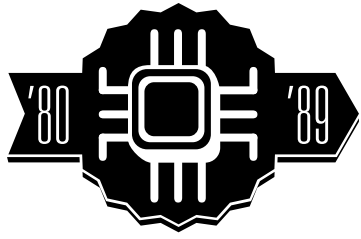
Designers & Dragons



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Warning.

What you hold in your hands is an epic tale. An epic tale of love, passion, ambition, treachery, war, peace, imagination, mythology, and godlike power. It's also about games. Especially roleplaying and adventure games. (Or as we in the know call them, RPGs.)

All of the above sentiments and emotions can, of course, be found in RPGs. After all, they are made of the very stuff that underlies all of our modern entertainment. A good RPG is something like a blockbuster movie, with the page turning seductiveness of a good beach read and the tactile sensibilities of a good meal. So first of all, this is a history of how, after a simple and rocky start in the basements of the Midwest, this entirely new form of entertainment expanded, reshaped, and matured into the form we know today; a form that still is mutating into new aspects even as I write this (virtual reality, anyone?).

But this epic tale only covers games in a most tangential way. Because this book is mostly about the people who *make* the games. As companies, creators, and visionaries, the people who make adventure games also embody all of the characteristics of their wayward brainchildren. They also have tales to tell—of grand visions that often lit up the starry gaming firmament. There are challenges and conquests in this tale. There are humorous stories that can still crack up the bar late at night. There are fights and feuds to the death. There are alliances, grand plans, great dreams, and a lot of other cool stuff. As you read this, you'll start to see a Grand Design shaping; a story of how the foundations of the geek world were forged from a wild and inspired roll of the dice.

This tale is also about a time—a most unique time. It's a moment when a fledgling industry staggered out of the darkness and obscurity that enveloped it, into the blinding light of international understanding and acclaim. The 1980's to 1990's

were an amazing time in gaming—a time when some of the most legendary game designers of the day strode around as giants, hurling cool ideas and equally cool games around like crazed titans. Like an Old Testament of game design, *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* beget *Traveller*, which in turn beget *Call of Cthulhu*, which then gave rise to *Champions*, *Vampire: The Masquerade*, *Shadowrun*, and *Cyberpunk*. Sometimes there was competition—bitterly so, with lawsuits and harsh words flying. But more often, it was mutual admiration—that moment when a fellow creator would walk up to you on the Gen Con floor, jab a finger at your latest baby clutched in your sweaty hands and say, "You son of a gun—I wish I'd written that," and you grinned back and said, "Yeah, well, I'm *still* jealous of your last project—it was so good!" Hitting the convention floor was always a thrill back then, not only because you had a killer new game you wanted to share with the world, but also because all of your friends were going to be showing up with their killer new games as well; games you *knew* you were going to want to play as soon as you saw them. And when the dealer room closed down for the evening, there was always a huge flurry of trading for each other's stuff.

But above all, this is about friendships. Friendships that span not only a small, exceptional arc of time, but remain strong and lasting to this very day. Even now, I can count many of the names scribed herein as best and closest friends, and in turn am honored to be considered their friends as well. We share common bonds—a love of the hobby that brought us together, a bunch of raggedy war-gamers with a passion for telling stories and creating worlds—all the way to the foundation of a multimillion dollar industry that spawned an entirely new generation of sleek digital war-gamer/storytellers. Some of us have fallen by the wayside; to other paths, interests, careers, or even to that Big RPG in the Sky. Some of us still carry the torch, forging new paths in digital terrains.

Maybe one day it will all happen again. But in much the way that the Silver and Bronze Ages of Comics will never *quite* be the match of that long, far off Golden Age of *Superman*, *Batman*, and the rest of the heroic pantheon, the next Golden Age of tabletop gaming will probably never be the equal of the one that brought so much scary good talent to one place and time and cut us loose to create some amazing stuff. Cosmic coincidences like that just don't happen that often.

But there's one, more, most important thing this book is. It's an *inspiration*. A guidebook for future gaming generations, if you will. Yes, they're out there, right under your noses. Because whatever the old timers might tell you, tabletop gaming is not dead.

Let me tell you a story that's *not* part of this book; a personal one. Over a decade ago, lured by the promise of new pastures (as you'll discover in the process of reading this book, my career in game design actually *started* in the digital world

rather than in pen and paper), I re-started a new career arc designing video games. Now, at the time, I had also produced a side project, a ten year old son who, like every other ten year old at the time, played video games. Since I was in the thick of what was fast becoming a "hip" profession, I figured that the "old man" was going to have massive "street cred" with my son's crowd. But nope. Nada. Video-games were the everyday. Until my son walked in one day with a battered copy of *Teenagers From Outer Space*—a game I'd written about ten years before he'd ever even existed. And he thrust this ratty copy at me, and said, "Hey Dad. Did you have anything to do with this?"

Suddenly, I was dragged out of my video game complacency to discover an entire secret world of roleplaying fever out there. Online. In text messaging. On chat boards. An entire generation was out there resurrecting the games their parents played; pulling them out of closets, getting their old school player "rents" to teach them the rules. There was an even bigger shock to come—literally half of the players were now girls—and trust me, as one of the few guys who married a girl gamer back in the superheated eighties, I knew how rare that had been.

And all of them are starting to write new games. Chances are, in fact, if you're reading this, you may already be part of that new generation of game designers. So in the end, this book is for you, and my son Cody (now a professional designer in his own right), and everyone who ever wanted to pick up a pair of dice and tell a good story. It is a testament, a story of people who love this stuff as much as you do. Take our knowledge, our memories, and our love—from our hands to yours, and make great stuff.

We'll be waiting to greet you on the convention floor.

Mike Pondsmith
R.Talsorian Games (reborn)
Seattle, 2014

Foreword: The ’80s

This is a book about the roleplaying industry as it existed during the boom following the James Egbert affair—and during the bust that followed the boom. It’s about hobbyist gaming in the ’80s. More specifically, it’s about 22 different companies that began publishing roleplaying games in the ’80s—from wargame leader SPI through a variety of wargame holdovers, roleplaying originals, old guard resurrections, and small press publishers.

The roleplaying industry is a very creative one, built on the backs of dreamers who are 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.

Many of them formed their own companies. You have the stories of: Steve Jackson, who pioneered universal roleplaying; Jordan Weisman, who created a multimedia empire; George MacDonald, who designed a superhero sensation; Kevin Siembieda and Mike Pondsmith, who spotted the industry’s next trends before anyone else; and Mark Rein•Hagen and Jonathan Tweet, who were serving an apprenticeship in the ’80s before creating the most innovative games of the ’90s and the ’00s.

And the dragons, they’re sadly here as well.

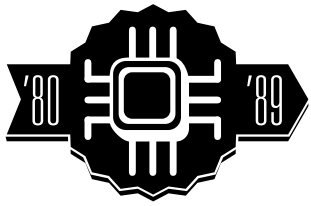
As ever, there are many of the legal variety (*draco lexus?*). One company was killed in part by a lawsuit, while another was assassinated when its licensor made careful use of the legal system. A third company was extinguished via a specific legal chain of events that no one seemed to understand even at the time.

However, these histories also highlight a flight of dragons of different sorts, including mismanagement, copyright disagreements, bad partnerships, overly busy owners, dot-com crashes, bored owners, bad designs, employee theft, poorly received updates, undercapitalization, and more.

Of the 22 companies profiled within, only 6 or 7 are still in business (depending on how you count), and that number drops to 3 or 4 if you remove companies that went out of business and then reappeared under new ownership. Three of the survivors have largely or entirely given up on roleplaying. 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 22 most notable companies to enter the RPG industry during its biggest boom ever (and afterward)— the story of their designers and their battles against the dragons.



About the Icon: Daniel Solis' icon for the '80s is a computer chip. It represents the introduction of the computer to roleplaying. This affected publishers first, when they began using Desktop Publishing techniques, then it took over the whole science-fiction genre when cyberpunk became the *flavor du jour*.

A Future History of Roleplaying

Though this book focuses on roleplaying companies that began publication in the '80s, 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 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 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 cropped up 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.

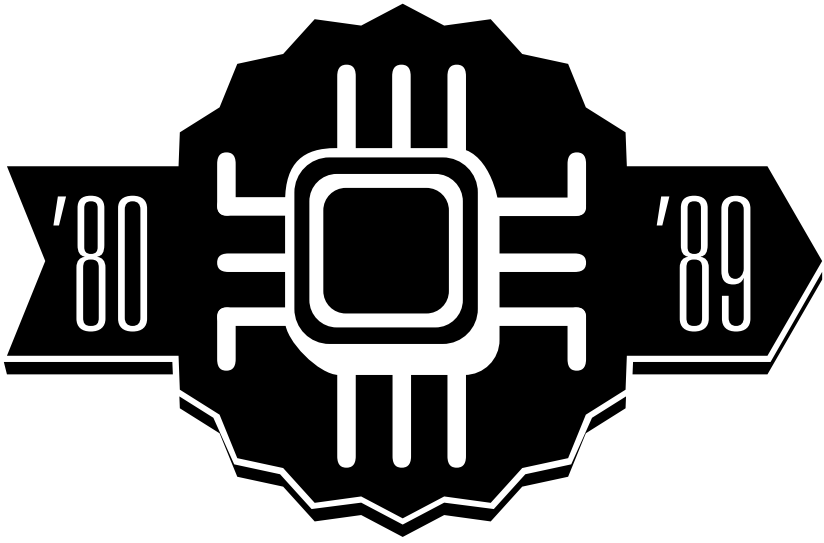
A Note to Readers of the First Edition

If you read the previous, black monolith edition of *Designers & Dragons*, you'll find that the information on the '80s in this new edition is just slightly increased. The history of Leading Edge Games is brand-new, while that of Different Worlds Publications has been expanded. Appendix I is all new as well.

In addition, articles have been updated for companies still in business.

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 histories of the hobby's boom ... and beyond.

Shannon Appelcline
January 6, 2013



Part One:

The Second Wargaming Wave

(1980)

When the first wargame companies moved over to roleplaying production in the '70s, they were a motley crew of miniatures makers and very small press publishers. RPGs were not yet a big enough industry for the big companies to get involved.

By the late '70s the roleplaying industry was doubling in size every year. But everything changed when James Dallas Egbert III disappeared from Michigan State University in August 1979, and private investigator William Dear incorrectly fingered *D&D* as the culprit. Wrong or not, *D&D* was suddenly getting lots of great publicity, and the roleplaying industry's growth went crazy.

The viability of RPGs was proven in 1980 when SPI—the biggest publisher of ***wargaming board games***—released their first roleplaying game, *DragonQuest* (1980). Other wargaming companies—including ' and Task Force Games—moved into roleplaying games around the same time. Though they weren't as big as SPI, together they formed a second wave of wargame publishers entering the industry.

Steve Jackson Games deserves some additional attention because it kicked off the trend of ***the old guard returning***, which gets its own section at the end of this book. Founder Steve Jackson was previously the top RPG designer for Metagaming Concepts—a publisher of science-fiction and fantasy wargames that jumped into the RPG field during the previous wargaming wave—and now he has founded a company of his own.

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
SPI	1969–1982	*DragonQuest* (1980)	7
Task Force Games	1978–1996	*Dungeon Tiles* (1980)	16
Amarillo Design Bureau	*1983–Present*	*Prime Directive* (1993)	25
Steve Jackson Games	1980–	*The Space Gamer #27* (1980)	27

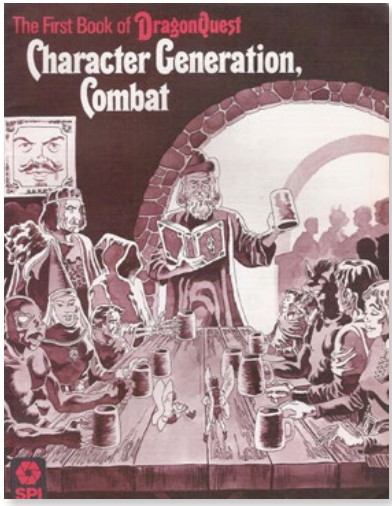
SPI: 1969–1982

SPI's main influence on the RPG industry was as an honored ancestor. It was the number one wargame producer for a short time, and though it did eventually produce a few RPGs, it was not a major force in that industry.

Wargame Beginnings: 1969–1980

Charles Roberts formed the modern wargaming industry in 1958 with the creation of Avalon Hill. Though small press wargame publishers were appearing by the mid-'60s, it would be another 10 years before a potential contender for Avalon Hill's throne came along. That's when James F. Dunnigan formed Poultron Press, which soon became Simulations Publications Inc., or SPI.

SPI was created in order to save *Strategy & Tactics*, a wargaming fanzine published by Chris Wagner. It was an innovative magazine, in part because it covered both sides of the wargaming hobby: board games *and* miniatures. However, within a few years, Wagner was finding the magazine in some



1980: DragonQuest

financial difficulties. Enter Dunnigan, himself a contributor to the magazine since *Strategy & Tactics #2* (February 1967). Given this history, Wagner was quite happy to pass the torch. He sold Dunnigan all rights to his 'zine for just $1—though Dunnigan wouldn't remember to remit payment until 1975.

With the magazine now in hand, Dunnigan set up shop for his new company in a windowless basement in New York City's Lower East Side, located between a puppeteer and a pornographer. There he published his first issue, *Strategy & Tactics #18* (September 1969).

Starting with that first new issue of *Strategy & Tactics*—which included a wargame designed by Dunnigan called "Crete"—SPI revolutionized the wargaming market. From then on, every issue of *Strategy & Tactics* would include a new game, an idea that was quite astounding at the time.

> *"The essence of a simulation game is that it allows, within well-defined limits, a great deal of variety in an otherwise strictly predetermined historical event. This is the popular 'what if?' element in the games."*
>
> –James F. Dunnigan, *The Complete Wargames Handbook, Revised Edition* (1992)

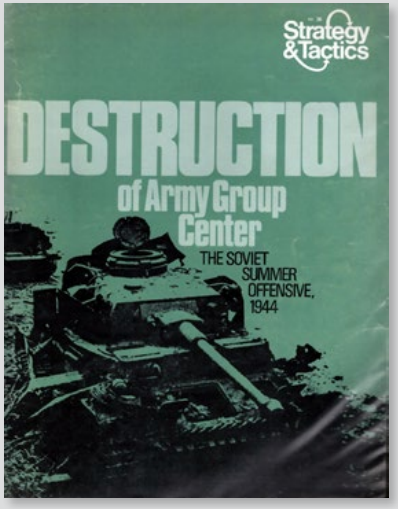
Dunnigan was quickly able to create that new wargame for his first *Strategy & Tactics* because he was a published designer with two Avalon Hill games under his belt: *Jutland* (1967) and *1914* (1968). His experience with Avalon Hill would soon influence SPI's future as well. As sales of *Strategy & Tactics* trended upward, Dunnigan began to consider the publication of larger-scale wargames. Part of this desire to publish games came from Dunnigan's dissatisfaction with Avalon Hill's production model. He envisioned a few changes he thought would improve the quality of his own games.

First, he wanted gamers to shepherd their games throughout the entire process; second, he wanted to produce many more games than the one or two a year Avalon Hill put out; and third, he wanted to be closer to gamers and more reactive to these desires. These were all pretty big changes from Avalon Hill's more monolithic model of being a publisher, not a designer; in fact they would more closely match the model used by roleplaying companies through the first decade or so of their existence—when all the roleplaying companies were run by designers, with the rare exception of publishers like FGU.

Over the next decade, SPI published hundreds of wargames. *Strategy & Tactics* quickly became its main means of marketing—foreshadowing another early roleplaying trend: the rise of the house organs that so many roleplaying firms would kick off in the '70s and '80s.

Magazine History

Strategy & Tactics 1967-Present



Strategy & Tactics is one of the scant survivors of the TSR takeover of SPI. Today it may be the oldest hobbyist gaming magazine in existence.

It got its start in January of 1967 under the auspices of original editor, Chris Wagner. He was dissatisfied with Avalon Hill's gaming magazine, *The General*, and wanted to offer something better. The quality of his original 'zine was quickly improved when graphic designer Redmond Simonsen came on board. Unfortunately, Wagner didn't have the marketing acumen to make it a success, and subscribership stagnated, then debts began to accrue. Wagner's last issue was #17 (June 1969).

James F. Dunnigan and SPI shepherded *Strategy & Tactics* through the most successful era of its life, from #18 (September 1969) to #90 (January 1982), that last issue being produced by SPI but published by TSR. SPI's *S&T* was notable for publishing a complete wargame in every issue, starting with #18. Its circulation exceeded that of *The General* during the period, marking SPI as inheritor of the wargaming crown.

Strategy & Tactics spun off two other magazines while at SPI. *Ares* magazine (1980–1982 under SPI, 1983–1984 under TSR) was similar, with a game every issue, but it focused on science-fiction and fantasy. *Moves* magazine (1972–1981 under SPI, 1991–2000 under Decision Games, after which it moved toward eurogames) focused more on the actual play of the games than *Strategy & Tactics* did.

Since SPI, *Strategy & Tactics* has continued under a number of publishers. TSR kept the torch alive from #91 (Winter 1983) to #111 (1987) and then sold rights to 3W (World Wide Wargames). 3W published from #112 (June 1987) to #139 (1990). After 3W's Keith Poulter got out of the business, *Strategy & Tactics* was sold to Decision Games. Their first issue was #140 (February 1991). They continue to publish the magazine to this day, though now under the imprint of their sister company, Strategy & Tactics Press.

As of this writing, *Strategy & Tactics* is approaching #290. It continues to publish a game every issue, but since #176 (September/October 1995), they have also offered a cheaper, newsstand version without the game. Decision Games reports that the non-game version now exceeds the main version in sales.

In its early days SPI was known for the lower quality of their games, which were often sold in envelopes—as were wargames sold by *everyone* except Avalon Hill at that time. However, this began to change as the company's success mounted—largely led by SPI co-founder Redmond Simonsen.

If these histories focused more on wargames, Simonsen would deserve an entire chapter all his own. He was the creator who really made SPI into something unique. Simonsen's biggest contribution was that he understood the need for graphical display of information; these ideas about graphical design and display influenced the entire wargaming field and continue to affect roleplaying game and board game design today. If you play a *Warhammer Third Edition* or a *Settlers of Catan* that simply summarizes complex information for players using clever components, you've felt the influence of Simonsen. He is also credited with coining the term "game designer."

By 1980, when wargaming was at its height, SPI actually surpassed Avalon Hill in both wargaming production and sales (though Avalon Hill remained a larger company thanks to sales of sports games and other items). It was posting $2 million dollars a year in sales.

In the meantime, SPI was also expanding into other fields.

Fantasy and Roleplaying Games: 1973—1982

At the same time as Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax were turning man-to-man fantasy wargames into roleplaying games, James Dunnigan was working on a modern man-to-man wargame called *Sniper!* (1973) If Dunnigan walked down the same paths of individualizing characters as Gygax and Arneson did, the first RPG could have been a modern military game rather than a game of fantasy dungeon-delving.

Instead, SPI was one of many companies who watched from the sidelines as roleplaying burst onto the scene. Smaller and less successful wargame companies quickly moved into roleplaying games, but like Avalon Hill, SPI increasingly had an established, successful business, and therefore no reason to change their business model.

However, SPI *did* test the waters of another emerging hobbyist industry: science-fiction and fantasy board games. By 1974, there were just a few entrants into the category. Even notables like GDW's *Triplanetary* (1973) and Lou Zocchi's *Alien Space Battle Manual* (1973) were very small press. When SPI published Redmond Simonsen's *StarForce* (1974), it became a bestseller and more importantly the first truly commercial science-fiction board game. Two more games followed, forming a trilogy: Irad Hardy's *Outreach* (1976) and Tom Walczyk's tactical-level *StarSoldier* (1977). These games were just the first of many

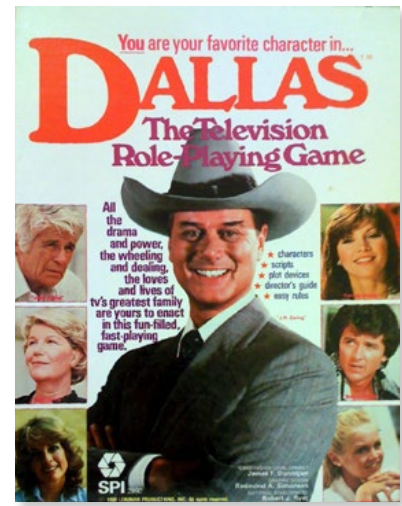
science-fiction and fantasy games that SPI published, the most notable of which was *War of the Ring* (1977)—a massive wargame licensed by Tolkien Enterprises that depicted the material actually at the heart of the entire fantasy explosion of the '60s and '70s, *The Lord of the Rings*. SPI also published a science-fiction companion to *Strategy & Tactics* called *Ares* (1980–1982).

SPI slowly edged into the actual roleplaying field with Eric Goldberg's *Commando* (1979), another man-to-man tactical combat game, but this one featuring roleplaying nuances, such as character creation and skills. Some consider it the first military RPG, but with its board game play, it really fell more toward the wargaming side of things—which would make the first actual military RPG Timeline's *The Morrow Project* (1980). However you define it, SPI was way out in front of the military RPG trend of the '80s.

The next year SPI put out Dunnigan's *Dallas: The Television Role-Playing Game* (1980), another borderline roleplaying game, this one featuring card play. It was massively overprinted—with preorders of 20,000 units rumored—and it didn't sell anywhere near expectations. It's often been counted as the first licensed roleplaying game ever, but that's because Heritage Models' smaller-press *Star Trek: Adventure Gaming in the Final Frontier* (1978) is usually forgotten.

SPI's biggest roleplaying game—perhaps its first true roleplaying game—was *DragonQuest* (1980), another Goldberg design. It was originally named "Dragonslayer," but a conflict with a trademark from Martian Metals caused the name to be changed. *DragonQuest* was a very tactical roleplaying game, again highlighting SPI's strengths. There was also little else in the field with the same focus, with Metagaming's *The Fantasy Trip* (1980) being one of the few exceptions.

Combat was laid out on a precise grid, with spells and other combat effects having very specific, tactical results. The result was one of the best examples of a roleplaying game built using wargame-style tactics. The strength of the combat system was shown by SPI's release of a board game using the same mechanics called *Arena of Death* (1980). However, there was some awkwardness in the combat system that wouldn't be entirely addressed for several years.



DragonQuest was the only SPI RPG that was really supported, with a handful of adventures (1981), and some Judges Guild supplements (1982). The supplements were by a who's who of the industry—including

Paul Jaquays, Rudy Kraft, and David Ritchie—but not by Eric Goldberg, who left SPI shortly after the release of his game. A world-generation system by Steve Jackson was announced multiple times, but sadly never appeared.



SPI's final RPG was John H. Butterfield's *Universe* (1981), a science-fiction game that was released at Pacific Origins 1981—a con notable mainly for its poor sales. *Universe* was generally considered a fine game with a poorly described background. The end result wasn't notable enough to take sales away from industry leader *Traveller* (1977) or even *Space Opera* (1980).

In late 1981, Gerry Klug took over roleplaying development. Employees were by then leaving the company, for reasons that we'll see. This could have led to a renaissance of roleplaying at SPI, as Klug had plans for lots of supplements for both *DragonQuest* and *Universe* and was even talking about a new espionage RPG—but none of that would come about at SPI. Klug would instead have to wait a few years for his chance to shine.

The last SPI RPGs ended up being second editions of *DragonQuest* (1982) and *Universe* (1982), which were licensed to Bantam Books. The first editions of both games had been published as boxed sets, common in the industry at the time. The second editions were instead single-volume books, which Bantam distributed into book stores—making them some of the earliest mass-marketed roleplaying games, though TSR was already there, beginning with *Deities & Demigods* (1980). The original plan was for Bantam to print 50,000 copies of each, which was a very large print run even at the time. It might have generated a lot of new customers for SPI, but the publications were too late to make any difference.

SPI had some very talented game designers, and if they continued in the roleplaying field, they might have had a larger impact on it, but by 1980 SPI was facing serious problems that would ultimately make this impossible.

The End of SPI: 1980—1982

By 1980 SPI was hitting a massive cash crunch.

The biggest problem was that the US economy was experiencing terrible stagflation (stagnant inflation) during the late '70s. Though SPI was earning $2

million in 1980, which was the same amount of money it had been earning back in 1975, representing a one-third loss in revenues over that inflationary period.

Two conflicting reasons are offered by SPI staff to further explain what happened to the company:

One explanation suggests a big push into retail stores hurt SPI, because bigger retailers had longer turnarounds on their payments, sometimes extending a 30-day due date to 180 days, and hurting cash flow. This was seen as a serious but failed attempt to expand the company into new markets.

(The case against this theory states that the push came in 1976–1977, and was too early to be the cause of the 1980 cash crunch.)

Another explanation suggests that it was the lack of business acumen at SPI that hurt the company. This was because it was a company being run by gamers for gamers—a pretty frequent event in the early days of the hobbyist industry. When VP of Marketing & Operations Howie Barasch left in the late '70s and was not replaced, the end was inevitable, bolstered by bad business decisions such as selling "capsule" games under cost.

(The case against this theory states that SPI was always run as a very tight, professional ship, and that growing the company from nothing to a very successful business proved that.)

Whatever the case, in 1980 James Dunnigan was forced out of SPI due to the worsening financial situation. When he resigned, he said that it was due to "general dissatisfaction and profound differences of opinion." By this point SPI was approximately half-a-million dollars in debt. Chris Wagner, the former publisher of *Strategy & Tactics*, took over as President.

Unfortunately, things continued to worsen. SPI was forced to sell five of their games to Avalon Hill, including the popular *Freedom in the Galaxy* (1979)—written by the authors of *War of the Ring* and *Universe*. Avalon Hill was considering a bailout of SPI, but in the end they only made an offer for most of SPI's games, which was refused. Heritage Models may have made a bid as well, but if so, it didn't go anywhere.

In 1981, word started to get around the industry that SPI was losing money. Meanwhile, staff casualties started to pile up. David Ritchie was gone by spring and Bruce Shelley— who had joined SPI after founding ICE—left by the end of the year. Things came to a head during the Christmas season—often one of the company's best sales times. This year was different, and Wagner was forced to borrow approximately $360,000 from a group of three venture capitalists.

Fortunately (perhaps) SPI was still talking with one other publisher: TSR, the young company that had tipped the whole wargame industry on its head. In 1982

TSR agreed to a loan of $425,000 for SPI— most of which apparently went to repay the venture capitalists. The debt was secured against SPI's intellectual property.

Two weeks later TSR suddenly called in their debt. SPI, of course, had no way to pay it back. TSR essentially foreclosed on the company, announcing on March 31, 1982, that they had "initiated a legal and economic chain of events" to buy SPI. Shortly thereafter, as they came to better understand SPI's debt-ridden situation, TSR clarified that they had inherited SPI's assets, but not its debts.

After TSR: 1982

Unfortunately, by that statement, TSR essentially killed SPI. They were unable to retrieve the plates to print many of SPI's wargames because printers that were owed money refused to release them. TSR didn't even honor lifetime subscriptions to *Strategy & Tactics*, which resulted in angry customers. This was all made worse by the declining wargame market. In November 1981, prior to the purchase, *S&T* had a circulation of 30,000. By November 1983, circulation plummeted to 17,000 and would continue to drop from there.

> *"Who killed wargaming? You tell me. The industry's best customers, the most avid wargamers in the world, were collectively told to piss off. How many never bought a wargame again?"*
>
> –Greg Costikyan, "A Farewell to Hexes," costik.com (1996)

TSR did very little with SPI's roleplaying games. *Ares Magazine #12* (1982), which was prepared by SPI and published by TSR, included a game called "Star Traders," which was for use with *Universe*; it was the last support for that game system. *DragonQuest* was mostly ignored until TSR published a third edition (1989), mainly to secure the trademark. This was the edition of the game that polished the combat system, helping it realize its full potential; unfortunately it was never seen again.



As TSR turned further away from SPI's origins, *Ares* magazine soon became an Ares section in *Dragon* magazine. However, it didn't focus on the SPI RPGs, but instead became a place to talk about TSR's own science-fiction games, such as *Gamma World* and *Star Frontiers*.

TSR used the SPI brand for wargames throughout the '80s, but it slowly faded away because TSR really didn't know what to do with a wargame company, especially not when its industry was generally declining. SPI's backlist was eventually sold to Decision Games.

Part of the reason that TSR didn't know what to do with SPI was that they lost most of the staff. TSR initially kept SPI's New York office open, but just seven days after TSR announced the acquisition of SPI, eight staff members jumped ship, forming a new company called Victory Games, which was a subsidiary of Avalon Hill. They'd go on to publish Gerry Klug's espionage RPG, *James Bond 007* (1983), more fully detailed in Avalon Hill's history. Redmond Simonsen was fired from TSR just a month later, on May 3, 1982, and over the next several months the rest of the SPI staff slowly faded away.

Two other SPI regulars, Greg Costikyan and Eric Goldberg, would go on to much greater success in the roleplaying field at another company, West End Games—the subject of yet another history.

As for SPI, its passing truly marked the end of an era. Where once wargames ruled the hobbyist game scene, now roleplaying games took over. More than anything, the TSR purchase of SPI represented the passing of this torch.

What to Read Next

- For wargame-related companies that got into roleplaying after SPI, read ***Task Force Games***, ***Yaquinto Publications***, ***Columbia Games***, and ***West End Games***.
- For a team of ex-SPI designers creating *James Bond 007*, read ***Avalon Hill***.
- For the future of Greg Costikyan and Eric Goldberg, read ***West End Games***

In Other Eras

- For a wargame and RPG publisher that emerged in large part thanks to *Strategy & Tactics*, read ***Gamescience*** *['70s]*.
- For more on the emergence of the science-fiction & fantasy board game industry, read ***Metagaming Concepts*** *['70s]*.
- For wargame-related companies that got into roleplaying before SPI, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*, ***GDW*** *['70s]*, ***Metagaming Concepts*** *['70s]*, *and* ***Heritage Models*** *['70s]*.
- For SPI's savior/executioner, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.

Or read onward to the next wargame publisher to dip its toe into RPG waters, ***Task Force Games***.

Task Force Games: 1978–1996

Though Task Force Games was primarily a publisher of wargames—particularly Star Fleet Battles*—they've still touched upon the RPG industry from time to time.*

Prelude to a Task Force: 1973–1977

The story of Task Force Games begins with Stephen Cole. In 1973, while a student at Texas Tech, he created a company called JP Publications that published *JagdPanther* (1973–1976)—a magazine full of small games as well as scenarios and variants for existing games. A few years later, Allen Eldridge—who Cole met at a local game club in Amarillo, Texas—joined Cole at JP.



1980: Dungeon Tiles

Besides the magazine, JP also published several small press games. They were mostly historical wargames, such as *Poland*, *1939* (1976). Though they didn't publish any roleplaying games, JP did produce one science-fiction offering, *Starfire* (1976)—a one-page set of starship combat rules that appeared under spin-off brand Eagle Games Ltd.

Cole and Eldridge decided to close down JP in November of 1976 and completed that task by the next spring.

Setting Up a Task Force: 1978—1979

Two years later, in the fall of 1978, Cole and Eldridge decided to get back into the hobbyist industry with a second company: Task Force Games. By this time, Metagaming Concepts had created a new model for hobbyist game publication: the MicroGame, a small and cheap product that still offered a full gaming experience. Task Force decided to follow in MetaGaming's footsteps by producing a "Pocket Games" line. It was the second line of fantasy and science-fiction microgames, preceded only by Metagaming's own.

Task Force had decided to publish Pocket Games because of the low investment the enterprise required. It was one of several canny business decisions that Cole and Eldridge made. They also decided to sell only to wholesalers and retailers—not to individuals. They did this largely to reduce their workload, but it was a very unusual decision in the '70s when most hobbyist companies sold direct to consumers, often at a discount. It was also a decision that proved a boon for Task Force in their relations with retailers. Cole would later say that more stores carried the Task Force line because of this stance—which kept the company from competing with the stores.

The Pocket Games line kicked off with four science-fiction releases, all designed by Stephen Cole: *Starfire* (1979), *Asteroid Zero-Four* (1979), *Cerberus* (1979), and *Star Fleet Battles* (1979). The four were packaged together in an attractive cardboard display for use by retailers. Of those games, two were particularly notable. *Starfire* was an expansion of the game previously produced by JP Publications, but it was *Star Fleet Battles* that would make a name for Task Force Games.

Cole had first conceived of *Star Fleet Battles* back in 1975. At the time, he'd been playing a lot of Avalon Hill's *Jutland* (1967) and watching reruns of the original *Star Trek* (1966–1969). One day those two ideas came together, and Cole was suddenly writing up stats for Klingon and Federation starships. The game was completed by November 1976, but because of the decision to close JP Publications, it didn't see print at the time.

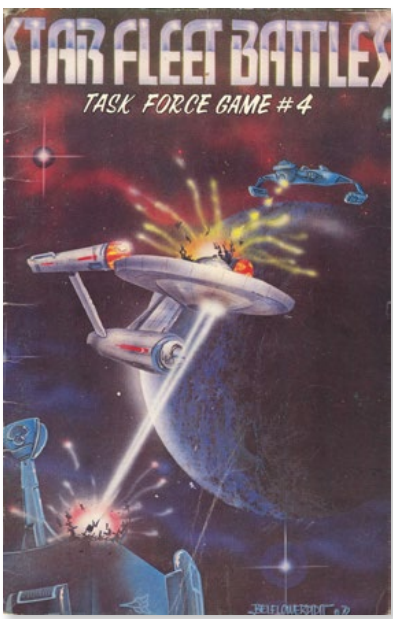
> *"We have [acquired forty wholesalers] by two basic means; treating distributors right and mass-marketing games. Both of these policies give us decisive edges in the race to become one of the 'top five or six.'"*
>
> –Stephen Cole, "Company Report: Task Force Games," *The Space Gamer #28* (May/June 1980)

Even after forming Task Force, Cole and Eldridge still faced one obstacle before they could release *Star Fleet Battles*: they needed a license. Getting a *Star Trek* license back in 1979 wasn't as daunting as that same task would be today, but Cole had a different "in." He knew that Lou Zocchi, an old friend, designed and published a set of miniatures rules called the *Star Fleet Battle Manual* (1977). It'd been licensed from a gentleman called Franz Joseph—the author and technical designer behind the *Star Trek Star Fleet Technical Manual* (1975). Though Joseph was initially very reluctant about licensing Task Force because of the violence implicit in a starship combat game, Cole eventually convinced him, and so *Star Fleet Battles* came to be.

The *Star Fleet Battles* Pocket Game was quite successful. Though Task Force had planned to release some Pocket Games supplements for the system, they decided to do something bigger when they saw how well-received the game was. After Eldridge got a line on inexpensive boxes, Task Force rereleased *Star Fleet Battles* in a regular-sized and boxed second edition (1979).

That left a gap in Task Force's four-game display, which Task Force filled with Cole's *Valkenburg Castle* (1979). It was the company's first fantasy release, and also a release that was (slightly) pushing them toward roleplaying—in the same way that *Chainmail* (1971) had pushed Gary Gygax in years previous.

Before we leave behind Task Force's initial releases, we should touch briefly upon their relatively unique *Star Fleet* license, which has really defined the feel of what has since become known as the "Star Fleet Universe." Under the terms of the license, Task Force can write about the races of *Star Trek*—like the Orions and the Gorn—but not specific characters—like Kirk and Spock.



The *Star Fleet* Universe is also very much a product of its time. It uses the peoples of the original *Star Trek* series and a few elements from the animated *Star Trek* series (1973–1974), such as Larry Niven's Kzinti, but nothing later. As a result, since 1980 the *Star Fleet* Universe and the *Star Trek* Universe have steadily diverged—as movies and new *Star Trek* TV shows began to appear, while Task Force simultaneously developed the *Star Fleet* Universe setting with races and governments all their own.

Though Task Force later signed a contract directly with Paramount, their universe today still reflects its 1979 *Star Fleet* origins.

> *"I suppose the biggest hole in the game section is the speed of light. We considered and developed two different game systems. One of them had the speed of light correct, and the other one was able to match the few combat incidents shown on the shows."*
>
> –Stephen Cole, "Retrospect: *Star Fleet Battles*," *The Space Gamer #42* (August 1981)

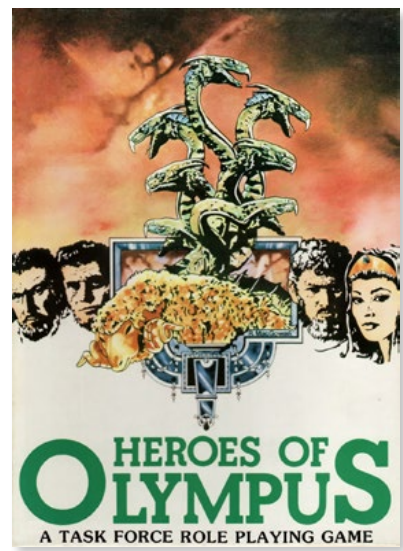
Two of Task Force's first four games—*Starfire* and *Star Fleet Battles*—are still notable to the hobbyist industry over 30 years later, but thus far all of this is prelude to Task Force's entry into the RPG field.

Pseudo-RPGs: 1980—1985

Task Force technically entered the RPG industry in 1980 with their production of *Dungeon Tiles* (1980). It was a set of cardstock tiles that could be used to lay out dungeons on a tabletop. It was preceded by Games Workshop's *Dungeon Floorplans* (1979), but was one of the earlier and more attractive accessories of its sort available to the US market.

In the years that followed, Task Force produced a number of pseudo-RPGs, of the sort that were also appearing at other wargaming companies like Metagaming and SPI.

The first was *Heroes of Olympus* (1981), by Dennis Sustare, who is probably best known for FGU's *Bunnies & Burrows* (1976). *Heroes* is based on Greek mythology, and players either take on the roles of Argonauts in Jason's crew or make their own heroes using point-based character creation. The game includes no less than two tactical combat systems for melee and a naval combat system. It was an attempt to bring together elements from roleplaying games, board games, *and* wargames. Nonetheless, it was probably as much a roleplaying game as other RPGs from the same time period, such as SPI's *DragonQuest* (1980) and





Metagaming's *The Fantasy Trip* (1977–1980). Though only supported by a pair of magazine articles, *Heroes of Olympus* did earn a second edition (1983).

Task Force's second pseudo-RPG—*Supervillains* (1982)—pushed further toward the board game side of things. Though players did have individual characters, combat was tactical and chit-based. The basic and intermediate rules only supported a simple combat scenario. Roleplaying wasn't introduced until the advanced rules, and *Different Worlds* called the results "a sort of supervillain *Diplomacy*."

Task Force wouldn't publish a more standard RPG for a few years. In the meantime, things were changing at the company. The Pocket Games line only lasted through 1983, at which time Task Force dropped it because it wasn't making enough money. The company still continued with board games, but moved them to the larger boxes that they premiered back in 1979.

The Fiction of Starfire

Though *Starfire* was always overshadowed by *Star Fleet Battles* at Task Force Games, it was nonetheless a widely successful game system, one that kicked off the career of two even more successful authors: Stephen White and David Weber.

Both Weber and White got their start writing short stories set in the *Starfire* universe for Task Force Games' *Nexus Magazine*. When Task Force cancelled the periodical in 1988, the two still had plenty of ideas and so they decided to write a *Starfire* novel together–a first for both of them. The result was *Insurrection* (1990), the beginning of a tetralogy that continued through their last collaboration, *The Shiva Operation* (2002)–which made the New York Times bestseller list–and *Exodus* (2007), written by Stephen White and Shirley Meier.

Both authors have also written widely beyond the *Starfire* universe, with David Weber's *Honor Harrington* series (1993-Present) being the most well-known result.

During Task Force Games' last years, the company released two controversial *Starfire* supplements–*First Contact* (1993) and *Alkeda Dawn* (1994)–that went beyond the history of the novels. They're now widely known as the "non-Weber' *Starfire* supplement. Other than those two publications, the novels by Weber and White have been the official background of the *Starfire* universe since their publication.

By that time, it was obvious that the company's two star games were *Starfire*, which received two expansions, and *Star Fleet Battles*, which received three. Going forward, *Star Fleet Battles* and its spin-off games—like the larger-scale wargame *Federation & Empire* (1986)—would largely define the company.

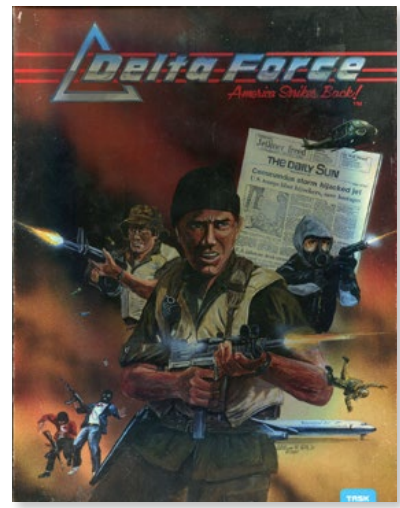
Meanwhile, the founders of Task Force Games came to a parting of ways. In 1983, as the Pocket Games line came to end, Stephen Cole left Task Force to form a new company, the Amarillo Design Bureau, his design house for future *Star Fleet Battles* products. Eldridge, meanwhile, stayed with Task Force proper. Amarillo Design Bureau and Task Force Games would continue working together for the rest of Task Force's life—even after Elridge's departure, which we're fast approaching.

Forces & Catalysts, Leading to Change: 1985—1988

It took until 1985 for Task Force Games to fully invest in roleplaying games. If we were to use that date instead of 1980 for their entry to the RPG market, we'd see how late their commitment really was. *Every* other notable wargame manufacturer that ended up in the roleplaying field had already made that move by 1985, resulting in products that ran the gamut from SPI's *DragonQuest* (1980) through Avalon Hill's *James Bond 007* (1983) to West End Games' *Paranoia* (1984). Of course, the fact that Task Force concentrated on their own board games for so long suggests how strong *Star Fleet Battles* was—even in a wargame market that was majorly contracting in the face of not just roleplaying games, but now computer games as well.

When Task Force *did* dive into the RPG market, they did so whole-heartedly, with three different product lines releasing in just a few years.

Their first RPG was *Delta Force: America Strikes Back!* (1986), which appeared right at the start of 1986. It was one of a glut of military games published that year, following GDW's very successful release of *Twilight: 2000* (1984). William H. Keith Jr., the game's author, was no stranger to military games. He previously produced the WWII game *Behind Enemy Lines* (1982) for FASA and was simultaneously illustrating *Freedom Fighters* (1986), a game that his brother J. Andrew Keith was creating for FGU.

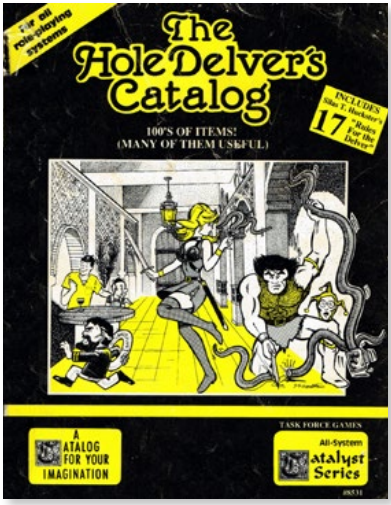


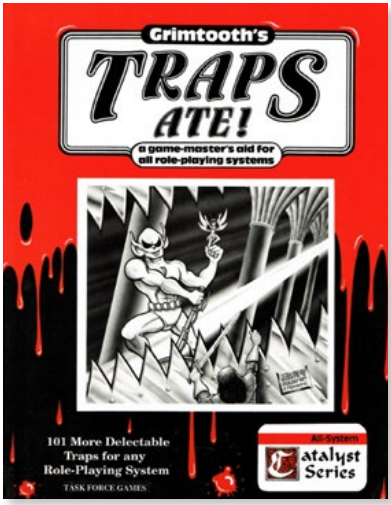
Given Keith's origins in the industry, it was no surprise that *Delta Force* looked something like *Traveller* (1977), with d6-derived characteristics and lots of skills. Beyond that, the game's best feature was its focus on small-unit tactics.

Delta Force was also notable because it was a counter-terrorism game, which was controversial in the mid-'80s. *Delta Force* somewhat blithely ignored the issue by presenting the war against terrorism in a stark black & white contrast not yet fully embraced by the rest of the world.

It seems unlikely that such nuances would be considered in a post-9/11 world.

> *"Of course no one would argue that the killing of innocents is criminal, but is it sometimes necessary (as in the bombing of civilian targets by the Allies in World War II)? And are all terrorists 'barbarians'?"*
>
> –*Delta Force* Review, *Different Worlds #47* (Fall 1987)





Delta Force was only lightly supported through 1987 with a handful of supplements and some articles in Task Force Games' *Nexus Magazine* (1982–1988). Task Force Games probably chose a good time to end the game line, as TSR soon after jumped into the exact same space with their anti-terrorist *Commando* supplement (1988) for *Top Secret/S.I.* (1987).

Task Force's second RPG line had its origins in Flying Buffalo's flirtation with bankruptcy from 1983–1985. As a result of those problems, Flying Buffalo licensed out some of its less successful lines. Task Force picked up Flying Buffalo's "Catalyst" line of generic FRP supplements.

The deal was probably beneficial to both publishers at the time. Flying Buffalo continued with the design and development of products like *Grimtooth's Traps Four* (1986) and *The Hole Delver's Catalog* (1987) while Task Force Games—who was in a better position financially—published them. The deal would continue through the

production of *Grimtooth's Traps Ate* (1989) and *Lejentia Campaign Book One: Skully's Harbor* (1989), after which Flying Buffalo reclaimed their license.

In the meantime, Task Force managed to create a line of generic FRP supplements that was all their own. The *Central Casting* line kicked off with Paul Jaquays' *Central Casting: Heroes of Legend* (1988), a book full of random tables that let players generate backgrounds for their characters. It appeared in a simpler form as "The Fantasy Role-Playing Previous History System" in *The Dungeoneer #9* (January/February 1979) and had been expanded by Jaquays for Flying Buffalo's Catalyst line. However, Task Force was able to publish the book without the Catalyst brand or the Flying Buffalo connection—which would allow them to maintain it as their sole RPG line in the years ahead.

To Van Nuys & Back Again: 1988—1993

As we've seen, things were definitely changing for Task Force around 1988. Though *Star Fleet Battles* of course continued on strongly, many of the company's other lines were ending. *Delta Force* completed its run in 1987, then *Nexus Magazine* closed up shop after its 18th and final issue (January 1988). The next year, Flying Buffalo was even able to get back rights to the Catalyst line.

The reason for many of these changes was simple: in April 1988, Allen Eldridge sold Task Force Games to New World Computing—to that point known for the production of the computer roleplaying game *Might and Magic Book One* (1986). Task Force was moved out to Van Nuys California, where John Olsen took over as president.

The purchase created some interesting shared opportunities. Perhaps most notably, Task Force's partner Flying Buffalo had two of their properties turned into computer games: *Nuclear War* (1989) and *Tunnels & Trolls: Crusaders of Khazan* (1990). Simultaneously, when New World put out the turn-based strategy game, *King's Bounty* (1990)—a precursor of the bestselling *Heroes of Might & Magic* series (1995-Present)—Task Force complemented it with a *King's Bounty* board game (1991).



However, that synergy wasn't enough for New World Computing. Just two years later, in April 1990, they sold Task Force Games to president John Olsen.

Despite all these changes, Stephen Cole's Amarillo Design Bureau stayed closely linked with Task Force. They even saw some benefit from the purchase when they got to (briefly) outsource the publication and distribution of the Task Force newsletter, *Starletter*, to Van Nuys. Now, with Task Force's computer connection ended, Olsen moved the company back to Amarillo, to better coordinate with Cole.

Under Olsen, Task Force returned its emphasis to the *Star Fleet* Universe, including *Star Fleet Battles* and a growing series of complementary games. His initial focus was on a new "doomsday" (or fourth) edition of the game, which kicked off with Cole's *Star Fleet Battles Captain's Edition Basic Set* (1990). It was a strong set of rules that continues to be used as the foundation of the game to this day.

As a result of this changed focus, Task Force Games stepped back from their late '80s dalliance with RPGs. They did publish a few more of Paul Jaquays *Central Casting* character books (1991) and even tried to expand the line into a franchise with Robert Sassone's *Central Casting: Dungeons* (1993)—a random dungeon generation book—but by the time the latter was published, the company had decided to dramatically change what they were producing for the roleplaying market.

Remember the *Prime Directive:* 1993—2004

Cole and Eldridge had been talking about the possibility of a *Star Fleet* Universe RPG since the early '80s; however it wasn't until the Olsen era of Task Force Games that the possibility was realized. It was, as it happens, a particularly good time to produce a *Star Trek*-influenced RPG, because FASA had lost their *Star Trek* license in 1989 and it'd be years before Last Unicorn Games produced the next official *Star Trek* game.

Task Force's *Prime Directive: The Star Fleet Universe Role-playing Game* (1993) was primarily the work of Mark Costello—a lead game designer for Task Force from 1992–1994—and Timothy Olsen. That game and its supplements remain the duo's only work in the RPG industry.

The game system received indifferent reviews. Some players hoping for a true *Star Trek* game didn't like either the differences of the *Star Fleet* Universe or its increased militarism. However, *Prime Directive* was the only *Star Trek* games of the mid-'90s, *and* it offered the unique opportunity to roleplay in the *Star Fleet* Universe, so it got some notice. It was supported by a handful of supplements through 1995.

By 1995, however, things were changing again, and for the worse. In an increasingly competitive market ravaged by the boom and bust of CCGs, Task

Mini-History

Amarillo Design Bureau: 1983-Present

The Amarillo Design Bureau (ADB) came into existence in 1983 when Stephen Cole left Task Force Games. For the next 16 years, the company was exactly what its name suggests: a design bureau that produced content for publication by Task Force. Over that period, Cole offered heavy support for *Star Fleet Battles*, which was long Task Force's most successful game.

In 1999, however, this equation changed. Task Force Games had been unable to produce any new products for three years, and Cole decided to step in to get *Star Fleet Battles* back on track. He incorporated Amarillo Design Bureau and took over publication of the *Star Fleet* Universe. Since that time, ADB has gotten *Star Fleet Battles* back into print and continued to supplement it. The company has also published a variety of closely related games set in the same *Star Fleet* Universe. Meanwhile, ADB has also pushed into the roleplaying industry, carrying on a line that Task Force Games started in their final years.

When Task Force Games published *Prime Directive* (1993), they created their own game system for roleplaying in the *Star Fleet* Universe. However, Cole had a different plan for *Prime Directive*: instead of supporting Task Force's game or creating a new game system, he instead decided to take advantage of existing game systems that could be licensed–an idea no doubt spawned by the industry's heavy focus on the d20 Trademark License and the OGL in the early '00s.

To date, Task Force has produced four variations of their "*Prime Directive*" game: *GURPS Prime Directive* for third edition *GURPS* (2002), *GURPS Prime Directive* for fourth edition *GURPS* (2004), *Prime Directive d20* (2005), and *Prime Directive Modern Edition* (2008) for *d20 Modern*. Ironically, the first of those *Prime Directive* RPGs was published the same year that Decipher published the third *Star Trek* RPG, beginning with the *Star Trek Roleplaying Game Player's Guide* (2002). History now marks the success of the two lines.

ADB has also published a handful of *Prime Directive* sourcebooks, from *Prime Module Alpha* (2003)–which added new rules to the GURPs system–to supplements for the Klingons, Romulans, and the Federation that have been released for each of *Prime Directive*'s active game systems. Cole says that he'd love to get more RPG products out, but production is ultimately slowed by his unfamiliarity with the medium. To address that problem, he's recently brought in editor Jean Sexton, who is now managing the line.

Going forward, it looks like the *Prime Directive* series will be a strong complement to ADB's top-selling *Star Fleet Battles* game, and that ADB will remain adjunct to the roleplaying industry, just like Task Force did before them.

Force was facing growing cash flow problems that would eventually drive them out of business.

We've already seen that 1995 was the last year of *Prime Directive* support. Somewhat surprisingly, Task Force produced a massively expanded version of *Central Casting: Heroes of Legend* (1995) before their Central Casting products ended as well. Then, the next year, Task Force published its last *Star Fleet Battles* products from Amarillo Design Bureau.

Task Force didn't publish again after 1996, though they continued selling products for a number of years. Meanwhile, they slowly divested themselves of their most valuable properties. They sold the *Starfire* line to Starfire Design Studio in 1997—who thereafter published a fourth edition as *Galactic Starfire* (2000), and continues to support the game online to this day. Meanwhile, Stephen Cole took over *Star Fleet Battles* in 1999, turning Amarillo Design Bureau into a corporation in the process.

By 2000, Task Force Games was a mere shell of a company, primarily selling old Central Casting books through a website, which continued through 2004.

Today, Task Force Games seems to be entirely gone from the industry. Though it took some products like Central Casting and the company's early Pocket Games with it, thanks to those sales of 1997 and 1999, Task Force's legacy lives on.

What to Read Next

- For contemporary publishers of *Star Trek*-related games, read ***FASA*** and (to a lesser extent) ***West End Games***.
- For the military RPG craze of the '80s, read ***Leading Edge Games***, including the mini-history of ***Timeline***.

In Other Eras

- For the origins of the MicroGame, read ***Metagaming Concepts*** *['70s]*.
- For more on the *Star Fleet* license and Lou Zocchi, read ***Gamescience*** *['70s]*.
- For more on Dennis Sustare, read about *Bunnies & Burrows* in ***FGU*** *['70s]* and *Swordbearer* in ***Heritage Models*** *['70s]*.
- For the game that caused a glut of military RPGs, read about *Twilight: 2000* in ***GDW*** *['70s]*.
- For Task Force's partner in Catalyst, read ***Flying Buffalo*** *['70s]*.
- For a later *Star Trek* RPG, read ***Last Unicorn Games*** *['90s]*.

Or read onward to learn about publishing chameleon, ***Steve Jackson Games***.

Steve Jackson Games: 1980–Present

Though Steve Jackson Games is best known in the roleplaying industry for GURPS, *it has published a wide variety of board games, card games, magazines, and even a few different RPGs throughout its history.*

Before Steve Jackson Games: 1977–1980

Steve Jackson, soon to be the founder of Steve Jackson Games, got his start in the gaming field three years previous, in 1977. Working as a freelance game designer he created several MicroGames for Metagaming Concepts, including: *Ogre* (1977), *G.E.V.* (1978), *Melee* (1977), and *Wizard* (1979). The last two grew into a full RPG: *The Fantasy Trip* (1980).



The Space Gamer #27

However—as is described more completely in the history of Metagaming—in the lead-up to *The Fantasy Trip*'s publication, Jackson grew unhappy with his lack of control over the editing, marketing, and publication of the game. Jackson therefore ended his freelance relationship with Metagaming.

By this point, Jackson had already left the UT Law School to pursue his career in game design. He wasn't ready to return to the field of law just because of a disagreement with his first publisher. He made an offer to purchase Metagaming's magazine, *The Space Gamer*, which by then had published 26 issues (1975–1980). It was traditionally a wargaming magazine and a house organ—mostly focused on Metagaming's MicroGames with some minor attention paid to RPGs. It had also been a money loser, leading Howard Thompson of Metagaming to sell.

With *The Space Gamer* now in hand, Jackson looked seriously at how to make it profitable. *The Space Gamer #27* (March/April 1980) increased the cover price from $1.50 to $2.00, decreased the paper quality to pulp, and started accepting advertisements for the first time in the magazine's life. The magazine went monthly with *The Space Gamer #28* (May/June 1980), which was also the first issue with a new editor—Jackson's first employee, Forrest Johnson, also Jackson's first GM.

However, this was all just a first step. In *The Space Gamer #32* (October 1980), Jackson announced that he was founding a new company to publish his own game designs, resolving the issues of control that had forced him to leave Metagaming. To explain his thinking he quoted Randy Reed, formerly of Avalon Hill, who said that independent designers could produce better products than greedy publishers.

"[There is a basic conflict of interest between] quality-oriented designers and profit-oriented publishers. Both are vital to the hobby, but incompatible under the same roof. Only an independent designer can guarantee the eventual quality of his design."

–Randy Reed, quoted in "Where We're Going," *The Space Gamer #32* (October 1980)



Steve Jackson Games (SJG) was founded in October 1980. *The Space Gamer* would remain a separate company (under common ownership) until it fully joined Steve Jackson Games in 1982.

Early Board Games: 1980—1984

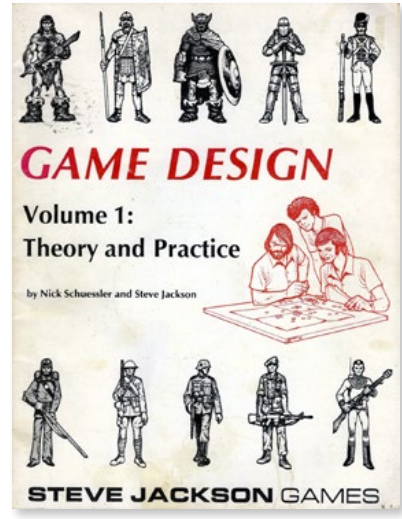
Most of Jackson's work for Metagaming was board game design. Even *The Fantasy Trip* had started out as a set of tactical combat games. It was no surprise that Steve Jackson Games got its start with board games as well. Though these products exist largely outside of this history of roleplaying, they were nonetheless critical for SJG's early evolution.

In October 1980 SJG published three wargames and a set of miniatures. The wargames—*Raid on Iran* (1980), *Kung Fu 2100* (1980), and *One-Page Bulge* (1980)—were all "minigames," designed in the same style as Metagaming's MicroGames. Each cost just $3 and shipped in a zip-lock bag. The miniatures were Denis Loubet's *Cardboard Heroes* (1980), a set of 40 full-color 25mm cardboard figures for use in fantasy roleplaying games.

Due to the then-recent Iran Hostage Crisis, *Raid on Iran* was the bestseller of the bunch.

One-Page Bulge, meanwhile, caused Jackson some problems. On October 15, 1980, Jackson received a letter from Howard Thompson of Metagaming claiming that *One-Page Bulge* was his property because Jackson had offered to sell it to him at an earlier time. A temporary restraining order put a halt to all of his Jackson's publications for about a week because they all contained ads for *One-Page Bulge*.

Jackson's attorney was able to get the order modified to allow the shipping of everything but *One-Page Bulge*, then on November 26, 1980, a judge dissolved the restraining order entirely—allowing for the sale of the disputed game. The lawsuit itself continued for the next year and soon came to also involve ownership of *Ogre* and *G.E.V.*, games which Jackson thought that he had purchased from Thompson—a fact Thompson disputed. Finally—on November 17, 1981—an agreement was signed which gave ownership of all three games to Steve Jackson.



Meanwhile SJG continued on with new publications. Several more *Cardboard Heroes* were produced by Denis Loubet, Paul Jaquays, and Jeff Dee. (In fact *Cardboard Heroes* continue to be available from Steve Jackson to this day.) Jackson also put out a more scholarly book called *Game Design Volume 1: Theory and Practice* (1981). It largely consisted of reprints from a series by Nick Schulessler and Steve Jackson in *The*

Space Gamer, though the pair had written a few new sections for the collection. Most of the focus was on wargames, but chapter 11 on "RPG Design" may have been the first of its sort.

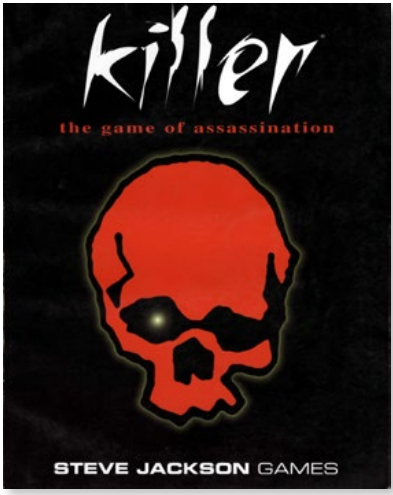
For the next few years, minigames continued to be an important focus at Steve Jackson Games, resulting in the publication of some of Jackson's most iconic and long-lived designs.

Car Wars (1981), a minigame of vehicular combat based on an original concept and design by Chad Irby, quickly became SJG's top seller. It was one of *Omni* magazine's 10 best games of 1981 and sold 100,000 units within three years. The game was heavily supplemented with additional minigame modules and later a magazine and adventure supplements. It would eventually become SJG's first "deluxe" board game, published in a full-sized gaming box (1985). Steve Jackson Games even formed the "American Autoduel Association" (the AADA) in 1983 to help coordinate tournaments. Though *The Space Gamer* got SJG its start, *Car Wars* built the company.

Illuminati (1983), a minigame of conspiratorial control, wasn't an immediate hit, but the game's secret societies and humorous conspiracies would slowly come to define SJG's corporate image, to the point where the game's eye-in-a-pyramid design became the company logo. A few different expansions for *Illuminati* were also released in the mid-'80s.

Meanwhile, *Ogre* and *G.E.V.* were produced in new editions (1982) by SJG and were supplemented by new releases like *Battlesuit* (1983).

SJG also published a few other games in these early years, including Steve Jackson's *Undead* (1981) and Allen Varney's *Necromancer* (1983). However, it was *Car Wars*, *Illuminati*, and the world of *Ogre* that defined the early Steve Jackson Games and which provided fertile grounds for exploitation for many years.



With that we'll leave Steve Jackson's board games behind for now, though SJG would continue to actively publish them—with considerable emphasis on *Car Wars*—into the early '90s.

Early RPGs: 1980—1983

Steve Jackson Games got its start with RPGs back in that premiere release of four publications. The fantasy-based *Cardboard Heroes* could be used in any fantasy RPG. This connection became even clearer when

SJG began producing licensed *Cardboard Heroes* for specific games like *Traveller* (1982) and *Villains & Vigilantes* (1982).

SJG's first actual roleplaying game—of a sort—was *Killer* (1981). This public-domain live-action roleplaying game was being played as early as the '70s at the University of Michigan and was spreading across college campuses in the '80s where it was variously called "KAOS," "Assassin," "The Assassination Game," "Paranoia," and "Victim."

In his rulebook Jackson created a standardized and professional version of the rules. It was the first mass-market publication of the Assassin rules, but more importantly it was the first mass-market publication of a LARP. As it turns out, *Killer* was one of the most heavily censored RPGs as well—as college campuses and conventions alike decided that they didn't like people running around with pretend weapons, and censoring RPGs was pretty popular in the '80s.

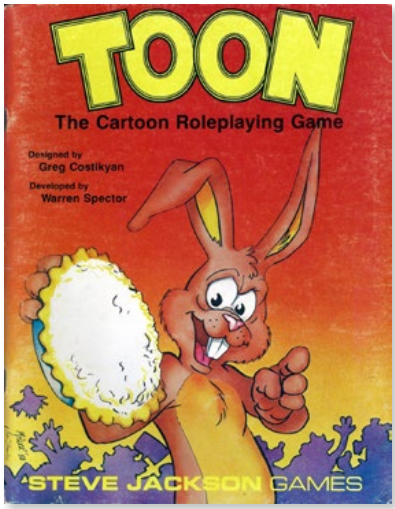
Autoduel Champions (1983), by Aaron Allston—who would later become a notable industry freelancer—was Jackson's second true roleplaying book. It crossed over two totally different game systems (Hero Games' *Champions* and SJG's *Car Wars*), in two different genres, published by two different companies. It was the first genre-bending book of its type in the industry (except, perhaps, for the science-fantasy elements found in many early *D&D* products, most notably TSR's *S3: Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* (1980)).

By 1983 Steve Jackson Games was involved in only a smattering of roleplaying designs—but that would change very soon.

Many Magazines: 1980—1984

In the early '80s, Steve Jackson's slow move toward roleplaying was also seen in its magazine production. *The Space Gamer* was expanding its wings to cover more than just wargames. Among the early Steve Jackson issues, *The Space Gamer #31* (September 1980) focused on computers, *The Space Gamer #32* (October 1980) on *Traveller*, *The Space Gamer #33* (November 1980) on play-by-mail (PBM) games, and *The Space Gamer #34* (December 1980) on miniatures. This trend of increasing levels of non-wargaming coverage continued through 1981. Then in 1982 SJG bought a wargaming magazine, *Fire & Movement*, from owner Baron Publishing, and that allowed almost all of the *Space Gamer* wargaming content to shift to the new magazine.

From *The Space Gamer #51* (May 1982) forward, the magazine came under new editor Aaron Allston and increasingly became a leading roleplaying magazine, full of copious reviews, company spotlights, and designers' notes on a variety of games. Two more editors followed at Steve Jackson Games: Christopher Frink with *The Space Gamer #66* (November/December 1983) and new hire Warren Spector with



The Space Gamer #70 (July/August 1984). Today the Steve Jackson issues of *The Space Gamer* remain one of the best snapshots of the early '80s game industry.

SJG also moved *Car Wars* material out of *The Space Gamer*. Its home was a new magazine, *Autoduel Quarterly* (1983), which had been created to support the AADA. The new mag was edited by *Car Wars* line editor and long-term employee Scott Haring—who would go on to work for SJG at five different times over the next 15 years.

But Steve Jackson Games still wasn't done with magazines. In 1984, *Space Gamer* (with the "The" now removed because editors and writers never knew how to use it) was split into a companion magazine—*Fantasy Gamer*.

> *"The article tended to get in the way, like untied laces on your shoe, and led to interesting mishandling of the language–was it The TSG Approach? The SG Approach? The Space Gamer approach? Now we can be sure."*
>
> –Aaron Allston, "Counter Intelligence," *The Space Gamer #63* (May/June 1983)

By the mid-'80s SJG was publishing four different magazines, an average of two a month. As we'll see, that was ultimately a rate that they could not support.

Toon: 1984—1986

That year also saw the publication of SJG's first complete roleplaying system, *Toon* (1984). It was a new RPG designed by SPI alumnus Greg Costikyan that allowed players to roleplay slapstick cartoon adventures.

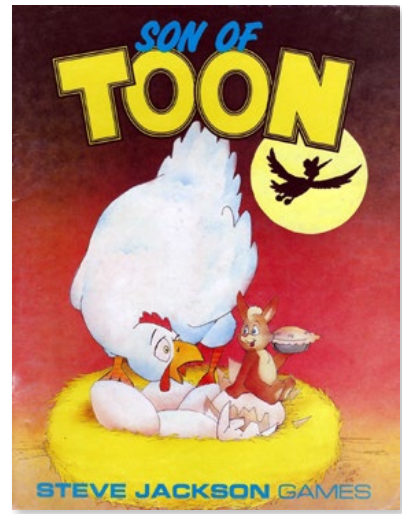
The idea had come from Jeff Dee (of *Villains & Vigilantes*) a few years earlier when he, Costikyan, and several other designers had been sitting around at Origins talking about genres without their own RPGs. Dee mentioned cartoons and everyone pretty much agreed that a game for them would be impossible to design. So a few years later Costikyan did. It had originally been intended as an article for *Fantasy Gamer* but Warren Spector—now editor-in-chief for SJG—liked it enough that he expanded it into a full game.

> *"For Jeff Dee, who thought he was kidding."*
>
> –Dedication in *Toon* (1984)

Though not as well-remembered as Costikyan's other RPG of 1984, West End Games' *Paranoia* (1984), *Toon* was equally groundbreaking. Like *Paranoia* it was one of the earliest "storytelling" RPGs, putting atmosphere and story first and characters second.

The rules worked hard to keep the game light, funny, and appropriate to cartoons. For example, the "50/50" rule said that whenever the gamemaster didn't know the answer to something, he should make a 50/50 yes/no die roll, a simple concept which kept the game rolling along. Characters couldn't die, just fall down—putting them out of play for three minutes—and this resulted in zanily crazy gameplay. The rules also encouraged the use of cartoon logic, with suggestions for things like "illogic logic" (where characters were allowed to do impossible things if they were too dumb to realize otherwise) and "cartoon coincidence."

The game system for *Toon* was a simple one, with point-based character creation and roll-under skill mechanics where two six-sided dice were rolled under a skill level. It was actually something like a vastly simplified *GURPS* (which we'll finally meet momentarily)—but in any case Costikyan said that the game system was largely "arbitrary." It was the theming behind the game that was all-important.



As with *Paranoia*, the biggest problem with *Toon* was that it didn't really encourage long-term campaign play. The third Toon supplement, *Son of Toon* (1986) tried to address this by introducing the "cartoon series," a concept described by author and staffer Allen Varney. These series remained true to cartoon logic, containing no actual continuity, just consistent characters, running gags, and recurring bad guys. *Son of Toon* was the final supplement for the game until an early '90s revival.

The Early Computer Days: 1981—1986

Another trend present at Steve Jackson Games from its foundation was an interest in the computer world. Jackson is a long-time technophile. This first showed up in Steve Jackson's *The Space Gamer*, which featured reviews of early computer RPGs like *Wizardry* (1981) and *Akalabeth* (1980)—the latter being Richard Garriott's first game. There was also a regular "Deus Ex Machina" computer column, and a couple of issues were dedicated entirely to computer games.

Magazine History

Space Gamer 1975—1990+

The Space Gamer was both one of the most long-lived magazines in the history of the gaming industry and one of the most variable over its lifetime(s).

It started out as a thin magazine (May 1975) from Metagaming intended to support the young science-fiction board gaming industry–and its own releases. The first 14 issues were digests and then the magazine became full-sized. However, Metagaming lost money on the magazine and so in 1980 was happy to sell it to former Metagaming game designer, Steve Jackson.

Jackson took over the magazine with #27 (March/April 1980) and eventually transferred the magazine to Steve Jackson Games with issue #51 (May 1982). Under Steve Jackson, the content of *The Space Gamer* changed notably. In its earlier days it had contained a few RPG reviews and some contents for Metagaming's *Melee* and *Wizard*–which were the foundation of their later RPG, *The Fantasy Trip*. Now, it truly became a roleplaying magazine. Issue #29 (July 1980) featured *The Fantasy Trip* on the cover. Later, issues #32 (October 1980), #40 (June 1981), and #46 (December 1981) focused on *Traveller* while issues #41 (July 1981) and #47 (January 1982) were both "Special *D&D* Issues."

A year after *The Space Gamer* was taken over by Steve Jackson Games, the company began revamping it further. Beginning with *Space Gamer #64* (July/August 1983) they dropped "the" out of the title because it confused people. Then they decided to return the "space" to *Space Gamer*–which increasingly had contained articles about fantasy RPGs–by publishing a companion magazine, *Fantasy Gamer* (August/September 1983).

However, the split was short-lived. Following *Fantasy Gamer #6* (June/July 1984), the sister magazine came to an end. With *Space Gamer #71* (November/December 1984) it was obvious that Steve Jackson's enthusiasm for the original magazine was dying too, as its paper quality decreased and covers became simple two-color affairs. The final Steve Jackson issue was *Space Gamer #76* (September/October 1985). It was also the end of an era. Where the second iteration of *Space Gamer* had its finger on the pulse of the RPG industry throughout the first half of the '80s, later follow-ups never managed to capture the same lightning.

Steve Jackson Games sold the rights to *Space Gamer* to a hobbyist magazine publisher called Diverse Talents, Incorporated. DTI had already published one issue of a generalist gaming magazine called *The VIP of Gaming* (October 1985). Starting with issue #2 (February/March 1986) *VIP* incorporated *Space Gamer* as a section of their larger magazine. They told people to think of it as four magazines in one (with the other topics being computer games, fantasy games, and wargames–though PBM games also had their own section). The result was pretty scattered, and the magazine itself was poorly put together: the layout was amateur and you had to dig

through each issue to find content listings for the individual sections. At first Steve Jackson Games produced the *Space Gamer* section for DTI, but this didn't last long.

After *VIP #5* (September/October 1986), DTI decided that it'd be better to use the well-known trademark of the magazine they'd purchased. They shut down *VIP* and resurrected *Space Gamer* with the publication of *Space Gamer/Fantasy Gamer #77* (January/February 1987). These DTI *Space Gamer* issues had many of the same problems as the *VIP* issues and don't stand up well to the light of modern viewing. Given the continuing quality issues, it should be no surprise that this effort soon came to an end with *Space Gamer/Fantasy Gamer #82* (July/August 1988)–and that was the extent of DTI's contribution to RPG publishing.

After *Space Gamer's* uninspiring third iteration, ownership of DTI passed on to World Wide Wargames, also known as 3W Inc. 3W was an old wargame company that had been publishing since 1977. They were also a magazine publisher of some note. *The Wargamer* (1977), a traditional magazine-with-a-wargame, had long been a staple of the company. They'd more recently become the publisher of SPI's well-respected *Strategy & Tactics* magazine, beginning with issue #112 (1987). Now, *Space Gamer* gave them an in to the RPG industry. They started publication with *Space Gamer/Fantasy Gamer #83* (1988). This was part of a general push by 3W into the RPG industry. Besides *Space Gamer* they published several licensed adventures, such as *City of Angels* (1989) for *Twilight: 2000*, *The Liftwood Conspiracy* (1989) for *Space: 1889*, and *Operation Overlord* (1989) for *Traveller: 2300*.

Under the 3W ownership, the quality of the *Space Gamer* magazines improved, but they still looked dated. 3W decided to resolve this problem following the release of *Space Gamer/Fantasy Gamer #85* (January/February 1989). Afterward they "rebooted" the magazine. *Space Gamer* Vol. II, No. 1 (July/August 1989) featured a much more professional cover and improved interior contents. Unfortunately the new *Space Gamer* only lasted through Vol. II, No. 2 (October/November 1989). In that last issue, the editor rather angrily decried *White Wolf Magazine* who said that they were "the only independent magazine left in the market." But that statement was largely true. Though considerably improved from its worst DTI days, the day that *Space Gamer* influenced the industry was done.

3W got out of the RPG business in late 1989, as part of a general sell-off resulting from some failed expansions in the late '80s. Thereafter ownership moved on to Future Combat Simulations, who put out a single issue, *Space Gamer #88* (March/April 1990), which continued the original numbering through the two second-volume issues. FCS brought back Jeff Albanese, who'd edited the magazine in its early 3W days. FCS' single issue of the magazine was a semi-professional desktop-publishing design. It was no surprise that they soon went under too.

The rights for the games floated around for a bit after that before they landed with Better Games, the publishers of a few semi-professional RPGs: *Barony* (1990) and *Era Ten* (1992) These "free style roleplay" games were early "indie" efforts that tried to break free of the old clichés of RPGs and instead offer more story-oriented games.

When Better Games got hold of the *Space Gamer* trademark they inexplicably decided to use it as the title of a house organ magazine that only covered their own games. The first issue was *Space Gamer/Fantasy Gamer: The Magazine of Free-Style Role-Play #1* (September/October 1992), and it was clearly Better Games' most professional publication to date. This new run of the magazine was designated "Volume II," though that designation had already been used by issues #86 and #87. This underlined Better Games' general ignorance of the magazine's history. They'd later publish a history of the magazine on their website that was full of omissions and inaccuracies. Better Games' *Space Gamer* continued through *Space Gamer/Fantasy Gamer: The Magazine of Free-Style Role-Play #8* (1994), after which the magazine died yet again.

Better Games tried to make an online comeback when the web appeared in the late '90s. By 2004 they'd officially changed their name to "*Space Gamer* LLC" because of a conflict with a ""Better Games" slot-machine producer. Their new "*Space Gamer* Online" site offered new free-style games on a subscription basis. However, interest in the website died within a few years. It still remains live today, but it's no longer updated and the subscriber services no longer work.

If you add up the 88 original *Space Gamer* issues, the 8 free-style *Space Gamer* issues, the 6 *Fantasy Gamer* issues, and the 4 issues of *The VIP of Gaming* that contained *Space Gamer* content, the old, venerable magazine had a run of 106 issues, under seven publishers (Metagaming, *The Space Gamer*, Steve Jackson Games, DTI, 3W, FCS, and Better Games), covering three major topics (the science-fiction board gaming industry, the hobbyist industry, and Better Games' products) and over a span of 19 years (1975–1994)–not even including its online pseudo-revival.



There's probably not another RPG magazine with a history quite so varied and there are only a few other RPG magazines (*Dragon*, *Dungeon*, *Polyhedron*, *White Dwarf* and some APAs, including *Alarums and Excursions*) that had print runs that hit the century mark.

SJG maintained a good relationship with Richard Garriott—better known as Lord British—for this entire period. Stopping by the SJG office one day, Garriott even ended up commissioning Denis Loubet—who painted covers for many Garriott games, starting with *Ultima I* (1980).

In early 1982 SJG bought its first computer, an Apple II+ with 48k and two disk drives. It was partially for computer game reviews and accounting, but Jackson also said: "We do plan to get into gaming software eventually, and the Apple is a necessary first step."

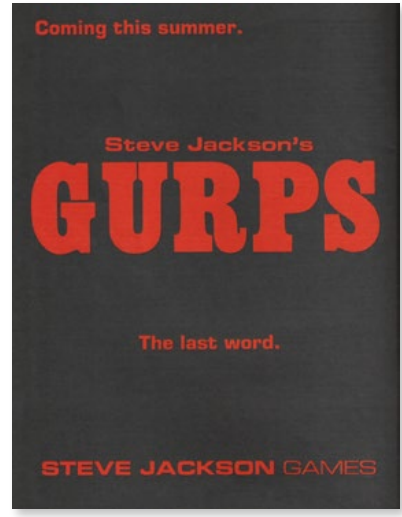
However by the next year Steve Jackson had given up on producing these games himself. Instead he licensed gaming rights to Garriott's new company, Origin Systems. *Autoduel* (1985) and *Ogre* (1986) were among the earliest hobbyist-licensed computer games (with GW's *Fighting Fantasy* games possibly the only ones that predated them).

On April 1, 1986, SJG pioneered another technology for the gaming industry. Their *Illuminati* bulletin board system (BBS) went online, offering fans a chance to dial in and talk about Steve Jackson games. It ran on an Apple II+, with a 300-baud modem. It also offered SJG a useful new tool: a community of players who could be used in blindtesting and other sorts of playtesting. Steve Jackson did some of the most extensive work of this sort in the industry prior to the '00s and the widespread use of the internet.

However the *Illuminati* BBS was not entirely good for SJG. As we'll see, it almost put the company out of business in 1990, but that story still lies years ahead in the future. Before we get there, we must first must meet the last important player in the history of Steve Jackson Games—and the problems that will arise in 1990—*GURPS*.

The Birth of *GURPS*: 1981—1987

Steve Jackson became interested in designing and publishing a new roleplaying system in the middle of 1981. He initially set three goals for the system: that it be detailed and realistic, logical and well-organized, and adaptable to any setting and any level of play. The last point was what would make the game unique.



There were already some house systems in the industry, such as Chaosium's *Basic Role-playing* (1980), where a single system was specialized for each of several different

games. However with the possible exceptions of Chaosium's one-shot *Worlds of Wonder* (1982) no one had successfully created a single, unified system that could be used for many different games *without* specialization. Hero Games would get the closest with a very expansive house system, but their full universal system wouldn't be released until 1990.

Despite thinking about the topic back in 1981, other business—primarily *Car Wars*—kept Jackson from pursuing his universal game for the next several years.

In 1983 Metagaming went out of business. Jackson saw the possibility of using his original *The Fantasy Trip* as the basis for his new universal game; unfortunately Thompson asked for $250,000 for the system. Jackson declined, but as he was bombarded by questions about the future of *The Fantasy Trip*, he started to think that now might be the time to get his *new* game going again.

> *"I don't have that kind of money–and I doubt that any other publisher does, either– not for a system which, good though it may be, is one among many."*
>
> –Steve Jackson, "Where We're Going," *Fantasy Gamer #1* (August/September 1983)

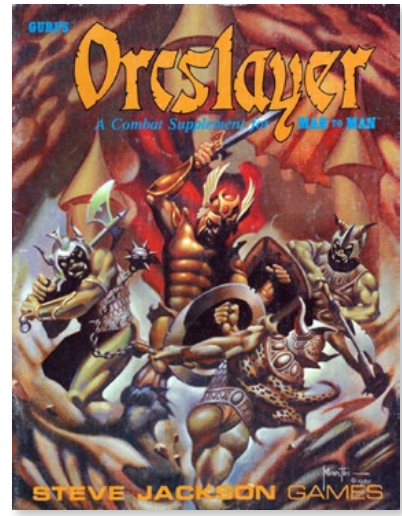
Jackson announced *GURPS* in 1983, calling it the "Great Unnamed Role-Playing System." Unfortunately there was still one factor that kept him from focusing on the new game: all those darned magazines that his company was constantly working on. In early 1984 Jackson announced, "SJ Games is redirecting its energies to put less emphasis on magazine production and more emphasis on new games and supplements"—and he started pruning magazines. *Fantasy Gamer* went first, consolidated back into *Space Gamer*. Immediately thereafter—in July 1984—work on *GURPS* began in earnest.

The changes at SJG multiplied on October 1, 1984, when the company officially incorporated. Shortly afterward the actual name of *GURPS* was announced. It was the "Generic, Universal Role-Playing System." Explaining the three parts of the title, Jackson would later say, "Generic: It would work at any level of expertise and complexity," "Universal: It would work for any game setting," and "Role-Playing System: [it would] encourage *real* role-playing."

In order to meet an Origins 1985 deadline, SJG decided to initially release just the combat system rather than the entire game. This was *Man to Man: Fantasy Combat from GURPS* (1985).

GURPS, especially in its original incarnation as *Man to Man*, shared some elements with Jackson's *The Fantasy Trip*. They both centered on tactical combat played out on a hex grid—offering battles that were much more thoughtful and strategic than those in most other roleplaying games. They also both used a

point-based character creation system—generally in vogue at the time—and both used only six-sided dice.



However, *GURPS* was a much more extensive and polished system than *The Fantasy Trip* had been. The characters provided for more depth and more variation, and of course the whole system was built to allow for many different genres—though fantasy was the clear starting point of *Man to Man*.

Man to Man was soon followed by a single supplement, *Orcslayer* (1985). It introduced the fantasy world of Yrth that would be later used in *GURPS Fantasy* supplements. The boxed *GURPS Basic Set* appeared a year later at Origins (1986), and then a second edition of the game appeared a year after that (1987). *GURPS* was on its way.

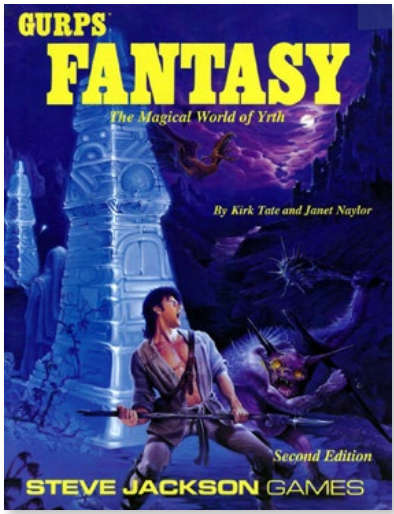
Meanwhile SJG continued to divest itself of magazines. Early in 1985 SJG sold *Fire & Movement* to a new company called Diverse Talents, Incorporated, which had grown out of the Southern Californian Strategicons. On October 1, 1985, SJG sold them *Space Gamer* as well. Jackson commented that they'd never been able to make the latter magazine a true success. It stayed with a circulation of 6,500 for most of its life, through any and all changes, and was, at best, a break-even operation. With *Man to Man* out by that time, SJG had other things to concentrate on.

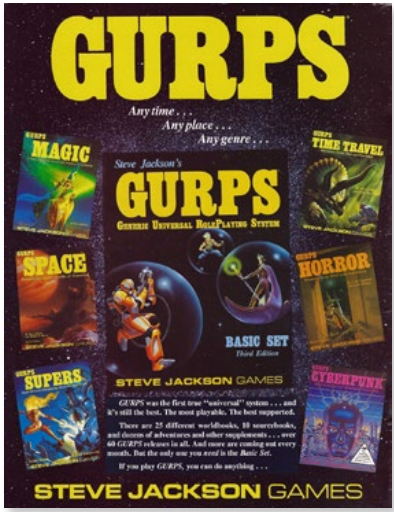
SJG's last magazine standing was *Autoduel Quarterly*, which was doing much better, with a circulation of 12,000. SJG continued publishing that for several more years, for a total of 40 quarterly issues through 1992.



The Early *GURPS* Days: 1986—1989

Ironically, SJG got right back into the magazine business. They started publishing a newsletter in February 1986 called *Roleplayer*. They were charging for it by 1988 and made it a full magazine in 1989. Unlike the magazines that SJG had closed down,





Roleplayer wasn't a generalist magazine. Instead it was a house organ, meant to do just one thing: publicize *GURPS*.

Following the publication of the first *GURPS Basic Set* in 1986, SJG also began regularly supporting the game with supplements. Though that *Basic Set* included the combat rules of *Man to Man*, it notably omitted magic rules. Those were released in *GURPS Fantasy* (1986), *GURPS*' first setting book, adding more detail on the world of Yrth. The Yrth background would eventually be expanded even more in *GURPS Fantasy Second Edition: The Magical World of Yrth* (1990) after the magic rules moved to the main *GURPS* book—as we'll see momentarily. Steve Jackson Games meanwhile presented a second *GURPS* setting in *GURPS Autoduel* (1986), which brought the world of *Car Wars* to life as a roleplaying setting.

Broad genre books followed, including *GURPS Horror* (1987), *GURPS Space* (1988), *GURPS Cliffhangers* (1989), and *GURPS Supers* (1989). By hitting so many of the most popular genres in RPGs, *GURPS* was truly proving itself as the universal RPG. With major genres out of the way, SJG moved into smaller subgenres with books like *GURPS Japan* (1988) and *GURPS Swashbucklers* (1988). It was a very different model of production from early companies like FGU who would instead have put out a different game for each of these genres (and did).

SJG also dabbled with licensed properties. Early books in this vein included *GURPS Horseclans* (1987), *GURPS Conan* (1989), *GURPS Wild Cards* (1989), and *GURPS Witch World* (1989). These licensed books never did that great for SJG, but Jackson liked publishing them, so they would be a regular part of the line for many years.

(*GURPS Wild Cards* itself was an ironic property because it was a *GURPS* book based on a series of novels based on a roleplaying campaign that had been

run using Chaosium's *Superworld* system. It also wasn't the last Wild Cards RPG; Green Ronin published another almost two decades later.)

These "first-tier" genre, setting, and license books were often supported by "second-tier" adventure and sourcebooks that required the first-tier books to use. Seven different *AADA Road Atlases* were published for *GURPS Autoduel* and *Car Wars* (1987–1989). *GURPS Space Atlases* (1988–1991), *GURPS Space Bestiary* (1990) and *GURPS Aliens* (1990) helped fill out the *GURPS Space* world. Many of the *GURPS* adventures were solos, following the trends of *The Fantasy Trip*'s *MicroQuests*. This included *Bill the Axe: Up the Harzburk!* (1989) for *GURPS Horseclans* and four *Conan* adventures (1989–1990).

Finally, SJG published a few universal sourcebooks like the *GURPS Bestiary* (1988) monster manual and two equipment guides: Michael Hurst's *GURPS High-Tech* (1988) and David Pulver's *GURPS Ultra-Tech* (1989). They could be used with many different worlds, which showed another benefit of a universal system.

As *GURPS* matured, it enjoyed a third edition (1988). When the game had originally been released, there (of course) weren't any genre books, and it was impossible to see how much the system would evolve. Now, after just a few years of publication, the new edition of *GURPS* was able to incorporate rules for magic, psionics, and both modern and SF weaponry.

> *"With this new edition of the Basic Set, and the worldbooks that will be out by the end of the year, GURPS finally fulfills its original promise … it's truly a system that will let you do anything. By the end of 1989, we will have books out on all the major roleplaying genres, and several of the secondary ones."*
>
> –*GURPS* Third Edition Design Notes (1988)

After three years of rapid changes, this new edition of *GURPS*—now published as a book instead of a box—would serve for six years.

Around the time of the third edition's release, Steve Jackson Games also made some changes to how they produced books. They increasingly outsourced to freelancers—which isn't that unusual for a roleplaying company trying to put out more than a few products a year. What *was* unusual was that they paid in royalties rather than flat fees. Very few RPG companies have done this with any regularity—with FGU being one of the few exceptions. Combined with the fact that Steve Jackson Games has usually kept their books in print year after year, some freelancers were still receiving payments a decade or more after they wrote their books. Unsurprisingly, this has generated a loyal group of authors writing for the company.

By 1989 SJG was unfortunately running into financial difficulties. They were spending too much money and selling at too low a discount, and management wasn't aware of these problems because their financial officer wasn't reporting certain debts. When that accountant left, SJG suddenly discovered that they were $90,000 in debt—$60,000 of that money owed to the IRS. At the start of 1990 SJG massively tightened its belt to start reducing what they owed.

Loyd Blankenship, a new hire from 1989, was then close to finishing a great new book. "GURPS Cyberpunk" would get SJG into the cyberpunk genre, which had been exploding into the RPG industry for the last two years. It would also help SJG get over that last hurdle, back into the black.

Or so Jackson thought, before the Secret Service showed up.

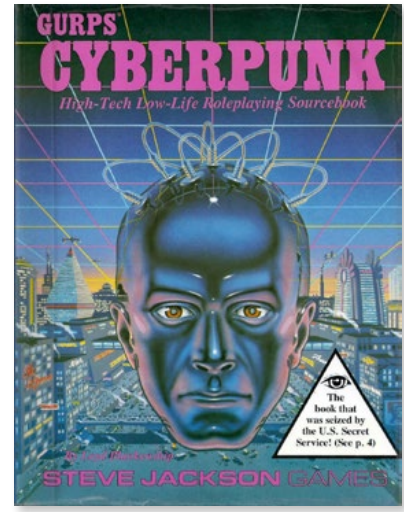
Steve Jackson vs. The Secret Service: 1990—1992

The most famous event in SJG's history occurred on March 1, 1990. The Secret Service raided the Steve Jackson Games offices, taking three computers, several hard disks, hundreds of floppy disks, and numerous computer accessories. The computers included the *Illuminati* BBS and two office computers that contained contracts, financial records, business correspondence, and the drafts of several upcoming games.

The reasons behind the raid went back several years and centered on an increasing federal response to computer hackers (who broke into computer systems) and phone phreaks (who stole telephone services). There were a number of different puzzle pieces:

On June 13, 1989, very public evidence of hacker intrusion into telephone systems had appeared when a Florida probation office's phone lines were forwarded to a phone sex line. That led to the arrest of four hackers in July, including the perpetrator of the prank and three members of a hacker club called the "Legion of Doom." One of the arrested Legion of Doom members, a Georgia Tech student, also ran *GURPS Special Ops* adventures; his *GURPS* campaign notes, intermixed with notes on real-world computer break-ins, all written on the backs of stolen BellSouth printouts, may have been the first element pointing the Secret Service toward the roleplaying industry.

On January 15, 1990—Martin Luther King Day—the AT&T long-distance system crashed and was down for several hours. Federal officials had previously been warned that the Legion of Doom was planning to crash the national phone system on a major holiday, and this sent them into a new frenzy. Days later, they raided the publisher of the *Phrack* e-zine; *Phrack* had in 1989 published a stolen BellSouth document called the "E911 Document" which described the 911 system. Now with new-found fears about the security of the long-distance system, the



Secret Service decided to take steps against the continued distribution of this document. BellSouth helped to encourage the Secret Service in this pursuit by proclaiming that the stolen document had a value of $79,449.

Meanwhile, in Austin, Texas, SJG managing editor Loyd Blankenship's past was catching up with him. He was a long-time computer hacker known in the underground as "The Mentor" and a member of the Legion of Doom. He was also the author of a pivotal piece of hacker literature called "The Conscience of a Hacker." At that time, he was running a computer bulletin board from his home called "The Phoenix Project." Though The Phoenix Project was a hacker's bulletin board, it was intended to be a legal one, without the stolen credit card and calling card numbers found on many other boards. Nonetheless it had quickly become the premier board of the Legion of Doom. It also contained a complete archive of *Phrack* magazine, including the stolen E911 document.

The Secret Service's raid on Loyd Blankenship's house and their seizing of the Phoenix Project computer is at least somewhat understandable. However, from that point forward the Secret Service's actions were increasingly a train wreck.

The Secret Service identified Blankenship as working as a computer programmer at Steve Jackson Games. (He didn't.) They stated that he was imparting SJG with hacking knowledge. (He wasn't.) They also seemed to think that SJG's *Illuminati* BBS was a hacking board. (It wasn't.) They even expected to find the E911 document on the *Illuminati* BBS. (They didn't.) However, because the warrant for the raid on the SJG office was initially sealed, the numerous misconceptions implicit in the raid weren't immediately obvious.

What the Secret Service did find while raiding Steve Jackson Games was the *GURPS Cyberpunk* manuscript. When Steve Jackson showed up at Secret Service headquarters the next day to retrieve his book drafts, he was told it was a "handbook for computer crime." When he tried to explain that it was just a game, a Secret Service agent told him, "No, this is real." Though the warrant for Steve Jackson Games had been authorized because of suspicion that the company was distributing the stolen E911 document, the Secret Service immediately started implying that this "computer crime manual" was the actual target. This misrepresentation had an immediate and chilling effect upon the entire science-fiction community, as suddenly writers were faced with the possibility that their homes could be raided

and their property taken if they *wrote* something that the government didn't approve of.

