, *The Space Gamer #21* (January/February 1979)

Heritage's second major RPG publication in was *Star Trek: Adventure Gaming in the Final Frontier* (1978), the first *Star Trek* RPG and the first officially licensed RPG. It was packaged for use with Heritage's *Star Trek* miniatures, which was a tactic that Heritage increasingly used from 1978 on — and that we'll return to. The actual RPG was built using Gamescience's *Space Patrol* (1977) game system and is thus covered more fully in Gamescience's history.







Heritage's final notable RPG product of the late '70s was their *Dungeon Dwellers* (1979) fantasy miniatures line. It started with the desire to renovate Custom Cast's old *Fantastiques* line of fantasy miniatures. Eventually Heritage decided to produce a new line that would work well with the *D&D* game. Howard Barasch proposed the basic model, which would include boxes of monsters sorted by *D&D* level.

Dungeon Dwellers was intended to be an official *Dungeons & Dragons* line, as TSR was then looking for an American miniatures licensee to replace their old deal with Minifigs of England. When TSR instead choose Grenadier for their premiere American miniatures (1980), Heritage produced the miniatures on their own — though with some names changed, such as the displacer beast, which became a "displacer cat."

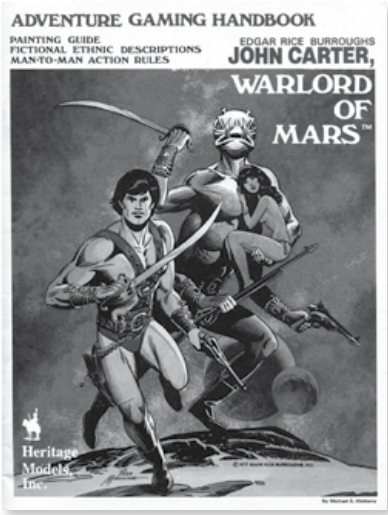
Heritage wanted to note that their miniatures could be used with *D&D*, and Jim

Oden — who now had a law degree — thought this was legally possible. After much discussion among Oden, Seifried, sculptor David Helber, and various attorneys, Heritage printed that the miniatures were "for use with *Dungeons & Dragons*," though they were careful to note that *D&D* was TSR's trademark and that its use wasn't sanctioned by them. This is a formula that's generally been considered lawful, and is more deeply explored in the histories of Mayfair Games ['80s] and Kenzer & Company ['90s] — two other gaming companies that were formed by attorneys and knew how intellectual property actually worked.

Somewhat predictably, TSR sued Heritage. TSR spent about five months taking depositions for the case, but then they decided to withdraw their claims of trademark infringement.

Before we leave Heritage's height of the late '70s behind, we should touch once more upon that *Star Trek* license. It was just one of several that Jim Oden was arranging at the time, offering another direction for the company to expand — and really distinguishing it from its competition. Future lines would continue an idea originated in *Star Trek: Adventure Gaming in the Final Frontier*: combining media licenses, miniatures, and a gaming system.

Heritage's *John Carter* miniatures (1978) were the next example of this trend and actually had two different rule sets, both for wargaming play: the *John Carter Warlord of Mars Adventure Gaming Handbook* (1978) and the *Barsoomian Battle Manual* (1978). Scott Bizar of FGU — who designed similarly pulpish games based on Conan and Flash Gordon for his own company — wrote the latter.



Heritage's real coup in the licensing field was probably their *Lord of the Rings* miniatures line (1978), based on the Ralph Bakshi movie (1978). Steve Perrin and Steve Henderson — coauthors of Chaosium's *RuneQuest* (1978) — were the ones working on the gaming link in late 1979 and early 1980. Their "Heroes of Middle Earth" would have been the first Tolkien RPG (and perhaps the second licensed RPG), except that it fell apart over contractual issues.

Together, *Star Trek*, *John Carter*, and *Lord of the Rings* marked a real pinnacle of media licensing for the hobbyist field in the '70s. Heritage almost got *Star Wars* too, going so far as to produce some sample miniatures, but eventually lost out on that opportunity. Nonetheless, what they accomplished already was impressive.

Throughout all of this, the principals of Heritage were doing their best to market their company and to push it even further into the future.

Duke Seifried — always a master salesman — promoted the company by driving an RV around the country, introducing hobby stores to Heritage Models one stop at a time.

Jim Oden, meanwhile, was spending time in Great Britain, trying to pick up more miniatures line and to explore other opportunities — including the idea of a Heritage factory in Northern Ireland that could supply the European market. Oden was at first deterred by the violence in Northern Ireland, and then representatives of the British government showed him that south Texas was actually more dangerous. After that, Oden came near to closing a deal where the British government would spend a million dollars funding the creation of the factory and the training of its work force; other factors however interfered.

The Year of Change: 1979

We've already touched briefly upon 1979, which saw the release of *Dungeon Dwellers*, the publication of some of Battleline's most famous games, and work on a *Lord of the Rings* RPG that never was finished. The rest of the year would see a variety of chaotic changes at the company.

To start with, Steven Peek (along with fellow Battleline employer Craig Taylor) left Heritage early in 1979 to form a new company, Yaquinto Publications — after which Heritage sold the existing Battleline games to Avalon Hill.

Cleve Burton also decided to leave the company that he cofounded some years before. The Hinchliffe miniatures were spun off into Hinchliffe USA under his management.

There was new staff too. To start with, Heritage lured Howard Barasch away from SPI, where he'd been Vice President of Marketing and Operations. Barasch became Heritage's new operations guy, taking over for Cleve Burton. Arnold Hendrick was brought on as Publishing Director that same year, to coordinate the company's non-miniatures production (and to design quite a few games of his own).

And that brings us to the problems that closed out Heritage's year — which caused the sale of those Battleline games to Avalon Hill and much more.

They began at First National Bank (now InterFirst), where Jack Hays was named the new president of the Houston branch — which moved him away from Dallas and thus away from Heritage. One of Hays' rivals was named to his old job, and that rival decided to withdraw the bank's factoring of the company. This left Heritage with a *huge* hole in its budget.

Not long after this newest financial hurdle appeared, Duke Seifried was in a restaurant talking with Jerry Campbell of Military Model Distributors about the need for a cash infusion to his company. Seifried's natural salesmanship skills came across as he talked up Heritage. By chance, he was overheard by millionaire Ray Stockman — who was won over by Seifried's arguments. Stockman bought out Jim Oden's share of the company — taking on his debts and offering a payment of $50,000. Oden also exited the company that he had created half a decade before.

Heritage Models was reborn as Heritage USA, itself a division of Heritage International. Stockman, it appears, had big plans for a globe-spanning company. To start with, Heritage began importing fully painted miniatures from Haiti; they sold well and were quite unique at the time. Unfortunately, the plans for a factory in Ireland — which would have improved Heritage's presence in Europe — fell through at the same time; the British government wasn't willing to sign on with the new owner.

In the years that followed, Heritage would also make large changes to their production, proving that the transformation into Heritage USA wasn't just skin deep.

The Final Years: 1980—1983

Following the Stockman buyout, the newly named Heritage USA receded somewhat from the roleplaying market. They continued to produce miniatures for RPGs, like *Dungeon Dwellers*, but they didn't publish pure RPGs, like they had in '77-'78. Instead they moved into new sorts of games.

One of their first new pushes was their "paint 'n' play" series, which promised "a complete hobby craft game kit." The first packages — *Caverns of Doom* (1980) and *Crypt of the Sorcerer* (1980) — were both parts of the *Dungeon Dwellers* line. However, they weren't just figures. They included miniatures, paint, *and* a minigame to play.

Arnold Hendrick's *Knights and Magick* (1980) was the most notable game of this sort for roleplayers, as it actively advertised itself as starting "where role-playing games end." Players could convert characters from *AD&D* (1977), *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1977), or *DragonQuest* (1980), then engage in tournaments, warfare, and more.

> *"[Knights & Magick] is a curious game, a set of miniatures rules in its basic form. However, with the use of optional rules, it can become akin to an open-ended fantasy role-playing game. The ultimate scenarios deal with army vs. army war, fought with expendable troops but 'character' heroes and wizards who can be rehired from conflict to conflict."*
>
> – Aaron Allston, "Capsule Reviews," *The Space Gamer #35* (January 1981)

Heritage's other major expansion following the corporate buy-out was the Dwarfstar Games line (1981–1982), which featured mini-games of the sort pioneered by Metagaming.

Heritage also published one more full RPG, *Swordbearer* (1982), by Arnold Hendrick and Dennis Sustare. It had originally been commissioned by Heritage as a competitor to *D&D*. The result was an innovative RPG with evocative magic and some ideas that almost seem pre-indie (such as abstracted wealth and encumbrance systems). Its tactical combat also got some acclaim — though that sort of tactical combat was more typical in the era of *DragonQuest* (1980) and *The Fantasy Trip* (1980). Sadly, *Swordbearer* came too late in Heritage's history to get much attention.

Even after the corporate buyout, Heritage's financial position was *still* poor. As early as 1981, rumors were circulating that Heritage might be in bankruptcy — though it turned out they were *slightly* premature. Duke Seifried left around the start of 1982, heading over to TSR — who was at the time looking to start miniatures manufacturing themselves. TSR laid off Seifried just a year later, though they did finally get their own short-lived miniatures manufacturing going a short time later. Meanwhile, back at Heritage, Howard Barasch took over running the company, but found its position grim.

By 1982 it became known that Heritage USA was up for sale. The company talked to Avalon Hill and Mayfair at various times — and hoped that TSR might be interested — but nothing ever came of the discussions. Heritage USA was thus forced to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection on November 1. An insurance company finally offered to put up a $1.1 million loan for the company in December, but it was expected to take more than four weeks to close, and that was too long. Heritage ran out of money, bounced some paychecks, and the staff left. The company finally closed its doors in March 1983 and ended up in bankruptcy court. It was liquidated and the various properties were auctioned off on June 23, 1983.

None of Heritage's pure RPG products had much of an impact on the industry following Heritage's dissolution. Arneson's *Dungeonmaster's Index* has never been seen again, but then by 1983 *OD&D* was quickly disappearing in the rear view mirror of the RPG industry. The *Space Patrol* game system returned in two more editions, one of which was *Star Trek* based, but neither was licensed — as is more fully described in Gamescience's history. Finally, *Swordbearer* got a boxed second edition from FGU (1985), which was recently reprinted as a short-run single book (2009).

Heritage's miniatures got a bit more attention in the '80s and '90s. PewterCraft — best known as the Armory's miniatures supplier — produced *Knights & Magick* for a while. Genesis Gaming Products — a division of World Wide Wargames (3W) — picked up the Dwarfstar Games, but their sole production ended up being a "dungeon floor," Arnold Hendrick and David Helber's *The Tavern* (1983). Some years later, Reaper ended up with ownership of the Dwarfstar Games; they returned some rights to creators when they learned about non-payment from Heritage and made others available freely on the 'net. Reaper Miniatures also released *Dungeon Dwellers* in their earlier days.

Finally, Duke Seifried was admitted into the Origins Hall of Fame in 2005. His story may be the longest lasting legacy of Heritage.

What to Read Next

- For the origins of Dave Arneson and D&D, read ***TSR*** and for his follow-up Blackmoor project, read ***Judges Guild.***
- For the *Space Patrol* game, read ***Gamescience.***
- For the second publisher of *Swordbearer,* read ***FGU***.

In Other Eras

- For the actual first *Lord of the Rings* RPG, read ***ICE*** *['80s]*.
- For Howard Barasch's origins in the industry, read ***SPI*** *['80s]*.
- For where the Battleline guys went, read ***Yaquinto Publications*** *['80s]*.
- For more products explicitly "for use with D&D," read ***Mayfair Games*** *['80s]* and ***Kenzer & Company*** *['90s]*.

Or read onward, to *gonzo* publisher ***Grimoire Games***.



Part Four:

Universal Publishers

(1978–1979)

TSR was (of course) the first company founded specifically to publish a roleplaying game. Wee Warriors and Judges Guild then both came into existence explicitly to supplement *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974).

After that, for a few years in a row, the major publishers who got into the roleplaying business were existing manufacturers. They moved over to roleplaying because it looked more interesting, more fun, or more profitable than what they were already doing. But new RPG publishers didn't appear out of nowhere in the mid-'70s — or if they did, they didn't make much of a mark.

It wasn't until the late '70s that notable companies were again being created solely to manufacture RPGs. Yet we still don't find companies founded to create original RPGs. Instead, new RPG publishers were ***unofficial supplementers***. Like Grimoire Games, creating variants of *D&D*; like Midkemia Press, publishing "universal" setting supplements intended for use with *D&D*; or most frequently like DayStar West Media, creating *D&D* adventures in everything but the name.

Phoenix Games is an interesting company is this era because they may have been the earliest ***second-generation roleplaying publisher***. After Little Soldier Games shut down, Phoenix Games continued on with some of the same ideas — mostly "universal" supplements and wargames. It wouldn't be until the '90s and the '00s that this trend of second-generation RPG publishers would really take hold.

