Designers & Dragons

A HISTORY OF THE ROLEPLAYING GAME INDUSTRY

'90 '99



SHANNON APPELCLINE

PART THREE OF A FOUR-VOLUME SET!



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- An extensive bibliography and index

Meet the characters behind the characters and the gamers behind the games in **Designers & Dragons: The '90s!**

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Designers & Dragons: The ’90s Credits

Shannon Appelcline
Author and Researcher

John Adamus
Editor

Karen Twelves
Proofreader

Rita Tatum & Shannon Appelcline
Indexer

Fred Hicks and Adam Jury
Layout

Daniel Solis
Graphic Design

Andrew Bosley
Cover Art

Chris Hanrahan
Business Development

Carrie Harris
Marketing Manager

Sean Nittner
Project Manager

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@EvilHatOfficial on Twitter
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This Kind of Quest

When I was asked to write the introduction for a book on the history of roleplaying games in the 1990s, I jumped at the chance. This decade almost precisely defines my first adventure into roleplaying games as a career. My friends and I started Wizards of the Coast in early 1990, and then we sold it to Hasbro in late 1999. That's about as close to "the '90s" as you can get!

Looking through the table of contents at the companies listed takes me back to a special time in my life. The history of each of these companies is a story about people—one, two, or a handful of gamers who shared the dream of taking their place next to the industry giants from the '70s and '80s, people we grew up admiring as heroes. Who would be the next Gary Gygax, Steve Jackson, or Greg Stafford? Could it possibly be someone like us?

I don't know *all* of these RPG designers, but I know most of them. And here's what I can promise: These companies were started by hardcore RPG enthusiasts—people who love RPGs. They were gamers first and businesspeople second.

This isn't the sort of industry some MBA business executive out to make money dives into. Oh, sometimes the suits will gather around and peek at this strange world we live in, but as soon as they talk to a distributor about what sales levels are for new titles, or learn how fragmented the retail channel is, or discover no Wall Street analysts write about this category, they run away to a "real" industry.

And I say that's okay. This kind of quest needs a hero who is in it for the journey, not just the loot.

The stories you'll find here are about real gamers—heroes and heroines who didn't get financial backing from banks or venture capitalists, but funded their games with credit cards and help from friends and relatives, sacrificed careers in

"respectable" industries, worked odd jobs on the side to put food on the table, and kept reaching for the prize through every setback life could dish out.

My thanks to Mr. Appelcline for telling the tales of these companies, their games, and the designers who made them, so that we might better appreciate the epic quests they had to complete to bring us this treasury of roleplaying games. I hope you will be inspired to begin a new adventure of your own, either around the gaming table or on the road to becoming the next great RPG designer.

Peter Adkison
Seattle, 2014

Foreword: The '90s

This is a book about the roleplaying industry as it existed during one of its most innovative periods ever. It's about hobbyist gaming in the '90s. More specifically, it's about 21 different companies that began publishing roleplaying games in the '90s — from constant innovator White Wolf though any number of publishers who each brought something novel and unique to the industry — including foreign translations, internet roleplaying games, diceless roleplaying, story games, and more.

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.

Some of them were the old guard (with varying definitions of "old") come back to lead new companies, among them: Terry Amthor, Bill Bridges, Andrew Greenberg, Gary Gygax, Marc Miller, Margaret Weis, and Erick Wujcik. However, there was also plenty of new blood, and many of these designers brought the biggest innovations to the industry, such as: Richard Garfield, who shook the roleplaying industry to its core without ever designing an RPG; Steffan O'Sullivan, who turned to the internet before almost anyone else; Mark Rein•Hagen, who created the game that would define the decade; John Tynes, who brought innovative and evocative designs to multiple companies; and James Wallis, who presaged the indie game movement a full decade early.

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

In a decade full of innovation, it's no surprise that the roleplaying industry's biggest dragons came in the form of innovation itself. The CCG boom and bust not only hurt roleplaying publishers — who had troubles selling their RPGs in the face of higher-profit CCGs — but it also damaged the entire system of distribution and retail. Even today, the front-list mentality created by CCGs persists. The d20 boom and bust wouldn't hit until the '00s, but the roleplaying publishers who had the bad luck to get started in the late '90s would nonetheless hit it while going full speed.

Bookstores surprisingly caused the next biggest problem, as book returns and store reorganizations heavily damaged the top two publishers in the RPG industry.