> *"As for GURPS Cyberpunk, it had merely been a target of opportunity … something 'suspicious' that the agents picked up at the scene. The Secret Service allowed SJ Games (and the public) to believe, for months, that the book had been the target of the raid."*
>
> –Steve Jackson, "SJ Games vs. the Secret Service," io.com (1994)

The damage done to SJG—already in the red—was enormous. Between a huge legal bill and the short-term loss of book drafts, SJG almost went out of business. On March 9, SJG was forced to let go 8 of its 17 employees. The company didn't receive a single disk or draft back until March 26 (almost a month after the raid), despite being constantly told "tomorrow." Even then, what they received was incomplete. *GURPS Cyberpunk* (1990) was recreated from old backups—absent recent revisions and player comment. More importantly, it was published despite the Secret Service's attempts at censorship.

Somehow SJG survived. A year later they said that, while not recovered, they were at least back on the road to health. On May 1, 1991, they also filed suit against the federal government and the Secret Service, alleging violations of the First and Fourth Amendments, the Electronic Communications Privacy Act, and the Privacy Protection Act. This was made possible thanks to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a brand-new civil-rights organization created to help ensure freedom on the Internet and to prevent unjust raids like the one on Steve Jackson Games. The SJG lawsuit against the government was the EFF's first big civil rights prosecution.

The case finally came to trial in early 1993 and a decision was rendered on March 12. Judge Sparks found for SJG (and co-plaintiffs) on two of three charges, saying, "The Secret Service conduct resulted in the seizure of property, products, business records, business documents, and electronic communications of a corporation and four individual citizens that the statutes were intended to protect." $50,000 in damages was awarded to the various plaintiffs, plus $250,000 in lawyer's fees.

There are three interesting postscripts to the 1993 trial:

First, Steve Jackson's white hats, the EFF, remain in business today. They are the 21st century's ACLU, and one of the single biggest proponents for personal freedom in the Internet age.

Second, in another hacker trial it was revealed that BellCore had much more extensive documents on the 911 system than the E911 document published

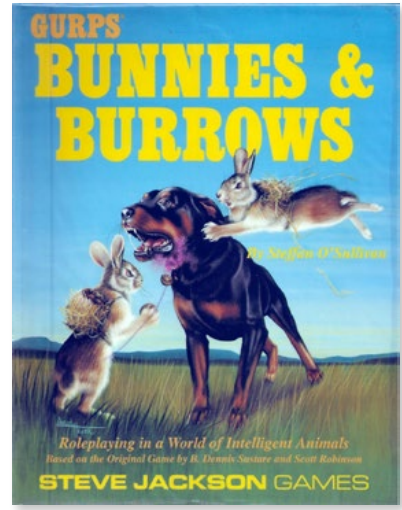
in *Phrack*. Though the *Phrack* document had been valued at $79,449, BellCore regularly sold the more detailed documents to the public ... for $13.

Third, Steve Jackson was undeterred by the problems and took the next big electronic step in 1993 by pulling a T1 line into their headquarters, and making a website, io.com, available to the Internet. This eventually became a full Internet Service Provider, which was spun off as its own company and later sold to prism.net. In late 1997 the Steve Jackson website would move to sjgames.com, where it resides to this day.

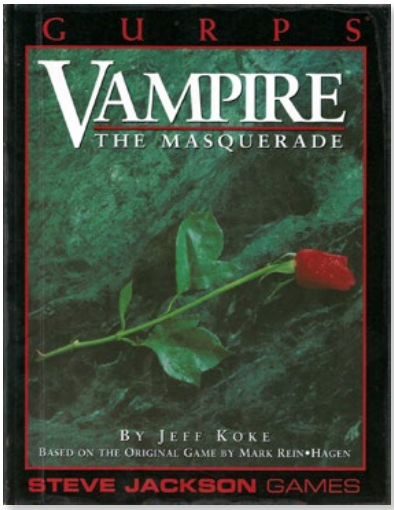
Changing Times: 1990—1994

The Secret Service raid caused two major upsets at Steve Jackson Games. We've already seen that they had to lay off half of their staff. Additionally, they decided to stop printing adventures, which had previously been a notable part of their publication schedule. This was a purely financial decision. Adventures have never been the best moneymaker in the industry, and the problem seemed even more pronounced with *GURPS* adventures. So during 1991 and 1992, SJG published their last game books of that type.

As a result, SJG was now putting out standalone *GURPS* books rather than the more complex tiered book lines. This included more historical subgenre books. Some, such as *GURPS Camelot* (1991) and *GURPS China* (1991), were clearly sub-subgenres, while others like *GURPS Old West* (1991) and *GURPS Middle Ages I* (1992) covered genres notably missing before this point. Additional universal books also started to appear, including David L. Pulver's *GURPS Psionics* (1991) and *GURPS Vehicles* (1993). These books tended to have complex and intricate mechanics—particularly the very mathematical vehicle construction system in the latter book. They would come to define *GURPS* over the coming years as a serious, technical game. The popularity of this trend showed in the sales, including at least five printings of *Ultra-Tech* and four of *Vehicles*.



GURPS again proved itself "universal" in the early '90s when SJG started adapting other game worlds to the system. *GURPS Bunnies & Burrows* (1992), based on an old FGU game, was the first. The *GURPS* versions of White Wolf's very popular World of Darkness games were a much bigger coup. The first release, *GURPS Vampire* (1993), rapidly went through three printings.



Unfortunately the relationship with White Wolf proved to be troublesome. White Wolf stepped on Steve Jackson Games' toes by using the eye-in-the-pyramid design—by then SJG's corporate logo—in *Wraith: The Oblivion* (1994) and then they rejected the initial manuscript for the *GURPS* adaptation of *Mage: The Ascension*. Production of the World of Darkness *GURPS* books temporarily ground to a halt. After it was finally approved, *GURPS Mage* (1994) became the final book in the line.

In 1992, SJG also started selling in book stores, a whole new market. Even more than before, this made roleplaying their top priority, displacing board and card games. *GURPS* was now the top game at SJG. *Car Wars*, the subject of some 40 games and books between 1982 and 1992, was slowly petering out.

The end for *Car Wars* came when *The Autoduel Quarterly* was shut down in late 1992 with issue 10–4. Board and card game production also largely came to a halt for the next few years, though *Hacker* (1992) and *Hacker II* (1993) were published to build on SJG's new-found notoriety.

Roleplayer also ceased publication, with *Roleplayer #30* (1993)—but only so that Steve Jackson Games could start a new magazine. *Pyramid* debuted in May 1993. It was an ironic return to the generalist magazine industry—though it also promised to incorporate the SJG material that had once been printed in *Autoduel Quarterly* and *Roleplayer*.



"This is the first time in eight years that Steve Jackson Games has produced a magazine designed for the mass gaming market, and it may take a few tries before we get it right, but we will."

–Derek Pearcy, "I in the Pyramid," *Pyramid #1* (May/June 1993)

The *GURPS* coverage indeed was strong, to the point that SJG always had problems

selling *Pyramid* as a non-house organ. Contrariwise *Car Wars* quickly faded away. The new magazine also looked quite nice, with glossy pages and some full color pages—luxuries that *Space Gamer* had enjoyed only briefly. It soon became entirely color, as SJG's star continued to rise over the next few years.

The increased focus on *GURPS* resulted in yet another new edition, this time the "revised" third edition (1994). It was largely unchanged from the previous third edition, other than the fact that an 18-page adventure had been dropped to provide 18 pages for new skills, advantages, and disadvantages from the ever-increasing count of *GURPS* supplements.

A Non-*GURPS* Interlude: 1994—2000

When publishing in a niche industry like hobbyist gaming you need to stay atop the newest trends, and by 1994 a new trend was washing over the industry: collectible card games. This got Steve Jackson Games right back into the board and card game industry with their own CCG, *Illuminati: New World Order*, or *INWO* (1994).

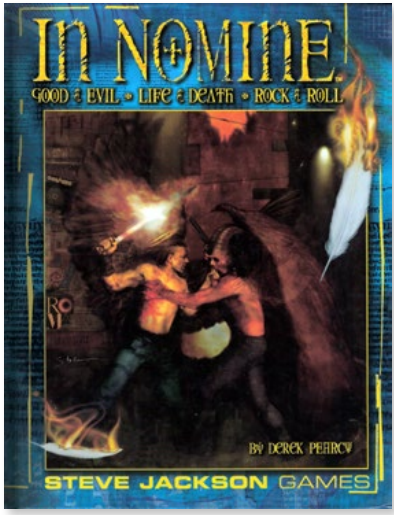
INWO was a brand-new CCG that expand upon the theming and some of the gameplay of the classic *Illuminati* card game. Because of its connections to the older, well-loved game, it was one of the more highly anticipated CCGs. It officially went on sale December 16, 1994, with the first full-color *Illuminati* cards ever, and it was an immediate hit. *INWO* would become SJG's best-selling product ever. It was supplemented by the *Assassins* supplement (1996) then a 100-card non-collectible release called *Subgenius* (1998). This quick fall back from collectability probably preserved SJG from the worst of the CCG bust. When the CCG star waned, *INWO* was cancelled and the original *Illuminati* was reissued in a new deluxe edition (1999).

Now firmly back in the board & card game business, SJG began trying out lots of new avenues, including the French design *Knightmare Chess* (1996), the educational game *Dino Hunt* (1996), and David Brin's *Tribes* (1998). Tongue-in-cheek humor, a Steve Jackson trademark since *Illuminati* itself, turned out to be the most successful. The slacker game *Chez Geek* (1999) did well and would be constantly supplemented—but as we'll see soon, a much bigger humorous card game was just around the corner.

Meanwhile, in the tabletop roleplaying sector, SJG was doing something else surprising. For the first time since their 1985 release of *GURPS* they were working on a new roleplaying line. *In Nomine* was a French game (1989) of angels and demons. Steve Jackson had long before played the game with the original designer, and had wanted to publish it, but felt that the American audience wasn't ready for a game where you could play demons. Now, with the anti-*D&D* hysteria of the '80s over

(and White Wolf offering up various potentially scandalous games), Jackson felt like there was a new opportunity—particularly with the company sitting comfortably on *INWO* money. Staff member Derek Pearcy was selected to the development of the new game. For a while it looked like the game wouldn't ever be released, as it was first announced for 1995, then 1996, but a year after *that* it finally emerged.

> *"After a year of broken deadlines and unfulfilled release dates, Steve Jackson Games has now refused to announce a schedule for the appearance of its new roleplaying game, In Nomine."*
>
> –"Despatches," *Arcane #9* (August 1996)



Steve Jackson's *In Nomine* (1997) built on the same audience as White Wolf's popular World of Darkness, and it was everything that *GURPS* wasn't. Where *GURPS* was a deeply simulative game, *In Nomine* was highly thematic. Where *GURPS* had no background, *In Nomine* was all about background. Where *GURPS* was quite complex, *In Nomine* was less so.

Although *In Nomine* was quite well-received, it only lasted four years in its initial incarnation. The game made money and had a following, but comparatively it didn't do as well as more successful lines. Just as d20 was kicking off and the room for independent games was shrinking, SJG released *GURPS In Nomine* (2000)—largely marking the end to the SJG experiment of supporting a second RPG. As we'll see, however, it's since been resurrected in an electronic-only form.

Meanwhile SJG was (again) having concerns over the profitability of publishing a generalist magazine. They finished up *Pyramid*'s print run with #30 (March/April 1998), and then did something unprecedented: they began publishing "volume two" of *Pyramid* as an online, weekly, subscription-based magazine and were able to successfully do so for 10 years.

We'll end this look at Steve Jackson Games' *other* properties at the cusp of the new millennium. It would be a pivotal time for the company, when the pendulum would once more swing between RPGs and strategy games. But for the time being, *GURPS* was still king—and still evolving.

The Expanding Face of *GURPS*: 1995–2002

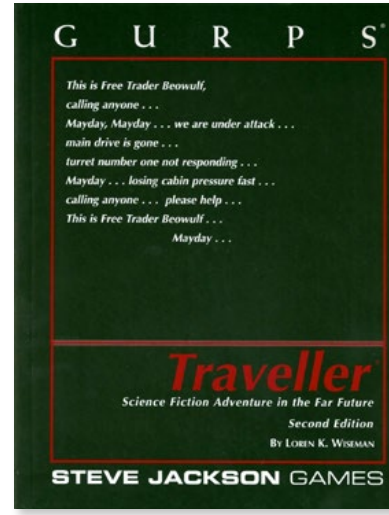
In 1995 Sean Punch took over from Steve Jackson as the *GURPS* line editor—working as a full-time telecommuter from Montréal, long before it was cool to do so. He would slowly reshape the line.

First, SJG became much more selective with their licensed products. This resulted in even more of the historical books that had started proliferating in the early '90s, and a new emphasis on original settings, such as *GURPS Technomancer* (1998).

Then in 1998, after *In Nomine* was finally out the door, SJG tried some broader experiments with their *GURPS* line.

GURPS Russia (1998), which released on February 28, was the most controversial experiment. Because retailers were unwilling to order a game on medieval Russia in more than token numbers, Jackson released *GURPS Russia* through a new "straight line" program that made it available only through SJG's website. There was considerable anger and distress over this, from fans and retailers alike. As Jackson expected, the book did well, and it was later reprinted for release through the standard distribution network. The "straight line" experiment itself wouldn't be repeated ... as such. However in 1999 SJG founded Warehouse 23, an online store that has since slowly expanded to include many publishers' products. When SJG started printing "Warehouse 23 Exclusives" a short time afterward, there was none of the uproar that "straight line" caused; the industry was changing and web stores were growing more accepted. SJG had just been ahead of the curve.

The next change was a return to branded *GURPS* sublines—largely abandoned since adventures had been dropped in 1992. SJG produced a major new *GURPS* line: *GURPS Traveller* (1998). Jackson had been a long-time fan of *Traveller* and had even talked to the Digest Group Publications crew about doing a *GURPS Traveller* back in the late '80s. Following the dissolution of GDW in 1996, Jackson licensed the property from Marc Miller.



Jackson brought on Loren Wiseman, a long-time GDW employee, to produce the new game, which was set in an alternative history of the classic *Traveller* timeline. (The standard *Traveller* timeline was at the time licensed to Imperium Games, though they didn't do very well with it, as described in

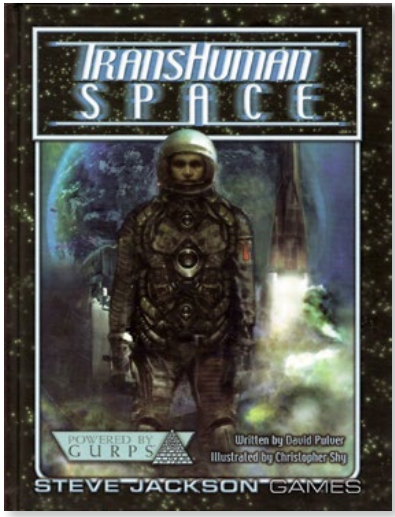
their own history.) Following the rulebook's publication, *GURPS Traveller* was extensively supported with numerous background books through 2003. *Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society*, the old *Traveller* magazine, was resurrected as a *Pyramid*-like online magazine in 2000 and continues to this day.

The last big change of 1998 was the publication of *GURPS Lite* (1998), which presented *GURPS* in a slim, trim, 32-page version. This was a major evolution because it gave Jackson the opportunity to produce standalone games that *didn't* require the main rulebook—without having to include a lot of redundant rules.

GURPS Discworld (1998) and *GURPS WWII* (2001) were the first books to include *GURPS Lite* in them. Later publications were labeled "Powered by *GURPS*," without including "*GURPS*" in the book title, primarily to make it easier for fans to find the books at mass-market retailers. These included *Hellboy* (2002), the second edition of *Discworld* (2002), and a new SF setting, *Transhuman Space* (2002)—another release by David Pulver. Both *WWII* and *Transhuman Space* were well-supported by extensive game lines.

Transhuman Space was notable for a few other reasons. First, it was the first major original background produced by SJG in 15 years. Second, with its inclusion of posthuman characters—including some who were literally software—It began to show the breaking points of the current *GURPS* system ... something that would be addressed by Pulver almost immediately, as we'll see.

One other "Powered by *GURPS*" book line appeared in 2002: *GURPS Prime Directive*, which was licensed for publication by Amarillo Design Bureau to portray the world of *Star Fleet Battles*, as is described in the Task Force Games history. Today, Amarillo Design Bureau continues to publish their Prime Directive books for *GURPS*, d20, and d20 Modern.



Coming into the '00s, SJG was producing piles of *GURPS* books and strategy games alike, but they'd soon be faced with new financial problems and the new challenge of d20.

d20 & Other Expansions: 2000—2003

In 2000 Wizards of the Coast changed the face of the RPG industry with the release of their d20 license, which allowed anyone to produce Dungeons & Dragons-compatible games. Steve Jackson Games was pretty busy with their own universal system, *GURPS*, but they didn't completely ignore the opportunity. When they released *Floor Plans* (2001)—a

new incarnation of the *Cardboard Heroes* line that included both standup figures and maps—they made them double-sided, with one side of each map using the *GURPS* standard 1" hexes and the other side of the map using the *Dungeons & Dragons* standard 1" squares.

Unfortunately SJG was also headed into a new set of financial problems. Though the 2001 d20 explosion might have exacerbated these problems, the origins were long-standing. SJG had been having negative cash flow for at least a year, and an accountant had neglected to produce comprehensive profit and loss statements during the period. The reasons behind the losses are unclear, but probably had to do with the decline of *In Nomine* and *INWO* without a similar decline in staff—now made worse by retailers increasingly stocking d20 over other products. On July 6, 2001, Jackson announced that he was laying off 13 employees from a staff of slightly more than 40.

Although tough, the layoffs were exactly what was needed to stem the red ink, and by the end of 2001 SJG was again profitable. This allowed SJG to engage in a second and larger exploration of d20. The next year they kicked off *d20 Weekly* (2002–2003), a new online 'zine in the same style as their successful *Pyramid* and *JTAS*. Unfortunately the d20 market was so sufficiently saturated with material—much of it free online—that there was really no place for a subscription magazine. The experiment lasted a year.

SJG didn't have all their eggs in d20; they were also experimenting in other areas. Cartouche Press was a new SJG imprint begun in 2001 to publish fantasy and science-fiction art works. Meanwhile, Warehouse 23 continued to gain steam, with several smaller publishers going exclusive with the online store, and Glorantha publisher Issaries even arranging an exclusive retail distribution agreement with Steve Jackson Games. However, the future of SJG would ultimately not be focused on d20, Cartouche, or Warehouse 23. Instead it would be a return to the company's roots.

The board game business was really booming for SJG after the 1999 release of *Chez Geek*. Over the next years they published a few new *Chez* games as well as new editions of all their classics, including *Illuminati*, *Ogre*, *G.E.V.*, and *Car Wars*. The biggest strategy game, however, was a new Steve Jackson design called *Munchkin* (2001). It was a satirical game with colorful John Kovalic art that made fun of dungeon delving as characters tried to level up by killing monsters. It was quickly supplemented by *Munchkin 2: Unnatural Axe* (2002), and *Munchkin 3: Cleric Error* (2003). SJG even put out some d20 books set in the same satirical world. By the end of 2003, Munchkin comprised 30% of SJG's $2.5 million sales.

And as we'll see momentarily, it was still on its way up.

GURPS 4e & E-publishing: 2004-Present

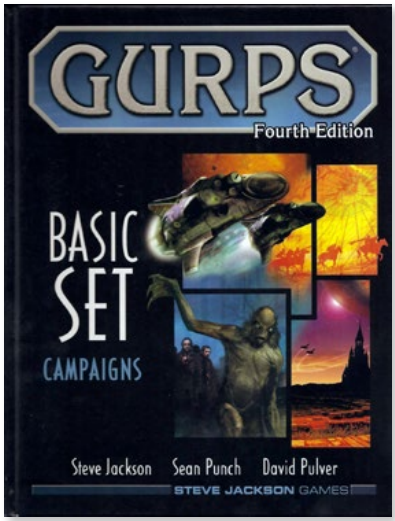
Though Steve Jackson Games would soon become a company (once more) focused on board and card games, *GURPS* still had one last "hoorah" planned. By 2004 the game system was almost 20 years old. Though material had been brought into the main game book over each of the previous editions, the game system itself had never undergone any particularly big transformations. The fourth edition of *GURPS* (2004) would change all that.

> *"The task was daunting, to be honest. We had to take apart the Basic Set, Third Edition, Compendium I, and Compendium II (over 400,000 words of text!) and revise and reassemble it all–in the context of 16 years of GURPS canon–in about a year. And the result had to be playable and fun."*
>
> –Sean Punch, "Designer's Notes: GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition," *Pyramid v2* (2004)

Sean Punch, long-time *GURPS* line editor, and David L. Pulver oversaw the new edition beginning in September 2002. Besides entering hundreds of small fixes into *GURPS*, the duo had three major goals:

- The original *GURPS* combat system was very much a product of its time, heavily based on wargaming principles. Now, rules were simplified and combat was generally sped up for higher-level characters.
- This led into the next issue. The original *GURPS* had been built around very human characters in the genres of fantasy, near-future, and science-fiction. Many players had complained that the system started to get creaky when applied to super-powered characters (which is to say nothing of the very high-level angels and demons of *GURPS In Nomine* or the posthuman characters of *Transhuman Space*). The new revision allowed the opportunity to design a game from the start with the understanding that you might be playing a bunny or an *Ogre* tank.
- Finally, the new edition allowed the opportunity to better unify all the systems that had appeared over the years. Poisons, diseases, drugs, vehicles, and weapons could be detailed in a much more standardized format in the core books, making it that much easier to produce coherent, unified supplements.

One other notable element came out of the new revision: the Infinity setting. *GURPS* got its start years before the two major genre-spanning games—West End's *Torg* (1990) and Palladium's *Rifts* (1990)—appeared. While the original



GURPS was universal, it didn't support players hopping from one world to the other very well. This topic was touched upon in *GURPS Time Travel* (1990), but it was a minor element, only showing up in a few supplements. Now in the new edition of *GURPS*, the genre-hopping possibilities were really played up—with *GURPS Infinite Worlds* (2005) building on those possibilities.

Following the release of *GURPS* 4e, it *looked* like support of the new edition would be business as usual. SJG immediately began publishing genre books like *GURPS Fantasy* (2004), *GURPS Powers* (2005), *GURPS Space* (2006), and *GURPS Supers* (2007). Meanwhile, SJG again pushed hard on their settings. The aforementioned *Infinite Worlds* book was joined by *GURPS Banestorm* (2005), which was a return to the world of Yrth, and new core books for their two SF lines: *GURPS Transhuman Space: Changing Times* (2006) and *GURPS Traveller: Interstellar Wars* (2006). Finally, there were the requisite tech books, such as *GURPS Bio-Tech* (2006), *GURPS High-Tech* (2007), and *GURPS Ultra-Tech* (2007).

However, by 2007 it was obvious that the times were changing. We'll talk about the continuing rise of *Munchkin* momentarily, but there was another reason for the disappearance of GURPS from store shelves beginning that year: e-publishing.

> *"We truly expect to become even more 'online and digital' in 2004."*
>
> –Steve Jackson, "Report to the Stakeholders: 2004," sjgames.com (2004)

In 2005—after many delays—SJG got into the growing PDF business with e23, an online PDF store. Today they are a strong second-tier PDF distributor, trailing the combined RPGnow/DrivethruRPG/OneBookShelf goliath.

The new medium allowed Steve Jackson Games to resurrect some of their older lines. *In Nomine* became active again through e23 releases, two of which soon numbered among e23's top ten sellers. *Toon Munchkin* (2006), meanwhile, resurrected the older *Toon* game, but in the context of the successful *Munchkin* card game.

(The rest of *Toon* was also made available through e23.)

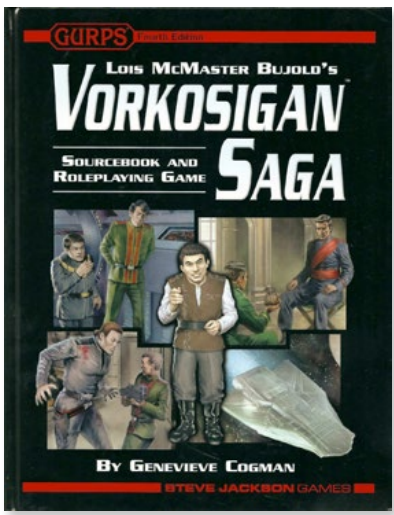
e23 also became a new outlet for *GURPS* publications. Where once SJG had printed a dozen or more *GURPS* print products every year, in 2004 it started



moving its production to e-books. That first year it experimented with e-adventures. The next year it put out one of its genre books, *GURPS Mysteries* (2005) as an e-book (with a print-on-demand book later available). *GURPS Fourth Edition* never printed more than about a half-dozen books a year, so in 2005 the first burst of PDF production already made up the majority of *GURPS*' publications.

As time went on, the PDF output for *GURPS* multiplied. The most successful PDFs have been arranged into lines, such as the *GURPS Creature of the Night* series (2007–2008), the *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy* series (2007-Present) and the *GURPS Spaceships* series (2007–2010). However, in 2012 PDF production seemed to drop dramatically too, with only about a half-dozen short pieces appearing.

Meanwhile, a dozen or so core *GURPS* books are kept in print—though many of them have moved from the hardcovers of early fourth edition publication to paperbacks. Since e23's heavy push into PDFs, new print publications have halted almost entirely. There have been only scant exceptions since 2007 such as *GURPS Thaumatology* (2008), *GURPS Low-Tech* (2010), and *Lois McMaster Bujold's Vorkosigan Saga* (2009)—the last an extremely rare licensed book for fourth edition.



In the modern day, *GURPS* is still somewhat alive under fourth edition thanks to the publication of short PDFs—but you sure wouldn't know it if you visited your local game store, which doesn't bode well for new players finding out about the game in the future. Steve Jackson Games appears to now be seeing the results of this decision, with *GURPS Low-Tech* doing well online, but poorly in stores. Meanwhile, even the *GURPS* PDF production seems in danger, if 2012 was any measure.

The move to PDF technology also resulted in one other change. In 2008 the HTML-based second volume of *Pyramid*

game to an end and the magazine was once more reinvented. The third volume of *Pyramid* (2008) looks like a traditional magazine again, though it's PDF only.

The Rise of *Munchkin* & Other Changes: 2003-Present

Steve Jackson has always been very good at adapting to changes in the hobby industry, which partially explains how his company has survived for over 30 years. Reading the highlights of Steve Jackson Games—how it went from wargames (*Car Wars*) to simulative RPGs (*GURPS*) to CCGs (*INWO*) to thematic RPGs (*In Nomine*) to a brief flirtation with d20—is practically a lesson in the cyclical highs and lows of the industry itself. It shouldn't be a surprise that SJG has continued to reinvent itself, again adapting to the changing industry.

In recent years, it's *Munchkin* that's come to the forefront. In 2003, as you may recall, Steve Jackson Games grossed $2.5 million dollars, 30% of which was in Munchkin sales. In 2006, *Munchkin* overtook *GURPS* to become Steve Jackson Games' bestseller. By 2011 *Munchkin* had been supplemented by dozens of new card decks, many of them genre-based such as *Star Munchkin* (2002), *Munchkin Fu* (2003), *Munchkin Cthulhu* (2007), and *Munchkin Apocalypse* (2012). That year Steve Jackson Games grossed $5.5 million dollars and 75% of the money came from *Munchkin*. In addition, newcomers *Zombie Dice* (2010) and *Cthulhu Dice* (2010) continued to do well—after being 8.4% of Steve Jackson Games' sales in 2010.

Given inflation, Steve Jackson Games saw a strong increase in profits from 2003 to 2011, but the company has also dramatically moved its emphasis toward the *Munchkin* game and other strategy offerings—which better explains exactly why *GURPS* went from a living hardcover line in 2004 to PDF-only in the present day. It doesn't even show up on Steve Jackson's priority lists in his recent Stakeholder Reports.

> *"The **fifth** priority was to support GURPS with at least two hardback releases and a whole bunch of PDFs. We only released one hardback…."*
>
> –Steve Jackson, "Report to the Stakeholders: 2010," sjgames.com (2010)

No doubt, Steve Jackson Games will stay with *Munchkin* for as long as it remains profitable. But they're also looking toward the future and the *next* big change. Sadly, all of their foresight seems to be directed *away* from the roleplaying industry.

As we've seen, SJG has long focused on electronic media. In the '00s, that focus moved toward online games. They first licensed a *GURPS Online* game to a Denver publisher called Worlds Apart Productions, but it never got past

designs and playtests. (Sony Online eventually bought out Worlds Apart, largely for their online CCG engine.) Steve Jackson Games has since purchased the rights to an online game called *UltraCorps*, which they've been redeveloping themselves for many years.

The hype over the iPhone also caused SJG to test out those waters. They produced two *Munchkin*-related apps, the *Fnorder* (2008) and the *Munchkin Level Counter* (2009), as well as a *Zombie Dice* (2010) app. Meanwhile, *Munchkin* is reportedly being developed for Xbox Live.

Over on the tabletop side of things, Steve Jackson Games is also trying out new things.

Though they've traditionally produced "American" style board and card games, SJG decided to try some publications in a "Euro" style in 2009. This resulted in the release of *Revolution* (2009), *Nanuk* (2009), and *The Stars are Right* (2009). None of the games got much attention in the Euro community, but they were all solid games built toward the European strengths of good mechanics underlying shorter games.

Steve Jackson Games saw bigger success with their first Kickstarter, for the *Ogre Designer's Edition* (2012). This "sixth" edition showed off the Ogres using beautiful chipboards that could be slotted together to produce three-dimensional models. The *Ogre* Kickstarter proved to be one of the most successful in the hobbyist industry to date, raising $923,680 from 5,512 backers against a $20,000 goal. Just as notably, it made them increase their print run from the planned 3,000 copies that to 10,000. Reaper Miniatures and Giants in the Playground Games were the only hobbyist publishers to do better in 2012. Meanwhile, top RPG Kickstarters seem to top out in the $300,000-$500,000 range, showing another reason that Steve Jackson Games its putting its focus elsewhere. The *Ogre* Kickstarter also gave rise to SJG's fourth iPhone app, *Ogre War Room* (2012), a free gaming aid.

Seeing a company like SJG moving so far from print RPGs makes one wonder if the age of tabletop roleplaying games is over. However, SJG has changed its core business enough times in its history that it should be obvious that nothing is forever.

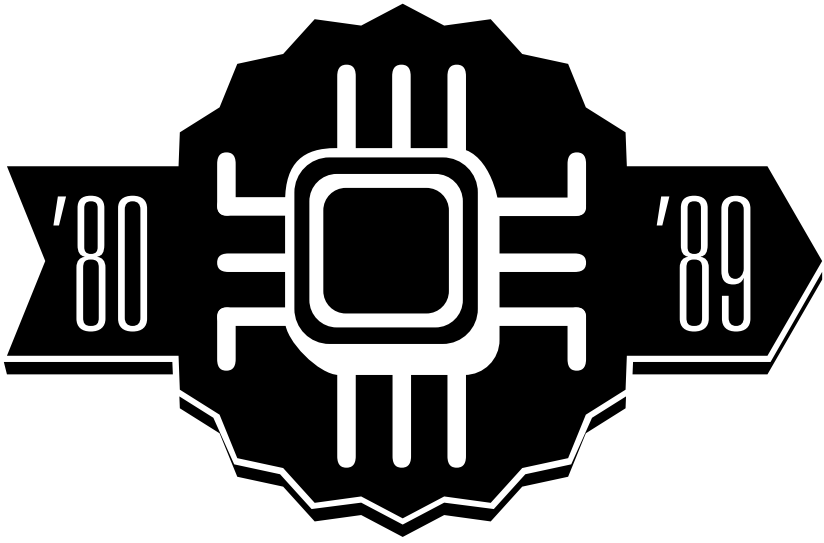
What to Read Next

- For *Toon* designer Greg Costikyan's other 1984 work, read ***West End Games***.
- For an earlier universal(ish) system, read ***Hero Games*** and to a lesser extent ***Palladium Books***.
- For information on how the *Hero System* became truly universal, read ***Hero Games*** and ***ICE***.
- For a "Powered by *GURPS*" publisher, read about ***Amarillo Design Bureau*** in ***Task Force Games***.

In Other Eras

- For the first half of the story of Steve Jackson and *The Space Gamer*, read ***Metagaming Concepts*** *['70s]*.
- For other major independent RPG magazines, read about *Different Worlds* in ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*, *White Wolf* in ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*, and *Shadis* in ***AEG*** *['90s]*.
- For more on the origins of house systems and universal systems, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For other prolific publishers of Conan games, read ***TSR*** *['70s]* and ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For the originator of *Bunnies & Burrows*, read ***FGU*** *['70s]*, and for the originator of the World of Darkness, read ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*.
- For another publisher who adapted a French urban fantasy game, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]* and for one of the first foreign-language games in the US, read ***Metropolis*** *['90s]*.
- For the origins of *Traveller*, read ***GDW*** *['70s]*, and for how it eventually came to Steve Jackson Games, read ***Imperium Games*** *['90s]*.
- For another RPG company whose main focus is card games nowadays, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.

Or read onward for the first second-tier licensee, ***FASA***.



Part Two:

Second-Tier Licenses

(1980)

Publishers like Games Workshop, Judges Guild, and Wee Warriors—which appeared in the early to mid-'70s—founded their business on publishing licensed *D&D* products. By the late '70s TSR wasn't giving out any more licenses, and companies like Grimoire Games, Midkemia Press, and Phoenix Games instead became "universal publishers," creating "generic" supplements that were really intended for use in *D&D*.

However, by the early '80s there was a new opportunity: other games became popular enough to take on licensees of their own. When Judges Guild selected *Traveller* (1977) as their second licensed product line in 1978, they led the way. It was no surprise when new ***licensee*** FASA appeared in 1980, solely to publish *Traveller* supplements.

Gamelords may most clearly show how the winds were changing. They got into business to create their own universal system—which made them look a lot like Grimoire Games or Midkemia Press—but then they began supplementing not only *Traveller* but also Metagaming Concept's *The Fantasy Trip* (1977, 1980).

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
FASA	1980–2001	*ISPMV Tethys (1980)*	61
Gamelords	1980–1984	Thieves' Guild (1980)	86

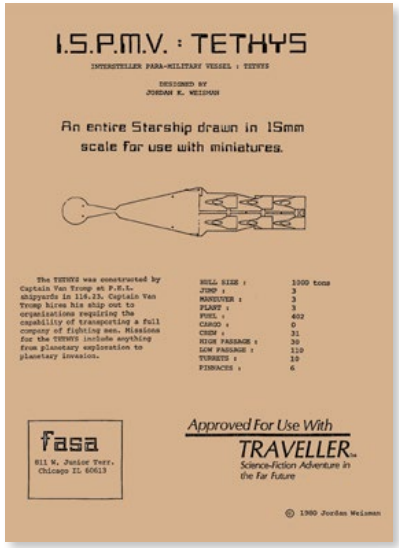
FASA: 1980–2001

FASA is best known for its Battletech *and* Shadowrun *games, but much of the company's success was actually the result of a versatile ability to transfer RPG backgrounds across many different media.*

Traveller & Other Early Beginnings: 1980–1984

Jordan Weisman—who soon would found FASA—got involved in gaming in the mid-'70s, when he began playing *Dungeons & Dragons* at summer camp. He continued to play during college, and although he didn't finish his degree, he did learn mechanical drawing skills that he would soon use in a career in the industry.

Weisman made the move into publication in 1980. While gaming at his parents' dining room table one evening, he told his friends that he was going to start a company to print his own adventures and deckplans for



1980: I.S.P.M.V. Tethys

Traveller. He said he had $150 and wanted to know if anyone else would join in. L. Ross Babcock III happened to have $150 too, and thus FASA was born.

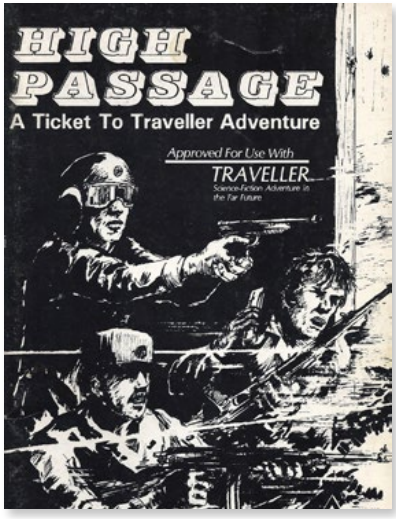
(FASA stood for the "Freedonian Aeronautics and Space Administration," a Marx Brothers homage that had originated in Weisman's high school days.)

Soon Weisman and Babcock were at the local Sir Speedy, printing up a few hundred copies of Weisman's early adventures. They sold them to a local Chicago store, and from there, they started tracing the distribution chain upward, to figure out how to get those adventures to more people. Shortly thereafter they began sending samples to distributors, who were soon selling them to retailers nationwide. The newborn FASA even managed a booth at Gen Con XIII (1980), but had to sleep in a van—as they couldn't afford a hotel room—and were only able to shower thanks to the kindness of Forest Brown of Martian Metals.

By the end of 1980 FASA was on relatively professional grounds. Though still working out of Weisman's basement, the company was now looking for outside talent. Their first recruits were William H. Keith Jr. and Andrew Keith—two freelancers who regularly wrote and drew for GDW. It was their knowledge of GDW that encouraged Babcock and Weisman to bring the Keiths into the company.

The first professional FASA publication was *I.S.P.M.V. Tethys* (1980), a set of deckplans for a mercenary transport; drawn by Jordan Weisman and also featuring three scenarios written by J. Andrew Keith. It was followed by more deckplans into 1981, and then boxed deckplan sets in 1982.

In August of 1981 FASA also came to an agreement to publish *High Passage*, a digest-sized magazine created by Jim Cunningham's High Passage Group. Financial issues had prevented further independent publication of the magazine, which was where FASA came in. William H. Keith Jr. immediately started providing art for the magazine, while Jordan Weisman and Ross Babcock did layout and editing. The first FASA issue was *High Passage #2* (1981).



"We frankly doubt whether High Passage will continue [it didn't]; if it does, FASA takes no responsibility for it and will not answer for quality, business policy, or anything else associated with it."

–J. Andrew Keith, Editorial, *Far Traveller #1* (October 1982)

Unfortunately there was a falling out between FASA and the Group. *High Passage #5* (1982) was edited by J. Andrew Keith, and then—just before issue #6 went to press—the High Passage Group ended the two companies' partnership and told FASA that they could not publish additional *High Passage* material. FASA replaced *High Passage* with a new J. Andrew Keith magazine called *Far Traveller*, which began publication in October 1982.

By then, FASA also had a third *Traveller* line underway, supplementing their deckplan and magazine publication: adventures. This new line had begun with the Keiths' *Ordeal by Eshaar* (1981)—a scenario connected into GDW's metaplot of the Fifth Frontier War. The Keiths also wrote FASA's "Sky Raiders" trilogy (1981–1982), which offered a 170-page campaign in three parts and is often considered one of the best adventures published for early *Traveller*. In all, FASA published ten professional *Traveller* adventures from 1981–1983, most of which were more action-oriented than the cerebral GDW adventures.

Though the Keiths were involved in most aspects of FASA's *Traveller* line, it was also still oddly disjointed, as FASA's publications were clustered in *three* different regions of the Third Imperium, based on different "land grants" from GDW. FASA had the rights to the Far Frontiers, which was the setting for early supplements like the "Sky Raiders"; High Passage Group had rights to the Old Expanses, which appeared in *High Passage* until the High Passage Group pulled the rights to use it; the Keith Brothers had the rights to Reavers' Deep, which showed up in *Far Traveller*.

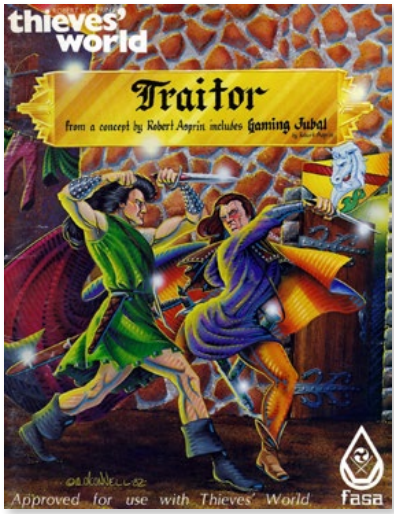
It didn't make for a very cohesive setting for GMs to use, which was probably the main fault in GDW's *Traveller* support—particularly when compared when the very extensively supplement Gateway Sector created by fellow licensee Judges Guild around the same time.

> *"We could have been doing a lot more, but there was only so much that they could buy. Andrew and I could have probably done eight to twelve adventures a year."*
> –William H. Keith Jr., Interview, *The MegaTraveller Journal #3* (1992)

During their early days FASA also produced two other roleplaying lines.

GDW's second RPG line began with a new roleplaying game called *Behind Enemy Lines* (1982), a William H. Keith Jr. design. It was a military RPG set in World War II, and was not only one of the earlier military RPGs, but also the first set in the 1940s. The idea was to support it with a line of licensed supplements, beginning with *The Guns of Navarone* (1982). Unfortunately, it didn't find the success of major military RPGs like GDW's *Twilight: 2000* (1984) and Leading

Edge Games' *Phoenix Command* (1986), so additional supplements planned for "The Dirty Dozen" and "Hogan's Heroes" never appeared.



GDW's third RPG line resulted from FASA's close connections with Mayfair—a Chicago gaming company that FASA shared offices and warehouse with early in their life. Chaosium had just produced a ground-breaking multi-system game called *Thieves' World* (1981). Now, FASA was able to pick up a license to publish *Thieves' World* adventures because Mayfair's Bill Fawcett was a friend with Robert Asprin and Lynn Abbey—two of the principals behind the *Thieves' World* books. FASA began their publication with *The Blue Camel* (1982), a con giveaway.

However, none of FASA's early RPG lines were very long lived. *Behind Enemy Lines* was supported with just two supplements (1982), though it was later picked up by RPG publisher The Companions (1985–1986). *Traveller* support rather abruptly ended with a double adventure (1983) and *Far Traveller #2* (January 1983)—the latter of which promised a third issue that never emerged. The Keiths immediately moved their *Traveller* writing to a new company called Gamelords, though they continued working for FASA in other capacities. The *Thieves' World* line lasted the longest, with its fourth and final adventure, *Dark Assassin* (1984), published a full year later.

Meanwhile, some potential RPG lines never came to fruition. Most notably, FASA announced plans to supplement Chaosium's *RuneQuest* in 1982. It would have been their third major licensed line and their second tie to Chaosium. They got as far as announcing "Vengeance of Maksheesh"—an adventure set in *Questworld* (1982)—for Christmas 1982 ... but the line died on the vine.

There were probably specific reasons for the cancellation of each of these early lines. For example, the *Traveller* license was becoming more troublesome toward the end because of a slowdown in GDW approval. However, what might have been the largest reason was revealed in the final page of *Far Traveller #2*, which advertised a new FASA product: *Star Trek: The Role Playing Game*.

Beginning the Voyages: 1982—1983

Over the years, Weisman would prove a very shrewd business man. Late in 1982, perhaps while scuttling the *RuneQuest* deal, he came to the conclusion that it made much more sense for the company to support its own RPG rather than someone else's game system. So he started making plans for a FASA-backed science-fiction roleplaying game. Not content with producing just another space game in a market growing increasingly crowded, Weisman instead sought out one of the two biggest licenses in the space adventure genre: *Star Trek*.

The result, *Star Trek: The Role Playing Game* (1983), wasn't the first of its sort. Heritage Models had put out an earlier licensed RPG, *Star Trek: Adventure Gaming in the Final Frontier* (1978), but that line was unsupported, and its real purpose was to sell miniatures. There were also knock-offs, such as FGU's *Starships & Spacemen* (1978). The best-known *Star Trek* game by 1982 was actually a wargame, Task Force's *Star Fleet Battles* (1979)—which was based on a license from the *Star Fleet Technical Manual*, not Paramount.

However, FASA made the first extended attempt at a *Star Trek* roleplaying line.

Weisman and Babcock looked out-of-house for a *Star Trek* design team. Unfortunately finding the right people proved harder than they suspected. Over the next several months FASA rejected four different designs for the game, largely because they all focused too much on combat, which was generally out-of-sync with Gene Rodenberry's vision of a more utopian future. It was the fifth design team—a freelance group that called themselves Fantasimulations Association—who was finally able to provide a workable design. The group consisted of Guy McLimore Jr. (formerly of Metagaming Concepts), Greg Poehlein, and David F. Tepool.

> *"The most fundamental assumption made about the game came the first day of discussion with Jordan and Ross–the game had to reflect the Star Trek universe in its design philosophy, as well as its details. To make Star Trek: The RPG a Klingon shoot [sic] would be in violation of everything the series represented."*
>
> –Fantasimulations Association,
> "Past Phasers and Pointed Ears,"
> *Space Gamer #64* (July/August 1983)



Star Trek: The Role Playing Game was a simple design, meant to be approachable by newcomers who were brought into roleplaying via the *Star Trek* license. The character creation system put characters through Starfleet Academy, then multiple years of "prior service," resulting in a skill-based character. The similarities to the old FASA favorite, *Traveller*, were obvious.

Despite the lesser emphasis on combat, *Star Trek* nonetheless had a very tactical combat system, where battles were played out on a square grid. It was based on a FASA board game called *Grav-Ball* (1982).

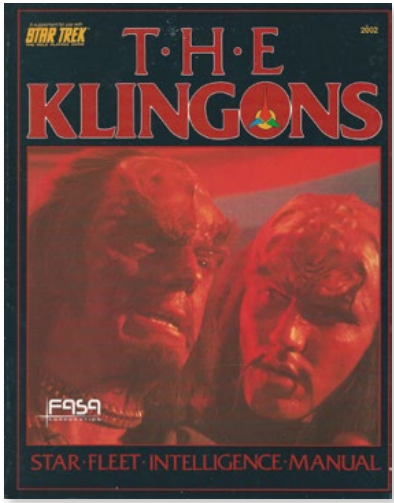
The most innovative element in *Star Trek* was the ship-to-ship combat system. Weisman and Babcock were insistent that the RPG not change into a board game when space combat occurred. The Fantasimulations crew devised a system whereby each section head had their own "console" to operate during combat. Uniquely the captain oversaw and coordinated everyone, rather than doing everything himself. Of all the science-fiction ship combat systems published over the years, *Star Trek*'s was one of the few that integrated well into roleplaying.

When *Star Trek: The Roleplaying Game* was released in 1983 it generally received good reviews, putting FASA on its way as not just a roleplaying publisher but also a roleplaying creator. It even brought them their own miniatures team, when Forest Brown and others from Martian Metals joined the company mid-year to make miniatures for *Star Trek* (and for other games).

It was the first sign that FASA could successfully be more than a follower in the roleplaying field—a sign that would soon be paid out in spades.

More Licensed RPGs: 1983–1985

Following the release of the core rules, FASA's emphasis quickly turned to *Star Trek* supplements. The classic *Star Trek* material that FASA produced from 1983–1986 is generally considered top-of-the-line. There were two feature films in that period, *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984) and *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986), but FASA was nonetheless the biggest producer of original *Star Trek* material during those years, and as such they were helping to define the canon. *The Klingons* (1983), co-authored by writer John M. Ford, was a book that notably influenced later Paramount productions.



In November 1984, after a year of preparation, FASA also kicked off a new magazine: *Stardate*. It was pitched as a science-fiction magazine that would cover both TV and RPGs, but from the start its sole focus was *Star Trek*.

The Great RPG Licenses: Science-Fiction

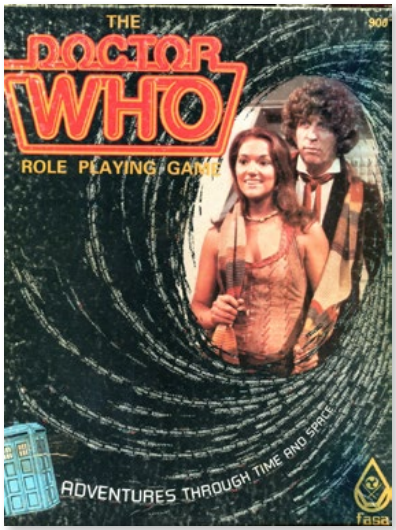
Though science-fiction RPGs have never been quite as wide-spread as fantasy RPGs, there are nonetheless a few SF licenses that have appeared multiple times.

Rodenberry's ***Star Trek*** universe has been the most obsessively relicensed. This kicked off with Heritage Model's unsupported *Star Trek: Adventure Gaming in the Final Frontier* ('70s), but it wasn't until FASA put out *Star Trek: The Role Playing Game* ('80s) that the setting really blossomed. Last Unicorn Games picked up the *Star Trek* license for their well-received ICON version of the game almost a decade after FASA ended production ('90s). Last Unicorn's purchase by Wizards of the Coast threw both the license and publication into disarray, but the Last Unicorn staff soon moved over to Decipher to create their CODA *Star Trek* game ('00s). Throughout all of this, first Task Force Games and later Amarillo Design Bureau has lightly supported their own *Star Trek* game, *Prime Directive* ('90s-'00s), which is based on the *Star Fleet Battles* universe.

George Lucas' ***Star Wars*** has seen much more stable RPG support. West End Games published their *Star Wars* RPG through the latter part of the company's existence ('80s-'90s). It was notable as a very early licensed RPG that was done right, with systems written to really give a cinematic feel for the game. Afterward, Wizards of the Coast got a hold of the license, and published in the *Star Wars* universe through two different major d20 editions ('00s). Fantasy Flight Games is the newest holder of the *Star Wars* RPG license. They are publishing a linked series of games, beginning with *Star Wars: Edge of the Empire* and *Star Wars: Age of Rebellion* ('10s).

Both *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* are also notable in a way that the great fantasy RPG licenses weren't. Perhaps because source material was continually being generated by a variety of creators, the licensees were able to influence the expanding universes of these settings, with FASA's Klingons material and West End's Death Star material both having been called out by later creators in this regard.

In the late '90s, it looked like ***Babylon 5*** might be the next great space opera, but it was never able to sustain a line of continuing books or television shows, the way that the other great SF licenses did. Nonetheless, it generated a couple of games. Chameleon Eclectic published the very short-lived *The Babylon Project* ('90s) while Mongoose Publishing produced a much more successful and long-lived line that was originally d20-based, but then moved on to OGL in its second edition ('00s).



Due to *Star Trek*'s success, FASA was on the lookout for other licenses. There was some speculation about a *Battlestar Galactica* roleplaying game (though this might have resulted from confusion with a licensed *Galactica* starship battle game FASA put out), and FASA actually announced that they had picked up the rights to Harry Harrison's *Deathworld*. However, it was a couple of years before FASA's next licensed RPG was released.

FASA finally got another RPG off the ground with *Doctor Who* (1985). Unfortunately it didn't receive the acclaim of its predecessor. Though its system was similar to *Star Trek* it was more complex. Many reviewers also found it lifeless, saying that it contained neither the wit nor the humor of the British science-fiction show.

FASA's last major license of the mid-'80s was for *The Masters of the Universe Role Playing Game* (1985). Despite the name, it was a board game, though industry rumors suggest that an expansion was intended to turn it into an RPG. If so, it never appeared.

Around the same time, a new FASA employee appeared: Jordan Weisman's father, Mort Weisman. Having sold his former company, Swallow Press, the elder Weisman brought in new capital, and offered new management for the company. His intent was to make it more profitable, and he was ready to make cuts to do so.

The first casualty was *Stardate*, which was sold off almost as soon as it had appeared. The magazine jumped over to Associates International Inc. with issue #8 (1985). Later issues were published by Reluctant Publishing (1987) before the magazine ended its run as the renamed *Stardrive* (1988).

Selling off *Stardate* freed up FASA to publish *Doctor Who* supplements and to work more another project that was even then growing in success: *Battletech*.

The Emergence of *Battletech*: 1983—1989

While working on their *Star Trek* RPG, FASA was also successfully introducing a pair of games about battling mechanoids. The first was *Combots* (1983), by Jordan Weisman and Bill Fawcett—showing off that FASA/Mayfair connection once more. It involved two player-designed robots fighting it out in an arena. This was soon followed by *Battledroids* (1984), a much more complete tactical wargame, where the armored robots were now giant "mech" vehicles of destruction.

Battledroids included plastic models from 20th Century Imports that were based on three Japanese cartoons—*Macross* (1982), *Fang of the Sun Dougram* (1981–1983), and *Crusher Joe* (1979–1983). Several of the original *Battledroids* mecha designs matched these models, a topic that we'll return to momentarily. Within a year *Battledroids* underwent its first big change: it was renamed *Battletech* (1985) in a new edition, presumably due to LucasFilm's trademark on the word "droid."

Battletech was an attempt to hybridize roleplaying and wargames. Like *Combots* it gave players the opportunity to design their own mechs. Like RPGs it provided continuity, since players could take their mechs from one combat to another, playing out a larger campaign. The influence of RPGs on *Battletech* was further evidenced by the well-described background of the Successions Wars, which was extensively detailed in *Stardate #5/6* (1985). However, unlike RPGs, *Battletech* didn't require a gamemaster—something that could potentially open up the game to numerous new players.

Battletech was also on the cutting edge of an entertainment trend that almost no one else in the United States was following: Japanese anime. FASA's use of those mecha from *Macross*, *Dougram*, and *Crusher Joe* played up this trend.

However, those models also made FASA the recipient of an unfriendly letter. On January 31, 1985, FASA received a letter from Harmony Gold USA Inc., the producers of *Robotech*—a mecha cartoon scheduled for release that March—demanding that FASA stop using their *Macross* designs. FASA produced their license from 20th Century Imports, who in turn was licensed by Studio Nue, one of the owners of *Macross*. Harmony Gold backed down and it seemed like the controversy was over—but as we'll see, it would return to haunt FASA 10 years later.

For now though, FASA had a notable new property, and one that made Weisman even happier than the *Star Trek* game. Previously he'd moved FASA's emphasis from *Traveller* to *Star Trek* because he'd decided that it was wasteful supporting someone else's game system. Now he could see the advantages of building up *Battletech* rather than supporting someone else's fictional world—which was another step toward independence.

Battletech's success—and the support for the line—quickly expanded as *Robotech* came on the air and interest in giant robots increased. Within a year FASA put out two boxed expansions, *Citytech* (1986) and *Aerotech* (1986). However, they were also looking into how to market *Battletech* more like an RPG, with more constant releases than a normal wargame could support.

This new strategy started off with saddle-stitched books of wargaming scenarios such as *Tales of the Black Widow's Company* (1985) and *The Fox's Teeth* (1985). FASA further narrowed the gap between their hybrid game and traditional RPGs by putting out a full set of roleplaying rules called *Mechwarrior* (1986). Though

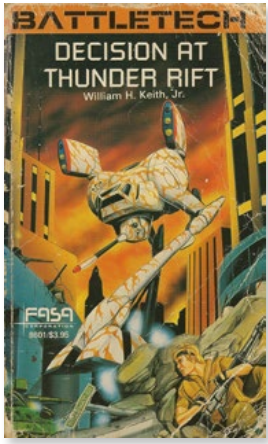


these RPG rules were never well-supported as a separate line, second (1991) and third (1999) editions did appear, each substantially revamped from what had come before. The years that followed also saw many more publications including: House "splat" books describing the major forces of the Succession Wars (1987–1988); several "technical readouts" full of mechs (1986+); and piles of books that described mercenary mech units and included mini-scenarios for play.

Taking a page out of *Traveller*'s book, FASA also began creating a metaplot for *Battletech*. At first this was just reflected in yearly updates: the *Battletech Technical Readout: 3025* (1986) was soon replaced by the *Battletech Technical Readout: 3026* (1987). However, FASA had simultaneously begun publishing fiction—starting with William H. Keith Jr.'s *Decision at Thunder Rift* (1986). Comics further developed the *Battletech* universe, including a short-lived series by Blackthorne Comics (1987–1989). Together, these fictional releases formed the basis for a story of ongoing change in the *Battletech* universe.

It was Michael A. Stackpole's *Warrior* trilogy of novels (1988–1989) that really got the metaplot going. These three books described the Fourth Succession War of 3028–3030—an event that caused major changes to the *Battletech* universe, which would be reflected throughout the rest of the line.

(The *Warrior* books are also of note because they were the first published novels by Stackpole, formerly a game designer at Flying Buffalo. They would be followed by over 30 additional Stackpole novels, including several more *Battletech* books, a *Dark Conspiracy* trilogy for GDW, several licensed *Star Wars* books, and original novels set in his own worlds.)



Stackpole's novels marked the start of FASA's careful attention to a multimedia *Battletech* timeline. At FASA's height *Battletech*'s metaplot was being plotted out three years ahead of time, to ensure that events were concurrently occurring throughout the novels, comics, and board game—as well as other media that we'll soon encounter. This proved even more important when FASA became a *Battletech* licensor, meaning that they were no longer even the only company trying to keep current on *Battletech*'s ever-changing universe.

"Later, at a trade show in Las Vegas (in 1988) Jordan and I had some discussions that resulted in the creation of the Clans. Because Jordan and I tended to think along the same lines, working together was very easy. Then as Jordan transitioned out of FASA and over to FASA Interactive, my continuing as the architect of the future history made sense."

–Michael Stackpole, Interview, altern8.com (March 2010)

One of their earliest licenses was for the *Battletech Science Fiction Combat Book Game* (1987), produced by Nova Games using a variant of their *Lost Worlds* system. It allowed players to fight each other in mechs using numbered pages in a book rather than hex maps.

However, Weisman wasn't content with success only in the print world of games and books. He thought that *Battletech* could be much larger, and he had the vision to oversee that expansion. In 1987 he founded Environmental Simulation Projects (which later became Virtual World Entertainment or VWE)—a company that licensed *Battletech* from FASA in order to create virtual reality game centers, roughly based on the model of the US military's SIMNET training centers. Such a huge endeavor sounded like a pipe dream coming from an RPG publisher, but as we'll shortly see ... *it wasn't*. It would be a large part of Weisman's focus over the next few years, while Sam Lewis stepped up as FASA president.

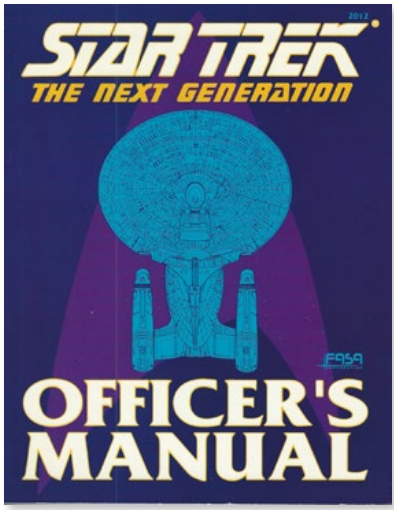
Meanwhile, the era of hobbyist-licensed computer games was heating up, and as a result, *Battletech* was headed toward personal computers as well. Activision's *Mechwarrior* (1989), a battlefield mech game, and Infocom's *Battletech: The Crescent Hawk's Inception* (1989), an RPG adventure, both beat VWE's *Battletech* centers out the door.

The End of the TV RPGs: 1986—1989

Though *Battletech* was on an upward curve in the late '80s, the same can't be said for all of FASA's lines.

Doctor Who ran out of time first. In the year after its release FASA published about a dozen supplements, including two solo gamebooks. However they abandoned the line in 1986 due to a lukewarm reception and disappointing sales.

Star Trek had been doing well—with 1985 and 1986 being banner years for the product line. However in 1987 something happened to shake up FASA's franchise: *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994) came on the air. For the first time since FASA had started publishing the *Star Trek* RPG, there were new *Star Trek* shows airing regularly. FASA slowed down their production of material set in the classic period, but that was soon balanced by new material for *The Next Generation*, including an



Officer's Manual (1988) and *First Year Sourcebook* (1989).

Unfortunately, the new show also made Paramount much pickier about what was being published, and they weren't entirely happy with FASA's two *Next Generation* supplements, which they felt didn't match their view of the *Next Generation* universe. In 1989 Paramount pulled FASA's license for *Star Trek*.

After 1989 we find FASA largely RPG-less. Though the *Mechwarrior* game remained in print, the focus of *Battletech* continued to be mech battles, while the older lines for *Traveller*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, *Thieves' World*, *Doctor Who*, and *Star Trek* were now all dead.

A Renegade Interlude: 1986—1993

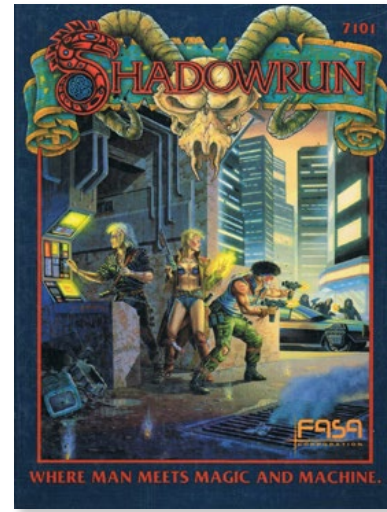
Despite their two TV RPG lines ending, FASA wasn't done with licenses. In particular they were working on licensing *Star Wars*. Toward this goal they had hopefully created a *Star Wars* inspired ship-to-ship combat game. Unfortunately for FASA, West End Games ended up with the license instead. FASA decided to release their *Star Wars*-inspired combat game as *Renegade Legion: Interceptor* (1987), the first in a line of *Renegade Legion* games.

Renegade Legion was laid out much like *Battletech*, with a deep and complex history. It generally matched Weisman's newest ideas of generating their own IP. *Interceptor* was soon followed by a series of boxed games and book supplements. The additional games included: *Centurion* (1988, 1991), a grav-tank combat game; *Leviathan* (1989, 1993), a capital ship combat game; *Prefect* (1992), a larger scale wargame; and *Circus Imperium* (1988), a more humorous grav-chariot racing game.

Though some thought the *Renegade Legion* universe was more sophisticated than *Battletech*'s world of giant robots, it didn't have the staying power of its older brother. After FASA pushed back into the RPG business with a one-shot role-playing game for the universe, *Legionnaire* (1990), the line began to fade, finally sputtering out in 1993. Without the *Star Wars* license, it wasn't in FASA's best interest to try and push another SF combat game. As we'll see, FASA would make this decision official a year later.

In any case, by 1993, FASA had a much more successful new game line on their hands.

Shadowrun Appears: 1989—1992



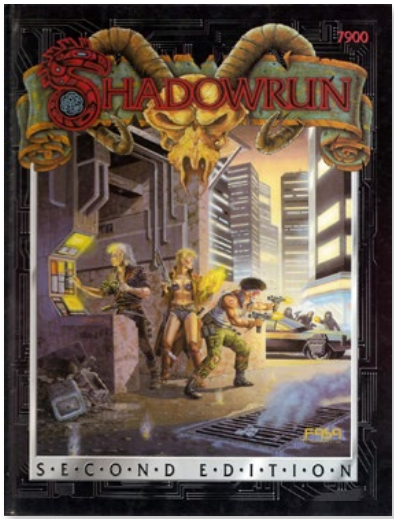
In the late '80s the cyberpunk genre made a sudden appearance in the roleplaying industry with the release of R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk* (1988) and ICE's *Cyberspace* (1989). FASA made its own entry to the field in August 1989 with *Shadowrun* (1989).

On the one hand, *Shadowrun* was fairly typical. It was set in 2050 and imagined a future of virtual-reality networks in a grim world overrun by megacorps. With this background alone, *Shadowrun* probably would have been lost amidst the cyberpunk games already proliferating, but Jordan Weisman had the idea of adding something extra: "elves on Harleys." In this regard *Shadowrun* was entirely original because it also described a world where magic had returned in 2011, giving rise to spell casters and all manner of fantasy races, whose DNA had been hidden within humanity for millennia. Though the background seemed an odd fit, it was well-developed, with well-integrated ideas such as the rise of the Native Americans in this new, magical world.

> *"When I heard that FASA was working on a cyberpunk genre role-playing game incorporating magic, I thought, 'Oh no, this is going to be sickeningly cute or too strange to be believed.' But … they've convinced me."*
>
> –Julia Martin, Review, *Challenge #41* (1989)

The game system also used an innovative comparative dice pool, where a set of six-sided dice were rolled, and each individual die was compared to a target number, with the number of successes then showing the final outcome of the task. Some found the system a bit too open-ended and even a bit clunky, but it nonetheless defined an entirely new way to resolve tasks that was used, revised, and reused throughout the '90s. One of the designers, Tom Dowd—whose first taste at game design had come at Waterloo Hobbies in New York, where he playtested and analyzed *Villains & Vigilantes* second edition (1982)—polished up the dice pool system a few years later for White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991).

Overall, *Shadowrun* very quickly caught gamers' imagination and would end up being one of just two truly successful cyberpunk games (the other being



the original *Cyberpunk*). FASA suddenly had a second viable original game setting on their hands—and a full RPG game this time, to boot.

Over the next few years, *Shadowrun* was supported by over a dozen supplements each year—some of which were quite well-received, such as *Seattle Sourcebook* (1990), one of the first extensive RPG descriptions of a modern city, and Nigel Findley's adventure, *The Universal Brotherhood* (1990). The line would eventually include a second edition of the rules (1992), which cleaned up some of the game systems and updated the timeline to 2053, following three years of metaplot advances detailed in the various supplements.

Battletech Updates, Licenses & Partners: 1989—1995

One of the most amazing elements of FASA's 20-year history is the way in which they constantly innovated. Many companies would have been content to sit on a successful product line like *Shadowrun* (or before that *Battletech* or before that *Star Trek*). FASA wasn't, and even in a time period like 1989–1993—between the major release of roleplaying line *Shadowrun* (which we just saw) and *Earthdawn* (which we'll soon meet)—FASA was constantly pushing the envelope on all their existing lines.



This started off with the *20 Year Update* for *Battletech* (1989). Having just completed the Fourth Succession War, FASA now wanted to quickly push forward the space operatic storyline that underlay the *Battletech* universe. The 96-page *20 Year Update* jumped the timeline forward from 3030 to 3050, telling players: "Don't think of your character as twenty years older ... think of his son as being ready for battle." It also introduced a notable new foe to the universe: the Clans, who attacked the Succession Houses with powerful and ancient technologies.

The result was a total revision of the *Battletech* universe, at a level almost entirely unseen in the RPG world. Thanks to new Clan technology the power level of mechs was notably increased—to the disgruntlement of some fans, who continued to use pre-Clans technology a decade later. As was increasingly the case, the new metaplot was supported by a new trilogy of novels, this time the "Blood of Kerensky" trilogy by Michael A. Stackpole (1989–1991); they would also be the last novels published directly by FASA.

Meanwhile FASA was working hard on leveraging their *Battletech* intellectual property (IP) into a variety of different media. The period from 1990–1995 would see huge successes in this regard.

It started off with the opening of the first VWE *Battletech* Center, in Chicago. This 16-cockpit center opened in August 1990. It provided exactly the virtual reality experience that FASA had promised three years before and was immediately successful. It sold 300,000 tickets in two years. Tim Disney—and the Walt Disney family—purchased majority control of VWE in 1992, giving it the capital needed to expand into 26 different *Battletech* Centers over the next years.

Meanwhile, FASA was expanding their book publishing as well. In 1991 they signed an agreement with Roc Publishing that resulted in over 100 FASA-related books being published through Roc in the next ten years. This kicked off with Robert Thurston's *Legend of the Jade Phoenix* series for *Battletech* (1991). *Shadowrun* got taken along on this expansion, beginning with Robert Charrette's *Never Deal with a Dragon* (1991).

Things were also going well for FASA in the computer game field. New licensed video games included SSI's *Renegade Legion Interceptor* (1990), Infocom's *Battletech: The Crescent Hawk's Revenge* (1991), Kesmai's *Multiplayer Battletech* (1992), and Beam Software's *Shadowrun* (1993) for the Super Nintendo.



It took FASA a bit more work to get their toy line out. They pitched a number of different companies including Playmates Toys before finally signing a deal with Tyco to publish *Battletech* action figures (1995). However, Tyco and FASA would soon face competition when Playmates started work on their own line of anime toys called ExoSquad. We'll return to this shortly, because it would spiral into a complex legal battle.

Finally, *Battletech* was one of the few RPGs to ever to get its IP on the television

airwaves. The *Battletech* cartoon (1994)—which was set during Stackpole's *Blood of Kerensky* trilogy—ran for 13 episodes in late 1994. Another comic—*Battletech: Fallout* (1994–1995), from Malibu—completed the series.

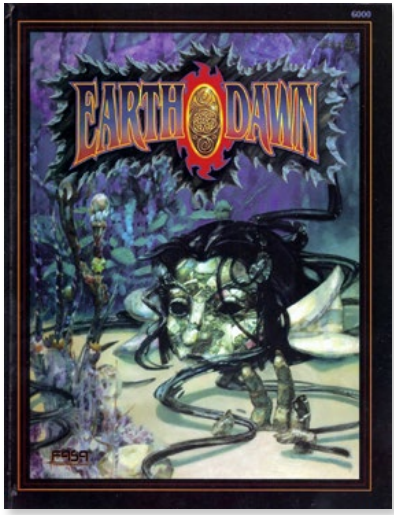
While doing all of this IP licensing, FASA was also preparing yet another new game for market.

Earthdawn Appears: 1993–1994

Most successful roleplaying companies seem destined to eventually produce a fantasy RPG, a trend which has resulted in games like White Wolf's *Exalted* (2001) and GDW's *Mythus* (1992). For FASA that game was *Earthdawn* (1993), with rules designed by Greg Gorden and a world created by Christopher Kubasik.

Earthdawn was an attempt to recreate an *AD&D*-like game for a modern audience. It featured a heavy emphasis on backstory—which detailed a world that had been ravaged by otherworldly Horrors and where civilization was just now reemerging—and used that backstory to try and explain many fantasy tropes. "Dungeons," for example, were the bunkers that civilization had hidden in while the world was being ravaged. *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975) and *SkyRealms of Jorune* (1984) had used similar tactics in years past. Beyond this, *Earthdawn* included character classes and levels, just like you'd expect in an *AD&D*-like game.

> *"As the art of the RPG continues to expand beyond its sword-and-sorcery roots, Earthdawn might just turn out to be the last great FRPG."*
>
> –Christopher W. McCubbin, "Pyramid Picks," *Pyramid #3* (September/October 1993)



The game's task system was target-based, with a very peculiar twist: a character's skill level told him what dice to roll, from 1D4 to 1D20. The system was quirky and used lots of fun dice, but it was also cumbersome to remember which dice to use at which levels.

Uniquely, *Earthdawn* was also connected to *Shadowrun* as a far distant mythic history—oddly the exact same connection later developed by White Wolf between *Exalted* and the World of Darkness. The connection was not entirely explicit, and mainly related to characters held in common between the two games—mostly dragons

and immortal elves. One of the most famous characters in common between the games was *Shadowrun's* Dunkelzahn, who was the great dragon Mountainshadow from *Earthdawn*.

The shared gameworld ended up creating constraints for both games. Because they were both metaplot heavy, they needed freedom to change characters at will, and the connection made this harder. For that reason, the connection would be downplayed following the third edition of *Shadowrun* (which we'll soon get to).

Generally *Earthdawn* was lauded for its background, but many found the overall system a bit too complex—other than the quick combat system. *Earthdawn* started off strong with an authorship of 15,000 rulebooks, and FASA extensively supported the line for the next several years with a pile of supplements and a series of fiction books from Roc. Nonetheless, after that initial surge, it quickly became their worst-selling line, trailing after *Battletech* and *Shadowrun*.

Battletech, Harmony Gold & FASA Interactive: 1993—1998

Meanwhile, FASA continued strong support for *Battletech*. However, things were about to take a more litigious turn for FASA's top line.

In 1993, Playmates Toys released their ExoSquad line of mecha action figures. FASA felt that these new toys infringed on their IP rights. Not only had Playmates seen their original *Battletech* prototypes when FASA was shopping them around, but they'd even used the *Battletech* "MadCat" design as a model for one of the ExoSquad figures. On April 22, 1993, FASA and VWE filed lawsuit against Playmates Toys, a legal action that would drag through the courts for years.

Meanwhile Playmates arranged a license with Harmony Gold to include Robotech toys as part of the ExoSquad line. The first of these appeared on the market in early January 1995. Immediately afterward, on January 13, 1995, Harmony Gold and Playmates filed a lawsuit against FASA about those original *Macross* designs that FASA had licensed from 20th Century Imports. Legal battles continued through 1995 and 1996. Playmates unsuccessfully tried to consolidate their lawsuit against FASA with FASA's lawsuit against them, and then the Harmony Gold lawsuit was dismissed and refiled. There would be no real movement on the case in a year.

On February 6, 1996, the Judge found for Playmates in FASA's original ExoSquad lawsuit, declaring that Playmates had not infringed on FASA's copyrights. Later that year FASA decided to remove all their original, licensed mecha designs from *Battletech*. The so-called "Unseen 13" mechs were dropped in reprints of the *3025* and *3055 Technical Readouts* (1996). Harmony Gold's lawsuit was shortly dropped as well.

Fortunately, things were going better for other *Battletech* endeavors. On June 7, 1995, Activision released *Mechwarrior 2* (1995), another successful *Battletech* computer game. However Weisman was no longer content to let other companies reap the rewards of *Battletech* in the computer market. That year, he followed a familiar entrepreneurial pattern. With Denny Thorley he formed a new company, FASA Interactive, and then FASA Corporation (the RPG company) provided FASA Interactive with a license for its properties in return for stock. FASA Interactive was soon after merged with the Virtual World Entertainment Group, consolidating all the *Battletech* computer properties.

It took a few years for FASA Interactive to release their first game, *MechCommander* (1998), a real-time unit-level tactical *Battletech* game of a sort not previously seen. (Most of the other *Battletech* games had been pilot point-of-view games, while Infocom's old RPGs were not real-time.)

MechCommander did well, but much larger success would be just around the corner for FASA Interactive. Of course, every action has consequences. FASA's decision to end their relationship with Activision by chance gave a huge boost to a competitive mecha game, *Heavy Gear*, as is mentioned in Dream Pod 9's history.

Out with the Old, In with the New: 1994—1998

By the mid-'90s, the gaming industry was starting to change dramatically, thanks largely to the CCG craze. Though FASA weathered much of the storm, it nonetheless caused upheaval.

The first fatality was *Renegade Legion*, which by 1994 was an entirely moribund line. FASA had come to the conclusion that any increase in *Renegade Legion* sales came at the cost of *Battletech* sales. Because FASA felt *Battletech* had more long-term potential, *Renegade Legion* had been dropped; now it was made official.

However FASA President Sam Lewis was very fond of *Renegade Legion*, so he wasn't prepared to let it go entirely. When Crunchy Frog Enterprises President Paul Lidberg—publishers of the licensed parody *Critter-Tek* (1994)—approached FASA about a wider *Battletech* license, Lewis instead talked him into picking up *Renegade Legion*.

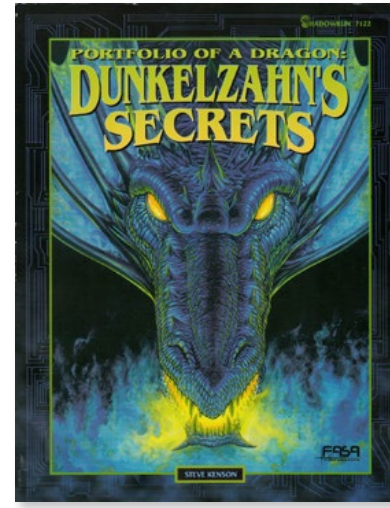
Crunchy Frog published the *Gathering Storm* (1995) campaign book, a set of reinforcements for *Renegade Legion*, and four issues of the *Renegade Transmissions* magazine (1994–1995), but ultimately couldn't afford to support the line. Lidberg discovered that without FASA actively pushing the game, retailers and distributors weren't willing to support it, and Crunchy Frog didn't have the clout to aggressively push the game itself. The rights reverted to FASA in 1996, who didn't do anything else with them.



Though *Earthdawn* wasn't a fatality yet, it had never found an audience. Now the CCG-induced tightening of the industry was making *Earthdawn* even less profitable for a company of FASA's size. In an innovative marketing move, FASA sent out 80,000 CD-ROMs featuring the *Earthdawn* rules to readers of *Inquest* and *Shadis* magazines. But, as we'll see, it would not be enough.

Of FASA's newer lines, only *Shadowrun* continued to do well, though it was changing. By the mid-'90s FASA was innovating its storyline. The game's metaplot had always been important, but now players were given the chance to influence the United Canadian and American States Election of 2057 by voting for the new president. This plot ran through *Bug City* (1994), *Super Tuesday* (1996), and *Dunkelzahn's Secrets* (1996). Some felt the intended outcome was pushed by FASA, but nonetheless the dragon Dunkelzahn was elected based on player votes—then promptly assassinated. A third edition of the rules (1998) eventually pulled the timeline all the way up to 2060.

This period of *Shadowrun* history also offers up one of the great gaming mysteries of the '90s. Carl Sargent—best known for his work on TSR's Greyhawk—was picked to become the new *Shadowrun* developer around 1995, presumably on the basis of the strong supplements and novels he'd already written for the line. Word is that he never got on the plane that should have taken him from Britain to Chicago, possibly due to a "medical problem." Afterward, he dropped entirely out of the roleplaying industry and hasn't been heard from again.



Throughout all this, it should be no surprise that FASA was working on new lines as well.

First was the inevitable entry into the CCG industry. FASA had already licensed *Battletech* to Wizards of the Coast, who was collecting RPG licenses in the wake of the release of *Magic: The Gathering*. Wizards of the Coast eventually published the *Battletech CCG* (1996) based on a Richard

Garfield design. FASA meanwhile published *Shadowrun: The Trading Card Game CCG* (1997) themselves.

FASA's second new line of the time was a bit of a stretch, even for a frequently innovative company. Around this time, FASA managed to come into ownership of a miniatures company: Ral Partha, who had been selling RPG miniatures since Gen Con VIII (1975). In 1997, following TSR's purchase by Wizards of the Coast, Ral Partha had lost its license to its lucrative *D&D* miniatures. That left *Battletech* as one of Ral Partha's top remaining miniatures line—which led FASA to purchase the company in 1998 alongside Lanier and Mike Hurdle, then owners of Zocchi Distribution. By early 1999 the Hurdles were working hard on expanding their distributorship, and so FASA was able to buy them out.

> *"Whenever I create different universes–Mechwarrior, Shadowrun, Crimson Skies– to me, it's all about looking at 'What are the fantasies that excited us when we were 5?'"*
>
> –Jordan Weisman, quoted in "What Ever Happened To Crimson Skies?," 1up.com (May 2008)

FASA's third new project of the time period was a wargame, generally showing their newest move away from RPGs. This new game was licensed from FASA Interactive, making an already convoluted web of intellectual property rights even stranger. Weisman had been working on a design for a computer game called "Corsairs!" that was set in an alternate universe United States where the country had crumbled in the wake of the Great Depression, and commerce had taken to the air. Now Weisman convinced FASA Corporation to develop a board game in the setting, to help enhance its value. *Crimson Skies* (1998) was well-regarded and won two Origins awards the next year. Ral Partha produced the official *Crimson Skies* miniatures.

Sadly, *Crimson Skies* would be FASA Corp's last major success.

Buy-Outs and Closing Down: 1999—2001

On January 7, 1999, Microsoft acquired Virtual World Entertainment Group and FASA Interactive. It was a marriage of convenience. FASA Interactive had been unhappy with their loss of control of the soon-to-be-released *Mechwarrior 3* to publisher MicroProse and was now looking for a new publisher. Meanwhile, with the upcoming release of the Xbox (2001), Microsoft was acutely aware of the lack of game design expertise within their company—which then only consisted of the simulation-oriented *Flight Simulator* team.

The VWE entity, which controlled the *Battletech* Centers, was sold off to some of its developers because Microsoft had no interest in local entertainment of that sort, while FASA Interactive became Microsoft's FASA Studio. Both Babcock and Weisman went over to Microsoft, the latter as a creative director of Microsoft Games from 1999–2002. *Crimson Skies* (2000) and *Mechwarrior 4: Vengeance* (2000) were among the first properties produced at Microsoft.

By this time FASA Corporation had already quietly shut down *Earthdawn* production, laying off several staff members including line developer Louis Prosperi in June 1998. They made this official a few weeks after Microsoft's 1999 purchase of FASA Interactive when they announced the cancellation of the line. The previous year's CD-ROM giveaway just hadn't increased interest in the game. A group of fans named Living Room Games would license the game from FASA in 2000 and begin publication of a second edition of the game (2001).

Then, on July 23, 1999, FASA announced that they were going to be acquired by Decipher Inc., the manufacturers of the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* CCGs. It seemed the end of the line for FASA ... until the deal fell through that December.

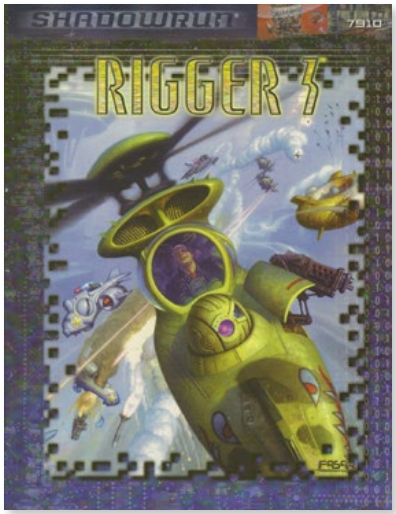
In early 2000 Ross Babcock stepped up as the final president of FASA, overseeing a company that was ready to get out of the tabletop publishing business. Jordan Weisman remained absent from FASA Corporation, and Jordan's father, Mort, was ready to retire. The RPG market also continued to be hard sailing—as it had been since the opening of the CCG market—and everyone was pretty much done with it.

In the last few years FASA made a few more attempts to push out new miniatures gaming lines—trying to take advantage of their acquisition of Ral Partha. These included the SF game *VOR* (1999) and the fantasy game *Crucible* (2000).

However FASA was no longer the center of innovation that it had been for the previous two decades. Instead it was Jordan Weisman who came up with an exciting new idea for miniatures games: the "clix" miniatures figure, which came prepainted and contained a dial to depict the miniature's stats. Using this technology he had founded yet another new company, WizKids, and already had produced its first release, *Mage Knight* (2000), a fantasy miniatures game which would immediately prove much more successful than FASA's own *Crucible* line.

With all these factors, it was clear that FASA's time was over. On January 25, 2001, Mort Weisman and Ross Babcock announced that FASA was closing down in an orderly way after producing a few final products.

"The adventure gaming world has changed much in those years, and it is time for the founders of FASA to move on. We may produce a few remaining products in the next month, but then we will close up shop.



"We will remain open to fill all orders from our inventory until April 30, 2001. We do not plan to print any new inventory; when an item goes out of stock, it will be gone forever.

"Making this decision now will allow FASA to meet all of its obligations to suppliers, authors, artists and other freelancers. Our plan is to sell our inventory, collect all of our receivables and royalties and continue to manage our subsidiary rights."

–Mort Weisman & Ross Babcock,
Open Letter (January 25, 2001)

FASA did indeed produce a few last products in 2001 including *Mechwarrior's Guide to the Clans* (2001) and a revised version of the *Battletech Master Rules* (2001), both for *Battletech*, and *Rigger 3* (2001), a rulebook for *Shadowrun*.

Properties & Licenses: 2001-Present

In the years since FASA officially closed up shop, it has continued to exist in two forms: as FASA Corp and as FASA Studio.

FASA Corp sold the rights to both *Battletech* and *Shadowrun* to Weisman's WizKids. The result was a pair of "clix" collectible miniatures games: *Mechwarrior: Dark Age* (2002) and *Shadowrun Duels* (2003).

Shadowrun Duels was very short-lived, lasting less than a year. Some suggest that this was because of the six-inch scale, which resulted in expensive figures.

Mechwarrior: Dark Age had a longer, six-year run. The game jumped the *Battletech* timeline forward 65 years to 3132, returning to an era where mechs were less common, recalling the successful classic era of *Battletech*. It was later updated as *Mechwarrior: Age of Destruction* (2005) and then when the collectible market began to die down, the *Mechwarrior* miniatures were sold as pre-packaged sets (2006) and "action packs" (2007), before the line fizzled out.

Miniatures company Ral Partha also went to WizKids in large part. They briefly produced metal miniatures for *Mage Knight: Rebellion* (2000), but the relationship just didn't work out. Ral Partha was spun off as Iron Wind Metals by the end of the year. They continue to produce miniatures—including classic Ral Partha miniatures, and miniatures for *Mage Knight*, *Shadowrun*, and *Battletech*—to this day.

The Topps Company bought WizKids in 2003, and then closed it down in 2008. In 2009 they sold most of WizKids properties to NECA—or The National Entertainment Collectibles Association Inc.—but this sale did not include either the *Mechwarrior* or *Shadowrun* properties. (It did include the "clix" system, and lots of other clix games that WizKids had produced.)

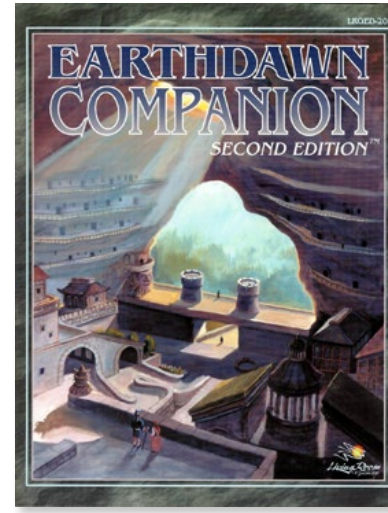
While they were doing miniatures, WizKids was happy to license out the tabletop and RPG rights to their games.

The tabletop *Battletech* game was published by FanPro LLC as *Classic Battletech* (2002); even the *Mechwarrior* RPG returned as *The Classic Battletech RPG* (2007). Through their products, FanPro continued to push forward the original timeline to 3070. FanPro also picked up the rights to *Shadowrun* and published a fourth edition of the rules (2005), set in 2070.

In 2007—following the expiration of FanPro's licenses—WizKids transferred the rights to both games to Catalyst Games Labs, a new subsidiary of inMediaRes Productions—who had been publishing *Battletech* fiction since 2004. Catalyst Games has been very successful in reviving both lines through both PDF and print publication. For the roleplaying industry, their most significant contribution is likely *A Time of War: The Battletech RPG* (2010).

More on FanPro and Catalyst can be found in their own histories, in the '00s.

FASA Corp sold *Earthdawn* to WizKids too, but eventually got it back, and today they remain the *Earthdawn* licensor. Living Room Games continued to publish their *Earthdawn* line for years, culminating in a second edition (2005). Meanwhile FASA Corp also granted New Zealand newcomer RedBrick Limited a license for *Earthdawn* based on a very professional proposal they submitted. RedBrick at first called their line "Earthdawn Classic" to differentiate it from Living Room Games' edition and to show that they were staying closer to the art styles and setting of the original FASA line than that of Living Room Games. RedBrick's line kicked off with the *Earthdawn Player's Compendium* (2005).



In 2005 and 2006, *Earthdawn* production was very confusing—with two companies simultaneously publishing "official" material—but RedBrick soon arose as the true inheritor of the game. They published their classic edition through 2009 and published a third edition (2009) distributed through the Flaming Cobra program at Mongoose Publishing.

FASA's other successor, FASA Studio, fizzled out soon after the dissolution of FASA itself. Their last *Battletech* releases were *Mechwarrior 4: Vengeance* (2000) and its two expansions, *Mechwarrior 4: Black Knight* (2001) and *Mechwarrior 4: Mercenaries* (2002). They did have one last hoorah, though. Five years later, the Studio put out a *Shadowrun* (2007) game—though it features a rebooted timeline and the odd decision was made to turn it into a first-person shooter. FASA Studio was dissolved in 2007 and all of the FASA rights were then licensed to Jordan Weisman.

Jordan Weisman could rightfully be called the third successor to FASA—after the now-shrunken FASA Corp and the now-defunct FASA Studio. In 2003—after he sold WizKids to Topps—he founded 42 Entertainment. It's a company dedicated to developing "alternate reality games"—which are games that use multiple media in the real world as a launching platform. He moved on again in 2007 to form electronic entertainment company Smith & Tinker. It's through Smith & Tinker that Weisman was able to relicense his old FASA properties. In 2009, nine years after the release of *Mechwarrior 4: Vengeance* (2000), Weisman announced a new *Mechwarrior* game was forthcoming through his newest venture.

> *"I like obscure names, and Smith & Tinker is a reference to Wizard of Oz, which we thought was appropriate since we're based here in the Emerald City."*
>
> –Jordan Weisman, Interview, gamasutra.com (May 2008)

That September, Smith & Tinker previewed some of the video and images from the game through website IGN ... and Harmony Gold issued a cease & desist order because of the usage of one of the "Unseen" mechs: the Warhammer. The dispute has since disappeared, and developer Piranha Games has released *Mechwarrior Online* (2012) in an open beta.

More recently, the name "FASA Games" has once again appeared as a publisher of RPGs. Though Ross Babcock (of the original FASA) sits on the board of directors and Jeff Laubenstein (of the original FASA) is the art director, it was originally overseen by President James Sutton (of RedBrick). The new FASA also continued on with the lines from RedBrick—*Blue Planet*, *Earthdawn*, and *Fading Suns*. As a result, it's more a second cousin of the original FASA than a direct descendent. Its history can be found in the history of RedBrick.

With so many roleplaying publishers carrying the banner of FASA into the '00s—and two of them still remaining active to this day—the long-time influence of FASA on the industry remains obvious, a full decade after its dissolution.

What to Read Next

- For the company that FASA once shared office space with, read ***Mayfair Games.***
- For contemporary *Star Trek* games, read ***Task Force Games.***
- For the future of the Keith Brothers, read ***Gamelords, FGU*** ['70s], ***Task Force Games,*** and ***DGP.***
- For another mech combat game that appeared in 1984, read ***R. Talsorian Games.***
- For an actual Harmony Gold licensee and still more '80s mech RPGs, read ***Palladium Books.***
- For the origins of cyberpunk RPGs, see ***R. Talsorian Games.***
- For more fantasy games with well-developed foundations for their tropes, read about *Empire of the Petal Throne* in ***Gamescience*** ['70s] and *SkyRealms of Jorune* in ***SkyRealms Publishing***.

In Other Eras

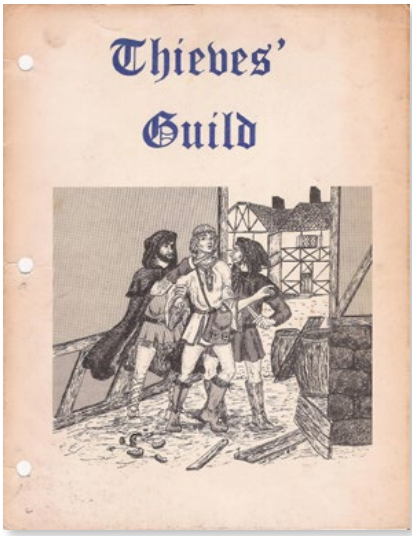
- For *Traveller*, other licensees, and the origins of the Keiths, read ***GDW*** *['70s].*
- For a later *Star Trek* RPG, read ***Last Unicorn Games*** *['90s].*
- For Michael Stackpole's origins in gaming, read ***Flying Buffalo*** *['70s].*
- For a modern mech competitor, read ***Dream Pod 9*** *['90s].*
- For the publishers of the *Battletech* CCG, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s].*
- For the future of *Earthdawn*, read ***RedBrick*** *['00s].*
- For the immediate future of *Battletech* and *Shadowrun*, read ***FanPro*** *['00s].*
- For the further future of *Battletech* and *Shadowrun*, read ***Catalyst Game Labs*** *['00s].*

Or read onward for a company that really loved thieves, ***Gamelords.***

Gamelords: 1980–1984

Gamelords was a short-lived RPG publisher noted for their Thieves' Guild *system as well as licensed publications for* Traveller *and* The Fantasy Trip.

Beginnings & *Thieves' Guild:* 1980–1984



1980: Thieves' Guild

Gamelords grew out of an older game company, Phoenix Games, also located in Maryland. That's where new RPG author Kerry Lloyd got his first book published, a "generic fantasy" adventure called *The Mines of Keridav* (1979). He had a sequel, *The Demon Pits of Caeldo*, ready to go, but Phoenix Games disappeared before the latter could be published. Having gotten a taste of publication, Lloyd decided to start his own gaming company, Gamelords. He brought along three friends: Richard Meyer, Janet Trautvetter, and Michael Watkins. However, they decided to take a different tack than Phoenix had — they'd publish their own game system.

Sort of.

Gamelords' premiere publication was *Thieves' Guild* (1980). It was a rules system for thieves, purported to be the first part of a full fantasy game called, simply, "The Fantasy System." The game was closely based on *D&D*, as was made obvious by abbreviations like AC (Armor Class) and HAC0 (Hits Armor Class 0). The core assumptions behind the thief rules seemed to be ultimately derived from TSR's *Supplement I: Greyhawk* supplement (1975).

Despite this derivation, *Thieves' Guild* was a coherent, independent RPG — just not a complete one.

From the start, *Thieves' Guild* was planned as a periodical, available by subscription. Two additional books soon appeared: *Thieves' Guild 2* (1980) and *Thieves' Guild 3* (1981). Each of these books included more thief rules for the eventual Fantasy System. They were all printed on three-hole punched loose leaf pages so that you could slot your supplements into a binder as they arrived — and hopefully have a full rulebook when you were done (which was much the same mechanism that Columbia Games would use a few years later for their *Encyclopedia Hârnica* and that TSR would use even later for their second edition *Monstrous Compendium*). The loose leaf pages were abandoned with *Thieves' Guild 4* (1981), but each new supplement continued to expand the original rule set. In the end there would be ten, ending with *Thieves' Guild 10: Bandit Gangs and Caravans* (1984).