It's also somewhat interesting to note the short lifespan of these new RPG-specific publishers. Though the RPG industry really boomed in 1979 and 1980 following the James Egbert case, it'd be busting by 1983, and only the most innovative new companies would survive. Grimoire and Midkemia both span the period from the boom to the bust pretty precisely — showing the dangers a new boom can bring. As we've already seen, Heritage Models, Judges Guild, and Metagaming were other notable publishers that expired during the RPG industry's first bust.

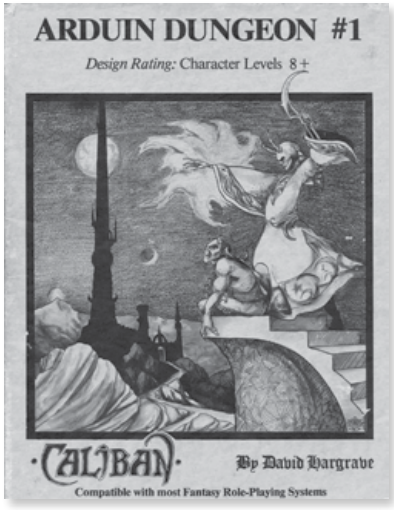
Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Phoenix Games	1978–1980	*The Book of Shamans (1978)*	300
Grimoire Games	1979–1984+	*Caliban* (1979)	321
DayStar West Media	1979–1982	*Rahasia* (1979)	338
Midkemia Press	1979–1983	*Cities* (1979)	342

Grimoire Games: 1979–1984, 1993

Though Grimoire Games' publication history is short, they left their mark on the hobby by releasing David Hargrave's Arduin to the world.

The San Francisco Bay Area Before Grimoire Games: 1975–1977

The Great Lakes region was the earliest locus of the roleplaying hobby — from Milwaukee (as described in TSR's history) to Detroit (as described in Palladium's history) and beyond. However, an early community of RPG players also appeared in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. Local players such as Clint Bigglestone, Dave Hargrave, Steve Henderson, Jerry Jacks,



1979: Arduin Dungeon #1: Caliban

Bill Keyes, Adrienne Martine, Jim Mathis, Gordon Monson, Steve Perrin, Dan Piersen, Jeff Pimper, Niall Shapero, and Anders Swenson would soon be numbered among the earliest designers in the hobby.

> *"Chaos reigned for the better part of the next year. Arguments over rule interpretations took up almost as much time as dungeoning … [a]nd at least one of our number flunked out of Berkeley at least in part due to the amount of time spent arguing and playing D&D as opposed to studying."*
>
> – Niall Shapero, "My Life & Role-Playing," Different Worlds #1 (1979)

The San Francisco Bay Area also saw some of the first *Dungeons & Dragons* conventions. DunDraCon — organized by Bigglestone and Martine for President's Day, early in 1976 — was the first. Author Fritz Leiber attended as a guest, and in honor of that Bigglestone, Jacks, and Perrin prepared a Fafhrd and Gray Mouser-inspired dungeon called The Ophidian Palace. Later that year — over Labor Day weekend — DunDraCon was joined by a second major Bay Area convention, Gen Con West (1976–1978). The new con started out in San Jose, moved to San Mateo, then mutated into Pacific Encounters (1979), which became the long-running Pacificon (1980, 1982–1997). A major national convention even came to the Bay Area in 1981, when Pacificon was run as Pacific Origins (1981) — back when the Origins convention used to move around the country.

In between those gaming conventions, roleplayers could visit a multitude of gaming retail stores in the Bay Area — to keep in touch with the newest releases in roleplaying. The best-known store of the era was probably The Gambit, which was located in San Francisco but later expanded into Berkeley when it merged with the East Asia Book and Game Center there. Many people who would later influence the industry worked at The Gambit in the late '70s and early '80s, including Charlie Krank of Chaosium, Tadashi Ehara of Different Worlds, and Donald Reents of Chessex. Rory Root, the founder of Comic Relief — one of the most forward-thinking comic stores in the country — also worked at The Gambit for a time.

There were several other game stores of note. GameTable of Campbell was opened in 1976 by Larry Duffield. *D&D* entered the store in 1977 when Dave Arneson himself ran a few games. Gamemaster's of San Francisco was founded around 1978 by Shelton Yee — who'd learned to play *Dungeons & Dragons* at DunDraCon I (1976). Around 1983 Yee would also create Gamemaster Distribution — at least the third distribution company in the Bay Area, following Armageddon and Donald Reent's Berkeley Games Distributors. Today he is still

coordinating events at Bay Area cons. Older stores like D&J Hobby — founded way back in 1971 — also entered the roleplaying sphere.

Returning to the gamers themselves, we find that early Bay Area players of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) were doing much the same thing as their peers across the country: designing their own variants to fill gaps in that original rule set. The result was a unique style of "California Gaming" — a style that was somewhat more far-flung than the variants of the Great Lakes, which is no surprise given the region's distance from the epicenter of roleplaying. Steve Perrin collected together many of these early house rules from Bay Area players in *The Perrin Conventions* (March 1976), which was published for the first DunDraCon and then made more widely available in *All the Worlds' Monsters II* (1977).

The latter book — a primordial monster manual edited by Perrin and Pimper — was published by Chaosium, which was probably the first hobbyist gaming company of the Bay Area. Owner Greg Stafford founded the company to publish *White Bear and Red Moon* (1975), a wargame set in his own world of Glorantha. Chaosium didn't get into the RPG hobby itself until 1977 — with the publication of the *Worlds' Monsters* trilogy — nor was Stafford much involved with the roleplaying community at the time. Nonetheless his company was another indicator of the early interest in fantasy gaming in the Bay Area. Chaosium is covered extensively in their own history, but they'll nonetheless return to this history of Grimoire Games and *Arduin* momentarily.

And that brings us back to another of those early Bay Area gamers, Dave Hargrave. He'd contributed to *The Perrin Conventions*, but he had many more ideas for how *Dungeons & Dragons* should be run, and the scope of his variants rules would end up being much, *much* larger.

Dave Hargrave Before Grimoire Games: 1968—1978

Dave Hargrave got into RPGs through a variety of different paths. He first heard of roleplaying in 1968 at the Military Intelligence School at Fort Holabird, Maryland — prior to his work with the Defense Intelligence Agency. Later he played miniatures naval battles and Russell Powell's *Air Aces* (1975), a game of miniatures dogfighting. He was also a lifetime member of the International Gamers Association. This organization was founded by Powell in 1974 in the Los Angeles area — which has its own history of early gaming culture, just as the San Francisco Bay Area did. Most notably, Hargrave was playing *Chainmail* (1971, 1972) by 1973 or 1974 and was corresponding with TSR regarding the game. They told him about their new *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) release, and suddenly Hargrave found his interests in roleplaying and gaming combined.

Upon obtaining *Dungeons & Dragons*, Hargrave began running a weekly campaign that would last for years. It was set on the world of Khaas, once ruled by a reptilian race called the Great Grey Beasts from beyond time — now long-since overthrown. Its focus was on Arduin, a neutral ground between many formerly warring nations and the home of the powerful nexus gates. The campaign was also heavily house ruled; within a few years Hargrave's game system was practically a *D&D* variant.

As with many early RPG campaigns, Hargrave's *Arduin* games had numerous players. In later days — after Hargrave moved from the Bay Area to Northern California — some of them would drive 250 miles just to play. The *Arduin* game also featured the high mortality and high power level of many primal roleplaying campaigns. Writing in *Different Worlds #2* (1979), four or five years after the campaign's start, Hargrave noted that a jaw-dropping 700 player characters had died in his campaign and that "two have become Princes, two have become Dukes, and about eight more have become Barons ... One even managed to marry into the ruling Royal family."

Now we return to Greg Stafford of Chaosium. Around 1976 neither he nor his company was that involved in the roleplaying community, but then he played in Hargrave's *Arduin* game for a bit. Afterward Stafford asked Hargrave about publishing the game system as "The Arduin Grimoire." The book was soon placed on Chaosium's schedule for February 1977 — which would have made it Chaosium's first roleplaying release. Hargrave and Stafford previewed the game system in *Wyrm's Footnotes #2* (1977) which included *Arduin* write-ups for some of Glorantha's main NPCs, from Prince Argrath to Beat-Pot Aelwrin. The stats looked sort of like *D&D*, but had classes such as "Warrior Priest," alignments such as "amoral" and "cyclical," and an "ego" stat.

> *"We wanted a thoroughly complete set of rules for the beginning gamer of role-playing games. Instead Arduin Grimoire is full of charts and specifications for the experienced, a supplement if you will, and practically useless for the noviciate."*
>
> – Tadashi Ehara, Wyrm's Footnotes #3 (1977)

Unfortunately, the partnership was short-lived. Stafford expected to receive a complete game that might be appropriate for a novice roleplayer. Instead he got a complex manuscript full of additions and variations to the *D&D* game. His typist also found the numerous charts in the manuscript hard to enter. The typographical issues turned out to be the last straw, leading Stafford to return *Arduin* to Hargrave. Chaosium's Tadashi Ehara announced the change in *Wyrm's Footnotes #3* (1977) — released just a few months after the previous issue brought *Arduin* to wider

attention. It showed how fast things were moving and changing in those early days of roleplaying.

Hargrave was annoyed enough by Stafford's reversal that they didn't talk for years afterward. Hargrave even named an *Arduin* spell after the incident: "Stafford's Star Bridge." It could be used to selectively drop the floor out from under various people.

For now, though, Hargrave had to figure out what to do with *The Arduin Grimoire* (1977). In the end he published it himself as a 96-page digest-sized book. That same year, Hargrave emerged into the gaming field in a second

Hargrave's Life and Chaosium Roleplaying

Despite Hargrave's disagreements with Greg Stafford, he continued contributing to Chaosium products – at least those being managed by other people. He submitted numerous *Arduin* critters to Perrin and Pimper's *All the Worlds' Monsters* volumes (1977–1980), wrote a biography for Tadashi Ehara's "My Life and Role-Playing" series in *Different Worlds #1* (1979) and even penned an extensive history of Arduin's world of Khaas for *Different Worlds #2* (1979).

However, those contributions ended around 1980 following the publication of Moira Johnston's article "It's Only a Game or Is It?" in *New West* magazine (August 25, 1980). The article – published almost exactly a year after the infamous disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III – was somewhat typical of that era's sensationalistic media coverage of RPGs, but it still managed to offer a pretty good snapshot of Californian roleplaying at decade's end. Along the way, it presented a fairly positive view of Greg Stafford – who'd run a *RuneQuest* game for Johnston and her son – and a largely negative view of Dave Hargrave – who was lambasted for the violence of the critical hit tables in *The Arduin Grimoire* and the sexuality of its art. Johnston even went so far as to say, "The mother in me rebels at my kids playing in the garbage dump of Hargrave's unhappy life." Apparently the marked contrast that Johnston showed in her attitude toward the two creators was enough to fuel the feud even further.

Stafford managed to bury the hatchet when he asked Hargrave to contribute to *The Asylum & Other Tales* (1983), the second supplement for *Call of Cthulhu* (1981). The resulting adventure, "Black Devil Mountain," was essentially a dungeon (containing no less than 28 monsters, among them three ghouls, two chthonians, and a full dozen zombies) that Stafford thought "really contrary to the game." It probably was, but Stafford opted to publish it anyway. Hargrave would later apologize to Stafford for the discord between them and even authored a second "My Life and Role-Playing" article (1983) as well as one more *Call of Cthulhu* adventure: "Dark Carnival" for *Curse of the Chthonians* (1984). That one was a bit more in tune with *Call of Cthulhu*'s style – though it ended with a dungeon too.



way: he opened a game store called The Multiversal Trading Company in Concord, California. That's probably what delayed the release of the next two *Grimoires* until the following year. They were *Arduin Grimoire Vol. II: Welcome to Skull Tower* (1978) and *Arduin Grimoire Vol. III: The Runes of Doom* (1978), each produced in the same format and all self-published. Together the three books have become known as *The Arduin Trilogy*.

With those books published — though not yet by Grimoire Games — we can now take a moment to examine *The Arduin Trilogy* and its place in gaming history.

By early 1977 there were about a dozen RPGs on the market, but *D&D* was clearly the market leader. As a result, third parties had begun supplementing the game, with the most notable early supplements including Wee Warrior's *The Character Archaic* (1975) and *Palace of the Vampire Queen* (1976), Little Soldier's *The Book of Monsters* (1976) and *The Book of Demons* (1976), and Judges Guild's *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (1976+) and *Dungeon Tac Reference Cards* (1976). It would be 1977 or 1978 before "generic fantasy" supplements intended for *D&D* really started to proliferate, but even then, most would fit into the categories defined by these early publishers: accessories (like *The Character Archaic*), adventures (like *Palace*), monsters manuals (like Little Soldier's *Books*), and setting books (like *City State*).

Meanwhile, TSR was publishing a totally different sort of supplement: rules expansions. In those same early years, they released *Supplement I: Greyhawk* (1975), *Supplement II: Blackmoor* (1975), and *Supplement III: Eldritch Wizardry* (1976). These supplements included new classes, new spells, new artifacts, and generally new rules — and almost none of the third-party publishers were duplicating them. Little Soldier did present some black magic rules in *The Book of Demons*, but that was a rare and much more focused exception. Enter *The Arduin Trilogy*, which was about to fill a niche among (unofficial) third-party *D&D* publishers that no one even realized was there.