There were certainly other dragons in the era — including financial troubles, creative troubles, and personal troubles. However, they tend to be occluded by the big three — CCGs, d20, and bookstores. In an era with such huge and sometimes surprising changes, it's sometimes harder to point out the minor factors that contributed to companies' falls (though you'll find them too!).

From a historical point of view, the most catastrophic event of the '90s was the loss of many of the industry's primordial companies. Though some were later resurrected in different forms, Avalon Hill, FGU, GDW, Hero Games, ICE, and Task Force Games all died in the '90s. FASA followed shortly thereafter. Oh, and a little company called TSR fell beneath a whole flight of dragons. As has been said before, 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.

Of the 21 companies profiled within, about 8 are still active publishers of roleplaying games. Another several are still in business, but running at a low level or outside the tabletop RPG industry. Compared to the publishers of the '70s and '80s, that's really quite a fine ratio. However, if the history of our industry has told us anything, it's that in another decade or two, many of these publishers will have moved on as well. For now they continue to fight the hobbyist fight.

Come and read the story of the 21 most notable companies to enter the RPG industry during one of its major periods of innovation — the story of their designers and their battles against the dragons.



About the Icon: Daniel Solis' icon for the '90s is an ankh. It represents the coming of White Wolf. However, it goes beyond that to also highlight the new styles of play and the new types of players that the '90s brought.

A Future History of Roleplaying

Though this book focuses on roleplaying companies that began publication in the '90s, many of their stories continued beyond that decade. Therefore, the trends of later times affected these early publishers. The most important future trends are detailed, in brief, below.

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 '90s in this new edition is slightly increased. The history of Metropolis Ltd. is new, while that of Hekaforge has been expanded. Appendix I is all new as well.

In addition, articles have been updated for companies still in business (and that actually added a fair amount to this book, since about half of the companies are still around).

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 hobbyist innovation.

Shannon Appelcline
March 29, 2013



Part One:

The Storytelling Small Press

(1990–1992)

The small press explosion that began in 1984 continued right into the early '90s, with new companies formed specifically to produce new RPGs continuing to appear. Many of them were ***original RPG producers,*** including White Wolf, Phage Press, and Dream Pod 9 — each of which appeared specifically to publish its own game.

Other paths into the industry continued to exist. AEG was an example of a ***magazine publisher*** — though like most, the company eventually abandoned its periodical to focus on other sort of roleplaying releases. Meanwhile, Atlas Games and Pagan Publishing proved that ***licensees*** could still excel in the industry.

Storytelling games — where plot and character were more important than exploration and combat — also proved to be an important and expanding trend in the early '90s. Games of this sort dated back to at least the mid-'80s — when *Paranoia* (1984), *Toon* (1984), and *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985) appeared — but now companies were being created specifically as ***storytelling publishers.*** White Wolf may have been the first, but Phage Press also ably advanced the banner. Even publishers like Atlas Games and (to a lesser extent) Pagan Publishing soon began to focus on storytelling games of their own.

It was a time of continued innovation in the industry, but also a calm before the storm that would soon shake the industry to its roots.

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
White Wolf	1990–2014	*Story Paths* (1990)	7
Atlas Games	1990-Present	*Tales of the Dark Ages* (1990)	52
Pagan Publishing	1990-Present	*The Unspeakable Oath #1* (1990)	75
AEG	1990-Present	*Shadis #1* (1990)	94
Crafty Games	2005-Present	*Back to Basics* (2006)	106
Phage Press	1991–2005	*Amber Diceless* (1991)	109
Dream Pod 9	1992-Present	*Night's Edge* (1992)	116

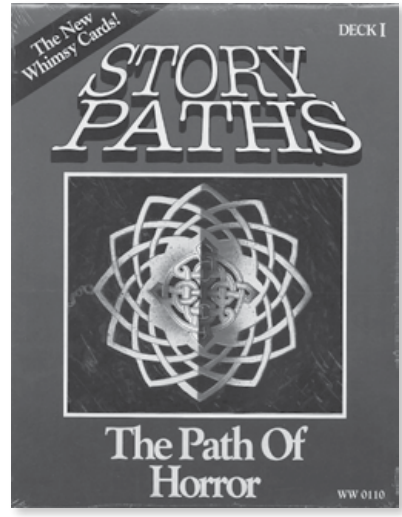
White Wolf: 1990–2014

Several years ago, White Wolf was one of the top companies in the RPG field, claiming a 25% share in the industry. Its rise to such heights from very small beginnings was amazing, and in recent years its downs and ups have been just as impressive.