The rules for the thieves of The Fantasy System were complex but comprehensive. Many of the *Thieves' Guild* systems — such as well-received rules for ambushes, strangulation, and backstabbing — were the only ones of their sort in the industry. Info on medieval trials also got Gamelords good attention. However, some reviewers found *Thieves' Guild* systems *too* complex — with numerous pages of charts and extensive calculations appearing in every subsystem, accounting for everything from the quality of the lock (when lock picking) to the presence of competing sounds (when listening for noise).

However, it wasn't those rules that made the books successful. Instead they succeeded thanks to the thief adventures presented in every single book — adventures that also provided much more detail on people and places that was common in adventures at the time. Together with the (somewhat clunky) rules, these adventures highlighted the core coolness of the *Thieves' Guild* supplements: you got to play unlawful player characters. As the designers said, "Sometimes it's more fun to play the bad guys!"



> *"Rather than emphasize a player's ability to roll a 20-sided die, or to memorize a gaming system's rules, thievish exploits by their very nature emphasize role-playing – the most enjoyable aspect of the whole fantasy gaming experience – and force players to use their wits and special skills to survive."*
>
> – Richard Meyer, Kerry Lloyd,
> "*Thieves Guild*: Designers' Notes," *Dragon #54* (October 1981)

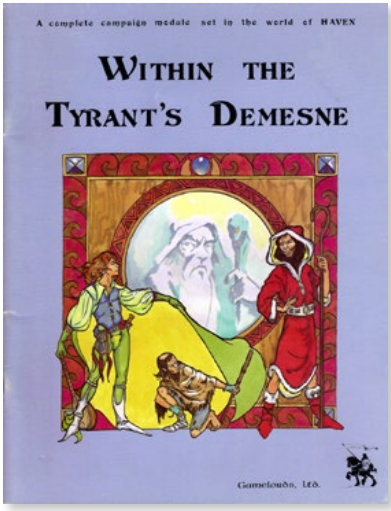
The background of *Thieves' Guild* soon spanned its own setting book, *The Free City of Haven* (1981), a loose leaf city description intended to be the first part of a three-part series. An early well-detailed campaign setting, *Haven* provided an extensive and interesting background, and showed that the strength of Gamelords was in background settings, not necessarily in rules.

Generally *Thieves' Guild* formed the strong core of the Gamelords game line from 1980–1984. In the middle of that period though, they began to expand their horizons as well.

Two Partnerships: 1981–1984

By late 1981, Gamelords' reputation was strong enough that they were offered a unique opportunity: the possibility to write for Metagaming's *The Fantasy Trip* (*TFT*). *TFT* was then the second or third most popular fantasy RPG. Much of its success was built on "MicroQuests," which were simplistic, solitaire adventures. What *TFT* really needed was a campaign setting, to put it on par with TSR's Greyhawk, Judges Guild's City State, and Chaosium's Glorantha.

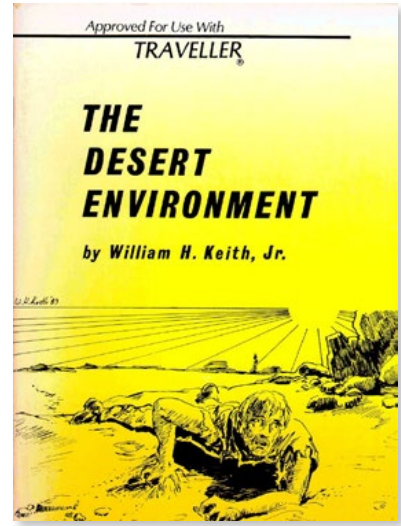
Gamelords was tasked to design "The Land Beyond the Mountains." This new setting was to be published jointly by Gamelords and Metagaming as a set of standalone adventures that could be played together for greater effect. The first two were *Forest-Lords of Dihad* (1982) and *Warrior Lords of Darok* (1982). Metagaming printed both of the books, though they accidentally left Gamelords' name off of the one that Gamelords was supposed to distribute. As a result, they had to sticker the books to show Gamelords' involvement in the project.



Unfortunately, Metagaming was by then on its way out of business, and after

these two publications, Metagaming decided to end their arrangement with Gamelords. Two final *TFT* books, *City of the Sacred Flame* (1983) and *Within the Tyrant's Demesne* (1983) were instead published by Gamelords as *Thieves' Guild* games set in the World of Haven.

Gamelords' other partnership, a license for the *Traveller* RPG, was more successful.

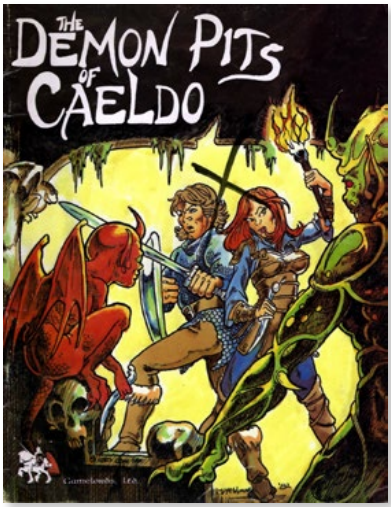


At the time, FASA was closing down their *Traveller* line so that they could better support their first successful independent RPG, *Star Trek* (1983). This left two very prolific freelance designers — J. Andrew Keith and William H. Keith Jr. — free. They began writing *Traveller* supplements for Gamelords.

Over the next couple of years the Keith brothers wrote seven well-regarded supplements for Gamelords. The best known were an innovative series of environmental guides that gave rules for playing on different sorts of planets. They were *The Desert Environment* (1984), *The Mountain Environment* (1983), and *The Undersea Environment* (1983). Each rulebook was complemented by an adventure set in the same locale. Generally, the Keith brothers' work felt like a continuation of what they'd been doing at FASA. Even the location was the same: the Keith adventures were all set in Reavers' Deep, the *Traveller* sector that they developed at FASA and through their own Marischal Adventures.

"The environmental guides are unique in the universe of Traveller play-aids."
– Tony Watson, "*Traveller* Supplements from Gamelords," *Space Gamer #72* (January/February 1985)

Besides the Keith adventures, Gamelords also published a few *Traveller* books by Gregory Lee and John Marshal, but the Keith books were the heart of their line.



The Final Years: 1983—1984

Through Gamelords' last two years — 1983 and 1984 — they were actively publishing both *Thieves' Guild* and *Traveller* supplements. They both seemed to be good years, with a dozen books published in 1983 and almost that the next year.

Notable books in these last years included: *Haven: Secrets of the Labyrinth* (1983), the long-delayed second supplement detailing the massive city; *The Mines of Keridav* (1983), a *Thieves' Guild* reprint of Kerry Lloyd's original publication; and *The Demon Pits of Caeldo* (1983), the never-printed adventure promised by Phoenix four years previous.

By 1984, the RPG industry was facing its first bust, and companies either had to step up to the next level of professionalism or perish. Gamelords looked like they were going to take those steps when they printed nice-looking boxed editions of *Thieves' Guild* (1984) and *Haven: The Free City* (1984). Unfortunately, it wasn't quick enough and the economics of the RPG boom and bust caught up with them. At the end of 1984, Gamelords said that they were temporarily in "a holding pattern" until sales picked up. They never did.

Gamelords had plans for many publications that were never completed. Some such as "Grand Survey" and "A Pilot's Guide to the Caledon Subsector," both for *Traveller*, were reputedly ready to go as soon as the printers could be paid. The latter was actually published many years later — first in *Traveller Chronicle* magazine (1994–1995) and then as a Far Future Enterprises PDF (2009). FFE also made Gamelords' many *Traveller* products available as PDFs as part of Marc Miller's general consolidation of classic *Traveller* material.



Other Gamelords projects were further from completion, among them: "Haven: Intrigue on the North Bank," the final book of the Haven Trilogy; Kevin Hardwick's "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory" Civil War

RPG, which had been promised way back in 1982; "Naked Sword" and "Paths of Sorcery," which would expand The Fantasy System to include fighters and magicians; and "Downbelow Station" a licensed RPG based on C.J. Cherryh's science-fiction novel.

Gamelords was sold to Tadashi Ehara of Sleuth Publications in 1986. He received 10,000 pounds of backstock in 344 cartons — perhaps explaining some of Gamelord's financial problems — on December 1, 1986. Ehara talked about plans to publish Haven 3, Paths of Sorcery, and Naked Sword, but never did.

Some of the Gamelords principals remain in roleplaying:

Richard Meyer and Walter Hunt continued to cooperate as "Adventure Architects" for several years. They wrote various RPG and game books, most notably *Mechwarrior* (1986) for FASA. Hunt is now a published novelist. Janet Trautvetter, after a long hiatus outside of the industry, freelanced for White Wolf, mainly in the early '00s. The Keith brothers next moved on to do work for FGU.

Kerry Lloyd passed away on August 27, 1988. As with so many others, his influence on the roleplaying industry remains.

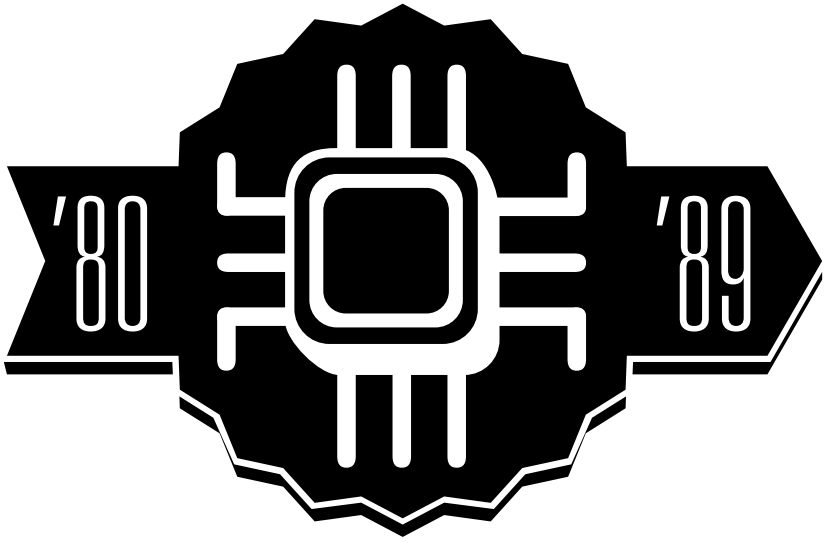
What to Read Next

- For contemporary games based closely on *D&D*, read about the *Palladium Fantasy Role-Playing Game* in ***Palladium***, and *The Atlantis Trilogy* in ***Bard Games.***
- For contemporary work by J. Andrew Keith and William H. Keith Jr. read ***FASA, Task Force Games,*** and ***DGP.***
- For those 344 boxes of product, read ***Different Worlds Publications.***

In Other Eras

- For the origins of Maryland RPG companies, read the mini-histories of Little Soldier Games and Phoenix Games in ***Gamescience*** *['70s].*
- For *Traveller*, its many other licensees, and the origins of the Keith brothers, read ***GDW*** *['70s].*
- For the Keith brothers' next work chronologically, read ***FGU*** *['70s].*
- For earlier games based closely on *D&D*, read about *Arduin* in Grimoire Games *['70s]* and *The Tome of Midkemia* in ***Midkemia Press*** *['70s].*
- For *The Fantasy Trip*, read ***Metagaming Concepts*** *['70s].*

Or read onward to the most famous publishers of Middle-earth, ***ICE.***



Part Three:

The Roleplaying Originals

(1980–1983)

Previous to the ’80s, the number of companies created solely to publish RPGs was quite small. But by 1980 the industry was booming and a huge inrush of new RPG-focused publishers appeared — one that would last for years.

Some of these publishers followed a model of publication from the late ’70s and started off as ***unofficial supplementers*** — like *Grimoire Games* and *Midkemia Press* had. ICE and Leading Edge Games both kicked off their production with combat modules for FRPs, while Bard Games and Palladium started off with *D&D* variants. Unlike the unofficial supplements of the ’70s, these new ’80s companies soon spun their variants into original game systems — most notably ICE’s *Rolemaster* (1982), Leading Edge Games’ *Phoenix Command* (1986), Bard Games’ *Talislanta* (1987), and eventually Palladium’s *Rifts* (1990).

Meanwhile, something completely new appeared: ***original RPG producers*** who got into the hobby to produce their own games. This was the story of TimeLine and *The Morrow Project* (1980) and of Hero Games and *Champions* (1981). They would be harbingers of the hobby’s future.

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
ICE	1980-Present	*Arms Law* (1980)	65
TimeLine	*1980–1991+*	*The Morrow Project (1980)*	177
Hero Games	1981-Present	*Champions* (1981)	126
Palladium Books	1981-Present	*The Mechanoid Invasion* (1981)	151
Leading Edge Games	1982–1993	*Sword’s Path: Glory 1* (1982)	174
Bard Games	1982–1990	*The Compleat Alchemist* (1983)	185

ICE: 1980–Present

ICE was a long-lived publisher that made its living largely on the Middle-earth license. Though they went out of business in the late '90s, they have since been resurrected multiple times.

Rolemaster Beginnings: 1980—1982

The story of ICE begins with Pete Fenlon. He'd been playing *Dungeons & Dragons* since its introduction in 1974, but it was in college in the late '70s where he got involved in the creative side of the business. There — while running a six-year campaign set in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth — Pete Fenlon, S. Coleman Charlton, and Kurt Fischer began to develop a set of unique house rules.

After most of them had graduated from the University of Virginia in 1980, the principals of the group decided to turn those house rules into a business. They formed Iron Crown Enterprises, named after the legendary regalia of Middle-earth. Most would call it ICE for short. Besides Fenlon and Charlton, the original ICE also included Richard H. Britton, Terry K. Amthor, Bruce Shelley, Bruce Neidlinger, Kurt Fischer, Heike Kubasch, Olivia Fenlon, and a few others.



Arms Law (1982 printing)

"I was in grad school in computer science, so I could put in hours at ICE and support myself with teaching and research assistantships."

– S. Coleman Charlton, Interview,
The Official MECCG Newsletter #5 (January 1999)

However, the company had little financing and its principals soon realized that it would be years before they could pay salaries to everyone. As a result, the ten people who founded ICE became six, and those remaining employees started working jobs on the side to make ends meet. Fenlon himself commuted from law school at William & Mary for two years, while Britton ran the company. Despite the part-time status of its employees, ICE quickly published three products: *Arms Law* (1980), *The Iron Wind* (1980), and *Manassas* (1981).

Arms Law, ICE's premiere publication, was the first release of the Virginia house rules and the start of ICE's *Rolemaster* line. At the time, *Rolemaster* wasn't seen as a stand-alone RPG. Instead *Arms Law* was offered as an alternative combat system for *AD&D*. This sort of freeform expansion to TSR's core games was common in the industry at the time. Judges Guild made a business of it, but the shelves were full of less official releases such as Chaosium's *All the Worlds' Monsters* books (1977–1980), Dave Hargrave's *Arduin Trilogy* (1977–1978), Midkemia's various city books (1979–1983), and Gamelords' *Thieves' Guild* (1980–1984).

Arms Law replaced *AD&D*'s simple combat systems with complex charts. Each weapon had its own chart that cross-referenced armor type to show very discrete results for different ranges of die rolls. In addition the percentage-based system introduced "open" dice rolls — allowing results above or below the d100 rolled — and integrated "critical hits" that could result in maiming or death.



The Iron Wind, ICE's second RPG supplement, was a system-neutral campaign centered on a fantastic island — complete with weather, ethnologies, NPCs, and other background details. It also featured an eight-level dungeon. As was common in the time period, *The Iron Wind* went

unsupplemented for years, but it would eventually be recognized as the first release in ICE's *Loremaster* campaign setting.

ICE's last early offering, Rick Britton's *Manassas*, was a Civil War-era wargame set in ICE's home state of Virginia. It was well-received, but lies largely outside of this history of RPGs. It does, however, point toward ICE's interest in strategic games from the very start.

After these three varied publications, ICE focused on *Rolemaster* for the next few years. Their next *Rolemaster* release was *Spell Law* (1981) — a plug-in spell system that was most notable for the fact that it organized spells into lists. These lists gave users access to multiple related spells as they attained additional character levels. Next, *Claw Law* (1982) extended *Rolemaster*'s combat rules to beasts. Finally, ICE produced *Character Law* (1982), a book that provided character creation rules. It tied the set of four books into a (somewhat) cohesive whole, as was shown when *Spell Law*, *Arms Law*, *Claw Law*, and *Character Law* were reprinted as a boxed set called *Rolemaster* (1982).

Despite origins as an *AD&D* plug-in, S. Coleman Charlton and Kurt Fischer's *Rolemaster* became its own unique system. If anything, it owed more to Chaosium's *RuneQuest* (1978) than to *AD&D* (1977–1979), especially given its focus on skill-based characters. Though it might seem a bit quaint now, the *Rolemaster* system was fairly innovative back in 1982. The critical hits of *Arms Law* were among the first of their type published for the mass market (though *Arms Law* postdated *The Arduin Grimoire*), while the related spell lists of *Spell Law* prefigured linked spell groups in many later games — from the spheres of magic in the third edition *Dungeons & Dragons* (2000) game to the Latinate magic of Lion Rampant's *Ars Magica* (1987).

However, *Rolemaster* really made its own impact on the industry through its careful simulation of real-life systems — from its weapon-by-weapon hit charts to its complex experience methods that gave points from everything from receiving critical hits to traveling. These careful simulations were based on relatively simple concepts, but they were nonetheless rooted in a complex, table-based presentation — and that would soon become a detriment when ICE signed a very important license in 1982.

Following the release of the *Rolemaster* box — and that important license we're just getting to — ICE was making real money, which allowed them to become a truly professional company. By the end of 1982 Neidlinger, Coleman, and Amthor all went full-time and began taking salaries.

The Origins of *MERP*: 1982—1984

Because *Rolemaster* had grown out of a Middle-earth game, it made sense for the young ICE to approach Tolkien Enterprises seeking a license to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. What's surprising is that they actually received it. According to Tolkien Enterprises, the reason was simple: no one else had ever asked.

That didn't mean no one else was interested. At least Judges Guild was considering a license and for very similar reasons: the founder's original game had been set in Middle-earth, as is described in their own history. On the other hand, some folks had published Middle-earth material *without* asking for a license, leading to problems for TSR, as their respective history recounts. Of all the companies in the young RPG industry, however, it was ICE who talked to the right people, made the right deals, and thus got the prize. Saul Zaentz's Tolkien Enterprises signed an exclusive, worldwide license with ICE in 1982, locking down the biggest and best license in the history of the roleplaying industry (at least until West End licensed *Star Wars* about five years later).

ICE started their Middle-earth line off by following the same path to success that they'd pioneered with *Rolemaster*. They produced a generic sourcebook that could be used with *AD&D* or other games. It was called *A Campaign and Adventure Guidebook for Middle-earth* (1982) and it was mainly an excuse to package Pete Fenlon's first map of Middle-earth.

The maps of Middle-earth produced by ICE are worthy of note. Besides that first, large, map, Fenlon also penned smaller scale maps for all of ICE's Middle-earth campaign supplements. They'd be used in ICE's Middle-earth books for approximately 15 years. They covered broad swaths of Middle-earth in exacting detail, and continue to be lauded for their technical skill.



After the generic guidebook, ICE began to produce Middle-earth books as *Rolemaster* supplements. The first of these new campaign supplements was *Angmar* (1982) by Heike Kubasch. Counting *Angmar*, ICE published a total of six Middle-earth supplements designed for use with *Rolemaster*.

In these early Middle-earth supplements, ICE made an interesting decision. Rather than setting them at the end of the Third Age — during the War of the Ring — ICE instead placed them about 1400 years earlier.

The Great RPG Licenses: Fantasy

There are a few different fantasy licenses that RPG companies return to again and again.

J.R.R. Tolkien's ***Lord of the Rings*** has always been one of the most sought-after licenses – which is no surprise, since it effectively created the roleplaying hobby. More surprisingly, it was held only by two companies over the first three decades of the industry: ICE ('80s-'90s) and Decipher ('00s). Cubicle 7 is the newest publisher to use the Middle-earth license, in their recent *The One Ring* ('10s) game, which has been hampered by its high price point (around $60 US at the time of this writing). One of the problems with Tolkien licensing is that the setting is sufficiently popular that roleplaying games can't always meet Tolkien Enterprise's expectations for profits. The ICE history discusses the pitfalls this can lead to.

A few other fantasy classics have been popular enough to generate multiple games.

Robert E. Howard's ***Conan*** has seen piles of RPG books published, using four different game systems. TSR held the license first ('80s). They originally published *AD&D* adventures featuring Conan, but then created their own Conan RPG system. Next, Steve Jackson Games featured Conan among their earliest *GURPs* supplements ('80s-'90s). More recently, Mongoose Publishing detailed the world more than anyone before in scores of d20-based books ('00s). They wanted to do a new *RuneQuest* version of the game, but were ultimately unable to maintain their license. As is so often the case with licensed products, Mongoose's line ended not because they were done, but due to disagreements with the licensor, who thought they could get more money from someone else. Since then, Steve Jackson Games has relicensed Conan ('10s) to produce *Munchkin Conan*. Ironically, this has let them reprint their old *GURPS Conan* adventures as PDFs.

Michael Moorcock's ***Eternal Champion*** was held by Chaosium as part of an open-ended license for decades ('70s-'00s) but more recently they gave up the rights so that that Mongoose could publish Eternal Champion *RuneQuest* books ('00s).

Fritz Leiber's ***Fafhrd & The Gray Mouser*** novels were the basis of over a dozen *AD&D* modules from TSR ('80s-'90s), including *Lankhmar: City of Adventure* (1985), one of the first great city books in roleplaying. These only appeared after Chaosium ('80s) gave up their license to keep Leiber out of a legal battle. More recently, Mongoose has published the World of Lankhmar as a *RuneQuest* game ('00s).

New classics are still arising – such as George R.R. Martin's ***Song of Ice & Fire***, which has already seen a d20 game from Guardians of Order ('00s) and an original game from Green Ronin ('00s) in just five years. Surely, worlds like Steven Erikson's ***Malazan*** can't be far behind.

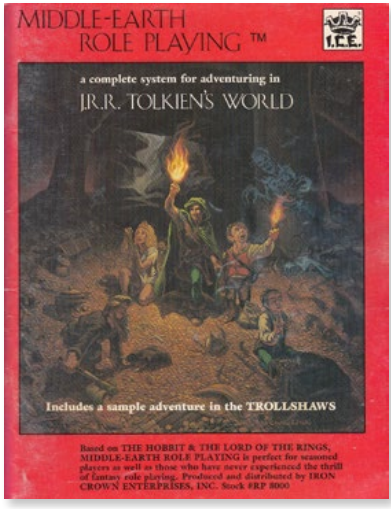
The first supplements wobbled from 1600–1700 in the Third Age (T.A.), but ICE eventually selected 1640 T.A. as the official year of the ICE campaign.

This is always a hard decision in a licensed product; you must determine whether to place your game in the most interesting era for players — when the original media was set — or to place it in a different era where the players will have more free will. As one of the earliest licensed publishers, ICE was blazing new ground when they decided on their non-standard setting.

Unfortunately, the decision was awkward. To start with, ICE never entirely stuck with the decision. Most books conformed to the 1640 T.A. standard, but every book talked about how it could be used in other eras — and the occasional book came out that just couldn't be used in the context of 1640 T.A. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that many players gamed during the War of the Ring Era anyway.

In their first few years, ICE used their license to publish not just RPG supplements, but also a handful of Middle-earth board games. This was fertile ground that had already been tested by SPI's *War of the Ring* (1977) as well as numerous unlicensed games — including a few that TSR had briefly distributed. ICE's Middle-earth board games ran from *The Riddle of the Ring* (1982), a clever game of card management and bluffing, to *The Battle of Five Armies* (1984), a more traditional chit-based wargame. By the time of that final publication in 1984, ICE was already mostly out of the board game industry. It'd be a decade before they published another board game using their Middle-earth license.

After two years of releasing Middle-earth supplements for *Rolemaster*, ICE published *Middle-earth Roleplaying* (1984), or *MERP*, a brand-new game system set in Tolkien's world. *MERP* was controversial in some ways. Though *MERP* simplified the *Rolemaster* system — offering one of the first examples of a publisher making a licensed game easier, to try and appeal to a wider market — it still retained the very mechanical, highly simulative mechanics of its parent. Combat was highly complex and the magic system — which was still essentially *Spell Law* — didn't fit well with Middle-earth. The next year Chaosium's *Pendragon* (1985) showed the power of deeply wedding a background and a game system. Unfortunately, *MERP* did not.



Though they now had a game system, ICE continued to market their Middle-earth books

as being generic — even though they contained *MERP* stats when required. The logos for *MERP* and *Rolemaster* didn't appear on Middle-earth supplements until 1987. Pete Fenlon would later admit in a 1992 open letter that he believed more people used the Middle-earth supplements with *D&D* than with the *MERP* rules themselves.

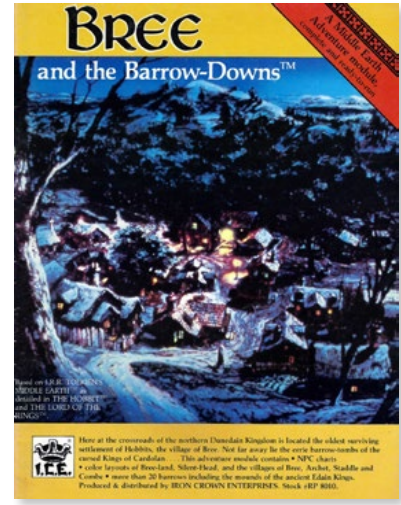
> *"[W]e knew that many gamers would prefer to play another game or even make up their own rules. We suspect that, to this day, a large portion of the folk adventuring in Endor use TSR's Dungeons & Dragons or AD&D rules, even though they employ our Middle-earth supplements."*
>
> – Pete Fenlon, Open Letter, *Other Hands #1* (1993)

Nonetheless, *MERP* was one of the best-selling RPGs in the mid-'80s, largely because of its success in the book trade and overseas. A couple of different reports suggest that first edition English edition of the rules sold over a quarter-million copies. *MERP* did better in Europe than in the United States, and it was translated into 12 languages over its lifetime. Not bad for a game that people "didn't use."

Early *MERP* Releases: 1982—1987

During its first decade of publishing Middle-earth books, ICE put out supplements that were heavy on setting and light on mechanics. This began with those first six *Rolemaster* campaign settings and grew into a line of 21 background books by 1992. Pete Fenlon edited the first of these books and later Jessica Ney-Grimm followed.

Judges Guild and Midkemia Press had done earlier work specifically detailing cities, but rarely went further. As a result ICE's Middle-earth campaign books were some of the most in-depth setting books ever published for roleplaying — a year before Columbia Games began their Hârn books and five years before TSR began publishing the Forgotten Realms. Today they still eclipse other attempts to detail worlds like Glorantha, Talislanta, and Tékumel. If they had any fault it's that they weren't as coherent as the Hârn or Forgotten Realms book; sometimes the areas detailed were widely scattered and ICE choose not to cover many important areas. For example, The Shire was not detailed until 1995. Barad-dûr never was.



Despite their success as setting backgrounds — or perhaps because of it — the

MERP campaign books were also odd ducks in the world of RPGs. Some call them "Encyclopedia Middle-earthia." They provided such specific & deep details, with so little game information, that they probably encouraged an even greater reader-to-player ratio than most RPG lines, which isn't a very healthy pattern for longevity (but they were little different from Columbia's Hârn in this regard).

There were 15 actual adventure modules published in *MERP*'s original adventure line, from *Bree and the Barrow-Downs* (1984) to *Dark Mage of Rhuduar* (1989), but up until 1987 these read more like small-focus setting books, with a few (usually very short) adventures thrown in.

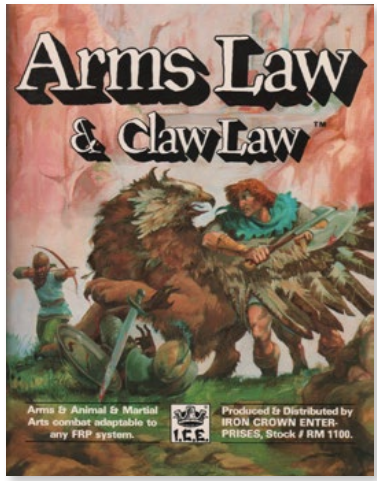
It wasn't until the late '80s that *MERP* started to really develop as its own game system — not just a series of system-agnostic campaign books. As noted, the *MERP* logo entered wider use around this time. In addition ICE produced a series of crunchier releases, beginning with the stat-heavy *Lords of Middle-Earth* (1986) and continuing on to more books of NPCs, monsters, and treasures. In addition, new "Ready-to-Run" adventures (1988–1992) would finally put the focus on real RPG adventures in a way that *MERP* hadn't seen before.

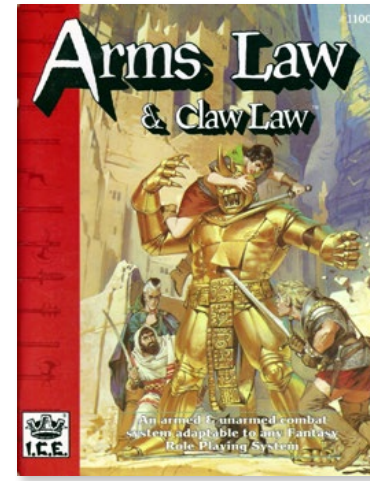
More *Rolemaster* Editions: 1984–1989

Meanwhile ICE was facing the opposite problem with their other line. With the release of *MERP* as its own game, ICE's *Rolemaster* system suddenly had no setting. Fortunately, ICE was prepared for this and opted to give *Rolemaster* (back) a setting when they published their fifth *Rolemaster* core book, *Campaign Law* (1984).

Campaign Law was even more novel than some of the early *Rolemaster* books as it described how to run an entire campaign — making it one of the earliest GM guidebooks on the markets. *Campaign Law* got *Rolemaster* its setting back by reintroducing the setting of *Loremaster* through three new islands collectively called "The World of Vog Mur." ICE simultaneously re-released *The Iron Wind* and published a few new books set in that world. However, the experiment was short lived, and soon the *Loremaster* line was abandoned for a second time, once again leaving *Rolemaster* setting free.

Despite that, *Rolemaster* remained successful. After publishing a second edition (1986), ICE introduced a series of yearly rule supplements, beginning with *Rolemaster Companion* (1986). Each of these books offered new spell lists, new classes, and other new rule systems for *Rolemaster*. On the one hand it seemed a good direction for a rules-heavy system, but on the other hand it highlighted the system's weakness by making it even more complex and convoluted with every release. Some would also complain about poor playtesting and lack of balance in the *Companions*.


Arms Law
& Claw Law™
Arms & Animal & Martial Arts combat adaptable to any FRP system.
I.C.E.
Produced & Distributed by IRON CROWN ENTERPRISES, Stock # RM 1100.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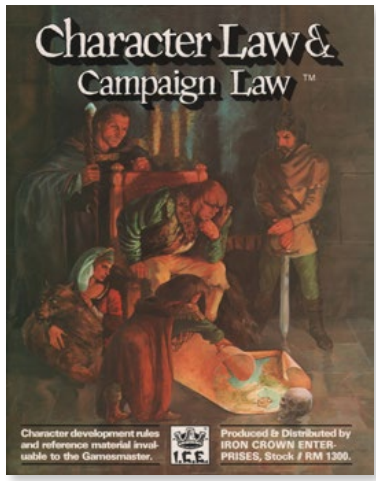
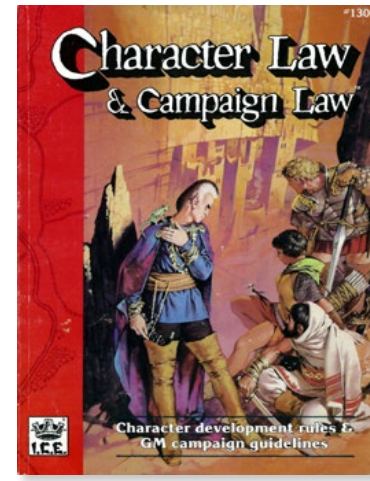
Arms Law
& Claw Law
I.C.E.
An armed & unarmed combat system adaptable to any Fantasy Role Playing System


Character Law &
Campaign Law™
Character development rules and reference material invaluable to the Gamesmaster.
I.C.E.
Produced & Distributed by IRON CROWN ENTERPRISES, Stock # RM 1300.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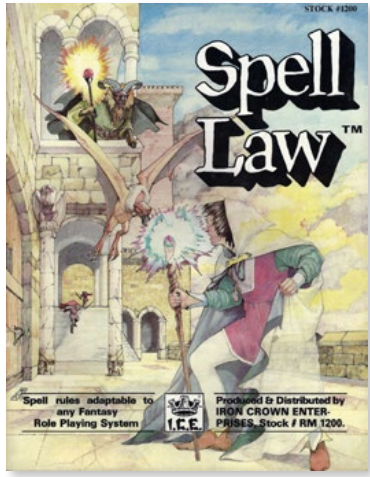
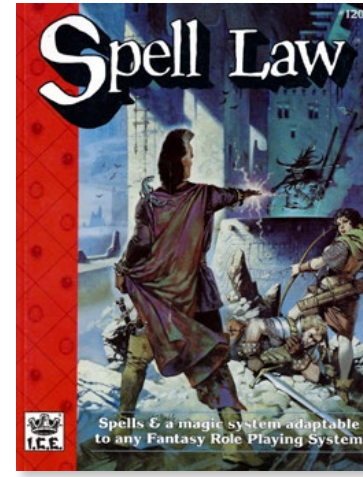
Character Law
& Campaign Law
I.C.E.
Character development rules & GM campaign guidelines


STOCK #1200
Spell Law™
Spell rules adaptable to any Fantasy Role Playing System
I.C.E.
Produced & Distributed by IRON CROWN ENTERPRISES, Stock # RM 1200.


1200
Spell Law
I.C.E.
Spells & a magic system adaptable to any Fantasy Role Playing System

The growing success of *Rolemaster* became obvious when ICE licensed their first *Rolemaster* computer game, a multiplayer text-based online adventure game that was released in demo form on GEnie as *GemStone* (1987), then to playtesters as *GemStone II* (1988). It would be another year before it went commercially live as *GemStone III* (1989). This game featured not only *Rolemaster*'s rules, but also the *Loremaster* background.

GemStone III was one of the earliest computer games licensed from the RPG industry — with only game books and board games preceding it — and it was also the *first* hobbyist-licensed multiplayer computer game, predating *AD&D*'s *Neverwinter Nights* (1991) on competitor AOL by two to four years. *GemStone III* maintained its ICE license until 1995 at which point it was "de-ICEd" — revamping numerous game mechanics to get rid of *Rolemaster* IP and changing the world from "Kulthea" to "Elanthia." The long-running game was released on the internet as *GemStone IV* (2003) and has since been updated as *GemStone IV — Shattered* (2010).

A revised version (1989) of *Rolemaster* second edition appeared just as *GemStone III* was going live. It has remained one of the best-loved editions of the rules through ICE's history. The new edition was supported by a new(ish) campaign setting: Terry Amthor's Shadow World, which retrofitted the old *Loremaster* background into a larger whole. As we'll see, Shadow World was better supported than either previous iteration of *Loremaster* — but ultimately not to ICE's benefit.

Piles of New Products: 1985—1990

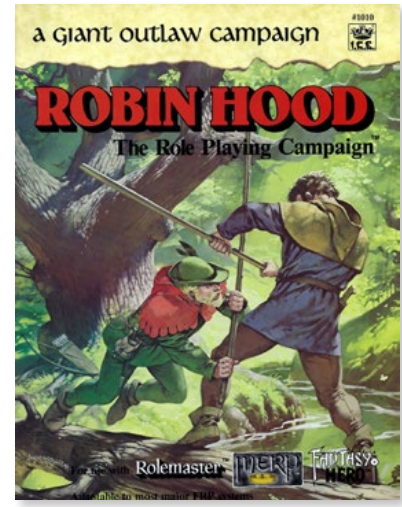
Meanwhile, ICE was not content to rest on its laurels. Following straight on from the *MERP* release of 1984, ICE kept putting out new lines — for a total of seven major expansions in the mid-to-late '80s that pushed ICE into entirely new mediums.

The first new product line was *Space Master*, a *Rolemaster*-derived science-fiction RPG designed by Terry Amthor and Kevin Barrett. It enjoyed first (1985) and second (1988) editions in the eighties. By the second edition — with its extensive world building and starship construction systems — it was obvious that *Space Master* was trying to go straight up against *MegaTraveller* (1987), the recent rerelease of GDW's classic SF game.

That same year, ICE got into the gamebook market — which had been successfully kicked off by the principals of Games Workshop with *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (1982). ICE introduced their line with *Night of the Nazgûl* (1985), the first of their *Tolkien Quest* books. A few years later they expanded their gamebook line, publishing first a series of *Sherlock Holmes Solo Mysteries* — beginning with *Murder at the Diogenes Club* (1987) — and then a series of *Narnia*

Solo Games, the first of which was *Return to Deathwater* (1988). Of all the RPG companies, ICE got more seriously involved with gamebooks than anyone but TSR, and as we'll see this would prove a grave mistake.

ICE's third new expansions of the period centered on a 1986 arrangement to publish Hero Games' books. They were some problems with this deal, all of which is more completely documented in the history of Hero Games, with the end result being that ICE was soon forced to both produce *and* publish the books. Fortunately, new ICE editor Rob Bell did excellent work expanding the *Hero System*. Before the *Hero System* came to ICE, it had been a house system, with rules scattered across several different games. Now *GURPS* (1986) was gaining steam, and the benefits of a truly universal system were becoming more obvious. Therefore, Bell unified the *Hero System*. With the release of *Champions* fourth edition (1989), the *Hero System Rulesbook* (1990), and *Fantasy Hero* (1990), there was a second (mostly) universal game system on the market.



ICE's fourth new product lines had ties to both Hero and *Rolemaster*. Their "Campaign Classics" books detailed historic and mythic backgrounds in excellent one-off sourcebooks that were dual-statted for both systems. There were five in all: *Robin Hood* (1987), *Mythic Greece* (1988), *Vikings* (1989), *Pirates* (1989), and *Mythic Egypt* (1990).

Though well-regarded and generally lauded, the *Campaign Classics* line also highlighted how poor the Hero/ICE fit was. Fans, freelance authors, and even in-house authors for ICE wanted little to do with Hero, and vice-versa. Monte Cook, for a time the editor in charge of both lines, would later recount having to deal with complaints from fans — who all felt like space was being wasted in their books with stats they'd never used — on a daily basis.

> *"Nearly half of AC's readership has spent months demanding that the Iron Crown material be pulled from the magazine. Another contingent has insisted that the Hero material be pulled so that the magazine can celebrate only ICE-dom."*
>
> – Aaron Allston, "'Nuff Said," *Adventurers Club #12* (1988)

As part of the Hero merger, ICE inherited part of a magazine; ICE articles appeared from issue #8 (Fall 1986) through #12 (1988) of *Adventurers Club*,



formerly a Hero-only magazine. But that didn't go over to well with the fans either, so shortly afterward ICE kicked off their fifth new line of the era, a tabloid magazine for talking about *Rolemaster*, *Space Master*, and *MERP*: *Iron Crown Quarterly*. It ran for seven issues (1988–1990). ICE's last new roleplaying line of the late '80s was *Cyberspace* RPG (1989), which used an iteration of the *Space Master* system, but set in a new cyberpunk era. As with many of their releases, ICE was following the trends. R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk* (1988) had just kicked off the genre, while FASA's *Shadowrun* (1989) was released that same year as *Cyberspace*. There was a joke going around the ICE office in 1989, following *Cyberspace*'s release, saying, "If ICE does a game in a genre, you know that genre is dead now."

Finally, ICE got into miniatures as their first decade came to end. Their first miniatures game was Barrett's *Silent Death* (1990), a combat game that used the *Space Master* background, but soon became a solid game line of its own. That same year they released the fantasy-themed *Bladestorm* (1990), which was published as a big box of rules, but also linked to a miniatures line.

By the start of 1990, things looked generally good for ICE, with *Rolemaster*, *Space Master*, *Cyberspace*, *Silent Death*, *Campaign Classics*, three solo book lines, a few miniatures lines, and the entire *Hero System* line of games all under the ICE umbrella. However, problems had been brewing in the background since 1986, and by the end of 1990 they'd become much more visible to the general gaming public.

The Bad Years: 1990—1992

There tend to be three notable signs when an RPG company is floundering.

First of all, freelancers stop getting paid. This was definitely the case for ICE by 1990. One staff member recounts that in this time period perhaps 20% of his time was spent talking with (rightfully) irate freelancers. Many of them stopped submitting proposals to ICE as a result.

Second, the employees face pay cuts or delays. By 1992, experienced ICE employees like Terry Amthor, Kevin Barrett, John Morgan, Monte Cook, and even VP Rick Britton had left ICE for more stable pastures.

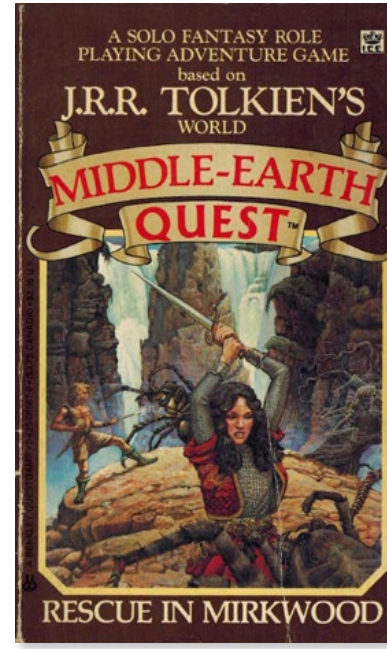
Third, book production grinds to a halt. For reasons that we'll see, all the solo game books dried up first, ending by 1989. Meanwhile most of ICE's roleplaying lines suffered from slowed production. Only the *Hero System* and *Rolemaster* were largely protected from the slowdown, but the *Rolemaster* system was nonetheless in a state of flux.

The *Campaign Classics* were replaced by "genre books," which removed the controversial *Hero* support — though ICE did try one more variant, releasing essentially the same book as Hero's *Western Hero* (1991) and ICE's *Outlaw* (1991). There were also some more far-flung settings among these new genre books, such as Monte Cook's *Dark Space* (1990), a fantasy/science-fiction/horror setting, and the time travelling *Time Riders* (1992).

Meanwhile, the Shadow World line — which had been supported with 15 books from 1989 to 1990 — suddenly died out. After Amthor departed ICE in 1992, the line would lay almost entirely moribund for a decade.

One day ICE staff received even more visceral evidence of the problem. Showing up at work they found the door locked, with a sign that said "closed by order of the sheriff." ICE hadn't been paying its rent. A company that had been successful in the '80s and would again be very successful in the '90s had reached a nadir, and was hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt.

The problems leading to ICE's near-bankruptcy in 1990–1992 originated from those solo gaming books — especially the *Tolkien Quest* books — with problems dating all the way back to 1986.



At that time, three *Tolkien Quest* books had been released, with a fourth on the way. They had already been approved by Tolkien Enterprises, but suddenly Tolkien's book publishing licensee George Allen & Unwin — who was also ICE's UK book distributor — claimed that both ICE and Tolkien Enterprises were in violation of their contract. ICE was forced to recall and destroy all four books. Two different sources put the loss from this and other gamebook issues at between $2.25 million and $2.5 million dollars, a disaster for a self-financed firm.

Meanwhile, a remarkably similar problem overtook the *Narnia Solo Games*. The Narnia

licensor turned out to not have all the necessary rights and went bankrupt, owing ICE considerable damages.

By 1988 ICE had renegotiated a gamebook license with the Estate of J.R.R. Tolkien, and put four *Middle-earth Quest* books out under license from George Allen & Unwin. This didn't make up for the lost revenues of all those destroyed books, but it at least gave ICE a new opportunity to take advantage of the book mass market. Unfortunately, the gamebook market already peaked in 1985–1986. By 1986–1988 it was going soft, with other lines like *Sagard the Barbarian*, *GrailQuest*, *Endless Quest*, *Super Endless Quest*, and *Wizards, Warriors & You* all ending. ICE missed the wave.

This would ultimately push ICE even further over the edge.

Yet another problem emerged when ICE was forced to cancel the solo lines — *Holmes* and *Narnia* in 1988 and *Middle-earth* in 1989 — due to decreasing sales. Approximately a dozen books that ICE had prepared for press could not be printed in the United States — though some did appear in foreign markets. Overall, this wasted investment added to the injury of all those destroyed books. With no chance of recovering from that original, costly letter from George Allen & Unwin, ICE teetered on the brink of collapse.

> *"ICE is NOT in Chapter 7, Chapter 11, or Chapter 13. They were in a voluntary-type of receivership, but it wasn't a formal one. They are out of that now. They are even starting to pay off their back author debt! Or so I've heard. ICE should be in fine financial shape."*
>
> – Bruce Harlick, quoted in a USENET post by John Nephew (January 1993)

Remarkably, ICE was able to claw their way out of their massive debt and by 1993 things were starting to look up. In a pattern also seen in other game companies recovering from downturns, the period immediately after the near-bankruptcy was a revival for the remaining game lines. Though *Cyberspace*, *Space Master*, and the gamebook lines had all been cancelled during the downturn, *MERP*, *Rolemaster*, Hero Games, the new genre books, and the *Silent Death* miniatures game all continued on. *MERP* and *Rolemaster* would also receive some careful attention from ICE in the next few years, including new editions that were the most massive revisions that either game had ever seen.

The Fan Component: 1989—1993

However, not all of ICE's growth came from within. The late '80s and early '90s were a bumper time for fan-created RPG magazines, thanks primarily to the advent of desktop publishing technology. Often these fanzines were able to support RPG lines through hard times, keeping interest in them up when production was down.

ICE was no exception to this trend. In 1989, just before ICE started faltering, Ross Henton and Lem Richards began publishing *Grey Worlds*, a *Rolemaster* fanzine. It ran for 14 issues through 1992. At that point, ICE picked it up, with the intent to publish it at a more professional level, an experiment that failed after just three issues published over two years.

The *MERP* fanzine *Other Hands* had much better luck. Chris Seeman's fanzine began publication in 1993. As we'll shortly see, this got it in on the ground floor of a major new era for *MERP*. With help from ICE's Jessica Ney-Grimm, Seeman's magazine became a nexus of *MERP* content, and later Seeman himself became an assistant line editor for ICE. *Other Hands #1* (1993) also had the privilege of publishing a unique announcement about the future of *MERP*, which we're just getting to.

The Final *MERP* Incarnation: 1993—1997

Despite the downturn for ICE and the slowdown in *MERP* production, two new Middle-earth games appeared in 1991, though only one was produced by ICE itself. The first was *Middle-earth Play-By-Mail* (1991), a licensed game created by Pete Stassun and Bill Field of Game Systems Inc., which would win numerous Origins awards over the years before being inducted into the Hall of Fame. The second was the *Lord of the Rings Adventure Game* (1991), which was a simplified version of *MERP*, showing ICE once again trying to appeal to a wider audience. Then, in 1993, in that *Other Hands* announcement, Pete Fenlon announced yet more growth for Middle-earth.

Fenlon prefaced his announcement by admitting the two problems that had long plagued *MERP*: the rules that seemed poorly meshed with the setting, and the setting that was often only lightly described with rules.

> *"Unfortunately, ICE's presentation of the MERP rules left much to be desired. We often created a sense of confusion and complexity, even where the guidelines were conceptually simple. In some cases (e.g., with the magic and character creation rules) ICE also failed to create a feeling that MERP was designed around the setting. We failed to create the feeling that the rules were uniquely well-suited to the world of Middle-earth.*

> *"So, while our Middle-earth products are generally very well-received, and while the vast majority of our fan mail is extremely positive, there is a lot of room for design improvement. Much of the problem can be attributed to the fact that ICE wanted the supplements, not the rules, to tell the tale of Middle-earth. …This philosophy, however, has 'diluted the line.'"*
>
> – Pete Fenlon, Open Letter, *Other Hands #1* (1993)

To reestablish the Middle-earth line, Fenlon laid out a four-step publishing program:

First, ICE would publish "three-dimensional" adventures, which could work with the *Lord of the Rings Adventure Game* (*LOR*), *MERP*, or as standalone board games.

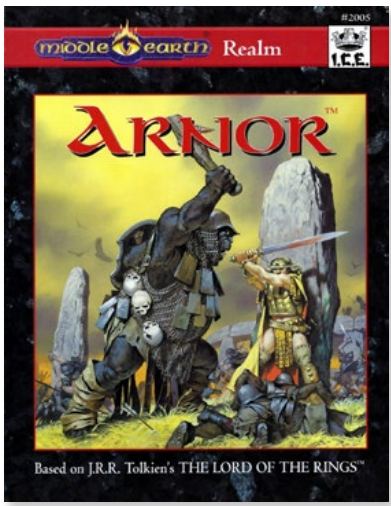
Second, ICE would produce a mass-market strategy game set in Middle-earth.

Third, ICE would continue to support the *Lord of the Rings Adventure Game* as an entry point to the hobby.

Fourth, ICE would release a second edition of *MERP*. It would still be *Rolemaster*-lite, but with a bit more attention paid to making character creation and magic fit into Middle-earth. At the same time, the *MERP* first edition line would be repackaged, and *MERP* supplements would become much larger and more expansive.

The multi-pronged approach was a strong one (and strikingly similar to other multi-pronged attempts to revitalize product lines, such as Chaosium's 1997 plans for Glorantha). Unfortunately, like those other plans, ICE was never able to fulfill theirs to its maximum potential.

The 3D adventures never came about, but each of the other prongs materialized … somewhat.



There was just a single mass-market board game, *The Hobbit Adventure Board Game* (1994). It was too simplistic for hobbyist gamers, and there are no records of it drawing in notable numbers of new players to *MERP* or even *LOR*.

The Lord of the Rings Adventure Game was supported with just one new supplement *Over the Misty Mountains Cold* (1993) — though at least two more were scheduled. *LOR* might have offered a good introduction to Middle-earth roleplaying, but it also diluted the *MERP* line, because

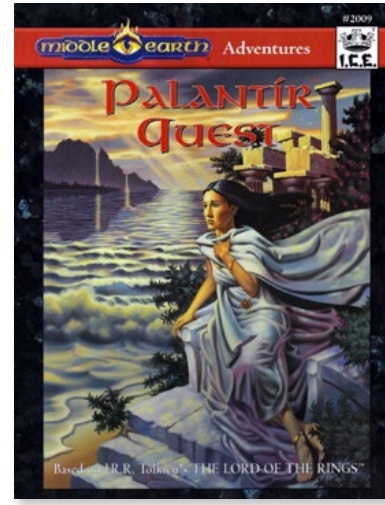
now every single supplement featured dual *LOR*/*MERP* stats, sometimes wasting tens of pages.

That left *MERP* second edition as the only notable expansion of ICE's Middle-earth lines. The new edition (1993) launched with a well-polished rulebook that contained better Middle-earth theming. It was followed by the very impressive sourcebook, *Arnor* (1994) — a massive 416-page tome that encompassed five different first edition sourcebooks. After that a lot of reprints discouraged older players, though *Arnor* continued to stand as a symbol of the revamped line's potential.

Unfortunately, *MERP* was *still* weighed down with its twin problems of complex rules and unintegrated backgrounds. The disconnects that Fenlon had noted hadn't been entirely fixed by the new *MERP* lines. The rules were better, but they were still an early '80s design that was simulative and didn't take advantage of the storytelling advances of the late '80s and early '90s. Though the sourcebooks were now intended to be crunchier, ICE still decreed that the proper background-to-adventure ratio was 9:1.

MERP second edition slowly fought against these problems, and a few supplements that stretched ICE's old background-only envelope eventually appeared. *Palantir Quest* (1994) was *MERP*'s first (and only) campaign-length adventure. *The Kin-Strife* (1995) offered a different type of campaign, with heavy emphasis on background, but with lots of adventures interspersed. *Hands of the Healer* (1997) was *MERP*'s first (and only) truly crunchy game book. It was a splatbook for healers.

Unfortunately, *Hands of the Healer* was also the final book in the *MERP* line. We'll return to all the reasons for the line ending shortly, but the simplest is this: from 1986 to 1995, *MERP* had bled readers at a high rate — at least partially because it was no longer in the book trade. Whereas Middle-earth books were 85% of ICE's sales in 1986, they were only 15% in 1995, a total reversal.



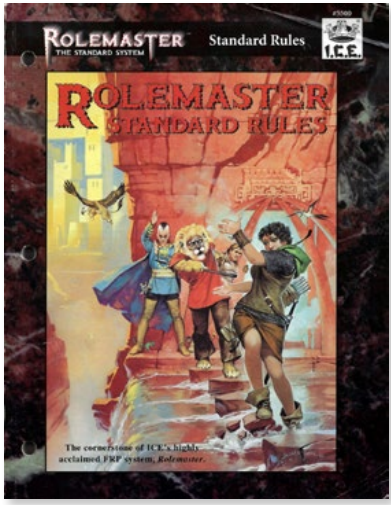
The Penultimate *Rolemaster* Incarnation: 1994—1998

In the years following their 1990–1992 flirtation with bankruptcy, ICE continued to support their *Rolemaster* second edition line up through 1994. In the meantime, ICE was preparing a new edition of *Rolemaster*, which they called the *Rolemaster Standard System*, or *RMSS*. It was released as four books: *Arms Law* (1994), *Gamemaster Law* (1995), *Spell Law* (1995), and *Rolemaster Standard Rules* (1995).

RMSS sought to resolve cohesion problems that *Rolemaster* had fought with since the earliest days, when the system was released as a series of *AD&D* plug-ins. Here, the new system was successful, as *Rolemaster* felt unified for the first time ever.

However, the designers also indulged their love for complexity in the new edition, and the resulting rules were quite bloated — to the point that some players have called it "Advanced Rolemaster," a truly daunting name. A core list of 28 skills had blossomed into 300+, divided among 56 skill categories. The character creation system required to support this growth was entirely convoluted, with 10 years of new game design ideas thrown in willy-nilly. The total size of all of the books bloated too, and the *Rolemaster* system could no longer be sold as a single box. To buy the entire set you needed to spend $65, an unheard of amount in the mid-'90s, though at $95 in modern money, it's comparable to the three-book *D&D* set today.

Following the release of *RMSS*, ICE tried to duplicate their old formula for success. Named companions collected coherent sets of rules, from the *Arcane Companion* (1995) to the *Mentalism Companion* (1998). New *RMSS* genre books expanded the system to new settings, including *Black Ops* (1997) and *Pulp Adventures* (1997). A single Shadow World adventure also appeared in the era (1995).



Rolemaster also returned to computer screens in this time period, thanks to Mythic Entertainment who put out three games using the *Rolemaster* system: *Rolemaster: Magestorm* (1996), *Darkness Falls* (1997), and *Rolemaster: Bladelands* (1997). They also published a *Silent Death* computer game (1999).

Finally, the *RMSS* resurgence capped off with some new fan publications. Though *Portals* (1996–1997) published just two issues, it was replaced by an online magazine called *The Guild Companion* (1998-Present), which continues to this day — and which has become very important to the future of *Rolemaster*.

Despite new supplements, computer games, and fanzines, *RMSS* was still saddled with two problems: a high price point and a dull line name which didn't emphasize the game's fantasy setting. As we'll see these two elements would result in yet one more edition of *Rolemaster* in ICE's final days.

The CCG Line: 1995—1998



For the moment, however, *RMSS* was unsuccessful as a revision of ICE's core system. Worse, as we've already seen, *MERP* sales had been dropping for years. These factors caused ICE to look increasingly toward other categories of games in their final years. *Silent Death* continued to do well, while Andrew Looney's *Fluxx* (1997), a chaotic American-style card game, was a surprise success. However to really be successful in the '90s, ICE decided that they needed to get into the CCG industry.

In 1994, this proved a bit of a problem, because ICE didn't actually have the rights to create a Middle-earth CCG. Shortly after the release of *Magic: The Gathering* (1993), Wizards of the Coast had begun gobbling up licenses for the most notable RPG gameworlds, in part to head off competition. ICE had signed over the rights to a Middle-earth CCG, but Wizards had not taken advantage of them. Now, ICE was able to recover those rights and publish the *Middle-earth Collectible Card Game* (1995) or *MECCG*.

The result — designed by *Rolemaster*'s own S. Coleman Charlton — was, unfortunately, very complex. Players had to juggle no less than five different types of cards — characters, sites, regions, resources, and hazards — which were divided into several decks, while trying to gather marshalling points faster than their opponents. Or, they could try and take out their opponents' wizards or destroy the One Ring itself, as there were a few ways to win the game. Some reviewers said that it was the first CCG that they wanted to collect, not play.

> *"On the one hand, [MECCG is] a unique combination of the best elements of board and card games, with vast depth and huge variety. On the other, it's complex, frustrating and poorly realised."*
>
> – Andy Butcher, "*Middle Earth: The Wizards* Review," *Arcane #4* (March 1996)

Despite issues with the mechanics, the Middle-earth CCG initially did quite well. ICE would sell about $12,000,000 worth of *MECCG* product, and it would be published in 13 languages, including Basque. However, CCG product lines are overall very hard to manage because of their explosive ups and downs. ICE found this out — much as Wizards of the Coast had before them — when they listened too much to distributors about what to print and ended up overprinting some early releases. As time went on, ICE tried to navigate the turbulent CCG market by changing from collectible releases to non-collectible "challenge decks," but it wasn't enough. As we'll see, those early overprinting errors would ultimately prove fatal.

Though *MECCG* was one of the beacons of hope (or at least profitability) in ICE's last years, it would eventually take the company down.

The Last Years of ICE: 1994—2001

In the mid-to-late '90s, ICE was beset by an ever-increasing number of problems that made the company struggle.

On the roleplaying side of things, paper costs tripled in 1994 and were continuing to spiral upward, undercutting ICE's idea of attracting readers through massive sourcebooks and rulebooks. In 1996 they were forced to limit their book size to 250 pages, and in 1997 they dropped their upper limit down to 144 pages.

On the collectible card side of things, the initial CCG bubble burst in 1996, and it started bringing down retailers and distributors. Several distributors went out of business in 1997 and 1998, making the entire hobbyist landscape very treacherous. ICE tried to head off this problem by signing an exclusive distribution agreement with Chessex, but then Chessex merged with Alliance, leaving ICE once more on its own.

1996 was ICE's best year, thanks largely to the CCG and strategy gaming market, with sales peaking at just under $6,000,000. However, this strategic focus also cost them. Hero Games offered an amicable warning to ICE that the *Hero System* needed more focus, and later they jumped ship on August 26, 1996 — announcing that R. Talsorian Games was taking over Hero's publishing and distribution. ICE had published and sold licensed Hero Games books for 10 years,

and the line accounted for 20% of ICE's core (non-CCG) revenue. The loss of the brand during the height of CCG sales didn't make a big difference, but as the CCG market cooled, that loss loomed larger, particularly when ICE's financial difficulties started gathering steam in 1997.

ICE wasn't the only company having problems in 1997. This was the same year that TSR was purchased by Wizards of the Coast, and also the year that long-running board- and RPG-manufacturer Mayfair Games went out of business. Not yet aware of its own impending financial downturn, ICE bailed out Mayfair, resurrecting them as Iron Wind Inc. — which then started doing business again under new management as Mayfair Games. Many of the shares of the new Mayfair went to the principals of ICE, while other shares ended up owned by ICE directly.

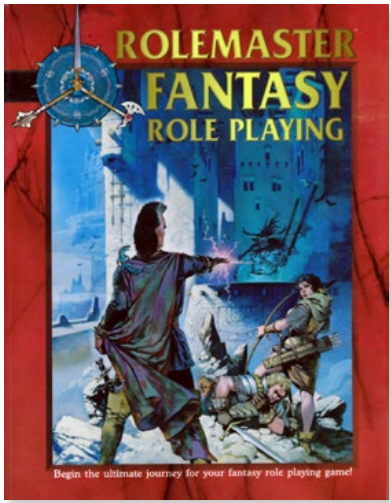
Just four months later, however, it was obvious that ICE wasn't that stable themselves. On September 19, 1997, ICE declared a moratorium on the *MERP* line. They planned to support it in small ways with short supplements and crossovers with their *MECCG* and *Rolemaster* lines, but for all intents and purposes, *MERP* was dead. Any hopes for roleplaying in Tolkien's Middle-earth were thereafter pinned on ICE's plan to release a *new* roleplaying game to coincide with the new *Lord of the Rings* movies (2001–2003) — even then planned for the big screen.

The end of the *MERP* line was sufficiently sudden that many partial or completed manuscripts never saw print. These included: The Inland Sea, The Grey Havens, Khand, Near Harad, Paths of the Dead, Umbar, and Northern Gondor. Under *MERP* second edition, ICE had really been trying to bring their whole world together in a more cohesive whole (as Hârn and Forgotten Realms had by now done), and these supplements would have completed the task — if they ever saw print.

Though *MERP* wasn't profitable any more, and though ICE was already hurting from the loss of Hero, the biggest cause of ICE's 1997 downturn was neither of these things. Instead, the problem was the aforementioned overprinting of *MECCG* supplements — beginning with *MECCG Unlimited Edition* (1996) and continuing through the next couple of supplements.

A CCG can cause remarkable swings in success at an RPG company, which usually works at a smaller financial scale. When *MECCG* was released in 1995 it helped ICE take care of the last debts left over from its first near-bankruptcy. Now ICE had sent the pendulum swinging far back in the other direction. Even though ICE got the print runs right for their final *MECCG* expansions, they never recovered. The history of Chaosium's interactions with the CCG industry tells an almost identical story.

MECCG production stopped in 1998 and ICE's debts began to *really* pile up.



ICE's last line standing was *Rolemaster*, which they released in a fourth edition that they called *Rolemaster Fantasy Roleplaying* (1999), or *RFRP*. This new edition sought to correct the two core problems of *RMSS*:

First, it allowed ICE to repackage the core rules as a single hardcover — which contained the former *RMSS* rulebook, plus some parts of *Arms Law* and *Spell Law* — thereby reducing the cost for entry into the game system.

Second, it let them put the word "fantasy" front-and-forefront, a much better branding strategy than the soulless "standard system."

Reports in 1999 indicated that RPG sales were on the upswing, and this boded well for the new *Rolemaster* system. However ICE's existing problems were too much. ICE was unable to bridge the final year or so that would have been required for *Rolemaster Fantasy Roleplaying* to mature ... and for the *Lord of the Rings* movies to be released.

Unfortunately, one of the debts that was piling up by 1999 was royalties owed to Tolkien Enterprises. Worse, Tolkien Enterprises had a vested interest in recovering the Tolkien gaming rights before the movies released (as it would allow them to resell the rights at a higher rate) and had evidenced a very mercenary attitude toward their licensees in the past.

> "To be honest, our eye is focused on royalty income rather than on the finer details of the games themselves."
> – Laurie Battle (Licensing director, Tolkien Enterprises), Interview, *Other Hands #10/11* (November 1995)

In 1999 Tolkien Enterprises called in their debts and ICE was forced to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. This is the type of bankruptcy which temporarily protects a company from debtors so that they can reorganize the company and make it profitable again. Clearly, ICE intended to have another go at it once they got their house in order.

However, by going into bankruptcy — even temporarily — ICE gave Tolkien Enterprises the opportunity to recover the Middle-earth license, and they did. On

September 21, 1999, ICE announced that they'd lost the rights to Middle-earth. They still kept publishing their other lines for another year — putting out a few final *Rolemaster* books and even a new *Spacemaster: Privateers* RPG (2000) while in chapter 11— but by now they were doomed.

Because of the bankruptcy proceedings, information on ICE's sales in these last few years was uniquely offered to the public, as the following chart of unit sales shows:

	1997	1998	1999	2000
RFRP Rules	–	–	2,386	1,255
RFRP Arms Law	–	–	*1,341*	*679*
RFRP Creatures & Monsters	–	–	1,486	635
Silent Death Boxed Set	1,572	868	258	419
Silent Death Rules	518	280	103	78

The sales numbers for *Rolemaster Fantasy Roleplaying* are pretty terrible for a set of original core book releases, probably 50%-75% what they should have been for a healthy company in 1999. Contrariwise the *Silent Death* products (which were not new releases) show the company's strength. Nonetheless, the abrupt downswing in 1999 is frightening, and really underlines how large ICE's problem was.

One of ICE's last attempts to revive the company resulted in them selling off *Silent Death* to Mythic Entertainment — makers of the computer game — for $15,000. At the time Mythic was also working on an MMORPG that used the *Rolemaster* rules called *Dark Age of Camelot* (2001). However, because of ICE's bankruptcy Mythic was forced to pull the *Rolemaster* mechanics out of their upcoming game. If *Dark Age of Camelot* had gone out as a *Rolemaster* game, it could have resulted in considerable royalties for the company. One source suggests a total of $7 million would have been earned over the next several years, which would have more than paid off ICE's debts.

Unfortunately, Tolkien Enterprises wasn't done with ICE yet. They stayed aggressively involved with ICE's bankruptcy proceedings, at one point even forcing ICE to stop sales of past *MERP* modules — though this could have raised needed money to pay off their debt. Later Tolkien Enterprises convinced ICE's bank to freeze their funds, which has been reported as the ultimate cause of what happened next.

Around October 26, 2000, Pete Fenlon announced that ICE entered Chapter 7 bankruptcy, which is the bad kind.

> *"I regret to say that, after 20+ years and after having published hundreds of adventure game products, Iron Crown Enterprises is closing its doors. We have filed a voluntary petition in the United States Bankruptcy Court pursuant to Chapter 7 of Title 7 of the United States Code, which governs the liquidation of companies. We are converting our Chapter 11 petition to a Chapter 7. We are beginning steps toward dissolution. We enter this termination period with great sadness. At the same time, we are very proud of our work, of the people we have trained and nurtured, and of the many rich experiences and friendships we have been blessed to receive. We are especially proud of having such a great group of loyal customers. All of us have been honored to serve the adventure game market with what have usually been labors of real love. While we have often been financially poor, we have always been enriched by our trade. Thank you for letting us serve you."*
>
> – Pete Fenlon, Announcement (October 2000)

ICE, as founded in 1980, was dead. The principals largely moved on to Castle Hill Studios (with the Kesmai Studios crew), and then to Mayfair — which is today overseen by Pete Fenlon and S. Coleman Charlton. Many other ICE alumni are scattered across the tabletop and computer fields: Kevin Barrett works as a writer at BioWare, while Monte Cook was one of the designers of the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Meanwhile the company's remaining assets were put on the auction block. The only questions were who would buy them, and what they'd do with them.

ICE for Sale: 2001

A weird scattering of things got put up for auction.

MERP (and *MECCG*) was now entirely gone — due to the loss of licensing rights. Tolkien Enterprises would later force the next owners of ICE's assets to destroy all of the old *MERP* stock.

Decipher eventually relicensed Middle-earth RPG and CCG rights from Tolkien Enterprises, and a few ICE alumni would participate in the new lines. Matt Forbeck and Chris Seeman each did some work on the RPG, while Mike Reynolds — the *MECCG* line editor — managed Decipher's *Lord of the Rings CCG* program. The history of Last Unicorn Games touches upon some of Decipher's roleplaying work. More recently, Cubicle 7 published a third Middle-earth RPG.

As already noted, *Silent Death* was gone as well.

Shadow World was still part of ICE's portfolio, but Terry Amthor had long before been granted a dual copyright to all the Shadow World material, as well as a license to use *Rolemaster* in conjunction with the world. He'd use those rights to

form his own Eidolon Studio. Since Amthor had always been the creative heart of Shadow World, no work on the world was likely to proceed without Eidolon's involvement, despite ICE's shared ownership of the material.

300 shares of Mayfair Games, or about 25% of the company, were sold for just $5,400, and appear to somehow have gotten back into the hands of the company itself.

> *"John R. Seal, a long time ICE fan, acquired the majority of the Iron Crown Enterprises Inc. assets. These assets were purchased at an auction run by a Federal bankruptcy court in Charlottesville, Virginia. John R. Seal will place these assets into Aurigas Aldebaron LLC ("Aurigas"). Aurigas will then enter into a Master License with Phoenix LLC, which will be charged with the full promotion and use of the assets.*
>
> *Phoenix LLC ("Phoenix") is largely owned and operated by certain ex-ICE employees, Bruce Neidlinger, Heike Kubasch, and Stephen Hardy. Phoenix (dba Iron Crown Enterprises) will start immediate operations using the large amount of inventory and intellectual property acquired at the auction."*
>
> – Press Release (2001)

That left *Rolemaster* and *Space Master* — although some of these rights had reverted to authors upon ICE's bankruptcy — as well as the ICE brand itself and those shared Shadow World rights. Everything that was left was sold to John R. Seal of London for $78,000. Those rights were then placed into Aurigas Aldebaron LLC, which is a holding company that takes on no debt and is solely intended to hold the ICE properties.

ICE Mk. 2, A Hopeful Beginning: 2002—2005

Shortly after purchasing the ICE rights, Aurigas licensed them out to a company interested in continuing ICE's production: Phoenix LLC, which soon became Mjolnir LLC. Though the original ICE was gone, Mjolnir began doing business as "ICE," using the company's IPs and brand.

The CEO of Mjolnir was Bruce Neidlinger. He'd previously been the CEO of the original ICE, but broke away when other principals moved to Mayfair. Heike Kubasch, author of *Angmar* — the first Middle-earth campaign sourcebook — was Mjolnir's President.

It took until 2002 for Mjolnir to start publishing ICE products. Once they got going, they were pretty reliable about publishing new products ... for a few years.

Mjolnir's first goal was to continue with the *Rolemaster Fantasy Roleplaying* line that *could* have been the original ICE's saving grace. *Fire and Ice: The Elemental Companion* (2002) looked like it'd been produced by the original ICE, but by the next year releases like the *Construct Companion* (2003) and the *Mentalism*

Companion (2003) sported a new trade dress that made the game look more professional and attractive than ever before.

Mjolnir also returned to ICE's original world with the *Shadow World Master Atlas* Fourth Edition (2003). Terry Amthor's massive 224-page overview of the Shadow World gave the best attention ever to the classic fantasy world — though Mjolnir had been scooped two years earlier by Amthor's own third edition of the book, published through Eidolon Studios. However, after the publication of the Shadow World-based *Races & Cultures* (2004), *RMFRP* publication dried up, suggesting that all might not be well with ICE's core fantasy line.

Mjolnir also jumped right into the *Spacemaster: Privateers* line that the original ICE had released just before its demise. The new *Privateers* universe was intended to step away from the "*Silent Death*" universe now owned by Mythic. The game also updated the *Spacemaster* mechanics to something more like the *Rolemaster's Standard System* mechanics — which is to say they were more complicated.

Unfortunately, *Privateers* hadn't been successful for the original ICE and it wasn't for Mjolnir either. Many fans found the new setting unimaginative, while the more complex rule system had all the same problems as the modern version of *Rolemaster*. Mjolnir released *Blaster Law* (2002), *Future Law* (2003), *Privateers: Races & Cultures* (2002), and a *Vehicle Manual* (2002) into a void, before realizing the game might not have much consumer support.

It wasn't the best start for a brand-new company, especially when combined with the halt of *RMFRP* production just two years later.

Fortunately, Mjolnir wasn't planning to continue solely on the path that the original ICE had pioneered — because, after all, that path had led to their ultimate bankruptcy. Though they put out products much like the old company would have in 2002 and 2003, by the latter year they also produced something all their own: *HARP: High Adventure Role Playing* (2003), a new RPG by Tim Dugger and Heike Kubasch.



HARP was *Rolemaster* rebuilt to be faster and simpler. It still retained some of the better elements of the *RMFRP* system — such as a focus on both races and cultures that allowed for a lot of detail in a character's background. However, it was also genuinely *quite* simplified. Though its parent game had at times been called "ChartMaster," *HARP* managed to reduce basic actions to a single chart, with another handful of charts

required for weapons and spells. Combat was so basic that you just added a roll to bonuses and penalties and hit if you got a 1 or higher — though there was of course the option for criticals as well.

Don't let all that talk of simplification make you think that *HARP* wasn't complex. It *was*. However, it wasn't necessarily more complex than the d20 system that was at the time the industry's state of the art.

Some people loved the new *HARP*, while others were indifferent to it. It definitely received some critical acclaim, and more importantly it gave Mjolnir something they'd been missing when they were just continuing with the original ICE's lines: attention. Mjolnir quickly supported *HARP* with a revised edition (2004) and major supplements such as *College of Magics* (2004), *Martial Law* (2004), *Monsters: A Field Guide* (2004), and an in-depth look at HARP's default setting, *Cyradon* (2005).

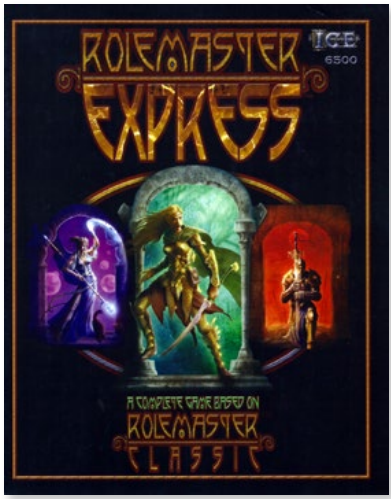
Sadly, all that wasn't enough to make Mjolnir a success. In 2005 word started getting around that bad things were going on at Mjolnir. To repeat an old theme: freelancers weren't being paid.

ICE Mk. 2, A Slow Decline: 2005—2010

Although Mjolnir admitted that they were behind on freelancer payments in 2005, they largely attributed that to illness on the part of the two principals — Neidlinger and Kubasch — as well as multiple family deaths. However, there seems little doubt that *Spacemaster: Privateers* and *Rolemaster Fantasy Roleplaying* weren't paying the bills, as Mjolnir never returned to them after closing down the lines in 2002 and 2004. *HARP* was supported a little longer — through almost a dozen print books in all — but after the *Battlemaster* (2007) adventure and the *Character Book* (2007) supplement, it was confined to PDF.

Meanwhile, Mjolnir had decided to resurrect an even older property. With support for the *RMFRP* — the fourth edition of *Rolemaster* — dead, Mjolnir instead went back to the very popular 2.5 edition, first producing a limited edition leather-bound edition of all the core books (2006), then individually reprinting its *Character Law* (2006), *Arms Law* (2007), *Spell Law* (2007), and *Creatures & Treasures* (2007) as a *Rolemaster Classic* line. The new *Rolemaster Express* (2007) game was then published as a simplified entry to *Classic*.

In 2008 it looked like Mjolnir was going to support the new line in a major way, starting with a few GM screens (2008) and a new *Rolemaster Classic* book, *Combat Companion* (2008). But then print support died entirely, presumably because *Rolemaster Classic* — whether it was more successful than *Rolemaster Fantasy Roleplaying* or not — wasn't successful enough to maintain a print production line.



In later years, the vast majority of Mjolnir production appeared in a pair of PDF magazines. *Harper's Bazaar* (2005–2008, 2010) offered support for the *HARP* game, but faded away just a year after the end of the game's print production. *Express Additions* (2007–2010) was originally intended to add more complex *Classic* rules to the simpler *Express* game, but sometimes included new rules *Classic* and *Express* alike.

A few final PDFs appeared for both *HARP* and *Rolemaster Classic* after 2008 — but not enough to keep even a small press line going. One of them — a *Rolemaster Classic* adventure called *Stone of Seven Souls* (2009) — was notable because it was a *Rolemaster* adventure built using one of the maps produced by 0one Games. It was supposed to be part of a much larger crossover, with numerous 0one maps and Mjolnir publications integrating tightly — but that plan has never come to fruition.

Mjolnir remained an active company through the end of 2010, but an increasing amount of their attention was focused on computer development such as "Iceverse," an ICE-specific implementation of the *SceneGrinder* online play environment, and *Hot Money* (2010), a Facebook game not related to any of Mjolnir's existing lines. Mjolnir continued to produce a few new PDFs, sell old PDFs, and sell their core game books in a variety of hardcover, softcover, and clothbound varieties — but as time went on, it became increasingly obvious that they'd moved from being a second- or third-tier RPG company to being a hobby.

Events in 2009 would prove prescient for ICE's second incarnation. That year Mjolnir previewed *HARP Sci-Fi* (2009) in an incomplete form at Gen Con Indy 2009, but ultimately decided that they couldn't finish development themselves, so they handed the property off to Guild Companion Publications of the UK, who we've already met through the *Guild Companion* fanzine.

Though Mjolnir never talked about their finances, we can guess at a few reasons for their downward spiral.

In retrospective, their decision to continue on with *Rolemaster Fantasy Roleplaying* and *Spacemaster: Privateers* was a bad one — though it's unclear if Mjolnir could have known that in advance, since both games were still pretty fresh when the original ICE went under. Of course, they had d20 to contend with as well, a problem that the original ICE never had to face off against.

Mjolnir's decision to revive *Rolemaster Classic* seems cannier, since it accurately responded to a discontent among *Rolemaster* fans that had been building for over a decade. Whether it was too little too late is a totally different question, as it seems unlikely that fans of the original *Rolemaster* game were paying attention to Mjolnir, 10 years after their favored game had disappeared. Worse, Mjolnir never did much in the way of marketing to get the word out there, nor did their products get very far into distribution, even when they did print them.

In fact, Mjolnir's isolation from the industry was likely a large part of its downfall. Their lack of marketing and distribution might well have been deathblows on its own. However, they went beyond that and refused to sign on to the popular PDF stores, such as RPGnow and DrivethruRPG. Instead, if you wanted to buy ICE PDFs, you had to go to Mjolnir's online store. Paizo Publishing and Steve Jackson Games have both been able to pull this sort of thing off, but only by building enormous online stores that people come to for products from *lots* of different companies. Mjolnir tried to do something similar through deals with companies like 0one Games — but without the clout that Steve Jackson or Paizo had.

Another problem for Mjolnir was likely their refusal to drop any game lines. In their final days, when you went to their website, you found a severely splintered brand that included: *Rolemaster Classic*, *Rolemaster Express*, *HARP*, and *Rolemaster Fantasy Roleplaying*. ICE tried to differentiate the games with articles that described "*RMC* vs. *RMX*" and "*RMC* vs. *RMFRP*," but the resulting mishmash was probably daunting to any new consumer (and likely many old consumers as well, each of whom could justly feel that *their* favorite game wasn't getting the appropriate level of support).

These problems could have continued as Mjolnir slowly slid into oblivion except for one fact: Mjolnir wasn't on their own like the original ICE had been. As the problems with the ICE brand became increasingly obvious, the actual owner of the IPs, Aurigas Aldebaron, decided to pull all of Mjolnir's ICE-related rights. Late in 2010, the second incarnation of ICE came to an end.

ICE Mk. 3, A Hopeful Beginning: 2010-Present

After recovering the ICE IPs from Mjolnir, Aurigas licensed the rights for *HARP*, *Rolemaster*, and *Spacemaster* to Guild Companion Publications. These joined licenses for *HARP Sci-Fi* and for Shadow World that GCP had already accrued during Mjolnir's long downfall.

Prior to becoming the new ICE, GCP had already put out two major products under license: *Rolemaster Companion One* (2008) was an update of ICE's classic *Rolemaster Companion I* for the new *Rolemaster Classic* system, while *Shadow World Player Guide: The World* (2010) was a brand-new intro to the Shadow

World by Terry Amthor himself. Both of these books were well-received, and perhaps more importantly, they were immediately available on DrivethruRPG — showing GCP's dedication to integrating with the gaming community, not isolating themselves as Mjolnir had.

> *"We still have a residual trio of RMSS/FRP products that we wish to rebrand – namely Arcane Companion, Channeling Companion and School of Hard Knocks, all of which date from an era when Old ICE used more fonts than is sane and software did not preserve these rare fonts, and that is why they've been left to last."*
> – Nicholas Caldwell, "Director's Briefing," ironcrown.com (January 2012)

GCP's first project as ICE was the PDF release of Nicholas Caldwell's *HARP SF* (2011), which we've already seen had been in process for a year and a half. By the end of the year they had both *HARP SF* and its companion, *HARP SF Xtreme* (2011) also available through DrivethruRPG's new print-on-demand program. GCP's other major project in the last two years has been what a "1.5" edition of *HARP Fantasy* (2012), released to date only as a PDF.

The rest of GCP's focus has been on making old materials available. You can now find clean and "rebranded" PDF copies of material from *Space Master* second edition, *Cyberspace*, *Spacemaster: Privateers*, *RMSS*, *RMFRP*, and *Rolemaster Classic* — all through DrivethruRPG.

Two years in, however, it seems that the GCP ICE faces some major obstacles that it must overcome if ICE is ever to rise once more to a position of prominence in the hobby.

First, their production has been quite slow, with almost nothing new to show for two years of production, and huge gaps still present in their PDF catalog.

Second, they've opted to stay with Mjolnir's confusing mishmash of game systems, at least on DrivethruRPG, and have even added to that confusion — for example by adding *Space Master* second edition to the mix. Their website even contains Mjolnir's old "RMC vs. RMFRP" article. At least *Rolemaster Express* seems to have gone by the wayside.

Third, almost all of GCP's books remain available only as PDFs. There are a few POD options, but no print books are available through distribution, and so there's nothing to tell a new generation of gamers about ICE's games. Ultimately, this seems like a doomed and declining strategy, even if multiple publishers are practicing it in the current day.

A recent license shows one hope for expansion, as some of ICE's (very old) *Sherlock Holmes Solo Mysteries* are now available for the iPhone and iPad thanks to licensee AppEndix.

However, the modern ICE's best hope is probably for its upcoming "unified Rolemaster," which was undergoing playtesting in 2012. The goal of the project — which is to bring together the best elements of all the editions of *Rolemaster* — sounds a lot like what Wizards of the Coast is doing in their own "D&D Next" playtest.

Whether ICE succeeds in this new project and whether they get it into distribution will probably be crucially important to the future of the company, now in its third incarnation.

What to Read Next

- For a contemporary RPG company that also got its start with a combat system plug-in for FRPGs, read ***Leading Edge Games***.
- For ICE's partner in the late '80s and early '90s, read ***Hero Games***.
- For where Hero went after ICE, read ***R. Talsorian Games***.
- For the former ICE staff after the first ICE's downfall, read ***Mayfair Games***.
- For other '80s RPG companies that have passed on into new hands, read ***Hero Games*** and ***West End Games***.

In Other Eras

- For unauthorized publication of Tolkien material and the problems it led to, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For a previous license to the *Lord of the Rings* that almost let to an RPG, read ***Heritage Models*** *['70s]*.
- For the origins of the gamebook craze that ultimately hurt ICE, read ***Games Workshop*** *['70s]*.
- For the origins of the CCG craze that ultimately hurt ICE, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For *Kult*, a game that ICE almost produced, read ***Metropolis*** *['90s]*.
- For a company whose CCG problems were almost identical to ICE's, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For future Middle-earth licensees, read about ***Decipher*** in ***Last Unicorn Games*** *['90s]* and about ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** *['00s]*.
- For another publisher trying to make all fans happy by melding together several variant editions of their game, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.

Or read onward to the first major superhero publisher, ***Hero Games***.

Hero Games: 1981-Present

Hero Games is a 30-year-old roleplaying company best known as the publishers of Champions *and the* Hero System. *It's also a company that's seen more than its share of turbulence.*



1981: Champions

Secret Origins: 1981

The story of Hero Games began with *Champions*, and the story of *Champions* began when George MacDonald — bored during college classes — started playing with the idea of adding more detailed super powers to Gamescience's *Superhero: 2044* RPG (1977). He also played with some early designs by Wayne Shaw, but ultimately created an original system that was very much his own. As soon as MacDonald playtested his new "Superheroes" rules with his San Mateo, California, gaming group he realized he had a hit on his hands. Everyone in the group made suggestions, but it was Steve Peterson who was willing to type up

the ideas and spend hours going over the rules of the game — a game that would soon become the superhero RPG *Champions* (1981).

That first edition of *Champions* was edited on a Commodore PET, printed on a daisy wheel printer, and illustrated by several local artists. It didn't even have a company logo, but simply said, "A Hero Game." MacDonald and Peterson barely scraped together enough money to print up fifteen hundred copies. Rather than having them professionally bound — which would have cost more money — they hand-collated the pages with the help of a group of friends and a pizza party. Finally they headed out to Origins — which was held that year in San Mateo — to sell their new game.

The superhero genre already existed by 1981, with the Lou Zocchi published *Superhero: 2044* (1977), FGU's *Villains & Vigilantes* (1979), and the small press *Supergame* (1980) all in print. However, none of them were well-supported prior to *Champions* breaking open the genre.

In part, *Champions*' success was due to its unique design, which brought many less popular RPG mechanics into the mainstream. Its most original component was likely its point-based character creation system. The concept had been seen before in Metagaming's *The Fantasy Trip* (1977–1980) — which was at the time the third or so most popular fantasy RPG — but it hadn't been more widely adopted. Most games still used random character creation methods.

> *"I never got into Magic because I felt it was inherently unfair, because your deck – if you spent more money – could be better than my deck. I think that's where the first part of distributing points around came from."*
>
> – George MacDonald, Interview, rockpapershotgun.com (July 2008)

Champions dramatically expanded upon *The Fantasy Trip*'s successful use of point-based character creation by creating a well-nuanced system that made the detailing of super powers particularly creative. This was largely thanks to "effects-based power creation." Rather than buying a fireball (or iceball, or whatever), a player purchased an energy blast, assigned it advantages and limitations to form the precise effect he wanted, and then detailed what it looked like — separate from the underlying effect it had. The result was a unique but well-defined power that helped players to create a huge variety of heroes, limited only by their imaginations.

Champions also introduced the idea of "disadvantages" to point-based character creation. These were flaws that characters could take — such as a secret identity, vulnerabilities, psychological disadvantages, or being "hunted" — to earn more character creation points.

Even beyond its mechanics, *Champions* did a great job of depicting the superhero genre. The artwork for the early books was clean and bright — just like the four-color comics. You even got to design and draw your characters' superhero costumes thanks to a figure drawn on each character sheet.

When they sold their unique (and frankly revolutionary) superhero RPG at Pacific Origins 1981, MacDonald and Peterson were surprised to see it sell well — very well. This was partially thanks to good marketing on Hero's part. First, they got an attractive woman — who might have been a friend of player Ray Greer — to wear a rented Wonder Woman costume and to hand out fliers to the grossly long Origins registration line; she went over well. Then the Hero Games staff grabbed the only indoor demo table — which was near the stairs, the elevators, *and* the dealer's room — and kept it staffed 24 hours a day throughout the convention so that they wouldn't lose it. The result was that every few hours a new group of players would play the game, then immediately head into the dealers' room to buy it.

Hero Games sold 1,000 of their 1,500 books during Pacific Origins 1981. Some of these sales were to distributors impressed by the sales to consumers. Distributor reorders would result in the first edition of the book being sold out in a month. (It was quickly reprinted.) MacDonald and Peterson realized that they had a business on their hands — and so their "Hero Game" logo became a publishing label.

Champions Year One: 1981—1985

Hero Games wasted no time in expanding their game. They had two supplements — the NPC book *Enemies* (1981) and the adventure *The Island of Dr. Destroyer* (1981) — ready to go by the next local convention.

Enemies acted as a monster manual for *Champions*; it contained 35 individual supervillains for players to face off against. It was notable because characters — whether friend or foe — would always be the strength of *Champions*, particularly in its earliest Hero Games incarnation. This first *Enemies* book really set the stage with bright, vivid NPCs.

By 1982, MacDonald and Peterson were ready to take the next step by turning Hero into a professional business. They opened up an office in San Mateo and asked player Ray Greer to join them as a partner handling marketing and sales. Player Bruce Harlick soon joined them too, as Hero's first employee. By the end of the year, with the release of a second edition of their game (1982), Hero Games was off and running.

Over its first five years *Champions* was well-supported — at least for small press games. All told, Hero published a total of three *Enemies* books, three organization books, a third edition of the rules, and four adventures in its early years. Two



companion rule books — *Champions II* (1982) and *Champions III* (1984) — added to the core line by detailing very simulative rule systems for creating headquarters, vehicles, and danger rooms. In 1983, Hero also kicked off its house magazine: *Adventurers Club*.

The *Enemies* books deserve some additional note because they were Hero's first supplement series. *Enemies II* (1982) also introduced *Champions*' first trademark character, the lunatic villain Foxbat, who would later garner even more attention in *Champions II* when he begged readers to send him experience points and free gadgets.

The Organization books continued to characterize the *Champions* universe. The first of these, *The Circle and M.E.T.E.* (1983), was also Aaron Allston's premiere Hero Games supplement.

Besides enemies and organizations, the *Champions* universe (of course) included heroes. Many of these came from the "Tuesday Night Gang," where multiple gamemasters ran city-based campaigns all set in the same universe. MacDonald ran New York City, Peterson ran Washington D.C., Bruce Harlick ran Ocean City, and Glenn Thain ran Chicago. The Guardians, who were the best-known heroes of the *Champions* universe, got their start in MacDonald's game.

In these early years Hero Games had a very liberal attitude toward licensing — calling back to the earliest days of the industry. The principals felt that cooperation between companies was to everyone's benefit, and so they allowed other people to use their properties. Steve Jackson Games produced Allston's *Autoduel Champions* (1983), one of the first ever crossover RPG books, bringing *Champions* into the world of *Car Wars*. Likewise *Villains & Vigilantes* books were published with *Champions* conversions, *Adventurers Club* printed rules for using *Champions* with TSR's *Marvel Super Heroes* (1984), and Chaosium's *Superworld* (1983) supplements ran with full *Champions* stats. *Cardboard Heroes* from Steve Jackson, miniatures from Grenadier, and the fully licensed *Golden Age of Champions* (1985) from Firebird Ltd. were some of the more official licenses that Hero did.

Today there's more cross-propagation among superhero games than within any other genre of roleplaying — not counting the quickly receding d20 boom — and that probably traces back to Hero's original stance.

Through some combination of a good system, comic book style, regular support, and an open attitude toward the industry, *Champions* quickly rose to a position as the head of the superhero RPG genre. FGU started cranking out *Villains & Vigilantes* supplements after *Champions* got going, but they couldn't compete. TSR's *Marvel Super Heroes* would eventually outsell *Champions*, thanks to the combined marketing power of Marvel and TSR, while Mayfair's *DC Heroes* (1985) did well too, but 20 years later *Champions* is the only game of the four still going strong — though *V&V* is at least in print again, thanks to the new attentions of its original creators.

However, superheroes weren't everything that Hero was doing in the early '80s. In 1983 they also began to expand into other genres of gaming.

Heroic Universal Role Playing: 1983—1985

That year Hero Games used their *Champions* rules — which would become known more generally as the "Hero System" — as the basis for a second roleplaying game, *Espionage* (1983). This new RPG was a very narrowly focused, realistic game of CIA spying. It wasn't as colorful or exciting as *Champions* and in any case it was entirely eclipsed by the release that same year of Victory Games' *James Bond 007* (1983).

Flying Buffalo's *Mercenary, Spies & Private Eyes* (1983) was also released around this time, making the espionage field suddenly quite crowded. Hero Games' reaction to Flying Buffalo's release was, not surprisingly, to cross-promote products. Flying Buffalo's *Stormhaven* (1983) adventure for *MSPE* featured *Espionage* stats, as the two little guys tried (unsuccessfully) to take down the British giant of spies.

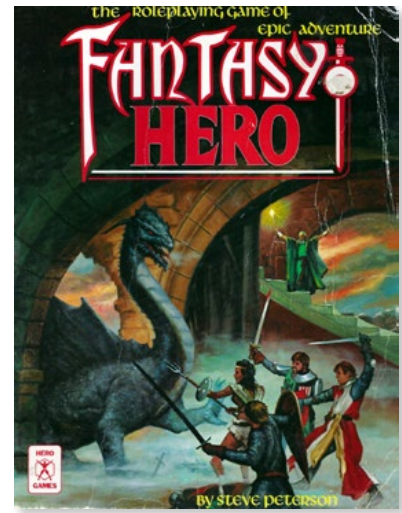
Espionage is notable in the history of roleplaying because it was the first (somewhat) universal roleplaying system. Although the *Hero System* was largely a house system — like Chaosium's *BRP* — Hero specifically tried to keep their games compatible so that you could transfer characters and items from one game to another. Some of the creators would later reflect that this seemed like a natural extension of *Champions*, because to design a superhero game, you already had to have rules that allowed characters to do *anything*.

The *Hero System* wasn't the truly universal game that Steve Jackson would release a few years later as *GURPS* (1986) because there were various — and sometime contradictory — rules scattered across what would eventually form six rulebooks. As later editor Rob Bell would comment, "*Fantasy Hero* magic wasn't quite like *Champions* powers or *Justice Inc.* talents." Nonetheless it was a clear step in that direction, with each new game adding skills, advantages, disadvantages, and other ideas to the overall system. *Espionage*, for example, introduced real-world skills and weapons to the *Hero System* that hadn't previously been available in

Champions. They were incorporated into the superhero game beginning with the third edition (1984).

Hero's next game, *Justice Inc*. (1984), was more critically successful than *Espionage*. It was a well-received pulp game that was considered *the* classic of the genre for a decade afterward. Continuing a theme, its supplements had heavy crossover to other games. *Trail of the Gold Spike* (1984) contained conversions for Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), FGU's *Daredevils* (1982), *and* Flying Buffalo's *MSPE*, while *Lands of Mystery* (1985) traded out *MSPE* for Pacesetter's *Chill* (1984). *Justice Inc*. also showed the growth of the *Hero System*. Where *Espionage* stated it was "using the famous *Champions* game system," *Justice Inc*. instead said, "Compatible with *Champions* and all *Hero System* games."