Today we'd probably define *The Arduin Trilogy* as a collection of rather "gonzo" house rules.

As with those early *D&D* supplements, there were new classes. However, *Arduin* really pushed the limits of the genre, with *The Arduin Grimoire* alone containing psychics, techno, barbarians, witch hunters, and medicine men. The techno class also showed one of the particular focuses of *Arduin*: science-fantasy. Later books in the *Trilogy* would expand that by providing details on space monsters and other aliens.

Beyond these new classes (and new magic items and new spells), *The Arduin Trilogy* also featured rules variants that were extensive and varied. This is where *Arduin* went far beyond what *D&D*'s official supplements were doing. Hargrave extended levels out to 105(!). He explained standard rules like combat and alignment through his own lens and often expanded and supplemented them as well — such as the addition of "amoral" to the alignment list and the inclusion of critical hit rules that Hargrave had originally written for *The Perrin Conventions*. Many of these rules variants showed off the gonzo elements of *Arduin*, but so do other parts of the rules, such as the discussions of 24-color prismatic walls and the description of not nine but *twenty-one* planes of hell.

Way back in the late '70s, *Arduin* was unique, groundbreaking, and well-received by a certain enthusiastic audience. There were several reasons that it was particularly appealing.

- Its gonzo-ness offered a pure joy in gaming that appealed directly to the 13-year-old in every roleplayer.
- Hand-in-hand with that, it argued the philosophy that gaming should be fun, even if you had to diverge from the "official" rules to achieve that. This directly contrasted with the direction that the new *AD&D* (1977) game was trending, with its emphasis on precise rules to better support tournament play.
- It offered one of the first public and unedited views of how a single individual might mash together his own *D&D* game, creating a unique campaign that matched his own vision. It was almost a guide to gamemastering.
- In showing Hargrave's unique vision, it also displayed possibilities in *D&D* that weren't a part of TSR's "official" vision. It was imaginative and original and it sparked imagination in its players.

The Arduin Trilogy deserves one other mention — for its artwork (and for the connections that this created in the small community of California game designers).

Erol Otus illustrated much of the first edition of *The Arduin Grimoire*. He later became one of the hobby's most iconic artists thanks to his covers for the Tom Moldvay *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set* (1980) and the Zeb Cook *Dungeons & Dragons Expert Set* (1980). *The Arduin Grimoire* was Otus' first major work, post-dating only a remorhaz he drew for *The Dragon #2* (August 1976).

Otus didn't work on Hargrave's books after *The Arduin Grimoire* (and his art was removed from later printings of that first book), but he did go on to co-author two of his own *Arduin*-influenced "generic fantasy" RPG supplements, *Booty and the Beasts* (1979) and *The Necromican* (1979), both published by super small press Fantasy Art Enterprises. This company was located in the hills north of the UC Berkeley campus, continuing to highlight the gaming and creativity of the San Francisco Bay Area in the late '70s. Most consider Fantasy Art's books even more gonzo than *Arduin* itself.

Brad Schenck (or Morno), a later *Arduin* artist, offered up another link to a California gaming company. That's because Morno is better known for his work with Cosmic Frog Productions and Wee Warriors — located at various times in Morro Bay and San Luis Obisbo, all toward the south of the state.

Though he *didn't* connect *Arduin* to any other game companies, it's probably fair to also note Greg Espinoza, who would become *Arduin*'s most prolific artist in those early years.

The *Arduin Trilogy* received acclaim for its content and for its artwork. By early 1980, the three books would reportedly have sold a total of 40,000 copies, which was a good success for the era. However, they also caused some controversy. As we've already seen, some thought the game violent — a topic that Vietnam vet Hargrave found very hurtful. There was also (probably) a minor confrontation with industry leader TSR. Everyone seems to agree that Hargrave specifically mentioned *Dungeons & Dragons* in the first edition of the *Arduin Trilogy* and received a cease & desist from TSR as a result. As the story goes, he removed the name from his books with white-out and/or correction tape, but otherwise continued selling them with no interruption. The source of this story and its veracity isn't clear, but it certainly wouldn't be at variance with TSR's approach to IP.

True or not, this sort of issue soon wouldn't be Hargrave's problem. Following the self-publication of *The Runes of Doom*, he was apparently done with *Arduin*. In a special message to fans of *Arduin* at the end of the book, Hargrave announced that he was heading on to "new worlds" and that he'd be releasing a "new game" in the spring of 1979. He also said that he'd sold *The Arduin Trilogy* to someone that he described as a "true friend."

"Due to financial considerations, I have sold the rights to these three books (and only to someone I trust as a true friend). I hope you will give the new publisher all of the support you gave me."

– Dave Hargrave,
The Arduin Grimoire Vol. III: The Runes of Doom (October 1978)

The "new game" was probably *Star Rovers*, a SF RPG under development at Archive Miniatures that Hargrave took control of in late 1978. Though he only remained lead developer for a few months — until Archive's Neville Stocken took over — Hargrave's contributions still can be found in the final product, *Star Rovers Module 1* (1981). Because of its wacky and gonzo nature, some have called it "Arduin in Space." Unfortunately, it also proved to be Archive's one and only roleplaying release.

As for the "true friend" ... that finally brings us to the story of Grimoire Games proper.

Enter Grimoire Games: 1979—1980

Somewhat ironically, it was Chaosium that offered many gamers of the late '70s their first look at *Arduin*. They sold the *Trilogy* direct and may even have gotten it overseas to Games Workshop. *Arduin* monsters also appeared in the latter two volumes of *All the Worlds' Monsters* — which were likely more widely distributed than Hargrave's self-published books. Although Stafford hadn't felt that *Arduin* worked as a beginner's game, he was happy to sell it to experienced gamers.

Then, in 1978, a new proponent of *Arduin* appeared: Jim Mathis, one of Hargrave's *Arduin* players and the true friend that Hargrave had sold his first game to late in the year. Mathis lived in Berkeley and got his new *Arduin*-publishing company, Grimoire Games, started out of an apartment building on the south side of the UC campus (just two short blocks from where most of these histories have been written, as it happens).

Unfortunately, the early publishing history of Grimoire Games is a little murky from the viewpoint of the 21st century. That's primarily due to several *Arduin* publications produced by others prior to Grimoire Games entering the scene. Besides the original *Arduin Trilogy*, printed by Dave Hargrave from 1977–1978, there also appear to have been three sets of illustrated cards that depicted *Arduin* artifacts, weapons, and monsters that were probably either published or distributed by the International Gamers Association in 1977. Grimoire reprinted all six of these products in later years but without changing the copyrights to reflect the new printings, so exactly when they did so is unclear.

What seems more definite is that Grimoire's first *original* publication was *Arduin Dungeon #1: Caliban* (1979), which appeared very early in 1979. It was authored by none other than Dave Hargrave himself. Though he wasn't planning to write any more rules for *Arduin*, Hargrave was happy to design some adventures that showed how his game worked — and *Caliban* was the first.

With its first publication, Grimoire Games also showed off a close connection with the aforementioned International Gamers Association, who was doing distribution for them out of Long Beach while Mathis dealt directly with players from his Berkeley apartment. Through this connection, Grimoire ended up associated with two other Californian "generic FRP" supplements that were also being distributed by IGA: *The Manual of Aurania* (1977, 1978) and *Wizard's Aide* (1977). The partnership between Grimoire and IGA, however, was relatively short-lived.

Following the publication of *Caliban*, the rest of 1979 was a great year for Grimoire Games. They published two more Dave Hargrave dungeons, *Arduin Dungeon #2: The Howling Tower* (1979) and *Arduin Dungeon #3: The Citadel of Thunder* (1979). None of these were ground-breaking — like the *Arduin Grimoires* were — but they were tough, competitive adventures of the sort more common at the dawn of the industry.

The *Dungeons* were already looking more professional than the small press *Grimoires* that Hargrave had typed up, then Grimoire Games took the next step: producing a gaming convention.

The result, GrimCon, was held in Oakland, California, late in 1979, in conjunction with Hargrave's store, Multiversal Trading Company. Though it featured quite a bit of *Arduin* (and excluded *D&D*, at least in its first year), GrimCon was intended to be a general gaming convention. It thus had dual purposes: to help keep Hargrave's game visible and also to remain profitable on its own.

GrimCon I hosted 300 attendees. It was the first in a series that lasted through 1983. Together with DunDraCon and Pacificon, it helped to define San Francisco Bay Area roleplaying in the early '80s. Hargrave himself would later say that the attendance at the GrimCons — which reached 1,000 attendees within a couple of years — was one of the things that kept him in the RPG industry.

> *"[T]he con was under the auspices of Multiversal Trading Company and Grimoire Games who are shall we say rivals in the FRP world with TSR Hobbies."*
>
> – Larry DiTillio, "System Snobbery," Different Worlds #7 (April/May 1980)

Somewhat surprisingly only three more Grimoire Games publications followed before the company disappeared (for the first time): *Arduin Dungeon #4 & Overland Adventure: Death Hart* (1980), the boxed *Arduin Adventure* (1981), and a boxed set of *The Arduin Trilogy* (1981).

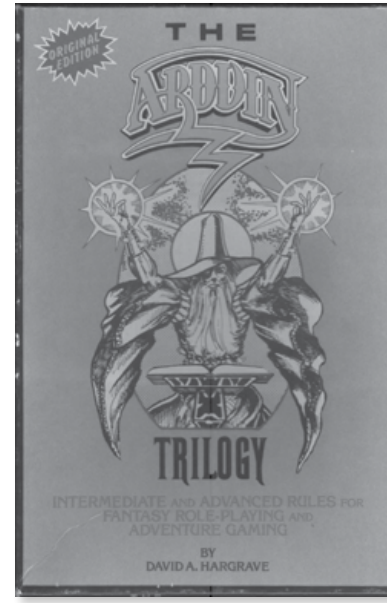
By those two final, professional, boxed products, Grimoire Games was looking like a gaming company really finding its feet. However, *The Arduin Adventure* was something more: it marked a new direction for *Arduin* itself.

An Adventure & Other Revisions: 1981—1984

The Arduin Adventure was originally planned for release in Christmas of 1980, but then it ran into an amusing setback: the typesetters refused to lay out the game's numerous tables — which of course was one of the problems that Chaosium had with *Arduin* a few years earlier. How Grimoire dealt with this problem isn't recorded, but it was probably early 1981 by the time the game actually appeared.

Before the publication of *The Arduin Adventure*, the *Arduin Grimoires* depended on the original *Dungeons & Dragons* game as the foundation of its own mechanics. It was *The Arduin Adventure* that turned *Arduin* into a truly standalone game system.

This product also fulfilled some of Hargrave's desire for a "new game" that he'd written about when he finished *The Runes of Doom*. He hadn't wanted to get away from *Arduin* so much as from *D&D*. Though the *Arduin Adventure* game system was still clearly *D&D*-derived, it was a first step away that introduced some new rules, most notably a totally new initiative system called "CF" (coordination factor). This movement away from *D&D* was a path that Hargrave would continue walking for the rest of his life.



The Arduin Adventure was notable for one other reason: it focused on teaching roleplaying to novice gamers, which was ironically what Chaosium had been looking for several years earlier (and what companies like Pacesetter and Yaquinto were working toward around the same time). The general organization of *The Arduin Adventure* — with one and two-page chapters each covering a basic concept — was quite innovative and definitely ahead of its time.

"The old days where everyone was an amateur are gone forever I'm afraid, and for the better, I think. … The public demands quality now that the novelty has worn off, and rightly so …"

– Dave Hargrave, "My Life & Role-Playing," Different Worlds #31 (November 1983)

Unfortunately, *The Arduin Adventure* wasn't well-received by the industry at the time. By 1980 or 1981, a bare-bones not-quite-retroclone of *OD&D* wasn't that exciting — except to *Arduin* players, of course, who had long needed this skeleton to hang their games upon. If anything, the reception has cooled since then. Whereas *The Arduin Trilogy* is still appreciated and respected for its gonzo imagination and the *Arduin Dungeons* for their unforgiving nature, *The Arduin Adventure* is very much an artifact of its time.

The fact that *The Arduin Adventure* appealed more to existing fans than to new ones might have been one disappointment too many for Grimoire Games. The company was having increasing financial problems by that time. It never had the cash to advertise, which kept *Arduin* from reaching a particularly large audience. Now the well was entirely dry, and Grimoire Games didn't have the money to produce new books at all.

At the same time, Hargrave was facing severe financial problems of his own. His problems started in 1980 when the city of Concord zoned The Multiversal Trading Company out of business. This caused a loss in the thousands of dollars for Hargrave and eventually required him to file for personal bankruptcy in 1982. It was after this that Hargrave left the Bay Area for northern California.

In April of 1982 — amidst this financial turmoil for both Grimoire and Hargrave — GrimCon was officially incorporated as "GrimCon, Inc." with shareholders including Hargrave, Mathis, and others. It helped to isolate the potentially profitable convention from the financial woes of its parents. Sadly, this wasn't enough to save the convention, which lasted for just one more year. GrimCon V, the last in the series, ran in Oakland in 1983.