Prelude to a Game Studio: 1986–1990

Though the growth of the RPG industry was slowing in the mid-'80s, the industry was still fairly young. The number of long-time RPG designers was small (and many still remained with their first companies), and therefore it was possible for fresh new faces with innate talent to break in. Such was the case when two Alabama brothers — Stewart and Steve Wieck — sent a *Villains & Vigilantes* adventure to FGU. Much to their surprise, *The Secret in the Swamp* (1986) was accepted and published.

Publication was a validation and though the two were still in high school, they decided to take the next step: self-publication.



1990: Story Paths: The Path of Horror

A short time later they were printing 30 copies of their first magazine, *Arcanum #1* (June 1986).

> *"Stewart just came up to me during class break during high school one day and said 'Let's start a magazine,'; I said 'Sure'; and we got to work that night on the first issue."*
>
> – Steve Wieck, "The RPGnet Interview #17," rpg.net (February 2008)

Thirty copies is really the smallest of small press, but the response was sufficient for editor-in-chief Stewart to decide his fanzine had the potential to be the basis of a business. Unfortunately, *Arcanum's* name was too similar to TSR's *Unearthed Arcana* (1985), so Stewart decided an alternate title was required. He settled upon "White Wolf," after the fantasy hero Elric of Melniboné.

White Wolf #1 (August 1986) appeared just two months later, produced by "White Wolf Publishing." Like its predecessor it was a stapled and photocopied fanzine, printed entirely in black & white — not really the stuff a future top-tier RPG company is made of. But the Wiecks persevered. Over the next couple of issues the print run jumped to 140, then 200. The magazine started being printed professionally with issue #4 (1986).

With issue #5 (1986), a second color to the cover was added, and distributors — beginning with Glenwood Distribution, run by Bob Carty — began to order the magazine, resulting in a print run of 1,120. White Wolf Publishing was clearly on the road to success. This was reflected by a cheeky illustration in that issue, which showed a white wolf wrestling with a dragon (and clearly getting the better of it). It was by a young Rich Thomas, who got involved with *White Wolf* after answering an ad in *Dragon* magazine. He'd become a staff artist with issue #7 (1987), then the magazine's art director with issue #11 (1987).

Meanwhile, *White Wolf* was changing in other ways, starting with issue #8 (December 1987). That issue's cover was printed full-color on glossy stock, the periodical's name was changed from *White Wolf* to *White Wolf Magazine*, and most importantly the Wiecks printed 10,000 copies. They gave many away at Gen Con 20 (1987), which helped them to market the magazine in a big way.

Early issues of *White Wolf* were primarily about *AD&D*, but that focus also changed with issue #8, when the young magazine became more "indie." Over the next 16 issues, *White Wolf* published numerous articles about two young games with innovative settings and rules: SkyRealm Productions' *SkyRealms of Jorune* (issues #8–16) and Lion Rampant's *Ars Magica* (issues #11–24). The magazine also gave attention to a perennial fantasy alternate, Chaosium's *RuneQuest*, (issues #15–22). Most of the articles for these game systems were written by the authors of

the games themselves, showing off the advantages of an independent magazine, beholden to no one.



As *White Wolf Magazine* highlighted independent games, it eclipsed Chaosium's *Different Worlds* magazine (1979–1987) — the former star in the category, which was then ending its run. Based solely on its magazine, White Wolf Publishing had become a notable force in the industry.

In its first incarnation, White Wolf Publishing also gave *some* indication that it was interested in the wider world of RPG publication. That began right in its first year of existence, when the company released an *AD&D* adventure by Stewart Wieck called *The Curse Undying* (1986). However, that was the company's only publication outside of *White Wolf Magazine* for four years.

Then in 1990 a new supplement appeared: *The Campaign Book Volume One: Fantasy* (1990), which included work by a young Ken Cliffe — also a *Villains & Vigilantes* writer before he came to White Wolf. The book was developed with the same independent ideas as *White Wolf Magazine*: it presented six fantasy settings in a generic manner that could be used with any game.

Though it built on the same independent ideals as the magazine, *The Campaign Book* would actually mark a new direction for White Wolf Publishing — as would become evident when a final puzzle piece fell into place.