When Mike Stackpole wrote *MSPE*'s *Stormhaven*, he created a supplement for *Espionage* that moved away from the game's familiar basis in CIA agents. That was the inspiration for Hero's fourth RPG, *Danger International* (1985). It revamped *Espionage* into a more interesting — but less focused — form by bringing in both additional spy agencies and detectives. Like *Espionage* and *Justice Inc*., *Danger International* wasn't very well-supported.



Hero's fifth and final new game for the early '80s was a big step away from its early releases: *Fantasy Hero* (1985), a fantasy RPG. Where *Champions* was built around super powers, *Fantasy Hero* was built around magic spells, bought with similarly careful point allocation. Though the system felt just right for modern superheroes, it was much clunkier for *Fantasy Hero*es, but it still gave Hero Games an opportunity to participate in a much more popular RPG genre.

Unfortunately by this time Hero Games was having chronic problems with cash flow and with manpower. *Adventurers Club #7* (Summer 1986), for example, was prepared in March of 1985 but then delayed for over a year while money kept being pushed toward more lucrative projects. One problem was that none of the Hero Games staff were really businessmen. They wanted to be creators and business work got in the way. As a result, it wasn't carefully attended to.

By 1986 this became a crisis.



The Early ICE Age: 1986—1989

In January 1986 Hero Games hit upon what seemed like a perfect solution to their business problem. They partnered with Iron Crown Enterprises (ICE) in a deal wherein Hero Games would continue to write, edit, and develop the Hero lines, which ICE would then produce, publish, and distribute. In many ways it was a very complementary arrangement, because Hero clearly had great creativity, while ICE had a much better infrastructure for actual production and distribution.

Unfortunately, the principals of Hero Games were also then moving on toward other jobs. Steve Peterson was working at Electronic Arts, George MacDonald became Senior Game Developer at SSI — the makers of the licensed *AD&D* computer games, and Ray Greer moved first to Steve Jackson Games and then to Mark Williams' special effects company. Of the three, only Peterson maintained any real connections with Hero Games. As a result, Hero's production speed couldn't rise to meet the expectations of the new partnership with ICE.

There was still *some* production in the early ICE age, mostly in the first year. Hero even published its sixth RPG, *Robot Warriors* (1986), by Steve Perrin — also author of Chaosium's superhero game, *Superworld*. It was a game of giant robot combat that had no chance against FASA's *Battletech* (1985) and Palladium's *Robotech* (1986), both released around the same time. However, as 1987 came to an end there had only been a total of 10 books published for Hero in two years, not much of an improvement over Hero's independent production speed.

At this point, ICE decided to entirely take over the editorial portion of Hero Games. They brought convention volunteer Rob Bell on as a part-time intern to oversee the line. Working one day a week between classes at the University of Virginia, and with help from the Hero Auxiliary Corps — a group of fans who ran Hero games at conventions — Bell managed to publish a half-dozen books in his first year. After he came on full time in 1988, he'd increased that to an even dozen.

These new books included more adventures, more enemies, and a seventh RPG, *Star Hero* (1989). Unfortunately *Star Hero* — like *Robot Warriors* — was another doomed game, released into a science-fiction field already crowded by GDW's *MegaTraveller* (1987), ICE's *Space Master* (1985, 1988), West End's *Star Wars* (1987), and the newly emerging cyberpunk games (1988).

Hero support also improved in late 1987 thanks to some cross production. That's when ICE began publishing their *Campaign Classics* line, starting with *Robin Hood* (1987). These books each portrayed a legendary fantasy background, dual-statted for ICE's own *Rolemaster* and Hero's *Fantasy Hero*. Five of these books were published from 1987–1990, offering five different potential settings for *Fantasy Hero* — but that was nothing compared to the explosion of Shadow World supplements (1989–1990), all set in ICE's newly redesigned *Rolemaster* fantasy world and again all dual-statted.

Ironically these newly statted books — which appeared from 1987–1990 — coincided with ICE backing off of a cross-branding experiment that they'd conducted in Hero's magazine. From *Adventurers Club #8* (Fall 1986) to *Adventurers Club #12* (1988), the magazine featured articles on both Hero and ICE games. Unfortunately, fans hated the split magazine. In their final dual-branded issue, editor Aaron Allston acknowledged that half of the readers had been asking that the ICE articles be removed and the other half had been asking that *only* ICE articles be covered. But that didn't deter ICE from pushing dual stats in their RPG books for a few more years.

ICE would have done better to learn their lesson from *Adventurers Club*, as the split supplements were never popular either. A later line editor would recount receiving complaints about the dual-statted books on a daily basis. Even among ICE staff, people tended to be interested in either *Hero* OR *Rolemaster*, but not both.

> *"[W]hen a new creative team takes over, they have a different set of experiences. To them, the Hero System – or whatever else they're doing – is a completely different thing. It's influenced by the first one, but it's not encompassed by it.*
>
> – George MacDonald, Interview, rockpapershotgun.com (July 2008)

By the middle of 1989, *Hero System* had been receiving improved attention for a year and a half. That's when it was decided to really make a major renovation of the *Hero System*, which would kick off with a fourth edition of *Champions*.

Champions in 4E!: 1989

Champions fourth edition (1989), largely the work of Rob Bell, was released as an impressive 346-page book at Gen Con '89. Besides writing the book, Bell also coordinated a massive volunteer effort with dozens of gaming groups giving input and feedback on the *Hero System*. The result was a large-scale revision of the original Steve Peterson & George MacDonald game, most notable for the fact that it

The View from Comic City!

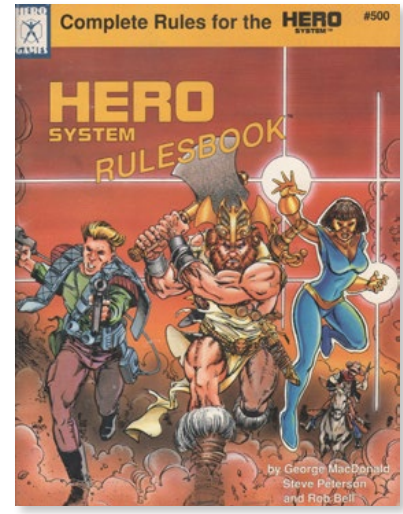


To date, *Champions* is the only original superhero RPG that's pushed back into the comics genre in any notable way. This began in the mid-'80s when comic creator Dennis Mallonee approached Hero Games to license comic book rights to the *Champions* heroes. Hero Games was actually a licensee themselves, with the characters largely owned by the original players of Hero Games' "Tuesday Night" games. Nonetheless, they were able to work with the actual creators to get Mallonee the permissions he needed. The result was an Eclipse comic book called *Champions* (1986–1987).

After the success of the Eclipse series, Mallonee decided to publish additional *Champions* comics under his own imprint – first called Hero Comics and later Hero Graphics. Over the next six years, Hero Comics published about 100 comic books across several series – the most prolific were *Champions*, centered on Hero Games' Guardians, and *Flare*, among the most popular of the Guardians.

Some of the early comics were good quality but later they became more centered on depicting attractive pinups. As Hero Games became increasingly uncomfortable with these changes in tone, some of the characters' owners pulled Mallonee's licensing rights. However, longtime Hero stalwarts Gleen Thain and Stacy Lawrence allowed their characters – Icestar and Flare – to continue under Mallonee's stewardship. To avoid confusion, Hero Games removed these creator-owned characters still being used by Mallonee from new editions of their products. Meanwhile, Mallonee changed the names of other characters in his universe, due to these licensing issues. Bruce Harlick's Marksman became Huntsman and his Foxbat became The Flying Fox. Over the years, Mallonee has also developed many original characters as well, slowly pushing his comics away from Hero Games' *Champions* universe.

The original incarnation of Hero Comics died in 1994, amid one of several comic industry booms and busts. Many years later, it was reborn as Heroic Publishing, which is now publishing *Flare* (2004), *Champions* (2005), *Champions Adventures* (2011), and others. Though Hero Games sold the *Champions* IP rights to Cryptic Studios in 2008, this seems to have little affected Heroic Publishing – who had long before entirely separated their universe from that depicted by Hero Games. However, the popularity of Cryptic's *Champions Online* (2009) is likely creating new interest in Mallonee's comic – just as his original Eclipse comics likely brought new attention to Hero Games 25 years ago.



was split into two parts: the first half of the rules was now the "Hero System Rulebook" while the last half was the "Champions Sourcebook."

By separating the superhero genre from Hero's core rules, fourth edition *Champions* made the *Hero System* truly universal. Almost 10 years of varied and sometimes contradictory rules had been meshed together into a more cohesive whole, and the distinctive "Hero System" section made it much easier to mirror those new core rules in later games. The next year's release of the *Hero System Rulebook* (1990) as a separate publication confirmed that there was now a second major universal system in town.

Just as the original edition of Steve Jackson's *GURPS* was probably influenced by the early *Hero System*, fourth edition *Hero* was probably influenced by *GURPS*. However, the two competing universal systems remained very distinctive. *GURPS* was much more realistic, full of nuts and bolts, while *Hero* was much more cinematic. *GURPS* often offered more street-level games, while *Hero* was generally more grand in scale — with larger-than-life heroes.

Fourth edition *Champions* was also notable for another reason: it featured a cover by famous comic artist George Pérez, already well-known for his comics work on *The New Teen Titans*, *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, and *Wonder Woman*. He was one of several comic artists that Hero was able to attract in the period — also including Ben Edlund, Jackson Guice, and Bill Willingham. In the late '80s — before Image Comics created new awareness of comic book artist rights — these artists were still poorly paid, which contributed to Hero Games' ability to hire them. Slowly, as comic artists became more valued — and ICE became less able to pay its creators — the comic book artists faded away.

> *"The object is that now that we have the rules in one place, an author that wants to write a genre book doesn't have to, as they did for Star Hero and Robot Warriors, re-do all the rules in one place."*
>
> – Rob Bell, Interview, *Space Gamer v2 #2* (October/November 1989)

Nonetheless, the fourth edition of *Champions* and the new, separate *Hero System Rulebook* offered Hero Games a new lease on life — something badly needed after 10 years of publication and multiple periods in the mid-'80s when the line was poorly supported.

Meanwhile . . . In Computer City: 1990—1993

Meanwhile, Hero Games founder Steve Peterson returned to the fold. But rather than getting back into the publishing business, he instead built on his EA experience to form a new company, Hero Software, licensing *Champions* rights from Hero Games.

Peterson had been thinking about a *Champions* computer game since at least 1984, and had even considered prototyping a game on the Macintosh in the '80s, but he eventually decided that computers weren't yet up to the design that he envisioned. By 1990 this had changed, so Peterson gathered together a group of four designers and programmers as well as a few long-time Hero artists. Hero founder Ray Greer would later join as well.

The original *Champions* computer game would have been an excellent example of a computer game emulating not just RPG play but also comic books themselves. The game was to be split into "issues," some of which centered on small plots, some advanced arcs, and some of which instead centered on a character's disadvantages, such as his secret identity. Together they were to form a very open-ended roleplaying experience.

The game got some great press, notably including a front-cover preview in the April 1992 issue of *Computer Gaming World*, but shortly afterward the project fell apart under its own weight. The scope of the project was ultimately beyond the capability of the small team. The stress led the two lead married programmers to divorces, and after that the project died entirely.

As the first major attempt at a superhero computer RPG, and also a notable failure, *Champions* would kick off what has become the "superhero curse," wherein several computer games in the genre have failed to ever release.

Despite that, the computer game project offered some benefit to the tabletop RPG community: the fully programmed character system from the game was extracted as *HeroMaker* (1993), the first of several computerized character creators for *Champions*.

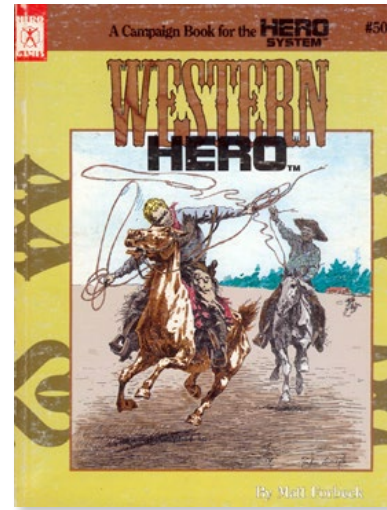
But beyond that, it would be over 15 years before *Champions* was able to actually crack open the computer RPG market.

The ICE Age Thaws: 1990—1995



Meanwhile, the tabletop RPG continued on undaunted. In the five years following the release of fourth edition, ICE published over fifty *Hero System* books, the game's largest sustained boom to that date. Remarkably they even published a decent number of books from 1990–1992, a time when ICE was reeling from a variety of financial problems. Hero products always shipped well, and were usually good money makers. Though Rob Bell left the company in 1990 — to eventually become a representative for the 58th District in the Virginia House of Delegates — he was soon replaced by Monte Cook as line editor and later by long-time Hero employee Bruce Harlick.

As usual, the majority of *Hero System* emphasis was on *Champions* supplements. There were more enemies, organizations, and adventures. The game also got its first major campaign setting sourcebooks, each based on individual *Champions* campaigns. Aaron Allston had already written about his own campaign world in the third edition as *Aaron Allston's Strike Force* (1988). Now Phil Masters described his British campaign in *Kingdom of Champions* (1990). Some books in this period were written by authors who would later have notable influence on the line: Steven S. Long wrote the sub-genre book *Dark Champions* (1993), as well as several additional sourcebooks in support, while Mark Arsenault co-authored *Corporations* (1994).



With *Hero* now a more universal system, ICE took the opportunity to publish full genre books on a variety of topics. Unlike *Champions* these books didn't come with rules, and therefore required the *Hero System Rulebook* to play. The new genre books included *Ninja Hero* (1990), the new *Fantasy Hero* (1990), *Western Hero* (1991), *Cyber Hero* (1993), and *Horror Hero* (1994). Matt Forbeck's *Western Hero* was a notable experiment among these releases because it

was a near copy of the *Rolemaster* genre book *Outlaw* (1991). By this time though, ICE was no longer publishing the dual-statted *Campaign Classics*, but they still made this final attempt to share resources between the two games.

ICE never supported these individual genres — as Hero had rarely supported anything but *Champions* — with the only exceptions being *Fantasy Hero Companion* (1990) and *Fantasy Hero Companion II* (1992). However, they did begin publishing sourcebooks for the *Hero System* as a whole, which could be used with all genres. These included a second *Hero Bestiary* (1992), a pair of almanacs (1993, 1995), and the first two books in a line conceived of by Steve Peterson and initially authored by Steven S. Long: *The Ultimate Martial Artist* (1994) and *The Ultimate Mentalist* (1996).

Things were good for Hero for several years, and by 1996 ICE was increasingly focused on a single line, their new *Middle-earth Collectible Card Game* (1995–1998). Toward the start of 1996, ICE announced that they were putting all other lines on hold for six months to pursue *MECCG*. The owners of Hero Games weren't happy with the prospect of their game being dropped, even temporarily, and so they began to look for a new publisher, initiating what would be six years of extreme turbulence for the *Hero System* — six years which almost killed the line.

Heroic Fracture!: 1996—1998

On April 25, 1996, Hero Games announced that they had come to a new publication deal with R. Talsorian, the publishers of the popular *Cyberpunk* RPG (1988). Several of the old principals would be involved with the new publishing partnership — including Steve Peterson, Ray Greer, and Bruce Harlick.

With their move to R. Talsorian, the Hero staff also decided to revamp their games by creating a new, simpler rules system — with the hope that this could attract new players. However, they decided not to just make *Hero* easier, but to do so while merging it with the Interlock game system of their new partner, R. Talsorian — which was then being used for R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk* and *Mekton Zeta* (1994) games. The two game systems were a good match because, with some adroit manipulation, they could be presented as a single rule set. The result was called Fuzion. It not only simplified *Hero*'s mechanics, but it also offered a powerful marketing advantage. Now the two companions could multiply their efforts, as new supplements could be used for *all* their games. On July 11, 1996, Hero announced this new direction.

Today, the rights to Fuzion are jointly held by Mike Pondsmith (of R. Talsorian), Steve Peterson, and Ray Greer. However the story of Fuzion mainly belongs to R. Talsorian, who has made more extensive use of the system over time.



Nonetheless, Hero *did* embrace Fuzion, at least temporarily. They quickly released *Champions: The New Millennium* (1997), the fifth edition of their core *Champions* rulebook. However, it was so totally revamped that not only was there a fan revolt, but today *New Millennium* is largely ignored when counting *Champions* game editions.

The first problem was, of course, the game system, which was different enough that old fans couldn't use their existing material. At the same time, Hero largely "reimagined" their setting. The west coast "Bay City" was now the center of the setting, while most old heroes had been killed in a mega-crossover that had occurred on the verge of the millennium. Even the art style had changed, with the new book being very reminiscent of the exaggerated styles of Image Comics. Altogether, long-time fans that stayed with Hero Games through hard times now felt abandoned.

Mind you, Hero Games hadn't *entirely* abandoned them because they were continuing to support old *Hero System* material in two ways.

First, Hero Games was supporting fourth edition *Hero* itself through "Hero Plus." Here they broke new ground by distributing their books in a brand-new form called PDF — years before that was a buzzword. This first book, *The Ultimate Super Mage* (1996) — released in September after seven months of delay — was a completely new release. Others would be classic reprints. In all, Hero would print over 20 electronic *Hero System* PDFs. For the particularly savvy, the PDFs were available from Hero's website, but for the rest of the world, they could be purchased on floppy disk from local game stores or at conventions.

> *"Hero Games is now publishing many new books for both the Hero System and Champions, though we've pioneered an unusual method: electronic books."*
>
> – Steve Peterson, Interview, gamespot.com (1999)

Second, Hero licensed Mark Arsenault's Gold Rush Games to produce fourth edition *Hero* books. By the time of the Fuzion announcement GRG already had their first book out, *Heroic Adventures* 1 (1996). Two days later, on July 21, 1996, GRG also announced that they had purchased all the old Hero stock from ICE.

Though Gold Rush was clearly becoming the place to go for old-style *Hero* games, they couldn't maintain a reliable production schedule any better than the

old Hero could. In the end, Gold Rush Games only produced a half-dozen books, the most notable of which was Patrick Sweeney's *San Angelo* (1999) — a well-detailed city sourcebook that also promised to be the start of a metaplot where the player characters took the central role.

Even more notable *would* have been a fifth edition of the *Hero System* from Gold Rush Games. In 1997, under Hero Games' auspices, Gold Rush hired writer Steven S. Long to write an update to their system. Things were going along well enough that Hero themselves announced the work in January 1998 — probably in an attempt to fend off the increasing anti-Fuzion sentiment. Unfortunately, Gold Rush's schedule didn't allow for the publication of the game quickly enough — and in a few more months Hero Games' priorities would be entirely changed, as we'll see momentarily.

In 1996 and 1997, the Hero Plus PDFs and Gold Rush supplements marked the full extent of Hero's *Hero System* support. Meanwhile, the Fuzion system was supported by a scant two supplements: *Alliances* (1997) and *Bay City* (1997) — the only books that would ever be published for the *Champions* Fuzion system. Hero Games had managed to fracture their fan support, and things were about to get worse, not better.

Online Years: 1998—2000

On February 15, 1998, Mike Pondsmith, the owner and president of R. Talsorian Games, announced that he was leaving the industry due to the turbulence of role-playing sales in the post-CCG years and the personal stress it was causing. Though, ultimately, Pondsmith didn't disappear entirely, he did put all his major lines on hiatus — which included Hero's products. That September, Hero Games officially announced their separation from R. Talsorian, to take place as of October 30. Once again, Hero Games was left without a publisher and after having depended on outside help for over a decade, they were now even less able to produce finished products than they had been back in 1985.

Hero was originally quite optimistic about the situation, saying that they expected to publish a book a month in 1999. They were unable to do so, and instead most of Hero Games' work over the next couple of years appeared on the electronic frontier. The publication of online Hero articles as *Digital Hero* (1998) was their biggest new initiative. Initially the focus was on both Fuzion and the *Hero System*, but the latter got more attention as time went on — perhaps because of fans' antipathy to the new system, perhaps due to disappointing *New Millennium* sales, and perhaps due to the fact that they'd now lost their partner in Fuzion publication (though in all likelihood, the truth is some combination of these facts).

Hero also published *Creation Workshop* (1998), a generic character creator intended to work with any RPG once appropriate templates had been published. Fuzion, the initial *Creation Workshop* template, came bundled with the program. It was also used as the basis for converting from any one supported game system to any other. *Hero Creator* (1998), a Hero Games template for *Creation Workshop*, soon followed.

In the next years, Hero Games released numerous template products for *Creation Workshop*, which remained their largest focus into 2000. Between that, family illness, and "real" work projects, Hero Games' actual game production dropped to nothing save for the Hero Plus products — a familiar situation for a company that had been plagued by production slowdowns over its history. Fifth edition was finished by Steven Long in July 1999 and turned in to Hero rather than Gold Rush because of the changing dynamics of the companies. Unfortunately this was just one of a few publications that failed to materialize in print, including a second edition of *Champions: New Millennium* and a second edition of *The Ultimate Martial Artist*.

Once more, Hero needed someone to help out. On July 8, 2000, Hero announced not another distribution deal, but rather a sale of Hero Games to newcomer Cybergames.com.

The Cybergame Year: 2000—2001

Cybergames.com — founded by Cliff Perotti, based on an investment from his wife's real estate firm — was an online gaming venture that soon expanded into tabletop roleplaying games. The idea was to use the RPGs as the basis of online communities.

With Cybergames' acquisition of Hero Games, Steve Peterson was hired as Vice President of Marketing and Product Development while Bruce Harlick was made President of the Hero Games division. Over the next months, Cybergames continued snapping up game companies, quickly announcing deals with Pinnacle Entertainment Group, Emperor's Choice, and Obsidian Studios.

There was some attempt to use Cybergames' more prominent position as a dot-com company to leverage the *Hero System*, such as when a license for the *Witchblade* comic was announced in 2001, in a deal put together by Steve Peterson. The plan was to produce an art-heavy gamebook that would appeal to comic readers *and* fans of the upcoming TV show.

Unfortunately, Cybergames was already in the process of collapsing. The initial funding for the project had been pulled and the company increasingly began to cannibalize itself, using the income from its new subsidiaries to pay for general expenses or for new acquisitions — rather than for new products. By January 2001,

Pinnacle had undone its acquisition — though as discussed in their history, the Cybergames deal already struck an apparently fatal blow to that company.

Hero Games got just a single book out during their Cybergames year: a new second edition of *Champions: New Millennium* (2000), now dual-statted for Fuzion and the *Hero System* — which had been Hero's plans for all their new products, following their departure from R. Talsorian. Fifth edition *Hero* continued being promised but wasn't delivered.

In late 2001 — amid Cybergames' website temporarily disappearing — word got out that Cybergames was looking for a purchaser for the Hero Games property. After the worst five years of Hero Games' history — during which they put out just a half-dozen paper publications — there was finally the opportunity for the *Hero System* to get some real development again. But the right purchasers had to be found first.

Hero Games, Fifth Edition: 2001—2002

On December 19, 2001, Cybergames.com sold all the assets of Hero Games except for the Fuzion version of the rules to DOJ Inc., a California Corporation owned by Darren Watts, Steven S. Long, and several other partners. The company was named after Watts' golden age *Champions* game, the Defenders of Justice. It would primarily be run by President Darren Watts and *Hero System* developer Steve S. Long, with Jason Walters initially acting as warehouse manager, and eventually becoming general manager.

> *"By now the game had been in decline for ten years and I knew several people who had taken a shot at a fifth edition. Steve Mendoza, Steve Peterson and Steve Long had all written up a proposal. I'd known Steve Long for years. We had visited game shows together. Of all the possible partners, he was the one who was at the same wave length as to the direction the game should take, so I told Steve I wanted him to write the fifth edition rules. He said he didn't only want to write the rules, he wanted to buy in and be a partner."*
>
> – Darren Watts, Interview, rpg.net (December 2006)

DOJ immediately started doing business as Hero Games.

The first priority of the new Hero — as announced in their initial press release — was to finally publish the long-awaited fifth edition of *Hero System*, now in process for over four years. Though several editors worked on the fifth edition manuscript over the years, none of that work made it into the new *Hero*. Nonetheless, Long had a book that was largely ready to go and the new Hero was able to release *Hero System Fifth Edition* (April 2002) very quickly.



Where ICE's fourth edition of the game had taken the first major step in making the rule system universal, the fifth edition took the final step, making the *Hero System* more than just "Champions Plus." The Hero rulebook was now entirely generic, featuring no setting information, and no emphasis on superheroes. That was just one of the five goals that Long and Peterson had set four years earlier, with the others being: making the rules more readable, answering rules questions, addressing game imbalances, and changing the rules presentation to better accommodate newcomers.

The new rulebook generally set the tone for the new line. It was a hefty book with an iconic cover, and a workmanlike interior. The book was text heavy, with an attractive but basic layout, and relatively few illustrations. But there was no doubting the massive amount of content squeezed between the covers.

Hero Games immediately set out to support the line with a genre book a month. They managed seven books total that first year, the most notable of which was *Champions* (2002) by long-time Hero author Aaron Allston. *Champions* embodied the newest incarnation of the "genre book" concept. It featured an overview of the superhero genre, including character creation and other genre rules. *Champions* was then supported with a full product line — as all major genre books were during the early fifth edition era. It's no surprise *Champions* got the most support, though, with over 30 books published for it over the next seven years.

Hero launched their second major genre line later that year, *Star Hero* (2002).

In that first year, the new Hero Games also showed off their progressive attitude toward computers. They immediately started a blog on their Hero Games website, which reported the production process of the Hero line on a weekly basis — and remarkably continued to do so for the next 10 years.

In addition they published two computer programs. *Hero Designer* (2002) was a brand-new Hero character creation program, now the third of its sort. *Herosphere* (2002) was an online combat simulation program.

Hero Games also kicked off the now obligatory online store. Initially, they did their best to be very supportive of brick-and-mortar stores. They didn't sell their own products in their online store until they'd been available for five months — though they soon cut that back to a more reasonable one month. Although Hero

Games wasn't yet making PDFs of their new books available, they did continue with Hero Plus — which made older Hero Game products available.

Finally, the new Hero also kicked off their own magazine about the *Hero System* — a new, more professional version of *Digital Hero* overseen by editor Dave Mattingly. This ten-times-a-year online magazine followed the Steve Jackson Games model that had been developed for *Pyramid* (1998) and *Journal of the Traveller's Aid Society* (2000).

Generally, the new Hero Games' first year of publication was phenomenal. They managed to entirely revitalize a game that previously languished for half a decade. It showed the potential for growth in the industry as first-generation RPG systems slowly came into the hands of second-generation RPG companies through licensing or sale.

> *"No doubt in answering so many of the existing questions, I've created new ones to replace them!"*
>
> – Steven S. Long, "We Are the *Champions*: Designing *Hero System* 5th," *Games Unplugged #2* (August/September 2000)

Though the original team of Hero Games publishers had finally left their game behind for real, it was in now in good hands.

Fifth Edition Revisions: 2003—2009

Over the next six years, Hero Games continued the successful publication schedule that they'd initiated in 2002, resulting in ultimately over 80 fifth edition books. Most notably, they produced a major new genre or subgenre books every year, usually at Gen Con Indy. These were: the well-loved *Fantasy Hero* (2003), the modern action game *Dark Champions* (2004), the very well-received *Pulp Hero* (2005), the *Champions 25th Anniversary Commemorative Edition* (2006), *Post Apocalyptic Hero* (2007), the Mexican-wrestling *Licha Libre Hero* (2009), and finally *Urban Fantasy Hero* (2009).



An amazing amount of the work was done by Steven S. Long, the Hero line developer and a constant writer. In his weekly blogs he has a few times commented on years where he "only" wrote a million words.



As already mentioned, a good amount of Hero Games' support in the '00s centered on their prime property, *Champions*. Among the *Champions* releases were some of the most detailed setting books the property ever enjoyed. Like its predecessor, Hero had to reboot the universe to a certain extent — due to the changes in ownership of certain Heroic properties — but unlike the revamp done several years earlier for *New Millennium*, fans seemed pleased with these results. *Champions Universe* (2003) introduced the new *Champions* setting; *Conquerors, Killers and Crooks* (2002) populated it; *Hudson City: The Urban Abyss* (2004), *Millennium City* (2003), and *Vibora Bay* (2004) detailed it; and *Champions Universe: News of the World* (2007) updated it for five years' worth of world-shaking adventures. One of the final fifth edition *Champions* supplements, *Book of the Destroyer* (2008), brought the whole line full circle by providing in-depth details on the villain who started things off years earlier in *The Island of Dr. Destroyer* (1981) and its ICE sequel, *Day of the Destroyer* (1990). The new Hero's strong focus on a vibrant superhero setting would pay dividends a few years later.

Though they were able to publish lots of genre books, setting books, and crunchy mechanic books, adventures were generally a sticking point for the new Hero Games — as was the case with most non-d20 publishers at the time. Hero was very reluctant to publish them because of the known lower sales numbers. *Champions Battlegrounds* (2003) was a rare and experimental exception. In 2005, Hero came up with a new answer: Hero Plus Adventures. These online-only adventures were made available through the Hero Store. Lower production costs helped make the adventures economical and allowed Hero to provide extra support for their lines.

The new Hero wasn't shy about marketing their games using viral campaigns and licenses alike. In late 2002, they returned the rights to *San Angelo: City of Heroes* (acquired as part of the Cybergames purchase) to Gold Rush Games; Gold Rush initially planned to re-release the setting for *Hero* fifth edition, but ended up publishing it for Green Ronin's *M&M* Superlink instead (2003).

In 2002, Hero also started plotting a gaming crossover with their friends at Guardians of Order, who had their own d20 superhero RPG, *Silver Age Sentinels* (2002). After publishing a pair of cross-interviews, the two companies then put

up a "who'd win" site for the company's heroes and villains to do battle. The end result was a rare cross-company cross-system crossover adventure, *Reality Storm: When Worlds Collide* (2004), which was unfortunately delayed by over half a year, probably because it was being produced by GoO rather than the very punctual Hero staff. *PS238: The Roleplaying Game* (2008) was another interesting crossover, this one a standalone *Hero System* game that depicted the world of Aaron William's *PS238* comic (2002-Present).

There were also a number of licensed releases that Hero had been supporting since the '80s. Z-Man Game's *Omlevex* (2003) contained Hero conversions, while Adamant Entertainment published a d20 conversion of some *Pulp Hero* adventures. New *Hero System* supplements appeared from a number of small press publishers including Blackwyrm Games and Final Redoubt Press. Perhaps most notably, Comstar Media — in association with Martin Dougherty's Avenger Enterprises — published *Traveller Hero* (2007), which converted GDW's *Traveller* universe to the *Hero System*. They supported it aggressively with PDFs through 2008, when the *Traveller* licensing changed due to Mongoose Publishing picking up the line.

Starting in mid-2003 the entire industry began to cool in the wake of the d20 bust. Hero Games showed the first signs of this in early 2004 when they admitted *Star Hero* sales were generally disappointing. They cut back production of the *Star Hero* genre line to a single book a year, rather than the three yearly books as had been planned. The next year, Hero said that the distribution chain wasn't working for them — an increasingly large complaint heard throughout the industry. In response, they made a massive shift from their original pro-game store attitude and instead started actively asking people to buy from their online store. The release of the Hero Plus Adventures was part of this new initiative.

Despite these problems, Hero remained a strong player in the industry throughout their fifth edition era, averaging a book a month — sometimes more — up until 2007 when changing priorities slowed them down a bit. Unfortunately, they were slowly forced to reduce or drop support for all their non-superhero genre lines. Though the core books sold well, supplements did not.

Dark Champions only enjoyed a handful of releases, ending with *Dark Champions: The Animated Series* (2005), the new Hero's first subgenre book. *Pulp Hero* support fell next, in early 2007, though *Thrilling Hero Adventures* (2009) offered a late return to the genre. The later genre books like *Post-Apocalyptic Hero*, *Lucha Libre Hero*, and *Urban Fantasy Hero* were produced with no intention to create support lines. Despite the slow decrease in non-superhero support, Hero was able to print books like *Fantasy Hero*'s *The Book of Dragons* (2009) and Star Hero's *Scourges of the Galaxy* (2008) quite late in fifth edition's life cycle.

In 2009, Hero Games' fifth edition renaissance finally came to an end. It was not due to any weakness in their game line, but rather due to a very exciting opportunity that had been announced the previous year.

Up, Up, and Away!: 2008—2011

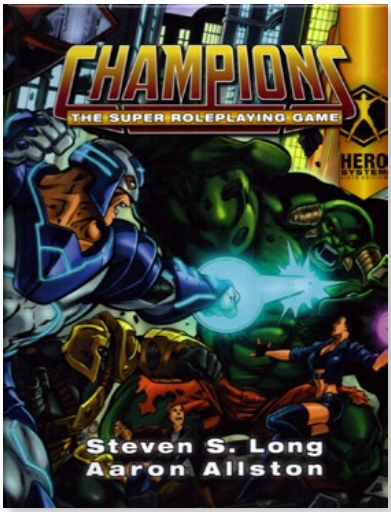
To continue the story of Hero Games we must first review the history of another superheroic company, Cryptic Studios. Cryptic was created in 2000 to break into the MMORPG market, but they decided they didn't want to get into the already crowded fantasy genre. Instead they tried something new: superheroes. The result was a pair of successful superhero MMORPGs: *City of Heroes* (2004) and *City of Villains* (2005) — the latter of which was produced by two RPG luminaries, Senior Developer David "Zeb" Cook and Senior Writer Shane Hensley. Publisher NCSoft purchased the two games from Cryptic in 2007.

By that time, Cryptic was already working on their *next* superhero MMORPG. "Marvel Universe Online" had been announced back in 2006 and promised to be even bigger than *City of Heroes* thanks to its big-name license. Unfortunately disagreements between Marvel and Cryptic became public in late 2007, and Marvel cancelled Cryptic's license on February 7, 2008. Cryptic was now sitting on an MMORPG that already had two years' of development time, but no longer had a license to support it.

As it happens, Cryptic's chief creative officer Jack Emmert had been playing *Champions* since it came out in 1981. Given the extensive work the new Hero had been doing to flesh out the *Champions* Universe over the last several years, Emmert and the rest of Cryptic decided that it was a great replacement for the lost Marvel IP. On February 19, 2008, Cryptic and Hero announced that Cryptic had purchased the *Champions* game and the *Champions* universe from Hero.

> *"Champions Online is all about total customization – it will offer a near infinite amount of character customization so that all players will have a unique game experience. Gamers will be able to create their hero's name, back story, costume, powers and abilities as well as design their own personal arch-enemy and his or her back story, which will guarantee a truly unique experience."*
>
> – Cryptic Studios, Press Release (February 2008)

Cryptic released *Champions Online* (2009) on September 1, 2009. Players could visit familiar locations like Millennium City and Vibora Bay, meet familiar heroes like Cavalier and Defender, and fight familiar villains like the ubiquitous Dr. Destroyer. Though they refuse to release subscriber numbers, Cryptic initially called *Champions Online* a "middling success."



Meanwhile, tabletop Hero Games initially saw *huge* success thanks to their deal with Cryptic. As part of their arrangement, they were perpetually licensed back the rights to *Champions* and the *Champions* Universe. This has allowed them to continue with their tabletop game.

Back in October of 2007, Hero decided to produce a sixth edition of the Hero rules; now they could do so in style thanks to the new attention and money brought in by the Cryptic deal. Hero's revised sixth edition rulebook was the biggest and most attractive book the new Hero ever published. It was so big that it was broken into two volumes, *Hero System Sixth Edition Volume 1: Character Creation* (2009) and *Hero System Sixth Edition Volume 2: Combat & Adventuring* (2009). Together they totaled 788 pages. These books not only improved upon the look of fifth edition releases thanks to the layout of Fred Hicks — better known as the head of Evil Hat Productions — but they were also published in full-color, a format that Hero was able to maintain through their additional releases thereafter.

Following the release of sixth edition, Hero focused primarily on the *Champions* property, kicking off with *Champions: The Super Roleplaying Game* (2010), a new iteration of the fifth edition genre book. That was quickly supplemented by *Champions Powers* (2010), *Champions Universe* (2010), and the first two books in a trilogy of *Champions Villains* (2010–2011) NPC collections. However, Hero wasn't sticking only with its new megahit, as revealed by the sixth edition release of *Fantasy Hero* (2010). *Star Hero* (2011) soon followed, but as we'll see, other genre books would soon fall by the wayside.

> *"I got into the hobby to design games, not to run a fulfillment business, and it became clear to me that it was time for me to move on from my role at IPR. The guys at DOJ already operated my warehouse, and they were doing more customer service tasks all the time. It seemed a logical choice to offer the company to them."*
>
> – Brennan Taylor,
> "Why I Sold Indie Press Revolution," galileogames.com (June 2010)

Before we get there, we should note Hero Games' final expansion, before things (again) turned bad. In 2010, Hero Games purchased Ed Cha and Brennan Taylor's

Indie Press Revolution — the top distributor and seller of indie RPGs, and Jason Walters took over as General Manager. Therefore, as a result of *Champions Online*, some of the most original and innovative RPGs in the industry continued to sell.

But then Hero Games' publications slowed and eventually stopped in their old form. There were likely two sides to this problem.

On the one hand, *Champions Online* wasn't doing as well as hoped. The first sign of this was Cryptic's rather lukewarm description of the game's "middling" success. In March 2010, they cancelled development of an Xbox 360 version of the game. Then in October they went "free to play" — often the last sign of desperation for an online game that had *intended* to charge a subscription fee.

On the other hand, Hero Games was seeing decreasing sales amidst decreasing releases.

Toward the end of 2011 these problems came to a head and Hero announced that on December 2, Darren Watts and Steve Long would no longer be working full-time with Hero. Jason Walters stayed on ship books and handle the day-to-day affairs of the company (while he simultaneously ran IPR as well).

Numerous projects were shelved including "Mythic Hero," "Time Travel Hero," "Horror Hero," "Cyber Hero," "Victorian Hero," and the *Champions*-oriented "Millennium City." It sounded like the death knell of a company that had faced more than its share of trials and tribulations over the past three decades.

Kicking the Future: 2012-Present

If it looked like Hero Games was dead following that 2011 announcement, it certainly hasn't proven true. However, if there was also a hope that the company would carry on as a large publisher of RPGs, it has not been the case.

Hero has seen the majority of its success since 2011 thanks to Kickstarter, which has generally given the RPG industry a good shot in the arm. Kickstarters succeeded for *The Book of the Empress* (2012) and *Champions Villains 3: Solo Villains* (2012) — both books that were already well on their way to completion when Hero largely closed down in 2011. Each Kickstarter raised a fairly modest $15,000 or so, more than the target but not a lot for Kickstarter's white-hot 2012 — which doesn't speak well for the future of *Champions* Kickstarters. This might be mirrored by Steve Long's inability to raise the $33,000 he needed to Kickstart "Mythic Hero" on his own. Fans were only able to raise $26,000 toward the goal.

Two newer projects point to possible futures for Hero.

First, Hero has published *Champions Complete* (2012), a softcover rulebook that puts everything you need to play *Champions* into one book — rather than depending on the unwieldy two-volume set of *Hero System* books.

Second, Hero very successfully ran a Kickstarter for "The Monster Hunt International Employee's Handbook and RPG," a new *Hero* RPG based on a license to Larry Correia's novels. Unlike competitor Steve Jackson Games, Hero has never licensed settings for use with their universal system. Raising $80,000 — almost double their target — suggests that this might be a viable path for Hero in the future.

There's no doubt that Hero is in a period of transition right now, between its era of strong *Hero* sixth edition production and what comes next.

What to Read Next

- For a more fully generalized early generic system, read ***Steve Jackson Games*** and for another try at universal roleplaying, read ***Palladium Books***.
- For Hero's partner in the late '80s and early '90s, read ***ICE***.
- For another development/publishing deal that didn't go nearly as well, read about *RuneQuest* at ***Avalon Hill*** and their relationship with ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For Hero's partner in the late '90s, and the co-creator of Fuzion, read ***R. Talsorian Games***.
- For other early RPG publishers that have come under the ownership of a new generation, read ***ICE*** and ***West End Games***.

In Other Eras

- For *Champions*' predecessor, *Superhero: 2044*, read ***Gamescience*** *['70s]*.
- For Hero's *Espionage* partner in crime, read ***Flying Buffalo*** *['70s]*.
- For the earliest take on universal roleplaying, read about *Worlds of Wonder* in ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For another publisher nearly killed by cybergames.com, read ***Pinnacle Entertainment Group*** *['90s]*.
- For the publisher of *Silver Age Sentinels*, which crossed over with *Champions*, read ***Guardians of Order*** *['90s]*.
- For *Champions*' main competitor in the modern day, read about *Mutants & Masterminds* in ***Green Ronin*** *['00s]*.
- For discussion of RPG MMORPGs that could have been, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]* and ***Pinnacle Entertainment Group*** *['90s]*.
- For more on IPR and the indie movement, read ***Adept Press*** *['00s]* and ***Galileo Games*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to a controversial yet consistent publisher, ***Palladium Books***.

Palladium Books: 1981–Present

Palladium Books is one of the longest-living companies in the current marketplace and was for a time one of the top three RPG producers in the industry.

Detroit Before Palladium: 1967—1980

The Great Lakes are the birthplace of the hobbyist industry. From 1967 onward, gamers gathered in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, each year to play first historical wargames, then fantasy wargames, and eventually fantasy roleplaying games. As the attendance to Gen Con increased year by year, so did the distance traveled by the attendees. Inevitably, when they returned to their homes, they brought back the games they'd played and the lessons they'd learned — thus spreading wargames and RPGs across the entire Great Lakes region.

This led to the formation of many gaming groups, one of which was the Metro Detroit Gamers, located in Detroit, Michigan.



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1981: The Mechanoid Invasion



Some of those groups then began running conventions of their own. The Metro Detroit Gamers' WinterCon began in 1972 — the same year as their formation.

At first WinterCon was a home to miniatures games, but it soon became involved in the newest and hottest thing to hit the hobbyist industry: *Dungeons & Dragons*. The fifth WinterCon featured a tournament scenario by Gary Gygax himself and even printed 300 copies of it for attendees. The result was *Lost Caverns of Tsojconth* (1976), which is generally counted as the second published RPG adventure, following Wee Warriors' *Palace of the Vampire Queen* (1976). Afterward, WinterCon kept running official *D&D* tournaments through at least WinterCon VIII, when they printed up the first run of *The Ghost Tower of Inverness* (1979) — which would in time become a TSR adventure, just like *Lost Caverns*.

By 1980, Detroit was a hotbed of roleplaying activity. It's no surprise that a company would soon rise up from those northern shores.

Kevin Siembieda Before Palladium: 1977–1980

Our story now turns to a young man living in Detroit in the '70s: Kevin Siembieda. He wanted to be a comic book artist, but the '70s comic book industry wasn't very friendly to artists yet. You had to live in New York, you had to accept starvation wages, and you didn't get control over any of the work you produced. So Siembieda opted not to go professional. Instead — following three years at the College for Creative Studies (1974–1977) — he produced an "underground" small press comic called *A+Plus* (1977–1978) through his own company "Megaton Publications." It was Siembieda's first professional creative work.

Over the next years, Siembieda became a freelance commercial advertising artist. Meanwhile, in 1979, he discovered TSR's *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Rulebook* (1977) and through it a new hobby: roleplaying games. He soon afterward joined up with a roleplaying group called the Wayne Street Weregamers that met at Wayne Street University in Detroit. A student named Erick Wujcik — who would become one of Siembieda's best friends and a constant creative consultant in the years afterward — organized the group.

Siembieda ran a game for the Weregamers called the Palladium of Desires. This fantasy game — which included science-fantasy elements, as did many of the

earliest RPG campaigns — was based on *AD&D*. Sort of. It started out as *AD&D*, but Siembieda was quickly building up a house system of his own — a system that would one day be known as "Palladium Fantasy." The result was very popular, as was evidenced by the up to 30 players that regularly attended the game.



"Kevin Siembieda is the best gamemaster I've ever seen."

– Erick Wujcik, *Echoes from the Rift* podcast (January 2008)

By 1980, the Wayne Weregamers were transforming into the Detroit Gaming Center. This Center was at first located in the soon-to-be-demolished Monteith House on campus, but Wujcik and Siembieda moved it to an off-campus building run by a non-profit. In the process, Siembieda began taking more responsibility for the group, becoming assistant director for the Center (with Wujcik as director). It must have been obvious that Siembieda was ready to take the *next* step — into the professional world of game design — because his friends began encouraging him to get his Palladium Fantasy game published by one of the industry's existing companies.

Reasonable people could argue whether Palladium Fantasy was "derivative" of *D&D*, "house ruled" *D&D*, or "inspired" by *D&D*. Palladium's system *does* have a lot in common with *D&D*, such as core attributes, hit points, armor ratings, a class and race system, and a level-based spell system. It *also* contains a lot that moves into original territory, such as a full skill system, dodges and parries in combat, a non-Vancian spell system (meaning that characters didn't memorize individual spells), and a different alignment system.

Wherever Palladium Fantasy lies in that spectrum, its proximity to the industry's primordial game wasn't unusual given the time period. In the early '80s, the industry was slowly diverging from *D&D* and it was pretty common for a professional gaming release to be influenced by *D&D*'s mechanics. David Hargrave's *Arduin Trilogy* (1977–1978), Gamelords' *Thieves' Guild* (1980), and Bard Games' *Atlantis Trilogy* (1984–1986) were all as much *D&D* expansions as game systems in their own right. Similarly, *Arms Law* (1980) — the beginning of ICE's Rolemaster system — was initially offered as a *D&D* expansion.

Because of this permissive publishing environment, there was no attempt to disguise the *D&D* inspiration in Siembieda's original RPG. Unfortunately, there was also no interest when Siembieda shopped his game around to what he later called "everybody in the industry."

One of Siembieda's potential publishers was Judges Guild — who was the only company to make an offer on the game. Though Siembieda didn't find their offer acceptable, he did decide to accept a job offer from them. That led to Siembieda's first professional work in the RPG industry, when he memorably spent a brief four-month stint as an artist at the Guild.

Judges Guild by this time was turning out books at a very rapid rate and had a voracious hunger for new artwork. Though he only worked for Judges Guild for a short time, Siembieda later estimated that he'd produced approximately 340 pieces of artwork for them. Much of it was reprinted numerous times over the next few years.

Judges Guild wasn't the only young roleplaying company that Siembieda worked with. Over the next several years he also freelanced art for other publishers that had tried to sell his RPG. Meanwhile, his experience in the industry suggested a new possibility. His friends were *now* suggesting that he self-publish his fantasy game. Siembieda decided to take up the challenge, forming his own publishing company — Palladium Books — in April 1981.

Before we get to Palladium, it's worth taking the time to talk a bit more about Kevin Siembieda himself. As a sole proprietorship, Palladium Books is very much a reflection of Siembieda's character — probably more so than any other notable company in the industry, except perhaps Scott Bizar's FGU and Mike Pondsmith's R. Talsorian Games.

As noted, Siembieda's origins are as an artist and graphic designer. Years later, with numerous gaming books under his belt, Siembieda would still acknowledge that he didn't really consider himself a game designer. Indeed, a more apt description of Siembieda might be a "creator." He is the source of many of the wild, crazy, colorful, and evocative ideas upon which Palladium bases its games. When Siembieda talks about new ideas and new possibilities, you can still hear the youthful enthusiasm in his voice — even after 30 battering years in the roleplaying industry. It's clear that he's full of ideas and that he loves to explore them.

On the other hand, Siembieda's general desire to be at the heart of everything creative produced by his company has caused the first of a few controversies surrounding him. Some freelance writers recount their initial pitches being accepted by Siembieda and then their final products being rejected for not matching his vision — resulting in Siembieda rewriting numerous books himself, sometimes over several frenzied weeks.

Siembieda — and therefore Palladium Books — has also often isolated himself from the rest of the industry. Part of this is due to Palladium's demographic, which seems to skew younger than much of the rest of the industry — appealing most to first-time roleplayers who might otherwise have gone to *Dungeons & Dragons*. However, Siembieda has also been forceful in his claims of rights over his intellectual properties. This has resulted in a few lawsuits against other companies as well as alienating letters sent to roleplaying magazines — as we'll see in more detail down the road. Though most of these issues date back over 15 years, they've continued to influence some views.

> *"I always felt the people who really knew me, knew the truth and wouldn't believe the lies, rumors, and negative or crazy, untrue stuff said about me at times, and the rest didn't really matter."*
>
> – Kevin Siembieda, Interview, rpgblog2.com (July 2009)

Overall Siembieda (and Palladium) are polarizing. For some in the RPG industry who see him from the outside, their main impression is that of an adversarial loner. For many who see him from within the world of his games, their main impression is that of a creative genius. These two sides of Siembieda underlie everything that follows in the history of Palladium.

The Palladium Invasion: 1981—1983

Kevin Siembieda's immediate desire following the creation of Palladium was to publish his fantasy system. Unfortunately, he priced out publishing the book as a trade paperback — a topic we'll return to — and realized it'd cost $10,000. As a poor artist living in Detroit, Siembieda couldn't raise that money. Instead, he decided to kick things off with a shorter game that he could produce for just $3,000. Even that turned out to be beyond his means, as he had only raised $1,500 by late 1981 — after a year's worth of scrimping and saving.

Enter Bill Loebs, a friend of Siembieda's and one of the players in his Palladium campaign. It becomes obvious what a nexus of creativity that gaming club was — which included Loebs, Wujcik, and Siembieda — when we realize that Bill Loebs is none other than Bill Messner-Loebs, a popular writer of '80s and '90s comics such as *The Flash*, *Wonder Woman*, and *The Maxx*. However, back in 1981, it was Bill's mom who was influencing the creative field. Francis Loebs loaned Siembieda $1,500 so that he could print his first roleplaying book. *The Mechanoid Invasion* (1981), which told the story of an attack on a human colony by alien cyborgs, appeared that November.

The Mechanoid Invasion laid the groundwork for many of Palladium's products.

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First, it was the beginning of the *Palladium* house system, which originated in those Weregamer sessions and ultimately would encompass all of Palladium's titles. It was one of the earliest house systems, following in the footsteps of Chaosium's *BRP* (1978+) and Hero's *Hero System* (1981+).

Second, *The Mechanoid Invasion* featured many themes that resonate throughout Palladium's books. It was the first of a few Palladium games that played upon the idea of machinery gone wrong. It wasn't exactly post-apocalyptic, but it did present a setting of desperate danger for humanity, another recurring theme. It also featured the colorful settings and action-filled adventures that would later be Palladium trademarks.

Following *The Mechanoid Invasion*, Palladium published two follow-ups: *The Journey* (1982) and *Homeworld* (1982). This trilogy of books formed a tight metaplot for the whole game system — something largely unknown for the time. Players met the Mechanoids in the first book, got the chance to attack a Mechanoid mothership in the second, and went to their home planet in the third — where they could destroy the threat once and for all.

> *"And how is this for a kick in the head: the low cover price of $3.95 actually worked against the product. I kid you not, I had dozens of people at conventions making the comment, 'if it's good, how come it's so cheap?'"*
>
> – Kevin Siembieda, "A Bit of Palladium History," *The Mechanoid Invasion Trilogy* (1998)

Though the *Mechanoid* books didn't do particularly well, Palladium was also preparing another project. Matthew Balent — one of a few future Palladium writers who Siembieda met through the Detroit Gaming Center — was working on a reference book that could be used in fantasy roleplaying games. As a Library Sciences graduate, he had the skill and knowledge required to pick through hundreds of books to create a general overview of medieval armor and armaments. *The Palladium Book of Weapons & Armor* (1981) was the first of several books Balent compiled for Palladium and which they would print, reprint, revise, recollect, and print yet again over the years. These early compilations were the company's first "quiet hit."

Balent also designed Palladium's second RPG — a historically based game, which was not a surprise given his research work. It was called *Valley of the Pharaohs*

(1983) and was Palladium's only *original* game not to use the Palladium system. It was also one of the earlier historical RPGs.

Through these first few years Palladium was still tiny, operating out of Siembieda's living room and warehousing on his back porch. Siembieda spent these years living on macaroni and cheese, tuna fish, and hot dogs as he tried to grow his young company in an industry then hitting its first "bust" phase. The company probably carried on largely due to Siembieda's determination — a theme we'll return to in the modern day.

The Palladium System: 1983—1985

By 1983 Palladium was doing well enough — largely thanks to the weapon and armor books — for Siembieda to start expanding. He was able to rent real warehouse space, but more importantly he was finally able to realize his original dream, the publication of his fantasy RPG, *The Palladium Role-Playing Game* (1983).

This new book revealed the entirety of Siembieda's "mega" system, which had only been hinted at in a scant 10 pages of rules in *The Mechanoid Invasion*. There were men-at-arms, men of magic, clergy, and numerous OCCs (or occupational character classes). The magic system from *The Journey* and the psionics system from *Homeworld* received revisions, and new magical ward and circle systems appeared as well.

Palladium RPG was also notable because it marked Palladium's move to trade paperback publication, a format that Siembieda had learned about in the comic industry. This is the square-bound publication format that became the industry standard in the mid-to-late '80s. There had been some use of it prior, dating back at least to FGU's *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1977), but the usage was rare. Instead most rules were published in boxes or as hardcovers, while most adventures were published as saddle-stitched books.

As with many of their early decisions, Palladium moved over to trade paperbacks to reduce costs. Boxes added a dollar or two to publication cost (and usually had to be collated by hand), while hardcovers likewise produced more expensive books. Trade paperbacks could, instead, be printed more cheaply. In 1983 Palladium shifted its production entirely to this new format — the first RPG publisher to do so.

By 1984, Siembieda extended his Palladium system to another game and another genre with the publication of *Heroes Unlimited*



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(1984). It was a superhero roleplaying game, though it offered a very different take on heroes than most of the industry; powers were more limited and superheroes were generally weaker, with the expectation being that problems would be solved more often with thoughtfulness than with brawn.

Heroes Unlimited also showed how the Palladium house system slowly grew and changed from game to game. Before *Heroes Unlimited* characters had "hit points," which represented a character's life. Objects, meanwhile, had structural damage capability (SDC). In *Heroes Unlimited*, SDC evolved to be a sort of non-deadly hit capability — allowing characters to be more ... super.

The next year *The Mechanoids* (1985) returned, with a new book that again advanced the storyline. With three different games under its belt Palladium was by now — alongside Chaosium and Hero — a leader in producing multi-genre house systems. However, Palladium's RPGs to date were less successful than the company's books of weapons and armor.

This would soon change.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles & Other Licenses: 1985

Heading into 1985, Palladium was a moderate success. As a result, Siembieda finished doing freelance work for companies like GDW and Steve Jackson Games — and in fact barely missed out on the opportunity to be the lead illustrator for FASA's *Battletech* (1985). Though Palladium was continuing to ramp up, it still needed a big hit to surpass their *Weapons & Armor* book sales. The answer to that problem turned out to be licensed properties, building on Siembieda's expertise in the comic field.

Palladium's first license was for Mike Gustovich's *Justice Machine*, a small press superhero comic from Noble Comics that had been cancelled after five issues in 1983. (In fact, the RPG used the original cover for issue #6.) Palladium's *The Justice Machine* (1985) was a supplement for *Heroes Unlimited*. On its own, it might have done Palladium some good, as the comic got picked up by second-tier publisher Comico the next year and went on to a multi-year full-color run.

However, *The Justice Machine* is notable today for something that has nothing to do with its success 25 years ago. Today *The Justice Machine* is one of the biggest Palladium collector items on the secondary market, for reasons that highlight some of Palladium's core policies. Unlike almost anyone else in the industry, Palladium focuses on a book-publishing model, and therefore does their best to keep all their books in print. Sometimes new editions appear, but in general Palladium will reprint a book again and again when it sells out, with the result being that almost every one of their books remains in print today (or did until problems in recent years).

The exceptions are the licensed properties, which of course depend on contracts from other creators. In the case of *Justice Machine*, creator Mike Gustovich did work for Palladium for several years, but meanwhile the comic went through several publishers after Comico. Then Gustovich disappeared. As a result of confusing rights issues, Palladium eventually gave *The Justice Machine* up for lost. They've since reprinted many of the powers from the book in the revised edition of *Heroes Unlimited* (1987) and have even replaced *Justice Machine*'s internal stock number with a new book, *Villains Unlimited* (1992).

Returning to *The Justice Machine*'s impact on Palladium of the mid-'80s, it was important for one other reason: it gave Kevin Siembieda experience in licensing rights for a roleplaying game. That likely put him more at ease when a freelancer called up and suggested he write a Palladium sourcebook about the "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles."

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles was a comic produced by Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird starting in 1984. In the seven years since Siembieda's own *A+Plus* comic had been published, the underground comic movement had slowly gone more mainstream, thanks in part to the appearance of comic book specialty stores. Comics like *Cerebus* (1977) and *Elfquest* (1978) had further pulled the underground out of the fringes, and they were now known more widely as "black & whites."

Like many black & whites, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles #1* (1984) had a small print run of just 3,000 copies. They immediately sold out, and the issue became an instant collectors' item. That kicked off a huge black & white comics boom, as everyone — shop owners and collectors alike — tried to get in on the next big black & white megahit. Print-runs climbed for *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* from issue to issue, and numerous imitators appeared, from *Adolescent Radioactive Blackbelt Hamsters* (1986–1989) to *Ex-Mutants* (1986–1994).



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Siembieda himself was one of many who'd been interested in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles #1* but hadn't been able to get a copy. When he did finally get *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles #2* (1984), it met his expectations as a fun, action-packed comic. So, he was already vaguely considering the idea of a *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* game when that freelancer called. Siembieda was able to get the rights and he gave the

freelancer the OK to write a *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* supplement for *Heroes Unlimited* — just like *The Justice Machine*. Unfortunately, when Siembieda got the finished product, it didn't meet his vision.

Re-enter Erick Wujcik. He remained a good friend of Siembieda's and contributed small bits to a variety of Palladium books, including an adventure for that first book, *The Mechanoid Invasion*, and artwork for the *Weapons & Armor* books. Wujcik had never written a complete sourcebook, but Siembieda thought he could. The catch: Siembieda wanted it in just four weeks.

Wujcik pulled through. He didn't quite make four weeks, but he got *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles & Other Strangeness* (1985) done in five. It ended up being a separate game — using the *Palladium* system, of course — and was a much bigger hit than *Heroes Unlimited* would ever be. In fact, it was the first of what Siembieda calls the company's "mega" hits; it sold an impressive 10,000 copies in just three months.

> *"He came to me and said, 'Erick, can you do Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles … in four weeks?'"*
>
> – Erick Wujcik, *Echoes from the Rift* podcast (January 2008)

There were two major reasons for Palladium's success with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles license.

First, Palladium caught the property very early in its success — an almost prescient move that Siembieda would repeat the next year. The RPG was just the second license ever for *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. It was published before most of the imitators in the comic field and years before the property found mainstream success with a TV show (1987).

Second, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles & Other Strangeness* did a great job of both adapting and expanding the original property. It included fun psionic and combat rules and offered the ability for group of characters to share powers (just like the Turtles), but more notably it let players take on the roles of many different types of mutant animals — not just turtles — which was a large part of its appeal.

Enter *Robotech*: 1986–1988

Though Palladium was almost immediately preparing supplements for *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, Siembieda was also working on getting his next license: Harmony Gold's *Robotech*. This Japanese anime television series debuted in early 1985, and a Palladium employee had suggested it to Siembieda as another license. Unfortunately it was being broadcast at 5am in Detroit; it wasn't until the show



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moved to a more reasonable timeslot in April 1986 that Siembieda finally watched it and was won over.

In order to obtain the *Robotech* license, Palladium worked with an agent named Mark Freedman. At first it looked like Palladium had no hope of securing the license, because Steve Jackson Games was already in negotiation for it. But when those talks fell through, Palladium suddenly had an open door. Siembieda sent Freedman several of Palladium's books as references, including their two licensed publications, *Justice Machine* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Based on these books Freedman would eventually okay the Robotech license for Palladium.

Freedman was also quite taken by the Turtles, and asked Siembieda how to get rights for them. Siembieda pointed him to Eastman and Laird. It was Freedman who would later get the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* TV show off the ground, and was responsible for most or all of the Turtles' later success, all thanks to the Turtles' Palladium connection.

Meanwhile, Palladium was getting the *Robotech* roleplaying game ready for market. They had little to go on in the way of source material other than a few Japanese technical drawings, and were ultimately forced to fall back upon the cartoons, watching them again and again. Siembieda would later recount freeze-framing the animation to — for example — count the number of missiles on a particular piece of mecha.

The *Robotech* game also gave Siembieda the opportunity to once more expand the *Palladium* rule system, using an idea he'd come up with in the previous year for potential use in a new *Mechanoids* RPG. It continued *Heroes Unlimited*'s trend of upping the power level of the game by introducing mega-damage and mega-damage capability (MDC), where 1 MDC = 100 SDC. The system fit well with *Robotech*'s juxtaposition of giant robots and human beings, so Siembieda incorporated it.

When *Robotech: The Role-Playing Game* (1986) hit the streets, it quickly became obvious that Palladium had another mega-hit on their hands. It wasn't quite as big of a monster as *TMNT*, but Palladium was again riding the early wave of a cultural phenomenon that was just getting off the ground. With that new success, Palladium was really on its way up, as was evidenced by their purchase

of a new warehouse in 1987 — three times larger than the one they'd previously been renting.

In many ways, *Robotech* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles & Other Strangeness* set the stage for Palladium as it exists to the modern day. With the success of these anime and comic book-related games, Palladium skewed toward a younger demographic. With the increasing power level of the games and the very action-oriented play, they also increasingly appealed to a very specific type of gamer.

Rather uniquely, Palladium's success with *Robotech* also gave them the opportunity to get into the wider anime market. In 1988, Palladium was licensed to distribute the *Robotech II: The Sentinels* series on video tape. This was followed by licenses to distribute two of the original Robotech series, *Southern Cross* and *The New Generation* — rights Palladium maintained through 1993.

A Variety of RPGs, a Paucity of Supplement: 1987—1990

The late '80s were generally a period of success and growth for Palladium. A few more RPGs appeared, and the company grew its lines.

> *"I had to cover what I thought was the quintessential Vietnam war experience, and the quintessential war experience in Vietnam is ambushing the other guy or getting ambushed."*
>
> – Erick Wujcik, *Echoes from the Rift* podcast (January 2008)

Erick Wujcik's *Revised Recon* (1987) was perhaps the oddest, because it revamped a tactical military RPG called *Recon* (1982) by Joe F. Martin. One of Wujcik's biggest problems was figuring out how to turn the miniatures-oriented wargame into a more complete RPG — a problem of course been faced by Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson and others in years past. Wujcik finally settled on focusing the game on ambushes. Because of its origins, *Revised Recon* was the only Palladium game that didn't use Palladium's house system.



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Next up was a modern horror game, *Beyond the Supernatural* (1987), which debuted Palladium's new Potential Psychic Energy (PPE) magic system, as well as an innovative system of ley-line geomancy.

Erick Wujcik then returned with the *Ninjas & Superspies* (1988) RPG, which built

on his long-term interest in Japan. Though there were plenty of other Asian RPGs and supplements out by then — from TSR's *Oriental Adventures* (1985) to FGU's reissuing of *Bushido* (1981) — *Ninjas & Superspies* was considered one of the most authentic thanks to extensive research Wujcik had done.

What's surprising in Palladium's production of the '80s is the general paucity of supplements for their RPGs. Prior to the company's *next* explosion in 1990 — which we'll be getting to shortly — *Ninja and Superspies* and *Beyond the Supernatural* were both entirely unsupplemented, while *Recon* received just one further book, *Advanced Recon* (1987), which contained information on Laos. *Heroes Unlimited* was likewise ignored following *The Justice Machine*, other than a substantial revised edition (1987) that finally allowed heroes to have more than one power. Even the *Palladium Role-Playing Game* — the fantasy RPG that Siembieda has long called his favorite — received a meager seven supplements in as many years, though a few of them were in excess of 200 pages, which was unusually long for the time. Of course, this all highlighted Palladium's general tendency to sell its RPGs like a book line, full of evergreen hits.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and *Robotech* did both receive supplements, as was appropriate for their place as Palladium's best-sellers. There were a dozen *TMNT* supplements up to 1990, the most notable of which was *After the Bomb* (1986), which adapted the mutation rules of *TMNT* to a new setting that was therefore free of licensing concerns. *Robotech* received about a dozen supplements too.

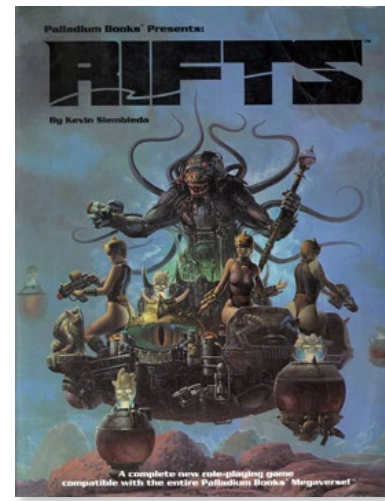
As the '80s came to a close Palladium looked more like a '70s RPG company, pushing new lines without expansions, rather than a '80s company, where most were pumping out increasing numbers of supplements. And then in 1990 Palladium saw their fortunes take an even bigger turn for the better.

Enter *Rifts*: 1990—1993

In 1990 two multi-genre roleplaying games appeared on the market, each centered on the idea of alien cosmos invading Earth: West End Games' *Torg* (1990) and Palladium's *Rifts* (1990).

Torg was a boxed game, complete with several books and a deck of cards, produced using the latest desktop-publishing technologies.

Rifts was a typical Palladium trade paperback, produced in a minimalistic two-column format, still laid out by hand with



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waxers, a process that Siembieda used until 2007 because he was able to do it faster than any desktop layout artist.

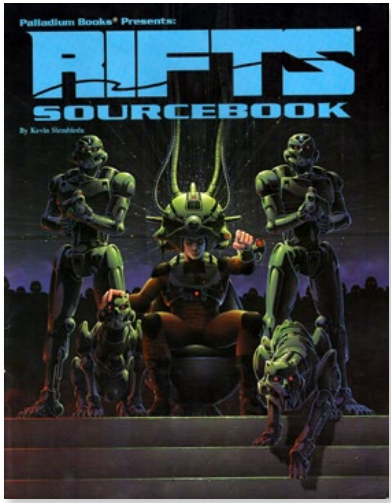
Torg was a storytelling system that used an innovative "drama" deck, character templates (increasingly popular at the time), and other recent expansions in game design.

Rifts was an old-school game that still used Palladium's *D&D*-inspired game system, now revamped as the "Megaversal" system. It was one part highly traditional — with its character classes, experience points, and levels — and one part arcane — with its abbreviations like OCCs, RCCs, PCCs, PPE, SDC, and MDC.

Both games were introduced into a by-then heavily saturated market, and so it's not surprising that one of them was dead within five years. What *is* surprising is that the other game carried its company to its biggest success ever. Some pundits were also surprised that the wildly successful mega-hit game was *Rifts*, with its old-school layout and its old-school game system, not the trendier *Torg*. Where Palladium's last mega-hit, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles & Other Strangeness*, had sold its first 10,000 copies in three months, *Rifts* did so in three *weeks*. It sold 45,000 copies in its first year.

> *"I wanted to create the ultimate gaming environment and a very specific, fun world. I wanted Rifts to be my Star Wars."*
>
> – Kevin Siembieda, Interview, rpgblog2.com (July 2009)

In all likelihood, *Rifts* ultimately did well because Kevin Siembieda understood his players. They wanted mind-blasting craziness and by-the-seat-of-your-pants adventure. They wanted even more powerful characters and even more powerful items. They wanted the raw creative vision Siembieda showed them before — and *Rifts* delivered that all to them in spades.



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If *Palladium* was a high-powered game beforehand, *Rifts* multiplied that, making mega damage capability (MDC) the norm. Now even normal weaponry produced damage previously only seen from mecha. It helped *Rifts* appeal to Palladium's youthful, action-oriented crowd.

Both games included colorful settings, but *Rifts* had an advantage that *Torg* didn't: it could mine all the old Palladium settings.

The next year Palladium produced the *Rifts Conversion Book* (1991). Although all of Palladium's games used the same house system, they weren't exactly the same, especially not with the MDC emphasis of later publications. The *Conversion Book* explained how to use any of the existing Palladium games as part of the *Rifts* megaverse. Now you could bring your ninjas, your superspies, your unlimited heroes, and your fantasy characters to the world of *Rifts*.

Because of this megasuccess, Palladium changed its production priorities and set out to supplement *Rifts* extensively. This began with three different series. *World Books* were the most numerous and described the "Rifted" Earth with its alien realities and existences. *Dimension Books* looked at some of the other universes that were now adjacent to Earth. *Sourcebooks* gave information on other topics of interest.

Some books further crossed-over into old Palladium properties, such as *Rifts Sourcebook 2: The Mechanoids* (1992) — the third appearance of Palladium's killer cyborgs — and *Mutants in Orbit* (1993) — which acted as a sourcebook for both *Rifts* and *After the Bomb*. If former hits *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Robotech* were largely ignored by Palladium after the release of *Rifts*, it's probably because they could not be crossed over in this manner due to licensing constraints.

Within five years the massive success of *Rifts* had catapulted Palladium to the apex of the roleplaying field, making it one of the top three RPG companies, trailing only TSR and White Wolf; within 10 years they were in close competition with White Wolf for the second-place spot. The success of Palladium generally surprises many in the roleplaying field, because Palladium's audience is, as already noted, somewhat distinct from the rest of the roleplaying community. Nonetheless, during the '90s Palladium was one of the top dogs in roleplaying, standing strong against the CCG surge, which they refused to participate in.

And their success wasn't just financial. Some of the *Rifts* books were also critically acclaimed for the vibrant backgrounds, such as *Rifts Dimension Book 1: Wormwood* (1993) — a dark fantasy realm co-authored by comic authors and artists Tim Truman and Flint Henry.

However in the wake of *Rifts*' release, Palladium also lost one of its top creative stars. Erick Wujcik's contributions to Palladium had been increasing ever since his work on *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles & Other Strangeness*. By 1990, his writings could be found in numerous books across the three lines that he'd created: *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *After the Bomb*, and *Ninjas & Superspies*. After 1990, however, it was another half a decade before Wujcik's next Palladium book, *Mystic China* (1995).

That was because he'd set up his own company, Phage Press, with the support of Siembieda, so that he could publish *Amber Diceless Role-playing* (1991). Much

of Wujcik's attention in the early '90s went to Phage, as is described in Phage Press' own history.

IP Wars: 1991—2004

While Palladium's success was skyrocketing with *Rifts*, Siembieda was also becoming increasingly protective of Palladium's intellectual property (IP).

Palladium's best-known lawsuit was against Wizards of the Coast over Wizards' first RPG book, *The Primal Order* (1992). As is described in Wizards' history, the young company published a book about deities that included conversions for many different RPGs. They'd consulted with IP lawyers and were fairly certain that their use of trademarks and copyright was all entirely correct; Palladium's attorneys disagreed and Palladium sued when it was unable to come to an agreement with Wizards otherwise. The lawsuit almost put Wizards out of business, and might have done so if Mike Pondsmith of R. Talsorian Games — then GAMA president — had not helped the two parties to reach a compromise settlement in March 1993.

> *"In the three years that White Wolf has been published and in the approximately 70 reviews that have appeared in the magazine, I believe only two or three Palladium products have ever been reviewed. And every time such a review was to appear, we were contacted to see whether we wanted to advertise. Coincidence??"*
>
> – Kevin Siembieda, Letter to the Editor, *White Wolf #27* (June/July 1991)

Palladium had an equally antagonistic — if more confusing — interaction with *White Wolf* magazine around the same time. *White Wolf #27* (June/July 1991) published a letter from Siembieda saying that *White Wolf* was "as narrow and prejudiced as a 'house' magazine," and demanding to know where the coverage for *Rifts* and Palladium's other RPGs was. Editor Stewart Wieck took the complaint seriously and started to look for freelance articles on Palladium's system. Upon receiving a *Rifts* submission for publication he sent a courtesy copy to Palladium prior to publication — something he didn't normally do. Siembieda's response was a letter through his lawyer which said "Palladium does not want this article published or distributed in any way."

At the same time Palladium was also having a dust-up with GDW, the publishers of *Journeys* and *Challenge* magazines, demanding pre-approval of any Palladium articles they published, something fairly unknown in the RPG world.

White Wolf, *Journeys*, and *Challenge* alike all decided not to publish Palladium articles. As Wieck said, "Why hassle with it?"

Palladium also got some bad press for its interactions with fans on the internet. In the net's early days, Siembieda demanded *Rifts* and Palladium sites be taken down because he felt that they violated his IP. In 2004 Siembieda loosened his

restriction, though he still outlawed conversions. In particular, he didn't want fans converting literary characters to Palladium games because he felt that doing so violated the rights of *those* creators.

> *"Please don't convert and post Palladium characters and/or rules to other games. Don't convert the fictional characters, space ships, monsters, gear and copyrighted images or text created by other companies and individuals to Palladium's game rules, either. Don't post them online or share them with others through invitations online via e-mail and downloads. If you have such 'conversions' online right now – please remove them. Thank you."*
>
> – "No Conversions and Why," palladiumbooks.com

Kevin Siembieda has often held a somewhat controversial place in the industry and these various actions are likely one of the reasons. Though many people know Siembieda through Palladium's various hits and mega-hits, RPG players from the '90s who had no other connection to Palladium saw him primarily through these actions.

Years of Success: 1993—2002

Though Siembieda generated some antagonism in the rest of the industry, in 1993 his own fans thought he walked on air. *Rifts* was by now in full swing and Palladium had kicked off a constant production program that continued until The Crisis of Treachery — which we'll meet shortly. By 2001 the *Rifts* line included 5 *Dimension Books*, 5 *Sourcebooks*, and 23 *World Books*. Toward the end of this period the game also kicked off its first major metaplot — after years of small changes from book to book. This was Kevin Siembieda and Bill Coffin's Coalition War (2000–2002), an event crossing over a half-dozen books.

However, Palladium was not content to rest on its laurels. The company continued seeking new licenses and received one for *Macross II*. After *Macross II: The Role-playing Game* (1993) and *Macross II: Sourcebook One* (1993), gaming newcomer Dream Pod 9 helped to produce several additional supplements (1994) before Palladium decided the new line wasn't going to become a megahit.

Palladium was also busy reviving their old RPGs and creating new ones.

The *Palladium Fantasy Role-Playing Game* appeared in a renamed second edition (1996), as did *Heroes Unlimited* (1998) — both of which updated their respective systems to the new Megaversal norms. Afterward, both games received more supplements than they had in earlier days, presumably because of Palladium's focus on supplements following the release of *Rifts*. Palladium also finally kicked off their own house magazine, *The Rifter* (1998-Present).



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Palladium's first new game of the late '90s was *Nightspawn* (1995), a modern game of an Earth shrouded in unnatural darkness. Unfortunately it was immediately the target of legal action. Todd McFarlane thought the name was too close to his *Spawn* comic book, and so Palladium changed their RPG's title to *Nightbane*. Under either name, the game was generally lauded for its colorful background.

Yet another new post-apocalyptic game of the period was Bill Coffin's *Systems Failure* (1999), where Y2K worries were real.

For the most part, the story of Palladium from 1993–2002 was simply one of success. *Rifts* was doing great and so was Palladium.

The Slide toward a Crisis: 2000—2006

It's difficult to say when Palladium Books started heading downhill. In 2000, they were still regularly ranked as the #3 roleplaying company in the industry, but the warning signs began to appear.

First, they started to lose their old licenses. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* came to end in 2000, and the *Robotech* license was cancelled in 2001. Siembieda points to specific reasons for both of these. He says *TMNT* became too "kiddified" by toys and cartoons, while Harmony Gold was becoming uncertain about the *Robotech* license because of their (unfulfilled) plans for the release of a new "Robotech: 3000." However, by 2000 the two properties were also a bit dated and Palladium clearly shifted its priorities toward *Rifts*.

Meanwhile, Palladium was also losing some of its best creative staff. We've already seen that Erick Wujcik's output for Palladium dramatically decreased following his creation of Phage Press (and later, his entry to the computer industry) — though he was a consultant from 2000 to 2008 and authored a few final books. Bill Coffin, who we've already met for his *Systems Failure* game, also contributed to *Palladium Fantasy Role-Playing* and *Rifts*. He was let go by Siembieda due to editorial differences.

Finally, by the early '00s, d20 began to tighten the market, and Siembieda decided not to convert his games, offering a final reason for Palladium's new downward trend.

To try and offset decreasing sales, Palladium continued creating new settings. A new game called *Rifts Chaos Earth* (2003) was released and soon supplemented by a few sourcebooks (2003). This prequel to *Rifts* could have been a major new line if it caught on. *Splicers* (2004) was published as yet another new post-apocalyptic game.

Palladium also revisited its biggest hit when *Rifts* got a revamp in the *Rifts Ultimate Edition* (2005) — which not only cleaned up rules, but also updated the rulebook for 15 years of metaplot. The *Rifts Ultimate Gold Edition* (2005) let Palladium raise extra money by serving the collector's market — though no one yet knew how badly the company was hurting for cash.

At the time, there was the possibility of a *Rifts* MMORPG, a *Rifts* movie, and a *Rifts* video game — any of which could have been a big boost to the company. Only the last came about, as *Rifts: Promise of Power* (2005). Unfortunately the video game was released for the Nokia N-Gage, shortly before Nokia withdrew its North American support for the platform, ultimately killing the game. There's still a movie option out with a major studio, but to date it's relegated to developmental hell, an unfortunately common fate of licenses in Hollywood.

Because of the aging of their most popular lines and the loss of old licenses, by 2006 Palladium wasn't in the shape they had been a decade earlier. Still, it was a surprise when Siembieda abruptly made this downturn public by announcing "The Crisis of Treachery."

The Crisis of Treachery: 2006-Present

On April 19, 2006, Kevin Siembieda made the surprising announcement that Palladium Books was on the verge of bankruptcy. He placed the majority of the blame at the feet of a former employee, saying that the employee had embezzled about a million dollars from the company.

> *"Palladium suffered a crippling blow last year involving employee theft and embezzlement. We thought we could weather the storm, but the damage was deeper and more severe than we ever imagined. Estimated damage and losses are at least one million dollars. It has been a struggle to stay afloat."*
>
> – Kevin Siembieda, Press Release (April 2006)

Stolen goods included items from Kevin Siembieda's personal collection, as well as color transparencies that were required to reprint covers and interior color pages from numerous Palladium books. The latter was probably almost as much of a problem as any missing cash given Palladium's schedule of constant reprints.

Palladium could only afford to prosecute the issue in a state court for a fraction of the amount stolen. By the time of Siembieda's announcement, the former employee had already pled guilty to a misdemeanor charge of "embezzlement under $200" and had agreed to pay Palladium $47,080 in restitution.

As a result of the high loss and the relatively small restitution, Palladium was in bad shape. Siembieda asked his fans to help keep the company afloat by paying $50 for a signed and numbered black & white art print — which would alone raise over $100,000 — and by purchasing high quantities of Palladium items. Here, the love of fans for Palladium was clearly shown, and enough money came in ... barely.

Year by year since the Crisis, Palladium has managed to stay in business and keep publishing. Year by year, Siembieda says things are improving. But, half a decade later, they're still not out of the woods. Even today, Siembieda says he's putting in six- or seven-day work weeks of long hours. And despite that level of work, production still suffers.

Palladium's continued cash flow and time problems were made the most obvious by a tentative schedule for 2006 Siembieda published when he announced the Crisis. Some books for less popular lines — like "Tome Grotesque" and "Beyond Arcanum" for *Beyond the Supernatural* — have still not seen print, while *Armageddon Unlimited* (2011) for *Heroes Unlimited* was five years late. Even Rift books have been tardy. The final *Rifts* book on that 2006 schedule, *Rifts Dimension Book 12: Dimensional Outbreak* (2010) appeared almost four years late. However, though Palladium's supplemental publication was uneven following the Crisis, Palladium has been very reliable in the publication of its quarterly magazine, *The Rifter*.



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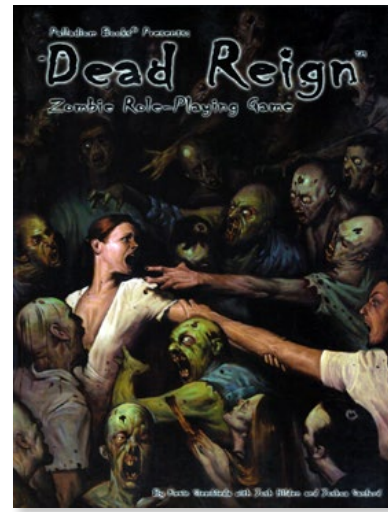
Despite problems, Palladium published a number of books of note in the half-decade following the Crisis.

Rifts Dimension Book 10: Hades: Pits of Hell (2007) kicked off a new five-part metaplot called the "Minion War." In the seeming answer to a prophecy dating back to *The Mechanoids*, an eternal war between demons and devils got kicked into overdrive and spilled forth across the *Rifts*. The War offered a lot of new and evocative settings and creatures for the *Rifts* megaverse. However, the metaplot has only slowly been revealed due to Palladium's generally weak production in recent years. The next

three chapters — *Rifts Dimension Book 11: Dyval: Hell Unleashed* (2009), *Rifts Dimension Book 12: Dimensional Outbreak* (2010), and *Armageddon Unlimited* (2011) — appeared over the next four years. Though the finale was promised as early as April 2012, it's been continually delayed. However, it looks now like *Megaverse in Flames* (2013?) may be close to release at last.

Meanwhile, Palladium was also working on some new games. The first was *Robotech: The Shadow Chronicles Role-Playing Game* (2008), which was released in a manga-sized book to try and appeal to the mass market. The new RPG came about due to Harmony Gold releasing a new Robotech movie called *Robotech: The Shadow Chronicles* (2007). Like *The Sentinels* and the unproduced Robotech: 3000 series, it was an attempt to reinvigorate the franchise, and so Palladium was of course interested in getting involved with that new opportunity.

The new RPG was largely a revamp of the old *Robotech* game, with some changes to the setting for the *Shadow Chronicles* era and lots of modification of the old mecha. The response was generally as to be expected. Old fans were very excited to see the return of a well-loved franchise. Non-fans who picked up the game because of the *Shadow Chronicles* connection didn't like the '80s-era rule system and panned the game as a result. The *Shadow Chronicles* RPG has since been supported with setting books for all the classic time periods, from *Macross* (2008) to the *New Generation* (2011).



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Robotech: The New Generation Sourcebook notably abandoned the *Shadow Chronicles*' manga format. Generally, smaller-sized books have been a struggle for RPG companies. Indie publishers have been the most successful with them, and occasionally a larger publisher like Eden Studios has made them work, but publishers like Palladium and Issaries eventually gave up on the format.

Palladium's other new game of recent years is *Dead Reign* (2008). This was Palladium's entry into the popular zombie apocalypse genre, to that point dominated by Eden Studios' *All Flesh Must Be Eaten* (2000). It was also a rare "SDC" game for Palladium, meaning that it runs at the more-human power level. *Dead Reign* has been expanded by three supplements (2008, 2012) and generally showed that Palladium was doing more than just surviving in the years following the Crisis; it was also continuing to innovate settings.

While still recovering from the Crisis of Treachery, Palladium also ran into another problem. In April of 2010 an MMORPG producer called Trion Worlds changed the name of their upcoming MMORPG from "Heroes of Telera" to "Rift: Planes of Telera." This caused Siembieda to file a lawsuit on May 7, as he felt both the name and the concept of Trion's game were too close to his own *Rifts* universe.

The lawsuit and a countersuit continued through much of 2010, with economic damage clearly accruing to Palladium as an increasing number of books dropped out of print. Some of Trion's responses wrote scathingly of Siembieda's creativity saying that "[e]ven its fans bemoan the lack of originality in the *RIFTS* materials and unwieldy set of rules." They even tried to cancel some of Palladium's trademarks.

A settlement was filed in October. Though the terms aren't known, Trion changed the name of its game to "Rift," and eight Palladium books were immediately scheduled for reprint in January 2011.

> *"My plan: To get Palladium back to being a major, viable force in gaming and healthy as an ox within in one year and grow the company from there. There are plans for reorganizing the company, new books, new games, ancillary products, licensing, marketing and advertising, the new website, new online projects, and much more. The Creators Conference we're hosting in April should be the official kick off to the rebirth of Palladium Books."*
>
> – Kevin Siembieda, Weekly Update, palladium.com (February 2011)

2012 and 2013 saw a few innovations that might be pushing Palladium closer to new stability. First, the company increased the number of leatherette & foil books it was producing, even offering them for relatively minor releases like *Rifts Black Market* (2012). This surely continues to be a nice moneymaker for the company. Second, Palladium jumped into crowdfunding. In 2012, Palladium did three "Megaverse Insiders" on its own rather than depending on Kickstarter or IndieGoGo. The results were generally good, with Palladium taking in about $28,000 on its first Megaverse Insider, for *Rifts World Book 32: Lemuria* (2012). A softcover, hardcover, and green-foil leatherette edition were all produced thanks to crowdfunding. In 2013, Palladium decided to take the next step by using Kickstarter itself to fund "Robotech RPG Tactics" — a brand-new *miniatures* game for *Robotech* derived from Palladium's house system. The results were nothing short of phenomenal, with the game's $70,000 goal being raised in three short hours.

On the downside, production at Palladium remained very slow. By the end of 2012, the company still hadn't produced most of the books it scheduled for March and April, and only one of its three crowdfunded books had seen release. Nonetheless Palladium's continually ambitious schedules suggest that *maybe* a

new series of rapid releases is just around the corner. Siembieda in particular says: "2013 will be the year of new RPG book releases" — though one wonders if the company's miniatures success may change that.

Though Palladium's RPG lines are no longer seeing the extreme success that they enjoyed 15 years ago, it seems likely that a Palladium that could survive the problems of the last several years will be able to survive the continued perils of publication for as long as Kevin Siembieda desires.

What to Read Next

- For another company that was built largely around the vision of one man who managed to spot cultural memes before they hit the mass market, read ***R. Talsorian***.
- For other early historical RPGs, read about *Man, Myth, and Magic* in ***Yaquinto Publications*** and (sort of) *Heroes of Olympus* in ***Task Force Games***.
- For early universal roleplaying systems, read ***Steve Jackson Games*** and ***Hero Games***.
- For a less-friendly interaction with Harmony Gold, read ***FASA***.
- For more on the military RPG boom of the '80s, read ***Leading Edge Games***.
- For *Torg*, that *other* multigenre RPG, read ***West End Games***.
- For what Bill Coffin did next, read ***West End Games***.

In Other Eras

- For how those early Metro Detroit Gamer publications fit into the chronology of early *D&D* adventures, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*, especially the ***Wee Warriors*** mini-history.
- For another company built by one man with a reputation in the gaming industry, read ***FGU*** *['70s]*.
- For the assembly-line early RPG publisher that Siembieda briefly worked for, see ***Judges Guild*** *['70s]*.
- For a general discussion of house systems and universal systems, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For the creators of some of the *Macross II* supplements, read ***Dream Pod 9*** *['90s]*.
- For Erick Wujcik's own company and its *Amber Diceless Role-playing* game, read ***Phage Press*** *['90s]*.
- For what happened to that tiny company that Palladium sued over *The Primal Order*, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For zombie roleplaying and 7"x9" books, read ***Eden Studios*** *['90s]*.

Or read onward to a top publisher of really complex RPGs, ***Leading Edge Games***.

Leading Edge Games: 1982–1993

Hyper-realist publisher Leading Edge Games is most notable for its Phoenix Command Combat System *and for how it exemplified some of the biggest trends of '80s gaming.*

The Spiral-Bound Years: 1982–1985

The story of Leading Edge Games starts off in a typical manner for a new roleplaying publisher in the early '80s. Friends Barry Nakazono and David McKenzie in Pasadena, California, decided to expand upon the FRPGs currently on the market by creating their own modular combat system. The result was *Sword's Path: Glory, Book 1: Medieval Melee System* (1982).

Physically the book was entirely small press. A red cardstock cover was printed with black ink. The actual book was spiral-bound, as if printed at a local copy store. Though Leading Edge would upgrade to a full-color cover on the second printing

1982: Sword's Path: Glory, Book 1: Medieval Melee System

of their premiere book, the spiral bindings would stay throughout this first era of Leading Edge's production.

"Why are you ducking? He couldn't possibly hit us in the head from there."
– Humbert NoDose, his last words

The idea of a modular combat system itself wasn't a new one. Dave Hargrave's *The Arduin Grimoire* (1977) added critical hits to *D&D* many years earlier, while just a few years earlier ICE got their publishing start with *Arms Law* (1980), their own plug-in combat system. However, Leading Edge Games' first release went far beyond those other supplements with its attention to extreme realism. In fact, it's been called the most intricate and detailed fantasy combat system in existence.

Sword's Path: Glory's combat system starts out with hit locations, as you'd expect, but there are more than 60 of them. To add complexity, there are different hit location charts based on how you're swinging your weapon and what type of weapon it is. Depending on the severity of the blow, you can break bones or even cause arterial bleeding.

The rest of the combat system is also fairly complex. For example, combat takes place using a 1/12th of a second time scale. Weapon, shield, and movement speed are all tracked separately. When moving, you track acceleration, deceleration, and turn radius (!). There are specific rules for how armor affects damage — both inflicted and taken — and much more.

Whether *Sword's Path: Glory* was playable is an entirely different question, and one that's ultimately left to the player. The average roleplayer would probably have found the game cumbersome — and in fact the average roleplayer might say that for all of Leading Edge Games' releases over the years. However, there were certainly players who loved the complex realism.

A reprint of *Book 1* slightly simplified the system — a simplification trend that Leading Edge would continue over the years as it published one game after another. Then Leading Edge released *Sword's Path: Glory, Book 2: Role Playing* (1983), which moved the modular combat system toward being a full roleplaying game by adding rules for characters, skills, training, and more. Amusingly, the rules for "recovery from wounds and medical aid" also waited until Book 2 — which could have left some characters wounded until a second book. At least four more *Sword's Path: Glory* releases were planned: "Book 3: General Rules," "Book 4: Monsters and Magic," an "Archery Supplement," and a "Mounted Combat Supplement." However, they never appeared, as Leading Edge was already moving onto new product lines.

The first of these was *Small Arms: Spectrum* (1983), which did for "modern" guns what *Sword's Path: Glory* did for medieval weaponry. It covered time spanning

from 1491–2060, going from flintlocks to lasers. The system was once more simplified — taking away some of the on-the-fly calculations. This new release also marked the future of the company as a publisher of more military-oriented RPGs, a topic we'll shortly return to.

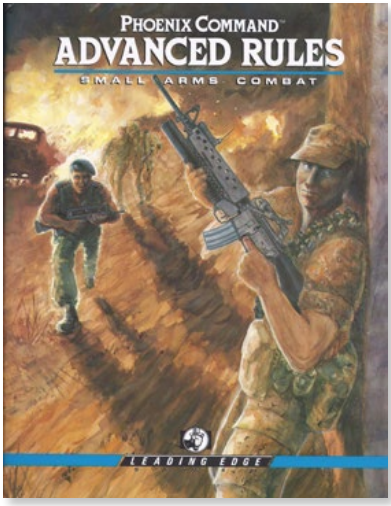
LEG's two combat systems came together in *Rhand: Morningstar Missions* (1984), the company's first truly comprehensive RPG and its first focused setting. It was set in a fantastic future after a scientific society had fallen — a popular trope in the '70s and '80s as seen in games from *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975) to *SkyRealms of Jorune* (1984).

Rhand presented a world 500 years after an "apocalypse" where inhuman "Spectrals" stalked the world and where some humans have been warped into malevolent "Vissers" while others had become "Blades," betraying their own species. Overall, the book showed LEG's future not just as a publisher of realistic combat systems, but also vibrant and original settings. We'll see these trends fulfilled in Leading Edge's second era of publication.

Rhand also included "magic" rules and many of the other elements originally planned for those missing volumes of *Sword's Path: Glory*. Because Leading Edge was effectively developing a house system — where different games used largely the same mechanics — these rules could even be used for *Sword's Path: Glory* if one desired.

The *Rhand: Hand to Hand Damage Supplement* (1985) closed off Leading Edge's first era of publication. Whereas all of their early publications were small press — and are exceedingly rare today — the *Hand to Hand Damage Supplement* appears to be one of the least available of all, contending with the "red book" first edition of *Sword's Path: Glory*.

What is The *Phoenix Command?*: 1986–1993



The earliest years of Leading Edge's history were defined by fantasy RPGs — from *Sword's Path: Glory* to *Rhand: Morningstar Missions*. At the time, *Small Arms: Spectrum* seemed like an aberration — a deviation from the company's more popular line. It's ironic that those small arms rules would come to dominate the publications of the company — and in general its place in roleplaying history — via Leading Edge's two most famous RPGs.