Miraculously, Hargrave kept writing during this period, as a form of escape. He did work on a 13-part *Arduin* campaign called "The Heart of Darkness," a superhero RPG called "Glory Wars," and a WWII aerial combat game called "Sky Tigers." More notably, he was working on "Arduin, Bloody Arduin," a revamp of the *Arduin* game system that would take it even further from its *D&D* roots.

Unfortunately, "Arduin, Bloody Arduin" faced some challenges based on the fact that Hargrave was an "intuitive" designer. He knew what worked. This resulted in great game sessions in which he was able to combine his gaming intuition with

an innate talent for telling stories. The flipside of this was that Hargrave didn't have the knack for the systematic organization that was increasingly required for successful game *publication*. His somewhat piecemeal *Grimoires* — the obvious result of this design style — weren't something that could continue to succeed as the industry matured throughout the '80s.

Some of Hargrave's friends and players saw these same problems cropping up in the "Arduin, Bloody Arduin" work. Starting around 1982, three of them — Mark Schynert, Carolyn Schultz, and Rod Engdahl — tried to do something about it. Over the next several years they did what they could to aid Hargrave in organizing what would be his final *Arduin* publication.

Their work became visible to the public when they prepared a thin 16-page booklet called *Revised Arduin: A Primer* (1984). Schynert, Schultz, and Engdahl produced the book to introduce the revisions to combat that would appear in "Arduin, Bloody Arduin" — most specifically the BF (battle factor) system which simultaneously simplified combat (by introducing a single value that could be precalculated) and made it more realistic (by including factors like training).

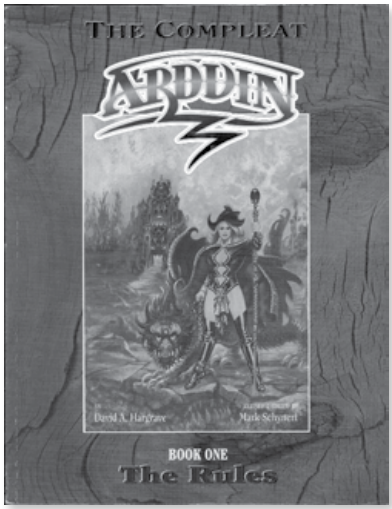
Through Grimoire Games, Jim Mathis printed up 100 copies of the booklet. It was given away to interested parties at DunDraCon that year — including to Hargrave himself, who hadn't been aware that the booklet was appearing! Schynert and friends also ran several *Arduin* games at the convention, to support the upcoming revamp to Hargrave's classic game.

Those 100 booklets were the last publications that Grimoire was able to afford on its own. It was the end of the company, as least as it existed in the '80s. Somewhere around this time Mathis left the Bay Area too, relocating first to El Cajon (near Los Angeles), then to San Diego — where he'd still be when he re-enters this story 10 years down the line. He kept selling Grimoire Games' products for a few years, but by the late '80s or so Grimoire Games was a company of the past.

The work that Hargrave's friends were doing to produce a better organized manuscript of "Arduin, Bloody Arduin" came to an end a short time later, around 1986. Hargrave had never taken to editing well and eventually threw up his hands and decided that he was going to produce "Arduin, Bloody Arduin" on his own — or not at all.

Dragon Tree & The Last of Grimoire Games: 1984—1993

While writing his second "My Life & Role-Playing" for *Different Worlds #31* (November 1983), Hargrave announced, "I have let it be known that I will be available for projects outside of my traditional Grimoire Games label." This decision



would soon lead to a new publisher not just for Hargrave, but for *Arduin* as well.

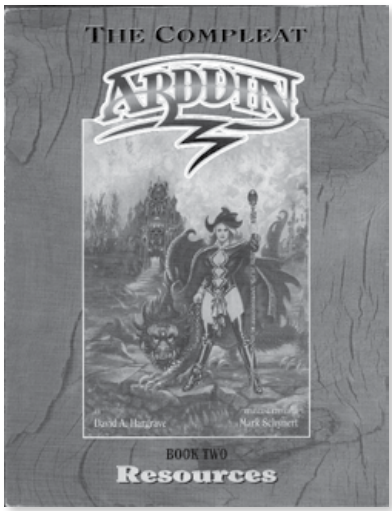
It was Mary Ezzell of Dragon Tree Press who suggested that Hargrave create a new continent in their campaign setting, the World of Delos. Hargrave (and Mathis) countered with the suggestion that this new material instead bear the *Arduin* name. Though Grimoire continued trying to raise money over the next several years — hoping to publish books like "Arduin, Bloody Arduin," which was supposedly sent to them in a complete form in early 1986 — they were not successful, and thus Dragon Tree became the *de facto Arduin* publisher.

The result was five more *Grimoires*, from *Arduin Grimoire Vol. IV: The Lost Grimoire* (1984) to *Arduin Grimoire Vol. VIII: The Winds of Chance* (1988). These new books had some rules, but focused more on the setting of *Arduin* itself. They were also more generic than some of the earlier *Arduin* works, and thus could more easily be used in a variety of settings.

> *"I want the world to know it was me. Mary. Who had the idea for publishing this and sat on the floor of Dave's mountain redwood house under his lavender silk Phraint banner chanting 'We want a new Grimoire' till he agreed."*
>
> – Mary Ezzell, The Arduin Grimoire Vol. IV: The Lost Grimoire (1984)

Dave Hargrave died on August 29, 1988, at the young age of 42. This brought Dragon Tree's new *Arduin* production to a sudden end — though they'd keep the books in print for decades. It also brought *Arduin* back to Grimoire Games, who as it turned out had one more book in them.

Jim Mathis got the ball rolling by asking Mark Schynert — who he worked with when printing up *Revised Arduin* — to complete (and organize!) the unfinished "Arduin, Bloody Arduin" manuscript. This was a fairly monumental task, as Schynert had to wade through the reams of paper that composed the manuscript. At times he had to deal with duplicated content, different annotations from different times on the same manuscript pages, and other outright contradictions. Eventually, Schynert was able to put together a complete and coherent book.



However, there was still the problem of finances, as Grimoire Games remained unable to pay for printing. Enter Michael Sloan of Berkeley Games Distributors — a California games distributor that we've already briefly met. He put up the cash to print the manuscript in return for a share in its profits. The result was a two-book set called *The Compleat Arduin* (1993).

At 450 total pages, *The Compleat Arduin* was the largest *Arduin* release. It was clearly based upon the original rules — as they'd developed through *The Arduin Adventure* and *Revised Arduin: A Primer* — but polished and reorganized.

In some ways, it wasn't exactly what Hargrave would have produced. He'd wanted to keep the old *D&D* system parallel with any updates, and he probably would have resisted simplifications of the sort that Schynert made as he polished the rules. *The Compleat Arduin* also contained considerably less background than Hargrave might have liked, but that was primarily a question of economics — the two-book set was already big enough. Despite all of that (or perhaps because of it) the books were generally well-received as both the first fully coherent set of *Arduin* rules and (much as Hargrave's original books) as a great source of ideas.

Unfortunately that didn't translate into financial success. Part of that was due to cost. At $42 for the two-book set (about $62 in today's dollars), the game was on the high end for a roleplaying system. However, the bigger problem was that *The Compleat Arduin* was a game whose time was already past — primarily due to the fact that it had been over a decade in genesis. If it'd been released in the late '80s, it would have been in the company of systems like *Megatraveller* (1987) and *AD&D Second Edition* (1989) — polished revisions of primordial games. Instead, released in the early '90s, *The Compleat Arduin* had to contend with games like *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991), which totally shook up the way players looked at RPGs.

Sloan sold somewhere less than half of the run of *The Compleat Arduin* and had to remainder the rest, taking a loss. Though Schynert asked for submissions for a new line of *Arduin* releases at the end of *The Compleat Arduin*, they'd never come to be. In the end *The Compleat Arduin* was just a single (massive and impressive) release from a company that had already moved on.

Arduin After Grimoire Games: 1993-Present

For the next several years, *Arduin* was largely neglected — other than those books kept in print by Dragon Tree Press. Then, around 1998, Grimoire Games sold its rights to *Arduin* to Emperors Choice Games. It took four years (and a disastrous partnership with cybergames.com, discussed more in Hero Games' history), but eventually Emperors Choice started publishing *Arduin* material of their own.

Their publication kicked off with *Arduin Grimoire Vol. IX: End War* (2002), the final *Arduin Grimoire*, which included content from Hargrave, Schynert, and others. Emperors Choice has since reprinted all of the Grimoire and Dragon Tree books. When reprinting all of the *Arduin Dungeons* in their *Vault of the Weaver* (2006) compilation, Emperors Choice also included "Heart of Darkness," that 13-part campaign that Hargrave was working on 25 years earlier.

Emperors Choice has also published two massive *Arduin* books all their own. *World Book of Khaas: The Legendary Lands of Arduin* (2004) is a huge 865-page look at *Arduin*, while *Arduin Eternal* (2009) is a largely new game system — the third major version of the *Arduin* rules — and also a mammoth book at 822 pages.

However, these new publications also came with some drama. In 2003, following Emperors Choice's reprinting of the Dragon Tree *Grimoires*, Emperors Choice sued Dragon Tree Press, who they believed no longer had the rights to keep those same *Grimoires* in print. Dragon Tree Press counter-sued, with the core issue being who owned the copyrights to *Grimoires* IV-VIII.

In the end, the case was settled out of court. Dragon Tree sold the rights to reprint their *Grimoires*, but has continued selling their existing stock and will regain the rights if Emperors Choice stops printing the books.

For the moment, it is Emperors Choice who is carrying the *Arduin* banner into the 21st century. However, even if they fall by the wayside at some point, there is still another publisher willing to continue forward with the small press game that Dave Hargrave created decades ago and that Grimoire Games published for a short time.

What to Read Next

- For the almost-first publisher of *Arduin* and a contemporary RPG publisher in the San Francisco Bay Area, read ***Chaosium***.
- For the creator of *D&D* and Grimoire's "rival," read ***TSR***.
- For a company in southern California publishing games that started out as the original *D&D*, read ***Midkemia Press***.
- For more on Morno and ***Wee Warriors***, read the mini-history in ***TSR***.

In Other Eras

- For later game companies in the San Francisco Bay Area, read about ***Hero Games*** *['80s]*, ***SkyRealms Publishing*** *['80s]*, ***R. Talsorian*** *['80s]*, ***Green Knight Publishing*** *['90s]*, and ***Issaries*** *['00s]*, including the mini-histories of ***Wizard's Attic*** and ***Impressions Advertising & Marketing***.
- For the fate of Tadashi Ehara's company, read ***Different Worlds Publications*** *['80s]*.
- For other companies trying to produce games for newcomers in the early '80s, read the histories of ***Pacesetter*** *['80s]* and ***Yaquinto*** *['80s]*.
- For a similar legal disagreement between two publishers following the death of a setting's creator, read ***Columbia Games*** *['80s]* including the mini-history of ***Keléstia Productions***.

Or read onward to a tiny universal publisher with a big effect on the industry, ***DayStar West Media***.

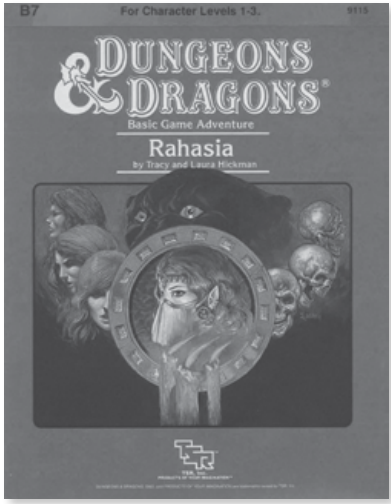
DayStar West Media: 1979–1982

Though DayStar West was a small company with just two publications to its name, the ideas of owners Tracy and Laura Hickman influenced the whole RPG industry — and may have saved TSR itself.

A Few Publications: 1979–1980

The story of DayStar West Media begins with Laura Hickman and her discovery of Dungeons & Dragons. She tried to tell husband Tracy Hickman about her exciting new addiction, but he was unimpressed by the idea of a game without a board — until Laura bought him the Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set (1977). She claims that she didn't see him for three weeks afterward.

The Hickmans next wanted to buy the brand-new *AD&D Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979), but it was expensive and Tracy was



1979: Rahasia (TSR's 1984 printing)

in college. They ultimately bought the book with student loan money, but also decided that they should figure out how to make money from their hobby.

Their answer? To sell adventures that could be "used in conjunction with existing fantasy role-playing systems." Thus the Hickmans began doing business as DayStar West Media and published two adventures under that name: *Rahasia* (1979) and *Pharoah* (1980).

> *"The text itself was typed on an IBM Selectric typewriter my father had loaned to us and was 'hand-justified.'"*
>
> – Tracy Hickman, Interview, tomesoftreasure.com (March 2004)

Despite its scant two publications, DayStar West Media was quite important for its "off-the-path" approach to FRPGs. The Hickmans highlighted this approach with four innovative elements in their "Nightventures" adventure publications:

- A player objective more worthwhile than simply pillaging and killing.
- An intriguing story that is intricately woven into the play itself.
- Dungeons with some sort of architectural sense.
- An attainable and honorable end within one or two sessions' playing time.