The first was *Phoenix Command* (1986), which would become Leading Edge's signature product. Though boxed, the

Mini-History

Timeline: 1980—1991, 2001-Present

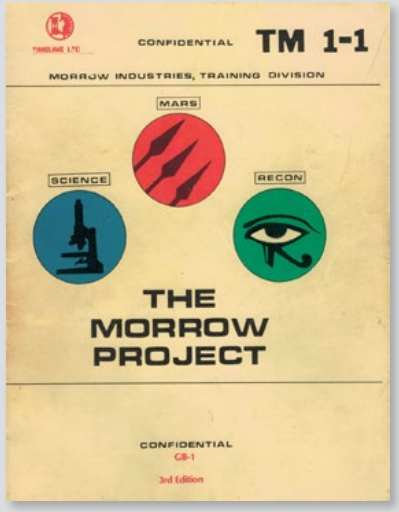
Timeline Ltd. started with a short story by Robert Sadler called "The Morrow Project." At the time, Sadler and two other Michigan roleplayers – Kevin Dockery and Richard Tucholka – were looking for "something more in games than killing orcs and rabbits." They decided to create an RPG that married Sadler's story with Tucholka's game systems.

One possibly apocryphal tale suggests that work on the game stopped when TSR announced *Gamma World* (1978), only to resume again when *Gamma World* turned out to be more science-fantasy than science fact. Whatever the reason, it was a few years later when *The Morrow Project* (1980) appeared as the first publication of Timeline Ltd.

The Morrow Project was a military game set after a holocaust; the players took on the roles of the heroes trying to rebuild the world. It featured complex combat systems – including blood loss, burn damage, cumulative radiation damage, and shock. In its first edition, it was in fact more a combat system than a roleplaying game, much like SPI's *Commando* (1979) pseudo-RPG. The game would eventually be expanded with a "roleplaying expansion" in its third edition (1983).

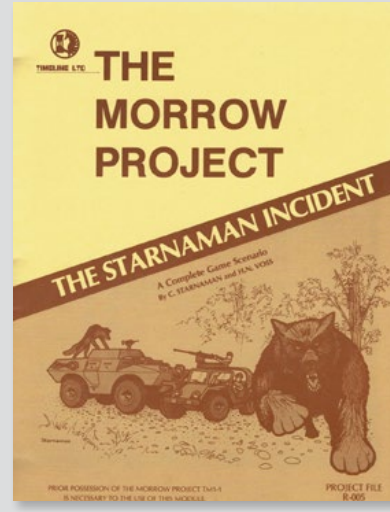
The Morrow Project foreshadowed many of the gaming trends of the '80s – when complex systems and military RPGs alike were popular. Though others would follow – and though GDW's *Twilight: 2000* (1984) and Leading Edge Games' *Phoenix Command* (1986) would prove more popular – *The Morrow Project* was there first.

Unfortunately, the TimeLine partnership proved short-lived. Sadler and Tucholka left TimeLine almost immediately but were thereafter able to join a new game publisher, Tri-Tac. Here they would create more games based on their short stories, starting with *Fringeworthy* (1982) and *FTL: 2448* (1982). These new games would carry forward some of *The Morrow Project*'s game systems.



Kevin Dockery would soon head off as well, to create the short-lived Firebird Ltd. This left TimeLine in the hands of H.N. Voss, who designed and drew many of its earliest supplements. He was soon joined by W.P. Worzel.

TimeLine and *The Morrow Project* did well throughout the early '80s, publishing eight adventures and a handful



of gaming accessories through 1987. The adventures tended to have monochrome covers, which were growing increasingly uncommon in the '80s, and print runs of about 2,000 units each, which would have been low but respectable for a professional company in the '80s. *PF-008: Prime Base* (1987) closed off the game's original run by detailing the destination that all *Morrow* players had been seeking. A few new supplements appeared several years later (1990–1991), but that was it for new publications – though TimeLine kept the game available through distributions in the years thereafter.

The game was popular in Britain in the '80s because Chris Harvey picked up a license to publish *The Morrow Project* there. He reprinted the majority of the line and even released a special boxed edition (1989) to commemorate the start of the war in the game.

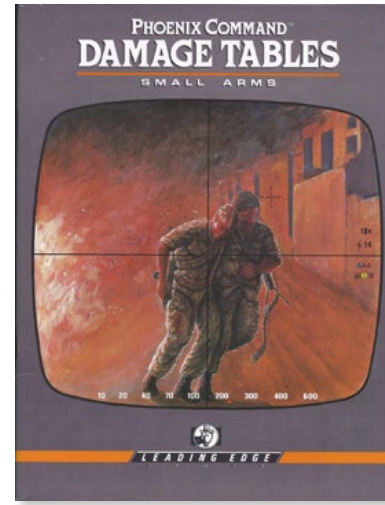
The '80s run of TimeLine produced one other RPG, *Time & Again* (1984), designed by Voss and Worzel. It was a "realistic" time travel RPG that – like *The Morrow Project* – was considered by some to be too complex. There was one supplement, *Holy Warriors* (1985), and after that the game disappeared. It's probably most notable because – like *The Morrow Project* – it highlighted a roleplaying genre that was popular in the '80s and died away afterward. Other time travel RPGs of the '80s included Yaquinto's *Timeship* (1983), Pacesetter's *Timemaster* (1984), FASA's *Doctor Who* (1985), and BTRC's *Timelord* (1987).

The Morrow Project started getting attention again in 1999 when Chris Garland started reprinting and selling TimeLine's products through his Abacus Dimensions website. This was sufficiently successful enough that in 2001 Chris and his wife Tammy bought TimeLine outright and began publishing under the classic name.

In the next few years, Garland published a few new adventures (2003, 2005), but the line was relatively quiet until 2012, when Garland Kickstarted a fourth edition of *The Morrow Project* – a new edition which had by that point been in development for years. The crowdfunding successfully raised $27,000 versus its $15,000 goal, making it as successful as the Kickstarters that year for Hero Games – a company that maintained much more of a marketing presence over the years.

The possible future of *The Morrow Project* and TimeLine therefore looks hopeful.

game otherwise looked a lot like LEG's releases from these first four years: the main rulebook was one of LEG's final spiral bound releases; it also featured a white cover with inset artwork, pretty much matching the line to date.



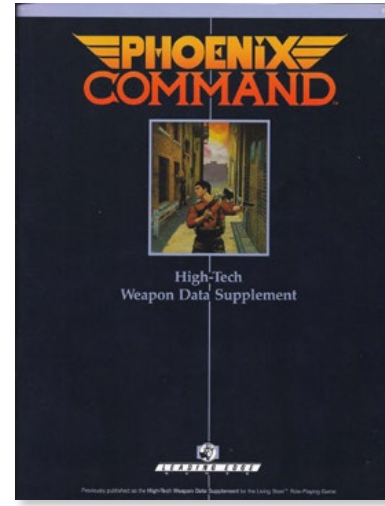
Phoenix Command was probably what you'd expect knowing Leading Edge's history. It revamped the house rules for *Small Arms: Spectrum*' modern weaponry. Historic weapons would be covered in later supplements, while future weapons would mainly be the purview of LEG's *other* major release from this time period, which we'll get to presently.

Phoenix Command was more than just a combat system for modern weapons. It was now technically an RPG, as it included rules for very basic character generation. That wasn't the focus of the release, though — the main intent was still to use it with other games.

Over the next years, Leading Edge supplemented *Phoenix Command* heavily, eventually making it their most supported line. This started with *Advanced Rules* (1986), *Damage Tables* (1987), and a second edition box (1987). Around the time of the second edition, Leading Edge made its presence felt in the larger world of roleplaying: regular ads began appearing in *Dragon*.

"I can just barely make it out, it's in Russian. It says, 'This face towards enem…'"
– Din the Decisive, his last words

Following a *Hand-to-Hand Combat System* (1988) — finally replacing older rules from *Sword's Path: Glory* or *Rhand: Morningstar Missions* — Leading Edge began publishing many *Weapon Data Supplements* — from the *Civilian & Police Weapon Data Supplement* (1988) to the *Wild West Weapon Data Supplement* (1989) and others.



Phoenix Command really came of its own in a third edition as *Phoenix Command Small Arms System* (1989). By then, the spiral-bound era was entirely gone. Instead, the

third edition introduced the trade dress that *Phoenix Command* is best known for: stark black books with an orange and red logo and simplistic icons.

More generalized rules appeared in books like the *Mechanized Combat System* (1992) — which preceded a subline of *Phoenix Command Mechanized* releases. Finally, Leading Edge published a few historical scenario books such as *Lock and Load — Vietnam: 1965–1971* (1993).

All told, Leading Edge published about two dozen *Phoenix Command* books, many in multiple editions. As with GDW's extensive *Twilight: 2300* line, *Phoenix Command* showed how popular military RPGs were in the '80s, particular for those publishers that really knew their stuff — and Leading Edge did.

The answer to the question "What is the Phoenix Command?" might have appeared in Leading Edge's next RPG — published in 1987, just when Leading Edge really dove into the world of professional publishing.

Return to Rhand: 1987–1991

If *Phoenix Command* grew out of *Small Arms: Spectrum*, then Living Edge's next new RPG — *Living Steel* (1987) — owed a lot to *Rhand: Morningstar Missions*. The game was, in fact, set on Rhand, but some hundreds of years earlier, when the alien Spectrals were just invading the one-time pleasure planet. Through the release of a virus, the Specrals had turned many of Rhand's inhabitants into sociopaths, creating the violent "Vissers" already seen in *Morningstar Missions*. The players took on the role of characters coming out hibernation to retake the planet — though *Rhand: Morningstar Missions* suggests that they're not ultimately going to be successful.

Living Steel offered considerable background not just for Rhand, but for the universe as a whole — including details on the Starguild Empire. Some 150 years previous, the Empire had taken over a bastion of Freedom called the Seven Worlds. Now that ancient history was becoming important to the future of Rhand. Though some of the players took on the roles of "alphas" from the local planet, other were "ringers" who fled the capture of the Seven Worlds but still spoke of its ideals of freedom and independence. Though alphas and ringers were now working together to save Rhand, it wasn't necessarily an easy alliance.



Leading Edge Games & The Trends of the '80s and '90s

Leading Edge Games is fascinating, in part, because they exemplify many of the gaming trends of the '80s and the '90s.

Most notably, they were one of the most serious publishers of military RPGs. In the '80s – when movies like *Red Dawn* (1984) suggested that warfare could be a real problem for the average American – roleplaying manufacturers published more military RPGs than have been seen in the entire rest of the industry's history.

TimeLine's *The Morrow Project* (1980) was one of the first. Its focus on military after a nuclear holocaust was a popular one, also used by FGU's *Aftermath!* (1981) and GDW's *Twilight: 2000* (1984). Of those, it was *Twilight: 2000* that would rule the military genre until the line petered out between 1993 and 1995 – by which time the military trend was done as well.

However, there were many smaller military RPGs, among them: FASA's *Behind Enemy Lines* (1982), RPG's *Recon* (1982), FGU's *Merc* (1983), Task Force Game's *Delta Force* (1986), FGU's *Freedom Fighters* (1986), and West End's *Price of Freedom* (1986). Though Leading Edge's *Phoenix Command* (1986) came out amidst a huge glut of military games in 1986, it would be the best supported military RPG aside from *Twilight: 2000* itself.

Leading Edge Games was also a publisher of very complex games, another trend of gaming in the '80s. FGU may have been the first publisher to really push up gaming's complexity, starting with *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1977), but continuing on through *Space Opera* (1980), *Bushido* (1980), *Aftermath!* (1981), and others. However the trend really multiplied in the '80s with major releases like ICE's *Rolemaster* (1982) and Columbia's *Hârnmaster* (1986) featuring high complexity. Only when the storytelling RPGs began to appear around 1984 would there be any reversal of this trend.

While it wasn't until the '90s and even the '00s that media licenses blossomed into successful adaptations within gaming – we've seen elsewhere how FASA was able to capitalize twice: *Star Trek* (1982) and *Doctor Who* (1986) and West End Games succeeded with *Star Wars* (1987) – Leading Edge Games was in the mix early on, with products like the *Aliens Adventure Game* (1991) and even the *Lawnmower Man Virtual Reality Roleplaying Game* (1993).

Having complex and varying goals and motives for PCs hadn't been that common before the late '80s, but now this sort of design was emerging as a part of Storytelling releases like West End's *Paranoia* (1984) — and *Living Steel* was right in the thick of it.

The ringers, by the by, gave the game its name through their power armor — but even this topic has some depth to it. The ringers were quite valuable as they

were the only ones with the implants that could control the armor, and so their lives couldn't be wasted. Simultaneously, energy was a constant issue for the power armor and for its use. This definitely wasn't *Battletech* (1985)!

The game was of course built on yet another variant of Leading Edge's house system, though as we'll see, it would receive tweaks quite a bit in the near future.

Leading Edge immediately supported *Living Steel* quite well with: the *Operation Seven Swords* sourcebook (1987), which gave even more depth to the history of the Seven Worlds; the *KViSR Rocks!* adventure (1987); and the *High Tech Weapon Data Supplement* (1987), all of which shared the high-tech *Living Steel* weaponry with *Phoenix Command*. Leading Edge even published a board game called *Dragonstar Rising* (1987), which adapted the RPG rules to a more tactical setting and told the story of the attacks on the Sword Worlds themselves.

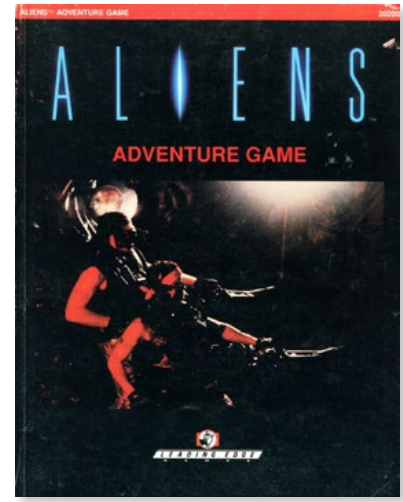
A year later, Leading Edge published a second edition of *Living Steel* (1988) that cleaned up the rulebook and also made the biggest changes ever to Leading Edge's house system. Though their previous games had varied in complexity, they were all still largely compatible. The second edition of *Living Steel* made such dramatic simplifications that this was no longer the case. On the downside, this cut *Living Steel* off from the support of Leading Edge's older lines. On the upside, it gave Leading Edge a new variant of their house system that would prove very useful for their *next* wave of games.

On the whole, *Living Steel* (especially in its second edition) was well-acclaimed. It had a vivid and interesting background, provoked interesting emotional questions, and was beautifully produced. Unfortunately, that didn't necessarily translate to sales. After the initial burst of products, Leading Edge published just three more releases for second edition *Living Steel*, ending with a *Power Armor Sourcebook* (1991) and a setting sourcebook, *Rhand 2349* (1991).

Though *Phoenix Command* is what Leading Edge is best remembered for — thanks to its strong showing in the military RPG genre — even folks *not* interested in military RPGs have often heard of *Living Steel*. 1988–1991 probably marked Leading Edge's Golden Age, spanning the entire run of *Living Steel* second edition and the beginning of *Phoenix Command*'s third edition production.

Before we close the book on *Living Steel*, however, we should return to an earlier question: what is the Phoenix Command? We might find that answer in the introduction to *Living Steel* first edition, where a Seven Worlds patriot on Rhand receives the message: "RHAND: APOCALYPSE — PHOENIX." It tells him that the Seven Worlds have fallen, and that he must fight on with no further help. *This* is the "Phoenix Command" and it could have been the inspiration for the game of that name.

Trailing Edge Games: 1989—1993



Though *Living Steel* production came to an end in 1991, *Phoenix Command* continued strongly through 1993. That last year, in fact, saw more *Phoenix Command* publication than any other time in Leading Edge's history, thanks in large part to *Phoenix Command Mechanized*.

However, Leading Edge was also by then exploring a new area of publication: licensed media games. This kicked off with the *Aliens* board game (1989), one of Leading Edge's best-received releases. It recreated scenarios from the movie (1986) to let the players cooperatively battle aliens. The tactical combat was fast and simple, a surprising change from Leading Edge's releases to date. The game apparently did very well, even generating a follow-up, the *Aliens Expansion* (1990). The board game's success reportedly funded a lot of Leading Edge's final projects.

Shortly afterward, Leading Edge decided to present a complementary RPG, the *Aliens Adventure Game* (1991). It was compatible with the second edition of *Living Steel*, which means that it used the most simplified variant of Leading Edge's house system. It was still too complex for many gamers and *not* well-received.

After that, Leading Edge iterated between licensed board games and licensed RPGs, sometimes publishing both for the same property and sometimes not. Their board games were *Terminator 2: Year of Darkness* (1991), *Bram Stoker's Dracula: The Board Game* (1992), and *Army of Darkness* (1993). The roleplaying games were *Bram Stoker's Dracula Role Playing Game* (1993) and *The Lawnmower Man Virtual Reality Role Playing Game* (1993). A *Terminator 2* roleplaying game was announced but never released.

None of the other licensed games were nearly as successful as the *Aliens* board game. The RPGs continued to use simplified variants of the Leading Edge house system and to focus on combat, and that might have impeded their success as well. *Dracula* further had a system for accumulating "clue points" to find vampires, which has been generally criticized as being overly mechanistic, but was nonetheless an innovative way to look at investigation games.

To support a lot of these later lines, Leading Edge also began producing miniatures. This resulted in a rather extensive *Aliens* miniatures line as well as lines for *Army of Darkness*, *Dracula*, *Lawnmower Man*, *Living Steel,* and *Terminator*.

Some of these miniatures may have appeared as late as 1994. If so, they were Leading Edge's last releases.

Around 1994, Barry Nakazono decided that he had enough of the roleplaying field. This was probably because Leading Edge Games wasn't making a lot of money. If anything, the problem was worse in these final years where high licensing fees for media properties were eating up profits. Nakazono therefore decided to devote his energies more fully to his "real" job. Today he's working as a propulsion engineer for NASA. Yes, that means he's literally a rocket scientist, which helps to explain the complexity of Leading Edge's designs.

David McKenzie decided to remain in gaming. He formed a new company called Bad Dog Designs, which got off the ground in part thanks to the sale of Leading Edge backstock. The majority of Bad Dog's releases ended up being metalwork, building upon the miniatures expertise of Leading Edge's final years. For a few years, Bad Dog produced miniatures for use with Task Force Games' *Star Fleet Battles*. They also created a variety of miscellanea, many of them Cthulhu-related, such as brains for use with the *Mythos CCG* (1996) and Elder Sign pendants. Bad Dog disappeared in the '00s. Given that they were a client of Wizard's Attic, it's possible that they got taken down when that part of the d20 industry crashed.

Today, Leading Edge is entirely gone, but they're still remembered for how they reflected the gaming trends of the '80s and '90s — from military RPGs and complex gaming systems to licensed movie releases.

What to Read Next

- For another company that got its start with a plug-in combat system for FRPGs, read ***ICE***.
- For a contemporary RPG about a scientific society fallen into fantasy, as occurred in *Rhand: Morningstar Missions*, read ***SkyRealms Publishing***.
- For other complex games of the '80s, read ***ICE*** and ***Columbia Games***.
- For another major publisher of movie RPGs in the '90s, read ***West End Games***.

In Other Eras

- For the earliest RPG about a scientific society fallen into fantasy, as occurred in *Rhand: Morningstar Missions*, read about Tékumel in ***Gamescience*** *['70s]*.
- For the biggest and most successful military RPG, read about *Twilight: 2300* in ***GDW*** *['70s]*.
- For a glut of military RPGs over the years, read ***FGU*** *['70s]*.

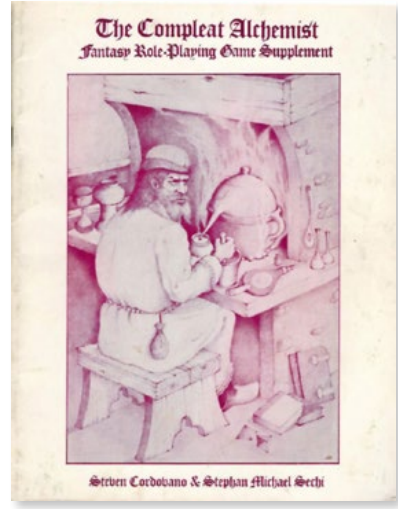
Or read onward to a publisher of a very untraditional fantasy RPG, ***Bard Games***.

Bard Games: 1982–1990

Bard Games published about two dozen RPG Books in the '80s, and is best known for the works of Stephan Michael Sechi. His Talislanta *game has been the most long-lived, spanning 20 years of history after Bard Games' demise.*

D&D Days: 1982–1986

Our hobby has always been small enough that a few gamers with a dream, some bucks, and some great products could break into the industry — and that was exactly what happened with Bard Games in 1982. Stephan Michael Sechi, Steven Cordovano, and Vernie Taylor each contributed $600 and together formed a company. The Bard Games trio also received a bit of encouragement. Not only did The Compleat Strategist — a New York game-store chain — tell the three that they'd carry any books that Bard Games produced, but Scott Bizar of Fantasy Games Unlimited also took time to talk to Sechi, Cordovano, and Taylor about the business. And so Bard Games was on its way.



1983: The *Compleat* Alchemist

This was the early '80s, when there were many "generic" RPG publishers who put out supplements clearly intended for TSR's *D&D*. Among them were Adventurers' Guild, The Companions, Dimension Six, Fantasy Enterprises, Gamelords, Grimoire Games, Loremasters, Midkemia Press, Quicksilver Fantasies, and Wee Warriors. Only a few of these receive complete histories in these books, because for the most part they've had very little impact on the industry as a whole. The same cannot be said of Bard Games, despite their start in "generic" fantasy supplement production.

Bard's first book was probably the one that caught people's eye. Sechi & Cordovano's *The Compleat Alchemist* (1983) presented an exhaustive look at a new character class: a magic item maker. This alchemist could produce over 100 items, from potions to golems. It was a big change from the combative characters that ruled most RPGs in that era.

Bard's other early books were in a similar vein, but less focused. Sechi's *The Compleat Adventurer* (1983) offered a number of variant classes for thieves and fighters — including bounty hunters, buccaneers, spies, and witch-hunters — while Sechi & Taylor's *The Compleat Spell Caster* (1983) presented many variant magic-user classes — including mystics, necromancers, sorcerers, and witches.

Because of the success of their *Compleat* books, Bard Games decided to combine the best information from those supplements within a game system and a setting. The result — which would become known as "The Atlantis Trilogy" — would really put Bard on the map.

Stephan Michael Sechi oversaw this new and daunting project — which took three years to complete. Eventually he produced three books: *The Arcanum* (1984), *The Lexicon* (1985), and *The Bestiary* (1986). The system was clearly derivative of *D&D*, but it also introduced character skills and point-based character creation. The setting was a bit more unique, as it portrayed an antediluvian world of myth (though it also contained some off-key elements including typical fantasy races of *D&D* and even druids). Some players embraced the new game as a more complex *D&D* with a uniquely textured setting.

Of course, this sort of thing *had* been done before. Sechi's *Atlantis Trilogy* was stylistically similar to David Hargrave's (perhaps) more-famous *Arduin Trilogy* (1977–1978), described in the history of Grimoire Games. They were both designed as a series of three books that could individually be used as "generic" FRPG supplements, but together created a standalone game system, a popular conceit at the time. ICE originally created *Rolemaster* (1982) the same way, while Gamelords planned to create a game system one character class at a time, starting with *Thieves' Guild* (1980).

Throughout the production of *The Atlantis Trilogy*, Bard kept their original *Compleat* books in print. Then in 1986 — the same year the *Trilogy* was completed — Bard produced new editions of all three *Compleat* volumes in nice

square-bound editions. This gave Bard a library of a half-dozen books for players who wanted fantasy gaming that took a step beyond what TSR was offering.

However, if Bard Games' history ended there, they wouldn't be that different from the many generic FRP publishers that came and went in the '80s. It would take some upcoming shake-ups for Bard Games to take the leap of creativity that would define it for the latter half of the company's existence.

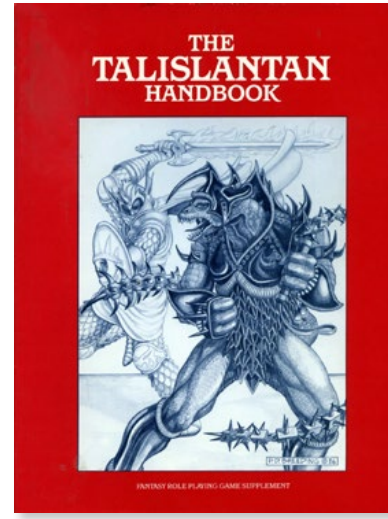
Talislanta Tales: 1987—1990

The changes at Bard Games began with discord. Due to personal and financial disagreements arising in the wake of the completion of *The Atlantis Trilogy*, Stephan Michael Sechi sold his shares in the company to Steven Cordovano and left. He didn't lose the writing bug, however; over the next three months he began work on another *Trilogy* of supplements that would form the basis of a new RPG game.

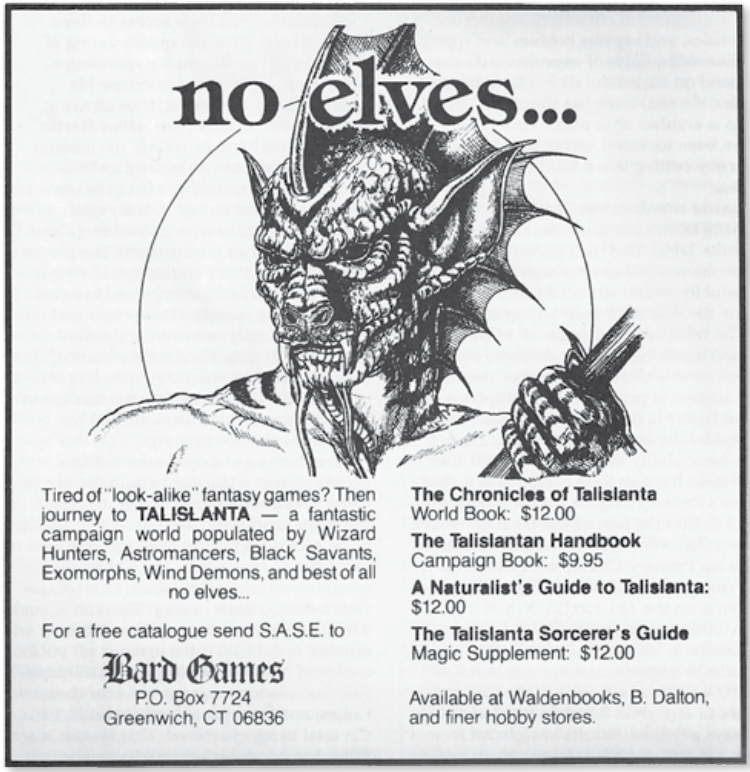
Cordovano later decided he didn't want to run Bard Games after all and sold it back to Sechi. As a result, Sechi now had a publishing house to produce his new game, which was called ... *Talislanta*. He took on new partner, Joel Kaye, and then he published his three new books over the course of the next year. Their organization exactly matched that of the *Atlantis* books. *The Talislantan Handbook* (1987) was a set of rules; *The Chronicles of Talislanta* (1987) was a setting book; and *A Naturalist's Guide to Talislanta* (1987) was a tome of monsters.

Talislanta owed more than just its organization to *Atlantis*. The game system was quite similar to Sechi's first RPG. However, from there the new game began to vary widely — not just from *Atlantis*, but also from the fantasy RPGs that were common in the industry.

Today, *Talislanta* — named for a continent on the world of Archaeus — is best known for its rich and original setting, which is based more on the works of Jack Vance than J.R.R. Tolkien. It is a world that has survived a great magical disaster and is still full of magical forces. The scope of the setting is large — so large that it could be intimidating to many new GMs ... especially given its originality.



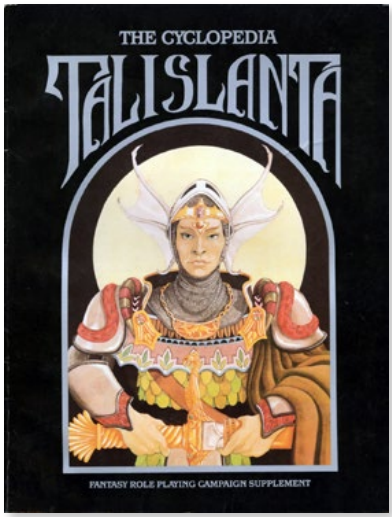
For years, Bard Games ran ads that proudly proclaimed, "No Elves!" and indeed the world of Archaeus was full of unique races rather than the standard fantasy peoples to be found in *D&D* and even Sechi's own *Atlantis Trilogy*. The result was unlike almost anything in the roleplaying field. Settings like M.A.R.



Barker's Tékumel and Greg Stafford's Glorantha probably approached *Talislanta*'s level of innovation, but it was probably matched only by the equally small press world of Jorune.

The first edition of *Talislanta* was published on a shoe-string budget, but it was sufficiently successful to allow Bard Games to retrench and expand. Sechi used this newfound success to collect his *Atlantis* setting material into a new sourcebook, *Atlantis: The Lost World* (1988); shortly thereafter, he published a second edition of the *Talislanta* game in the *Talislanta Handbook & Campaign Guide* (1989). This second edition book was perhaps Bard Games' greatest success. It sold 12,000 copies in just two years, good numbers at the time (and great by modern standards). Unfortunately, other factors would soon turn against the reborn company.

> *"During the time I was running Bard Games, I was single, living in an inexpensive apartment, and driving an old VW that I'd paid $150 for in cash. Even though I was making very little money, my expenses were so low that I was able to afford to work full-time on the Talislanta game and the business."*
>
> – Stephan Michael Sechi,
> "SMS Interview: The Origins of *Talislanta*," talislanta.com (2010)



Though it wasn't obvious at the time, Bard Games' problems kicked off with the publication of *The Cyclopedia Talislanta* (1988). Sechi intended this overview of the *Talislanta* continent to be a standalone book, but it did much better than expected. As a result, Bard rolled out further *Cyclopedias*, each exploring a portion of Talislanta in more detail. The first of these more detailed books was *The Cyclopedia Talislanta Volume II: The Seven Kingdoms* (1989); the series would continue through *The Cyclopedia Talislanta Volume VI: The Desert Kingdom* (1990). Unfortunately, the later *Cyclopedias* did not sell nearly as well as the original.

Another, and bigger, problem was caused by *Atlantis: The Lost World* — the final legacy of the company's earlier days. A buyer from Waldenbooks who was not very familiar with RPGs decided to place a huge order for the book. Sechi was reluctant to fill it, but eventually he did. About a year later many of the books were returned, forcing Bard Games to refund about $20,000. That was the death knell of the company. A final *Talislanta* book, *The Cyclopedia Talislanta Volume VII: The Northern Lands*, was almost ready to go to press, but never saw print.

Bard Games shut down with honor and dignity. Sechi repaid the company's debts to the book trade, paid off his partner, and then turned out the lights. There was one blip in the clean shutdown. Though Sechi had paid the editors and writers of the later *Cyclopedias* their initial writing fees, he was unable to pay them owed royalties. He tried to arrange some deals to make up for this, first by trying to give the rights back to the editor or to the writers and later by asking Wizards of the Coast to pay off the writers if they reprinted the *Cyclopedias*. However, none of these possibilities ever came through. As a result, Sechi has entirely removed *Cyclopedias II-VI* from the *Talislanta* milieu.

Many Publishers: 1992-Present

Though Sechi shut down Bard Games in 1990, he retained control of its properties — and continues to hold them to this day. Because of this careful control of the IP, he's been able to shepherd Bard Games' products through a large variety of publishers, always bringing them back home after a publisher went under or otherwise decided to end the line.

A very young Wizards of the Coast was the first publisher to license Bard Games' products. They printed a new edition of *The Compleat Alchemist* (1993) and a third



edition *Talislanta* line (1992–1994), the latter overseen by Jonathan Tweet. The line was a short-lived, however, ending in 1994 following the success of *Magic: The Gathering* (1993). Wizards' work with the Bard Games products is covered in their own history.

Death's Edge Games licensed Bard Games' *Atlantis* books shortly thereafter. This small press publisher of the *Inferno* RPG (1994) put out *The Atlantis Trilogy* as three volumes (1995–1996) before they closed up shop.

Talislanta, meanwhile, was having a tougher time of it. First the rights went to Daedalus Entertainment, publishers of the indie hit, *Feng Shui* (1996) — but they went out of business before publishing anything for *Talislanta*. Then the rights went to Pharos Press. This new company spent years working on a "10th anniversary" rule set, which became a "fourth edition" after 1997 came and went. Pharos only managed to print a fraction of their rules before losing the license because of delays. Fortunately, Shooting Iron, who hosted the *Talislanta* website, was willing to step in. They completed and published Pharos' fourth edition rules (2001), almost a decade after the previous Wizards of the Coasts edition.

Though Shooting Iron did publish one supplement, *The Midnight Realm* (2003), they didn't really want to be full-time publishers, bringing us to the final licensee of Bard Games' properties, and the one who could most fully be called their successor: Scott Agnew's Morrigan Press. Morrigan Press published *Talislanta* from 2005–2007, with their products including both a d20 edition and a fifth edition of the rules. Unfortunately, setbacks brought their line to an end after just a few years too.

By 2010, *Talislanta* passed through the hands of five publishers since Bard Games and ran up a total of six editions, including a d20 detour. Creator and owner Stephan Michael Sechi decided that it was time for something different. He placed the entire corpus of *Talislanta* books — from first edition to fifth — under a Creative Commons license that allows for their free, non-commercial distribution. He has also shepherded a scanning project to ensure that all the books actually become available on the web. They can now be found on talislanta.com — a site that proudly proclaims "Still No Elves!"

Though some small press RPGs have appeared under CC licenses in the past, *Talislanta* is the most notable RPG ever released in this way — and a pretty large corpus of roleplaying material too.

"I figure that Tal has already had five editions. How many more editions can you do? Any more, and I feel like you're just trying to soak money out of the people who play the game. Though I got a couple of legit offers from other game companies to license Tal, I decided not to do it. And I'm glad I did."

– Stephan Michael Sechi,
"SMS Interview: The Origins of *Talislanta*," talislanta.com (2010)

Twenty years earlier, *Talislanta* was one of a few RPGs that suggested how different fantasy gaming could be — bracketed by the similarly innovative *SkyRealms of Jorune* (1984) and *Earthdawn* (1994), which are discussed, respectively, in the histories of SkyRealms Publishing and FASA. Today *Talislanta* is at the center of another revolution, suggesting what RPGs could be in a new world of free digital information.

With the *Talislanta* RPG books now free, Sechi has the time to expand his world into new venues. There have been discussions about an online comic, a video game, and a full-color *Talislanta* art book over the last few years, though none have yet come to fruition.

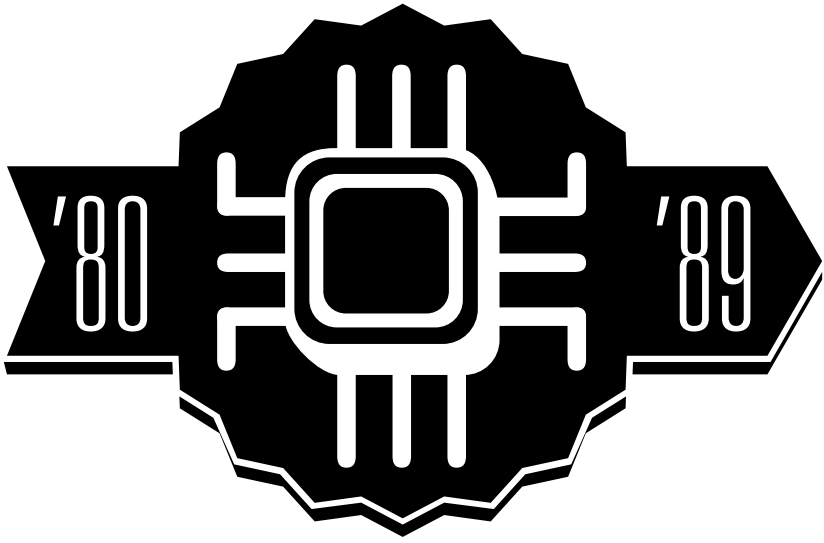
What to Read Next

- For contemporaries who created games (like *Atlantis*) that had strong ties to *D&D*, read about *The Fantasy System* in ***Gamelords***, *The Palladium Fantasy Role-Playing Game* in ***Palladium***, and (to a lesser extent) *Rolemaster* in ***ICE***.
- For other particularly innovative FRPGs (like *Talislanta*), read about *SkyRealms of Jorune* in ***SkyRealms Publishing*** and *Earthdawn* in ***FASA***.

In Other Eras

- For more on Scott Bizar, read ***FGU*** *['70s]*.
- For some of the earliest publishers who created games that had strong ties to *D&D*, read about *Arduin* in ***Grimoire Games*** *['70s]* and *The Tome of Midkemia* in ***Midkemia Press*** *['70s]*.
- For some of the earliest publishers of innovative RPGs, read about *Glorantha* in ***Chaosium*** *['70s]* and *Tékumel* in ***Gamescience*** *['70s]*.
- For a later publication of *The Compleat Alchemist*, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For a later publisher of *Talislanta*, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For a mini-history of ***Morrigan Press***, Bard Games' most notable successor, read ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to the beginning of the third wargaming wave, with ***Yaquinto Publications***.



Part Four:

The Third Wargaming Wave

(1982–1984)

A final wave of wargame publishers entering the roleplaying field was heralded in 1982 by a spectacular power shift, when RPG giant TSR bought out wargame giant SPI. After that, the rest of the wargaming field was left to adapt or die.

The third wargame wave was again focused on board game publishers. This included traditional ***wargaming board game publishers*** like Columbia Games, Mayfair Games, and Yaquinto Publications and also science-fiction and fantasy board game publishers, like West End Games.

The most important wargame publisher to move over to RPG manufacture was Avalon Hill. If the SPI purchase marked the beginning of this third and final wave, Avalon Hill's entry into roleplaying marked the beginning of the end. Not only had Avalon Hill founded the modern wargaming market, they were also a larger publisher than SPI — though some of their focus shifted from wargaming toward party and family games.

Avalon Hill and West End Games also continued the trend of ***the old guard returning,*** which gets more focus at the end of this book. Both companies drew much of their expertise from former SPI developers, while Avalon Hill also rolled up talent from TSR and Chaosium.

By the mid-'80s, the wargaming market was being battered by computers and RPGs alike. West End would be the final publisher of note to transform itself. For those who hadn't, it was already too late.

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Yaquinto Publications	1979–1983	*Pirates and Plunder (1982)*	195
Mayfair Games	1980-Present	Beastmaker Mountain (1982)	199
Avalon Hill	1958–1998	James Bond 007 (1983)	214
Columbia Games	1972-Present	Hârn (1983)	231
Kélestia Productions	*2003-Present*	*Hârnmaster Gold* (2003)	239
West End Games	1974–2009	Paranoia (1984)	242

Yaquinto Publications: 1979–1983

Yaquinto Publications was a short-lived game company that had an even shorter history of roleplaying game publication. However, its scant publications offered some interesting innovations for the industry.

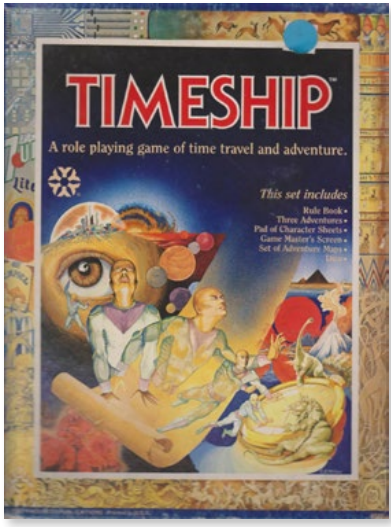
A Brief History: 1979–1983

Yaquinto Publications was founded by Robert Yaquinto Printing in early 1979. In Steve Jackson Games' *Space Gamer #28* (May/June 1980), editor Forrest Johnson described the history of the company as such: "underpaid Heritage employee meets rich father-in-law with printing press. New game company born." Founder Stephen Peek (along with Craig Taylor) *originally* worked for wargame company Battleline Publications, but that merged into Heritage Models to speed its growth. When that didn't work out, the two took the opportunity to form Yaquinto, a new wargame publisher.

Thanks to its printing connection, Yaquinto released an impressive eight games at Origins in 1979. However, their most notable wargaming innovation didn't appear until the next year, when they introduced the "album game." Packaged like double-LP record albums, the cover also acted as the game board when opened. Album games sold very well, and remarkably weren't duplicated by anyone else, either while Yaquinto was in business or afterward. The most popular album game may have been *Swashbuckler* (1980), a man-to-man combat game with simultaneous action. Yaquinto also published a *Dallas* (1980) album game the same year that SPI put out a *Dallas* roleplaying game (1980).

Yaquinto didn't get into the roleplaying field until 1982. However, in short order they put out three roleplaying games: *Pirates and Plunder* (1982), *Man, Myth & Magic* (1982), and *Timeship* (1983). All three games featured unique, easy-to-learn rules that introduced gaming concepts one-by-one through the use of programmed adventures. This was clearly Yaquinto's biggest contribution to the RPG industry; it was mimicked by TSR throughout several editions of *Basic Dungeons & Dragons*, starting with their second edition (1983) and by Pacesetter through a series of games (1984), but has largely been neglected by the rest of RPG industry.

The author of *Pirates and Plunder*, Michael Matheny, was at the time much better known for the numerous strategy games he was creating for Yaquinto. His only previous experience with the RPG industry came when he wrote some roleplaying notes in his *John Carter, Warlord of Mars* (1978) man-to-man combat game published by Heritage. It's perhaps not a surprise then that *Pirates and Plunder* included little that was innovative or notable; it was an early swashbuckling game, a genre largely dominated before and after by FGU.



"To a professional writer, role-playing presents the greatest creative challenge since the invention of the novel."

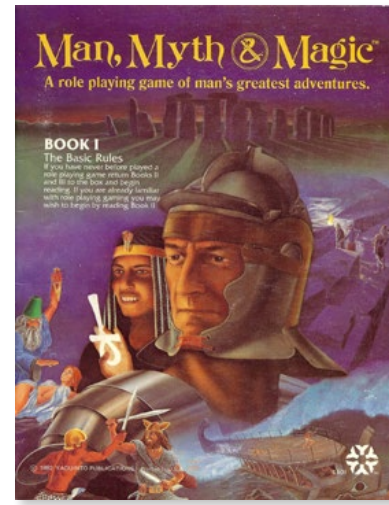
–Herbie Brennan,
"Confessions of a Role-Playing Junkie,"
Different Worlds #30 (September 1983)

Herbie Brennan's *Man, Myth & Magic* was the star of Yaquinto's RPG line. It was advertised as being "the first time that a major fiction writer had turned his attention to building a role playing system." Whether Brennan was actually a *major* fiction writer is debatable. He published numerous small press New Age books over the previous decades, but was generally an unknown. Unfortunately, the result of bringing in an amateur game designer to create Yaquinto's star gaming system was about as expected. The game system was an awkward mish-mash. This was no doubt partially due to the fact that it started life as a much smaller RPG called *Arena* and then grew considerably from its Roman base.

Amid that mish-mash was an easy-to-learn game system — apparently a Brennan idea and may have influenced *Pirates and Plunder*'s use of the same — along with two other notable innovations.

First, *Man, Myth & Magic* was the earliest notable RPG to really take a solid look at historical roleplaying. *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1977) by FGU somewhat broke this ground, but its very medieval settings were mostly fantastical. *Man, Myth & Magic* instead offered players the opportunity to reincarnate into many different historic eras. The initial game was set in Ancient Rome, but *The Egyptian Trilogy* (1982) offered a new era during the reign of Pharaoh Akhenaton. Accurate maps of Stonehenge and the Great Pyramids of Egypt further pushed this real-world veracity.

Second, *Man, Myth & Magic* was one of the earliest RPGs to provide truly serialized adventures. You could say TSR did this with their "G" Giants series (1978), but *Man, Myth & Magic* went further, providing tighter connections between adventures, and even cliffhangers at the end of each supplement. The first adventure ran in nine parts, three of which were included in the rules (1982–1983). It would set the stage for later serial adventures, running from TSR's Dragonlance saga (1984–1986) to the adventure paths released by Paizo Publishing in their periodicals.



Man, Myth & Magic was the only RPG that Yaquinto actually supported. They published half-a-dozen supplements (1982–1983).

Timeship was Yaquinto's last RPG and another Brennan design. Again, it broke new ground by opening up a new genre, this time the science-fiction genre of time travel. The rules, unfortunately, were almost

non-existent, covering just 10 pages of the 48-page rulebook; the game was almost universally panned as a result.

By 1983, wargames were on a downswing. Of the big publishers, SPI had been absorbed by TSR. Avalon Hill was desperately trying to get into the roleplaying business. With Yaquinto's own RPGs already failing, they had nowhere to expand, and the company was shut down.

Robert Yaquinto Printing — Yaquinto Publications' father company — exists to this day. The Yaquinto RPGs have never been seen again, though their ideas of easy-to-learn rules and serialized adventures have both come into much wider use.

Herbie Brennan would go on to offer one more contribution to the gaming industry. He wrote several different *Fighting Fantasy* style gamebooks. The most notable was *GrailQuest* (1984–1987), a well-received series of eight Arthurian adventures. He also more recently wrote a series set in various historic periods, though only *Aztec Quest* (1997) and *Egyptian Quest* (1997) were actually published, and only in French.

What to Read Next

- For other particularly innovative wargame publishers who ended up in roleplaying in the '80s, read ***Columbia Games*** and ***SPI***.
- For a contemporary who focused on easy-to-learn rules, read ***Pacesetter***.
- For a mythical pseudo-RPG that preceded *Man, Myth, and Magic*, read about *Heroes of Olympus* in ***Task Force Games***.
- ·or a later historical RPG, read about *Ars Magica* in ***Lion Rampant***.
- For better supported time travel RPGs, read about *Doctor Who* in ***FASA*** and *Timemaster* in ***Pacesetter***.

In Other Eras

- For Peek and Taylor's origins in the industry, read ***Heritage Models*** *['70s]*.
- For three different swashbuckling RPGs, read ***FGU*** *['70s]*.
- For the origins of gamebooks, read about *Fighting Fantasy* in ***Games Workshop***. ['70s]

Or read onward to TSR's nemesis in the '80s, ***Mayfair Games***.

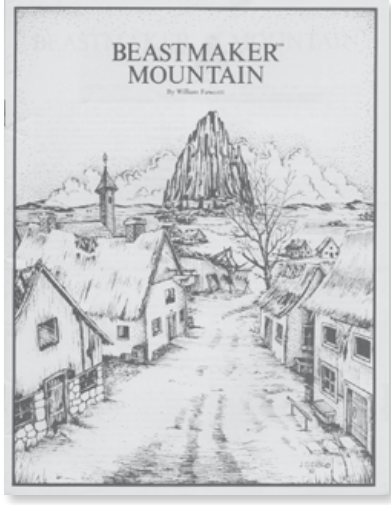
Mayfair Games: 1980–Present

Mayfair Games is a long-lived board gaming company involved in roleplaying for a bit more than a decade and got into a few well-publicized scrapes with TSR along the way.

The First Board Games & *Role Aids:* 1980—1984

Attorney Darwin Bromley was a railroad game fan, who in 1980 founded a company to publish a railroad game of his own. The company, Mayfair Games, was named for the Chicago neighborhood where it was founded. Bromley soon brought on Bill Fawcett as a partner, and together they designed *Empire Builder* (1980).

Outside of this history of roleplaying, *Empire Builder* was a pivotal hobbyist game. It was the first of Mayfair's "crayon rails"



1982: Beastmaker Mountain

games where players laid track by drawing connections on a blank board. It has since been followed by numerous variants, covering areas from Russia to the moon and at least three computer programs — some official and some not so. It is one of the most long-lived American hobbyist game systems, with most games still in production, the most recent release being the slightly simplified *Empire Express* (2012).

Mayfair was also well known in its infancy for minigames — a cheap type of board game pioneered by Metagaming — and for *War in the Falklands* (1982), a board game that produced complaints that Mayfair was profiteering on the Falklands War fought between Argentina and the United Kingdom that spring. It did very well for Mayfair, apparently doubling their distribution — except in the UK where they lost a lot of favor. (Favour?)

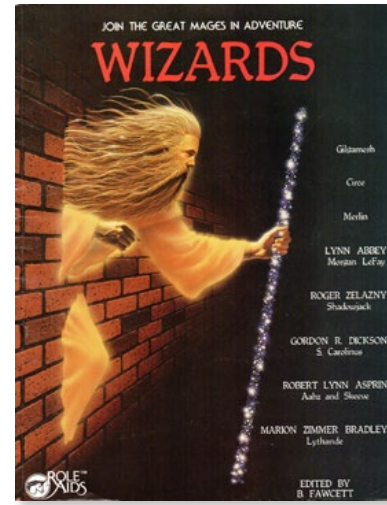
Though Mayfair didn't immediately jump into the roleplaying field, they had an early connection: they shared office and warehouse space with none other than FASA. They also had an early advocate of RPGs in the company, as Bill Fawcett was a roleplaying veteran who played in Dave Arneson's original Blackmoor campaign using photocopies of the proto-*Dungeons & Dragons* rule set. It was natural that he encouraged Mayfair to move into that space.

> *"I was fortunate to be in the Chicago/Milwaukee area when the first Dungeons & Dragons game was being played from mimeographed sheets Gary [Gygax] had passed out to the group he was leading. And one of that group began running a D&D campaign that I was in. Interestingly enough he was an IRS agent – well, he could enforce the die rolls. That's Lawful Evil."*
>
> – Bill Fawcett, "Bill Fawcett: Admitting to Influence," *Crescent Blues v3, #6* (December 2000)



By the early '80s, there were an increasing number of publishers putting out "generic" fantasy adventures, which were usually *AD&D* modules in all but name. That was what Mayfair did with their new *Role Aids* game line, which kicked off with *Beastmaker Mountain* (1982), *Nanorien Stones* (1982), and *Fez I* (1982). These were all adventures that ran at the Chicago Wargaming Association's convention, CWAcon, a group that Bromley was involved with. Notably,

Fez had also been run at Gen Con XIII (1980) by NASCRAG, the National Society of Crazed Gamers; it became the first of a six-part series for Mayfair.



However, it was Mayfair's fourth *Role Aids* supplement, *Dwarves* (1982), that moved the line in a few new directions. Though it centered on an adventure like the others before it, it also featured considerable background material. Where it stood out, however, was its subhead, which read: "A Complete Kingdom & Adventure suitable for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*."

Now, intellectual property law as related to games is an unsettled subject. The general understanding is that you can't protect game mechanics, except with a patent. As a result, a game manufacturer's primary protection against other people using its IP is a trademark. Other publishers can't use trademarks — like *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* — in a way that would cause "confusion" ... but that didn't limit their use entirely.

In the early '80s, most publishers making "generic" supplements avoided the wrath of TSR's increasingly litigious legal department by not making any reference to TSR's trademarks. However, Darwin Bromley had legal expertise that most other publishers didn't, and he felt that Mayfair could legally use TSR's trademarks as long as they were careful. Mayfair made it clear that they were not the trademark holders by printing on the cover of *Dwarves*: "*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* is a trademark of TSR Hobbies Inc. Use of the trademark NOT sanctioned by the holder."



After *Dwarves*, Mayfair published additional *AD&D Role Aids* supplements quickly and in volume. The line featured many adventures as well as an increasing number of source books, including race- and class-related books like *Dark Folk* (1983), *Wizards* (1983), and *Elves* (1983). Each product proudly proclaimed its use with *AD&D*, though the disclaimer was soon moved to the back cover.

Given TSR's attitudes of the time, it's not surprising they decided to sue Mayfair over usage. What is surprising is that they came to an agreement rather than pursuing the lawsuit to the bitter end. Some Mayfair insiders say that TSR was afraid of the legal precedent that would be set if Mayfair won. Darwin Bromley's law degree and his family's deep pockets probably helped too.

In a September 28, 1984, agreement between Mayfair and TSR, Mayfair was given a perpetual, royalty-free license to use the *AD&D* trademark, but only in connection with the *Role Aids* books, and only with very specific text and graphics, agreed upon by the two parties. *Fantastic Treasures* (1984) was the first product to contain the new text, as well as the words *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* in a simpler, sans-serif font, all inside a red cartouche that would be used throughout the rest of Mayfair's history.

Afterward, *Role Aids* production continued at a high rate. Sometimes, there was as much as a book a month. There was some talk in these early days about Mayfair licensing settings and characters from the science-fiction and fantasy communities for use with *Role Aids* — Mayfair had connections with many authors. Among the properties that were discussed but never licensed were Andre Norton's *Witch World*, Robert Adams' *Horseclans*, C.J. Cherryh's Morgaine Cycle, and even Dave Arneson's Blackmoor. The scant few licensed *Role Aids* books that did actually appear included write-ups of a few fictional wizards such as Shadowjack, Aahz, Skeeve, and *Thieves' World*'s Lythande in *Wizards* and an adventure based on a movie called *The Keep* (1983).

Though there might have been a missed opportunity here, *Role Aids* products benefited from the fact that they were generically usable in any fantasy realm — a trend they followed throughout their life.

Early Licenses in Board Games & Superheroes: 1982–1989

Though the *Role Aids* licenses didn't work out, those weren't the only licensing agreements that Mayfair was working on at the time. The company was also seeking licenses for board games, and here they *were* more successful. One of their first licensed board games was *Sanctuary* (1982), based again on *Thieves' World*; Fawcett also helped FASA to get a license to publish *Thieves' World* RPG adventures (1982–1984) around the same time, showing off the connection between the companies. Other early licensed board games included: *The Company War* (1983), based on C.J. Cherryh's *Downbelow Station*; *The Forever War* (1983), based on Joe Haldeman's novel of the same name; *The Keep* (1983), based on that same movie; *Dragonriders of Pern* (1983), based on Anne McCaffrey's novels; and *Hammer's Slammers* (1984), based on the series by David Drake.



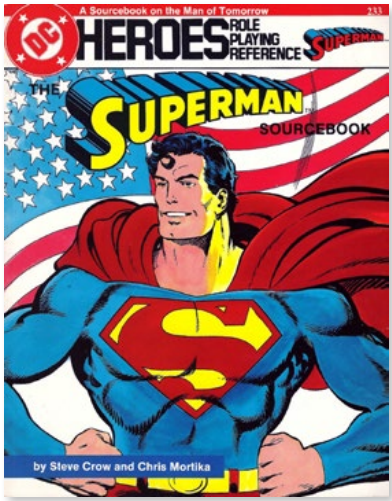
As this list of publications suggests, Mayfair truly stayed a board game publisher, moreso than most companies moving into the RPG space. There were some lean years in the late '80s, but other than that Mayfair regularly put out four to six board games a year, including licensed games, crayon rail games, and others. We won't pay much attention to these publications in this history of roleplaying, but nonetheless they were a vital part of Mayfair's business.

Mayfair's most important license would end up being for comic book superheroes. The company started trying to acquire a license to the Marvel superheroes in the early '80s. However, by 1983, they were involved in a bidding war that also included TSR and numerous other publishers. Ultimately, Mayfair lost out on the license and was forced to move their superhero roleplaying ideas to a new setting: the DC Universe. This time, Mayfair convinced the comic publishing house that *they* were the right choice. The result, the *DC Heroes Role Playing Game* (1985), speaks for itself. It was one the most elegant and well-designed systems of the '80s.

Greg Gorden, the main designer of *DC Heroes*, previously did work on Victory Games' *James Bond 007*, another innovative game of the '80s that worked very well for its genre. He similarly drew many of *DC Heroes*' strengths from the requirements of the material. The DC universe needed a game system where you could stand Lois Lane up next to Superman. Gorden solved this by using a logarithmic system for characteristics, with each point being valued at double the previous one.

Champions used a similar scale, but *DC Heroes* differentiated itself by making its values very concrete and extending the point scale to *everything*. Attribute Points (or AP) measured distance, time, and weight alike. Even more cleverly, all of these AP measurements were equivalent. A Strength of 6 could lift 6 APs worth of weight, or it could lift 4 APs of weight and throw it 2 APs of distance. Likewise a 6 AP speed skill allowed movement across 6 APs of distance.

DC Heroes also contained numerous other systems that were all in vogue during the '80s. Universal action and result tables provided variable results for all opposed actions, much as was the case in both *James Bond 007* and *Marvel Super Heroes*. Hero points, another common feature of the time, were spent for extraordinary results.



There were some flaws in the system, particularly in the first edition, which had awkward gadget rules and at times uneven editing, but it was overall a great adaptation of the DC universe. Though the Marvel heroes were more popular at the time, the DC heroes were on the way up thanks to the pivotal *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985) then in process. The cover of Mayfair's *DC Heroes* was even drawn by George Perez, the artist of that event.

> *"Greg Gordon's worst problem was 'this guy right here' (pointing to a poster of Superman). The problems inherent in trying to balance the powers of Krypton's finest son within a game system that included Robin were enormous."*
>
> – Roger E. Moore, "A Super-Powered Seminar!," *Dragon #103* (November 1985)

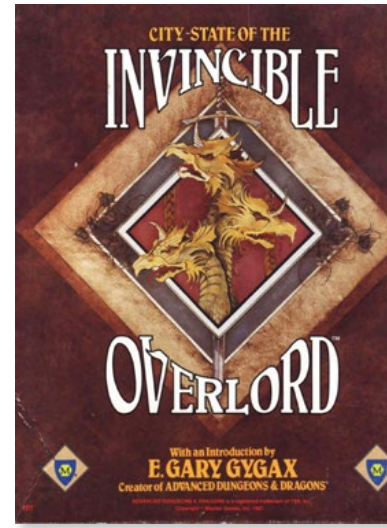
In some ways, *DC Heroes* was released at the worst time possible. Though *Crisis on Infinite Earths* gave the line extra attention, it was also revising the entire DC continuity and immediately made some of Mayfair's sourcebooks obsolete. Ironically, 25 years later, future DC licensee Green Ronin would have the same problem with the "New 52" DC reboot. Despite this problem, *DC Heroes* was a strong start for Mayfair's original roleplaying lines.

Following the release of *DC Heroes*, much of Mayfair's attention went to the new line. It saw considerable publication from 1986–1990, most of which were adventures centered around various DC heroes.

The biggest DC Heroes releases were a standalone *Batman Role-Playing Game* (1989), published to take advantage the Tim Burton *Batman* movie, and a second edition (1989) of the main rules. The new rules brought the game into post-*Crisis* continuity, fixed up gadgets and magic, and also offered access to a much larger set of characters — with twice as many heroes and villains as appeared in the boxed rulebook. It is generally considered the best iteration of the *DC Heroes* rules.

However, by the late '80s, Mayfair's RPG work was quickly expanding beyond DC Heroes, and they had a new source for licensing: the RPG industry itself.

Iterating the RPG Industry: 1986—1991

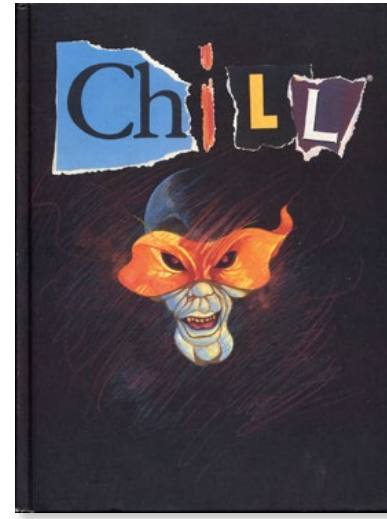


Mayfair kicked off their next major line a few years after *DC Heroes* with the publication of *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (1987) — a completely rewritten version of Judges Guild's original city setting. It shared some of the themes and ideas of the original *City State*, but to a large degree was a new setting.

City State was not a *Role Aids* book, but the cover did state that it included "an introduction by E. Gary Gygax, creator of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*" — which as we'll see was a use of TSR's trademark that did not comply with the 1984 Mayfair-TSR agreement. The new *City State* release was followed by a few adventures (1988–1989) before Judges Guild's setting went on hiatus for another 14 years.

With two strong new lines underway, Mayfair's older lines languished in the late '80s. From 1987–1989, they did very little work on either the *Role Aids* line — which was no longer selling well — or in new board game production. Only in 1990, when *City State* ended and *DC Heroes*' light slowly waned, did those older lines return.

The *City State* wasn't the only older RPG line Mayfair was negotiating for in the '80s. They also purchased a horror game named *Chill*, previously published in a first edition (1984) by Pacesetter. Mayfair picked up both ownership of the line and a former Pacesetter staff member, Troy Denning, as is described more completely in the history of Pacesetter. Denning — working with Mayfair staffers David Ladyman, Jeff Leason, and Louis Prosperi — soon brought a new *Chill* rulebook to market.



The second edition of *Chill* (1990) was released in an attractive hardcover format. It downplayed the role of SAVE — an anti-monster organization from the first edition — and as a result many people found it a darker, moodier version of the game.

There were also mechanical changes, including the removal of *Chill*'s universal action table — ironic given *DC Heroes*' mechanics.

The new edition was generally well-received and considered by most — though not all — to be an excellent re-envisioning of the original game. If it hadn't been released just prior to White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991), *Chill* might have become a major contender in the genre of horror RPGs. As it was, it would be well-supported for the next few years.

From licensed board games to *DC Heroes* and a variety of RPG licenses, Mayfair of the '80s was built upon other creators' IPs. The Mayfair principals had such great contacts for licensing at the time that Mayfair couldn't even keep up with them. Thus, Bill Fawcett produced a set of licensed gamebooks in the style of Games Workshop's *Fighting Fantasy* books, but *not* for Mayfair. These *Crossroads* books (1987–1988) were published by Tor — but you could see the connection to Fawcett's work at Mayfair, because they were licensed from many of the same worlds as Mayfair's games, including Anne McCaffrey's Pern, C.J. Cherryh's Morgaine, and Piers Anthony's Xanth.

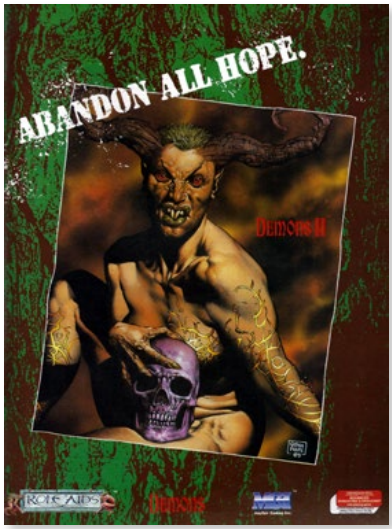
However, times were changing. Not only would the end of the '80s mark the end of Mayfair's major licensing work, it would also point toward a very big problem with one of Mayfair's "licensors": TSR.

Demons & Other Darkness: 1991—1993

Following the release of *Chill*, staff member Ray Winninger — who just finished up work on second edition *DC Heroes* — became Mayfair's editorial director. In this role, he would massively revamp the direction of Mayfair's roleplaying lines.

Winninger's first act was to resurrect the *Role Aids* line. However, he was determined to recreate it with a new sensibility, publishing *AD&D* material that was more sophisticated than what TSR was offering at the time — though with TSR now offering "artistic" campaign settings like *Dark Sun* (1990) and *Planescape* (1993), this would prove a tall order. Nonetheless, Winninger felt he had an opening.

In 1989 TSR had come out with the second edition of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* and in doing so, removed all references to demons and devils. This left an unfilled niche in *AD&D* mythology. Thus, Mayfair's new *Role Aids* line kicked off with *Demons* (1992). It was followed by over half-a-dozen books (1992–1993), most of them demonic monster manuals, but also included *Apocalypse* (1993), a campaign-ending adventure by Jonathan Tweet. It was one of several products written by modern RPG designers, a group that Mayfair was actively seeking out.



TSR didn't allow Mayfair to advertise their new *Role Aids* books in *Dragon* magazine, but sales were nonetheless strong.

Despite these good sales, all was not well with *Role Aids*. On January 22, 1991, TSR reopened their old legal dispute with Mayfair. TSR complained that Mayfair had violated their 1984 agreement, beginning with the publication of *City State of the Invincible Overlord* — which contained the trademark *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, but not in the agreed-upon red cartouche — and later through some minor misstatements in a variety of catalogues and fliers. Mayfair's publication of *Demons* had probably cranked up the importance of the case, since it ran in the face of TSR's attempt to make their game more "mother friendly." As a result, *Demons* eventually showed up in the legal proceedings, with TSR's chief argument against it being that the golden *Role Aids* logo wasn't high contrast enough.

> *"TSR has shown a number of contract breaches by Mayfair – but not such as to demand rescission. In some instances Mayfair has cured the problems on its own, or (as in the Demons situation) has promptly stated its intention to correct the inadvertent error. In one instance it terminated the employee responsible for misreading the Agreement's directives. And there is no reason to believe that it will not promptly correct the remaining breaches that have been found here."*
>
> – Memorandum Opinion and Order, TSR vs. Mayfair Games (March 1993)

The judge reached an initial decision on March 13, 1993. He found that Mayfair had in some cases violated the 1984 agreement, but that they had acted in good faith to correct these violations when possible. He refused to allow TSR to revoke the license as a result of the violations, but left the door open to determine "the scope of appropriate relief."

The judge never had to make that final decision because Mayfair decided to sell their entire *Role Aids* line to TSR. Two final *Role Aids* supplements were published by TSR as *Chronomancer* (1995) and *Shaman* (1995), but the rest of the line disappeared into TSR's vaults.

An End to Roleplaying: 1991—1996

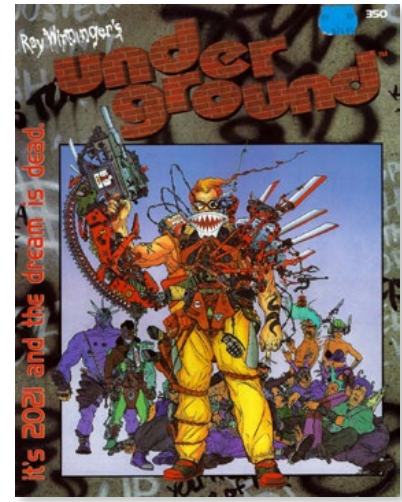
No doubt Mayfair sold their *Role Aids* line to TSR partially to avoid paying damages. However, just as Mayfair's RPG lines had blossomed in the '80s, in the '90s it was obvious that they were slowly disappearing, and that was likely another factor. The *City State* line had ended in 1989. Now, in 1993, just as they were selling off *Role Aids*, Mayfair was closing down their *Chill* line as well.



It looked like *DC Heroes* might continue, as it was reaching a creative high in its final years. *Swamp Thing* (1991), *Magic* (1992), and *Who's Who in the DC Universe 2* (1992) all covered new ground for the game by detailing people and places that were then gelling into DC's new Vertigo universe (1993). *2995: The Legion of Super-Heroes Sourcebook* (1992) was an even more unique release for the RPG industry. It was written by the then-authors of the *Legion of Super-Heroes* comic (v4: 1989–1994) and contained background information that hadn't yet been revealed in the comic. Though material from FASA's *Star Trek* RPG and West End's *Star Wars* RPG had occasionally influenced the licensor, this is one of the very few cases where a supplement was deliberately written to reveal information for a larger license.

Following that, Mayfair published a third edition of the rules (1993), reprinting everything in a singular book rather than as a box. However, sales of *DC Heroes* books had been dropping for years and Mayfair could no longer afford the combined cost of royalties and payments made to DC to extract comic book artwork for the roleplaying products — which they were contractually required to use. In 1994, Mayfair decided not to renew their license for *DC Heroes*, and their rights to sell the game came to an end on August 31, 1994.

However, Mayfair wasn't *quite* ready to close their roleplaying division down yet. Though all their old lines were gone, Ray Winninger was working on two products.



The first was *Underground* (1993). In many ways it was a replacement for *DC Heroes*. It even used the DC Heroes' system — which fans were now calling the Mayfair Exponential Gaming System — though it tightened up the logarithmic scale to offer a bit more granularity.

Underground grew out of the dark age of comics that *DC Heroes* had only lightly touched upon before its demise. In it, players took on the roles of superhero ex-mercenaries in a dystopic future. Peter Chung, the creator behind *Aeon Flux*, was one of the artists working on Mayfair's game, and his show was a clear influence. Reviewers also listed *Marshal Law*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Elektra: Assassin* as possible sources for the game — which underlines how well *Underground* referenced the entire dark-and-gritty genre. The dark satire of *Underground* was generally well-received and sold well — at least until CCGs started causing a decline in RPG sales.

Underground's other notable contribution to the industry was its beautiful, full-color rulebook, possibly the first. Even for years afterward, full-color releases were notable and special, such as White Wolf's *Changeling* (1995) and Daedalus' *Feng Shui* (1996).

> *"During the Underground era, the audience for RPGs seemed to be growing more interested in games that allowed them to tell sophisticated stories … . The original intent behind Underground was to create a sophisticated RPG in the superhero genre."*
>
> – Ray Winninger, "Profiles: Craftmaster," *Dragon #293* (March 2002)

Mayfair's second new product was "*D.O.A.*" This Greg Gorden game was being designed in conjunction with White Wolf, with major contributions by Ray Winninger, Mark Rein•Hagen, and Stewart Wieck. It would have been a Storyteller System game jointly produced by the two companies that included some ideas from Inferno, an unpublished game that Rein•Hagen had worked on previously at Lion Rampant. Unfortunately, *D.O.A.* was never published either.

In late 1993 or early 1994, Mayfair decided to "release" all of their roleplaying staff. They said that freelancers would do all future work for their RPG lines. There was no roleplaying production in 1995, then Mayfair published two final RPG books — one for *Chill* and one for *Underground* — in 1996. They would be Mayfair's last roleplaying books ever.

The downturn in RPG sales wasn't the only reason for the slow shutdown in Mayfair's roleplaying department; the company was also expanding into other areas one final time.

The German Coda: 1994–1997

Starting in 1994, when Mayfair's RPG department largely dissolved, the company was increasingly working on board games. A lot of this emphasis went to a new style of board game called the "German board game."

In Germany an award called the Spiel des Jahres (SDJ) had been created in 1978. This "Game of the Year" award was intended to encourage German game invention, and did so through a strategy of aggressive marketing. Award-winning games could sell hundreds of thousands of extra copies. The result was a vibrant and growing game design community in Germany.

German games were typically simpler and lighter than the hobbyist games found in the United States. They were also designed more around serious strategy and tactics, removing many of the random elements and the chaotic player interactions found in American titles. The result was a new type of board game design.

Darwin Bromley was an early adopter of German games, but before 1996, he'd only imported German originals to distribute in the United States. The games were out of necessity expensive and didn't have English rules. It was hard to sell them.

> *"Darwin had been a fan for years. He imported them in chunks of 500 and tried to sell them. But at $75–80 retail and without English rules, it did not go well. I suggested we add English rules and we sold a few more that way, but the price was just too high."*
>
> – Jay Tummelson, "Interview with Jay Tummelson," funagain.com (1999)

Enter Jay Tummelson. He was a former owner of 54°40' Orphyte, a company that had purchased all of Pacesetter's games excluding *Chill*. It was through that connection that Tummelson met Bromley. He joined Mayfair in 1995 and under Bromley's direction, spent the next two years licensing German games so Mayfair could produce new American editions. These new American editions avoided the high cost of importing and could be priced more reasonably. Under Tummelson's watchful eye, German classics like *Grand Prix* (1996), *Modern Art*

(1996), *Manhattan* (1996), *Streetcar* (1996), and *The Settlers of Catan* (1996) were published in the United States for the first time.

Mayfair was not the first company to translate German games (or more broadly: eurogames) for American audiences. Avalon Hill had published a few over the years, but it was Mayfair that became the major mover in the new American market for these releases. This was in part due to their publication of Klaus Teuber's *The Settlers of Catan*, one of the most popular games in Germany, which would soon become a phenomenon in the United States as well.

As we'll see shortly, this new direction wasn't enough to save Mayfair. However, it did have a major influence on the entire hobbyist industry.

After he was laid off from Mayfair, Jay Tummelson founded Rio Grande Games, which became the major publisher of eurogames in the United States for many years. In 2009, Rio Grande sold half-a-million board games. Many other companies have joined these efforts, and the ideals of German design are also starting to infiltrate classic American hobbyist board game design, with Fantasy Flight Games being another notable RPG company that has moved toward euro-style game production.

Thus, while the particulars of the German board game invasion that Mayfair kicked off in its last days lie beyond the field of roleplaying, its results do not.

Death and Rebirth: 1997-Present

As has been alluded to, finances were worsening at Mayfair throughout the mid-'90s. After the initial roleplaying cuts of 1994, Mayfair tried to get into the CCG business.

Unfortunately, their *Sim City: The Card Game* (1995) was one of the bigger flops of the period — though Mayfair might well have failed even without that. In 1996, Mayfair laid off 8 of their remaining 21 staff as debts began to mount. Finally, in January 1997, they were forced to close their doors.

Remarkably the company thereafter got a second chance; they were bought out by the principals of ICE and soon returned to life as "Iron Wind," doing business as Mayfair. In existence since 1997, they concentrate entirely on board and card game production — including a few American designs and a proliferation of games from Germany, Italy, and the rest of Europe — roleplaying games are no longer a part of their business. In 2011 they really showed off their connections with eurogaming when they formed Mayfair Games Europe GmbH, a German subsidiary intended to help bring Mayfair's board games to the continent.

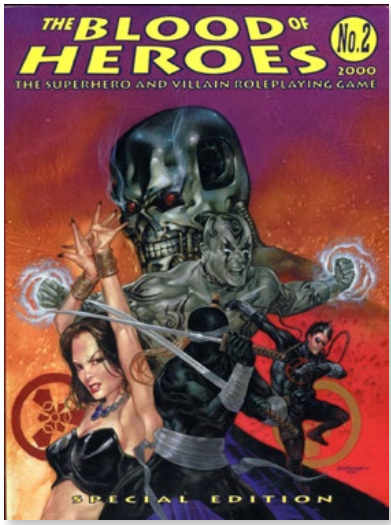
Meanwhile, some of Mayfair's RPGs have returned in other forms.

The *Role Aids* line is now owned by Wizards of the Coast, who like TSR, hasn't done anything with it.

The rights to *Chill* were sold to a small company called OtherWorld Creation, who has done work for a variety of systems, but has been most successful as a *Pathfinder* licensee. OtherWorld has been promising third edition *Chill* since 2004. However, a failed fundraising attempt to publish the core rulebook in 2009 may well have signaled the end of those efforts.

> *"Chill is moving forward, although it's been pushed back to Spring of 2004. We want this to be the definitive horror game and rushing it out the door wasn't going to do that. As for system, it will be a streamlining of the Mayfair version of the system, but will include OGL conversions. Right now we're still deciding between doing a house system book and a D20 version (a la Silver Age Sentinels) or one book with both systems included."*
>
> – R. Hyrum Savage,
> "Interviews: Otherworld Creations," ogrecave.com (April 2003)

DC Heroes is permanently dead due to the loss of the license. West End Games later published a new RPG in the setting called *DC Universe* (1999). After that, the license moved on to Games Workshop, who didn't use it, then to Green Ronin, who published *DC Adventures* (2010), based on their popular d20-based *Mutants & Masterminds* system.



Meanwhile, the rights to the *DC Heroes* mechanics were licensed to a new company called Pulsar Games, who was trying to acquire them even before the original Mayfair went under. There remains some question about whether Mayfair actually owned the system, or whether it had been turned over to DC — the exact same dilemma West End Games and their d6 system faced around the same time — but nonetheless Pulsar published a DC-free superhero game called *Blood of Heroes* (1998). It was nearly identical to third edition *DC Heroes*, minus the DC characters. *Blood of Heroes* was criticized due to poor artwork, and the company went out of business in 2003. It's since been resurrected by a new group of people who haven't brought any new products to market. Their website has recently disappeared.

Though none of Mayfair's RPGs are being published today, the majority of them have the opportunity to return, if the environment ever becomes right.

What to Read Next

- For the company that Mayfair once shared office space with, read ***FASA***.
- For Victory Games and *James Bond*, predecessor to *DC Heroes*, read ***SPI***.
- For how Jay Tummelson got to Mayfair and for the past of *Chill*, read ***Pacesetter***.
- For the next publishers of a DC RPG, read ***West End Games***.
- For the purchasers of Mayfair, read ***ICE***.

In Other Eras

- For the origin of minigames, read ***Metagaming Concepts*** *['70s]*.
- For more on the *Role Aids* lawsuits, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For a glut of universal action tables, read about colored charts in ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For the origins of the *City State of the Invincible Overlord*, read ***Judges Guild*** *['70s]* and for its future, read ***Necromancer Games*** *['00s]*.
- For Mayfair's Distinguished Competition in licensed superhero RPGs, read about *Marvel Super Heroes* in ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For the further future of DC RPGs, read ***Green Ronin Publications*** *['00s]*.
- For the current owner of *Chill*, read the ***OtherWorld Creations*** mini-history in ***Paizo Publishing*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to the king of wargaming, ***Avalon Hill***.

Avalon Hill: 1958–1998

Before its fall in 1998, Avalon Hill was the oldest hobbyist gaming company in existence. However, their entrance into roleplaying was much later than the rest of their peers, and it was largely a story of mismanagement that didn't reflect the strength and competence Avalon Hill showed for years in the wargaming industry.



1983: James Bond 007

The Wargame Years: 1953–1983

The history of Avalon Hill begins far before the first roleplaying game. In 1953 Charles Roberts designed *Tactics* (1953), the first wargame for the mass market. He'd originally designed it because, as a reservist, he wanted to learn more about war. However, he eventually decided to market it and managed to sell 2,000 copies over the next four years under the name of the "Avalon Games Company." Following this success, Robert officially founded Avalon Hill to publish the newest incarnation of his wargame, *Tactics II* (1958).

Roberts' new company published 18 more games over the next few years, the most successful of which was *Gettysburg* (1958) — a product which sold almost 140,000 copies in five years, and which brought at least three major creators into the RPG industry: Dave Arneson, Gary Gygax, and Rick Loomis. However, following five successful years, Avalon Hill started to run into problems. Niche industries like wargaming (and roleplaying) are much more vulnerable to booms and busts than larger, more stable markets. Thus, in 1963 when a number of distributors went out of business, it cost Avalon Hill about 25% of their market.

Avalon Hill was leveraged against future expansion, and this put it into a financial quandary. Rather than try to dig his way out, Roberts decided to get out of the publishing business and turned Avalon Hill over to its two biggest creditors: Monarch Services (his printer) and the Smith Box Company (his box maker). Monarch Services, under president Eric Dott, would eventually become the sole owner of Avalon Hill.

From 1963–1982, the story of Avalon Hill is that of a wargame publisher. Tom Shaw — an old friend of Roberts' and the only person to stay on from the original company — oversaw this successful period. Though times were rough for a year or two, after that Shaw's Avalon Hill did very well, becoming the top producer of wargames for two decades. A young wargame company SPI (1969–1982) would eventually sell more wargames, but that's because Avalon Hill had by then expanded into other gaming markets.

Perhaps because of their success in the wargaming market, Avalon Hill was at first entirely uninterested in roleplaying games. Some sources suggest they rejected *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) when Gary Gygax submitted it to them, even though they'd previously published his wargame *Alexander the Great* (1974). Even when *D&D* proved successful Avalon Hill opted *not* to move into the new industry — unlike smaller wargame companies like Chaosium, FGU, GDW, and Metagaming Concepts. They did, however, note the commercial interest in science-fiction and fantasy board games that kicked off with SPI's *StarForce* (1974). They got into the genre themselves with games like *Starship Troopers* (1976), often counted as the first major tactical-level game for SF troops, and *Dune* (1979), a popular licensed game by the creators of *Cosmic Encounter* (1977). They also released a very

complex early adventure game called *Magic Realm* (1978), which had well-defined individual characters.

This all started to change around 1980, when rumors began to circulate that Avalon Hill was working on RPGs. First, Eric Goldberg was said to be creating a basic FRPG for them, then Greg Costikyan was said to have sold them his "High Fantasy" FRPG. By 1982, Avalon Hill definitely had an RPG department — where Richard Snider and Bruce Shelley were both said to be working on new designs. However, of all these early attempts at roleplaying design, only Richard Snider's

Avalon Hill Computer Games

Though Avalon Hill didn't dive into RPGs until the '80s, they weren't afraid of innovation. In 1977 or 1978 Avalon Hill proved this by deciding to make computer games. After a few years of development they were ready to launch; in 1980 Avalon Hill announced a new subsidiary, Microcomputer Games Inc. Though a number of other roleplaying companies wanted to make the jump to computer games in the '80s – among them GDW and Steve Jackson Games – Avalon Hill was one of the few to actually get something off the ground.

Avalon Hill's first computer games – *B-1 Nuclear Bomber* (1980), *Midway Campaign* (1980), *North Atlantic Convoy Raider* (1980), and *Nukewar* (1980) – were all wargames. Though Avalon Hill was entering a new medium, they were sticking to their core expertise. However, when they began to move into the RPG field in 1982, they also started considering computer roleplaying games (CRPGs). *Telengard* (1982) was actually one of the first CRPGs professionally produced by anyone; it was a *D&D*-derived game which had originally been programmed back in 1976 on a PDP-10. *Jupiter Mission 1999* (1983) and *The Quest of the Space Beagle* (1984) were some of the other CRPGs Avalon Hill put out.

Though an early mover, Avalon Hill's computer games aren't that well-known today. They did, however, continue publishing right up to 1997, and in later years, computer games were an important part of their cash flow.

Ironically, just as Avalon Hill (perhaps) rejected *Dungeons & Dragons*, causing Gary Gygax to create a company that would surpass their own, they similarly created a computer rival through a rejection. Around 1980, Joel Billings approached Avalon Hill to publish a computer game called *Computer Bismarck*. They turned him down, and so Billings decided to found his own company to publish his game. That company was SSI, who would in 1988 become the biggest mover in the hobbyist-computer-game market thanks to their licensing of the *AD&D* game system.

would bear fruit. And that would only occur *after* Avalon Hill published another RPG: one that surprisingly originated with Avalon Hill's biggest rival, SPI.

Victory Over SPI: 1982—1983

Even before the wargame market began to falter in the early '80s, SPI was having troubles making ends meet. As is more fully detailed in the histories of SPI and TSR, these problems left SPI on the verge of bankruptcy, allowing TSR to acquire SPI's assets, as announced on March 31, 1982.

Not all of the SPI staff were happy with this change. Others became nervous because TSR was slow in making employment offers. A week later eight SPI employees jumped ship. Avalon Hill hired John Butterfield, Mark Herman, Gerry Klug, Eric Smith, and others to form a new New York-based subsidiary called Victory Games.

Victory Games would publish some 50 games before it disbanded in 1989. Most of them were wargames, built for the traditional SPI wargamer. *Ambush!* (1983), an innovative paragraph-based solitaire wargame, was one of their biggest hits. More relevant to the history of RPGs, they also published Avalon Hill's first roleplaying game, *James Bond 007* (1983).

> *"At Victory, we knew that an entry into the role-playing field would be necessary to establish credibility in the marketplace."*
>
> – Gerry Klug, "*James Bond 007*: The History of the Game," *Heroes #3* (1984)

James Bond 007 had been in process since SPI days, when designers Gerry Klug and Robert Kern had first talked about publishing an espionage game because they felt that the area was then untouched by the roleplaying industry. At that time, if you wanted to play a spy game, your only real choice was TSR's *Top Secret* (1980).

After the SPI collapse and the Victory Games rebirth, it was becoming increasingly clear that roleplaying games were the wave of the future for hobbyist gaming. Klug knew that the fantasy market was already glutted, and so he decided to dust off his old espionage design. The first name for the game was the more generic "License to Kill," but eventually Victory Games decided to pay for a Bond license and was able to call it *James Bond 007*.

Gerry Klug's game probably could have coasted on the license alone. However, it was also a very well-designed game. Characters were built using a point-based character generation system with optional flaws — a mechanic previously seen in Hero Games' *Champions* (1981), but still relatively innovative. *James Bond 007* also used another up-and-coming mechanic: a unified task system. Every single task in the game, from seduction to combat, was based on skills which were

assigned "Ease Factors," After a player rolled dice, he cross-referenced results on the "Quality Results Table," which showed him how well he succeeded, another relatively innovative idea. Before *James Bond 007* most RPG tasks successes had been binary, though FGU had already prototyped a few success tables in *Bushido* (1980) and *Wild West* (1981). Beyond its raw mechanics, *James Bond 007* was generally quick, cinematic, and true to the genre.

Previously, *Top Secret* had been a pretty good espionage game, despite origins as a *Dungeons & Dragons* derivative. *James Bond 007* blew it out of the water. Two other major spy games — Hero Games' *Espionage* (1983) and Flying Buffalo's *Mercenaries, Spies & Private Eyes* (1983) — were released the same year, but they couldn't get any traction against *James Bond*'s solid combination of background and mechanics.

Because Avalon Hill was also a printer, they could do things that other publishers couldn't. They showed this off with *James Bond 007* by publishing the entire line in boxes, something that other publishers by now reserved only for their most notable releases.

This decision, however, would both help and hurt the line.

On the one hand, the boxes let Avalon Hill produce multiple books within a single product — allowing books to be split up among players and gamemasters, which was particularly useful for rulebooks. It also allowed supplements to include player aids and handouts — building on the same idea of textual player aids already innovated by Chaosium, but taking them up to the next level of authenticity.

On the other hand, the boxes increased the prices of the products compared to similarly sized singular books. Worse, Avalon Hill chose to use some poor-quality components. Boxes always are threatened by damage — which can hurt the long-term usefulness of a product — but the Avalon Hill boxes were no worse than the industry average. However, Avalon Hill opted to use paper covers for the books within those boxes, where most companies instead used cardstock covers if they boxed a game. This notably decreased the life of Avalon Hill products, and was a complaint from day one.

Despite any issues with the production, *James Bond 007* was a hit. Within a year, it would sell 100,000 copies. It looked like Avalon Hill was off to a brilliant start with its first roleplaying line.

The Giant Jumps In: 1983—1984

Meanwhile the company was (finally) getting ready to produce a whole family of RPGs through Avalon Hill proper. This made the rest of the RPG industry very nervous because of Avalon Hill's previous success in wargaming. The idea of the wargame leader getting into the roleplaying business was immortalized on the cover of Steve Jackson's *Fantasy Gamer #6* (June/July 1984), which showed a giant

leaping into a lake where fretful men looked up from their mostly submerged locations. It was labeled "The Giant Jumps In."

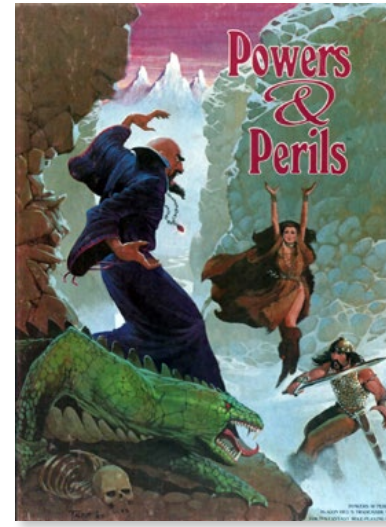
> *"Uniting all of these efforts is their surprising mediocrity. Despite having bided its time before leaping into the RPG market, Avalon Hills seems to have been unable (or unwilling) to come up with anything unusual or innovative."*
>
> – Editorial Note, *Fantasy Gamer #6* (June/July 1984)

Although Avalon Hill was no longer working with Eric Goldberg and Greg Costikyan, they still had some notable designers lined up for their original RPGs. One was Richard Snider, a player in Dave Arneson's original Blackmoor group and the co-author of Arneson's *Adventures in Fantasy* (1978) RPG. Another was Tom Moldvay, a TSR employee best known for his creation of the second edition *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set* (1980).

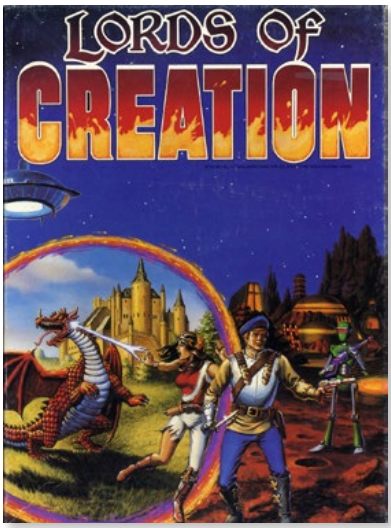
Richard Snider's game, *Powers & Perils* (1984) — which was originally called "Perils & Plunder" — was scheduled for release at Origins 1983 but didn't appear, underlining the long-standing problems Avalon Hill had in publishing an RPG. Instead the convention was filled with empty demo rooms where the game was to have been played. It finally rolled out early in 1984.

When released, *Powers & Perils* was a grave disappointment. It's tempting to call it a "fantasy heartbreaker," meaning a game that read like it was designed in the '70s with knowledge of little more than *Dungeons & Dragons*. One reviewer called it "absurdly complex" and said that it "add[ed] nothing to the genre of fantasy roleplaying games." He was not alone in this assessment.

Powers & Perils was an unfortunate failure for Avalon Hill, who had always been known for their high-quality productions. Unfortunately, this failure was indicative of the company's lack of experience in the new roleplaying world — an inexperience that was highlighted by the fact that *Powers & Perils* included stolen art traced from fantasy artist Frank Frazetta. Unlike Victory Games, whose staff had past experience with RPGs, this was all new ground for Avalon Hill.



Tom Moldvay's *Lords of Creation* (1984) came out shortly thereafter. It was a more playable, simpler game. However, Moldvay's past experience with *Basic D&D* was ultimately to his new game's deficit. One



reviewer commented that *Lords of Creation* was "everything *D&D* should have been a decade ago, but little more."

Lords of Creations' biggest innovation was its setting, a World of Tiers-like background that allowed for multigenre roleplaying. Sadly, Avalon Hill never was really able to do the game justice. Instead it would be six years before the multigenre genre was simultaneously broken open by Palladium's *Rifts* (1990) and West End's *Torg* (1990).

Due to the general failure of both *Powers & Perils* and *Lords of Creation*, Avalon Hill allowed the lines to die after a few supplements were published in 1984.

Meanwhile, Avalon Hill was rolling out one more new roleplaying product: a magazine called *Heroes* (1984–1987). This house organ supported all four of Avalon Hill's roleplaying games, *James Bond 007*, *Powers & Perils*, *Lords of Creation*, and a fourth roleplaying game which was then in preparation: the third edition of Chaosium's *RuneQuest*, which Eric Dott called the "Cadillac" of the Avalon Hill game line.

RuneQuest Beginnings: 1984—1989

Just as Avalon Hill considered many possibilities before releasing their own RPGs, they also talked with a number of different people about publishing existing properties. Arneson & Snider's *Adventures in Fantasy*, SPI's *DragonQuest*, and Metagaming's *The Fantasy Trip* were also rumored to be under consideration at various times, but Chaosium's *RuneQuest* was the only existing RPG to actually make the journey to Avalon Hill.

Ultimately *RuneQuest* would prove the most enduring of Avalon Hill's roleplaying properties — which isn't a surprise given that Chaosium already published it from 1977–1983. The arrangement for Avalon Hill to take over had come about, as such things often do, by chance. While Chaosium was in negotiation with Avalon Hill to publish some of their board games, Avalon Hill also expressed interest in publishing a new edition of *RuneQuest*.

This was pitched to Chaosium as a complementary partnership where Chaosium could do what it was best at — creation and production — while Avalon Hill could do what it was best at — publishing and marketing. Avalon Hill claimed that they could multiply the success of the game, and Chaosium

took them up on the offer. While Chaosium gave Avalon Hill an extensive license to *RuneQuest*, they held the rights to Glorantha, *RuneQuest*'s game world, a bit closer — requiring Chaosium approval for any such publications.

> *"The upcoming edition, the Avalon Hill RuneQuest, will improve on the elder editions. It is truly a game for the future."*
>
> – Greg Stafford, "*RuneQuest*: New Face for an Old Friend," *Heroes #1* (1984)

RuneQuest third edition (1984), or *RQ3*, was released at Gen Con 17 (1984). The rules were generally cleaned up, with more consistent skills and some additional complexity inserted into combat — including a fatigue system that has generally been considered *too* complex. At first, it looked like things were going well, as Avalon Hill trumpeted that *RuneQuest* sales were the best since *Squad Leader* (1977). Within four months, *RuneQuest* had sold more games than *Powers & Perils* and *Lords of Creation* had in their first year combined. However, *RuneQuest*'s troubles lay just around the corner.

Those troubles began with the fact that Avalon Hill published the new game in one of their big boxes. It retailed for $38 (which would be about $81 today), an astronomical amount for a roleplaying game. The problem was even worse in Britain where Games Workshop was publishing a licensed version of *RuneQuest*. Avalon Hill revoked Games Workshop's license — though it would be restored in late 1986 — which resulted in a UK price jump from £8 to £40.

Avalon Hill's decision to turn *RuneQuest* into a high-priced luxury game probably did more to kill the line than any of their later decisions. Before Avalon Hill, *RuneQuest* had been the second or third most popular fantasy roleplaying game in the United States and had won prizes two years running as the best-loved RPG of Britain. Under Avalon Hill, *RuneQuest* would slowly fade into obscurity over the next decade.



Avalon Hill made two attempts to deal with the price problem. First, they published separate "player" (1984) and "gamemaster" (1984) boxes, primarily to assuage the British market. However, these never proved popular, and soon dropped out of print. Second, they published a "standard edition" (1986) of the rules, which cut out many spells and other rules and so could be

sold cheaper. This proved to be a detriment, not a benefit, to the line. Not only was it unpopular, but it also forced Avalon Hill to waste four to six pages in every subsequent supplement to include crucial rules left out of the "standard" edition.