These objectives have been called (by others) the "manifesto" of the "Hickman Revolution" — and what Tracy Hickman would do with them in his later career was indeed revolutionary.

Unfortunately, DayStar West Media had to die first, and that came about due to a problem all too common in small business: fraud. Tracy had gone into business designing a networked video game (long before the days of MMORPGs). Unfortunately he partnered with an associate who wrote $30,000 in bad checks, which left the Hickmans deeply in debt. As a result, they opted to try and sell their adventures to TSR.

TSR was interested, but said that the Hickmans would have better luck selling the adventures to the company if Tracy joined the TSR staff. So in 1982 the Hickmans set out on a cross-country trip from Utah to Wisconsin, with their two children in a Volkswagen Rabbit.

Meanwhile, two planned DayStar West adventures never appeared. A cover had been printed up for "Eye of the Dragon," while "Vampyr" had been playtested, but neither went to print.

Secrets Uncovered: 1981-Present

What's most amazing about DayStar West Media is how the company's ideas influenced the industry afterward. To start with, all four of DayStar West's published and theoretical adventures showed up at TSR.

Pharoah appeared as *I3: Pharaoh* (1982) and was then turned into a campaign. First, Hickman was asked to integrate it with a desert adventure by Philip Meyers, which became *I4: Oasis of the White Palm* (1983). Afterward he tied everything together in *I5: Lost Tomb of Martek* (1983), resulting in the well-loved "Desert of Desolation" trilogy.

When the three adventures were collected a few years later as *I3-5: Desert of Desolation* (1987), they were moved to the brand-new *Forgotten Realms* (1987). Here they were one of the first two campaigns for the setting — alongside Michael Dobson and Douglas Niles' *Bloodstone* series (1985–1988).

Rahasia was reprinted as *RPGA1: Rahasia* (1982) and then expanded with *RPGA2: Black Opal Eye* (1982) — both adventures exclusively distributed to the RPGA. They were then collected as *B7: Rahasia* (1984), part of TSR's classic run of adventures for *Basic D&D*.

The idea behind the unpublished *Vampyr* module was to create an adventure where vampires *weren't* just monsters that you fought in some room in a dungeon. The Hickmans had already playtested this adventure multiple times at Halloween. It was eventually written for TSR as *I6: Ravenloft* (1983).

A few years later they outlined a sequel, *I10: Ravenloft II* (1986). Afterward, Ravenloft became a phenomenon, spawning a horror-oriented setting line for *AD&D Second Edition* (1990–1999) and then a d20 line for White Wolf (2002–2005). The Count's most recent appearances have been in the *Expedition to Castle Ravenloft* (2006) adventure and the *Castle Ravenloft Board Game* (2010).

Finally, *Eye of the Dragon* didn't *directly* impact TSR, but it did suggest Tracy Hickman's interest in dragons, and it also provided him with the idea of using dragons as mounts. This all came together as Tracy and Laura were driving across the Plains toward Tracy's new job at TSR.

It was on that road trip — while Tracy and Laura were discussing what they could possibly bring to the company that would be seen as valuable — that they took the concepts of *Eye of the Dragon* and expanded them under a new title: *Dragonlance*. Tracy Hickman proposed and developed the concept at TSR under the operational title Project Overlord, which eventually became the best-selling Dragonlance series of adventures (1984–1986), novels, and supplements.

These four adventures alone would be an impressive legacy that would probably be worth noting. However, the DayStar West's legacy goes beyond that, thanks to

the Nightventures "manifesto." The idea of creating thoughtful adventures focused on intriguing stories outlived DayStar West, and it dramatically changed the shape of roleplaying.

In the early '80s, most adventures were still location-based. TSR was making the occasional foray into plot-oriented adventures — most notably in *B6: The Veiled Society* (1984), an event-driven adventure set in a city — but they were rarities. That all changed with the advent of Dragonlance, the most plotted adventure series ever (to that point).

Finally, it's worth noting that the string of events originating with DayStar West may have saved the roleplaying industry. Dragonlance was one of several initiatives that combined to save TSR following its near-collapse in 1983–1984. If it hadn't been for a few little adventures produced by a very little roleplaying company, the whole history of the industry might have been different.

As for Tracy Hickman: he moved onto novels after the success of Dragonlance, but returns to the industry from time to time. He coauthored the *War of Souls* Dragonlance trilogy (2000–2002) for Wizards of the Coast — which moved the world of Krynn into a new age — and also co-authored the *Sovereign Stone* books (2000–2003) in coordination with the company now known as Margaret Weis Productions. More recently he co-authored *XDM: X-Treme Dungeon Mastery* (2009) a guide to dungeonmastering, alongside his son, Curtis Hickman.

Tracy and Laura Hickman continue writing both games and novels together, exploring new and innovative directions in both through their websites.

What to Read Next

- For the majority of Tracy Hickman's roleplaying career, read ***TSR.***
- For other "universal" RPG publishers of note, read ***Grimoire Games*** and ***Midkemia Press.***

In Other Eras

- For another small company with an over-sized influence on the future of roleplaying, read ***Lion Rampant*** ['80s].
- For more on Tracy Hickman's fiction, read ***Margaret Weis Productions*** ['90s].

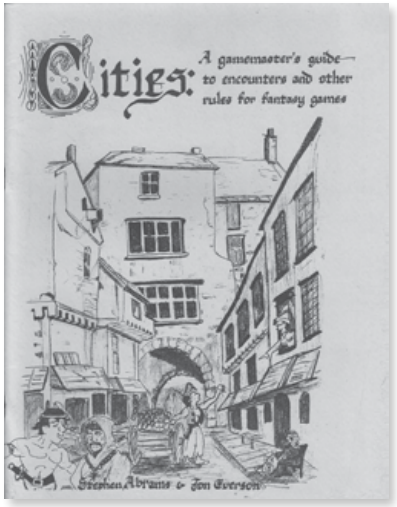
Or read onward to the creators of cities and a fiction career, ***Midkemia Press.***

Midkemia Press: 1979–1983

Midkemia Press was a small publisher of generic FRPG supplements that was most active in the early '80s. Though their impact on the RPG field was relatively small, the fiction that Midkemia Press spawned has been higher profile than almost anything else originating in the gaming field.

The Press Gang: 1975–1977

The story of Midkemia Press begins in 1975 when UC San Diego student Conan La Motte came across a copy of a brand-new game called Dungeons & Dragons (1975) while he was visiting Los Angeles — a few hours up the coast. He was immediately struck by the creative game, but felt it needed some help. Thus he produced the Tome of Mid-Kimia (1975?), a very small press digest-sized book that briefly defined the "Land of Darkening Shadows," outlined different sorts of adventures (including the "town adventure," which we'll return to), and copied various tables for easier use. It was intended for local friends, and it's unlikely that many copies were printed.



1976: Cities

LaMotte's fellow students were interested in the new game too, and *D&D* quickly became the newest fad for a group of them. However, the group soon began to diverge from the original *D&D* game. As was the case with other players across the nation, LaMotte's group of UCSD friends house ruled the game, changing mechanics to suit their own interests and knowledge — not only Medieval history, but also battles fought in the SCA. The result was a game system closely derived from *D&D* that they called "The Tome of Midkemia."

Looking through the histories of other companies from this time period, we can see just how often *OD&D* was reinvented. David Hargrave's *The Arduin Trilogy* (1977–1978), Gamelords' *Thieves' Guild* (1980), and Kevin Siembieda's *Palladium* RPG (1981, 1983) all had similar geneses. The "Warlock" *D&D* variant, created at Caltech — just 100 miles north of UCSD — and first revealed in *The Spartan Simulation Gaming Journal #9* (August 1975), suggests that these variants were even more common than the widely distributed systems would suggest.

Gamers Stephen Abrams and Jon Everson created a new campaign setting hand in hand with their new game system that they called the "First Midkemian Campaign." It's this world that would prove the most important to both the history of Midkemia Press and to what would follow. (As we'll see, the game system itself would eventually fall by the publication wayside.)

The first games truly set in the world of Midkemia were run in 1976 at UC San Diego for a thriving group of players. Among those early participants was Raymond Feist, who will soon become much more important in the history of Midkemia Press. For a time this group was called the "Thursday Gamers," though they would become the "Friday Gamers" in later years as schedules changed.

By the campaign's height in the early '80s, there were at least 12 different GMs running games within the shared Midkemia world. As students left the college, the particular rules and background of Midkemia sometimes spread even beyond these "official" groups.

The world of Midkemia had one feature that made it somewhat unique among the early roleplaying campaigns: cities. Judges Guild was rolling out its own massive *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (1976+) around the same time, but the Midkemia players went a step beyond and made cities into a true passion.

Jon Everson and Conan La Motte got the ball rolling by creating a complete city for play — building upon La Motte's original ideas for a "town adventure." Soon, many other contributors to the Midkemian Campaign were creating cities of their own.

"Soon, we all discovered that a well-run city was excellent fun in its own right; in fact, many times it was more entertaining than a dungeon or wilderness for the battle-weary."

– Introduction, Cities (1979)

In the late '70s, Jon Everson and Stephen Abrams decided to take a step beyond personal play — to create a gaming company to produce FRPG products. Though the company was originally called "Abrams & Everson," it became Midkemia Press after they received La Motte's permission to use the name for "all future time."

The Publication History of Midkemia Press: 1979—1983

Midkemia Press started publishing with Cities (1979) — a book that built on the group's biggest strength. It was a delightful book of plot hooks for urban adventures, spread across numerous random encounter tables that designated who players met based on their location within a city. Assassins might try and join the party or drunks might harass them.

The result was both innovative and well-received. Though adventures were becoming increasingly common by 1979, a book of GM *tools* like *Cities* was more of a rarity. Again, we should note that Judges Guild pioneered this area by creating random tables for cities as far back as their *Initial Guidelines Booklet I* (1976), part of their "Initial Package," but they never took it to the extent that Midkemia did.

Following the success of *Cities*, Midkemia Press quickly grew. What had been a two-person company soon expanded to five. Computer systems analyst Stephen Abrams and experimental psychologist Jon Everson were joined by biologist (and artist) April Abrams (now April Apperson), chemist (and calligrapher) Anita Everson, and communications expert (and writer) Raymond Feist.

Midkemia's next book was *The City of Carse* (1980), a building-by-building description of a seaside burg, following directly in the footsteps of Judges Guild's *City State*. Midkemia later published two similar city books: *Tulan of the Isles* (1981) and *Jonril: Gateway to the Sunken Lands* (1982). After *Cities*, it's these urban settings — all located within the First Midkemian Campaign — that are the best-remembered publications from Midkemia Press' brief years of publication.

Midkemia Press' publication peak came in 1981, which saw the publication of four different books. The first of these was the aforementioned *Tulan*. Two books that differed somewhat from the company's production to date followed. *The Black Tower* (1981), which indeed described a tower, was Midkemia's only true adventure. *Towns of the Outlands* (1981), meanwhile, described not a single city but instead six different villages. It was more notable for being the first Midkemia



Press supplement written by designers from outside the UC San Diego group. 1981 ended with the publication of a second edition of *Cities* (1981). To that date, Midkemia Press" books had featured simple one-color cardstock covers. A full-color glossy cover graced the second edition of *Cities*.

With full-color covers and external designers, Midkemia Press looked like it was poised to become a real mover in the RPG field. Instead, the company published only two more books, *Jonril: Gateway to the Sunken Lands* (which we've already encountered) and *Heart of the Sunken Lands* (1983), both of which were also produced to the same higher standards as the revised *Cities*. The last book was by Rudy Kraft — best known for his work on *RuneQuest* supplements like *Snake Pipe Hollow* (1979) and *Griffin Mountain* (1981). It did for the wilderness what *Cities* did for urban settings. A GM could now consult tables, sub-tables, and sub-sub-tables to generate wilderness encounters; players even got to fill in a map as they explored the Sunken Lands.

A last hoorah from Abrams and Feist appeared in *Sorcerer's Apprentice #17* (1983), which featured a pair of articles by them. "The Village of Hoxley" described a small village in Midkemia while "Hard Times in Hoxley" offered an adventure set therein. It was the last notable publication from Midkemia Press (though we've actually skipped some other external work they did in 1981, a topic we'll return to).

By 1983, the RPG market was entering its first bust cycle. By that time Midkemia Press *had* diversified a bit, with Stephen Abrams producing some computer software in the early '80s, but it wasn't enough. The company thus opted to end publication. At first they announced that they'd be doing game design for other publishers, but this never occurred. After 1983, Midkemia Press instead became primarily a rights holder for Midkemian games — though a few resurrections of different sorts have appeared over the years, as we'll see.

Before leaving Midkemia's most active period behind, we should note a few things:

First, their game system, "The Tome of Midkemia," was never published. The company's principals though have expressed interest in doing so even in recent years. Instead, the Midkemia supplements were all published for general use. The

supplements' "generic" stats nonetheless did manage to reveal a few of the unique elements of the Midkemia rules. Fighters, thieves, and clerics all appeared, but so did lesser path magicians, merchants, and shaman-priests, suggesting some points of divergence from the original *D&D* game.

Second, the world of Midkemia as described in Midkemia's six later supplements was quite innovative for the RPG field in the early '80s. In 1980, when *The City of Carse* appeared, info on other early campaigns like Blackmoor, Glorantha, Greyhawk, and Tékumel remained brief and scattered. Though some pure setting books were produced — like *The First Fantasy Campaign* (1977), *Arden* (1979), and *The World of Greyhawk Fantasy World Setting* (1980) — they provided overviews without going into any depth. Judges Guild's *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (1976+) was one of the few settings that matched what Midkemia Press was doing in actually detailing its world. By the time other highly detailed worlds appeared — such as ICE's Middle-earth (1982+) and Columbia Games' *Hârn* (1983) — Midkemia Press' publications were already coming to an end.

Midkemia Press' innovation in the world of campaign settings alone would have been a fine legacy for a small RPG publisher of the early '80s, but the world of Midkemia would end up striking it much, much richer.

Raymond Feist's Midkemia: 1977-Present

For that story, we return to Raymond Feist, who had quickly become a senior editor and partner at Midkemia Press. That was just a part-time gig, though. He'd been working professionally in health and human services until he found himself abruptly unemployed. This was the result of a tax revolt centered around California's Prop 13 (1978), which dramatically affected the State's ability to provide services by limiting the speed of property tax increase.

Fortunately, Feist had another iron in the fire. He'd already been writing (unpublished) Midkemia fiction for a while when Stephen Abrams suggested that he tell the story of how "Greater Path Magic" came to Midkemia. The result was a novel of a boy who became a magician, set in Midkemia 500 years earlier than the RPG products. Feist started the novel in 1977, finished it in 1979, and sold it to Doubleday in 1980. They published it a few years later as *Magician* (1982).

Feist completed the trilogy of books that became known as "The Riftwar Saga" over the next few years with the publication of *Silverthorn* (1985) and *A Darkness at Sethanon* (1986). They were well-received and quickly became one of the more popular fantasy series of '80s. Feist has since published 25 additional Midkemia books, spanning nine more series — the most recent of which, "The Chaoswar Saga," is scheduled to be completed in May 2013.

Because of his unique position — describing a world created by a roleplaying group — Feist has long said that he's writing historical novels, not fantasy. However, over the years Midkemia's creative pendulum has swung from one extreme to the other. In the earliest days, Feist was writing what many would call gaming fiction; he set his stories in places like the Sunken Lords and revealed how Midkemia Press' world came to be. Today, Feist is instead the prime mover in the world of Midkemia, leaving Stephen Abrams to revamp the world's source material as Feist rewrites its history.

Midkemia's unique creation has also resulted in one bit of controversy: according to Feist, the original Midkemian Campaign run by Abrams and Everson contained some minor elements borrowed from Tékumel, as described in TSR's *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975). Those elements were, of course, not brought into any of Midkemia Press' published books. However, Feist wasn't aware of this genesis, so some of these elements *did* find their way into the world of Kelewan — which opposed Midkemia in the Riftwar. Feist says the ultimate impact of Tékumel on the novels is "superficial," with other sources like Alan Dean Foster's Thranx and Jack Vance's *Big Planet* being just as important.

> *"I don't write fantasy; I write historical novels about an imaginary place. At least that's how I look at it."*
>
> – Raymond Feist, "The Real History of Midkemia" (1998)

Ultimately, we outsiders can never know the exact influence of the *EPT* world filtered through a house campaign upon Feist's writing. Suffice to say, it might be more than professional writer Raymond Feist is comfortable with and probably is a lot less than fans have suggested throughout the years.

Before closing out on the topic of Midkemia Press and authorship, it's worth noting that the Midkemia gang had one other future writer among its members. Science-fiction writer David Brin was working on his Masters in Applied Physics and his PhD in Space Science at UC San Diego in the late '70s and early '80s and thus he came into the orbit of Midkemia. He's credited in various Midkemia Press books, including a note on his "contributions" to the city of Carse.

However, it was author Raymond Feist who took Midkemia and ran with it. His success with Midkemia has been reflected in latter-day success for Midkemia Press, primarily thanks to computer games they were able to license — a topic we'll return to. First, though, we're going to touch upon Midkemia Press' last major interaction with the tabletop RPG field, which happened in the '80s thanks to an existing relationship with long-time RPG publisher, Chaosium.

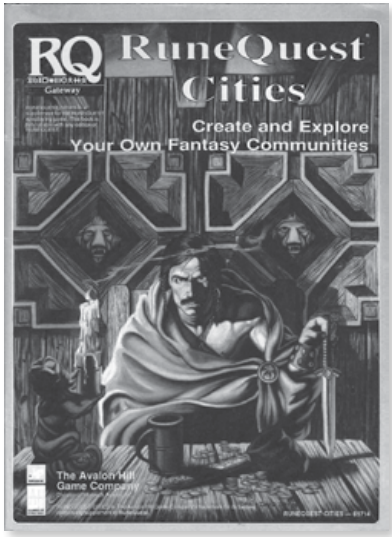
The Chaosium Rebirth: 1986—1988

During their years of publication, most of Midkemia Press' focus was spent on their own books. However, they went further afield to work on two other projects. The first was a pair of articles written for Flying Buffalo in Sorcerer's Apprentice, which we've already touched upon. More notably, they were among the contributors to Chaosium's Thieves' World (1981), published during that same year which marked Midkemia Press' greatest period of activity.

Thieves' World itself was a very innovative product in the gaming field, as is described more fully in the history of Chaosium. That wasn't because it minutely detailed the people and places of a city, but instead because it brought together many of the top designers of the gaming industry, from Dave Arneson to Marc Miller to Ken St. Andre. Among those contributors was none other than Midkemia Press.

However, Midkemia Press wasn't just *a* contributor to *Thieves' World*. They were the biggest contributor other than (perhaps) Chaosium itself. Where most of the external contributors to *Thieves' World* wrote just four to eight pages for the book — each converting characters to "their" own RPG — Midkemia Press authored about a third of the completed product. Most of that was focused on Midkemia's strengths: encounter tables for the *Thieves' World* city of Sanctuary and descriptions of many of its most important places.

Given this existing relationship, it's no surprise that a few years after Midkemia Press ended publication, Chaosium licensed their books for reprints. This kicked off with three books published under Chaosium's "Universal Supplement Series" brand: a third edition of *Cities* (1986) and second editions of *Carse* (1986) and *Tulan of the Isles* (1987) — the latter also including the "Village of Hoxley" setting and adventure. The material was edited and expanded by Chaosium editors William Dunn and Lynn Willis. Among other things, the old *D&D*-like stats were removed and replaced with *BRP*-like percentages. *Cities* later got done one more time as *RuneQuest Cities* (1988), published by Avalon Hill.



And that was the end of Chaosium's brief resurrection of the Midkemia sourcebooks.

The reason for this ending is easy enough to speculate. Chaosium was headed into its

first financial downturn right around the same time, thanks in large part to the licensing of *RuneQuest* to Avalon Hill. Some of Chaosium's lines never returned afterward, and the "Universal Supplement Series" was one of those.

However, the market had also changed between 1983 and 1988. Most notably, building-by-building city descriptions were no longer in vogue, instead replaced by books like TSR's *Lankhmar: City of Adventure* (1985, 1993), which randomized less important buildings within the city, and Flying Buffalo's *Citybooks* (1982, 1984, 1987, etc.), which instead focused upon a handful of important buildings that could be placed in any city.

Even today, Midkemia Press' supplements from the early '80s are quite well thought of (by those who remember them), but the gaming field has also moved on.

Latter-Day Midkemia: 1993-Present

Despite their publication ending in 1983, Midkemia Press continues to exist and has occasionally risen back to the forefront.

In 1993 they licensed *Betrayal at Krondor* (1993), a very well-received computer RPG that was named Best Game of the Year by *Computer Gaming World*. It was one of the most novelistic of the early CRPGs, thanks to its division into chapters that told a complete story. When Raymond Feist later novelized the game as *Krondor: The Betrayal* (1998) he credited game designers Neil Hallford and John Cutter as co-authors of the original story, reflecting the same sort of shared conception that had resulted in Midkemia's creation in the first place. Midkemia has since appeared in two other computer games, the CRPG *Return to Krondor* (1998) and the text-based *Midkemia Online* (2009), but they haven't received the same attention as the original.

> *"Midkemia has been mapped in 5 mile hexes over a significant portion of the surface. We know the history of the Kingdom (and to a lesser degree Great Kesh and Queg) for over 1,000 years. We have detailed city maps of a dozen cities and a score of towns."*
>
> – Raymond Feist, Online Questions, crydee.com (1995)

In 1997, twenty years after the company's formation, Midkemia Press returned to the public eye via a method that several companies from the '70s have used: the internet. This has allowed them to make their original books available again in two ways.

First, they sold their remaining stock, which consisted of those final books printed with full-color covers: *Cities* second edition, *Jonril*, and *Heart of the Sunken Land*. The last two sold out quickly, but Midkemia was selling *Cities* until 2010.

Second, they made some of their early books available as PDFs. *The Black Tower* (1997) appeared first, followed by *Towns of the Outlands* (2000). Those both continue to be available for free today. After *Cities* second edition dropped out of print, Midkemia created a "third edition" PDF for sale through their web site.

For a time, it looked like the d20 boom might cause a larger-scale resurrection of the world of Midkemia as a gaming setting. As early as 2003, Midkemia Press was fielding licensing requests for d20 books, but they never came about. The last possibility fell apart in 2007, by which time the d20 market already crashed and burned.

Though Midkemia Press hasn't published any new books in almost 30 years, their continuing web presence, and the recent conversion of *Cities* to PDF, suggests that the tabletop field may not have heard the last of the company yet.

What to Read Next

- For a contemporary company working on a *D&D*-originated gaming system, read ***Grimoire Games***.
- For an exclusive if short-lived focus on (unlicensed) *D&D* adventures, read ***DayStar West Media***.
- For another leader in the creation of detailed cities, read ***Judges Guild***, especially the *The Settings of Yore: The Wilderlands* box.
- For the publisher of *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, read ***Flying Buffalo***.
- For more on *Thieves' World* and the reprints of a few Midkemia books, read ***Chaosium***.

In Other Eras

- For later companies working on *D&D*-originated game systems, read ***Gamelords*** *['80s]* and ***Palladium*** *['80s]*.
- For the last company to reprint a Midkemia book, read ***Avalon Hill*** *['80s]*.
- For the origins of the d20 boom that never quite made it to Midkemia, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.

Or read onward to a variety of **appendices**.

The Story Continues!

There are still plenty of topics to discuss about gaming in the '70s, while the future continues to unfold every day. For a new series of articles meant to complement this set of books, visit:

- http://designers-and-dragons.rpg.net

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How wargamers, licensees, and the small press together built the industry.

1990s. The Age of Innovation.
How dice pools, diceless roleplaying, and vampires fought the CCG menace.

2000s. The Age of Indie.
How d20, the old guard, and indie RPGs all revolutionized the industry.



Appendix I: 10 Things You Might Not Know About Roleplaying in the '70s

In the '70s, roleplaying was different. It was still growing and evolving, still finding its feet. Much of the gaming culture that appeared in that era was quite different from what we know today. Things would change abruptly around 1980, as the industry ascended to a higher level of professionalism. But back in the '70s, the industry wasn't really big enough or long-lived enough to be professional. Besides that, there weren't a lot of rules about how things should be done.

Thus, things were often done differently.

1. Roleplaying Still Lay Very Near Its Wargaming Origins

The original three-volume set of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) was labeled "Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures." A modern roleplayer might actually classify that original rule set as a wargame rather than an RPG. It assumed players would be moving their figures step-by-step and turn-through-turn through dungeons and battlefields, and even fell back on the *Chainmail* rules (1971, 1972, 1975) to resolve combat.

This wargaming focus was clearly reflected in the more amateur early dungeons that appeared in places like *The Dungeoneer* (1976–1980). These dungeons were often simple lists of rooms, each noting the monster that the room contained and nothing more.

Publishers clearly didn't see much distinction between wargames and RPGs either. Some of the other earliest RPGs that followed *D&D* hewed even closer toward the combative side of things — not placing much emphasis at all on the new possibilities offered by "roleplaying." Among those pseudo-RPGs are GDW's *En Garde!* (1975), TSR's original *Boot Hill* (1975), and Metagaming's *Melee* (1977) and *Wizard* (1977).

Although roleplaying would better define itself as its own creature during the '80s, artifacts of the '70s wargaming remained until at least the publication of Second Edition *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (1989). Prior to that, movement in *AD&D* was still described in inches, with a typical character moving 6", 9", or 12", depending on encumbrance. Players of the '80s who discovered that an inch was 10 feet indoors or 10 yards outdoors were probably entirely befuddled. (I was!) It only made sense if you presumed that *D&D* would be played with miniatures moving across a table, like those wargames of old. Second Edition *AD&D* would keep the standard movement rates of 6, 9, and 12, but get rid of those confusing inch marks.