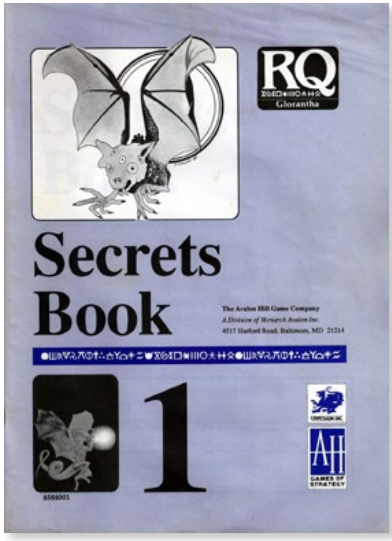
Because of the terms of the license with Chaosium, Avalon Hill chose to take a step away from Glorantha, instead highlighting a new "Fantasy Earth" setting. This invoked yet more controversy — as *RuneQuest* had always been tightly connected to the vivid world of Glorantha — and was another strike against Avalon Hill's new edition.

Fans weren't the only ones upset with the new edition of *RuneQuest*; Chaosium was also unhappy with their new partner due to various contractual violations such as the lack of author credits on the *RuneQuest* box. However they wanted to take advantage of Avalon Hill's marketing power, so they stuck it out. Over the next five years, Chaosium acted as creators of *RuneQuest* material. Glorantha was largely ignored, other than the singular *Gods of Glorantha* (1985), but Chaosium did create interesting supplements for the new Fantasy Earth background, including *Vikings* (1985) and *Land of Ninja* (1987).

Then, all parties involved seemed to realize the mistake they made in dropping Glorantha. The Fantasy Earth supplements came to an abrupt halt and Glorantha material started appearing — much of it updating second edition releases, but some of it including totally new material, including the well-received *Glorantha* (1988) and *Elder Secrets* (1989).

Unfortunately, this improvement in the *RQ3* line occurred at a time of increased weakness for both companies.

Avalon Hill by then had cut all of its other roleplaying lines. As noted, *Lords of Creation* and *Powers & Perils* had both failed immediately. *Heroes* magazine ran 10 issues before being quietly cancelled in 1987. Despite its critical acclaim, Avalon Hill also cancelled *James Bond 007* in 1987; licensing fees for Britain's top spy were too high to make the game profitable.



That just left *RuneQuest*, and Avalon Hill was now trying to publish the game on the cheap. This showed up most prominently when in-house cartographer Dave Dobyski was given all artwork assignments for *RuneQuest*. Though his maps were top rate, he wasn't an illustrator, and it showed in the amateurish drawings that appeared starting

in *Troll Gods* (1989). After *Elder Secrets* (1989), Avalon Hill also dropped their more expensive boxes.

Chaosium meanwhile was having troubles of their own, which we'll return to momentarily, as they would have grave effects on Avalon Hill's *RuneQuest* output.

Board Gaming Continues: 1982—1991

Throughout this period, and indeed throughout the rest of its existence, Avalon Hill continued publishing board games.

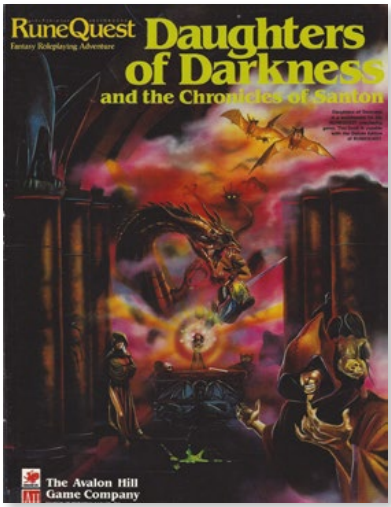
The wargame industry was continuing to decline. A reported 2.2 million unit sales at the hobby's height in 1980 had dropped to 450,000 by 1990. Nonetheless, Avalon Hill soldiered on and even had one notable success in the period: *Advanced Squad Leader* (1985). Much of this success was based on Avalon Hill's decision to publish the game like an RPG, with a base game and lots of expansions. Ten numbered supplements were printed from 1985–1992, bringing continuity and continued sales to the wargaming line.

Other board game production was very scattered. *Mystic Wood* (1982) was a reprint of a fantasy adventure game by the UK's Philmar that fit well with Avalon Hill's RPG production, as did two *Dune* expansions (1984) and several other fantasy and science-fiction board games. Other games like *Luck or Logic* (1987) and *Quest for the Ideal Mate* (1987) were family- or party-oriented. Klaus Teuber's *By Hook or Crook* (1991) was an early reprint of a German-style game for the American market — a few years before first Mayfair Games and then Rio Grande Games really broke the niche open.

If Avalon Hill sometimes seemed like it was flailing in its roleplaying production, the same thing was happening with its board games too, as the company was trying — and ultimately failing — to come to grips with the death of the commercial wargame market.

The Dark Ages: 1989—1991

Unfortunately Avalon Hill's problems were affecting their partners too. As is more fully described in their own history, in 1989 Chaosium faced a serious cash crunch that nearly put them out of business. The company channeled most of its resources into Avalon Hill's *RuneQuest* and sales had not met expectations. Chaosium was forced to change their focus once again. As part of their recovery Chaosium stopped working for Avalon Hill — instead returning to the games they still controlled. They were forced to abandon *RuneQuest*, as Avalon Hill now controlled the trademark.



Afterward, Avalon Hill had little ability to publish Glorantha supplements due to a lack of expertise. Because they'd abandoned Fantasy Earth in the years previous, this left them in a bad situation. Their dilemma points to the real problems that occur when creation and publication of roleplaying books are split — the exact same problems which Hero Games and ICE were facing at the same time (as described in their own histories).

Avalon Hill decided to continue *RuneQuest* by publishing non-Gloranthan material. However, rather than returning to their colorful Fantasy Earth, they instead published two books set in completely different fantasy milieus, *Daughters of Darkness* (1990) and *Eldarad* (1990). These books were widely derided by *RuneQuest* fans, in large part due to their lack of applicability to any *RuneQuest* game (except those of the authors).

Afterward, official *RuneQuest* support entirely died for over a year.

> *"The concept [of Eldarad] was unoriginal, the layout uninspiring, and the artwork poor. This has dealt a blow to the reputation of RuneQuest for quality supplements, and raises questions over Avalon Hills (sic) choice of manuscripts."*
>
> – The Tales Staff, "Ruined-Quest?," *Tales of the Reaching Moon #5* (Spring 1991)



However, by 1989, it was becoming increasingly easy to organize fans and to print amateur publications. When Avalon Hill support began to fail, many fans leapt into the breach, producing an unprecedented number of fanzines.

Tales of the Reaching Moon (1989–2002) — staffed by David Hall, Nick Brooke, Michael O'Brien, and others — led the way. At some time over the next 13 years it would be the prime voice of Glorantha. One TotRM staffer, Rick Meints, would eventually become the publisher of

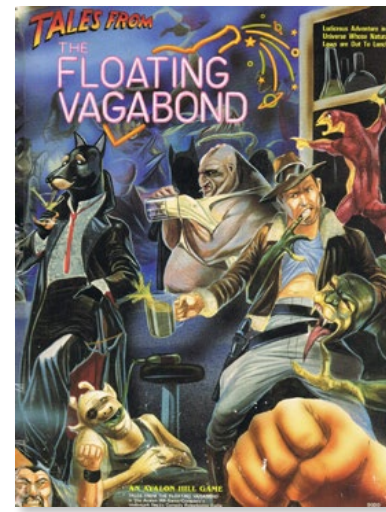
RuneQuest's successor, *HeroQuest*. The *Tales* staff also kicked off a series of British "Convulsion" conventions, which in turn led to a series of successful RQ-Cons in the United States.

Tales set the stage for the publication of many other Gloranthan fanzines. They would alternatively appear during high points in *RuneQuest*'s schedule — when it was exciting and well-supported — and during low points — when it really needed the help. Later fanzines included: John Castellucci's *RuneQuest Adventures* (1993–1998), Mike Dawson's *Codex* (1994–1995), Harald Smith's *New Lolon Gospel* (1995–1996), Stephen Martin's *The Book of Drastic Resolutions* (1996–1998), the German *Tradetalk* (1996-Present), and Mark Galeotti's *The Unspoken Word* 2001–2002).

Another Tale: 1991—1993

Just as fans were coming to the conclusion that *they* needed to support *RuneQuest*, Avalon Hill in turn seemed to be giving up on the game. 1991 was the first year with no official *RuneQuest* production since Chaosium created the game in 1978. However, Avalon Hill had not abandoned roleplaying entirely; instead they released their first new RPG in several years, Lee Garvin's *Tales from the Floating Vagabond* (1991).

This new game was a comedy set in a transdimensional bar. Not only was the cover by Jim Halloway — famous for being the original *Paranoia* artist — but one reviewer called it "the funniest rulebook since *Paranoia*." With its silly skills and bigger than life character concepts like "space Nazis" and "bikini girls with guns," people either loved *Tales from the Floating Vagabond* or hated it.



In producing *Tales*, Avalon Hill tried to take advantage of their abilities as a printer more than they had on any line since *James Bond 007*. Supplements were regularly printed with "toys" such as maps, concert ticket, brochures, stat sheets, and anything else you could imagine being useful as a play aid. If you could make it out of paper, Avalon Hill was willing to include it in *Tales* supplements.

Avalon Hill supported *Tales from the Floating Vagabond* with seven supplements (1991–1993). By then, they'd figured out a new strategy for *RuneQuest*,

and as was always the case, they were willing to abandon their other RPG lines for their "Cadillac."

Starting in 1996, Garvin would begin trying to get rights to *Tales* back, but Avalon Hill would stubbornly hold on to them until the end.

The Last Renaissance and Fall: 1992—1997



The final Avalon Hill rebirth of *RuneQuest* came about when Avalon Hill acknowledged that they needed a *RuneQuest* line editor. In 1992, they brought on Ken Rolston — a contributor to *RuneQuest* who had also done work for Chaosium's *Stormbringer* and *Superworld* lines and therefore was familiar with both the game system and the principals involved.

Rolston soon kicked off the "RuneQuest Renaissance," which saw the production of the best official books ever for *RQ3*. His first publication was *Tales of the Reaching Moon* contributor Michael O'Brien's *Sun County* (1992). It, and the releases that followed, were all perfect-bound books cheaper and more durable than the older boxes. Even the rulebook was published in a more durable and cheaper square-bound form (1993), though it was almost a decade too late.

Things were looking good, especially with top artist Roger Raupp producing covers for the first *RuneQuest* Renaissance books and Avalon Hill hiring on a new managing editor of roleplaying designs, Robin Jenkins. He was a former *Dragon* magazine editor with real experience in the industry who at the time would have been overseeing both *Tales from the Floating Vagabond* and *RuneQuest*.

Sadly, the *RuneQuest* Renaissance only lasted two years, through six well-received supplements including the long-awaited *Dorastor* (1993). In 1994, Avalon Hill dropped Rolston from their regular staff, relegating him to freelancer status. This appears to have been part of another belt-tightening maneuver, since artwork for the books was also (once more) pulled in-house. Rolston's last two manuscripts, *Strangers in Prax* (1994) and *Lords of Terror* (1994) saw print that year, but afterward Rolston moved on to work for a multimedia company. Robin Jenkins' name seems similarly to disappear from *RuneQuest* products around the same time.



Meanwhile, the great hope for the *RuneQuest* line was a new manuscript called *RuneQuest: Adventures in Glorantha*, which was to be a fourth edition of the rules which — unlike *RQ3* — concentrated on the popular Glorantha background. It was prepared by several fans working with Avalon Hill who had little to no contact with Chaosium — which was unfortunate given that Chaosium needed to approve any Glorantha material. By the time Greg Stafford finally saw the manuscript in 1994, he simply noted that it had not yet been approved.

While working on *Adventures in Glorantha*, Avalon Hill tried to replace Rolston with a new line editor, *RQ* fan Joseph Scott, but by 1995 he was gone as well. Various RQ books including "Soldiers of the Red Moon," "In The Service to the Red Emperor," and "Tower of Night" were announced, but never appeared. Once again, fanzines became the main source of *RuneQuest* lore.

RuneQuest: Adventures in Glorantha began to falter further in 1996 when the lead author was charged with an Internet-related sex crime. He was convicted, but later freed on appeal, and the case was dismissed with prejudice. In 2004, the author sued the city of New York for $10 million for prosecutorial misconduct, but his case was dismissed six years later in 2010. As we'll see, the case and its follow-up would outlast Avalon Hill by over a decade.

On March 4, 1997, Chaosium pulled the rug out from under *RuneQuest* by ending their relationship with Avalon Hill entirely. Though Avalon Hill retained rights to the *RuneQuest* rules and trademark, they could no longer produce any Gloranthan content — and by now Avalon Hill had learned that Glorantha was critical to *RuneQuest*'s success.

(Chaosium had ended the agreement not just due to 13 years of dissatisfaction, but also due to their own new plans to rejuvenate Glorantha, which are fully described in the history of Issaries.)

After the Fall: 1997—1998

Avalon Hill's final roleplaying effort was a new game called "RuneQuest: Slayers." Though it used the *RuneQuest* trademark, it wasn't set in Glorantha, nor did it use the *RuneQuest* rule system. Instead, it was entirely new. The game was announced for publication in Summer 1998, but never saw print.

By 1998, the industry was in upheaval. Avalon Hill's biggest markets continued to be computer games and board games — not RPGs — and by now these markets were weakening. Worse, in 1998 Avalon Hill lost the rights to two of their best-selling board games — *Civilization* and *1830* — as the result of a lawsuit versus computer game producer MicroProse over the "Civilization" name. The gaming division of Monarch Avalon (as the overall company was now known) lost $1.5 million dollars in 1998, against $2.5 million in sales.

Monarch Avalon was still making money, just not in games. By the late '90s, their biggest money-maker was instead a magazine they founded in 1994 called *Girls' Life*, intended for the pre-teen audience. The possibility of a sex scandal erupting from their roleplaying division — and possibly harming sales on their real money-maker — no doubt made Monarch Avalon that much more cautious about maintaining gaming lines.

As a result of all of these problems, and a general financial downturn, Monarch Avalon made a final decision on their gaming division. On August 4, 1998, disgruntled employees reported that the Avalon Hill game division had been sold by Monarch Avalon to Hasbro for the paltry sum of $6 million. Comparatively, Hasbro paid $70 million for MicroProse and $325 million for Wizards of the Coast.

> *"Avalon Hill once served as the center of wargaming. SPI's fall had taken the other nexus away, making AH even more important in recent years. Hasbro will not do this, and something else is needed."*
>
> – Peter L. de Rosa, "The Fall of Avalon Hill," *The Strategist #29* (September 1998)]

After 45 years in the gaming business, Avalon Hill was dead. To their credit, they went out publishing wargames, including *On to Richmond!* (1998), *For the People* (1998), and an 11th *ASL* module.

Hasbro Subsidiary: 1998-Present

Hasbro now holds the rights to over 300 Avalon Hill games, but they are mostly unused. Hasbro has reprinted a few of the board games, including *Acquire*, *Diplomacy*, and *History of the World*, while Multi-Man Publishing has licensed rights to a few wargames including *Advanced Squad Leader*, but other than that, Avalon Hill's catalogue of board game lies dormant.

Though these scant board games survived the transition, no roleplaying games did. *Powers & Perils*, *Lords of Creation*, and *James Bond 007* will probably never be published professionally again. *RuneQuest: Slayers* had literally been at the printers when Hasbro acquired Avalon Hill and killed the project. The rights reverted to the authors who released the game for free on the Internet as *RuneSlayer*. *Tales from the Floating Vagabond* has also been re-released on the Internet, as PDFs from Lee Garvin's company, Reality Cheque.

In 2003, the Avalon Hill trademark was turned over to Hasbro subsidiary Wizards of the Coast in order to produce a line of hobbyist games. This resulted in over a half-dozen games, including the horror storytelling game *Betrayal at House on the Hill* (2004) and the award-winning auction game *Vegas Showdown* (2005). Unfortunately, most of these games have since been remaindered — including *Vegas Showdown*, which Wizards canned just days before it became the *Games* magazine game of the year.

The only happy ending at Avalon Hill has to do with *RuneQuest* itself. Hasbro let the trademark lapse, allowing original owner Greg Stafford to pick it back up. He also held rights to the *RuneQuest* system proper (or at least to the functionally identical *BRP* system) and when he put that trademark and the game system together, he once more had the *RuneQuest* game.

Stafford licensed *RuneQuest* to Mongoose Publishing, who produced a successful fourth edition that they called *RuneQuest* (2006), followed by a cleaned-up *RuneQuest II* (2010). These games were once more set in Glorantha, though in a different time period than the original game. After Mongoose closed down its *RuneQuest* line, Stafford licensed the game again, this time to The Design Mechanism, who published *RuneQuest Sixth Edition* (2012). All three of these editions are more fully discussed in the history of Mongoose Publishing.

Most of Avalon Hill's roleplaying games never had a chance. However, before Avalon Hill got ahold of *RuneQuest* it was one of the top-selling fantasy roleplaying games. Twenty years of neglect and misunderstanding nearly killed it, but at Mongoose it has gained a new lease of life. Whether it will ever regain its past glory is a question for the future.

What to Read Next

- For the origins of Victory Games, read ***SPI***.
- For more on the espionage RPG boom of 1983, read ***Hero Games***.
- For the multigenre RPG boom of 1990, read about *Rifts* in ***Palladium***, and *Torg* in ***West End Games***.
- For more on German games, read ***Mayfair Games***.
- For other companies that tried to split up creation and publication, read about ***Hero Games*** (who did the creating) and ***ICE*** (who did the publishing).

In Other Eras

- For computer games and the RPG field, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For another side of how the Victory Game guys (briefly) ended up at Avalon Hill, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For Tom Moldvay's origins, once more, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For the past of *RuneQuest*, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For Chaosium's Gloranthan plans after ending their relationship with Avalon Hill, read ***Issaries*** *['00s]*.
- For what Greg Stafford did when he got the *RuneQuest* trademark back, read ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For recent use of the Avalon Hill trademark, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to the masters of Hârn, ***Columbia Games.***

Columbia Games: 1972-Present

Columbia Games has been in the wargame business for 40 years, but for the last 30 years they've also been the producers of the well-detailed Hârn gameworld.

Quebec & Block Games: 1972—1982

In the early '70s three gamers — Steve Brewster, Tom Dalgliesh, and Lance Gutteridge — formed a gaming company called Gamma Two Games. As the company was located in Vancouver, British Columbia, their games immediately took on a Canadian flavor, beginning with the release of *Quebec: 1759* (1972).

Columbia's game production was light in their first years, but they nonetheless brought a notable innovation to the hobbyist industry by popularizing the block wargame. These new games lay halfway between miniatures wargames and board game wargames because they allowed for more freeform play (like miniatures) but encoded information on their pieces (like board-based chits). They also offered the benefit of hidden



1983: Hârn

information since the wooden blocks were stacked on their sides with information facing their owner. Thirty-five years later, block-based wargames are among the few wargames still enjoying widespread publication, from Columbia Games themselves, GMT Games, and others.

Despite their innovation in wargaming, Columbia didn't get into the equally innovative field of roleplaying games when it appeared in 1975. Instead, they continued with their existing products. The company slowly changed, however. Brewster left early on and Gutteridge departed in the mid-'80s, leaving the company firmly in the hands of Dalgliesh for most of its history. Along the way the company name changed too. Gamma Two Games became Columbia Games (as in British Columbia) in 1982.

Here we should introduce the other player in the story of Columbia Games' roleplaying efforts. N. Robin Crossby was born in England, but moved to British Columbia in 1968. He earned a degree in Philosophy, but his true love was creating histories and maps of imaginary worlds. Beginning in 1977, Crossby started to codify his fantasy world of Kethira.

> *"Hârn is 'strangely familiar' because a fantasy world should be woven from familiar threads. It is impossible to fully document an entire alien world, so the GM and his players must be able to fill in the gaps with their knowledge of the real world."*
>
> – N. Robin Crossby, "The World of *Hârn* Design Notes," *Space Gamer #76* (Sept/Oct 1985)

The publication of *that* world began 30 years of Columbian roleplaying production.

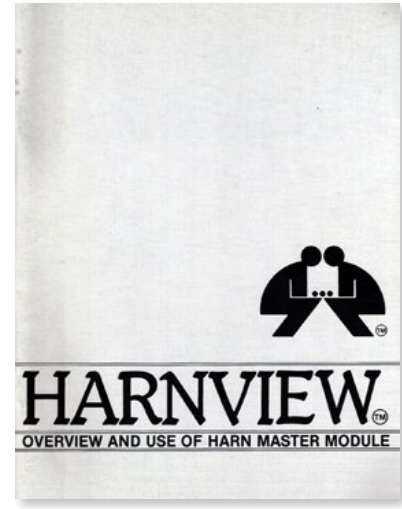
Campaign Worlds and Hârn: 1982—1983

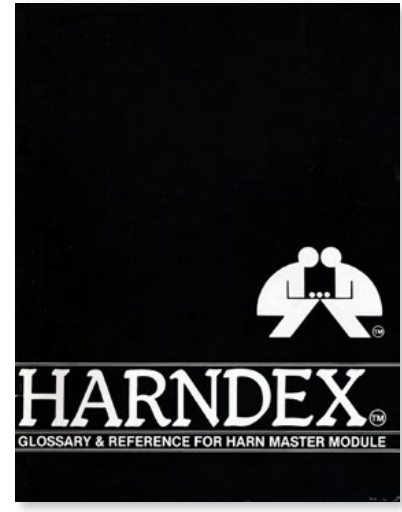
N. Robin Crossby's world of Kethira — or Hârn as it is better known, after the island which has been best detailed — would soon become the best detailed world in all of roleplaying, entirely changing the way that designers looked at world creation. It's worth briefly looking at the start in the early '80s, when the original book was in production.

Campaign worlds first saw publication in Judges Guild's *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (1976+). It wasn't until a few years later that other companies began to see the viability of publishing setting material. Major publishers then started publishing campaigns, with early releases including Judges Guild's *The First Fantasy Campaign* (1977), FGU's *Arden* (1979) and GDW's *The Spinward Marches* (1979). TSR finally got into the game with *The World of Greyhawk* (1980).

With the exception of the seminal *City State*, most of these publications were standalone, without any thought of providing *depth* to the campaign worlds. It was only as the industry grew in the '80s that product lines appeared for campaign settings. Judges Guild led again here with their Gateway Quadrant campaign books and adventures for *Traveller* (1980–1982), but other *Traveller* licensees such as Group One and Paranoia Press soon followed.

The most in-depth approach to campaign design came from a small publisher called Midkemia Press who published a half-dozen books detailing their world of Midkemia (1980–1983). These books detailed cities (and therefore settings) in much more depth than anything save for the original *City State* itself. Shortly afterward ICE began publishing similarly detailed Middle-earth setting books starting with *Angmar* (1982). However, it would not be Midkemia or ICE, but instead Columbia Games who would ultimately be the one to best define how a campaign setting *should* be produced.





The world of Hârn first appeared in *Hârn* (1983). Much like TSR's *World of Greyhawk*, Columbia presented its new campaign world as a folio that offered a general overview of a campaign area: the island of Hârn was about three times the size of Great Britain. It included background, history, a book of religion, a small encyclopedia called the Hârndex, and a beautiful map of Hârn drawn by N. Robin Crossby.

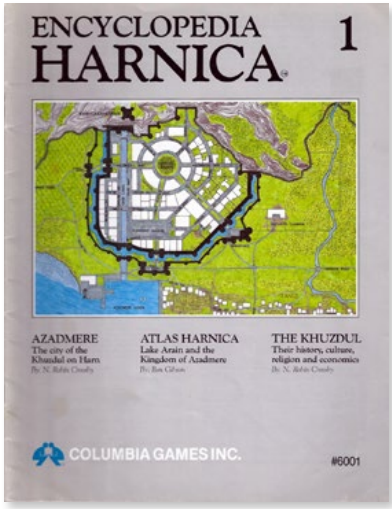
Crossby carefully constructed his world, creating a much more detailed and well-integrated setting than anything else on the market. Hârn was broadly based on Norman England, with some fantasy elements appearing through dwarves, elves, and orcs. It was low magic, and Crossby could really detail the intricate and realistic workings of a medieval society. On the market, FGU's *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1977) was one of the few other games to take a serious look at medieval society, but whereas *Chivalry & Sorcery* gave an *impression* of realism, Hârn instead tried to create a genuinely real setting, based on

careful research and consideration. The result was a superbly self-consistent and logical world.

It's worth briefly noting that the careful design of Hârn also included careful attention to language. The title of that original book, *Hârn*, showed off Crossby's use of accents in the names found in his world. It appeared everywhere; for example the proper name of the world itself was Kèthîra, not Kethira. However Columbia Games didn't feel that these accents added much to the publications, and so throughout their '80s publications used the simpler name "Harn" — a spelling which was also used in the interior of the original book itself. This actually caused contention between Crossby and Columbia, and is noted as one of the causes behind their break-up, which we'll encounter 20 years down the road.

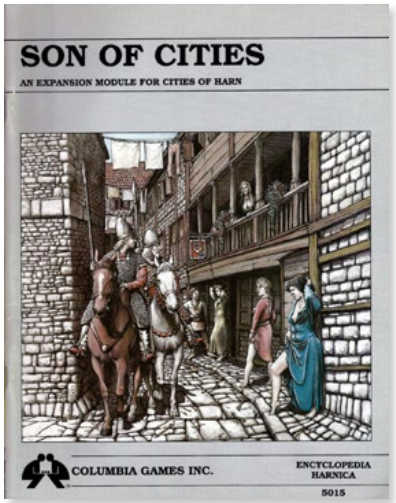
But back in 1983, *Hârn* had just been published, and though it received some immediate attention for its maps and its world, it was broadly similar to the overviews published by others. The extent to which *Hârn* would soon expand the traditional ideas of RPG campaign worlds was not yet obvious.

The Golden Age of Hârn: 1983—1987



Columbia followed the release of *Hârn* with their first sourcebook, *Cities of Hârn* (1983). *Cities* was a 48-page book detailing the seven major cities of Hârn, including 12 pages of beautiful full-color maps. Columbia labeled it as the first book in their "Encyclopedia Hârnica." Afterward they published a series of 16 more setting books, starting with *Encyclopedia Hârnica 1* (1984) and ending with *Encyclopedia Hârnica 16* (1985). Each of these was a 16-page book including several detailed pages on the cultures, castles, lands, and kingdoms of Hârn. Columbia intended these articles be cut out, three-hole punched, and placed in a single binder, the "Encyclopedia Hârnica."

This rapid publication schedule came at the cost of Columbia's block game production. In the '80s, RPGs were still waxing over wargames, and now Columbia switched gears. As a result, they ended their production of new block games in 1984.

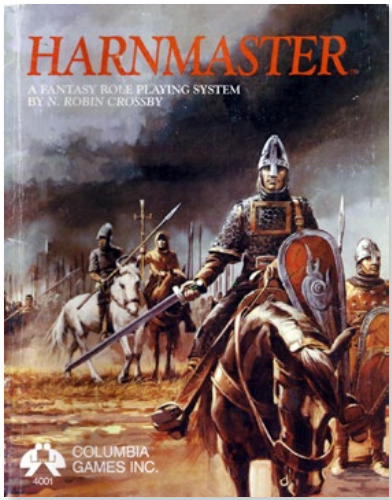


When retailers complained that the *Encyclopedias* were coming out too fast — and that it was hard to stock them all — Columbia moved their production to "kingdom" modules. These continued to fill out the *Encyclopedia*, but now through larger, 40–80 page books arranged by geography. The first few of these contained reprints of the smaller *Encyclopedias*, but they quickly moved onto new material. This was the golden age of Hârn, roughly from 1983, when *Cities of Hârn* was produced to 1987, when Columbia completed their coverage of the core Hârn kingdoms and started producing standalone books like *Son of Cities* (1987) and *Castles of Hârn* (1987).

The most amazing thing about the Hârn products was the in-depth, cohesive, and exhaustive look they offered of the gaming world. Rather than stopping at a single overview product, as had been common in the industry in the early '80s, Columbia went on to detail every kingdom upon the island of Hârn. But they went further than that and detailed many individual cities as well — and continued even further than that, publishing floorplans of individual buildings or castles too. ICE's Middle-earth sourcebooks were possibly as exhaustive as the Hârn sourcebooks, but they were not as cohesive, nor did they as fully detail any specific area. Even when TSR brought these ideas of campaign design into the mainstream with their *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* (1987), they'd rarely reach the level of detail found in almost every Columbia product.

The Golden Age Hârn modules also highlighted the numerous high-quality creators at Columbia. Crossby was of course the author of many Hârn articles and beyond that the "creative consultant" behind the whole series, but he was joined by many other authors, among them Tom Dalgliesh himself. The cartography in the Hârn books also continued to be some of the best in the industry, and that was thanks not only to Crossby but also to production editor and cartographer Eric Hotz.

> *"There are now five others involved with the writing and mapping of the Harn universe. There is a natural reluctance on any author's part to allow others to tamper with his creation, but I can happily admit the world of Harn has benefitted from the diverse views of these talented individuals."*
>
> – N. Robin Crossby, "The World of *Hârn* Design Notes," *Space Gamer #76* (Sept/Oct 1985)



However, in these early years, the cracks at Columbia also started to show.

First, there were always problems with price. Dalgliesh later admitted that Columbia was following the "'Rolls Royce' business strategy" which meant "quality product with limited appeal, but loyal following." A $5.00 cover price for the 16-page *Encyclopedias* soon became $5.00 for a 12-page black & white fanzine called *Hârnlore* (1987–1992). Several times Dalgliesh defended Columbia against cries of "rip-off."

Second, beginning in 1986, Columbia's production schedule degenerated. At first, books were delayed just months or a year, but after things really slowed down — beginning in 1987 — some books got delayed up to five years!

One reason for these delays was *Hârnmaster* (1986), the Hârn RPG. Traditionally all Hârn supplements were (and would continue to be) system independent, but based on reader interest Columbia decided to produce a Hârn game system too. Crossby took the lead on the game — which surely cost him time that he could have spent as Hârn's "creative consultant." He based the new game on designs that he'd first written down in the '70s — and which were in part derived from Chaosium's *RuneQuest* (1977), according to early playtesters. Unfortunately, this antique origin of *Hârnmaster* showed. It was presented as an innovative game because of its lack of classes, levels, and hit points, but by 1986 few new games were still using those *D&D* concepts.

Hârnmaster's biggest strength — and its biggest weakness — was the complex, simulative game design. Characters had 30 characteristics; the convoluted combat system was full of charts and tables; and magic and religion alike were underlain with solid mechanics. Later supplements added to the simulative systems, creating mechanics for everything from dog breeding to manor holding.

By 1987, Columbia Games had fully detailed the island of Hârn over four years of rapid production and had supplemented it with a complete RPG system. They could have been perched on the edge of their next roleplaying explosion ... but instead it was the end of the Golden Age. What Columbia did from 1983–1987 clearly influenced the rest of the industry, but over the next years, that influence would wane as TSR and others picked up the baton of setting creation.

Toward a Fall: 1988—2000

From 1988 onward, a series of decisions would cause the setting of Hârn to get less and less official support from Columbia. Much of this was because Columbia was a small company, and beginning in 1988 their limited attention was directed toward *other* product lines.

That began when Columbia shifted their focus toward supporting their new *Hârnmaster* RPG, rather than playing to their strengths and supporting the setting of Hârn. Thus the first ever Hârn adventures appeared, *100 Bushels of Rye* (1988) and *The Staff of Fanon* (1988), as well as the rules-oriented *Pilots' Almanac* (1988). They were followed by a series of magic books and other RPG supplements.

Columbia also started publishing wargames again in 1990 and did not let up. Though this resulted in less support for Hârn, one Hârn wargame also appeared: *Battlelust* (1992), a Hârn-based miniatures game — fully compatible with *Hârnmaster*. It had been in development for five years through several different iterations, and was another reason for the Hârn product delays that began in 1987.

The real turning point for Hârn came in 1994, when even the *Hârnmaster* books came to an end. That was when Tom Dalgliesh decided to move Columbia Games across the border from Vancouver into Washington State. N. Robin Crossby did *not* move with the company and afterward stopped producing new material for Columbia.

A few adventures and a second edition (1996) of *Hârnmaster* were the only Hârn books that appeared through the end of the decade. Second edition *Hârnmaster* was a simplified version of the game that extracted out the magic systems into *Hârnmaster Magic* (1997) and *Hârnmaster Religion* (1998). The set of rulebooks concluded with *Hârnmaster Manor* (1999) and finally *Hârnmaster Barbarians* (2000).

In order to fill the void left by the lack of official Hârn setting support, fans increasingly began to add their own expansions. Where official Hârn material was called "canon" this new fan-created material — not official but still carefully integrated into the background — was instead called "fanon" after the *Staff of Fanon* adventure.

However, the fans would soon be joined by another unexpected publisher of non-Columbian Hârn material: N. Robin Crossby himself.

Division and Death: 1998—2008

It seems likely that Columbia's decision to move to Washington State contributed to Crossby's alienation from the company. However, he also disagreed with the direction in which Columbia was taking Hârn. In particular, he didn't like the decision to simplify the second edition version of *Hârnmaster*.

Thus, after Columbia released their updated vision of the game, Crossby started working on his own version. The result was *Hârnmaster Gold* (1998), a divergent set of rules that instead sought to increase realism — perhaps with some additional ease of use as well. Not only was Columbia unhappy with the competition, but they also felt it was a violation of their contract with Crossby. This would be the start of an increasing division between the two main forces that had shepherded the first 15 years of Hârn's development.

But it would take a few years for this disagreement to really heat up. In the meantime, Columbia had lots on its plate. On the one hand, their return to block games really blossomed with the release of *Wizard Kings* (2000), a fantasy game that brought Columbia to the attention of many new gamers.

On the other hand, Columbia was suddenly presented with an opportunity to improve the profile of Hârn with the appearance of Wizards of the Coast's d20 license. They reprinted classic setting material like *Trobridge Inn* (2001) and *Evael: Kingdom of the Elves* (2002) with dual *Hârnmaster*/d20 stats.

The releases were successful enough that Columbia decided to make a regular return to the world of Hârn for the first time since 1987. They began production of a new 48-page quarterly periodical called *HârnQuest* (2002-Present). It was very much in the style of the old *Encyclopedia Hârnica*, providing background articles on the world of Hârn that were intended to be cut apart and stored in big three-ring binders. It also showed off Dalgliesh's "Rolls Royce" business strategy, as Columbia sold their new 48-page black & white pamphlet for a kingly $25 (later $20) per issue.

Just as Columbia was upping their production of Hârn books, their disagreements with Crossby were also coming to a head. Crossby made his split with Columbia official in 2003 when he terminated their contract to publish Hârn material. This would have ended Columbia's Hârn resurgence ... except the two parties disagreed on the technicalities of the contract, including: whether termination had to be mediated; whether the termination was justified; and what exactly that meant for Hârn when all products had been copyrighted by both Crossby and Columbia Games for the previous two decades.

> *"The so-called dispute between CGI and myself is such that one of the parties is a liar, a fraud, a cheat and/or a thief. Someone who says 'I can't decide which party is the scoundrel' is, in effect saying that s/he thinks it might be myself. I realise this is not conducive to impassioned argument, but I find the logical inevitability of this hurtful and distressing."*
>
> – N. Robin Crossby, Post to Lythia.com (September 2005)

Mini-History

Keléstia Productions: 2003-Present

The story of Keléstia Productions began in 1994 when N. Robin Crossby left Columbia Games, who had been publishing material for his world of Hârn for over a decade. Though Columbia initially maintained their rights to Hârn, it soon became obvious that Crossby had publication plans of his own. The result was the self-published *Hârnmaster Gold* (1998), Crossby's competitor to Columbia's own Hârn RPG.

It still took another few years for everything to come together. On 2003 – around the 20th anniversary of the publication of *Hârn* – Crossby terminated his contract with Columbia Games and officially formed Keléstia Productions to continue Hârn publications of his own. He could now publish Hârn books as he saw fit, complete with accents and complexity – both issues of contention between Columbia and Crossby. Columbia refused to recognize Crossby's ability to terminate their agreement, but Crossby nonetheless proceeded to publish on his own.

Keléstia's production was limited to PDF. It started out with a new edition of the *Hârnmaster Gold Player Edition* (2003), which was followed by a few other rule books. Beyond that Crossby began to present information on some of the other islands near Hârn, including *The Kingdom of Chelemby* (2005) and *Hârbáaler Kingdom of Lédenheim* (2008). Most impressively, *Kèthîra* (2005) presented an overview of the entire world of Hârn.

Unfortunately, Crossby became sick around 2006, and passed away in 2008. Since then, his eldest daughter, Arien, has continued Keléstia's publication of what Crossby labeled as "Hârn Canon." Books postdating Crossby's death, such as *Venârivè: Northwestern Lýthia* (2010) emphasize Keléstia's commitment to detailing the wider world of Hârn, not solely rehashing the Kingdoms on the nominal island that were first visited in the '80s. Today Keléstia's most active line is the *Atlas Keléstia* (2011-Present), which continues the globe-trotting ideal.

In September 2009, Keléstia was also granted a trademark to the name Hârn by the Canadian Intellectual Property Office. Meanwhile, in the US, Columbia Games has trademarked Harn while Keléstia has trademarked Hârn – raising up that old issue of accent marks again. Columbia has also filed trademarks for Harnworld and Harnmaster.

Neither party was willing to take the case to court, nor were they willing to engage in formal mediation. As a result the case was largely waged in the court of public opinion, with both parties explaining their sides of the dispute to the Internet and posting portions of their contract. This would be the state of things for the next five years.

Meanwhile, *both* parties decided to continue publication of Hârn material, with Columbia continuing with their old product lines, and Crossby beginning publication under the new banner of Keléstia Productions.

Beyond their *HârnQuest* subscriptions, Columbia began work on broader products. The first of these was a third edition of *Hârnmaster*, now in the form of an even more streamlined — but still mostly compatible — third edition (2003). The following years saw a busy Hârn schedule, not quite reaching its heights of the Golden Age, but sometimes approaching it. While *HârnQuest* maintained its not-quite quarterly schedule, more comprehensive pamphlets like *City of Golotha* (2003) and *Kingdom of Kanday* (2004) dramatically expanded on material from *Cities of Harn*, *Son of Cities*, and the Kingdom Modules of the '80s. Once Hârn had been the most detailed world in RPGs, and now it was again competing for that title.

Meanwhile, the *HârnQuest* subscriptions also offered a testbed for Columbia: from the start, they'd sold them directly to readers rather than making them available through distribution and stores. Apparently Columbia liked the results, because on April 23, 2003, they began to sell their complete catalog direct-only. They said it was due to discontent with game distribution and online discounters. Many considered it the death-knell of the company when it was announced, due to the lack of store shelf presence it presaged.

This continued Hârn resurgence — still going strong by 2008 — was of course done without N. Robin Crossby, who by now had published a number of books through Keléstia Productions.

Sadly, Crossby would never see the Hârn community reunited. He died on July 23, 2008, after an extended period of sickness.

The Hârnic Future: 2008-Present

Over the last several years a number of roleplaying publishers have adopted policies that allow them to sell direct to consumers. Chaosium has published direct-to-consumer "monographs" while Paizo has offered subscriptions for all of their product lines. Columbia Games went further than any of its competitors by taking all of its products off of game store shelves. While these programs can offer a publisher a much larger share of the income generated from their books, this short-term gain can slowly be eaten away by long-term losses, as future generations of players never get an opportunity to see those games in their local stores — or even at internet discount sellers.

Columbia seems to have become aware of these potential issues in recent years, as they've attempted to push back into game stores. First, they've produced adventures for two of the Free RPG Days: *Field of Daisies* (2008) and *Dead Weight* (2010). However, the latter product was more a teaser than anything. Stores only

received one copy of the adventure when they purchased a box of Free RPG Day products; Columbia has since started selling the rest of the print run — and even admonished websites that reviewed *Dead Weight* as a "free" release. More recently they produced a map of Hârn (2012) for Free RPG Day 2012.

Columbia has also returned to distribution. Though they continue to sell their *HârnQuest* periodical direct to consumers, their block games and the rest of the Hârn products are now available to retail stores. Of course, whether retail stores wants to carry them is another issue, since it wasn't too long ago that Columbia did their best to steal away Columbia customers from those same retail stores that they're now trying to befriend once more.

Ultimately, the fate of Columbia as an RPG publisher depends not just on their success in re-entering retail stores, but also upon the dispute over the ownership of Hârn, which continues on between Columbia and Crossby's estate. Though Crossby's death ended the war of rhetoric on the internet, Crossby's heir, Arien Crossby, is still working to secure her father's legacy.

The d20 boom and bust hurt many companies in the RPG industries, but it seems to have brought Columbia back into the fold. Though they've never let up from the serious return to Hârn publication that d20 allowed, because of the legal issues their future remains uncertain.

What to Read Next

- For another innovative wargame publisher that moved into RPGs in the '80s, read ***Yaquinto Publications***.
- For a deeply detailed fantasy world published by a contemporary, read about Middle-earth in ***ICE***.
- For another "Rolls Royce" gaming line, read about *RuneQuest* at ***Avalon Hill***.
- For more on the complexity and "realism" of game design in the '80s, read ***Leading Edge Games***.

In Other Eras

- For the earliest publishers of deeply detailed fantasy worlds, read ***Judges Guild*** *['70s]* and ***Midkemia Press*** *['70s]*.
- For another realistic medieval RPG, read about *Chivalry & Sorcery* in ***FGU*** *['70s]*.
- For *RuneQuest*, one of *Hârnmaster*'s main influences, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For companies that have more successfully pushed for direct sales, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*, ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*, and ***Paizo Publishing*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to the last major wargame publisher to enter the RPG field, ***West End Games***.

West End Games: 1974–2009

Though West End Games technically survived in various forms from 1974–2009 — an impressive span of 35 years — they were notable to the roleplaying industry only for the middle 15 years, from 1984 to 1999.

The Wargame Years: 1974–1983

In the late '70s, Scott Palter was just finishing his education. After receiving an AB from Dartmouth, then in 1972, a JD from Stanford, he joined the New York State Bar and thereafter began work at the family firm, Bucci Imports — an importer of Italian shoes, handbags, and other accessories.



1984: Paranoia

However, Palter also had other interests. He playtested wargames for SPI, RAND, Morningside Games, and others, and he was interested in getting into the hobbyist industry as well. Fortunately for him, Bucci was a successful enterprise back in 1974, and Palter was able to use some of its financial power to fund a new enterprise of his own: West End Games.

The result was a small wargame publisher located in New York — more a vanity press than a major player in the hobby field. Publication was very slow during the '70s and consisted entirely of straight wargame designs, such as World War II simulation *Salerno* (1977). There were also, of course, some Scott Palter designs — among them *Marlborough at Blenheim* (1979), a simulation of a 1704 battle during the War of Spanish Succession. West End's most successful early game was likely *Imperium Romanum* (1979), a strategic-level Roman Empire wargame by Albert Nofi — a SPI designer and long-time associate editor of *Strategy & Tactics* magazine (1969–1982).

It wasn't until 1983 that West End Games began to change. At that time that company was still a tiny enterprise, with just two employees and an annual gross of about $100,000. Then Greg Costikyan came aboard. He was a veteran of SPI — which had been killed by TSR the previous year — and so he had experience hard-won from years at a major wargame publisher.

Costikyan quickly brought West End Games into the world of science-fiction and fantasy board games, which had been growing for almost a decade. One of his first games, *Bug-Eyed Monsters* (1983), broke open the genre for West End. It was also the West End release that caught the attention of many roleplayers and other hobby gamers. Its lurid cover — showing aliens that wanted our women — was plastered across advertisements in numerous gaming magazines. It suggested that there was a new contender in the hobby gaming industry.

But it would be West End's next genre release which really made their name.

A Sense of Growing *Paranoia:* 1983—1984

Before coming to West End Games, Greg Costikyan had already been working on an RPG design called "Paranoia." The core ideas for the game came from friend Dan Gelber, who had created a computer-controlled world of dystopic adventure. He'd been running these stories of "Alpha Complex" for his local group when Costikyan — along with long-time friend and former SPI co-worker Eric Goldberg — approached him about turning the setting into a professional product.

> *"I played the game a couple of times, enjoyed it a lot, and thought the approach of a malevolent gamemaster in a malevolent universe was a very interesting one."*
>
> – Greg Costikyan, Interview, *Space Gamer #72* (January/February 1985)

Goldberg would later recount Gelber handing the two of them 10 or 11 pizza-stained pages that described Alpha Complex. Costikyan and Goldberg then set out to turn those ideas into a complete manuscript.

The result was something almost unheard of in the world of roleplaying. Certainly by the early '80s there was any number of imitators of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), from *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975) to *The Fantasy Trip* (1977–1980). More intrepid publishers had extended roleplaying into new genres, from *Traveller* (1977) to *Call of Cthulhu* (1981). Though these publishers innovated roleplaying's settings and genres, no one really innovated its conventions, such as the fact that players should cooperate and that characters should get a fair chance to live from game to game. *Paranoia* went against those expectations.

However, being innovative and original can be a problem for a commercial product. Costikyan shopped the manuscript around, but no existing RPG publishers were willing to take such a step away from the industry norms. When he began work at West End — which in 1983 was only a wargame producer — Costikyan was still looking for a publisher for his new game.

Now we return to Costikyan's friend and former co-worker, Eric Goldberg, who in 1983 was also taking a job at West End Games. As the new Vice President of Research & Development, it was Goldberg's job to find new things for West End Games to publish. With wargaming in a general decline, he decided that the company needed to move in the direction of roleplaying ... and it just so happened that he knew of a game that was looking for a publisher.

Gelber, Costikyan, and Goldberg licensed *Paranoia* to West End Games for publication. Because the game wasn't designed in-house, the three retained ultimate ownership of the game — something that would be an important distinction several years down the road.

Meanwhile, Goldberg was aware of one flaw in the manuscript: it was written in the wargaming mold that he and Costikyan were familiar with from SPI, making the game too technical. It needed more color and a more visceral description of the dystopic Alpha Complex. Enter *Paranoia*'s fourth creator, Ken Rolston — formerly a *BRP* writer for Chaosium, and now West End Games' newest hire. Rolston was ultimately responsible for turning Costikyan's dry rules into a highly atmospheric game. The result of Rolston's work, *Paranoia* (1984), was finally published at Gen Con 17 (1984); it was one of two very original games that Costikyan was involved in released that year (the other being Steve Jackson Games' *Toon*, which is described in Steve Jackson Games' own history).

> "I think to a very large degree Ken is owed the majority of credit for the success of the game because, as I said, what's important in the game is the atmosphere, and Ken's writing is what brings out that atmosphere so very well."
> – Greg Costikyan, Interview, *Space Gamer #72* (January/February 1985)



The game was innovative in a few different ways.

First, as already noted, it subverted the standard conventions of roleplaying. Characters were no longer sacrosanct and GMs might not even play fair.

Beyond that it was perhaps the earliest game in a new "storytelling" branch of RPGs that ran through the '80s and '90s and influenced the indie games of today. In this regard, *Paranoia* was more about having a fun experience than players achieving individual success. It also was one of the first games to give players notable influence in the outcome of the game. They could deeply involve themselves in machinations against other characters and may either fail or succeed at the individual quests they received. Many of these player plots were driven by secret societies. Though these sorts of individual player organizations had already been seen in books like Chaosium's *Cults of Prax* (1979), they were still very innovative, foreshadowing the magician houses of Lion Rampant's *Ars Magica* (1987), the vampiric clans of White Wolf's *Vampire* (1991), and by extension, the whole splatbook movement.

The first edition of *Paranoia* was well-received and seen as the industry-changing game that it was. If it had one flaw, it was that some of the game systems were a little too complex. Its skill trees were more detailed than was required for the game, and there was a bit of a mishmash of primary and secondary characteristics that used a variety of scales — none of which is surprising when you look back at the wargaming roots of Costikyan and Goldberg. Fortunately, this complexity didn't impact the ability of the game to really catch the attention of the industry.

Paranoia didn't just change ideas about what an RPG game was; it also changed ideas about what an RPG campaign was — ultimately to the game's deficit. Specifically, it shared a problem with Costikyan's *Toon*: it wasn't a good game for long-scale campaign play. Player characters died in massive numbers, and there was very little continuity between adventures. *Paranoia* could also be exhausting to play for both gamemasters and players. While many players might rank *Paranoia* as one of the top games they'd played, they couldn't play it month after month ... which would ultimately result in some changes to *Paranoia* supplemental production that we'll see in the '90s.

Despite such issues, *Paranoia* showed the hobbyist industry that West End Games arrived and that they were now publishing world-class RPGs.

Expansion & Growth: 1984—1987

With stars like Costikyan, Goldberg, and Rolston directing West End, the company quickly moved into a more central — and notable — spot in the hobby gaming industry. Despite critical success with *Paranoia*, they didn't move entirely over to roleplaying games right away, probably because *Paranoia* hadn't been a *commercial* breakout.

Instead, West End split its focus between board games and RPGs.

Many of the board games West End produced in the mid-'80s were aimed squarely at the growing genres of fantasy and science-fiction. Several of these were of particular note.

Most notably, West End licensed the rights to publish Star Trek board games — getting into a property that was hot thanks to the trilogy of movies that were released to date (1979, 1982, 1984). Hobbyist fans were even more in tune with the series than most, thanks to FASA publishing *Star Trek: The Role-Playing Game* just a few years earlier (1982).

West End was able to build on this fandom with a total of three games: Greg Costikyan's *Star Trek: The Adventure Game* (1985), an exploration game focused on a paragraphed choose-your-own-adventure-style book; *Star Trek: The Enterprise⁴ Encounter* (1985), a more typical board game that mixed racing and set collection and was designed by Bill Eberle, Jack Kittredge, and Peter Olotka of Eon Products; and *Star Trek III* (1985), a set of three solitaire games.

Unfortunately, West End wasn't the only one publishing *Star Trek* board games at the time. Though they had the "adventure gaming board game" rights, RPG publisher FASA had the "roleplaying board game" rights. This caused a bit of animosity between the companies, especially when FASA's *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984) microgame quickly became confused with the similarly named game by West End.

West End also picked up a license for Roger Zelazny's *Amber* with the intention of designing *Amber* board games. They never did, but their unused license (eventually) led to Phage Press' creation of *Amber Diceless Role-playing* (1991), as is described in the history of that company.

West End's other major genre expansion of the mid-'80s came when they licensed all of the board games from Eon Products, the publishers of genre classic *Cosmic Encounter* (1977) and creator of West End's own *Star Trek: The Enterprise⁴ Encounter*. However West End's second edition of *Cosmic Encounter* (1986) only remained in print for a few years, and the company never reprinted any of Eon's other games. It would be Mayfair Games who published a better-known and more long-lived third edition (1991) of the game.

Mini-History

Eon Products: 1977—1983

Although never directly involved in the roleplaying field, Eon Products was a small hobbyist publisher who interacted with many RPG companies and whose ideas have impacted the wider industry.

It all started in 1972 when Peter Olotka, Jack Kittredge, Bill Eberle, and (sometimes) Bill Norton came together as a game design cooperative "Future Pastimes." Rather uniquely, all four designers came from the general gaming community, *not* the hobbyist market. Despite that, they created one of the most identifiable hobbyist games: *Cosmic Encounter*.

The group's biggest goal was for *Cosmic Encounter* to not be *Risk* (1957), a Parker Brothers game that they grew sick of. Their own game was a wargame but featuring the science-fiction themes that were just beginning to proliferate the hobbyist industry, and it played in only a few hours' time. The game's most unique feature was its variable powers: each player got one of six special powers when they played the game.

In 1976, Future Pastimes successfully licensed *Cosmic Encounter* to Parker Brothers for a princely advance of $5,000. But Parker Brothers was never entirely happy with the game and eventually canceled it, saying, "science-fiction won't sell." Therefore Future Pastimes decided to publish it themselves. The biggest problem was, of course, money. However, while demonstrating the game at a 1977 science-fiction convention in Boston, they met Ned Horn, who offered to invest in the game. Several weeks later, Olotka, Kittredge, Eberle, and Horn created a new company, Eon Products (though they were more frequently called Eon Games).

By the time *Cosmic Encounter* (1977) went to press, it included 15 alien powers, not 6, providing much more room for variability from game to game. The designers had come to embrace what would be the game's biggest contribution to the hobbyist genre. After the game's release, Eon supported *Cosmic Encounter* extensively with nine expansions, featuring an additional 60 more alien powers plus lots of other rules (some of them very silly).

Over the next six years, Eon also put out four more board games: *Darkover* (1979), *Hoax* (1981), *Runes* (1981), and *Borderlands* (1982). Of these other games, *Borderlands* was probably the most memorable. It was an attempt to create a diplomatic wargame that ran in a reasonable amount of time, but besides its core systems of combat and negotiation, it also included a resource management system. Individual spaces produced resources like coal, iron, gold, and timber, which in turn could be turned into weapons, cities, and river boats. A city, for example, could be built using 1 timber, 1 coal, 1 iron, and 1 gold – or alternatively 4 gold.

Mini-History

The Eon team also designed the *Dune* (1979) game for Avalon Hill, which was their other notable release. When the game had originally been designed by Eon as "Tribute" it didn't have any links to the *Dune* universe, but when Avalon Hill asked them to retrofit it … the rest was history. *Dune* was a wargame with an original combat system that mixed resource management and bluffing. It also had a set of six variable powers, linked to the major characters in the books – very much like the original design of *Cosmic Encounter*.

It really looked like Eon Products was on its way up in 1983, because they started putting out the bimonthly *Encounter* magazine (1983) in support of all of their games. However, by 1984 the Eon crew decided that there wasn't enough money in board games, so they moved on to computer games and other things – though the crew did come together one last time in the board game arena to produce *Star Trek: The Enterprise*[4] *Encounter* (1985) for West End Games.

Much of Eon's influence on the hobbyist industry came afterward.

Eon's premiere game, *Cosmic Encounter*, made the rounds of RPG companies. West End Games produced an unsupported second edition (1986) and later Mayfair published a third edition (1991), which together with its supplements was the *de facto* standard for almost a decade. Hasbro produced an attractive but unsupported version of the game (2000), while more recently it saw publication by Fantasy Flight Games in a fifth edition (2008) that receives about one expansion each year.

The idea of variable powers from *Cosmic Encounter* has also been very important for the industry. Richard Garfield has often referenced it as a major influence on *Magic: The Gathering* (1993), and the impact of that game is of course noted throughout these histories.

More recently, FFG published a re-themed version of *Dune* called *Rex: Final Days of an Empire* (2010) and revamped *Borderlands* as *Gearworld: The Borderlands* (2013).

Meanwhile, a few of Eon's games made the jump to Germany in the '90s, when a new and more mainstream gaming market was developing there. The first of Eon's games to be reprinted as a eurogame was *Borderlands*, which became *Ascalion* (1991). Multiple commentators have suggested that *Ascalion* influenced the ideas of resource production and resource management found in Klaus Teuber's *The Settlers of Catan* (1995) – though if so, Teuber has not acknowledged the influence. In turn, *The Settlers of Catan* was one of the main games that brought the eurogame revolution into the United States, as is detailed in the history of Mayfair Games.

Though Eon Products itself is long gone, original partner Peter Olotka is still having fun making games. His latest release was none other than *Cosmic Encounter Online* (2003), a high-tech Flash version of Eon's original game.

Though West End's *Star Trek* and *Cosmic Encounter* games were big news — as the names were already known to hobbyist fans — West End was simultaneously producing original games that have since become hobbyist classics. Among them: Tom Wham's *Kings & Things* (1986), a silly chit-based wargame; and Eric Goldberg's *Tales of the Arabian Nights* (1985), a unique paragraph-based story-telling board game. Though both of these games were out of print for many years following the demise of the original West End, in more recent times they've both come back thanks to new productions from Z-Man Games.

Meanwhile, West End Games was intent on extending their roleplaying presence. *Paranoia* received a number of notable early supplements, including John M. Ford's award-winning adventure *The Yellow Clearance Black Box Blues* (1985) and Warren Spector and Allen Varney's *Send in the Clones* (1985), but the two new RPG lines that West End kicked off in 1986 were bigger news. The first was *Ghostbusters* (1986), which was actually designed by Chaosium; although a long-time publisher in their own right, Chaosium was experimenting with acting as a design house at the time — writing *RuneQuest* books for Avalon Hill, and now *Ghostbusters* for West End Games. *Ghostbusters* was, as you'd expect, a licensed game based on the movie of the same name. Together with *Star Trek* it positioned West End as a strong publisher of licensed products. It was also a breakout commercial hit for the company.



"And in the mid-1980s, not long after FASA had made a disappointing job of both Doctor Who and Star Trek, and TSR's Indiana Jones and Conan had been slammed and cancelled in short order, nobody held much hope that West End's Ghostbusters roleplaying game would be anything different."

– James Wallis, "James Wallis on Ghostbusters," *Hobby Games: The 100 Best* (2007)

The system that Chaosium designed for *Ghostbusters* was innovative and would be instrumental in West End's later success. It was the first iteration of the "d6 system" that we'll meet again soon at the heart of West End's most successful RPG.

The core of *Ghostbusters*' d6 system was an "additive dice pool." Additive dice pool themselves weren't new; every time you rolled 20d6 of damage in *Champions* (1981),

for example, you'd add up the results. *Ghostbusters*' innovation was that it applied additive dice pool to characteristics and to skills, not just to damage. Thus, your characteristics and skills told you how many dice to roll when you were engaging in a task. You then threw those dice, trying to meet a difficulty set by the gamemaster. An "Easy" task might have a value of "5," which would hard to do if you had a skill which let you roll 1d6, but pretty easy if your skill allowed you to roll 4d6.

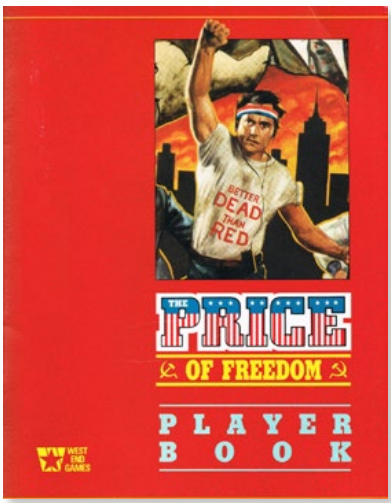
We'll see the system again throughout West End's history. It's likely that it also influenced the comparative dice pools that first appeared in FASA's *Shadowrun* (1989) then proliferated throughout White Wolf's World of Darkness games (1991-Present).

Ghostbusters also featured "brownie points," which gave players the opportunity to "rewrite the script" — allowing them to get their characters out of jam. Similar concepts had been seen in spy games like *Top Secret* (1980) and *James Bond 007* (1983), but it was the d6 games that popularized ideas of players influencing games and creating more dramatic results.

Finally, *Ghostbusters* was also a rare RPG that could be played practically out of the box. The rules were just 24 pages long, split into easily consumed two-page sections. Designer James Wallis later compared it to Pacesetter's *Sandman: Map of Halaal* (1985), saying they were the two true "pick-up-and-play" RPGs in the industry.

As already noted, *Ghostbusters* was a big success for West End. More than the critical acclaim for *Paranoia*, the commercial acclaim for *Ghostbusters* is likely what pushed the company to develop more roleplaying games.

West End's second new RPG of the period was *The Price of Freedom* (1986). A few years earlier, GDW had found unexpected success with a military RPG called *Twilight: 2000* (1984). *The Price of Freedom* was a Greg Costikyan design intended to attract that same audience. It wasn't particularly successful, and Costikyan would later say that it was probably too much of a wargame and too right-wing. The central conceit, of the USSR occupying the United States, was also already growing less believable by the time the game was released. To make matters worse, it was released into a glut of military RPGs that included Leading Edge Games' *Phoenix Command* (1986), Task Force Games' *Delta Force* (1986), and FGU's *Freedom Fighters* (1986) — and it was



Phoenix Command that won the prize as the number two military game, leaving *The Price of Freedom* and others in the dust.

Overall, West End's RPGs met with varied success until 1987. *The Price of Freedom* petered out after a few adventures, and *Ghostbusters* received just a handful of adventures despite its commercial success. It was actually the *Paranoia* line that got the most support. By 1987, it had been reprinted in the US and in a Games Workshop edition in the UK (1986). Shortly thereafter, *Paranoia* received a full second edition (1987).

The new version of *Paranoia* simplified many rules as part of a comprehensive overhaul. The style of the game was also changing, primarily due to the attentions of line editor Ken Rolston. He envisioned a setting that was less dark and more slapstick and a new edition that became the official face of Alpha Complex. The result was what most consider West End's best version of the game.

After that, West End was flying high and this would just carry on to their next — and most famous — RPG.

A Rising Star & A Coming Fall: 1987—1988

While publishing *Ghostbusters* and *The Price of Freedom*, West End was also working on another license, this one for George Lucas' *Star Wars* universe. At the time, it wasn't seen as a *huge* license. After all, *The Return of the Jedi* (1983) was three years old and fiction production had since slowed to a trickle. Even Marvel Comics' venerable *Star Wars* series (1977–1986) had ended after 107 issues. In 1986 or so, the *Star Wars* franchise was probably at its weakest.

As a result, Lucasfilm was seeking a *Star Wars* roleplaying licensee: they thought it would help keep the franchise alive. They actively interviewed a number of role-playing publishers and requested bids for the license. TSR was among those that Lucasfilm talked to ... so it was surprising that the license went instead to the smaller West End.



West End's experience with the licensed *Ghostbusters* has been listed as one reason for their successful bid. However, West End Games had another advantage not enjoyed by most RPG companies: it, Bucci Imports, and a variety of other companies were wholly owned by the Palter family who freely transferred money among them. Bucci had helped West End when times were lean — getting a tax write-off in the process — and now they

offered to advance $100,000 to Lucasfilm, which may well have been the highest advance for a roleplaying property to that date.

> *"Lucasfilm was one of the best and most supportive licensors with which I've worked; they laid down some key strictures, but otherwise were quite good about letting us be creative."*
>
> – Greg Costikyan, Interview, jedinews.co.uk (October 2012)

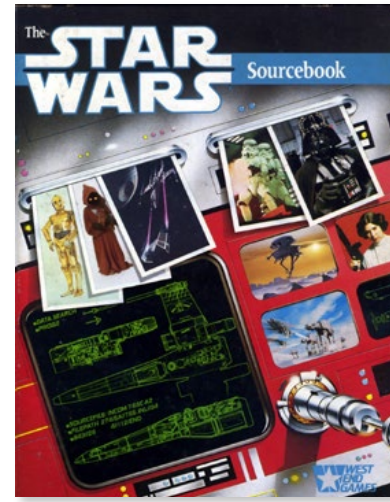
Thanks to Palter and Bucci, West End *was* able to license *Star Wars*. The result was *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* (1987), designed by Greg Costikyan with help from Doug Kaufman and others.

Most consider *Star Wars* to be the next iteration of *Ghostbusters*' d6 system, though Costikyan says there were other influences, including the skill-based gaming of Chaosium's *RuneQuest* (1978) and the wonderful feeling of rolling a huge pile of dice found in Flying Buffalo's *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975). Whatever the exact evolutionary path, *Star Wars* definitely built on two systems from *Ghostbusters* — additive dice pools and dramatic brownie points (now "force points") — but expanded them into a more substantive whole.

Among the new systems Costikyan created for *Star Wars* was a template-based character creation system that allowed players to quickly design characters that were broadly recognizable in the style of the characters from the movies. It offered up some of the advantages of a class-based game like *Dungeons & Dragons* (1975) without the constraints. Here again we find *Shadowrun* (1989) following West End's lead, this time with a template system of its own. Many other games did likewise in the early '90s, such as *Ars Magica*, beginning with its third edition (1992).

Though it had an innovative and polished design, *Star Wars* still faced one hurdle: designers Greg Costikyan and Eric Goldberg decided to leave West End in January 1987, and the game wasn't yet ready for release. Different sources cite different reasons for them doing so: from not getting equity in the company despite its increasing success in the roleplaying industry, to disagreements over staff decisions or with new management. In any case, the reports tend to agree that there was ultimately a conflict between Scott Palter and the two. So Costikyan and Goldberg left West End — costing the company the core designers of most of its games. They'd go on to form Goldberg Associates, which published a board game and an RPG sourcebook based on George Lucas' *Willow* (1988) before dissolving.

Enter Bill Slavicsek, a recent graduate of Saint John's University. He'd joined West End in 1986 in response to a want ad in *The New York Times*. Some of his first work had been proofreading the galleys of *Ghostbusters*. Following that, he participated in the development and editing of numerous games. As it happens, Slavicsek was



also a big *Star Wars* fan. He'd seen the movie a total of 39 (!) times the summer that it was released and was now an expert on the setting. It was natural that Slavicsek stepped in as the developer and editor following the departure of Costikyan and Goldberg.

Early in 1987, Slavicsek was also working on another important release: *The Star Wars Sourcebook* (1987), which he coauthored with Curtis Smith. This exhaustive sourcebook was one of the first references to really detail the *Star Wars* universe; even giving the names of some alien races for the first time. In many ways, it marked the start of the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe. The *Sourcebook* was released simultaneously with the *Star Wars* RPG later in the year.

Combining a strong license with a strong system produced a winner. *Star Wars* ultimately became West End's most influential and successful game. Its modern and adventurous SF gameplay even eclipsed former industry SF giant, *Traveller* (1977) — which was being released in a second edition (1987) that same year. Despite revamped rules, *Traveller* was still too closely tied to the industry's wargaming beginnings, and couldn't compete with the dramatic, story-oriented gameplay of West End's newest hit — though it did last almost as long as *Star Wars* in the market and has since been reborn in many different forms.

> *"The Star Wars movies themselves are always my basic source of 'real' knowledge. Supplementing that is a tremendous body of background material put together by West End Games over the years for their Star Wars role playing game. The WEG source books saved me from having to reinvent the wheel many times in writing Heir [to the Empire]."*
>
> – Timothy Zahn, Interview, zoklet.net (1992?)

As we'll see, the *Star Wars* line was heavily supported for 10 years. Bill Slavicsek oversaw these releases for the first year, until he moved up to become West End's creative director. The supplements were well-loved not just by roleplayers but also by non-gaming fans of Lucas' films, who bought the game books just to read. Part of this appeal was that West End did a great job both in capturing the feel of the original movies while expanding their universe. At times, even LucasFilm referred to some of West End's most detailed supplements, and when author Timothy Zahn

started work on a new trilogy of *Star Wars* books, boxes of West End sourcebooks were delivered to him.

We'll return to Timothy Zahn, *Star Wars*, and the rest in a bit. For the moment, however, we should also note some danger signs for West End. They really started at the beginning of 1987, when Costikyan and Goldberg left the company. Then, in 1988, Palter made the decision to move West End from the center of New York to a more rural location in Honesdale, Pennsylvania. This cost the company more designers — among them Ken Rolston, who had been doing the hard work of maintaining *Paranoia*'s subtle mix of humor and satire.

This was far from the end for West End, but with the loss of so much talent, the company was afterward in a much worse position for long-term growth than it had been a year before — even with a successful *Star Wars* game.

The Fall of *Paranoia:* 1989—1995

The most obvious result of the departures of Costikyan, Goldberg, and Rolston was the slow failure of the *Paranoia* line. Ed Bolme's *The People's Glorious Revolutionary Adventure* (1989) is often marked as the line's last good release. After that, new line editors were increasingly unable to duplicate the careful mood required of the line.

One of the most notable changes was a shift from biting and sarcastic satire to simplistic and increasingly obvious parody. In this style West End published adventures like: "*Doctor Whom and the Paranoids of Alpha*" (1990), a *Doctor Who* time travel parody; *Mad Mechs* (1991) where players fought against radioactive Australian mutants; and most infamously *Creatures of the Nightcycle* (1997), a "Complex of Dimness" adventure that was a parody of White Wolf.

During this era, the *Paranoia* editors also started introducing "metaplots," which were a big buzzword in the industry at the time. They probably seemed like a great idea for the line because metaplots could encourage players to play longer campaigns, thereby resolving one of *Paranoia*'s long-standing problems. Unfortunately *Paranoia*'s metaplots generally worked against the intended style of the game, and later ones would take the setting far from its roots.



These metaplots kicked off with the "Secret Society Wars" in *The DOA Sector Travelogue* (1989), which seemed OK, but then things took a dramatic wrong turn with

Crash Course Manual (1989), which introduced MegaWhoops Alpha Complex where the Computer was gone!

A trilogy of time travel adventures followed: *Alice through the Mirrorshades* (1989), *Twilightcycle: 2000* (1990), and *Vulture Warriors of Dimension X* (1990). Characters set out to restore the Computer, but more notably the adventures featured one of the rarest elements in the world of roleplaying: RPG crossovers. *Mirrorshades* brought troubleshooters to the world of R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk* while *Twilightcycle* was a crossover with GDW's *Twilight: 2000*. The Computer was "rebooted" in *The Paranoia Sourcebook* (1992), but by now the line had spun wildly out of control and was almost unrecognizable. Though some post-Rolston releases like the pre-crash *Don't Take Your Laser to Town* (1988) and the time travel *Alice through the Mirrorshades* did well commercially, the uneven humor of the early '90s and the metaplot issues would eventually doom the line.

West End tried one final time to set things right with "fifth" edition *Paranoia* (1995), which "humorously" skipped over third and fourth editions. It ignored MegaWhoops and Reboot, but many felt like the original game's humor was lost along the way. It wasn't enough. West End barely supported their fifth edition game, and just two years later they were promising a "long lost" third edition ... which never appeared.

> *"No Fifth Edition was published by West End Games in 1995, nor did West End show pages from a projected "Long Lost Third Edition" at Gen Con in 1997. Note that there also has never been a Crash Course Manual, nor any 'Secret Society Wars,' 'MegaWhoops,' or 'Reboot Camp' adventures. These products never existed. They are now un-products. Are you absolutely clear on this, citizen? Do you still doubt The Computer? Perhaps you need to visit the Bright Vision Re-Education Center."*
>
> – Greg Costikyan, Press Release (2004)

Over just six years, West End managed to utterly destroy one of the most innovative and appreciated roleplaying games of the '80s — but they scarcely missed it, because by the '90s they were developing several new RPG lines. It all began with a game called "Torg," an innovative new design by Greg Gorden with assistance from Douglas Kaufman and Bill Slavicsek.

A New Roleplaying Game Experience: 1990

The game that would be *Torg* began with a surprisingly effective teaser ad campaign. Ads in major RPG magazines counted down the months to its release. At first they didn't even list the name of the game, instead saying just: "Coming in 1990



... A New Roleplaying Game Experience from West End Games." Eventually they revealed a new game known only as "Torg." Enthusiasm mounted, and when *Torg* (1990) was finally released, it didn't disappoint. West End's new game was every bit as evocative as the ads that preceded it.

Torg's setting depicted a near-future Earth which had been invaded by multiple "cosms," creating a realm of terror, a cyberpunk realm, a magical realm, and others, all overlaid over Earth itself. It was a natural outgrowth of the idea of universal roleplaying took *GURPS* (1986) had been pushing for a few years now, but *Torg* took a fresh look at the idea by placing all of the different genres together in one world. This concept of multigenre roleplaying was quite original, and so it's notable that Palladium Books almost simultaneously released *Rifts* (1990), a game with a nearly identical precept.

Unlike other multigenre games — past or present — *Torg* provided a very mechanical system for describing the underlying laws of each realm. This was done with four axioms: magic, social, spiritual, and technology. Items, spells, and even social gatherings might or might not work based upon a particular cosm's axioms.

The game system at the heart of *Torg* was also innovative, though not always in a good way.

> *"Greg Gorden was certainly my mentor from the start. Torg is still one of the most brilliant systems in gaming. It was the first I ever saw that let you be a 'face' man and still be effective in combat. The cards seamlessly tied a game system to story-telling and really helped the group create incredible memories."*
>
> – Shane Hensley, Interview, rptroll.blogspot.com (April 2010)

The game's core dice mechanic was slightly awkward: a player rolled a die, referenced that roll on a chart to get a value, and then added the value to a skill. It was a variation of the simpler "die + bonus" technique — which was becoming increasingly popular in the industry — but it traded off simplicity for the possibility of great success or failure. Some found it more trouble than it was worth, but beyond that *Torg*'s mechanics were more usually lauded.

Like *Star Wars*, *Torg* offered players the ability to influence the game, here through the use of "possibilities." The difference between possibilities and most

other force, brownie, fate, or fame and fortune points was that they were clearly integrated into the game's reality. Player characters literately manipulated the possibilities of the world around them, which was reflected in additional die rolls, quick-healing wounds, or the ability to use non-axiomatic items.

Torg's biggest innovation was its "drama deck," which was used to complement the dice system. Players received drama cards that they could use during play, and additional cards were flipped up during round-by-round conflicts. The complex cards served many purposes:

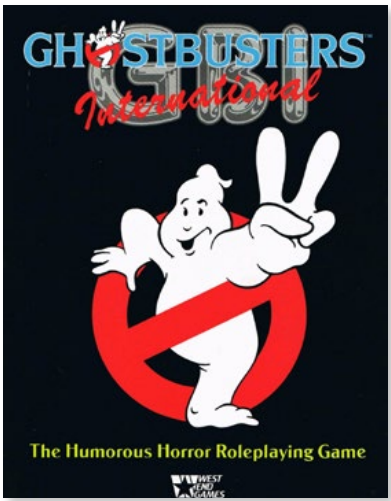
- They could be saved up by players, and then expended all at once, to create a dramatic success.
- They encouraged players to try and trick, intimidate, or taunt their enemies, rather than just fighting them.
- They created a dramatic progressive skill system where a task could only succeed through the play of multiple cards.
- They created new storytelling opportunities by giving players the chance to monologue or take on new subplots.

Overall, the drama deck did exactly what its name promised: it gave more dramatic options for play. (It was also probably influenced by Lion Rampant's *Whimsy Cards*, produced 1987.)

There was one final element of note in *Torg*: its metaplot. The tale of the invading cosms was slowly advancing as the game went on. What made this unique compared to the other metastories of the '90s was the way that West End involved its players. They managed this involvement through a newsletter called *Infiniverse*, the first issue of which was boxed with *Torg*. Each issue of *Infiniverse* included a "response form" which players could send back to West End in order to report the happenings of their own game. The results of all of these campaigns were then averaged together to present the general trends of the Possibility Wars. Once again, these mechanics were even explained in the context of *Torg*'s gameworld: there were an infinite number of realities — including all of the *Torg* campaigns out in the wild — and the Possibility Wars was the sum total of all those realities.

Of the two multigenre games introduced in 1990, Palladium's *Rifts* would ultimately do better — probably for reasons more to do with the audience it was appealing to than the comparative quality of the two games. Nonetheless, *Torg* received critical acclaim and would be well-supported by West End over the next few years.

The Slow Death of Roleplay: 1989—1995



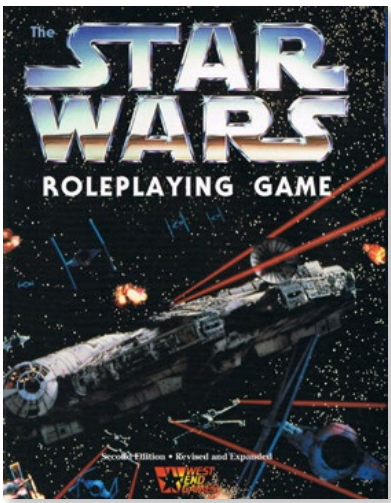
The release of *Torg* could have heralded a new era of roleplaying excellence at West End, but looking back from a historical perspective, we can now see that it instead marked the start of a period of decline. There were surely highs and lows, but over the next five years the ultimate trend would be a downward one.

We've already seen the fate of *Paranoia*, which was into its own period of decline by 1989. That's the year the Computer crashed. Even after the 1992 Reboot, there were just one or two *Paranoia* products a year until the 1995 fifth edition that largely ended the line.

Ghostbusters was looking better thanks to the release of its second edition, *Ghostbusters International* (1989). The line was heavily supported through 1990 with almost a half-dozen products — as West End tried to get in on the marketing for the *Ghostbusters II* (1989) movie — but afterward the license expired and West End declined to renew it.

The larger *Star Wars* franchise continued to look pretty weak around 1989. In fact by 1990 the biggest source of new *Star Wars* material was actually the West End game. Despite that, the game itself continued to do great for West End ... and it was about to head upward.

You may recall those boxes of West End sourcebooks being sent to an author named Timothy Zahn. He was writing what would become known as the "Thrawn Trilogy," the first book of which was *Heir to the Empire* (1991). This new novel, set after the original *Star Wars* trilogy, was the first major expansion of the *Star Wars* mythology since *The Return of the Jedi* eight years previous. It was well-marketed and is generally credited with reinvigorating the entire franchise. Dark Horse Comics simultaneously released the first new *Star Wars* comic in half a decade, Tom Veitch's *Dark Empire* (1991–1992), beautifully illustrated by Cam Kennedy. It was set a year after Zahn's Thrawn books.



These and later books and comics brought new life to the *Star Wars* franchise and West End's already successful game. West End meanwhile released a cleaned-up second edition of their game (1992) followed by many new supplements, including sourcebooks for Zahn's three novels (1992–1994) and for *Dark Empire* (1993). Older books were also reprinted, sometimes collected into high-quality hardcovers. West End even got into the magazine business, which they largely avoided other than their *Infiniverse* newsletter. The result was the *Star Wars Adventure Journal* (1994–1997), which featured fiction and adventures alike. West End published *Star Wars* books throughout the period of lowest interest in the franchise, from 1987–1990, and now they were earning the dividends. It was the only highpoint in their latter-day RPG work.

That finally brings us back to *Torg*, West End's new star as of 1990.

From the start, things looked rocky, with co-developer and editor Bill Slavicsek leaving West End the same year the game was released. After a few years freelancing, he would move on to TSR where he became creative director, then to Wizards of the Coast where he became R&D director — a job he held for roughly 15 years.

Despite that personnel shakeup, West End supported the *Torg* line strongly from 1990–1992. Early books detailed all the cosms and offered initial adventures that moved the metaplot along. Crunchier books of creatures and equipment also appeared.

Then in 1993 and 1994 *Torg* started to face the same problems as all of West End's non *Star Wars* lines: support began to falter. West End had done all they could to encourage a vital, well-supported line, but it wasn't enough. Despite a colorful background, an innovative game system, and critical acclaim, *Torg* just didn't sell to West End's core audience. *Torg*'s unique game system might actually have worked against West End because of its unusual mix of dice and cards — mirroring problems that Fantasy Flight would face years later with their *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* revamp.

Whatever the reason, it was clear by the end of 1994 that *Torg* was as doomed as *Ghostbusters* and *Paranoia*. West End brought the line to an end with a release called *War's End* (1995). This innovative adventure offered a grand finale to the entire *Torg* storyline. As usual players afterward got the opportunity to report their own game's results for a final issue of *Infiniverse*.

Never before had a game line been brought to such a spectacular and real ending (though White Wolf would do the same with their own World of Darkness in later years).

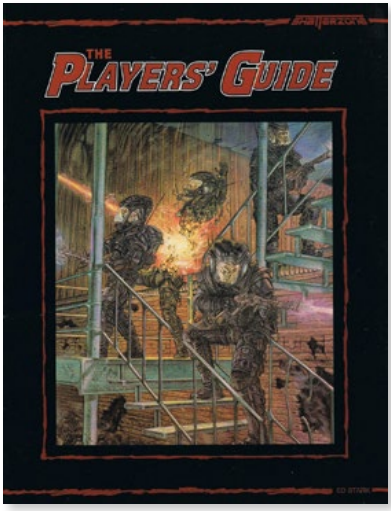
Though *Torg* was dead by the end of 1995, its influence was still being felt at West End thanks to a new product line called *MasterBook* — one of West End's *two* attempts to generalize a house system before they ultimately went under.

The *MasterBook* Fizzle: 1993–1997

By 1993, *Ghostbusters* was dead and *Torg* and *Paranoia* were both on their way out. This left West End with just one successful line, *Star Wars* — a fact that would rightfully make any publisher a little nervous, no matter how strong that singular line was. West End started working on new RPGs.

By this time, universal systems were growing increasingly popular. *GURPS* (1986) was a well-accepted part of the industry by now. Recent years had also seen the release of the universal *Hero* fourth edition (1989). Beyond that, publishers were increasingly rolling out house systems to encompass all of their games, such as GDW's new *Twilight: 2000*-based system that went into wider use in 1990 and White Wolf's Storyteller System, which originally appeared from 1991–1995. West End decided to follow this trend.

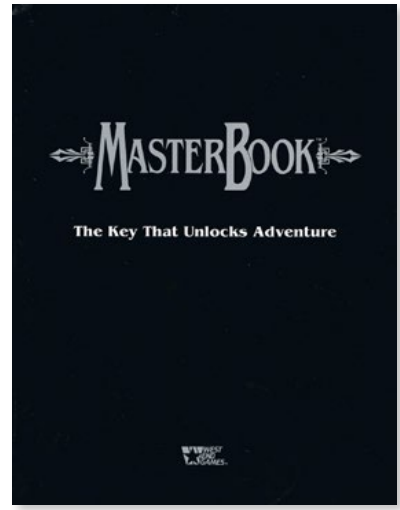
Despite *Torg*'s innovations, Star War's d6 system would probably have been a better choice to use as the template for a West End house system — as it was simpler and more standard for the industry. Some reports suggest there were questions about d6 system rights; it wasn't clear if they could be separated from *Star Wars*, or if it had now become a part of the property licensed from LucasFilm. However, Scott Palter liked *Torg*'s system of dice and cards better. So he decided to use *that* as the basis of a series of new games.



The first release was *Shatterzone* (1993). This was a new space opera game that gave West End the opportunity to use many of its *Star Wars* ideas in a non-licensed setting — including ideas that had been rejected by Lucasfilm. Unlike *Star Wars*, *Shatterzone* had a hard, cyberpunk edge — which was the general trend of science-fiction RPGs in the early '90s. However, West End only supported *Shatterzone* through 1995. Ultimately, it wasn't original enough to catch on.

Despite its short life, *Shatterzone* proved something important: that West End's *Torg* system could be modified to produce other sorts of games. As a result, during the year after the release of *Shatterzone*, West End made the *Torg* system entirely generic and re-released it as a standalone game called *MasterBook* (1994).

MasterBook was a second-generation *Torg* game system featuring some changes from *Torg*'s mechanics — changes that many thought detrimental to



the game. Most notably, it abandoned a lot of *Torg*'s heroic and pulpish mechanics, replacing them with more realistic styles. Unfortunately, the result was at odds both with *MasterBook*'s origins *and* with many of the games they later released. Many older fans of *Torg* felt like the new system was a step down, and West End lost some of what should have been their core audience.

Nonetheless, West End launched a huge pile of *MasterBook* games over the next few years — so many that it looked like a desperate attempt to find *anything* that worked. It was understandable, with the CCG market now eating into RPGs and with West End watching *Paranoia*, *Torg*, and *Shatterzone* all fail — but the results weren't really to West End's benefit.

The World of Bloodshadows (1994), a noir fantasy, was West End's only original setting for *MasterBook*; everything else was licensed. *The World of Indiana Jones* (1994) and *The World of Necroscope* (1995) might have been good licenses. However, the same can't be said of *The World of Aden* (1996), *The World of Species* (1995), *The World of Tales from the Crypt* (1996), or infamously *The World of Tank Girl* (1995).

Following the final *MasterBook* "Worlds" of 1996, 1997 saw a few supplements for *Indiana Jones* and *Necroscope* and then the *MasterBook* lines came to an end. *Bloodshadows*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Necroscope* had all seen a decent amount of support over the four-year run of *MasterBook*, but that aside, the *MasterBook* line was a clear failure. Retail stores were filled with copies of *Species* and *Tank Girl* they couldn't sell. Though clever, the core *MasterBook* system hadn't been enough to save *Torg*, and it wasn't enough to save these new game lines either. If West End was trying to produce their own version of *GURPS* — with their own numerous, licensed supplements — they failed miserably.

By 1997, West End realized this mistake and was moving in a new direction — one they probably should have moved in a decade before — toward a d6-based house system.

D6 Comes Too Late: 1996—1998

Moving into its final years, West End Games still had just the one successful game, *Star Wars* — which had been reprinted in a revised second edition (1996). The *Star Wars* line was even enjoying something of a renaissance, with some innovative material going to press, notably the *DarkStryder Campaign* (1996), which



took a darker look at the *Star Wars* universe. West End was also happily supporting the ever-growing Expanded Universe by printing books like the *Shadows of the Empire Planets Guide* (1996) and the *Tales of the Jedi Companion* (1996).

Meanwhile, the failure of *MasterBook* was causing West End to reconsider its house system. Years too late, the company decided that if they were going to publish a house system, it should be based on their most well-known and well-tested game system, which was *Star Wars*' "d6" system.

West End released a "toolkit" they called *The D6 System* (1996). This core rulebook was a bit raw, and without background or setting it would never be that popular. However, it marked a new direction for West End that they slowly expanded upon in the next year. *Indiana Jones Adventures* (1996) added d6 rules to the *World of Indiana Jones MasterBook* game. It was *Men in Black* (1997), however, that truly showed West End's new commitment to d6; it was released exclusively using that system — marking an end to years of licensed *MasterBook* games.

Despite this new commitment, the West End staff wasn't entirely happy with the d6 system. They thought that adding up multiple dice required too much math for the mass market that they aimed for with their licensed games. To correct this, they designed a new variant of the system called "d6 prime" (or later "d6 legend"). This new system changed the "additive dice pool" of West End's original games — where you rolled a number of dice, then summed up a total — to a "comparative dice pool" like that seen in *Shadowrun* (1989) and *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) — where you instead assessed whether each die was a success or a failure. To make the system *really* easy, you always succeeded on a 3+ in d6 prime — and you could even buy dice which showed successes on four faces and failures on two, discarding numbers entirely.

The first game using the new d6 prime system was *The Hercules & Xena Roleplaying Game* (1998). It would be one of West End's final publications.

By the end of June 1998, West End's production was cut back to its three final d6 lines: *Star Wars*, *Men in Black*, and *Hercules & Xena*. There was word of an upcoming *Paranoia* third edition, but with only two publications in the previous three years, the *Paranoia* line was effectively dead. Some other licenses that West End had been working on — such as a license for Chris Carter's *X-Files* — failed to

reach agreements, but the company did have one exciting new project in the works: a DC comics roleplaying game. West End had snapped up the license after Mayfair had lost it only a few years earlier.

Sadly, the first incarnation of West End would never publish that DC game, because things were about to get very bad for them.

Bankruptcy: 1998

Though West End had troubles sustaining roleplaying lines throughout the '90s, no one was talking about them as a potential casualty of the CCG boom and bust that was continuing to shake up the industry. It was a surprise when, on July 2, 1998, West End's bank refused to advance the company the money it needed to make payroll. The death of the company was being reported widely by July 4. Though some sources noted that West End owed over a million dollars, that figure included a mortgage. West End's actual and immediate debt was somewhere in the tens of thousands of dollars.

It was enough.

Scott Palter felt that the company was still viable, so he had West End Games enter Chapter 11 bankruptcy in order to restructure. Though he let staff go, Palter claimed he'd soon be rebuilding the company upon the licenses for *Star Wars*, *Hercules & Xena*, and DC — which were all quite good licenses, unlike the *MasterBook* licenses that West End acquired previously.

However, bankruptcies usually give licensors the ability to end their contracts, and that's exactly what happened here. Lucasfilm tried to work with West End for a while, but ultimately had to move on. They pulled their *Star Wars* license and would soon relicense it to Wizards of the Coast. Meanwhile, former employees Greg Costikyan and Eric Goldberg decided to recover their own licensed game, *Paranoia*. Scott Palter fought this, and in 1999 was still claiming rights to the game, but by 2000, a judge agreed that Costikyan and Goldberg owned the game, not West End. Costikyan and Goldberg thereafter licensed the game to Mongoose Publishing, who has published two well-loved editions of the game.

> *"I don't think there's any validity to [Costikyan and Goldberg's] claim. Per the court, we can continue to act on this, subject to further review. The worst that may happen is that if what I regard as bizarre legal theory holds any water, we may have to give them back further money."*
>
> – Scott Palter, Interview, *Pyramid* (April 1999)

The rest of West End's properties — the *MasterBook* system, *Torg*, the d6 system, *Bloodshadows*, and *Shatterzone* — as well as the company's inventory were sold off under court supervision, a topic we'll return to.

The downfall of West End can be attributed to many causes, as is usually the case. Despite the failures of *Torg* and *MasterBook*, by 1998 West End was getting its act together. Reports indicate that in the run-up to its bankruptcy, West End's gross revenues were at the highest levels ever, with final products like *Men in Black* and *Hercules & Xena* doing well. However, TSR made that exact same claim about high revenues just before they started defaulting on payments themselves.

In part, that's because gross isn't the same as profit, and West End *was* facing a lot of other problems — many of them the same problems that drove other hobby companies out of business in the same time period. Book store returns were hurting West End as chains consolidated into super-stores, while in the gaming industry many distributors were going out of business thanks to the CCG bust, leaving debts unpaid. Finally, those remaining distributors were moving to a more frontlist mentality, which was damaging to publishers who had depended on strong backlist sales.

Ultimately, when West End's bank rather suddenly cut off their credit, the company didn't have any cash flow to continue paying staff, producing books, and otherwise doing the things necessary to generate more money.

> *"I may have done a lot of stupid things; I may have done a lot of foolish things; but I didn't do anything illegal."*
>
> – Scott Palter, Interview, *Pyramid* (April 1999)

The result was all but inevitable.

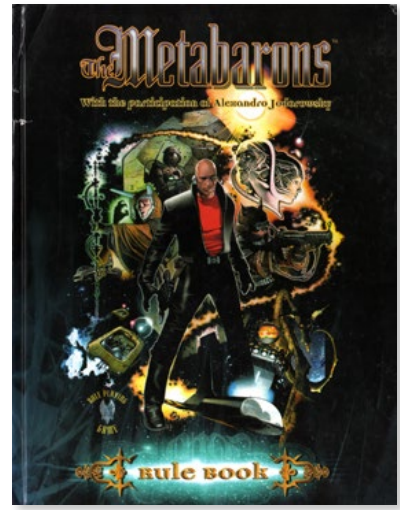
The Second West End: 1999—2002

However, Palter was not willing to let West End go, and so he continued to look for someone to bail his company out. On March 23, 1999, he announced a new merger. According to official PR, Yeti Entertainment purchased West End, and together they formed a new entity called D6Legend Inc.

The ownership situation was actually much more complex than that, because Yeti — a graphic design house and a publisher of choose-your-own-adventure books — was itself owned by Humanoids Publishing, which was itself owned by a multinational corporation called Humanos. They were the publisher of the French *Heavy Metal* magazine and now wanted to expand into the American market.

On the other side of the equation, there wasn't really a West End to "merge" with — but Yeti *was* able to purchase West End's five remaining RPG properties and to bring Scott Palter in to manage them. Palter was also able to recover one of West End's licenses. Unlike Lucasfilm, DC was willing to stick with West End. They relicensed rights to D6Legend, who was able to publish the *DC Universe Roleplaying Game* (1999) — a new d6 prime RPG. It was supported by several

supplements over the next few years, but was never wildly popular. Many fans of the original d6 system didn't like d6 prime, and some felt that neither system was a great fit for a superhero game.



Meanwhile, the new West End was also working on a new RPG more closely aligned to the interests of Humanoids Publishing. *The Metabarons Roleplaying Game* (2001) was based upon one of Humanoids' star comic book series. It featured high-quality art, returned to the original d6 system (in fact, much of the text was a straight copy from *Star Wars*), and even adapted the system appropriately to the new setting by adding an "honor code." Unfortunately, the *Metabarons* comic was all but unknown in the United States, and the new game was largely released into a void — though it did receive several French language supplements. After the failure of *Metabarons*, Humanoids Publishing decided that they didn't want a roleplaying company under their umbrella after all. As a result they largely closed up shop. Scott Palter was let go and new production was halted. Some staff was kept on, but their main job seemed to be turning old products into PDFs.

Humanoid did try one more strategy before shutting down West End entirely. Following in the footsteps of the gaming licenses of the 21st century, Humanoid announced a "West End Games House Systems" license that gave other publishers the ability to license the rules systems from d6 classic, d6 legend, *MasterBook*, *Torg*, or *Shatterzone*. This was *not* an open license, but royalties started at a modest minimum of $500 a year. The company's first licensee was none other than Scott Palter, who had formed a new game company called Final Sword Productions. He soon put out a giant-robot space-opera science-fiction game called *Psibertroopers* (2002).

It was the only such license. By the end of the year, Humanoids decided to sell the company entirely.

The Third West End: 2003—2009

Bidding for West End began in 2002, but Humanoids didn't announce a deal until November 14, 2003. Eric J. Gibson's Purgatory Publishing was the new owner of the West End properties, making West End another first-generation RPG publisher which had come under second-generation ownership in the early 21st century. Gibson's purchase involved the same abbreviated portfolio that had been brought into the Humanoids West End a few years before: the *MasterBook*, d6

Separated at Birth?

Hero Games and West End Games were both notable publishers during RPG's golden age of the '80s, and if you dig further they have very similar histories.

Both companies got into RPGs in the early '80s and went out of business in the late '90s. Afterward third parties from outside the RPG industry – Cybergames and Humanoids Publishing, respectively – picked them up and continued to work with some of the original owners, but the deals didn't work out and so the companies were sold again just a few years later. In the early '00s, both companies came under a totally new set of owners who wanted to redevelop their original lines. Of course, what's happened since shows that nature is as important as nurture, as West End crashed and burned spectacularly from 2007–2009, just when Hero was achieving their best success, thanks to their sale of *Champions* to Cryptic Studios.

classic, and d6 legend rules systems, plus the *Bloodshadows*, *Shatterzone*, and *Torg* settings — and of course the West End trademark itself. The last may well have been the most valuable.

Gibson's primary contribution to the legacy of West End was turning d6 classic into a more universal system. To accomplish this, the third West End published three core genre books as high-quality hardcovers: *D6 Adventure* (2004), *D6 Fantasy* (2004), and *D6 Space* (2004). A number of supplements detailing critters and locations for these genres followed in 2004 and 2005. Finally, a pair of "world-books" helped to flesh out two of the genres even more. *Bloodshadows* (2004) was D6 Adventure's return to the classic West End setting, while *Fires of Amatsumara* (2006) was a brand-new setting for D6 Space. As it happens, *Fires of Amatsumara* was also the last book published in of those original three genre books.

Though a fourth genre book appeared, it was from a licensed publisher. That was *D6 Powers* (2006), a superhero genre book published by Khepera Publishing built on their experience creating a successful D6 setting, *GODSEND Agenda* (2005). Khepera continued their D6 support through the publication of a revised *D6 Powers* (2008), but now seems to have moved on to other games, such as Michael Fiegel and Jerry Grayson's *Hellas* (2008) and Colin Chapman's *Atomic Highway* (2010).

D6 wasn't the only thing going on at the new West End. Throughout the company's early days, Gibson talked up his intention to publish *Torg* in a new edition that would allow him to revitalize the line. However, he ended up producing only two PDFs for the *Torg* line: a *Torg Introductory Pack* (2003), which gave players an introduction to the rules and the setting; and *Torg Revised and Expanded* (2005), a new rule set that incorporated fan comments and material from supplements. The



third West End was never able to produce the "Torg 2.0" as Gibson intended.

By 2007, it was obvious that the third West End's plan of creating a universal system anchored by a trio of genre books wasn't working. The expensive-to-produce hardcovers were also continuing to put a dent in West End's finances. This meant that Eric Gibson needed a new way to finance his next publications. Fortunately, he had a new way to generate excitement for those publications — something that the third West End had largely neglected — name recognition. Bill Coffin was a popular RPG writer who'd written evocative sourcebooks for Palladium Books from 1998–2002. Though he was no longer with the company, he *did* still have a fan base, and that was to West End's benefit. Since leaving Palladium, Coffin had been playing around with writing a novel and in the process had come up with a setting that would be great for RPGs too. West End announced "Bill Coffin's Septimus," hyped it with the *Septimus Quickstart* (2007) at the first Free RPG Day, and then started taking preorders to raise the money to print the full book.

And that was pretty much the end of West End, because even with the preorder, Gibson wasn't able to raise the money to print *Septimus* or to do anything else with the properties. What followed was two years of internet flame wars as the company slowly and very publicly self-destructed.

In 2008, Gibson announced that he was cancelling *Septimus*, that he couldn't refund preorders, that he couldn't afford to ship books to people who wanted to take product instead of a refund, that none of his D6 lines had ever made money, that he'd lost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and (finally) that he was done with West End Games and would be dissolving the company.

> *"I'm not dishonest. I am many things. I'm often irresponsible. I certainly dream bigger than my means, and I'm quick to go public with things before I've done 100% of the homework. I'm a passionate lover of gaming – or was at one time – that leads [me] to make business decisions not fully motivated by profit. I'm emotional, and fallable. I am a human being. [I] am not now nor will I ever be a scammer or a crook."*
>
> – Eric Gibson, RPGnet Forums (July 2008)

Gibson was back before too long and though he claimed that he'd decided not to sell off his properties, he ended up doing just that. First though, he did some work cleaning house. Gibson *did* end up refunding *Septimus* preorders, but it took a year. He also eventually released *Bill Coffin's Septimus* (2009) as a PDF, West End Game's last product. Finally, he released his core genre books under the OGL, so that the D6 system could be used by other publishers.

Gibson sold off West End's remaining properties. *Torg* went to German publisher Ulisses Spiele, who originally planned to publish a new edition of *Torg* for the German market in 2012. It has since disappeared from their schedule, quite possibly due to their considerable attention toward their German edition of *Pathfinder* (2009). The *MasterBook* system and the *Bloodshadows* and *Shatterzone* settings all went to small US publisher Precis Intermedia, who has reprinted considerable books for the lines (2011-Present) as PDFs and PODs.

And with that final diaspora of products, it's likely that there will not be a fourth West End Games, for other than the trademark, the company is now ... *gone*.

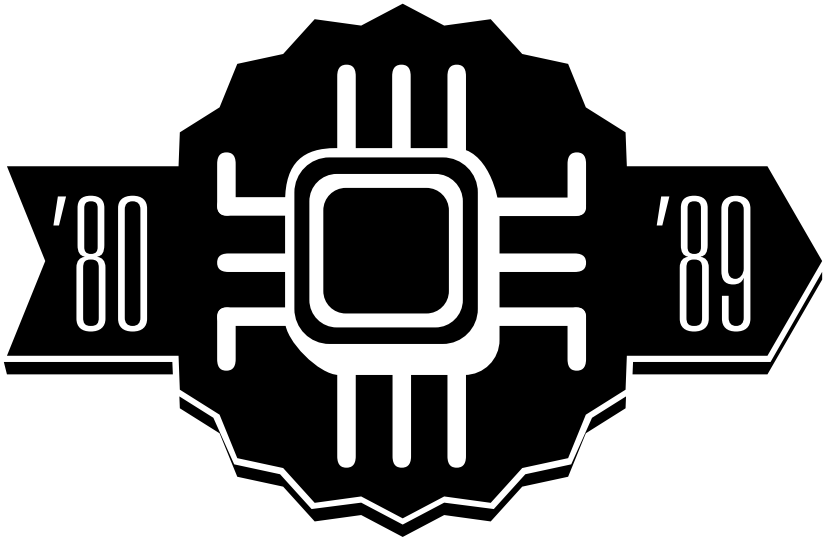
What to Read Next

- For Greg Costikyan's other storytelling game of 1984, read about *Toon* at ***Steve Jackson Games***.
- For more *Star Trek* games of the '80s, read ***FASA***.
- For *Rifts*, a more successful multi-genre game, and for Bill Coffin's previous RPG work, read ***Palladium Books***.
- For a contemporary publisher that made a push into licensed RPGs around the same time, read ***Leading Edge Games***.
- For other RPG companies whose original IP was picked up by a second-generation company around the turn of the century, read ***Hero Games*** and ***ICE***.

In Other Eras

- For Greg Costikyan and Eric Goldberg's previous employer, read ***SPI*** *['70s]*.
- For the modern-day publisher of *Paranoia*, read ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For how West End got the ball rolling for *Amber Diceless Roleplaying*, read ***Phage Press*** *['90s]*.
- For the creators of *Ghostbusters*, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For later companies that have pushed hard into licensed RPGs, read ***Eden Studios*** *['90s]* and ***Margaret Weis Productions*** *['90s]*.

Or read onward to enter a new era of small press with ***SkyRealms Publishing***.



Part Five:

Rise of the Small Press

(1984–1987)

By 1984, roleplaying originals like Hero Games and Palladium were increasingly proving themselves, leading more entrepreneurs to form companies specifically to publish roleplaying games.

However, the terrain was now more treacherous. The first roleplaying boom — which kicked off in late 1979 — had turned into the bust of 1983. Where unofficial supplements of *D&D* could once make a business, now publishers had to create new and innovative games to gain the attention of the public. The result was the biggest explosion of ***original RPG producers*** ever seen as SkyRealms Publishing, R. Talsorian Games, and Lion Rampant all offered up new and innovative game systems. Meanwhile, there was still room for ***licensees*** of second-tier RPGs, or at least for licensees of *Traveller*, as shown by DGP.

Lion Rampant deserves some special attention here because they directly led to some of the biggest gaming trends of the '90s through their successor, White Wolf Game Studio. It all started here.

Though the publishers of 1984–1987 had to contend with the results of RPG's first bust, they had an advantage that the publishers of the early '80s didn't: Apple's Macintosh computer went on sale on January 24, 1984, and within a year desktop publishing was possible. This allowed many new publishers to reach the level of professionalism required by the maturing RPG market.

Though this section cuts off at 1987, that's an artificial boundary created by the contents of this book and the lack of major new publishers in 1988 or 1989. In the history of the '90s, the initial small press wave continues on through at least 1992, after which some new trends started to bring publishers into the industry.

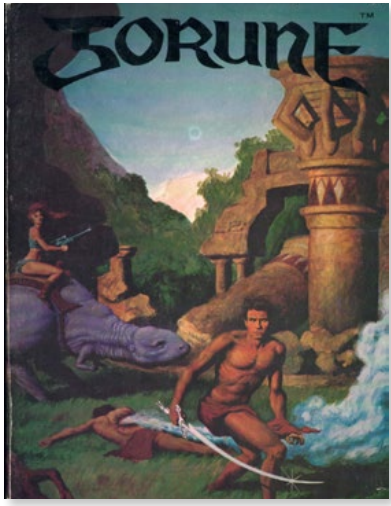
Company	Years	First RPG	Page
SkyRealms Publishing	1984–1988	*SkyRealms of Jorune* (1984)	271
DGP	1985–1993	*The Travellers' Digest #1* (1985)	276
R. Talsorian	1985–Present	*Mekton* (1986)	285
Lion Rampant	1987–1990	*Whimsy Cards* (1987)	304

SkyRealms Publishing: 1984–1988

SkyRealms Publishing was a short-lived game company most notable for the effect it had on other designers.

Jorune Beginnings: 1984–1989

The time was the early '80s. The place was UC Berkeley. A physics and applied mathematics undergraduate by the name of Andrew Leker was imagining a roleplaying game set in a very alien realm. It started as a variant of TSR's *Metamorphosis Alpha* (1976), but soon Leker's world, which he called Jorune, took on a life all its own.



1984: Skyrealms of Jorune

"A problem with doing detailed design work was that I didn't own any of the games I had mentioned. I had no reference works. I was a 7th grader with a buck twenty-five allowance and a passion for the movies."

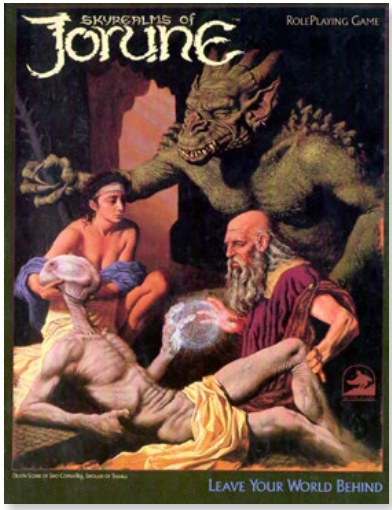
– Andrew Leker, "History of the Game (Part One)," Sholari #1 (1993)

Jorune has been most frequently compared to M.A.R. Barker's *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975). Like *Empire of the Petal Throne*, Jorune is a science-fantasy game that adheres to none of the classic fantasy tropes. It's set in the far future on a world colonized by man in 2138 AD. Humanity found many intelligent races already on Jorune when it landed there. There was peace at first, but then war developed between mankind and the native shantha, devastating both civilizations.

The game picks up three thousand years later.

Leker self-published the first edition of *SkyRealms of Jorune* (1984) through a new company, SkyRealms Publishing. The rulebook was a hefty 176 pages and featured high-quality technical art by Miles Teves. It was a very small press edition, supplemented by just one digest-sized adventure (1984). If that had been the extent of Jorune's publication, the game would have quickly slid into obscurity.

However, SkyRealms Publishing decided to put out a second edition of their game the next year (1985). The new version of the game was adeptly edited, had some system work done by Mark Wallace, and was broken into a three-book boxed set by Amy Leker. At least that was the theory; the printer didn't let Andrew know that the boxes wouldn't be ready on time until a week before the game's release date. Leker took the problem in stride, selling unboxed but numbered "pre-release" copies at Gen Con 18 (1985). Unfortunately, the lack of boxes kept the game from getting into distribution until the next year.



The second edition of *SkyRealms of Jorune* modified the world somewhat, throwing out less interesting races, redrawing maps, and generally turning the game away from the hack-and-slash play of the early '80s and toward the more intelligent gameplay that was developing across the industry.

Thanks to this improved rules set — and some serious advertising — SkyRealms Publishing started attracting attention. Where the first edition of the game was almost unknown, the second edition was distributed far and wide; reviews appeared in

Different Worlds, *Dragon*, *Vortext*, *White Dwarf*, and *White Wolf*, a veritable who's who of gaming magazines in 1986–1987.

> *"Although our sales were good at Gen Con, without boxes, we could not take orders from distributors. That cost us precious months and countless sales. Our ads were pre-paid and hyped the market well, but no product was available."*
>
> – Andrew Leker, "History of the Game (Part Two)," Sholari #2 (1994)

The unique and original game world of *Jorune* was what really won over reviewers and players. It was a superb example of how a completely alien setting could be developed to the point where it became clearly and entirely "true."

Jorune also demonstrated how standard fantasy tropes could become realistic and consistent through careful world design — a methodology that FASA would also adopt in their design of *Earthdawn* (1994), several years down the road. The world of *Jorune* was a planet of swordplay because of the destruction of technology during the great wars, while it was a planet of sorcery because of "isho," a physical energy that could be tapped by Jorune natives (and by one of the three races of humans). It also contained plenty of places to explore, from underground shantic ruins to the wondrous SkyRealms; these places were filled with all sorts of wonderful treasure, from isho items to lost Earth-tec.

Jorune also did a good job of providing reasons to adventure. Starting characters took part in "tauther," a ritual needed to become citizens ("drenn"). This required them to collect signature marks ("copra") from citizens, thereby creating a real, repeatable reason to engage in tasks for others.

There were downsides to *SkyRealms of Jorune*, explaining why it never became a *big* hit. The skill-based game system was a little awkward, requiring constant lookups on an imposing table. Other systems were generally rough and unpolished, to the point where some reviewers were unable to figure out how they worked. The rulebooks were also filled with *Jorune* terminology, making them at times cryptic and hard to read.

A booklet of rules modifications (1987) tried to address some of the mechanical issues, but *SkyRealms of Jorune* would never be well-known or well-loved for its game system. It was always the wonderfully imagined and wonderfully drawn world that was the source of *Jorune*'s critical acclaim; it showed that RPGs didn't have to dwell within the confines of standard genres, but could instead be completely original.

Second edition *SkyRealms of Jorune* was supported by a couple of setting books and a tech book (1986–1988). It was also well-supported by *White Wolf Magazine*

— which was then in its early days, when it was very friendly to independent publishers. SkyRealms Publishing wrote a "Segment Jorune" for the magazine that ran from *White Wolf #10* (1988) to *White Wolf #16* (1989).

However by this time Andrew Leker was out of college and moving on to his real career. In 1987 his company took on a contract from Autodesk to work on an "Ants" computer game. As he moved into the computer gaming field, his tabletop gaming work trailed off. The last original *Jorune* supplement appeared in 1988, then the final Segment Jorune in early 1989. SkyRealms Publishing quietly disappeared.

Jorune Aftermath: 1990—1994



Though SkyRealms Publishing was gone, the game itself was not.

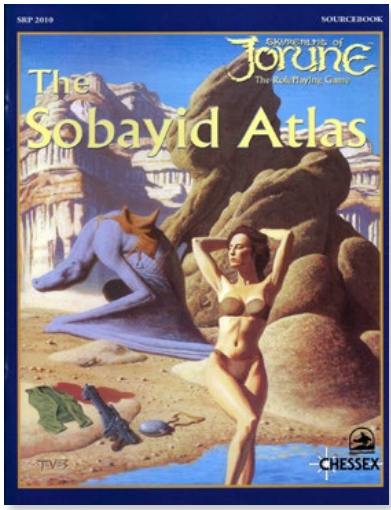
Chessex published a third edition of *SkyRealms of Jorune* (1992) under license. Dave Ackerman — who sold the idea of a license to both Leker and Chessex — was the initial force behind the line. Unfortunately, the new edition hadn't been playtested, nor had it received a lot of editing, and as a result the rules were a mess.

Janice Sellers later stepped up to be the line editor, then Joe Coleman — today known as Joseph K. Adams, a Los Angeles playwright and minor radio personality — was given a free hand to move forward on *SkyRealms* products as time allowed. Though Coleman produced good supplements such as *The Gire of Sillipus* (1994) and *The Sobayid Atlas* (1994) later in the line's history, the line still had structural problems. Chessex was never really an RPG manufacturer, and winning approval for supplements from Leker was at times difficult. After a handful of supplements and adventures (1993–1995), the *Jorune* principals decided to pull the license.

In its later days, *Jorune* also received some support through a selection of fanzines, such as Alex Blair's legendary *Sarceen's Knowledge* (?), Joe Coleman's *Sholari* (1993–1995), and Ray Gilham's *Borkelby's Folly* (1995–1996). Unfortunately these 'zines never generated the same huge community as the similar *RuneQuest* fanzines of the time period, and so they died out with the line.

Meanwhile Andrew Leker had founded a new company called Mind Control Software, drawing on the computer field experience he'd gained since shutting down SkyRealms. Mind Control's first project was a *Jorune*-based computer

game called *Alien Logic* (1994), which was published by SSI. The game was considered original and innovative, but too tough to learn, so it never really got much attention.



Since 1995 *Jorune* has been entirely quiescent. Unfortunately the *Alien Logic* game resulted in the rights being a bit fractured. There are now multiple investors with a finger in the pie, all wanting some payback, as the computer game didn't do particularly well financially; as a result it appears that *SkyRealms of Jorune* is, at least for now, dead. Mind Control Software continues on; its most successful release was likely the award-winning *Oasis* (2005).

SkyRealms Publishing's biggest impact on the industry was probably its effect on other game designers. Lion Rampant's *Ars Magica* (1987), Biohazard's *Blue Planet* (1997), and White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1990) are just a few of the games that were influenced by *SkyRealms of Jorune* and its particular attention to original world design and story.

There are probably many more.

What to Read Next

- For other particularly innovative fantasy RPGs, read about *Talislanta* in ***Bard Games***, and about *Earthdawn* in ***FASA***.
- For a game influenced by Jorune, read about *Ars Magica* in ***Lion Rampant***.

In Other Eras

- For the origins of RPG publishing (and playing) in the San Francisco Bay Area, read ***Grimoire Games*** *['70s]*.
- To learn about *Metamorphosis Alpha*, Jorune's original basis, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For one of the earliest innovative fantasy RPGs, read about Tékumel in ***TSR*** *['70s]* and ***Gamescience*** *['70s]*.
- For the early independent days of *White Wolf Magazine*, read ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*.
- For lots about computer RPGs, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.

Or read onward to a small press licensee, ***DGP***.

Digest Group Publications: 1985–1993

Digest Group Publications was a notable licensee because it took a major hand in the direction of its licensor's game — GDW's Traveller. *However, changes beyond their control eventually shut them down.*



1985: The Traveller' Digest #1

The Early Digest: 1985—1987

Editors Gary Thomas and Joe D. Fugate Sr. founded Digest Group Publications (DGP) in 1985, aided by staff members Kristie Fields, Patty Fugate, Nancy Parker, and Bob Parker. Like many companies the same size, DGP was an entirely part-time business where the principals took part *after* their regular jobs.

Two different trends allowed DGP to break into the RPG business.

First, desktop publishing (DTP) technologies were rapidly advancing, thanks to the 1984 release of the Apple Macintosh. Early DGP books looked very computerized, but nonetheless Apple's *MacWord* allowed for a cheap and simple way to produce professional books.

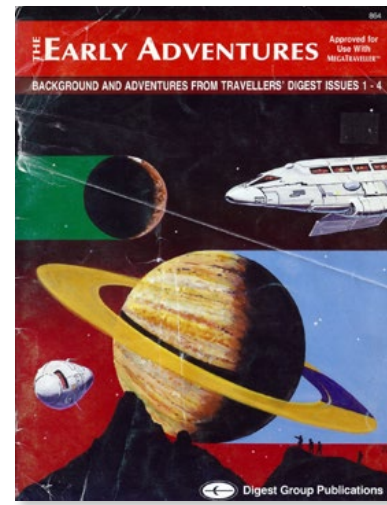
Second, GDW had always been very willing to license its premiere roleplaying game, *Traveller*. By 1985, most of the first wave of licensees — including FASA, Gamelords, Group One, Judges Guild, and Paranoia Press — ended their *Traveller* production, and there was now room for a new entrant to the field.

DGP entered the RPG world with *The Travellers' Digest #1* (1985), a digest-sized black & white magazine based on GDW's own *Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society* (JTAS; 1979–1985) — down to including an in-universe date for each publication, with the first issue being set in 152–1111.

> *"Our goal in this issue (and every issue) is to make Traveller even more enjoyable for referees and players. To accomplish this end, The Travellers' Digest will add color and flesh out details of the Traveller universe."*
>
> – Gary Thomas and Joe Fugate Sr.,
> "Editors' Digest," The Travellers' Digest #1 (1985)

Unlike GDW's JTAS, *The Travellers' Digest* focused on a more cohesive goal. It would flesh out the Traveller universe by presenting a "Grand Tour." Over many issues, a group of characters would circle the entire Traveller Imperium via a series of connected adventures. Each issue would also support the adventure with background material detailing the visited areas.

The scope of the undertaking was impressive, and in many ways it was something only a naïve new publisher would consider. What is impressive is that over five years — from 1985–1990 — DGP succeeded in their original goal. The protagonists of the Tour traveled from the Imperium's Spinward Marches to Earth and back over the course of a 21-part adventure. Including related background material, the complete Grand Tour probably ran between 300 and 400 pages, making it one of the longest cohesive campaigns of its era. (TSR's 12-part Dragonlance campaign — that ran from 1984–1986 — was comparable.) Sadly,



the complete adventure has never been published together, though the first four adventures would appear as *The Early Adventures* (1988).

The first issue of *The Travellers' Digest* was sold at Origins 1985, helping DGP find the distributor connections they needed. The next seven issues also continued in the magazine's original digest-sized format. Printing improved with issue #3 (1985) and a second color was added to the covers with issue #5 (1986), but up until issue #8 (1987), the magazine remained otherwise unchanged.

However, the *Digest* was publishing articles on more than just the Grand Tour, and this would lead DGP to greater success in the industry.

The Road to *MegaTraveller*: 1985—1987

"Robot Design Revisited, Part One," by Joe D. Fugate Sr., also appeared in *The Travellers' Digest #1*. It was the first of a three-part series that revised robot design rules that originally appeared in old issues of *JTAS*. These articles caught the eye of Marc Miller at GDW. As a result, Fugate and Thomas were invited to expand and revise the material for GDW. The result was *Book 8: Robots* (1986), the last of GDW's "little black books." It marked the start of a working relationship between the two companies lasting several years.

That first issue of the *Digest* set the path for DGP, for a third article, "Using Skills Effectively," by Fugate, was also influential. It presented a codified skill system for use with *Traveller*. Over the next few issues, it was refined into a "Universal Task Profile" that qualified task difficulty, repeatability, and duration — offering one of the first complete skill resolution systems in the industry that went beyond only determining if a skill's use was effective or not. As we'll soon see, DGP's UTP put the company on "the road to *MegaTraveller*" as much as their new relationship with GDW did.

DGP quickly supplemented the *Digest* with their own original gaming supplements. They started with *101 Robots* (1986), which built on an original robot system. Then they published two books: *Grand Survey* (1986) and *Grand Census* (1987), adding considerable detail to GDW's planetary generation system — something that GDW had wanted for years.

Despite DGP's innovative ideas for *Traveller* and their close relationship with GDW, what happened next, in 1987, is still surprising. Marc Miller wrote DGP a letter wherein "he asked [DGP] to help him make the 50+ volumes of available *Traveller* material more accessible." Initially, it sounded like DGP might be repackaging background material, but then in *The Travellers' Digest #9* (1987), DGP announced they were actually writing the second edition of the *Traveller* rules, which they called *MegaTraveller*.

> *"The techniques of role-playing games have matured since [Traveller] first appeared, and the volume of material about the Traveller universe has mushroomed over the years as well. Game Designers' Workshop recognizes these facts, and has therefore commissioned our staff here at Digest Group Publications to revise and enhance the Traveller rules.*
>
> – "Editors' Digest," Gary Thomas and Joe Fugate,
> The Travellers' Digest #9 (1987)

For a licensor to go out to a licensee for such a major revision of their core system is virtually unprecedented. It was likely due to the fact that GDW just put out a new SF game on their own, *Traveller: 2300* (1986) — which shared a name with Traveller but not a background or a rule system. Distracted from Traveller itself, DGP was given the green light to produce the first major revision in Traveller's 10-year history.

MegaTraveller!: 1987

MegaTraveller (1987) — edited by DGP and published by GDW — underwent an amazingly fast genesis. The three core books — the *Players' Manual*, the *Referee's Manual*, and the *Imperial Encyclopedia* — were all available by the end of 1987.

The new edition did indeed repackage old material. It collected rules and information from a dozen different books published over the previous 10 years — from the original *Traveller* rules (1977) to the board game *Azhanti High Lightning* (1980).

In addition, DGP polished the rules to reflect the evolving RPG market. To do this, they added many new systems to the game, including their own Universal Task Profile, which became the core of the new rule set. The Task System was made universal in the new release — with combat and other systems once unique now depending upon this standard mechanism.

If anything, the DGP staff had an even more methodical and mechanical view of gaming than GDW, and the new edition of *Traveller* tended to increase the complexity of the game — a general trend that would continue in later issues of *The Travellers' Digest*. Sometimes, this was to the game's benefit; Marc Miller had long stated that one of the draws of *Traveller* was its complex game systems that could be enjoyed as solitaire activities between games.

However, some of these new systems proved overly complex. Worse, some were poorly playtested due to the speed of the revision. Systems like the new

combat rules failed in actual use. These problems were aggravated by the fact that *MegaTraveller* — at least as published — was one of the worst edited books of its era. This was in part due to the fact that DGP and GDW used different computer systems, therefore all of DGP's material needed to be re-entered by hand prior to publication. The *MegaTraveller* rules were riddled with errors, many of them making the various complex rules systems — such as world generation and starship generation — either confusing or unusable. It would take five years for GDW to produce a cleaner version of the *MegaTraveller* rules, which they finally did in 1992 with their third printing.

Although the rules systems for *MegaTraveller* came primarily from Digest Group Publications, another innovation came from GDW itself. As reported in the Editors' Digest of *The Travellers' Digest #9*: "GDW has decided that as long as they are improving the *MegaTraveller* rules, they can also make the *MegaTraveller* universe more exciting by allowing certain events to occur."

These exciting events centered on the apparent assassination of Emperor Strephon, ruler of the Third Imperium, and the Rebellion that followed. The reasons behind this decision, and the results, lie more within the domain of GDW, and are further discussed in their history. However, as a sign of DGP's close connection to GDW, they were offered a real coup. In issue #9 of the *Digest*, DGP was allowed to announce the event with the first *MegaTraveller* scenario ever, "Lion at Bay," by Gary L. Thomas.

Despite early insider access to the Rebellion metaplot, DGP would grow uncomfortable with the constantly changing background, because they had little control over the GDW-driven plot. Back in 1987, however, this seemed a minor concern. Though DGP was a licensee of GDW, within two years they became the prime mover and shaker of the *Traveller* world. As GDW retired *JTAS* to produce the more general *Challenge* magazine, and as they moved away from classic *Traveller* and toward their new *Traveller: 2300* design, DGP came to center stage — not just designing the new *MegaTraveller* rules, but also breaking the biggest news in the history of the game.



They were flying high, and ultimately — as a licensee — there was no place to go but down.

The MegaTraveller Years: 1987–1991

From 1987–1991, GDW and DGP were practically partners in *MegaTraveller* production — again an entirely unprecedented relationship for licensor and licensee in the RPG industry.

The Travellers' Digest continued production. Beginning with #9, it adopted a full-sized format and a full-color cover. This increased size allowed for publication of additional material beyond the Grand Tour. The Digest used some of that space to present regular *Traveller: 2300* material over the rest of its life, though it was never a popular addition to the magazine according to DGP's own polling. The *Digest* ran until issue #21 (October 1990). That marked the return from the Grand Tour to the Spinward Marches and the end of a phenomenally long and cohesive campaign.

Meanwhile, *The Early Adventures* (1988) was the first book in DGP's *MegaTraveller* supplement line. More books came into the line every year thereafter, many of which were more notable than GDW's own publications of the same time period.

The *Starship Operator's Manual* (1988) extensively detailed a *Traveller* starship. The *World Builder's Handbook* (1989) revamped *Grand Survey* and *Grand Census* to offer the most comprehensive world building rules ever for *Traveller*; it would also be DGP's bestselling product. *Vilani & Vargr* (1990) and *Solomani & Aslan* (1991) — or "cogs and dogs" and "rats and cats" to use fans' slang names for the books — presented the most complete and vivid background ever for four of the core *Traveller* races (and also the *first* real look at the Vilani). *The Flaming Eye* (1990) was one of the two largest campaigns available for the *MegaTraveller* universe, the other being GDW's *Knightfall* (1990) — also written by DGP staff.

The Flaming Eye also included another DGP innovation: the "cinematic nugget" format for adventures. This format divided an adventure into *scenes* featuring *actions*, which were called *nuggets*. Nuggets were then laid out in a diagram depicting varied paths players could take through an adventure. On the one hand it was a more dramatic, storytelling-oriented way to organize an adventure, but on the other hand it was the sort of mechanical designs common from DGP.



Following the completion of the Grand Tour, DGP started a new magazine called the *MegaTraveller Journal*. It ran four issues, from February 1991 to March 1993. These issues offered a coherent setting for the new

Rebellion time period — something that was notably missing from GDW's own product line. Rather than organizing a Grand Tour, the new *Journal* instead focused on the Domain of Deneb, a particular portion of the *MegaTraveller* Universe.

However, after the publication of the second issue of the *Journal* — in July 1991 — the magazine went on hiatus for almost a year. DGP's last standalone *Traveller* product, *Solomani & Aslan*, was also published in 1991.

Though it wasn't yet apparent, DGP's amazing run was at an end.

The GDW Rebellion: 1991—1993

Unfortunately for DGP, things were changing over at GDW.

In 1991, Marc Miller — who had always been DGP's biggest fan and a key element in their involvement with *MegaTraveller* — left GDW. At the same time GDW's *Traveller: 2300* game had largely failed, even after a last-minute attempt to infuse cyberpunk into the setting. As a result, GDW decided to take the *Traveller* RPG in a totally new direction.

This began with the publication of *Hard Times* (1991), pushing the timeline of the universe several more years forward. Again, DGP saw control of the game's background slipping between their fingers. This, however, was just the start. Over the next year, GDW tore their entire universe down, eventually creating a new game called *Traveller: The New Era* (1993), which abandoned DGP's *MegaTraveller* system and effectively abandoned the setting with a second jump of the timeline forward another 75 years.

In 1991, DGP recognized the direction that things were going. They announced their own upcoming SF RPG, *A.I.*, which *they* could control. They offered an evocative description of their new game's setting: "Set 1,500 years in Earth's future ... the face of both humanity and the planet earth has changed. Nanotechnology and genetic engineering combine to make Earth an eerily alien environment. Holding civilization together are the mighty A.I. citadels — the last bastions of true scientific understanding."

A hard drive crash was one of the elements that kept *A.I.* from meeting its original publication date of October 1991. It was still advertised in issue #3 of the *Journal* (1992) and issue #4 (1993). *The MegaTraveller Journal #4*, DGPs' final publication, also carried an announcement about the future of DGP's support for *Traveller*. To no one's surprise, Fugate announced that DGP was leaving *Traveller* behind, saying that they had a "puppet on a string relationship" with GDW.

> *"We've decided to no longer support [Traveller] with GDW's release of Traveller: The New Era. There are lots of reasons for this, the most significant being our desire to control a game's direction ourselves."*
>
> – Joe D. Fugate Sr., "Helm Report," The MegaTraveller Journal #4 (1993)

This is a problem any licensor is ultimately going to face. Even if they're producing the best material for a game line — as DGP arguably did for *MegaTraveller* and as Pagan Publishing arguably did for *Call of Cthulhu* — they're still supporting someone else's game, and the game's metaphorical rug could be pulled out from under them at any time.

Which is exactly what happened to DGP.

DGP's termination of support for *Traveller* left them with many incomplete sourcebooks, among them: "The Black Duke," another campaign book; three more "*MegaTraveller* Alien" books; additional *Starship Operator's Manuals*; an adventure called "Manhunt," which would have been the first of a trilogy; a new "Robots and Cyborgs" book, further updating their original robot rules; and a "Best of *The Travellers' Digest*." There was some work done on the third aliens book ("Zhodani and Droyne," which wits might have called "Joes and Dros") and "Manhunt," but most of the other books were just ideas or outlines.

Abruptly closing down their *Traveller* support also left DGP in debt, as they were forced to pay fees for art and other material that they would never be able to publish. Some creators were paid late or worse, never paid; most famously this was one of the reasons that Blair Reynolds — a star artist for both Pagan Publishing and DGP — decided to leave the industry.

DGP did have one last hurrah. That final publication, *The MegaTraveller Journal #4* (1993), featured a huge campaign for *MegaTraveller* set in the Gateway sector. William H. Keith Jr. — one of the most famous *Traveller* authors of the early '80s — penned it. DGP learned that Seeker Games commissioned the campaign but never published it, so even though they were otherwise out of the *Traveller* business in 1993, DGP offered up this final gift to the fans.

Unfortunately, DGP never published *A.I.*, and was never able to recover sufficiently from its debts. General burnout was another factor, as the company never became a full-time business, and ate up the free-time of Fugate and others for over eight years. The publishing house slowly and quietly folded, doing its best to continue to pay back its creditors over the next few years.

Post-Fugate DGP: 1994-Present

One morning, late in 1994, a fan named Roger Sanger showed up at Joe Fugate's door looking to buy DGP books. Joe Fugate was still paying back creditors and trying to decide what to do with the remaining boxes of DGP items he owned. Sanger initially bought some of the remaining backstock, but over the next nine months he came to an agreement whereby he paid Fugate a few thousand dollars for the remaining assets of DGP, including copyrights and trademarks. Fugate would keep the larger debts, but Sanger would deal with the smaller ones.

Fugate agreed, and soon DGP had a new owner. At first, Sanger was enthusiastic about republishing DGP material and supporting what was by then the fourth edition of *Traveller*, *Marc Miller's Traveller* (1996), published by Imperium Games. However, Sanger was unable to come to an agreement with Marc Miller. Reports indicate that Sanger was unwilling to pay Miller's licensing fees, and that he offered to sell the DGP material rights to Miller for an outrageous fee of a few hundred thousand dollars.

As a result, the DGP material has languished for the last 15 years, despite being some of the best *Traveller* material published in the late '80s and early '90s. Marc Miller, concerned over copyright issues, explicitly forbade his licensors from referencing the DGP material and as a result it has taken on "forbidden canon" or "fuzzy canon" status: No one can reference it, but no one wants to contradict it either.

The principals of DGP have largely gotten out of the RPG business. Gary Thomas did some work for TSR, but the last of that was in 1989–1991. Rob Caswell — the art director during DGP's later years and the editor for most of *The MegaTraveller Journal* — went into freelancing; his art later appeared in WEG's *Star Wars* (1991–1996) and SJG's *GURPS Traveller* (1998–2002). Joe Fugate Sr. now runs a model railroad site. He is currently producing professional how-to videos for *Model Railroader Magazine*.

Due to Sanger's attitude, it appears that the DGP material is irrevocably dead. The fact that there is still angst about this a decade later speaks to the high quality of the original publications.

What to Read Next

- For some of the earliest "second-tier licensees" of *Traveller*, read ***FASA*** and ***Gamelords***.
- For other gaming material in IP hell, read ***SkyRealms Publishing*** or any licensed game ever.

In Other Eras

- For DGP's licensor and partner, read ***GDW*** *['70s]*.
- For the past of epic RPG campaigns, read about Dragonlance in ***TSR*** *['70s]* and for their future, read about adventure paths in ***Paizo Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For another licensee whose releases at times outshone those of their licensor, read ***Pagan Publishing*** *['90s]*.
- For more on Blair Reynolds' unique art, read ***Pagan Publishing*** *['90s]*.
- For the origins of the Keith brothers, read ***GDW*** *['70s]*.
- For the fourth edition of *Traveller* that Roger Sanger *could* have supported, read ***Imperium Games*** *['90s]*.

Or read onward to the masters of anime, ***R. Talsorian***.

R. Talsorian: 1985—Present

In the '80s and early '90s, R. Talsorian was flying high as a futurist RPG publisher always seeing the next *trends, from anime to cyberpunk.*

Before The Games: 1980—1982

Today, game design is rarely taught in school. Thirty years ago — when role-playing games were young and computer games were just appearing — such an education would be unthinkable. However Mike Pondsmith — who graduated from UC Davis with degrees in Graphic Design and Behavioral Psychology — felt like he got the right training and one can see his point: behavioral psychology offers insight into what makes games fun, while graphic design offers insight into how to make them usable.

Following graduation, Pondsmith went to work for a small packaging firm called California Pacific. There he came into contact with the early computer gaming market, as California Pacific published the first two works of a young 19-year-old from



1986: Mekton

Texas named Richard Garriott. The games were *Akalabeth* (1980) — which was influenced by *Dungeons & Dragons* and was one of the first commercial computer roleplaying games — and *Ultima I* (1980). Today, Richard Garriott is better known as Lord British, one of the most prominent computer game designers of the 20th century.

In a different universe, Pondsmith might have moved directly into the computer gaming field thanks to his relationship with California Pacific and Richard Gariott. In our universe, however, Pondsmith's California Pacific job collapsed due to problems the owner was having, and Pondsmith instead found himself working at the University of California Santa Cruz, running a typesetting house by virtue of his degree in graphic design.

So instead of continuing with the perfect venue to create computer games, Pondsmith instead began working somewhere that gave him free access to typesetting. Tabletop games followed almost naturally.

The Pre-Interlock Games: 1982–1987

Years later, Mike Pondsmith would attribute his entry to the gaming field to GDW's *Traveller* (1977) — or rather to its combat system, which Pondsmith felt he could improve. The result was *Imperial Star* (1982?), Pondsmith's own version of the premiere SF RPG.

> *"I get home, build some characters, and kill my first character off while generating it. Kill my second character off while generating it. So finally I get it right, and I get into a game, and I find that I can't kill my character. I found out that, in order to kill my character I have to effectively knock down 3 stats to be able to off my character. I'm realizing … this is bogus. I can't kill the guy except when I'm generating him. This sucks."*
>
> – Mike Pondsmith, Interview, blog.obsidianportal.com (March 2010)

Whereas *Imperial Star* was written for Pondsmith's amusement, he decided to self-publish his next game for a larger audience. It originated when Pondsmith took an interest in the *Mobile Suit Gundam* manga (1979–1980) and decided to combine that with his *Imperial Star* game system. The result was the "white box edition" of *Mekton* (1984), a game of giant robot combat.

Mekton was not only the first game of giant robot (or "mecha") combat — barely predating *Battledroids* (1984), which shortly became *Battletech* (1985) — but also the first game of any sort based on Japanese cartoons. This was a niche that R. Talsorian entirely controlled until the appearance of much more recent companies like Dream Pod 9 and Guardians of Order.

Unfortunately, *Mekton*'s small press status kept it from enjoying success as the herald of its genre. Distribution was limited, some of the artwork was poor, and the game system was unpolished. It also had a less-than-small press competitor in FASA's *Battletech*. Both games were just barely RPGs, focusing much more on the battles between the giant mecha than the pilots inside. They both came in boxes, with maps and figures. However *Mekton* had no chance of competing with FASA's slick packaging, colorful components, professional-quality artwork, and plastic miniatures.

Nonetheless, *Mekton* did well enough to convince Pondsmith he could make a business out of game design. He founded R. Talsorian in 1985, then put out a second edition of *Mekton* (1986) through the new company. Now packaged as a 100-page rulebook rather than a box, the new edition considerably expanded the rules. Most notably it included a six-page flowchart that could be used to generate characters — a predecessor to the Interlock system's Lifepaths, which we'll meet shortly. It also introduced a setting with some depth, expanding a map of two islands from the first edition into the world of "Algol."

R. Talsorian put out one more early game — *Teenagers from Outer Space* (1987) — before settling on the game system that would headline their products for the next 10 years. This new game introduced American gamers to a whole new genre of Japanese cartoon: the comedy, or more specifically the-comedy-of-aliens-and-teenagers-in-high-school, perhaps most famously seen in *Urusei Yatsura* (1978–1987), published in the US as *Lum*.

As a rare comedic RPG, *TFOS* shared much in common Greg Costikyan's *Toon* (1984) — and Costikyan would go on to do some writing for the third edition of the game, several years down the road. The game, generally, did a good job mimicking the wacky and socially-aware world of the high school cartoons it emulated. As with *Toon*, there was no possibility of lethal damage: characters lost "bonk" until they went into a stupor. Even the stats and skills for *TFOS* were appropriate from the genre.



From a game-design perspective, the most important element of *TFOS* was its skill mechanics. The game used a simple target-based skill-roll system: you rolled a d6, added an attribute and a skill, and you tried to reach a set difficulty. It was similar to the "die + bonus" system that designer Jonathan Tweet developed that same year for *Ars Magica* (1987) and popularized through his work on *Dungeons & Dragons* third edition

(2000). Besides being innovative, the *TFOS* game system was also a precursor to the Interlock games that we'll meet momentarily and is even considered by some to be a "simplified" form of the system.

When *TFOS* won a Gamer's Choice award in 1987 for its excellent theming and well-designed game system, it was clear that R. Talsorian came a long way from a self-published white box in 1984. However, this was all prelude, for in 1987 R. Talsorian was on the verge of introducing their new house system to the market.

The Future of *Mekton*: 1987—1994

Mekton II (1987) — the third edition of R. Talsorian's classic mecha game — revealed the full-fledged Interlock system for the first time. Though Interlock would evolve over the next few years, the base form of the system that R. Talsorian would hang its hat onto for almost a decade was on display here.

Like *TFOS*, Interlock was based on a simple "die + bonus" system, here using a d10 rather than a d6. Beyond that, the game system was much more regularized. Where *TFOS* had silly characteristics like Smarts, Luck, Looks, and Relationship with Parents, *Mekton II* instead tried to produce a serious game system.

> *"I'd like to say that Gundam influenced Mekton, but I didn't know enough about what was going on to make Mekton into Gundam."*
>
> – Mike Pondsmith, Interview, blog.obsidianportal.com (March 2010)

Mekton II also used the character background system that had appeared in the original *Mekton*, though in a considerably more complex and comprehensive form. These "Lifepaths" really defined Interlock as much as the well-designed and simple mechanics. They gave Interlock's otherwise point-based characters a depth that helped them become more than just a set of expenditures.

As with previous *Mekton* games, the new one centered on robot construction and tactical combat, not characters. Interlock as the basis of a complete roleplaying game would need to wait for R. Talsorian's next product line.

Because of its better polish, *Mekton II* received more acclaim and attention than its predecessor — even in an increasingly crowded giant-robot genre thanks to FASA's *Battletech*, Palladium's *Robotech* (1986), and even Hero's *Robot Warriors* (1986). As a result, R. Talsorian was able to support it with a few supplements, the most notable of which was *Mekton Empire* (1991), offering a more soap opera setting useful for anime like *Captain Harlock*, *Gundam*, and *Voltron*.

Mekton II would eventually pick up a licensee when Ianus Publications — who we'll meet again shortly — created a new setting for the game in their *Jovian Chronicles* (1994) and *Europa Incident* (1994) supplements. Ianus' modern

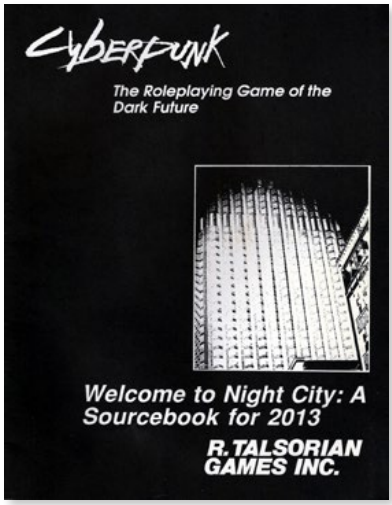
incarnation, Dream Pod 9, was one of the prime anime-esque publishers of the late '90s and early '00s — as is more fully described in their own history — making them an R. Talsorian descendent in the modern marketplace.

We'll leave *Mekton* there, in its third edition, with a handful of supplements, and a licensee. Sadly, by now it started to fade away, as R. Talsorian was already giving much more attention to a newer and more successful line.

Cyberpunk'd: 1988—1993

In producing *Mekton*, Mike Pondsmith predicted an area of future growth in the entertainment industry. When he put out his original game in 1984, he was very much on the cutting edge of entertainment, as Japanese anime had yet to become truly popular in the US. *Battle of the Planets* (1978) and *Star Blazers* (1980) already appeared, but they barely touched upon giant robots, and in any case were precursors to the anime explosion heralded by releases like *Voltron* (1984) and *Robotech* (1985). Pondsmith repeated and improved upon that prescience with his next game, *Cyberpunk 2013* (1988), R. Talsorian's second Interlock design.

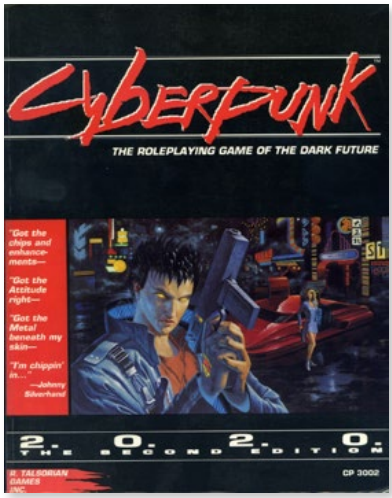
Pondsmith became interested in the cyberpunk genre through the film *Blade Runner* (1982). He watched as the genre grew through books like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Bruce Sterling's anthology, *Mirrorshades* (1986). His *Cyberpunk* game was primarily created in the mold of Gibson's work. It offered a violent world full of dark corporations, deadly weaponry, and cybernetic body parts. Other ideas common in some cyberpunk stories such as biotechnology and artificial intelligence were downplayed in *Cyberpunk*'s vision of a dark near-future.



"Blade Runner. My all time favorite movie. One of the few worlds I'd like to live in. I love the technology and the dark, film noir style. What can I say? My favorite places all have wet city streets with reflected neon signs."

– Mike Pondsmith, Interview, gamegrene.com (January 2005)

Cyberpunk expanded the original Interlock system by introducing a new combat system called "Friday Night Firefight" which was dark, gritty, cinematic, and lethal. If you wanted to make sure you didn't die, the best answer was not to get hit in combat, and failing that, augment your body with piles of metal.



Cyberpunk was a huge success, defining a whole new genre for roleplaying, just like Gibson's books defined a whole new genre of literature. It was quickly supplemented with setting and equipment books. The new *Cyberpunk* line also featured R. Talsorian's first licensed book — where before they created generic publications based only on the feel of specific books or TV shows. That was *Hardwired* (1989), licensed from the cyberpunk book (1986) by Walter Jon Williams — himself a one-time game designer with FGU. R. Talsorian's second licensed book would be similar: *When Gravity Fails* (1992), another *Cyberpunk* setting, this one based on the George A. Effinger novel of the same name (1986). When R. Talsorian published the second edition of the game, *Cyberpunk 2020* (1990), it polished up the Interlock system once more — producing what's now known as "Standard Interlock." This new edition also jumped the timeline forward by seven years, as the name suggests. Though the publication gap between the first two editions of *Cyberpunk* was quite short, it was necessary, because *Cyberpunk* had become a phenomenon.

The extent of *Cyberpunk*'s success (in both editions) can be seen in the ripples it caused in the rest of the industry. First, it brought R. Talsorian its first three licensees. Young company Atlas Games started publishing adventures for *Cyberpunk* with *The Arasaka Brainworm* (1991), and would later recount that they were more successful than most d20 books a decade later. Ianus Publications — who we've already met — actually got their RPG start with licensed *Cyberpunk* games. Two years before *Jovian Chronicles* they published *Night's Edge* (1992), which detailed a new techno-horror setting for *Cyberpunk*. Ianus published over a dozen supplements for their "alternate reality universe." A few years later, Gold Rush Games received a more unique license to publish a licensed roleplaying soundtrack, which was *Cyberpunk: Night City Trax* (1994).

Second, the whole industry, seeing R. Talsorian's success, started putting out cyberpunk games of their own. Notable releases included ICE's *Rolemaster*-based *Cyberspace* (1989), FASA's *Shadowrun* (1989), and Steve Jackson Games' *GURPS Cyberpunk* (1990). Of all those cyberpunk releases, *Shadowrun* was most important because it was the only other cyberpunk game to actually catch on. That was

probably due to the mix of fantasy and science-fiction, as is detailed in FASA's history. *GURPS Cyberpunk* deserves some attention too, but that's because it almost put Steve Jackson Games out of business thanks to a real-life run-in with cyberpunks and their cyber-legal pursuers, exhaustively detailed in Steve Jackson Games' history.

Cyberpunk didn't *just* create a new genre. It also nearly destroyed an old one: the science-fiction roleplaying genre. The SF genre was stumbling along in the late '80s, with leader *Traveller* in a long downturn. Beyond that, the older science-fiction games failed to keep up with the technological advances of the intervening decade, with computers being a particular sore point. *Traveller*, for example, featured room-sized computers that were less powerful than what was available to the home user by the early '80s. The cyberpunk craze just accentuated these problems by highlighting future possibilities for computers — like virtual reality and cybernetic connections — that SF RPGs largely ignored to that date.

Not *all* science-fiction games were affected by these problems. Space opera games like *Star Wars* (1987) and giant mecha games like *Battletech* and *Heavy Gear* (1995) did fine, but harder science games increasingly floundered after the release of *Cyberpunk*. Some of them unsuccessfully tried to adjust to the new world with books like *Earth/Cybertech Sourcebook* (1989), taking GDW's *2300AD* (1986, 1988) game in a cyberpunk direction, and *Traveller: The New Era* (1992), which made the Traveller universe dark and gritty thanks to a massive computer virus. Other games like ICE's *Space Master* (1985) simply died. It would be almost a decade before new space-oriented science-fiction games could be brought to market, when games like Holistic Design's *Fading Suns* (1996) and White Wolf's *Trinity* (1997) successfully adopted dark and gritty sensibilities to their game designs.

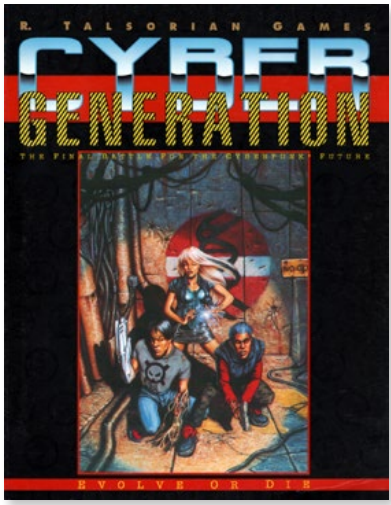
Of course, while the rest of the industry reacted to R. Talsorian and *Cyberpunk*, Pondsmith kept happily putting out supplements for his top game, and reaping the benefits of the genre he'd created. As the *Cyberpunk* line continued publication, however, it started to evolve — to the consternation of its earliest fans, who felt like it was moving toward "anime" sensibilities. Many mark 1992 as the year when Cyberpunk abandoned its *Neuromancer* origins and became more of an action/adventure RPG.



That's when R. Talsorian published both *Chrome 2* (1992), introducing full-borgs (essentially, people who replaced *everything* with cybernetics), and *Maximum Metal* (1992), which added power armor to the game.

"If you're an old Cyberpunk player, get ready for a shock."

– Cybergeneration Introduction (1993)



Ironically, R. Talsorian simultaneously rebelled against the idea of heavily-cybered characters in *Cybergeneration* (1993), a new setting based in an alternative 2027. It went beyond the slow decay of *Cyberpunk 2020* to a world where the corporations became the new governments. Players took on the roles of young adults with more heroic motives for fighting against the Machine. There were other changes, such as the total removal of drugs and the addition of heavy virtual reality use in the real world, a la Larry Niven and Steven Barnes' *Dream Park* (1981), a book we'll return to momentarily. Some players felt Pondsmith was telling them they were playing *Cyberpunk* wrong and offered up a new model, showing how PC rebels **should** be fighting corporate evildoers. It was not the first time Pondsmith and fans would be at odds.

Regardless, *Cybergeneration* was popular enough that R. Talsorian supported it with a half-dozen or so supplements.

Though some old fans may have been disgruntled by the changing worldview of books like *Chrome 2*, *Maximum Metal*, and *Cybergeneration*, new fans continued to arrive. By the early '90s, R. Talsorian was definitely a mover and a shaker in the hobbyist field.

Visions & Revisions: 1991–1996

Riding high on *Cyberpunk*'s success, the next few years at R. Talsorian are notable for the company both publishing new games and revising old ones, as it grew into a major professional RPG publisher.

Their first new game of the era *could* have been Erick Wujcik's *Amber Diceless Roleplaying* (1991), which was in development at R. Talsorian in the early '90s.

However, creative differences led Wujcik to head out on his own, instead publishing *Amber* through his own Phage Press.

Instead, *Dream Park* (1992) was R. Talsorian's next new game and their third license. It was based on the aforementioned series of books by Larry Niven and Steven Barnes — which told of a virtual reality park — and was released to coincide with the third book in the series. As is often the case with licensed publications, Pondsmith's game tried to appeal to the mass market by offering a massively simplified game system. Here a character was defined by just a few skills. The result was not an Interlock game, though it shared common characteristics, including some point-based character creation and a "die + bonus" skill roll. The *Dream Park* RPG focused on a weird sort of metagame since players played characters playing characters in a game. There were a few supplements through 1993, but the game never caught on.

Meanwhile *Mekton* received a fourth edition called *Mekton Zeta* (1994). By now the anime market had considerably matured in the United States and was much more popular and better understood. As a result, *Mekton Zeta* could play up its Japanese origins. There was even Japanese kanji on the cover that revealed the "true" name of the game: *Super Dimension Mobile Warrior Mekton Zeta* — a reference to *Gundam* and *Macross*, two definitive pieces of anime. The game was soon supplemented with a set of advanced rules called *Mekton Zeta Plus* (1995).

Mekton's world of Algol was largely abandoned in this new edition — becoming just one of several possible settings — and the game became even more of a toolkit for replicating *any* anime than before. The default setting was now "Invasion Terra," a *Macross*-based setting also appearing in a few supplements. *Starblade Battalion Mekton* (1996) revealed another new setting, one that was a sort of crossover; it was a possible future for the world of *Cyberpunk*. It would also be the final supplement for *Mekton*.

With all of their focus on the future, it's a bit of a surprise that R. Talsorian's next big game of this period instead looked to the past.

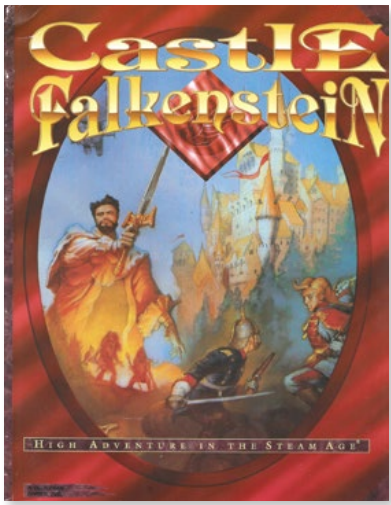
Castle Falkenstein, Good Sir: 1994—1997

Despite its historical bent, R. Talsorian's newest RPG, *Castle Falkenstein* (1994), was again adapting an innovative new literary genre. This time it was "steampunk," just coming to mass-market attention thanks to *The Difference Engine* (1990), a novel by cyberpunk veterans Sterling and Gibson. It was not the first book in the genre, but it was the book that popularized steampunk.

Generally, the steampunk genre concerns itself with a Victorian age that has discovered advanced steam-based technology. Some steampunk books feature the tropes of era writers like Doyle or Wells, while others are more fantastical

or horrific. By 1994, there had been one major RPG in the genre, but GDW's *Space: 1889* had already come and gone (1988–1991). That may be because *Space: 1889* was well-respected for its theming, but not necessarily the mechanics. *Castle Falkenstein*, instead, would receive praise for both.

The theming of *Castle Falkenstein* was carefully managed from the start. The rulebook was divided into two parts: a diary of a game designer sucked into the strange world of *Falkenstein* — which combined gentlemanly adventures, steam technology, and the fay — and a more traditional rulebook. The influence of White Wolf was obvious — which was fair enough, as the dark and gritty themes White Wolf used had their basis in R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk 2013*.



However, *Falkenstein*'s theming went beyond that bit of fiction and generally infiltrated the game. Instead of having character sheets, players had diaries, and since only riff-raff would use dice, players instead used a standard deck of cards as their randomizer. The actual background of *Castle Falkenstein* was likewise evocative. It allowed players to hob-nob with Sherlock Holmes, Moriarty, or just about anyone else from the era — real or imagined.

Finally, the game system itself was simple, yet innovative. As noted already, it centered on cards. These were used as resources that had to be managed, much as TSR would do in their SAGA system (1996–2000) a few years later. Cards could be played to augment the efficacy of a skill, but unless they were in the right suit, their usefulness was limited. *Castle Falkenstein* was probably the first RPG to use cards as a major game mechanic. Wizards of the Coast's *Everway* (1995), Pinnacle's *Deadlands* (1996), and the aforementioned SAGA system would soon follow.

Castle Falkenstein was not nearly as popular or as successful as *Cyberpunk*, but it nonetheless was greatly lauded for its beautiful artwork, evocative theming, and classy and original gaming system, making it one of R. Talsorian's best-loved games — and another award-winner. It would be supplemented by a half-dozen books over the next three years, including: *Comte il Faut* (1995), a player's guide; *The Book of Sigils* (1995), a magick guide; and even *Six-Guns & Sorcery* (1996), a North American sourcebook.

Fuzion Times: 1996—1998

Coming into the mid-'90s, R. Talsorian was riding high. *Mekton Zeta* was still a year from the end of its line, while *Castle Falkenstein* was still receiving support and acclaim. It was *Cyberpunk*, however, that was showing the most potential for growth.

Cybergeneration had just enjoyed a second edition (1995) while word began to circulate that Mike Pondsmith was working on a third edition of *Cyberpunk* called "Cyberpunk 203X." Though former licenses Atlas Games and Ianus Publication moved on to their own projects, *Cyberpunk* was now the subject of an even more notable licensed publication: *Netrunner* (1996), Richard Garfield's newest CCG, published by Wizards of the Coast and based on *Cyberpunk 2020*.

And then along came Hero.

Hero Games, long-time publisher of first *Champions* (1981) and later the *Hero System* had for the previous 10 years enjoyed a close partnership with Iron Crown Enterprises (ICE), who had been doing all of their production and distribution. However, ICE was now focusing on its own *Middle-earth Collectible Card Game* (1995–1998) to the detriment of all its other lines — including *Hero*. The principals at Hero Games decided that they needed to sever their ties with ICE and find a new partner.

On April 25, 1996, Hero Games and R. Talsorian jointly announced that they were entering a partnership where R. Talsorian would publish and distribute Hero games, much as ICE had before.

When they first starting talking about this new partnership, Mike Pondsmith and Hero Games owners Steve Peterson and Ray Greer decided that they needed to build some conversion rules to connect Interlock and *Hero System* — making the games more compatible and supplements jointly usable. As the companies further explored these possibilities, they came to the realization that the game systems weren't really that far apart. So they decided to combine them into a new system, which they would call Fuzion. Hero Games announced the new direction on July 11, 1996.

> *"Fuzion is simple, scalable, flexible, and universal. [It] has a simple core: the basic rules fit on a couple of pages, and the basic character can fit on a trading card. The rules provide more detail as needed or desired, so the game is scalable to whatever degree of detail you want."*
>
> – Hero Games, Press Release (July 1996)

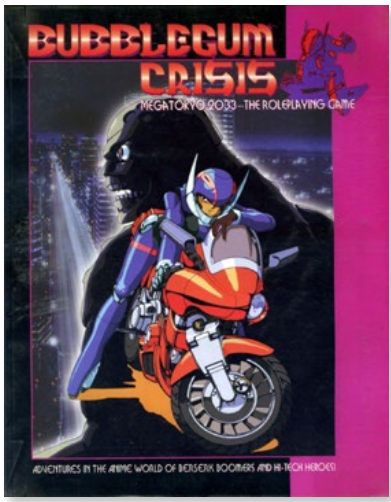
Fuzion made its debut as a file freely available on R. Talsorian's website, marking the start of its remarkably open attitude. It was also offered to other publishers with a relatively open (though not free) license, years before d20 used similar methods.

Fuzion's strengths included simplicity and scalability. The simplicity was something that Pondsmith had long sought after in games like *Teenagers from Outer Space*, *Dream Park*, and even *Castle Falkenstein*. The scalability hadn't been a long-term interest, but it was something the Interlock system really needed — since its basis was in giant mecha games where human-scale people were just nuisances. Fuzion offered better interrelations between things at different power levels.

Its biggest weakness was that it *was* a different system — and one that some fans felt didn't solve problems they were experiencing. This pushback was worse for Hero Games, as is described in their own history. R. Talsorian didn't have quite as much player discontent — probably because Fuzion was closer to Interlock than to Hero; it added a few stats and the concept of disadvantages, but kept its core die-rolling system and most of its valuation scales.

The discontent that did arise may have been a problem of marketing. Quantitatively, the difference between Fuzion and Standard Interlock was probably no greater than the difference between Standard Interlock and earlier versions of the game system — and perhaps not even as big as the difference between *Mekton Zeta* and *Cyberpunk 2020*. After all, Interlock was a house system, *not* a generic system (like *Hero*), and there was variation from game to game. If the new system had been named Interlock 3.0 instead of Fuzion, it probably would have been less controversial — at least for R. Talsorian fans.

R. Talsorian released the first Fuzion game, *Bubblegum Crisis* (1996) that year. It marked a new push into anime for the company, bringing it back to its roots. A third edition of *Teenagers from Outer Space* (1997) soon followed. It was the first existing R. Talsorian game converted to Fuzion.



Armored Trooper VOTOMS (1997) — another licensed RPG — came next and really highlighted R. Talsorian's move toward licensed games after largely avoiding them. To mark this new direction, R. Talsorian created a new imprint called "ANimechaniX," meant to specialize "in the creation of anime-based game titles." R. Talsorian would release later anime RPGs under the new brand as well as reprints of books like *Mekton Zeta*. It was meant

to eventually include posters, figures, and other anime-related items. Word also started to circulate about an upcoming *Dragonball Z* roleplaying game as well as "Mekton Double Zeta," which would have been a Fuzion edition of R. Talsorian's classic *Mekton* game. However, as we'll soon see, R. Talsorian wouldn't get around to most of these releases.

R. Talsorian was not the only company putting out Fuzion games. Hero Games quickly released a Fuzion-based edition of *Champions*, called *Champions: The New Millennium* (1997). The Hero Games history talks about the fan revolt they immediately encountered. Old company friend Gold Rush Games was another early publisher of licensed Fuzion games, beginning with *Usagi Yojimbo* (1997), based on the comic book adventures of a samurai rabbit.

All around, the late '90s looked like a great time for R. Talsorian. The Fuzion system was booming, licensees were appearing, and new licensed games were doing better than ever before. Amidst all that, R. Talsorian kept giving attention to their classic *Cyberpunk* game too. Rumors of a third edition of *Cyberpunk* began to solidify, as did the fact that it would now be Fuzion-based. Finally, R. Talsorian showed that they were serious by kicking off a trilogy that would change the world of *Cyberpunk* in advance of the new edition. *Firestorm: Stormfront* (1997) and *Firestorm: Shockwave* (1997) kicked off the story of a corporate takeover that turned into a global conflict.

Then, quite suddenly, on February 15, 1998, Mike Pondsmith announced that he was cutting back on R. Talsorian, turning it into a part-time operation.

Shutting Down: 1998—2000

Though things might have looked sudden from the outside — though it seemed like R. Talsorian was shutting down just when many of its lines were on the upswing — in truth things had been getting worse for a while. The biggest trouble was the general worsening of the RPG industry that followed the CCG boom and bust.

The previous few years had been terrible for the industry, and this was something that Mike Pondsmith as president of GAMA was very aware of. GDW shut down in 1996 and TSR and Mayfair Games both died in 1997. West End Games was destined to enter bankruptcy a few months later, while FASA would shut down in 1999, the same year ICE would enter bankruptcy. When Pondsmith said in an open letter that "companies are in chaos," he wasn't joking.

The economic problems didn't just undercut R. Talsorian's business. They were also heartbreaking for Pondsmith, who saw his friends in the industry disappearing and believed that everyone was heading toward an even worse crash. It made creating games not *fun*.

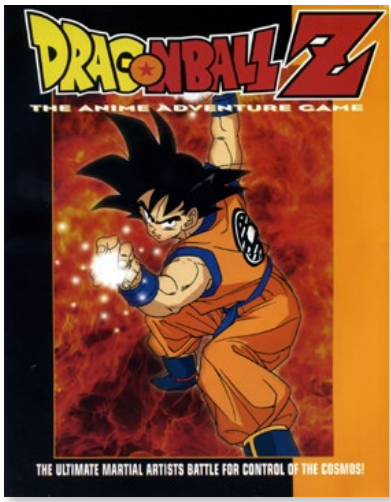
"I have been considering this move … for over a year. The full-time gig was wearing Lisa and I out, and we felt that if we kept on at it, in a few more months we would absolutely hate gaming."

– Mike Pondsmith, Open Letter, February 1998

Controversies regarding the 1998 Gen Con Game Fair also blew up and highlighted many of the same trends that Pondsmith was already worried about. The con was now under the new management of Andon Unlimited, thanks to the 1997 purchase of TSR by Wizards of the Coast — and these new owners had decided to make large-scale changes to the cost of manufacturer booth space and the way that space was allocated. Pondsmith felt that these changes helped to promote CCG companies over RPGs, further dooming the industry. As a result, R. Talsorian ended up boycotting Gen Con 31. So did Steve Jackson Games, Palladium Books, RPGnet, and others.

While Steve Jackson Games' *Daily Illuminator* was publishing news of the spreading boycott throughout February, Mike Pondsmith was making the final decision to drop R. Talsorian down to a part-time operation. He announced the plan to his staff on February 1, 1998.

R. Talsorian existed in this "powered-down" configuration for two years. Since they could no longer act as a major creator of RPGs, they couldn't really act as a publisher for Hero Games — as they had for the previous two years — so Hero Games and R. Talsorian parted amicably on October 30, 1998. After self-publishing for a brief time, Hero went on to join cybergames.com, as is again described in their own history.



Another result of R. Talsorian throttling down their production was that the cutting edge of Fuzion development shifted to third-party licensees. Their publications included several "Atomik" plug-ins made available as PDFs, Goldrush Games' *Sengoku* game (1999) and Obsidian Studios' *Shards of the Stone* (2000) — the last of which was also bought by cybergames.com, as it happens.

Besides maintaining reprints of old products — such as the new ANimechaniX-branded *Mekton Zeta* (2000) — R. Talsorian also produced one new product during their last years in Albany, California: *The Dragonball Z Adventure Game* (1999), a

new Fuzion game licensed from the very popular anime. Though no one could have predicted it in 1999, it would be the entire basis of the company for the next several years, because an even bigger change was coming.

The Microsoft Years: 2000—2004

In the early '80s, Mike Pondsmith narrowly missed the opportunity to work in the young computer game industry and ended up creating 20 years of well-received tabletop RPGs instead. In late 2000, that early choice was turned on its head when Pondsmith was offered — and accepted — a job with Microsoft to produce Xbox games. He'd stay there for four years.

Microsoft proved to be a harsh taskmaster, and the part-time status of R. Talsorian moved to almost non-existent. During Pondsmith's years at Microsoft, it was his wife Lisa Pondsmith who kept the company alive by keeping some books in print and helping to usher a few new books to press.

Core Fuzion (2002) made R. Talsorian's new generic system available in a generalized form, but it was just a blip in R. Talsorian's production. R. Talsorian's biggest focus was instead on the *Dragonball Z* RPG, which was doing very well in anime markets, though it was scarcely noticed in the RPG community. R. Talsorian published two *Dragonball Z* supplements: *Dragonball Z Book 2: The Frieza Saga* (2001) and *The Garlic Jr.* • *Trunks* • *Android Sagas* (2002).

Though Pondsmith tabled Mekton Double Zeta because it was no longer exciting enough for an increasingly frontlist-driven industry, he was considering an alternative. He licensed the Japanese *Mobile Suit Gundam* RPG, which would have allowed for some of the same sort of mecha battles. Unfortunately, it never came to be due to time constraints of the period.

Because of those time constraints, it was again other publishers that carried forward R. Talsorian's torch during the Microsoft years.

Castle Falkenstein — which largely ended its production when R. Talsorian went part-time — reappeared under license from Steve Jackson Games as *GURPS Castle Falkenstein* (2000). The final book of the *Falkenstein* line, *The Ottoman Empire* (2002), was produced by Steve Jackson in a dual-statted edition. Pondsmith considered reprinting the core *Falkenstein* in 2003, but a combination of the d20 bust and the (acrimonious) departure of the original artist from the industry would have made the book unprofitable, so Pondsmith instead officially ended the line.

Gold Rush Games continued to be the main bearer of the Fuzion banner, printing *Sengoku* supplements as well as a new *Zorro* (2001) game — but after that they decided to revamp and republish Fuzion under the catchier name of the "Action! System." This new system was released under an Open Gaming License (OGL),

and has since been used by a number of smaller publishers, including ComStar Media and Firefly Games.

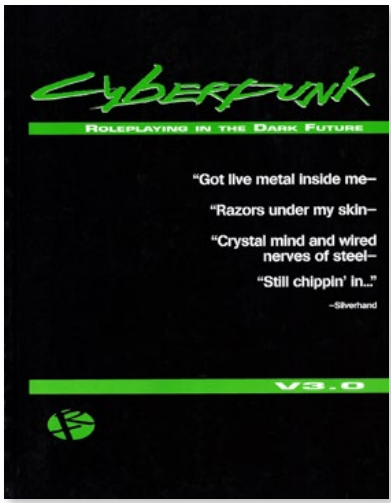
A few new Fuzion publishers appeared as well, including: Heresy Games, who put out *Victoriana* (2003); Dilly Green Bean Games, with *Guardian Universe* (2004); and Archaia Studios Press, with *Artesia* (2005). Some of these games have been quite well-received, even award-winning. Since 2005, however, Fuzion seems to have largely faded away.

There's one exception to that. After leaving his job at Microsoft, Mike Pondsmith would finally be ready to produce a long-anticipated game: *Cyberpunk v3*.

The New Cybergeneration: 2005-Present

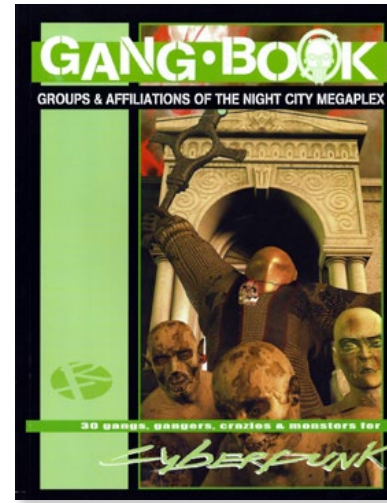
After 2002, it looked like R. Talsorian was gone. Nothing but *Dragonball Z* had been published since 1997, and now even that line came to an end. However, in 2004 things began to change again, largely due to Mike Pondsmith's departure from Microsoft. He continued full-time work — first on *The Matrix Online* (2005), then as a Professor of Game Design at the DigiPen Institute of Technology — but these newer jobs weren't the time-sink that Microsoft was. He then had more time for roleplaying publication.

In December 2005, R. Talsorian Group (no longer R. Talsorian Games) produced a game 12 years in the making: *Cyberpunk v3* (2005). This new edition advanced the timeline past the Fourth Corporate War previously detailed in that unfinished trilogy of *Firestorm* adventures and updated the game to use the Fuzion system. It also introduced a simpler character creation system, meant to get players quickly into the game. It built on lessons learned — both from computer-gaming and *Cybergeneration*.



Unfortunately, the game flopped.

The biggest problem was new game's changed setting. In a plot point surprisingly like that of *Traveller: The New Era* (1993), a virus was behind many of the changes. Everything paper got eaten up and the net was crashed, thanks to the DataKrash program. Now people didn't even know what year it was, hence the original "203X" name of the third edition.



A lot more had changed as well. Corporations fled the planet and were replaced by neo-corps, solely criminal enterprises. Society was now divided into "alt-cults," each of which had their own super technology and views of the world.

The new organizations did a lot to extend the *Cyberpunk* setting into the biotech and transhuman ideas that increased in popularity since *Cyberpunk*'s beginnings. Some even went back to cyberpunk concepts of the '80s that were ignored. However, many players felt that they didn't blend well with the setting as it existed before *v3*. To them, what might have been a good lower-case "c" cyberpunk game was widely considered a poor sequel to *Cyberpunk 2020*.

There were a number of other complaints, including problems with layout and text directly cut-and-pasted from previous publications. The artwork got a lot of attention because it consisted entirely of pictures of action figures, appropriately modded for *Cyberpunk*. It was certainly a daring idea, but one that many didn't consider successful. However, all of this paled in the face of the setting changes.

Notably, the change from Interlock to Fuzion generated relatively few complaints; in fact, many fans liked some of the new rules and planned to fit them into their *Cyberpunk 2020* games — again underlining how close Interlock and Fuzion really were.

Following the publication of *Cyberpunk v3*, Mike Pondsmith planned to release a supplement every few months, but as has tended to be the case with R. Talsorian post-1998, these releases quickly faded away. R. Talsorian managed a book or two a year through 2008, when they put out *Beyond the Edge* (2008) — *v3*'s first splatbook, covering the Edge Runner alt-cult. It was R. Talsorian's last publication for several years.



As Fuzion has slowly faded from the gaming landscape, it's ironically once more Interlock generating interest from other companies and people.

Firestorm Ink licensed rights to the *Cybergeneration* alternate reality starting in 2004 and published a handful of products including *Generation Gap* (2005) — which had originally been scheduled by R. Talsorian a decade earlier. However, their final Cybergeneration book, *Mile High Dragon* (2009), was PDF only, and they've since published their own indie RPG, *Geasa* (2010).

Cubicle 7 announced a new *Cyberpunk 2020* setting called "Genesis Descent" for release in 2010. It's since been moved to Angus Abranson's new company, Chronicle City.

Meanwhile, a group of fans at Datafortress 2020 not only continue talking about *Cyberpunk 2020*, but have also updated R. Talsorian's original rule system to what they call "Interlock Unlimited."

> *"Interlock Unlimited is a re-imagining of R. Talsorian's Interlock Rules System and as such was designed not only to cover any genre, setting, or situation, but remain fully compatible with all games built on the Interlock System."*
>
> – Deric Bernier, datafortress2020forums.110mb.com (March 2008)

By 2013, R. Talsorian looked dead, with a stale web site and no new products in five years. Then the internet rode to the rescue. A June 2013 Kickstarter helped Mike Pondsmith to raise $50,128 from 618 backers for "Mekton Zero" (2014?), the newest iteration of the company's original game. Meanwhile, work continues with Polish developer CD Projekt RED on a computer RPG called "Cyberpunk 2077"; a brand-new web site has even brought R. Talsorian's online presence back to life.

Though R. Talsorian may never return to its production of the '90s, it certainly seems poised to create new games in the '10s

What to Read Next

- For another company led by a singular visionary who is good at spotting upcoming trends, including the anime revolution, read ***Palladium Books***.
- For *Battletech*, which beat out *Mekton*, read ***FASA***.
- For another early look at point-based characters, read ***Hero Games***.
- For the only other cyberpunk game that did particularly well, read about *Shadowrun* in ***FASA***.
- For a steampunk game of note that didn't do as well as *Castle Falkenstein*, read about *Space: 1889* in ***GDW***.
- For R. Talsorian's partner in Fuzion, also read ***Hero Games***.
- For other companies that upset fans by destroying existing settings, read about *Traveller: The New Era* in ***GDW*** and the 4e Forgotten Realms in ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.

In Other Eras

- For companies that have carried the anime banner in more recent years, read ***Dream Pod 9*** *['90s]* and ***Guardians of Order*** *['90s]*.
- For early licensee Ianus Publications, read ***Dream Pod 9*** *['90s]*.
- For science-fiction games that appeared after the *Cyberpunk* revolution, read about *Fading Suns* in ***Holistic Designs*** *['90s]* and about *Trinity* in ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*.
- For what became of that *Amber* game, read ***Phage Press*** *['90s]*.
- For the publisher of *Netrunner*, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.

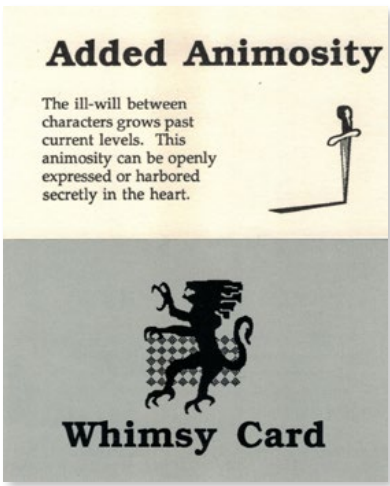
Or read onward to the company that would create the modern White Wolf, ***Lion Rampant***.

Lion Rampant: 1987–1990

Lion Rampant was a small game company founded in 1987. It lasted just three years, and published less than a dozen items, but in that time managed to offer several innovations for the industry.

Foundation & Whimsy: 1987

Lion Rampant was founded in 1987 by Jonathan Tweet and Mark Rein•Hagen. They were both gamers — Mark was running a *RuneQuest* campaign at the time while Jonathan was running *Call of Cthulhu* — and both were students at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. Game companies often start at colleges, but this time the college would offer something unique to the company. Lion Rampant was named after the heraldic symbol of the university.



1987: Whimsy Cards

Jonathan initially funded Lion Rampant with an inheritance, which went to buying the company's sole computer: a MacPlus with two floppy drives.

Lion Rampant was one of the first companies to take advantage of new desktop publishing trends. This allowed them to publish much more professional looking books than those put out by new companies even five years before — though the histories of companies like R. Talsorian and DGP offer up examples of a few other publishers doing the same thing. All of these early DTP products look a little dated today; you can usually recognize them by the rounded boxes that early Mac publishers used to excess. Still, they were great for the time.

As is also the case with many young RPG companies, Lion Rampant was strictly a volunteer organization — and soon it started attracting those volunteers. Lisa Stevens was one of the first. She graduated from St. Olaf the year before, but had been hanging around campus to run *Dungeons & Dragons* games. She had editorial experience, which was definitively needed at the company, and she soon became the company's tie-breaker, offering the final word when Tweet and Rein•Hagen disagreed. Other locals who joined the company over the next couple of years include John Nephew, Darin "Woody" Eblom, Nicole Lindroos, and Kirsten Swingle. Some of them, such as Nephew and Swingle, came from Carleton College, the traditional rival of St. Olaf; how they felt about working for a company symbolized by the emblem of their rival is unrecorded.

The initial goal of Lion Rampant was to create a game that did wizards right, but as Gen Con 20 (1987) approached it became obvious that their premier product would not be ready. Rather than rushing it out (a mistake made all too often by RPG companies), Lion Rampant instead prepared an alternative product for that Gen Con: *Whimsy Cards*.

In 1987, the storytelling branch of roleplaying design was just beginning to develop. There were fewer dungeons crawls and more plotted and city adventures. The original Dragonlance adventures (1984–1986) kicked off a whole new way to look at epics. New games like *Paranoia* (1984) and *Pendragon* (1985) deemphasized characters, making them secondary to the plot. Story was increasingly important, but no one had taken the next step and placed stories also into the hands of players, not just gamemasters.

Enter *Whimsy Cards* (1987). The idea was simple: print up a deck of 43 cards (plus a few blanks) where each card presented a distinct story element such as "abrupt change of events," "added animosity," "bad tidings," or "bizarre coincidence." These cards were shuffled and handed out to players at the start of a game; those players would later play a card and describe how it applied to the story. If the gamemaster liked the results, he incorporated the description into the story, otherwise he vetoed it.

> *"It was amazing how much more deeply the players became invested in the plot. At our first Gen Con, we sold a pack of cards to Dave Arneson himself, and thus was my career launched!"*
>
> – Lisa Stevens, "Twisting the Plot Away!," Paizo Store Blog (July 2010)

Original cards were printed on cardstock so poor that they came to be called "flimsies." Nonetheless, they were a neat and original idea, one of the first products ever that suggested that players were just as good of storytellers as a gamemaster. Lion Rampant sold about 200 units at that first Gen Con and it put them on the map as an indie publisher of innovative RPG products.

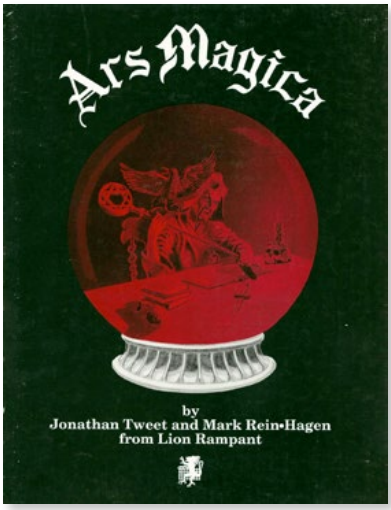
And, the core idea of the Whimsies had legs: West End included a similar "drama deck" in *Torg* (1990), while White Wolf eventually released two decks of *Story Paths* (1990), attempting to make *Whimsy Cards* more mechanical and more genre-specific — as is discussed further in the history of White Wolf. Twenty years on, Lisa Stevens returned to her roots by publishing *GameMastery Plot Twist Cards* (2010) through Paizo Publishing.

Publication & Magic: 1987—1988

The wizard game that would eventually become known as *Ars Magica* was in full development that same summer. Mark Rein•Hagen was offering the wild, imaginative ideas while Jonathan Tweet supplied the careful mechanics. However, it still wasn't ready for publication. That was probably because Lion Rampant — especially in these early years — was more a bunch of gamer friends who happened to be publishing a product than a professional company.

This was made even clearer in late 1987 when some members began to push for the game's publication. Christmas was approaching and there was a chance to catch the holiday sales, but Tweet was intent on perfecting the game, Christmas sales or not.

Ars Magica (1987) was finally published near the end of the year. It was innovative for several reasons:



First, the magic system was original and amazingly freeform. Its base conceit is that all magic is based on 5 techniques and 10 forms. By combining those two elements (e.g., as "Creo Ignem," or Create Fire) a wizard could generate any type of spell imaginable.

The idea of thematically related spells was not new. It dated back to at least *Spell Law* (1981) and has since become pretty well-codified in *Dungeons & Dragons* itself. However the *Ars Magica* system took this idea and made it open-ended. Wizards could create *any* spell based upon their techniques

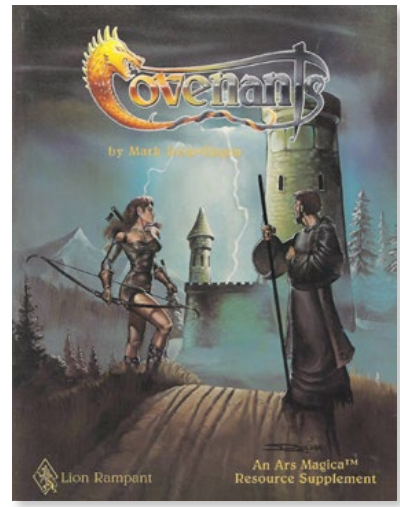
and forms, whether it was in the rulebook or not (and the gamemaster just had to figure out the level of said new spell).

This freeform spell casting was complemented by an extensive set of laboratory rules that gave players the opportunity to learn spells, create spells, make magic items, teach apprentices, and create familiars in their off time. The whole idea of off-time was something relatively new. *Pendragon* (1985) was one of the few previous games that suggested adventuring was only a small part of a character's life, and gave rules for what he did the rest of the time.

Second, *Ars Magica* stepped away from Tolkien fantasy and instead presented a true medieval fantasy setting, set on an Earth where legends and folklore were true. Though a few other games like FGU's *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1977), Columbia Game's *Hârn* (1983), and Avalon Hill's Fantasy Earth *RuneQuest* (1984–1987) had detailed realistic medieval settings, *Ars Magica* was a rarity, and it may be the only game that presupposed that the faerie tales, myths, and legends of the Middle Ages were what actually defined the world.

Third, *Ars Magica* placed a heavy emphasis on the characters' home — the covenant — and even gave rules for mechanically defining it. This would later be developed into a full book, *Covenants* (1990). Part of the innovation of *Ars Magica*'s covenant system was that it was specifically designed to introduce plot hooks into the game, thereby building recurring storylines from the beginning of play.

Fourth, *Ars Magica* was generally designed with careful attention to mechanics. One of the notable innovations of *Ars Magica* was Jonathan Tweet's target-based skill roll (or, "die + bonus" as Tweet calls it). Early RPG systems had mostly used simple roll-under mechanics (e.g., percentages) or roll-over mechanics (e.g., THACO). They were ultimately limited in range by a die roll, and initially offered no opportunities for comparison contests. These early systems were now being innovated by games like *Pendragon* that used a roll-under-and-highest-roll-wins mechanic for competitions.



Tweet felt the need to have contests, modifiable rolls, and results that weren't bound by die size. He introduced "die + bonus" and targets in *Ars Magica*. The idea was a wave that hit the industry at the time; it can also be found in Bard Games' *Talislanta* (1987) and R. Talsorian's *Teenagers from Outer Space* (1987) and *Cyberpunk* (1988).

However just putting out a solid, innovative game system isn't enough, and Lion

Rampant soon discovered this. With boxes of the game now filling Tweet and Rein•Hagen's home, the crew realized they needed to figure out how to sell the game.

The first sale was eventually made to a local college store on consignment. With the money they earned, the Lion Rampant staff promptly bought a keg of beer. Greg Stafford of Chaosium would later give Lion Rampant a list of distributors in the gaming industry, and they eventually made their first distributor sale to Wargames West.

Ars Magica's first notable success came via a much more unlikely source. Lisa Stevens wrote a short story called "Night of the Wolf" that was published in the RPGA's *Polyhedron Newszine #40* (March 1988). It was about her *Ars Magica* character, "Lupus Mortis" and included game stats for both *Ars Magica* and *AD&D*. This brought *Ars Magica* to the attention of RPGA members and resulted in it winning "Gamer's Choice Award for Best New Role-Playing Game from the RPGA" for 1988. After the presentation of that award at the combined Gen Con 21/Origins Game Fair, numerous gaming distributors picked up *Ars Magica* overnight, and Lion Rampant was suddenly on its way.

More Publications, More Ideas: 1988—1989

Ars Magica received some attention from another source at that same convention. In *White Wolf Magazine #11* (1988), the Origins 1988 issue, *Ars Magica* earned a stellar review from Stewart Wieck. Wieck mainly praised the magic system, but also offered positive comments on the storytelling elements of the character creation system. In that same issue the first of many *White Wolf* articles by Tweet, Rein•Hagen, and Stevens appeared, this one describing the background of the *Ars Magica* magicians.

The Lion Rampant and *White Wolf* folks met for the first time at that convention, and their connection thereafter grew. Notable *Ars Magica* articles that followed included: "The Fate of the Grog" in *White Wolf Magazine #14* (February/March 1989), which offered suggestions for making the henchmen-like characters of *Ars Magica* more than simple cannon fodder; "The House of Hermes" in *White Wolf Magazine #16* (June/July 1989), which detailed the many different orders of magicians that magi could belong to; and "Troupe Style Role-Playing" in *White Wolf Magazine #21* (June/July/1990), which offered a totally new way to roleplay.

If troupe-style roleplaying had ever caught on, it would have been the biggest change in roleplaying since Gary Gygax first decided to individualize fantasy characters, way back in *Chainmail* (1971). It suggests a style of playing where players change *who* they play from game-to-game within a campaign, sometimes playing powerful magi and sometimes humble warriors, and it also suggests that gamemasters can take turns, each having control over some part of the world. If *Whimsy Cards* gave players

a little bit of control over their stories, troupe-style roleplaying knocked the idea out of the park by making everyone equal participants in a game's story.

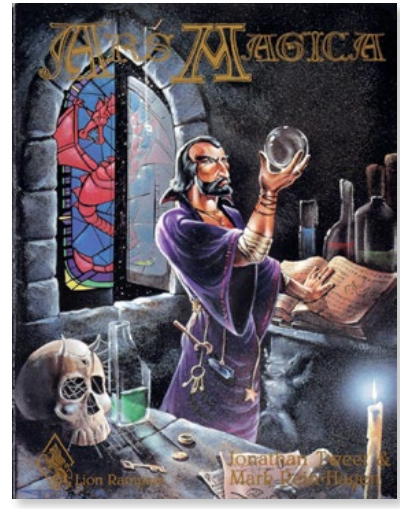
Troupe-style roleplaying also rather deftly introduced a "metagame" to *Ars Magica* that was larger than any individual play session. By encouraging players to change up their characters, it suddenly became okay for characters to have dramatically different power levels, because everyone would get their own time in the limelight. You didn't have everyone playing magi all the time — which might well break *Ars Magica* — and likewise no one got stuck always playing a grog.

That 1990 White Wolf article probably remains the best published explanation of troupe-style roleplaying. The concept was also incorporated into the second edition (1989) of *Ars Magica*, but not as fully explained. However, in the almost 20 years since, no other major game has ever pushed the idea. The latest, fifth edition (2004) of *Ars Magica* still gives a couple of pages to the idea, but that's probably the only place you'll find it mentioned.

> *"Since players switch characters, it is easy to switch storyguides from story to story as well. Doing so keeps the world large and unpredictable, rather than being entirely contained in one person's mind."*
>
> – Ars Magica Revised Edition (1989)

Besides writing very regular articles for *White Wolf Magazine*, Lion Rampant also published a few more innovative products of their own.

This included two "jump-start kits." The first was *Bats of Mercille* (1988, 1989) and the second was *The Stormrider* (1989, 1991). Following the lead of earlier small press designers at Yaquinto and Pacesetter, Tweet wanted to offer simpler introductions to roleplaying to gradually ease players into the system. The jump-start kits were his first experiments in this regard, providing lots of handouts which helped players to slowly learn the game. (Tweet later refined this concept while working on the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*.)



The Order of Hermes (1989) was a much more notable product. It developed the idea of 12 different wizardly organizations that players could join in *Ars Magica*. The new book gave players real handles for their characters and story seeds to carry them into the



future; the desires of a House of Hermes could be used as plot hooks throughout a campaign.

There had been a few predecessors to this idea of player character organizations. Tweet himself cites Chaosium's *Cults of Prax* (1979), which provides information on the numerous cults that players could join in *RuneQuest*. West End Games' *Paranoia* (1984) was another early game that offered each player their own organization and view of the world. However, *The Order of Hermes* took the next step by providing more background and more gameable material (especially for long-term play, never a strength of *Paranoia*).

The Order of Hermes has been repeatedly copied, first by Rein•Hagen himself at White Wolf, and later by pretty much the whole industry. *Cults of Prax* might have been the true origin of the modern splatbooks that filled gaming store shelves in the '00s and '10s, but *The Order of Hermes* is the missing link.

In this time period, Lion Rampant also played with releasing tapes of mood music for RPGs. The first were *Melos Caverna* (1989) and *Bard's Song: Battle Cry* (1990).

An innovative product that never got released by Lion Rampant was the *Ars Magica* LARP. Live-Action Roleplaying Games had been slowly gaining momentum in the '80s, particularly in Europe and Australia. The *Ars Magica* LARP imagined a wizard's tribunal — occurring every seven years in the world of Mythic Europe — where wizards came together to engage in politics and diplomacy. Lion Rampant ran a few *Ars Magica* LARPs at Gen Con, Dragon*Con, and elsewhere, but no book was ever published. Mark Rein•Hagen would follow up on the idea with *Mind's Eye Theater* (1993) for *Vampire*, while an *Ars Magica* tribunal LARP would finally see print over a decade later as a book called *The Fallen Fane* (2004).

With all that innovation, it really looked like Lion Rampant was going places, but very soon the company would be gone entirely.

A Year of Tribulations: 1989—1990

The problems started in 1989 when Jonathan Tweet left Lion Rampant to go start a "respectable" career. He wouldn't be away from the gaming industry for long — as is recorded in the histories of Atlas Games and Wizards of the Coast — but he was gone from Lion Rampant permanently. Meanwhile, Lion Rampant's economic position was growing dire. Despite the acclaim that *Ars Magica* had received, the company was running up debt and having increasing problems printing new products.

"From 1990 to 1991, I sold mutual funds. Financial sales wasn't what I'd seen myself doing, but the job offered a shot at management and a decent income."
– "Interview with Jonathan Tweet," Redcap v2 #3 (Autumn 1994)

Enter Dan Fox. He was an independently wealthy southerner who literally showed up on Lion Rampant's doorstep one day. He wanted to publish his own RPG, "Hahlmabrea," and he was willing to fund Lion Rampant if they took care of this little matter for him.

Hahlmabrea was what indie game designer Ron Edwards would later call a fantasy heartbreaker — an RPG that played like a second-generation *Dungeons & Dragons* game without much attention paid to the evolution of game design since the '70s. Fox's original name for the game, "Warriors, Witches, and Wizards," highlighted the problem. He thought that by having three alliterative subjects in his title he'd set it apart from games with mere two-topic titles like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Tunnels & Trolls*.