2. Games were Competitive

Given the origin of RPGs in the wargaming field, it should be no surprise that they were originally quite competitive. One only has to look at the games that were run at convention tournaments to see this. These adventures were about players maybe succeeding or maybe failing and doing so with the deck stacked heavily against them. This can be best seen in two early tournaments that were later published by TSR.

S1: Tomb of Horrors (1978) is of course the classic — full of no-chance death traps like a sphere of oblivion that you could walk right into. *A4: In the Dungeons of the Slave Lords* (1981) — which strips characters of all their equipment and

then lets them fight their way to freedom — offers another example of a game solely about the PCs trying to survive in a difficult environment.

The competition in early RPGs wasn't just confined to tournaments; it factored into many local games as well. You just need to listen to the war stories of a gamemaster from the era like Dave Hargrave, who talks of killing hundreds of characters. Alternatively, one can read the hundreds of tricks and traps suggested by players in the many RPG magazines of the time. Most of these traps weren't very fair, but most did give players a hard time — and thus something they could excel against (or else fail ignobly). *Grimtooth's Traps* (1981) was in some ways the culmination of this early, competitive mindset, but by the time it was published (and especially by the time its sequels appeared), it was more a humorous meta-RPG book than something that might be used in games. The same would not have been true just a few years earlier.

In the modern day, RPGs have moved over to a model of facilitated play, but that was surely not the case in the '70s.

3. Rules were Guidelines

The original *Dungeons & Dragons* game (1974) openly stated that its rules were guidelines and gamemasters should feel free to change them as they saw fit. TSR almost immediately put its money where its mouth was by publishing three books of variant rules. *Supplement I: Greyhawk* (1975) included an alternate combat system and made many changes to characters — forcing magic-users to learn limited spells and giving fighters exceptional strength. *Supplement II: Blackmoor* (1975) introduced hit locations. Finally, *Supplement III: Eldritch Wizardry* (1976) threw psionics into the pot.

Out in the wild, among actual gaming groups, variants were even more common. It's hard to find a story of an *OD&D* game today without also finding descriptions of the variant rules it used. Some of these variants became their own game systems in time, such as *The Arduin Grimoire* (1977), *The Complete Warlock* (1978), and *The Palladium Role-Playing Game* (1983). Tales of variant D&D systems that never got published, such as Midekemia Press' "Tome of Midkemia" and Gamelords' complete "Fantasy System" are at least as common.

By the time Gary Gygax was drafting *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (1977–1979), he'd decided that *D&D*'s rules should actually be rules — not guidelines after all. This alternate philosophy was clearly stated in the new releases. The rules were also more comprehensive, so that fewer off-the-cuff decisions were needed on the part of GMs. The reason for the change, according to TSR, was to better support tournament play — which was an increasing interest throughout the time period. However, it took a while for the players to accept the change. During

the '80s Gygax would fight an ongoing war in the pages of *Dragon* and elsewhere as to whether it was OK to use variant rules, or if *AD&D* had to be played as it was published.

4. *D&D* was the De Facto Standard

Though players felt empowered to create their own variants of *D&D* (1974), D&D was nonetheless the standard that nearly everyone was playing. It was so ubiquitous that players were able to move their characters from campaign to campaign to convention and back — all without even thinking about which game folks might be playing. Campaign worlds might even interact; one early article on the industry describes David Hargrave's Black Lotus Society (in the San Francisco Bay Area) planning an attack on Deanna Sue White's world of Mistigar (in Los Angeles). Despite the existence of early alternate FRPGs like *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975) and *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975), *D&D* remained the gold standard.

As new FRPGs appeared in the later '70s — including *The Arduin Grimoire* (1977) and *RuneQuest* (1978) — they began to take up some of the roleplaying mindshare. There were old-timers, however, who regretted these changes. Lee Gold discussed the loss of the industry's early ubiquitous game system when she said: "San Francisco runs 'high entropy' worlds — lots of magic and power; Long Beach and Boston, 'low entropy.' *RuneQuest* is talking strike rank; *D&D* is talking dexterity rolls. They can't talk to each other. It's like the Tower of Babel ... The trend is to closed-world campaigns." (*New West* magazine, August 25, 1980)

5. Science-Fantasy was a Heavy Influence

Though we today use the acronym "FRPG" to describe *D&D* and what followed, in the earliest days it seems like "science-fantasy" was as important as pure fantasy.

The original *D&D* (1974) kicked off this focus on science-fantasy by referencing Edward Burroughs' John Carter novels. A few years later — in the legendary "Appendix N" of the *AD&D Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979) — Gygax listed several science-fantasy works on his inspirational reading list, including: Burroughs' Mars series, Burroughs' Venus series, Philip José Farmer's World of Tiers series, and Jack Vance's Dying Earth; together they offered up a wide cross-section of science-fantasy writing.

This science-fantasy emphasis also showed up in the early adventures of TSR. We know that Rob Kuntz's "Machine Level" for Greyhawk Castle was full of robots and other machinery. Kuntz also offered inspiration for Gygax's *S3: Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* (1980). The latter adventure — focusing on a crashed alien ship in Greyhawk — is today the best-known example of the science-fantasy of the '70s, but it was really the tip of the iceberg.

- Dave Arneon's Blackmoor had its own crashed starship lending technology to the world — though full information on it wouldn't be publicly published until years later in *DA3: City of the Gods* (1987).
- The idea of aliens coming to a fantasy world was also one that Dave Hargrave included in the second Arduin Grimoire, *Welcome to Skull Tower* (1978).
- *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975) took a different tactic. It was placed in the far future after a technological civilization had fallen — thus allowing characters to discover ancient technological artifacts.

Many early RPGs also included the idea of dimensional gates, which could bring technology (and thus science-fantasy) straight from Earth to your favorite fantasy world. When Bob Bledsaw got tired of his Middle-earth campaign, he let players enter the Wilderlands through a gate; later gates would bring Pepsi ads and helicopters into the Wilderlands. Gates were even more important to Dave Hargrave's world of Arduin.

Science-fantasy continued as a minor theme into at least the '80s — with the aforementioned resurrection of Blackmoor and the appearance of *Spelljammer* (1989) — but it was minor compared to the '70s. In those early days, it seems like every primordial FRP realm had a fair amount of science-fantasy at its core.

6. Players Made Up Their Own Stuff

Perhaps it's because they were brought up to understand that the rules were guidelines, and perhaps it's because not much had yet been released into the RPG market, but for whichever reason the early RPGers of the '70s made up a lot of their own stuff. As we've already seen, they happily house ruled *D&D* to the point where it developed into totally new games. They wrote their own dungeons, they created their own monsters, and (perhaps most notably) explored their own worlds.

The early RPG companies clearly recognized this tendency. That's why TSR so famously told Judges Guild in 1976 that no one would be interested in supplements. It's why GDW didn't bother with a setting when they created *Traveller* (1977).

Flying Buffalo was a rare exception that started putting out adventures for their own *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975) almost immediately. However, for *D&D*, it was not TSR but other companies that led the way in publishing supplements — including Wee Warriors (in 1975) and Judges Guild (in 1976). Even when TSR got involved, they published GM tools meant to complement creativity — such as the original *Geomorphs* (1976–1977) and several pre-generated lists of monsters and treasure (1977–1978).

There were a lot of third-party supplements under the bridge before TSR finally decided that players might be willing to buy some made-up stuff from them. They eventually began to publish adventures, starting with *G1: Steading of the Hill Giant Chief* (1978), and settings, starting with *The World of Greyhawk Fantasy World Setting* (1980).

7. Players Published Professional Content Too

The line between players and professional designers was very fuzzy in those early days, and average players were writing stuff for publication too. This was the most obvious in the various gaming magazines.

Judges Guild was probably the publisher that most frequently distributed the writings of entirely average *D&D* players. This came about largely through their magazines, *The Dungeoneer* (1976–1980) and *The Judges Guild Journal* (1976–1980). In the earliest days of the Journal, players wrote up their ideas for "Omniscient Opinions." Some additional player content appeared thanks to contests, such as a dungeon design contest that generated extensive material for *Judges Guild Journal #12* (December/January 1978/1979) and #13 (February/March 1979). In *Dungeoneer*, player content appeared through multiple columns, such as "Monster Matrix," "Booty Bag," and the trap-filled "Nose Wet? or No Sweat!" Many other player "articles" were little more than letters that might contain a single item, some random tables, or even a very extensive discussion of enchanting magic items.

Even publishers less focused than Judges Guild on producing content in volume provided many opportunities for "amateur" players to contribute. *White Dwarf* had "Treasure Chest," full of magic items (1977–1986), and occasionally other articles like Brian Asbury's "The Asbury System" — a new XP system that gave experience for spell-casting, skills, and more. Don Turnbull's "Fiend Factory" (1978–1986) also contained player content and went on to much greater renown. When Metagaming produced their *Interplay* magazine (1981–1982), they subtitled it "The Metagamer Dialogues," with the idea being that it'd be almost entirely contributed by players.

The greatest sign that players could easily become published designers in the '70s was the way in which very small press companies were so easily created. Many of the earliest designers — including Dave Hargrave, Kevin Siembieda, and Ken St. Andre — got into the business simply because they'd written up something cool and they were encouraged by players or friends to publish it.

As ever, we can see the end of this early RPG trend right around 1980. That's when Judges Guild started discriminating between different sorts of writers by creating variable pay schedules. They offered amateurs $2–8 per full page of copy while they were giving pros $5–20.

Today the barriers of entry into the RPG industry have gone way down with the advent of PDFs, but nonetheless the line between players and designers seems much more rigid than it was so briefly in the late '70s.

8. Companies Didn't Know What to Publish

Perhaps it's good that players were so able to produce publishable content in those early days, because to a large extent the RPG publishers of the '70s had no idea what would be successful and what wouldn't be in the entirely new RPG industry. Therefore the sort of content being produced varied widely from company to company.

TSR thought the answer was to publish an ever-growing list of rulebooks, from *Greyhawk* (1975) to *Eldritch Wizardry* (1976) and *Swords & Spells* (1976), but no one else followed the model until Dave Hargrave began publishing *Arduin Grimoires* (1977–1978, 1984–1988).

TSR published a very early adventure, "The Temple of the Frog," in *Blackmoor* (1975). However, they apparently thought little of the form because they didn't return to it until *G1: Steading of the Hill Giant Chief* (1978). Meanwhile, Wee Warriors happily published adventures beginning with *Palace of the Vampire Queen* (1976), as did Judges Guild, beginning with *Tegel Manor* (1977).

Judges Guild was pioneering campaign settings with the *City State of the Invincible Overlord Playing Aid* (1977) and *The First Fantasy Campaign* (1977), while TSR didn't mimic this sort of supplement themselves until *The World of Greyhawk Fantasy World Setting* (1980). Chaosium published the first monster book with *All the Worlds' Monsters* (1977), though in this case TSR almost certainly had their *Monster Manual* (1977) in production.

The examples go on. No one had decided what was successful and what wasn't, and thus everything might be.

Judges Guild probably offers the best example of how bizarre some of the publications of the late '70s were — at least to our eyes decades later. At GenCon IX (1976), Judges Guild began offering "subscriptions," which would provide players with material every couple of months. These subscription "issues" were "published" as envelopes contained stacks of cardstock sheets, small booklets, and other loose leaf material. The first subscription envelope contained several maps, a 12-page booklet, a one-page reference, and Issue "J" of *Judges Guild Journal* (December/January 1976/1977).

Slowly, companies figured out what to publish, and the production of the industry became more homogeneous. TSR produced adventures and settings, and Grimoire Games added dungeons to their Arduin line. Even those strange Judges Guild subscriptions started to look more like what was being produced by the rest

of the industry: the envelopes full of stuff were later published under cover sheets to identify them as single products ("Installment L" became *Tegel Manor* and "Installment M" became *Modron*), then around 1981 many of those supplements that still featured separate maps and booklets were combined into singular books.

9. There Were No Editions as We Know Them

Even in the first years of the industry, some of the earliest RPGs were published multiple times. *Tunnels & Trolls* went through five printings from 1975 to 1979 and *Boot Hill* went through two during that same period. *RuneQuest* quickly revved from its original publication (1978) to what would become widely known as "RuneQuest II" (1979). Even GDW's *En Garde!* went through two iterations (1975, 1977).

En Garde! may have been the first RPG to use the word "edition" — proclaiming its second printing as a "revised edition." However, neither it nor most of the other reprints of the '70s were what we recognize as editions today. New printings might be revised, refined, or reformatted. Errata might be incorporated into the games. However there were no big revamps until the late '80s. Even today you can look back at *Tunnels & Trolls* first through fourth editions (1975–1977) — to use our modern vernacular — or even much later products like *Call of Cthulhu* first through third editions (1981–1986) and say, "Those were all basically the same game."

The exception for the period might have been *D&D*, which certainly evolved throughout the '70s, but the reaction of the community as a whole to these changes proves the general rule.