Nonetheless, publishing *Hahlmabrea* seemed like a good deal for Lion Rampant. Fox would pay off their printers and buy them computers, and all they had to do was publish his game. There was, however, one catch. Fox lived in Georgia, and he had family there, so he wanted to stay. Lion Rampant would have to relocate to the south. But, with Fox offering them a house to live in, the choice wasn't too hard. In 1990, Lion Rampant pulled up stakes and headed southward.

This was when former President John Nephew left Lion Rampant, along with Woody Eblom — neither wanted to leave Minnesota. John Nephew almost immediately formed Atlas Games, which published five licensed adventure books for *Ars Magica* from 1990–1991 — almost as many as Lion Rampant — and which went on to more success, as is described in their own history.

Meanwhile, down in Georgia, Lion Rampant found out that everything wasn't as it'd initially appeared. Dan Fox's wealth wasn't quite as great as had been implied, and one morning the Lion Rampant crew found the actual owner of their new house stopping by to tell them that they were going to have to move.

Mark Rein•Hagen was ready to close up shop. *Hahlmabrea* was dumped and later self-published (1991) by Sutton Hoo Games. But the Lion Rampant folks had one last trick up their collective sleeves.

White Wolf & Lion Rampant: 1990—1991

Lion Rampant had been friends with the staff of *White Wolf Magazine* for a while. Following that 1988 review of *Ars Magica*, Lion Rampant and *White Wolf Magazine* were closely linked. As we've already seen, from issue #11 to

issue #23, an article about *Ars Magica* written by Mark Rein•Hagen, Jonathan Tweet, Lisa Stevens, or some combination thereof appeared in almost every issue of the magazine.

However, *White Wolf Magazine* had been more economically successful than Lion Rampant, and as a result they had good printer credit. Lion Rampant, meanwhile, had ramped up enough that they could pay for the printing, artwork, and writing of a gamebook out of its authorship — but because of their cash flow issues they didn't have the credit they needed to get this cycle going again.

So, the companies — by crazy chance, now located in adjacent states in the south, White Wolf in Alabama and Lion Rampant in Georgia — decided to merge. It was Lisa Stevens who pitched the idea (complete with spreadsheets) to Mark Rein•Hagen and Stewart Wieck — atop Stone Mountain, overlooking the city of Atlanta. The decision was announced in *White Wolf Magazine #24* (December 1990/January 1991). Though the Lion Rampant brand was kept for another 9 months while sales of old Lion Rampant supplements paid off old Lion Rampant debts, White Wolf immediately started printing the new books. The merger would soon be made official under a new company name: White Wolf Game Studio.

> *"Well, about a week after it was first suggested in late September, White Wolf Publishing and Lion Rampant have merged to form a single game company called White Wolf. This new company will continue to offer all of the products available from each in the past."*
>
> – Stewart Wieck, "Runes," White Wolf Magazine #24 (1990)

Being able to print books again was vitally important for Lion Rampant because Mark Rein•Hagen had big ideas. He wanted to write not just a single game, but instead a series of interlinked games which together depicted many different aspects of a single society. His original plan for a second game was called "Shining Armor," which would look at knights in the world of *Ars Magica* — but the success of Chaosium's *Pendragon* deterred him. Instead he decided to expand the world of *Ars Magica* to the modern day — into a darkened world that would include vampires, werewolves, and goblins.

Thanks to conversations on the way to Gen Con '90, by the time of the merger Rein•Hagen was ready to push on one of those new games: *Vampire: The Masquerade*. But the story of *Vampire* is part of the history of the White Wolf Game Studio, for its predecessor, Lion Rampant, was now officially gone.

Latter Days: 1991-Present

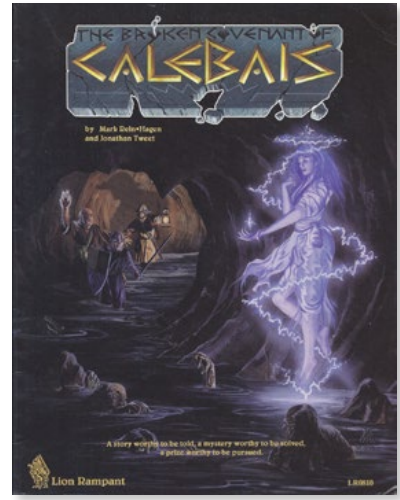
Perhaps more amazing than Lion Rampant's tale of innovative production over three years is the success of its principals since the company evolved.

Mark Rein•Hagen stayed on with White Wolf, who soon published his *Vampire: The Masquerade* roleplaying game (1991). It quickly overtook Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* as the top horror RPG and catapulted White Wolf into the top tier of RPG companies.

> *"The last idea that's floating around right now is a game about wizards, very much like* Ars Magica, *even to the point that there is an Order of Hermes – only set in the present day. Magic has been chased from the earth by the ever-powerful Dominion, but a few creatures of magic and might still manage to hang on in out of the way places. The wizards are part of normal society, covenants may even be corporations, but on certain nights, when the Dominion falls, they can cast their spells with impunity again. But on those nights, others emerge as well… Since no one takes evil seriously anymore, it has been breeding and growing stronger and stronger. Vampires, werewolves, and even goblins still exist."*
>
> – Mark Rein•Hagen, "Looking Ahead," Running Rampant #2 (Autumn 1989)

Lisa Stevens soon moved on to the young Wizards of the Coast, but ended up leaving after the Hasbro buyout to set up her own company, Paizo Publishing, which is now the leader of the former d20 industry thanks to her company's *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game* (2009). Ironically, for a time she was publishing *Polyhedron* — the same magazine that helped get her original company going.

Jonathan Tweet further pioneered the storytelling branch of roleplaying with *Over the Edge* (1992) and *Everway* (1995). The latter was published by Wizards of the Coast after he joined Lisa Stevens there. He was then selected by Wizards to perform the (at the time) biggest renovation ever of *Dungeons & Dragons*, resulting in its third edition (2000). He ended up incorporating a number of ideas from *Ars Magica*, most notably "die + bonus" rolls. Tweet stayed at Wizards until he became a victim of Hasbro's yearly layoffs in 2008.



John Nephew's Atlas Games continues to publish today. Besides those *Ars Magica* supplements, it also published Tweet's *Over the Edge*, and continued pioneering storytelling

roleplaying with works by Robin D. Laws. Today, Atlas Games holds the rights to *Ars Magica*.

Woody Eblom, who also stayed in Minnesota, formed Tundra Sales, a "sales and service organization" for small press RPG publishers. It was eventually subsumed into R. Talsorian and then disappeared in 2006.

Nicole Lindroos became a freelancer and also co-founded *Adventures Unlimited* magazine (1995–1996). It's perhaps not a surprise that the first issue of that magazine included adventures for *Ars Magica*, *Vampire: The Masquerade*, and *Over the Edge* — all games Lindroos had been involved with. More recently, with husband Chris Pramas, Lindroos formed Green Ronin Publishing, a star publisher of the d20 industry of the '00s — and also one of its survivors, thanks to its innovative expansions to the system.

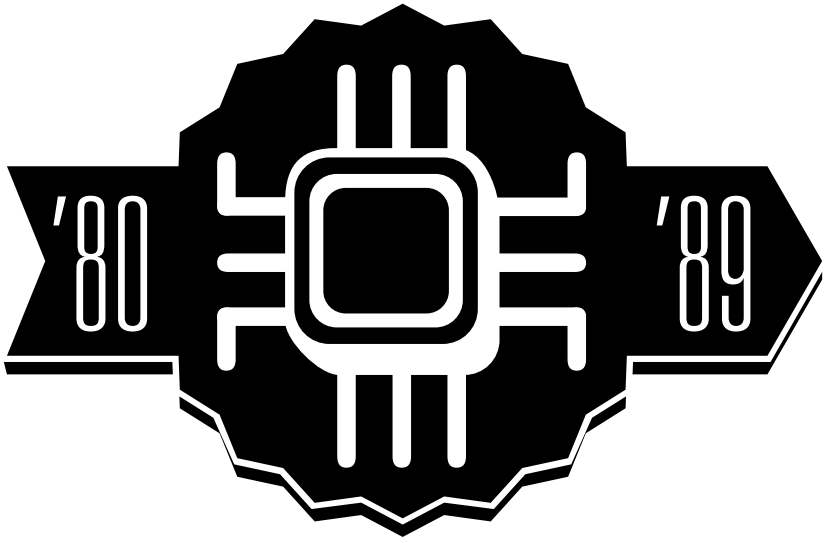
What to Read Next

- For other DTP pioneers, read ***DGP*** and ***R. Talsorian Games***.
- For a similar small press pioneer, read ***SkyRealms Publishing***.
- For other early "die + bonus" game systems, read ***Bard Games*** and ***R. Talsorian Games***.
- For early "quick start" ideas, read ***Yaquinto Publications*** and ***Pacesetter***.

In Other Eras

- For the most direct continuation of Lion Rampant's story, including the future of Mark Rein•Hagen, read ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*.
- For other early storytelling games, read about *Pendragon* in ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*, *Toon* in ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*, and *Paranoia* in ***West End Games*** *['80s]*.
- For fantasy heartbreakers, including *Hahlmabrea*, read ***Adept Press*** *['00s]*.
- For the future of Lisa Stevens, read ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*, ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*, and ***Paizo Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For how John Nephew turned a photocopier into an RPG company, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.
- For the future creative works of Jonathan Tweet, including how his "die + bonus" skill system took over the world, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]* and ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['00s]*.
- For Nicole Lindroos' more distant future, read ***Green Ronin Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For another gaming company founded at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, read ***Fantasy Flight Games*** *['90s]*.

Or take a step sideways to learn about the trend of old guard returning in ***Pacesetter.***



Part Six:

The Old Guard Returns (An '80s Trend)

Throughout the '80s, we've seen a continuing trend: game designers leaving their original companies to create new ones. The first ***old guard*** company may have been Steve Jackson Games, founded in 1980 by Steve Jackson following his departure from Metagaming Concepts. Another early entrant was Adventure Games, created by Dave Arneson in 1981. Avalon Hill and West End Games both sort of fit the old guard pattern too, as their respective introductions to the world of roleplaying in 1983 and 1984 came thanks to former employees of SPI.

By the end of the '80s, this trend was really booming, due in large part to increasing upheaval at TSR. That led to the creation of Pacesetter in 1984. Then, *three* old guard publishers were created in 1987: Creations Unlimited, Different Worlds, and New Infinities. It was the height of the old guard boom.

Several old guard companies were scattered across this book in roughly chronological order — thanks in large part to their links to the continuing waves of wargame publishers entering the industry. The rest are gathered here.

As it happens, these non-wargaming old guard publishers were considerably less successful than their peers and didn't last much beyond the '80s, after which the old guard trend faded into the background. That may be because they didn't have any existing publications to depend on — where Avalon Hill and West End had their board games and Steve Jackson had *The Space Gamer*.

Starting from scratch, these newer companies just weren't able to make the jump to successful long-term publication.

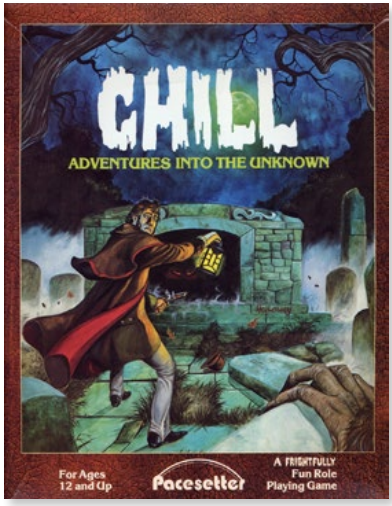
Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Steve Jackson Games	1980-	*The Space Gamer #27* (1980)	27
Adventure Games	*1981–1985*	*Adventures in Fantasy 2e (1981)*	324
Avalon Hill	1958–1998	*James Bond 007* (1983)	214
West End Games	1974–2009	*Paranoia* (1984)	242
Pacesetter	1984–1986	*Chill* (1984)	317
54°40' Orphyte	*1991–1992*	*Miss Him, Miss Him, Miss Him (1991)*	322
New Infinities Productions	1986–1988	*Sea of Death* (1987)	324
Creations Unlimited	1986–1987	*Prisoners of the Maze* (1987)	333
Different Worlds Publications	1987–1989+	*Empire of the Petal Throne* (1987)	342

Pacesetter: 1984–1986

Pacesetter was a small company made up of former TSR employees that put out four different RPGs in just two years in the '80s.

A Trio of Games: 1984–1985

Between 1983 and 1984, industry leader TSR was rapidly spiraling downhill. Multiple rounds of layoffs resulted in approximately 200 people leaving the company, some because of layoffs, others because the company was in freefall. Some of these people left the industry, but one intrepid group of designers, editors, and artists led by CEO John Rickets and including Mark Acres, Andria Hayday, Gaye Goldsberry O'Keefe, Gali Sanchez, Garry Spiegle, Carl Smith, Stephen D. Sullivan, and Michael Williams decided to do something different.



1984: Chill

On January 23, 1984, they formed a new company called Pacesetter, Ltd. It would be the first of a few companies largely staffed by

TSR alumni, with others including Imperium Games, New Infinities Productions, and Sovereign Press.

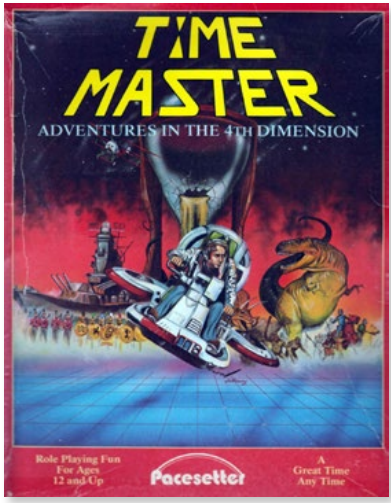
Pacesetter got rolling pretty quickly in 1984. Some staff members began almost immediately, while others such as art director Sullivan and typesetter O'Keefe didn't start until sufficient design work had been done to make their own talents useful.

> *"Our games are aimed at a wide audience…In addition to expanding our demographics, we wanted to include greater use of investigation and interaction in roleplaying, positive ethnic role models, and emphasize plot-oriented adventures."*
>
> – Carl Smith, "The Word from Pacesetter," Space Gamer #75 (July/August 1985)

The result of that design work was not one, but three brand-new RPGs — *Chill*, *Timemaster*, and *Star Ace* — all built around the same house system, and all released within a year. It's notable that the Pacesetter staff decided *not* to publish a fantasy RPG, despite their expertise; they did not want to try and take on TSR — and probably get squashed by the industry giant as a result. The histories of GDW, New Infinities, and others suggest this was a pretty good idea.

Chill (1984) was a modern horror game. It focused on Gothic horror and on classic horror movies. These elements helped to distinguish itself from genre leader *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), which centered on H.P. Lovecraft's horror writings and was set in the 1920s.

Timemaster (1984) was a time travel RPG. Yaquinto Publications pioneered the genre with *Timeship* (1983), but was now gone, leaving the niche wide open.



Timemaster also did more to play up the issues of time travel than any of the other scant few games in the genre, past or future. It even gave events "significance ratings," allowing gamemasters to determine if players adversely affected history (and to dock experience points if they did).

Star Ace (1984), much like *Chill*, delved into a popular RPG genre but did so with a fresh twist. Where genre leader *Traveller* (1977) and up-and-comers *Space Opera* (1980) and *Star Frontiers* (1982) were all very serious games, *Star Ace* was more of a "swashbuckling" science-fantasy game,

written entirely in the mood of *Star Wars* (1977); it was exactly what would be needed to dethrone *Traveller*, though as we'll see Pacesetter ultimately wouldn't be the company to do so.

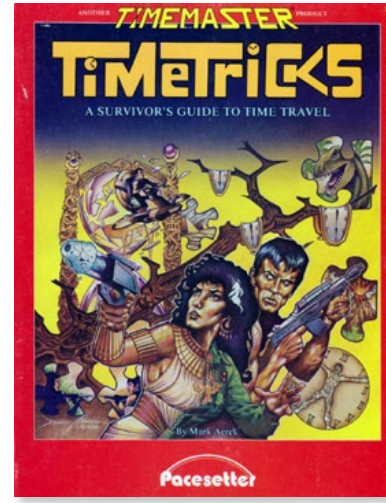
All of the Pacesetter games were very approachable — with light, fun backgrounds sheltered between brightly colored book covers. This approachability was also reflected in the games' mechanics. The Pacesetter house system centered on a universal "action table" that used one chart to resolve all game actions. It was similar to the action table of TSR's *Marvel Super Heroes* (1984), not a surprise given that Mark Acres and other employees of Pacesetter worked with Jeff Grubb on the original idea while at TSR.

The Pacesetter games also used another method to try and attract new gamers to the fold, one pioneered just a few years earlier by Yaquinto Publications: the rule sets included introductory adventures which could be played without reading the main rulebooks, thereby allowing players to start playing with little preparation. This whole concept of "out of the box" game playing was central to Pacesetter's conception.

All told, the Pacesetter games tried hard to attract new, young gamers to the industry. However, there were some issues with the games.

First, they were rushed out, and it showed, particularly in *Chill*, published just four months after the foundation of the company.

Second, some of the game systems were uncomfortable fusions between new and old. Character creation, for example, involved both dice rolling and point allocation. Characters had skills, but they improved when a character killed things — no matter what a player's expertise was. Though the universal table was simple, it also included references that changed based on situation. (An "H" result, for example, might be a "H"eavy wound, a "H"igh success, or "H"arsh damage.) There was a lot of simplicity in the system, but it was also pretty uneven.



Third, though the simplicity was great for attracting new people to gaming, it also turned off many older players who might have otherwise supported the new publisher. Some gamers didn't like the system, while others found the settings overly simplified and campy — particularly *Chill* and *Star Ace*. Ironically, some of Pacesetter's designs might have done better 20 years later, when the indie movement of gaming made simple mechanics that didn't get in the way of storytelling more desirable.

"Some Pacesetter systems appear too clean to the casual observer. A game should have simple and elegant mechanics. After all, more complex is not necessarily better."

– Carl Smith, "The Word from Pacesetter,"
Space Gamer #75 (July/August 1985)

Nonetheless, Pacesetter continued forward with raw enthusiasm, and they also corrected problems as they became aware of them, for example revising the wound system following *Chill* and modifying the way skills worked in *Star Ace*.

Pacesetter also did the most important thing that a company can do to ensure the success of its product lines: they supported them, and they supported them well, with over a dozen publications in each of 1984 and 1985.

Wabbits, Sandmen, and The End: 1985—1986

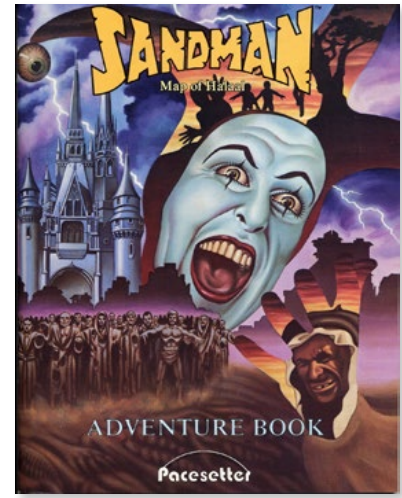
Pacesetter's near-simultaneous publication of three RPGs declared that they intended to be a major force in the hobbyist market. This was shown again when Pacesetter began publishing board games, including *Wabbit Wampage* (1985), *Chill: Black Morn Manor* (1985), and *Wabbit's Wevenge* (1986).

The *Wabbit* games got peoples' attention with their funny killer bunnies while *Chill: Black Morn Manor* got some good acclaim as an *Arkham Horror*-like adventure game; it was notably designed by Troy Denning, later known for his creation of TSR's Dark Sun campaign setting. Word of a possible *Chill* screenplay suggested that the franchise might even go beyond roleplaying games and board games.

Meanwhile, Pacesetter's Carl Smith announced that they were working on a "totally new concept in gaming," which he called the "instant adventure roleplaying game." The result was published that summer as *Sandman: Map of Halaal* (1985).



Sandman was a fourth RPG line, but rather than being released as a big core rules set, it was instead published as an adventure. A gamemaster needed to spend five minutes or so reading a short booklet, then he could start running immediately. It was the next step past the introductory adventures published by Yaquinto the year before and the ultimate expression of their goal of "out of the box" gaming.



Map of Halaal was the first of a trilogy of adventures. Characters woke aboard a train with amnesia. Throughout the course of the adventure they slowly regained their skills, and were in the meantime haunted by the strange "Sandman." Pacesetter hyped the adventure's mystery by offering a $10,000 reward to the first person that uncovered the secrets of who the *Sandman* and the players were, before the third adventure was produced.

That wasn't the only innovative work done at Pacesetter near the end. Another late product from the company was *Creature Feature* (1986), a supplement for *Chill* that let players take on the role of monsters. It predated Stellar Games' *NightLife* (1990) and White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) by years, and may well have been the first release in the urban-monster genre of RPGs — though the general concept of monsters as PCs dated back to at least Metagaming's *Monsters! Monsters!* (1976).

Unfortunately, none of this innovation was enough to keep the company going. Pacesetter had been undercapitalized from the start — the same problem New Infinities Productions would face just a few years later. Their sales were never able to reach their staffing levels. These problems were furthered by the fact that typesetting and color separations were still expensive back in 1986, before the desktop publishing revolution truly took hold.

Ironically, the last might have been a problem caused by Pacesetter's *professionalism*, as new publishers like DGP, R. Talsorian, and Lion Rampant were shifting over to DTP at about this time. The catch was: it didn't look quite as nice (yet).

To make these matters worse, Pacesetter had an accountant later convicted of questionable accounting practices. Put all that together, and you have the reason that Pacesetter was forced to ceased publication in 1986. By the end of the year, they were down to just one employee, who was fulfilling orders. Soon, even they were gone.

The *Sandman* trilogy of adventures was never completed.

Pacesetter Afterlife: 1990-Present

As is often the case, Pacesetter's properties lived on well beyond the company.

Chill was the most successful game after their demise. Rights to it went to Mayfair Games, who would publish a second edition of the game (1990–1996),

Mini-History

54°40' Orphyte: 1991—1992

If Pacesetter's genesis came in an exodus from TSR, 54°40' Orphyte was similarly born out of the RPGA. The founders of 54°40' Orphyte, Donald and Linda Bingle, were both top-rated RPGA players when the company was founded, with Linda ranked as second in the world at the time.

When the Bingles decided that they wanted to publish roleplaying books, it was obvious where they should get their start, as they'd both been small shareholders in Pacesetter in the '80s. They purchased all of the product rights that they could – which included everything but the *Chill* game, which had already been sold to Mayfair – as well as all of Pacesetter's backstock. At the time of the Pacesetter purchase, the Bingles also brought a third owner on board, Jay Tummelson, then the top-ranked RPGA Judge.

Sadly, the 54°40' Orphyte experiment in publication was short-lived. They put out two *Timemaster* adventures, *Miss Him, Miss Him, Miss Him* (1991) and *Darkest Before the Dawn* (1992) and supported the line with RPGA tournaments for a while. Since then, they've slowly shed rights and products. Jay Tummelson sold his shares sometime after he founded his own Rio Grande Games, leaving the Bingles once more in sole charge.

The company does still exist, and like many older companies who faded away without going out of business, they've taken advantage of the internet. In 1999, they put up their own website offering for sale most of the products that Pacesetter had produced in the '80s. They sold this backstock throughout the '00s before selling the actual rights to *Star Ace*, *Timemaster*, and *Sandman*. At the moment, some *Chill* first edition books are still available from 54°40' Orphyte, but that's all. When they disappear, it seems like that the company will as well.

as is more fully described in their own history. Troy Denning ended up a Mayfair employee, while Marc Acres did some freelance work for them. The rights to *Chill* have since passed on to OtherWorld Creations, who has been working on a third edition since 2004. An attempt to hold a fundraiser in 2009 to assess interest in the game failed, possibly marking the horror game's last gasp.

54°40' Orphyte, a new company, picked up the rights to the rest of Pacesetter's lines — as well as all of their backstock, including lots of first edition *Chill* material — shortly thereafter. They published a few additional *Timemaster* adventures (1991–1992), but the one-color covers made it obvious that they weren't able to publish to the same high standards set by Pacesetter.

Pacesetter has since sold the rights to all of their games. *Star Ace* went to Philip Reed, the president of Ronin Arts, but though he created a website in 2003 that

promised a d20 version of the game, it disappeared within a year. *Wabbit Wampage* (and the rest of the *Wabbit* IP) went to an undisclosed party who is not expected to reprint it. More recently rights to *Sandman* and *Timemaster* passed on to Goblinoid Games, who has made some of it available as PDFs and has also published *Rotworld* (2012), a new RPG that uses the Pacesetter system.

Sometimes small events lead to large consequences. From that original creation of Pacesetter in 1984 and the transfer of its properties to 54°40' Orphyte and Mayfair Games thereafter, you can trace a line of events that eventually led Jay Tummelson of 54°40' Orphyte to speak with Darwin Bromley of Mayfair. Though these discussions about the companies possibly working together never came to fruition, they did lead to Tummelson working at Mayfair Games, which led to German board games making their way into the hobbyist industry — a major development in gaming that is more completely discussed in the history of Mayfair Games.

Even though Pacesetter existed for just a few years, its ripples are still felt today: in its specific games; in the chain of events that led to "eurogaming"; and in its dedication toward cleaner, simpler games that could be played "out of the box."

Pacesetter Games & Simulations, a retro-adventure publisher that appeared in 2010, has no connection with the Pacesetter Games of the '80s.

What to Read Next

- For another company of the '80s focused on approachable games, read ***Yaquinto Publications***.
- For more on *Chill*, read ***Mayfair Games***.
- For how Pacesetter's successors helped to bring a new category of games to the United States, read ***Mayfair Games***.
- For the other post-TSR publishers of the '80s, read ***New Infinities*** and ***Creations Unlimited***.

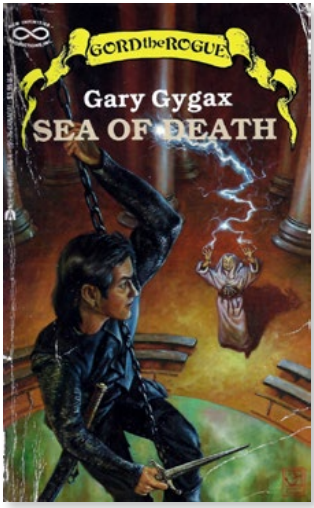
In Other Eras

- For the problems that caused these creators to found Pacesetter, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For future publishers staffed by ex-TSRers, read ***Imperium Games*** *['90s]* and ***Margaret Weis Productions*** *['90s]*.
- For the current owner of *Chill*, read the ***OtherWorld Creations*** mini-history in ***Paizo Publishing*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to the company of the oldest of the old guard, ***New Infinities Productions***.

New Infinities Productions: 1986–1988

New Infinities Productions was a short-lived publishing house — best known as Gary Gygax's second RPG company, following his break with TSR.



1987: Sea of Death

Discovering New Infinities: 1986–1987

In late 1985 Gary Gygax, co-author of *Dungeons & Dragons*, was forced out of TSR, the company he founded. At the time, he decided to make a notable break with the past. He ended his 13-year-old Greyhawk game, and made it clear that he had no interest in forming a new RPG company. He instead wanted to hew to the creative side of the business.

Enter Forrest Baker, a wargamer and accountant, who worked as a consultant for TSR during the crisis years of 1984 and 1985. He wrote up a business plan and convinced Gygax to have another go at the

business side of the roleplaying business. The result was New Infinities Productions Inc. — or NIPI to its employees — a brand-new game company with Baker as CEO and Gygax as Chairman of the Board. Gygax also brought over two notable employees from TSR to act as design executives: Kim Mohan, long-time editor of *Dragon* magazine, and Frank Mentzer, the founder of the RPGA and Gygax's right-hand designer during the early '80s.

New Infinities was publicly announced in October 1986. However, the company ran into problems before putting out a single product. In his initial proposal for New Infinities, Baker promised Gygax one to two million dollars in outside investment, but that never came through. Baker, in the process of a

Jefferson Swycaffer & The Rise of RPG Fiction

Roleplaying fiction got its start in short stories. The earliest was probably a series of Greyhawk adventures that Gary Gygax narrated for various fanzines beginning with "The Giant's Bag" in *Great Plains Game Players Newsletter #7* (April 1974). It took a couple of years for RPG short stories to become more widespread with publications like: Rob Kuntz's adventure parody "The Quest for the Vermillion Volume" in *The Strategic Review Vol. II #1* (February 1976); Greg Stafford's Gloranthan "A History of My Black Horse Troop" in *Wyrm's Footnotes #1* (1976); Robert L. Large Jr.'s *EPT*-based "The Emperor is Dead" in *The Space Gamer #6* (June/July 1976); and Gary Gygax's serialized Greyhawk story "The Gnome Cache" beginning in *The Dragon #1* (June 1976).

Novels were slower in coming. Andre Norton's *Quag Keep* (1979) was set in Greyhawk with Gygax's permission. That was pretty much it.

1984 changed that all with not one, but three different RPG novels, each kicking off a series. Surprisingly, book publishers led the way, with TSR only getting into the act afterward. The first of these books was M.A.R. Barker's *The Man of Gold* (July 1984), set in Tékumel and published by DAW. The second was Jefferson Swycaffer's *Not in Our Stars* (September 1984), published by Avon. The last was Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman's *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* (November 1984), published by TSR/Random House.

Of those three books, Barker's is still remembered, because his fiction has received some renewed interest after the publication of three more of his Tékumel novels by Zottola Publishing (2003–2004). Meanwhile *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* is considered a touchstone for the RPG genre – the one that got the whole trend of RPG fiction going (and led to Gygax's "Gord the Rogue" books and his ability to finance New Infinities). Jefferson Swycaffer's books, however, are largely forgotten.

divorce at the time, subsequently disappeared entirely. New Infinities would never recover from Baker's absence and the resulting lack of funds, but for the time, the principals thought they could still make a go of it. In February 1987, Don Turnbull — formerly of Games Workshop and TSR UK — was brought on as the company's new CEO, correcting the first problem. That just left one issue: money. (In later years, Turnbull would say that the lack of money remained a huge issue for him, and that he'd been lured out to the United States to lead New Infinities under false pretenses.)

Fortunately New Infinities had another way to raise funds: fiction publication. Gygax, you see, retained the rights to "Gord the Rogue" — the adventurer he



Swycaffer wrote seven books total, four published by Avon Books (1984–1986) and three by New Infinities Productions (1988). They were all set in the *milieu* of GDW's *Traveller* game. The way that science worked and the universe was arranged were derivative of the game – and this was clearly acknowledged at the start of each book. However the actual universe itself – the "Concordat of Archive" – was entirely original.

Besides being ground-breaking for their time, Swycaffer's books were also quite different from much of the RPG fiction that followed. Compared to the majority of RPG fiction, Swycaffer's books (especially the earlier ones) were more prone to intricate characterization, to unique storytelling techniques, and to thoughtful speculation than the average gaming fiction. Though New Infinities' first two Concordat books, *The Empire's Legacy* (1988) and *Voyage of the Planetsmasher* (1988), seemed to be novelizations of adventures, they were very much the exception among Swycaffer's writing.

How well Swycaffer succeeded when writing his other five books – which *didn't* feel like adventures – is an entirely different question, and one left for the critics. However, what is clear is that Swycaffer was one of the originators of the field of RPG novels – with his *Not In Our Stars* quite possibly being the second such book (and definitely one of the earliest, no matter the actual count).

Following Swycaffer's work with New Infinities, he wrote two creator-owned books for TSR: *Warsprite* (1991) and *Web of Futures* (1992).

described in two TSR novels, *Saga of Old City* (1985) and *Artifact of Evil* (1986) — as part of his severance agreement. Now, he licensed Greyhawk from TSR and started writing new books. The first was *Sea of Death* (1987), and it quickly hit bestseller lists. Over the next years, the success of the Gord novels would continue, and they would be the main thing keeping New Infinities in business. As a result, Gygax would spend most of his time at New Infinities working on books rather than RPGs.

The fiction line soon expanded to include publications from other authors — such as *The Last Knight of Albion* (1987) by Peter Hanratty, *Against the Horde* (1988) by David Gemmell, and the "Tales of the Concordat" trilogy (1988) by Jefferson P. Swycaffer. There was also a set of novels supporting *Cyborg Commando*, New Infinities' first RPG, as we'll see shortly. This type of cross-marketing was increasingly common in the RPG industry in the wake of TSR's successful Dragonlance books (1984–1985).

Gygax wasn't the only successful writer at New Infinities. Most of the books did well and many of the imprint's authors have gone on to write for other publishers. Unfortunately, New Infinities would not have the same success in what it *intended* to be its core business.

Roleplaying games.

Cyborgs & Converts: 1987

In their first ads, New Infinities proudly announced that it would be highlighting the works of Gary Gygax, Frank Mentzer, and Kim Mohan. This name recognition was at the heart of the company's marketing and it was successful: there was a lot of anticipation and enthusiasm for New Infinities' first roleplaying game, which would be Gygax's first since he left TSR. It was called *Cyborg Commando* (1987).



Cyborg Commando was designed primarily by Mentzer based on notes from Gygax. It was a dark, gritty game — following trends of the period — set on an Earth invaded by aliens. The planet's last line of defense was the Cyborg Commando Force, made up of characters who gave up their humanity to save their world.

The game used an interesting dice-rolling mechanism called "10X." Two 10-sided dice

Mini-History

Adventure Games: 1981—1985

Though Dave Arneson left TSR in early 1976, he stayed involved in the hobbyist industries for over a decade thereafter. First, he collated the *Dungeonmaster's Index* (1977) for Heritage Models, then he wrote up the Blackmoor setting for Judges Guild in *The First Fantasy Campaign* (1977). After that he created an entirely new RPG for Excalibre Games in *Adventures in Fantasy* (1979, 1981).

By 1981, Arneson started his own hobbyist company, Adventure Games. The staff of Adventure Games was largely made up of Arneson's friends, most of whom were also members of a Civil War reenactment group. None of them were fantasy gamers. Thus, it was no surprise that the main focus of Adventure Games was wargame publication. Two of their best-known products – both later picked up by GDW – were *Harpoon* (1981) and *Johnny Reb* (1983).

In their first year of publication, Adventure Games *did* also touch upon the role-playing industry. Most notably, after Arneson bought back the rights to *Adventures in Fantasy* using settlement money from TSR, Adventure Games put out a new edition (1981). In addition – due to Arneson's personal friendship with M.A.R. Barker – Adventures Games published about a half-dozen Tékumel-related books, including army lists, maps, and other general reference material. One of the most intriguing was *The Tsolyani Language* (1981), a two-volume description of the language that came with audiotapes to demonstrate precise pronunciation. A new post-holocaust RPG by Richard Snyder was announced in 1982, but would never appear. It was to be called "Mutant," which oddly enough was also the original name for *Gamma World* (1978).

Adventure Games only published for three years. Their final product was a board game called *Pentantastar* (1983) – authored by *Dungeon!* (1975) designer Dave Megarry and his sisters.

In 1985 Arneson sold all the Adventure Game rights to Flying Buffalo, another hobbyist company that he partially owned. After that, he wrote several Blackmoor adventures for TSR (1986–1987), but then largely left the hobby industry until d20 gave him the opportunity to return during the last years of his life.

are rolled and then multiplied together. However, the result isn't entirely intuitive, as it favors lower numbers as part of an uneven distribution. Worse, in order to explain this mechanic *Cyborg Commando* used charts that were at best confusing. Even worse, other game mechanics weren't as polished. There were strange, unused skills like "sex" and "interior decorating." Cyborg power systems were weak,

resulting in player characters running out of energy after just a few minutes of combat. Much of the game seemed rushed.

The cyborgs and the setting itself were further seen as appealing only to power-gamers. Though companies like Palladium have been able to pull this sort of design off, the Gygax fans who followed him to New Infinities didn't fit into that demographic.

As a result of these various factors, *Cyborg Commando* is today seen as one of the biggest flops in the industry.

"Fundamentally, the problem with the Cyborg Commando game is the idea that playing cyborgs shooting lasers out of their fingers, in a world overwhelmed by aliens, was in some way cool. The writers were sadly mistaken in this."

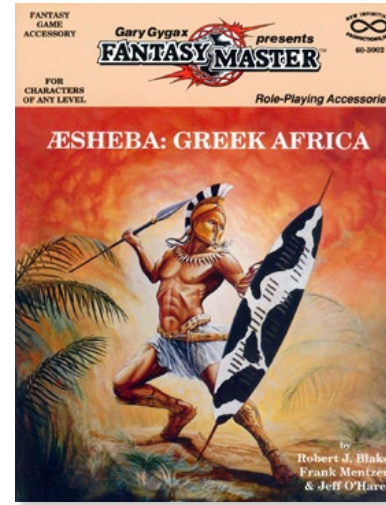
– Cassander Tewdros, "Review of Cyborg Commando," RPGnet (April 2004)



Meanwhile New Infinities was also working on a third line of products that would cause them even more problems: generic RPG supplements put out under the "Fantasy Master" logo.

The whole line kicked off with an adventure called *The Convert* (1987). Frank Mentzer wrote it as an RPGA tournament for *D&D*, but TSR decided they weren't interested in publishing the module when Mentzer left the company, so he got their permission to instead publish it with New Infinities.

Unfortunately, New Infinities never got that permission in writing, and which gave them little recourse when TSR hit them with an injunction to prevent the adventure's sale. Though this injunction was lifted, a lawsuit over the adventure would last for the rest of New Infinities' existence.



New Infinities published just a handful of other "Fantasy Master" supplements. The most notable was *Æsheba: Greek Africa* (1987), an African sourcebook.

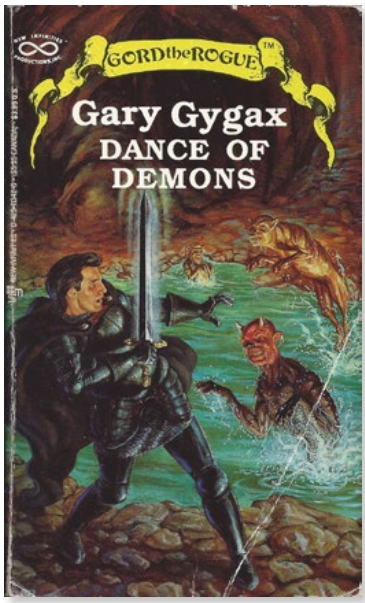
Hopes & Failures: 1988

By 1988 things looked increasingly grim for New Infinities. The fiction books were the company's only successful line and the *Convert* lawsuit was grinding on. New Infinities was unwilling to face the problem. Even after they'd stopped paying their own staff, they were still making new job offers.

Similarly, Gary Gygax had big plans for the future despite the current issues. New Infinities expected to continue supporting its existing lines, of course. The fiction line was to feature more fantasy, science-fiction, and horror books from other authors. *Cyborg Commando* was to be supplemented by two other linked science-fiction games. However Gygax's biggest plans centered on returning to the world of fantasy.

> *"Two collaborators are working along with me to create an up-to-date version of the campaign I began in 1972. That's right, Perceptive Peruser, the fantasy milieu from which the D&D and AD&D game systems sprang will be revealed to you, beginning then."*
>
> – Gary Gygax, "Sanctum of the Savant," Realms of Adventure #1 (Summer 1988)

The new FRP-related plans were revealed in *Realms of Adventure*, a short newsletter that New Infinities published twice in 1988. First, there would be a new fantasy roleplaying game put out by New Infinities. Second, New Infinities' "Fantasy Master" line would start detailing the Castle and City of Greyhawk as Gary Gygax and Rob Kuntz had originally envisioned them. Kuntz himself — who had stuck his toe back into the RPG field the previous year with his Creations Unlimited company — would be contributing to what was to be called "Castle Dunfalcon."



(Get it? Dun = grey and falcon = hawk.)

Gygax got as far as laying the groundwork for this new direction. In *Dance of Demons* (1988) — the final Gord the Rogue novel — Gygax destroyed Greyhawk's Oerth and introduced

a new fantasy world called "Yarth." This is where the new Dunfalcon was to be located. Meanwhile, a young editor by the name of Matt Forbeck — future author of *Western Hero* (1991), *Brave New World* (1999) and many others — was editing a Gygax adventure called *Epic of Yarth: Necropolis*, which would have been the first Fantasy Master supplement set in the new world.

Then, the company fell apart when New Infinities' investors decided to force it into bankruptcy. New Infinities finally disappeared in 1989; its bankruptcy was Case No. 89–01464 in the Eastern District of Wisconsin. Many people ended up unpaid. There was some animosity.

Following the dissolution of New Infinities, some of its employees returned to TSR. Most notably Kim Mohan became the editor of TSR's *Amazing Stories* magazine. Others left the industry entirely. Frank Mentzer, for example, now owns a bakery in Wisconsin.

Ironically, most of those final projects *did* come to be, just not at New Infinities.

The fantasy game system Gygax was working on eventually became GDW's *Dangerous Journeys* (1992) and Yarth probably became that game's Ærth — though the game's publication resulted in another TSR lawsuit, as is more fully described in GDW's history.

Gygax's plans to publish the City and Dungeon of Greyhawk in a renamed setting were somewhat fulfilled at Troll Lord Games, who published a few Castle Zagyg books — detailing the uppermost levels of the dungeon — before Gygax's death. Meanwhile, Rob Kuntz published some of his own contributions to Castle Greyhawk through Pied Piper Publishing.

The *Necropolis* campaign has seen print twice, once as a *Dangerous Journeys* supplement published by GDW (1993) and once as a d20 supplement published by Necromancer Games (2002).

Master of the Game, a GMing book by Gygax that was also being edited during that last year, was published by Perigee Trade — who already published Gygax's *Role-Playing Mastery* (1987).

Finally, Gygax's Gord the Rogue appeared a few times after New Infinities disappeared, once in White Wolf's *Pawn of Chaos: Tales of the Eternal Champion* (1996) and once in Paizo Publishing's *Dragon Magazine #344* (2006). Some of his stories were also reprinted by Troll Lord Games and Paizo Publishing.

What to Read Next

- For Rob Kuntz's *other* work in the same period, read ***Creations Unlimited***.
- For other TSR refugees, read ***Pacesetter***.

In Other Eras

- For how Gary Gygax came to New Infinities, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For the future of the "Epic of Yarth," read about *Mythus* in ***GDW*** *['70s]*.
- For Gary Gygax's further future, read ***Hekaforge Productions*** *['90s]* and ***Troll Lord Games*** *['00s]*.
- For the game that inspired Jefferson Swycaffer's writing, read about *Traveller* in ***GDW*** *['70s]*.
- For the future of Castle Dunfalcon, read about Castle Zagyg in ***Troll Lord Games*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to the old guard company formed by Gygax's friend, Rob Kuntz, in ***Creations Unlimited***.

Creations Unlimited: 1986–1987

There are any number of small companies in the roleplaying industry that published a dozen or fewer products. Few are covered in these books, but Creations Unlimited is given special attention because of the important role of its principal, Robert J. Kuntz, in the history of roleplaying.

Creative Beginnings: 1972–1985

The story of the young roleplaying industry is ultimately the story of players. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson got into the business because they created games that they wanted to play. The same was true for young Robert Kuntz.

Kuntz met Gygax in 1968, and practically grew up in the Gygax household. In 1969, he was one of the founding members of the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association and in that same year, he started playing in Dave Arneson's Napoleonic Simulation Campaign. He was still just 17 in 1972 when he got to play in the second ever *D&D* game set in the World of Greyhawk, where he took on the role of a fighter named Robilar. Over the years, various



1987: Prisoners of the Maze

tales have been written of Robilar: how he looted the Temple of Elemental Evil, much to Gygax's dismay; how he was the first ever to defeat the Tomb of Horrors, thanks to expendable orc lackies; how he turned to evil; and more.

However, Kuntz was not content for long to be a mere player. In 1973, he began running his own *D&D* campaign, set in his world of Kalibruhn. The main attraction in those early days was Castle El Raja Key and the main player was none other than Gary Gygax himself — whose famous characters Mordenkainen and Yrag originated upon that world. Little is written of Kalibruhn, because Kuntz was soon asked to co-GM Gygax's own Greyhawk campaign, and elements of Kalibruhn were translocated to Greyhawk. Castle El Raja Key itself was mixed with Castle Greyhawk, creating a new and larger delve. Kuntz's participation as a judge of the Greyhawk campaign continued until 1985, when Gygax closed it down following his exit from TSR.

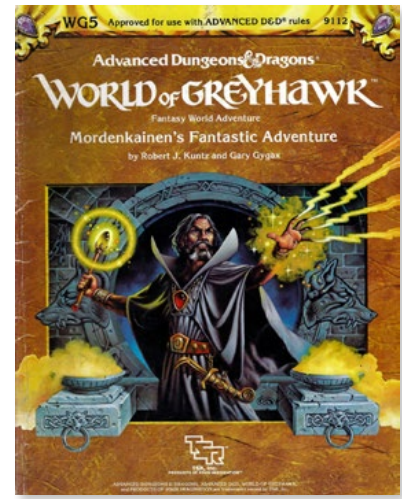
Meanwhile, Kuntz was also getting involved in the professional side of TSR. Late in 1975, he became their sixth employee and though he was hired to do shipping, he *wanted* to do design work. Fortunately, TSR was small at the time, and so everyone got to do a little design. Kuntz became the co-author of two of the original *D&D* books — *Supplement I: Greyhawk* (1975) and *Supplement IV: Gods, Demi-Gods & Heroes* (1976) — and also helped to redevelop the *Lankhmar* (1976) board game. His fingerprints can further be found on other projects from the time, such as *S3: Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* (1980), originally run at Origins II in 1976. Gygax credits Kuntz therein with "substantial ideas," probably talking about the technology and the plant creatures in the adventure — both of which were topics found in Kuntz's own adventures.

Kuntz also wrote for TSR's gaming magazines in his early days with the company, starting with "The Quest for the Vermillion Volume" in *The Strategic Review v2 #1* (February 1976), which was the first fiction published by TSR. "The Lovecraftian Mythos in Dungeons and Dragons," published in *The Dragon #12* (February 1978), highlighted another of Kuntz's interest. It was also his next-to-last work at TSR for a few years, as we'll see.

Kuntz wanted to move entirely over to design, and was writing what he hoped would be "Supplement V: Kalibruhn" — which would have included rules for poison, a new wizardly class, and more — but it was not to be. As a result of the company's refusal to let Kuntz become more involved in the creative side of things, he left TSR. That was in 1977, shortly after Dave Arneson and Dave Meggary's departure from the company — resulting in the hobbyist industry's loss of some of its founders.

"That was a raucous period in TSR's history."

– Robert Kuntz, "An Interview with Robert Kuntz," reprinted at thekyngdoms.com (2005)



Over the next several years, Rob Kuntz went to college and got married. He also wrote and designed, creating the start of what would be a huge corpus of (unpublished) material for both Greyhawk and Kalibruhn. However, by 1981 or 1982, the winds had changed at TSR. Gary Gygax asked Kuntz back to do design work on the world of Greyhawk and eventually become its "Brand Manager." Kuntz happily agreed.

Unfortunately, the early '80s were a time of serious discord at TSR, with Gygax's influence at the company waning in 1982, then the whole company nearly dying in 1983. The results of Gygax's new Greyhawk group were not all he'd hoped for. Some of the work done by Gygax, Kuntz, and graphic designer and author Eric Shook *did* show up, beginning with *WG4: The Forgotten Temple of Tharizdun* (1982). However, development for the Castle and City of Greyhawk and the Wild Coast was never finished, while a completed manuscript written by Gygax and Kuntz on the Bandit Kingdoms City of Stoink was never published and subsequently lost.

"Primarily, although not exclusively, I created my Castle, 'The Ruins of El Raja [Key],' from which this dungeon is derived, for Gary Gygax, who deserved an opportunity for some extensive play because of all the judging … he had done for the players in his Greyhawk Campaign."

– Robert Kuntz, WG5: Mordenkainen's Fantastic Adventure (1984)

A two-part tournament adventure that Kuntz first ran in college *could* have been another TSR publication in this era. It was called "The Maze of Xaene" and was set in Greyhawk's Great Kingdom, focusing on its king, Ivid V. Though James Ward ran the adventure as the *D&D* tournament at EastCon in 1983, it didn't see print at the troubled TSR of the time. Kuntz was more fortunate with *WG5: Mordenkainen's Fantastic Adventure* (1984), which was co-authored with Gary

Gygax with lead billing given to Kuntz. It finally revealed some of Castle El Raja Key to *D&D* fans across the world.

During his second stint at TSR, Kuntz also designed the board game "King of the Tabletop" with Tom Wham, for publication in *Dragon #77* (September 1983). It was later expanded and rereleased as *Kings & Things* (1986) by West End Games, which has become a touchstone for board games in the roleplaying industry. *Kings & Things* was an Origins award-winner, and also one of the earliest examples of a modular hex-mapped board — preceded by Avalon Hill's *Magic Realm* (1979), but still years before eurogame classic *The Settlers of Catan* (1995).

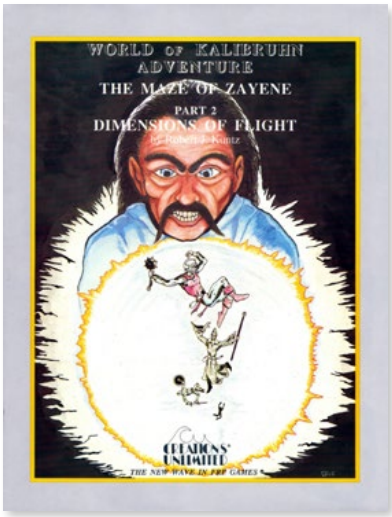
Unfortunately, all good things must end, and this was the case for Kuntz's second stay at TSR. By 1985, the company was enveloped in another power struggle, and this time Gygax ended up on the outs. That marked the end of Kuntz's time as well.

When Gygax was forced out of TSR, he had to leave behind most of the intellectual property that he'd created over the previous decade, including *D&D* and Greyhawk. This was probably instructive to Kuntz, who has since been very protective of his own IP — not signing rights to Kalibruhn over to anyone. That's probably also the prime reason that Kuntz created a company of his own in the wake of his departure from TSR: so that it could hold and protect his game world and other creations.

The company's name was Creations Unlimited.

The Actual Story of Creations Unlimited: 1986—1987

The story of Creations Unlimited itself is anti-climactic when compared to the story of Robert Kuntz's influence on the industry overall. Nonetheless, the company does remain important, because it reminded the industry of some of its roots, 15 years after its founding and because it featured as a part of a trend in the '80s where creators left their original companies and struck out on their own.



In all, Creations Unlimited produced just five supplements. Work on them started in 1986 and all five were printed and distributed between 1987 and 1988.



The first four adventures were a linked set of adventures: *The Maze of Zayene, Part 1: Prisoners of the Maze* (1987); *The Maze of Zayene, Part 2: Dimensions of Flight* (1987); *The Maze of Zayene, Part 3: Tower Chaos* (1987); and *The Maze of Zayene, Part 4: The Eight Kings* (1987).

The first two adventures were the ones Kuntz created at college and that ran subsequently at EastCon in 1983. Though the adventures were unforgiving "gauntlets" of the type that Kuntz enjoyed, they were unusual for the time because they had a political veneer laid out upon them — centering on a plot to assassinate a king. They also feature the evil wizard Zayene, who Kuntz intended to be a recurring villain, constantly returning to bedevil players.

Each of these adventures also proudly proclaimed that they were "World of Kalibruhn Adventures." This makes them a bit of a milestone, because it was the first time ever that the so-called "3rd longest-running FRPG world" received major focus in a roleplaying product — though it had been referred to on occasion, such as in *WG5: Mordenkainen's Fantastic Adventure*. The labeling was always somewhat ironic, as the adventures had originated in Greyhawk, as we've already seen. Now, the names were changed, such as Xaene becoming Zayene.

Creations Unlimited's final publication, *Garden of the Plantmaster* (1987), was of an older vintage than the Zayene adventures — though it still lay as much in Greyhawk as Kalibruhn. It was prototyped as a special area in the famous Castle Greyhawk dungeons around 1974 or 1975; its completed form was moved to Kuntz's Lost City of the Elders and closely tied to *WG5: Mordenkainen's Fantastic Adventure*. *Plantmaster* did not bear the "World of Kalibruhn Adventures" trade dress.

Kuntz had some other publications planned for Creations Unlimited. The "City of Brass" was advertised in *Plantmaster*. It would have begun with Kuntz's (*To the) City of Brass* (1987), an RPGA tournament that was later released to the internet. Afterward Kuntz planned to publish "Hidden Realms of Zayene," the first of which was to be "The Iron Castle."

However, Creations Unlimited never printed them— or anything else. Instead the company slowly faded away. Kuntz cites *Dragon* refusing his ads (due to his products' "generic"/*AD&D* terms) and TSR increasing its production as reasons. More likely though, the issue was financial. The company was likely

Ye Settings of Yore: Kalibruhn

On Pied Piper Publishing's website, Kalibruhn is called "3rd longest-running FRPG world in existence today." And, it's likely true. Blackmoor and Greyhawk predate it, but Gary Gygax was running around Robert Kuntz's World of Kalibruhn in 1973, likely before even the early, postal releases of *Dungeons & Dragons*. It was probably also the first RPG setting created with a "top-down" approach: building down from an overall worldview rather than up from the individual actions of players.

Given Kalibruhn's primordial position in our hobby's history, it's surprising that we still know almost nothing about it. To date, the majority of publications centered on Castle El Raja Key, Kalibruhn's biggest dungeon delve. Variants of it appeared in *WG5: Mordenkainen's Fantastic Adventure* (1984) and in three adventures published by *Dungeon Magazine*: "Maure Castle," a 3.5e revamp of *WG5* in *Dungeon #112* (July 2004); "Chamber of Antiquities," a return to Maure Castle in *Dungeon #124* (July 2005); and finally, "Return to Maure Castle: The Greater Halls" in *Dungeon #139* (October 2006). "Warlock's Walk" from Maure Castle later showed up in the online *Oerth Journal #28* (March 2008). However, the Maure Castle created for these later magazines was an original work, used as a "stand-in" for El Raja Key so that Kuntz could continue to protect his IP.

Today, those publications represent the greatest sources of Kalibruhn lore – at least for those who haven't participated in auctions of Kuntz's original notes online. However, since those published pieces are each set in the World of Greyhawk, they at best represent a flawed reflection – which is the prime reason that Kalibruhn has been so little explored in the 35+ years since it was created. This also reflects Kalibruhn's place in gaming history. Though it was originally created as a world to be explored by Gary Gygax, many of its features were brought into Greyhawk when Kuntz became the co-DM of Gygax's Greyhawk game.

That isn't to say that there isn't a lot of Kalibruhn to be explored. During his various departures from the RPG industry, Kuntz kept creating. At this point, he has thousands of pages of RPG source material, and only ten percent of that relates to the Greyhawk material that he actually *has* been publishing. There's an untapped reservoir of material detailing the third FRPG world that *could* someday be published.

undercapitalized. It certainly never enjoyed a lot of marketing. Much of Creations Unlimited's stock ended up at Noble Knight Games (nobleknight.com), a used and new game seller, and in fact remains cheaply available from them decades later.

Meanwhile, Kuntz continued in the industry. By 1988, he was talking with Gary Gygax about writing "Castle Dunfalcon" — which was Castle Greyhawk with its name changed — for New Infinities Publications, but Gygax's company collapsed shortly thereafter.

Kuntz's last work in the Creations Unlimited time period was a pair of adventures he contributed to TSR's *WG8: Fate of Istus* (1989), the module that transitioned Greyhawk from first edition *AD&D* to second. Kuntz's old friend, "Xaene the Accursed" even showed up in the first adventure, "Down with the King." Xaene was now depicted as a two-headed lich because he served two different masters: Rob Kuntz and TSR.

Though Creations Unlimited stopped publication two years previous, the end of the original edition of A*D&D* was the most definitive sign that Kuntz's short-lived burst of original Kalibruhn and Greyhawk publication had ended.

After 1989, Kuntz largely faded away from the RPG scene for another decade. In the early days of the internet, he did briefly reappear on the GreyTalk mailing list, where he shared stories of early Greyhawk days and talked with fans like Erik Mona. There was also word of Kuntz working on Castle Greyhawk for the RPGA in the late '90s, alongside Gygax and Mona, but by the turn of the century he was gone once more.

D20 Makes All Things Live Again: 2001-Present

There is a happy footnote to the story of Creations Unlimited. Thirteen years after Creations Unlimited ceased publication, Wizards of the Coast — the new owner of *Dungeons & Dragons* — licensed the third edition of their game for use by anyone through their d20 and OGL programs. This opened up the market to hundreds of publishers all eager for material; some of them were very enthusiastic about the industry's past and so they began reprinting the books of "classic" authors.

Among the most old-school of the new d20 publishers were Kenzer & Company (who licensed many *AD&D* rules, supplements, and adventures from Wizards for use in their *HackMaster* game), Necromancer Games (whose motto was "third edition rules, first edition feel"), and Troll Lord Games (whose *Castles & Crusades* reimagined the original *D&D* game). Each of them would print some of Kuntz's corpus of writing during the first years of the d20 craze. Necromancer Games reprinted the first three *Maze* adventures (2001), though

Different Worlds Publications had to step in to publish the final chapter (2004). Troll Lord Games printed *Dark Druids* (2002), a 1976 Kuntz adventure originally set in Greyhawk's Gnarley Forest. Finally, Kenzer & Company reprinted *Garden of the Plantmaster* (2003) and later published the brand-new *CZA1: Dark Chateau* (2005), Kuntz's contribution to Castle Zagyg, which was yet another iteration of Castle Greyhawk.

When Kuntz got started with Necromancer, he was thinking about his unpublished (and incomplete) City of Brass, but he decided to begin with something easier, hence the work with them on the *Maze of Zayene*. Unfortunately, Kuntz ran into a variety of problems at Necromancer, not the least of which was a several-month delay between publication of the first and second *Zayene* adventures. That wasn't Necromancer's fault, since their books were published at the whim of White Wolf — which would be a problem for them later in life — but it was a big issue for Kuntz, as those first two adventures were tightly connected and couldn't really be run separately.

As a result, Kuntz ended his relationship with Necromancer, taking City of Brass with him. Because of the work already put into the setting, Necromancer decided to go ahead with their own version of the setting, *City of Brass* (2007) — which ended up being one of their last publications.

After his brief stint with Troll Lord Games, Kuntz gave the City of Brass another shot with Kenzer & Company. Unfortunately, he had not finished the adventure when he shattered his leg. Though Kuntz continued to work on the book, he fell out of contact with Kenzer, who had another author finish the book as *Sir Robilar's City of Brass* (2003), a *HackMaster* adventure. Sadly only half of the 89,000-word manuscript that Kuntz prepared appeared as a result, and what did appear was not from Kuntz's original manuscript.

Much as Gygax's problems with TSR in 1985 led Kuntz to start publishing on his own with Creations Unlimited, Kuntz's loss of control over projects at both Necromancer and Kenzer made him realize that he once more needed good control of his IP. He then started another publishing venture, Pied Piper Publishing. This new company debuted with *CAS1: Cairn of the Skeleton King* (2006), an original *AD&D* adventure.

Pied Piper afterward published a half-dozen more RPG supplements, including a seven-page description of *The Original Living Room* (2007) and a more comprehensive adventure called *RJK1: Bottle City* (2007) — both drawn from the original Castle Greyhawk — as well as *The Stalk* (2009), a Wild Coast adventure from 1975. There was even a *Castle El Raja Key* supplement in the works.

Unfortunately, Pied Piper Publishing didn't last much longer than Creations Unlimited as an active RPG publishing company. In more recent years, Kuntz has turned back to other interests, among them fiction writing. Pied Piper's final publication was *Black Festival* (2010), a novella by Kuntz.

However, Kuntz has also signed a contract with Black Blade Publishing to take up work where he left off on the "Lake Geneva Castle and Campaign™ dungeon levels." As a publisher of the retro-clone *Swords & Wizardry Core Rules* (2008, 2009), Black Blade is well-positioned to produce Kuntz's classic work, especially with Greyhawk scholar and Black Blade co-founder Allan Grohe overseeing the line.

Whether they will be able to take advantage of the positioning remains an open question, as the publishing house has sat mainly unused in recent years. As recent as 2012, however, Kuntz has talked about working with Black Blade, so perhaps the possibility for Creations Unlimited's potential to be fulfilled still remains.

What to Read Next

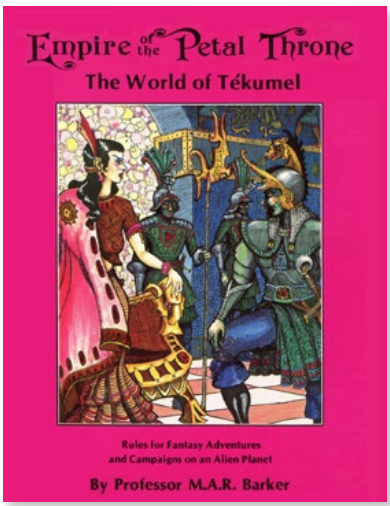
- For some contemporaries who jumped from TSR to their own company, read ***Pacesetter***.
- For a company Kuntz worked with around the time of Creations Unlimited, read ***New Infinities Productions***.

In Other Eras

- For Rob Kuntz's origins in the business, his two different times at TSR, and a comprehensive history of Greyhawk, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For more on Erik Mona, read ***Paizo Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For the reasons behind d20, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For d20-era publishers of Kuntz's work, read ***Kenzer & Company*** *['90s]*, ***Necromancer Games*** *['00s]*, and ***Troll Lord Games*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to an old guard company that actually didn't have anything to do with TSR, ***Different Worlds Publications***.

Different Worlds Publications: 1987–1989, 2004-Present



1987: Empire of the Petal Throne

Though they engaged in a notable roll-up of RPG properties from several publishers in the mid-'80s, Different Worlds released just a couple of books during their brief life.

Chaotic Origins: 1977–1985

The story of Different Worlds Publications begins with Tadashi Ehara, who in early 1977 was a buyer for The Gambit game store in San Francisco, California. He got into the creative side of the business when he joined Albany-based game publisher Chaosium as their second employee. Though Ehara did some writing for *Wyrm's Footnotes #3* (1977)

and even designed Chaosium's *Stomp!* minigame (1978), most of his work went on behind the scenes, keeping the company running.

Ehara's biggest contribution to Chaosium was his creation of their *Different Worlds* magazine (1979), a glossy periodical that sought to cover the whole industry in a way that no one else was at the time — though Steve Jackson's *The Space Gamer* (1980–1985) would contend for the position once it moved away from its board gaming origins.

Ehara's *Different Worlds* did more than just offer news and reviews, however. It also gave designers from across the industry the opportunity to talk about "their life and roleplaying" and to offer up meaningful articles for their own games.

Unfortunately, Chaosium hit a downturn in the mid-'80s that caused Ehara to leave the company. He took *Different Worlds* — then 38 issues old — with him.

Sleuthing Continuations: 1985—1987

Ehara's immediate goal was *not* to found a new company, but rather to hook up with someone who already had their own business infrastructure. He joined Sleuth Publications, a San Francisco-based company best known as the publisher of the *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective* mystery game (1981) — itself an innovative game about solving mysteries using fewer clues than Sherlock Holmes. It won the SdJ (Game of the Year) award in Germany in 1985 — the same year that Sleuth published *Gumshoe* (1985), which took the game's ideas to San Francisco in the 1930s.

Under Ehara's guidance, Sleuth made a serious attempt to expand into the roleplaying field. This started in 1985 when Ehara took advantage of Sleuth's existing mail order business for Sherlock Holmes materials to sell the newest roleplaying products to *Different Worlds* readers each issue. The experiment only lasted a few months. Though there certainly were readers without access to game stores, the situation wasn't the same as it had been in the '70s, when RPG products were so hard to find that companies like Gamescience, Judges Guild, and Games Workshop could build a business around selling them by mail.



Ehara's next expansion was into a parallel hobbyist field: play-by-mail. Born in Japan, Ehara retained an interest in its history and now said that he "[had] been studying the



history of feudal Japan for the past five years." He began running *The Samurai Campaign* (1986), which he envisioned as a 258+ player game — full of daimyos, ninja spies, assassins, and more. The PBM lasted only a year, but Ehara's Japanese expertise would rise to the fore in more recent years, as we'll see.

Throughout all of this, *Different Worlds* magazine kept publishing, much as it had at Chaosium. In the end, Sleuth would publish issues #39 (May/June 1985) to #46 (May/June 1987) of the magazine. For that first Sleuth issue, the magazine changed its slogan from "The Magazine for Adventure Role-Players" to "The Magazine for Adventurers," but there was relatively little change to the content. Promised case files for *Sherlock Holmes* never appeared, and instead *Different Worlds* remained a top independent roleplaying magazine — and effectively the last one standing, as *Space Gamer* by this time was moving on to a much less successful publisher. *Different Worlds* would settle upon "The Journal of Adventure Gaming" as its slogan for the last few years of its life.

> *"The game aspect of the magazine will remain intact but the magazine will focus more on the pulp adventure genre…."*
>
> – Tadashi Ehara, "Editorial," Different Worlds #39 (May/June 1985)

By 1986, Sleuth was moving beyond mail order sales and PBMs. It was now pushing into the roleplaying field in new ways that would define Different Worlds Publications afterward: it was picking up existing RPG lines (and related items) from publishers who could no longer maintain them.

This began when Sleuth acquired the rights to *Sorcerer's Cave* (1978) — an adventure game previously distributed by FGU. However, by the end of 1986, Sleuth completed much more notable deals with Flying Buffalo, Gamelords, and Judges Guild.

The Judges Guild deal was the least of the three, since it only involved Judges Guild's backstock — as Judges Guild was by this time successfully licensing their actual IP to Mayfair Games. Nonetheless, by late 1986, Sleuth Publications was exclusively selling over 80 Judges Guild products, most of them drawn from the company's "universal" fantasy lines.

Sleuth similarly bought up all the backstock of Gamelords, the publishers of *Thieves' Guild* (1980), *The Free City of Haven* (1981), and various *Traveller*

supplements (1983–1984). This brought in a total of 344 boxes of gaming books, which Ehara received on December 1, 1986. This purchase came with rights to Gamelords' lines as well, and Ehara planned to make use of them — as we'll see.

Sleuth's other major purchase of 1986 was Flying Buffalo's *Mercenaries, Spies & Private Eyes* product line — a reimagining of the company's popular *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975) system for the espionage genre. Though Sleuth was able to immediately start selling the *MSPE* adventure *Stormhaven* (1983) as backstock, the original game was out of print.

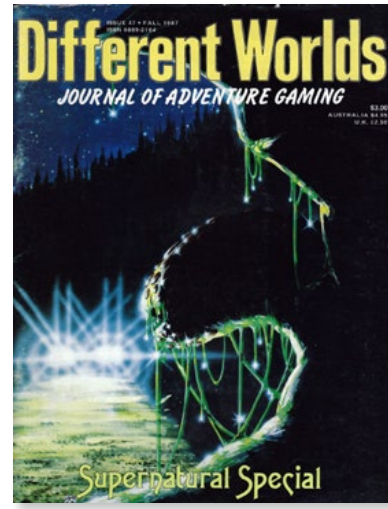
This led to Sleuth's first non-*Different Worlds* publication for the RPG industry: a new, boxed edition of *Mercenaries, Spies & Private Eyes* (1986). It was soon followed by their only supplement, *Ident-a-kit 1: Fingerprints* (1986), which rather uniquely gave players the opportunity to match up real-looking fingerprints in their roleplaying games.

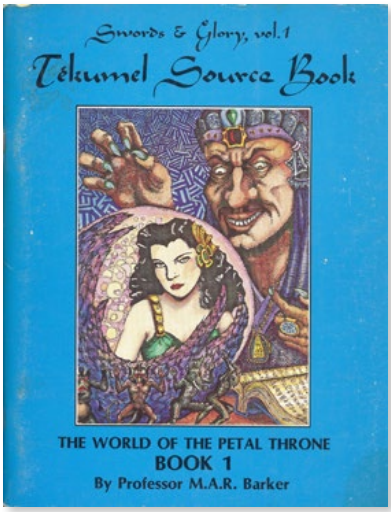
Ehara's last big acquisition while at Sleuth was a license to publish the original *Empire of the Petal Throne* game, previously from Gamescience. A hurricane interfered with Gamescience's business and as a result, their license had lapsed. Ehara now seized the opportunity.

However, Sleuth wasn't to see any more of the roleplaying growth that Ehara built for them. Instead, in mid-1987, Ehara and Sleuth decided that *Different Worlds* (and one presumes the roleplaying industry in general) weren't a good fit for Sleuth. Ehara withdrew from the company, taking all of his new properties with him. Shortly thereafter, he formed Different Worlds Publications to hold his various RPG acquisitions.

Different Worlds Publications: 1987—1989

In 1987, Different Worlds Publications could have been positioned for notable success. Its portfolio included *Different Worlds* — by now the only major independent RPG magazine around, even if its publication had slowed in recent years — and M.A.R. Barker's Tékumel, one of the first three FRPGs. The company also had some opportunity to bring in existing fans of other published games thanks to their Judges Guild backstock and properties from Flying Buffalo and Gamelords.



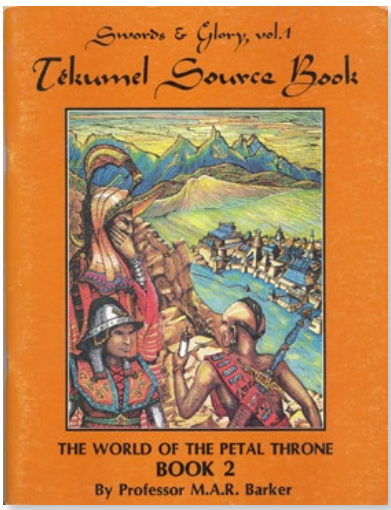


Ehara even continued with his purchasing spree when he picked up Boardcraft Simulation's gaming accessories: *Fantasy Paths* (1981), *Castle Paths* (1981), and *Village Paths* (1981) — three boxes of geomorphic map tiles. Ironically, they each came packaged with Chaosium's *BRP* rules. It's likely this purchase came about due to the companies knowing each other, as Boardcraft had been located in nearby Martinez, California.

Despite tremendous potential, Different Worlds only ended up publishing five books in its first incarnation. Different Worlds' first four books were: *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1987), a rerelease of the original Tékumel game; two books that reprinted the first two-thirds of Gamescience's *Tékumel Sourcebook* (1987, 1988); and *Different Worlds #47* (Fall 1987). A year later, Different Worlds tried one more time with the *Blackwatch Technical Reference Manual* (1989), an original skill-based science-fiction RPG. Unlike the older reprints, the *Blackwatch* RPG was the sort of product needed by a new company to make a splash in the late '80s, but today it's so obscure that this history's author is only partly convinced that it was actually produced for the mass market.

That's not to say that Different Worlds didn't have big plans, most of them related to the various properties that the company had acquired.

There was still more *Tékumel Sourcebook* to reprint, as well as the rest of the second edition Tékumel rules, *Swords & Glory* (1983–1984) — including the unpublished "Gamemaster's Handbook." After that, Ehara planned to start publishing rarer Tékumel material, such as *The Book of Ebon Bindings* (1978), previously available only from small press Imperium Publishing.



Using Gamelords IP, Ehara intended to finish up their fantasy system by publishing "Naked Sword" and "Paths of Sorcery." He also planned to complete their trilogy of *Haven* adventures.

Even *MSPE* was going to see continued publication with "Ident-a-Kit 2: Mugshots."

Instead, publication for Different Worlds ended in 1989. Flying Buffalo regained rights to *MSPE* and published the *Mugshots* books on their own (1991–1992), after which the line faded away. Tékumel was quickly relicensed to Theatre of the Mind Enterprises, who published *The Book of Ebon Bindings* (1991) themselves and afterward moved on to a third edition Tékumel RPG (1992–1994).

Tékumel licenses changed hands a few times since then, as is more fully described in the history of Gamescience. Tito's House of Games — formerly a game store in the California Bay Area — took over the publication of many Tékumel products a few years after TOME's line ended, with most of their publications occurring from 1997–2002. Among other things, they finished the three-book series of *Tékumel Sourcebooks* that Different Worlds began by printing *The World of the Petal Throne, Book 3* (2002).

Different Worlds meanwhile held on to piles of backstock, the rights to the Gamelords IP, and of course *Different Worlds* itself. Paste-up copies of issue #48 were shown at cons for a few years, but the company's attendance soon ended, and it looked like Different Worlds had come to an end.

The Return of Ehara: 2004-Present

Different Worlds Publications went underground for over a decade until reappearing in 2004 — brought back to the RPG scene by the internet and the d20 license, as were a number of other older RPG publishers. Early that year, a website at diffworlds.com announced, "*We will be back in business soon. Thank you for your patience.*"

This new incarnation of Different Worlds kicked things off with *Valus* (2004), a d20 setting by Ryan Smalley, and followed that with Smalley's *Valus* adventure, *Return of Ippizicus Child-Eater* (2004) — printed in a limited edition for Gen Con Indy 2004. Perhaps more notably, Different Worlds published a d20 edition of Rob Kuntz's *The Eight Kings* (2004) — the final book in a four-book adventure series that Necromancer Games abandoned. However, the d20 field was already cooling, and so Different Worlds didn't stick around for long.

> *"I too have been out of gaming for 17 years. It renewed my interest when one of my latest beau's kids told me he played Dungeons & Dragons and started telling me about it. I too thought the hobby was dead. I guess d20 revived the industry."*
>
> – Gigi D'Arn, "A Letter from Gigi," diffworlds.com (November 2004)

Despite this second end to publication, Different Worlds' website stuck around, which meant a goldmine of roleplaying material from the '80s — including Gamelords books, Judges Guild books, and lots of back issues of *Different Worlds* — was suddenly available to modern consumers.

More recently, Different Worlds appeared for a third time to publish *Daimyo of 1867* (2010) and *Shogun & Daimyo* (2011), each advertised as a "gamer's guide to Feudal Japan" and each building on that same interest Ehara spoke of when he kicked off *The Samurai Campaign* some 25 years earlier. However, there's been no indication that this is part of a larger return to gaming. You can still purchase some '80s gaming stock from the Different Worlds website, but beyond that the company seems to have largely left the history of the RPG industry.

What to Read Next

- For *Different Worlds*' biggest competition in the '80s, read about *Space Gamer* in ***Steve Jackson Games***.
- For other Sherlock Holmes gaming work being done at the same time, read about the *Sherlock Holmes Solo Mysteries* from ***ICE***.
- For the company that Tadashi Ehara bought completely, read ***Gamelords***.
- For the origins of Rob Kuntz's adventure series, read ***Creations Unlimited***.

In Other Eras

- For Ehara's start in the industry and the origins of *Different Worlds*, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For an older mystery game that almost became a roleplaying game, read about *Elementary Watson* in the minihistory of ***Phoenix Games*** (found in the ***Gamescience*** *['70s]* history) and in the history of ***FGU*** *['70s]*.
- For a more recent game that managed to mix investigation and roleplaying, read about *GUMSHOE* in ***Pelgrane Press*** *['00s]*.
- For the origins of the PBM industry that led to *The Samurai Campaign* and also for the origins of *MSPE* and why it was sold, read ***Flying Buffalo*** *['70s]*.
- For a comprehensive history of Tékumel and what happened immediately before it got to Different Worlds, read ***Gamescience*** *['70s]*.
- For the reprints of Rob Kuntz's adventure series, read ***Necromancer Games*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to cool 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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1970s. The Age of Origins.
How TSR, Flying Buffalo, Judges Guild and others founded the hobby.

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 '80s

Coming into the '80s, the roleplaying world was changing thanks to the extreme success that it found in the wake of the James Egbert affair. Then, by the end of the '80s, things would be changing again thanks to new editions and new genres. This is a look at what happened in between.

1. Roleplaying was Huge

Depending on what criteria you use, the roleplaying industry hit its height sometime between 1979 and 1985. Things started rolling when *Dungeons & Dragons* got noticed by the mainstream thanks to the controversy stirred up by the disappearance of James Dallas Egbert (1979) — which flared up again when Rona Jaffe published *Mazes and Monsters* (1981), when CBS made that into a movie (1982), and when private investigator William Dear wrote his own account in *The Dungeon Master* (1984). However, that singular incident wasn't the only thing behind roleplaying's success: it'd been on an upward trend since TSR published those first thousand boxes of *Dungeons & Dragons* in January 1974.

Whatever the reason, the result was *really* big. You could find roleplaying games in mainstream stores like Waldenbooks and Toys "R" Us. Not only did TSR get a *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon (1983–1985) on the air, but it reportedly won its time slot (at 9:30am on Saturdays) for the first two years. *Inc. Magazine* even featured TSR as one of the 100 fastest growing, privately held companies in the United States.

The scattered information we have on print runs holds up the idea of roleplaying hitting its zenith in the '80s. After starting out with a paid circulation of 20,155 copies in October 1980, *Dragon* magazine's paid circulation topped out in September 1984 at 118,021 copies, according to TSR's yearly publisher's statement. This would be about double its paid circulation in the '90s and perhaps close to triple its circulation when the magazine's run ended in September 2007. Meanwhile, reports suggest that *D&D* adventures were selling between 50,000 and 150,000 units — before dropping to 20,000 in the '90s and rising up to just 60,000 in the d20 era.

Despite this huge success, the danger signs were already on the horizon, beginning with massive layoffs at TSR in 1983. They'd take the company from a height of 300–350 employees in 1982–1983 to just 100 employees in 1984.

2. Roleplaying Was Feared and Hated

In part because it was suddenly so popular, in part because it was poorly understood, and in part because it touched upon themes considered "occult" or "violent" by some, roleplaying became demonized during the time of its greatest popularity. If you were a young gamer in the '80s, you probably had one or more friends who were forbidden from playing *D&D* by their parents — and who probably played it anyway.

These problems started — as with roleplaying's biggest success — with the James Egbert affair. Though *Dungeons & Dragons* got lots of media attention from

Egbert, Jaffe, and Dear, none of it was particularly good. *D&D* was depicted as a dangerous sport whose players ran around in the steam tunnels of universities. In Jaffe's novel, the protagonist was deeply mentally troubled, and could only achieve mature adulthood by leaving *D&D* behind.

Throughout the rest of the decade, ignorant fear of roleplaying games proliferated. Patricia Pulling formed Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons (BADD) after her son committed suicide in 1982; *60 Minutes* eventually brought her on the air to talk about her story (1985). Thomas Radecki testified in multiple cases saying that *Dungeons & Dragons* caused the deaths of gamers; he was also part of the National Coalition on Television Violence in 1985, when it demanded that the FTC place warnings on the *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon to say that it had caused real-life deaths. Chick Publications released their infamous *Dark Dungeons* tract (1984), suggesting that *D&D* players engaged in real-world Satanism. Characters said laughably ridiculous things like, "I used the mind bondage spell on my father. He was trying to stop me from playing *D&D*."

The hysteria even spread into the roleplaying industry, some of which began to engage in self-censorship. Lorraine Williams' TSR was the worst, because there you couldn't even make fun of the moral outrage over *D&D* without putting your job in jeopardy. But Williams wasn't the only one at TSR that was "Bothered About Patricia Pulling" (and others). The company famously removed devils and demons from second edition *Dungeons & Dragons* (1989), then James Ward defended the decision in an editorial in *Dragon #154* (February 1990) where he said "Simply put, if a topic will anger the normally calm, caring mother of a gamer, we aren't interested in addressing that topic in any of our game products."

As the '80s turned into the '90s, and as the star of RPGs slowly waned, outraged moralists moved on to their next target: video games.

3. The Industry Was Mature, Yet Primitive

The industry's move toward professional production was one of the biggest and most important trends of the '80s. Before that, even TSR printed its adventures with two-color covers. GDW similarly produced most of its releases as black-covered digests with just a single splash of color. Judges Guild had some of the lowest production standards among the major publishers, with its pulp-quality pages, floppy pulp-quality covers, and hand-separated "fake" colors.

Then interest in the industry exploded, and the cash came flowing in. That gave publishers the bootstrap they needed to step up to the next level of professionalism. TSR moved over to full-color cardstock adventure covers in 1980, while GDW upgraded its lines more gradually, starting with the publication of *The Traveller Book* (1982) and *Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society #13* (1982), kicking

off increasingly regular full-color production. Meanwhile, companies like Judges Guild, which *didn't* make the move to this new level of professional production, went out of business.

This could have created a barrier of entry for the *next* generation of roleplaying entrepreneurs, but fortunately technology improved just in time, when the Mac appeared (1984) followed by desktop publishing (1985). New companies like Digest Group Publications, Lion Rampant, and R. Talsorian were then able to use this new technology to release polished products. DTP was still somewhat primitive, so these publishers' books didn't look as good as those by GDW or TSR, but they were still light years ahead of the state of the art from the '70s.

Though the RPG publications of the '80s looked much better than those of '70s, they're still not up to the standards of publication today. Book interiors were entirely black & white, layout was plain, and art tended to be simple line drawings, with very few of the more complex grayscales that would show up in black & white publications starting in the '90s. Today, the layout quality of the '80s still remains a baseline for roleplaying companies — a sort of lowest acceptable level — but when a publisher like Chaosium or Mongoose hews to that simpler layout style, it usually generates criticism from some percentage of readers.

4. Games Were Often Complex

When *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) first appeared, it grew directly out of the miniatures wargaming hobby, and it's not surprising that rules were complex and often full of reference charts. What *is* surprising is that the complexity of many games *grew* in the '80s. We can see this trend best among publishers releasing increasingly complex game systems as the '70s turned into the '80s.

For example GDW put out *Traveller* (1977) in the '70s, which was a fully fleshed-out skill-based game with complex simulative systems for character generation, shipbuilding, and much more. It paled, however, in the face of *Twilight: 2000* (1984), which had much more complex combat and skill systems, and *MegaTraveller* (1987), which had a complex universal action system and a new, almost unusably complex shipbuilding system.

Meanwhile over at FGU, the one-time publisher of light classic *Bunnies & Burrows* (1976) now moved to a whole serious of very complex games, including *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1977), *Space Opera* (1980), *Bushido* (1980), *Aftermath!* (1981), and *Daredevils* (1984).

Even mainstream and well-accepted games like *Champions* (1981) and *GURPS* (1985, 1986) were pretty complex when compared to what came before them. However, they were nothing compared to super-complex releases like *Rolemaster* (1982), *Hârnmaster* (1986), and Leading Edge Games' house system.

The various Leading Edge Games varied in complexity but their first release, *Sword's Path: Glory* (1982) may win the prize for the most complex RPG ever. It featured variable weapon, shield, and movement speeds, variable hit locations depending on type of swing, and lots more.

Part of the era's complexity played out through the entry of skills into mainstream roleplaying. They'd premiered in the '70s through games like *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975), *Traveller* (1977), and *RuneQuest* (1978), but it was in the '80s that they became ubiquitous. Even *AD&D* joined the club, first with non-weapon proficiencies in *Oriental Adventures* (1985), then more fully with second edition *AD&D* (1989). The complexity of skills came from the fact that skill lists often expanded and multiplied. That tendency might have reached its zenith with ICE's publication of the *Rolemaster Standard System* (1995), which included over 300 skills organized into 56 categories. Compare that to the modern day, when you see products like fourth edition *D&D* (2008) and sixth edition *RuneQuest* (2012) continuing to pare skill lists down.

Complexity was enough of a trend in '80s gaming that there was even a complexity counterrevolution. The basic idea of making games easier to play out of the box may have started with Frank Mentzer's *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set* (1983), but it was more fully realized by publishers like Pacesetter (1984–1986) and Yaquinto (1982–1983) and in TSR's later color-chart games (1984–1986). *Dinky Dungeons* (1985) and *TWERPS* (1987) might be the best examples of the backlash against complexity; the latter reduced characters to just one attribute: Strength.

5. Adventures Reached Their Zenith

If you gamed in the '80s, you probably thought adventures were the standard unit of publication for RPG manufacturers. That was a pretty big change from the '70s when top company TSR thought that adventures didn't have any value and was instead pushing off manufacture to companies like Judges Guild and Wee Warriors, and it'd be a pretty big change from the '00s when Ryan Dancey created the d20 Trademark License primarily to offload adventure publication. For a brief moment in time the RPG market was in a sweet spot when adventure was king (and looking at the sales numbers, one can see why).

To offer TSR as an example, in the early '80s they were publishing at best one or two *AD&D* hardcovers and just one new boxed set for the *D&D* series in any year. Perhaps there was also a new RPG and a few "accessory" products like character sheets and GM screens. Meanwhile they'd probably produced one or two dozen adventures.

Other popular lines like *MERP*, *Call of Cthulhu*, and *Champions* showed similar trends. There were certainly some variance from company to company, but as a whole it's likely that more than half of the RPG production of the early to mid-'80s consisted of adventures — followed by magazines (which usually included adventures), rulebooks, and gaming aids.

6. Settings Were Loosely Defined

Meanwhile, settings were still pretty loosely defined. You could see snapshots of them through adventures set in specific locales, but it was usually the adventure that was important (because adventures were at their zenith!), while any insight into the setting was purely secondary.

TSR, as is often the case, offers the best example of the trend. Greyhawk by the end of the '80s was almost entirely defined by one supplement, *The World of Greyhawk* (1980), and a few dozen adventures. When Gary Gygax published his first Greyhawk novel, *Saga of Old City* (1985), it became a major source of Greyhawk lore because novelistic details about currencies and the feel of the city of Greyhawk immediately surpassed anything that had ever been printed in RPG supplements. Things would only start to change (slightly) for Greyhawk with the publication of *The City of Greyhawk* (1989) at the end of the decade.

There were, of course, exceptions as far back as the '70s. Judges Guild started deeply defining the Wilderlands way back in 1976, while Midkemia Press began describing their eponymous world in 1980. However, it was ICE's Middle-earth (1982) and Columbia's Hârn (1983) that really offered a new direction for role-playing through a constant publication of background material.

TSR finally recognized this new direction and made it an industry standard in the late '80s. This wasn't through their publication of the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* (1987) — which was a lot like *The World of Greyhawk* campaign box that had preceded it — but rather through their release of a string of detailed setting books that began with *FR1: Waterdeep and the North* (1987) and *FR2: Moonshae* (1987). TSR simultaneously began detailing Mystara with *GAZ1: The Grand Duchy of Karameikos* (1987).

It was a sign — as the '80s waned — that adventures were no longer king, and that setting books had become a viable publishing category for the gaming mainstream.

7. Military Roleplaying Was Big

Though the military roleplaying fad was foreshadowed in the '70s with the release of SPI's man-to-man combat system, *Commando* (1979), it really got going in the new decade with Timeline's *The Morrow Project* (1980). Many more military RPGs were published over the next 10 years, but the genre leader was clearly GDW's *Twilight: 2000* (1984), followed by Leading Edge Game's *Phoenix Command* (1986).

Among the *many* other releases were: FGU's *Aftermath!* (1981), FASA's *Behind Enemy Lines* (1982), Task Force Games' *Delta Force* (1986), FGU's *Freedom Fighters*, FGU's *Merc* (1983), West End Games' *Price of Freedom* (1986), and Palladium's *Revised Recon* (1986). The games covered a wide variety of topics from World War II and Vietnam to modern-day terrorism and post-apocalyptic America.

And then the games *totally* disappeared as the '80s came to an end. Even *Phoenix Command* and *Twilight: 2000*, which each supported wide product lines, fizzled out in the 1992–1993 timeframe. After that, the '90s were almost bereft of military RPGs. Perhaps the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent death of the USSR convinced the roleplaying community that — no matter what Ronald Reagan said — Soviets wouldn't be driving tanks down Main Street any time soon.

PDFs and the d20 boom had offered some traction for military roleplaying in the '00s, but it's now clearly a minority. The *GURPS WWII* (2001–2009) line has been the only one with any legs since the militant era of the '80s.

8. *Cthulhu, Traveller,* and *Champions* Ruled

Fantasy is the heart of the roleplaying industry, but three other genres constantly get serious attention: horror, science-fiction, and superheroes. In the '80s those genres were ruled by three games that have since lost their crowns: *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), *Traveller* (1977), and *Champions* (1981). Besides ruling their genres, each of these games also defined the boundaries of that genre.

Call of Cthulhu — with its thoughtful and investigative horror-based gameplay — was a surprise hit. It was two more years before anyone else released games in the genre, and generally *no one else* was successful with horror RPGs in the '80s — though Pacesetter certainly tried hard with their cheesy and humorous *Chill* (1984). It would take a totally new sort of horror gameplay to knock *Cthulhu* off its throne, when *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) appeared. *Call of Cthulhu* still exists today, but it mainly survives on the glory of its past. Meanwhile, newer releases like *Trail of Cthulhu* (2008) have been able to innovate where *Call of Cthulhu* hasn't, and may be threatening the classic game within its own investigative subgenre.

Traveller won in a similar way to *Call of Cthulhu*: it was the first science-fiction RPG to receive good support. It defined SF gameplay in the '80s as being about the Golden Age of science-fiction when space opera was king. Unfortunately, life got increasingly hard for *Traveller* as the decade went on. First, TSR jumped into the genre with *Star Frontiers* (1982), which went head to head with *Traveller* and probably won the genre when TSR bothered to support it (1982–1985). Then *Star Wars* (1987) appeared with the power of a license and managed to move science-fiction roleplaying toward science-fantasy. However, it was *Cyberpunk* (1988) that really annihilated *Traveller* because it showed how old-fashioned *Traveller's* view of technology was. Though space opera was the core sort of SF roleplaying for the '80s, it would die throughout the '90s. *Traveller itself* didn't recover for 20 years — though it may have emerged as the SF leader again in the late '00s when most other games abandoned the field.

Champions went straight up against former superhero RPG leader, *Villains & Vigilantes* (1979), and won — perhaps on the basis of a superior rule system, perhaps on the basis of better support. Because *Champions* offered up a very four-colored view of superheroes, its own lead wavered when *Marvel Super Heroes* (1984) and *DC Heroes* (1985) were released. As a result, *Marvel* emerged as the superhero leader toward the end of the '80s. Meanwhile, *Champions* faced even greater problems as it switched publishers five times over the next 20 years. Most people thought the game dead by the time the '00s rolled around, and it's never recovered from that — despite a strong product line throughout the decade.

9. TSR Became the Enemy

In the '70s, TSR was the scrappy young company that created the industry, but by the '80s it had become The Man. Though it still led (and defined) the hobby, it also alienated serious roleplayers as often as not.

The problems started in the early '80s, when Gary Gygax increasingly insisted that *D&D* be played by the official rules — a trend that had originated from the codification of *AD&D* rules. Then, when the Blumes took over TSR, they managed to anger the wargaming community by buying SPI in 1982, killing it, and opting not to honor SPI's magazine subscriptions. When Lorraine Williams became the new head of TSR in late 1985, a whole new set of problems appeared, as Williams ruled the company in a tyrannical manner and occasionally showed open contempt for roleplayers themselves.

Meanwhile, TSR increasingly became the people who threatened the rest of the industry with lawyers, as epitomized in their lawsuits against Mayfair (1982–1984), New Infinities (1987–1989), Mayfair (again) (1991–1993), and GDW (1992–1994).

Then — so the story goes — TSR ever-so-ironically trademarked Nazis as part of the *Adventures of Indiana Jones* RPG (1984). Which is only sort of true. TSR did indeed have a stand-up figured marked as a Nazi™, but a separate sheet marked that the trademark was in the name of Lucasfilm, the *Indiana Jones* licensor. The fact that the general public *believed* that TSR trademarked Nazi (and still does), however, says lots about how they felt about TSR at the time.

If there was anything that truly proved that TSR was The Man, it was that James Ward editorial in *Dragon #154*. As 1990 dawned, TSR proved that it was afraid to publish freely — a sign of a conservative company too comfortable in its position to want to upset anyone.

10. Editions Still Didn't Exist

In the '70s, editions as we know them didn't exist, and in the '80s ... they still didn't. *Champions* revved through three largely interchangeable editions (1981, 1983, 1984), and *Call of Cthulhu* did the same (1981, 1983, 1986). *Traveller* saw the release of *Traveller Deluxe* (1981), *The Traveller Book* (1982), and *Starter Traveller* (1983), which all could be used together. Even when *Basic D&D* was revised in the Tom Moldvay (1981) and Frank Mentzer (1983) editions, they remained largely compatible.

The stability of editions in the '80s can be seen in how unstable fans became when edition changes (as we know them) finally appeared at the end of the decade. Second edition *AD&D* (1989) got off relatively lightly, but there were fans that were unhappy with the loss of classes like the monk and the assassin, the renaming of "mom-unfriendly" monsters like demons and devils, and even the restructuring of books like the *Monster Manual* — which became the three-hole punched *Monstrous Compendium* (1989–1993).

However, it was GDW that showed the horrors that were to come when it re-released *Traveller* (1977) as *MegaTraveller* (1987). The new game had a much more complex action and combat system, but it was really the changes in the *Traveller* background that angered people, primarily because the Emperor of the Imperium — someone that most player characters would never meet — got assassinated. Oh, and the Third Imperium fell into Civil War.

There were other reasons for discontent among GDW fans, including terrible editorial work on the new edition, tens of pages of errata, and a divided focus at GDW that included attention spent on a *different* science-fiction RPG, *Traveller: 2300* (1986–1990). The anger was intense.

And that was only a preview of the edition wars that would drive publishers to distraction in the '90s and '00s.

Looking back, the '80s were a simpler and more innocent time.

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.

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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.

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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.

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