D&D started, of course, with the original three-book set (1974), which was supplemented by four additional books (1975–1976). These were followed by what today we might call a new edition: the Holmes *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set* (1977), which was really just an introduction to *OD&D*. When the *Monster Manual* (1977) was released that same year, it was called *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, but it was freely used with the *OD&D* and the *Basic Set* by players at the time. The *Players Handbook* (1978) and the *Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979) eventually proved to be a (somewhat) different system than *OD&D* — but where would you say the edition lines lie, when the evolution from one product to the next was so gradual?

Looking in the magazines and journals of the time, it's obvious that players didn't see much difference at all. As late as 1980, most magazine articles just used the words *D&D* without trying to identify what they meant beyond that, because it was all just one game. There were no editions.

In 1980 things would start to change. That's when *Tunnels & Trolls* — which had already been heavily revised for its "fifth edition" (1979) — started carrying the text "completely revised and re-illustrated." And it had been changed notably under

fifth edition editor Liz Danforth. That's also when the Tom Moldvay *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set* (1980) appeared, which was more obviously not the same game as either *OD&D* or *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*. And finally, it's when Metagaming revamped *Melee* (1977) and *Wizard* (1977) as *The Fantasy Trip* (1980).

From there, the first edition wars were just around the corner.

10. Centralization Was Poor

The final striking thing about gaming in the '70s — the final thing that the modern gamer wouldn't even consider — is how poorly centralized it was. When people talk about entering the gaming field in the '70s, or about finding a new game, they often talk about a long-distance personal connection. Greg Stafford of the SF Bay Area was mailed *D&D* by a friend in Milwaukee. Lee Gold, who lived in LA, got *D&D* from friends in San Francisco. Conan La Motte, then at UC San Diego, picked up his copy in Los Angeles.

New games were passed on through personal connections because there weren't game stores that carried everything. Small distributors like Armageddon covered very geographically limited areas (in this case the San Francisco Bay Area). Others, like Zocchi Distributors, tried to offer many things to all people, but they were a far cry from the huge distributors of the modern day like Alliance.

One of the consequences of a poorly integrated web of RPG commerce is that companies would often pick up and sell products from other publishers. The most notable of these are probably Games Workshop — who distributed lots of RPGs to the UK — and Judges Guild — who sold an extensive catalog of RPG books and miniatures to their members. However, you'd frequently see such deals on a smaller scale too. If TSR hadn't picked up Wee Warriors' books, it's likely that they would never have been seen outside of California. Similarly, Chaosium sold the self-published *Arduin Trilogy* (1977–1978) until Grimoire Games reprinted them.

Conventions in those days were pretty local affairs, and so they tended to support the wide-scale balkanization of the community — but within a locale (such as the Great Lakes) they still managed to get the word out. APAs (and to a lesser extent, letter columns in professional magazines) jumped beyond even these local barriers — giving ideas about roleplaying one of the few conduits to hop from community to community. Thus the importance of the Southern Californian *Alarums and Excursions* (1975-Present), the Massachusetts *Wild Hunt* (1976–1994), and others can't be overstated.

Today, the role of APAs is largely taken over by the internet, which has done considerably to homogenize gaming (and the world). However, that process was already starting in the '80s, as distribution of products and information alike began to improve.

Appendix II: Bibliography & Thanks

This book was built from thousands of primary sources including interviews, design notes, reviews, news articles, press releases, catalogs, forum postings, and other non-fiction articles. It was also built with the assistance of hundreds of readers, fact-checkers, and scanners. This bibliography does its best to note the most important resources and thank all the people involved.

Books

To learn more about this era, I particularly suggest *40 Years of Gen Con* and *Playing at the World*, each of which offers piles of great historical detail.

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Numerous magazines and newspapers were consulted. The most important are listed below, while others might be found referenced in individual quotes.

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Web Sites

I visited hundreds of web sites in the preparation of this book, particularly for companies active in the '90s and afterward. Below is a brief listing of only the most important, which you may wish to visit yourself.

acaeum.com — details on TSR publications

afterglow2.com — a site cataloging many classic RPG products

blog.retroroleplaying.com — a fine blog on old-school play

darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg — an impressive list of game companies and locations

dndlead.com — a look at *D&D* miniatures
dragonsfoot.org — a great old-school resource with lots of interviews
dwarfstar.braniac.com — info on Heritage's Dwarfstar games
enworld.org — a d20/*D&D* site that often had great discussions and official info
escapistmagazine.com — occasional source of high-quality RPG-related articles
greyhawkonline.com/grodog — Allan Grohe's site on Greyhawk & Rob Kuntz
groknard.blogspot.com — all about *Star Trek* roleplaying
grognardia.blogspot.com — The best blog around on the history of RPGs
gspendragon.com — Greg Stafford's *Pendragon* site
playingattheworld.blogspot.com — the blog that goes with Jon Peterson's book
rpg.net — gaming index, forums discussion, news
rpggeek.com — gaming index
saveordie.info — classic podcasts, including interviews
thepiazza.org.uk/bb/index.php — discussion of many old TSR worlds
tomeoftreasures.com — a research site for collectible RPGs
travellerrpg.com/CotI/Discuss — *Traveller*-related forums
tunnelsandtrolls.com — Ken St. Andre's *T&T* site
weareallus.com — Greg Stafford's personal website

Fact Checkers

Whenever I finished an article, I tried to get one or more people associated with the company in question to comment on it. In one or two cases where I didn't have sufficient company feedback, I got some help from fans as well. These people helped to make this book considerably more accurate and informative thanks to both corrections and insight generously given. Some were kind enough to comment on multiple editions of these articles over the years. A few of these folks just answered questions for me. Errors remaining are, of course, my own.

Thanks to: Stephen Abrams (Midkemia Press), Howard Barasch (Heritage Models), Scott Bizar (FGU), Bob Bledsaw (Judges Guild), Timothy Brown (GDW), Brian Collins (Grimoire Games), Liz Danforth (Flying Buffalo), Jeff Dee (FGU), Willard Dennis (Heritage Models), George Dew (Metagaming), Mary Ezzell (Grimoire Games), Matthew Goodman (GDW), Allan Grohe (TSR), Jeff Grubb (TSR), Scott Haring (TSR), Leonard Heid (Grimoire Games), David Helber (Heritage Models), Laura Hickman (DayStar West), Tracy Hickman (DayStar West), the UK Steve Jackson (Games Workshop), the US Steve Jackson (Metagaming), Jennell Jaquays (Flying Buffalo, Judges Guild, Metagaming), Charlie Krank (Chaosium), Paul Lidberg (FGU), Rick Loomis (FGU, Flying Buffalo), Jim Lowder (TSR), Kim Mohan (TSR), James Oden (Heritage Models), Dori Olmesdahl (TSR), Steve Perrin (Grimoire Games, Heritage Models),

Jon Peterson (TSR), Randall Porter (Heritage Models), Ed Pugh (Heritage Models), Donald Reents (Chaosium, Grimoire Games), Marcus L. Rowland (Games Workshop, GDW), Steven Schend (TSR), Mark Schynert (Grimoire Games), Lester Smith (GDW), Michael Stackpole (Flying Buffalo), Greg Stafford (Chaosium, Grimoire Games), Stephen D. Sullivan (TSR), James M. Ward (TSR), Steve Winter (TSR), Loren Wiseman (GDW), David Witts (Games Workshop, TSR), and Lou Zocchi (Gamescience).

Scanners

Collecting covers to illustrate the book was challenging, as even my obsessive gaming collection doesn't cover many companies that I discuss. The denizens of RPGnet (and elsewhere) really came together here, helping me to put together a thousand scans over the course of January and February 2011.

Some people went *way* out of their way, borrowing books from local game clubs or from friends to scan them, for which I'm very grateful. When I asked people to scan companies for me, I asked them to scan the most important books, and thus I sometimes got a book that I hadn't included in a history, but afterward realized I should have, so thanks for that too.

Thanks to scanners: Dave Ackerman, Michael Beekman, Marius Bredsdorff, Nick Brooke, Tim Bryant, Nicholas Caldwell (of Guild Companion Publications), Bob Cram, Walter F. Croft, Rich DeBarba, Charles Dunwoody, Emma Eriksson, Ken Finlayson, Andrew Gammell, Garry Gross, Joseph M. Jankowski, James Knevitt, James Koti, Adam Krump, Richard J. LeBlanc, Jr. (of New Big Dragon Games), Dominic Lund, Andrew MacLennan, Ken MacLennan, Gary McBride, Darth Mauno, Clemens Meier, Alexander Osias, Jon Peterson, John Poole, Keith Rains, R.L. Sagarena, Robert Saint John, Kurt Sanders, Janice Sellers, Leath Sheales, Nick Smith, Chris Tavares, Gary Thompson, Brian Weber, and Marsha White.

Thanks to book lenders: Christopher Allen, Mike Blum, and Dave Pickering.

Thanks to stores that let me scan their stock: EndGame, Games of Berkeley.

Special Thanks

Since the '70s was about the beginning of the roleplaying industry, I'd like to use this book to especially thank the folks who got me on the path to writing this book.

Thanks to Christopher Allen, who supported my work at RPGnet that got me thinking about the history of roleplaying games.

Thanks to Lisa Stevens, who convinced me to turn some online articles into a book in the first place.

Thanks to Matthew Sprange, who published the first edition of this book.

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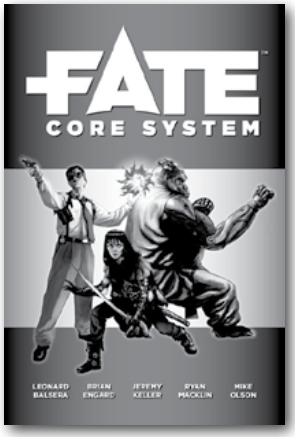

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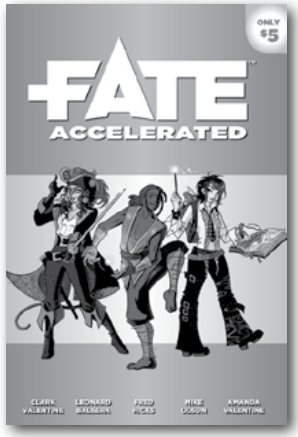

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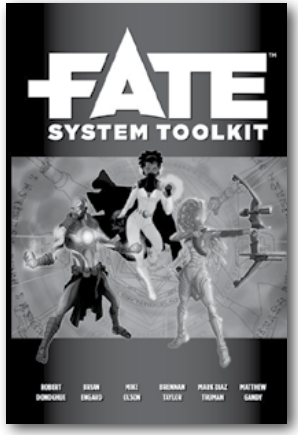

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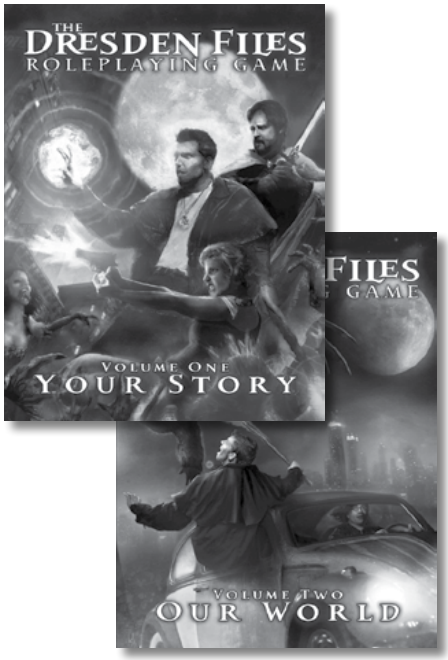

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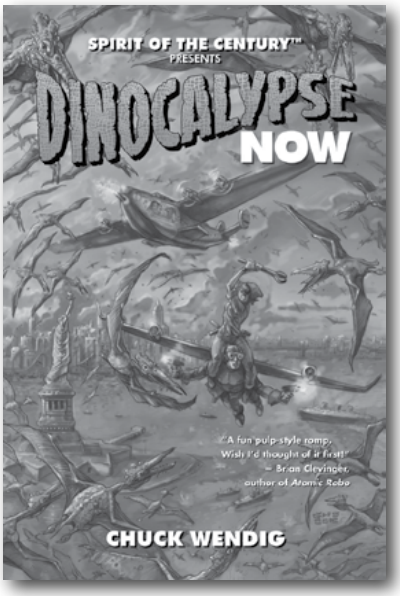

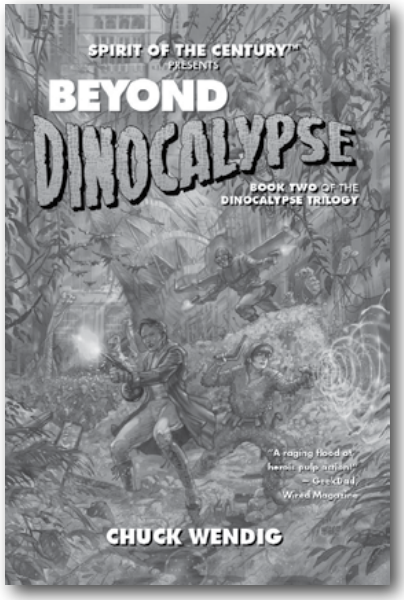



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