Lions, Campaigns, and Stories, Oh My: 1990—1991

Enter Lion Rampant. They were a young roleplaying company — founded in Minnesota in 1987 — and one of the three independent publishers befriended by the Wiecks and their magazine. By a set of strange coincidences described in their own history, around 1990 Lion Rampant ended up in Georgia — just one state over from White Wolf Publishing — and then saw their funding disappear. They still had the creative talent to create great roleplaying material and their books still sold well enough to pay for their creation, but cash flow problems made it impossible to get that cycle started once more.

So, Lion Rampant and White Wolf Publishing decided to merge. White Wolf's Stewart Wieck and Lion Rampant's Mark Rein•Hagen became the co-owners of a new company that was called simply "White Wolf." The *Ars Magica* roleplaying game came along with the deal, as did the other members of Lion Rampant's staff,

including Lisa Stevens and Nicole Lindroos. This new White Wolf — founded in late 1990 and fueled by the creative staff of two different companies — is the heart of this roleplaying history.

White Wolf Magazine #24 (December 1990/January 1991) announced the merger (and quietly noted the new company name in its indicia). In his editorial, Stewart carefully explained that the magazine would remain *independent*, despite the company's new interest in roleplaying production.

> *"White Wolf Magazine will not become a house organ magazine. While house organs do service to the company they represent, they ultimately do harm to the roleplaying industry."*
>
> – Stewart Wieck, "Runes," *White Wolf Magazine #24* (1990)

By the time they released that announcement, White Wolf was already finishing up the first publication that was the joint work of the two former companies. It was an unassuming gaming accessory called "Story Paths," which expanded on Lion Rampant's *Whimsy Cards*.

The *Whimsy Cards* (1987) had been an innovative pack of 43 cards that gave players the ability to influence the storyline of an RPG by playing cards with text like "bad tidings," then explaining how that card influenced the plot of the game. White Wolf's new *Story Paths* — whose publication began with *The Path of Horror* (1990) and *The Path of Intrigue* (1990) — did the same thing, but offered more evocative detail for a very specific genre of gaming. Each deck also showed the new "White Wolf" logo and promised "A Renaissance in Games." There were originally supposed to be six more of these 24-card decks — including Paths of Danger, Hope, Deception, Discovery, Whimsy, and Suspense — but they were never produced.

That was because of Lion Rampant's final debt. For nine months following the merger of the companies, the Lion Rampant name and logo were maintained. Sales of the company's old stock were being used to pay off various debts that Lion Rampant owed. But nine months later there was one debt still remaining: the money invested by Dan Fox, the financier who moved Lion Rampant from Minnesota to Georgia. To pay off this remaining debt and to ensure that White Wolf's IP was clean and free, White Wolf traded Fox the *Story Paths* line. Fox would eventually sell them to Three Guys Gaming, who released a new edition of 81 cards in 1996, then dropped off the face of the earth.

Though they'd lost the first product jointly produced by White Wolf and Lion Rampant, the staff of the new company wasn't worried. They knew that much bigger things lay ahead.

Before we finish on the topic of White Wolf's origins, we should briefly talk about its changing company name. As we've already seen, White Wolf Publishing was merged with Lion Rampant to create White Wolf in late 1990. A few years later, beginning with *White Wolf Magazine #34* (January/February 1993), White Wolf started doing business as White Wolf Game Studio — a brand name that they continued using until their demise.

Calling the company a Game Studio back when they'd just put out some cards would have seemed a bit funny, but by the start of 1993, White Wolf actually had considerable gaming publications under their belt, as we'll now see.

Enter the World of Darkness: 1991

Mark Rein•Hagen's most impressive attribute as a game designer is clearly his constantly bubbling creativity. Though he (alongside Jonathan Tweet) created the definitive game of medieval magic in *Ars Magica* (1987), he wasn't content to rest on those laurels. As early as 1989 he was thinking about turning over the *Ars Magica* line to freelancers, so that he could start his next big project.

> *"For a while there was talk of a game called Shining Armor, which could be a companion game to Ars Magica, focusing on the Chivalric Knight; but I think other games, such as Pendragon, already cover the area well enough (or at least have saturated the market)."*
>
> – Mark Rein•Hagen, "Looking Ahead," *Running Rampant #2* (Autumn 1989)

Rein•Hagen's first idea was to create a series of linked games set in the Middle Ages, beginning with a knightly game called *Shining Armor*. Then he considered moving *Ars Magica* into the modern day as an urban fantasy. *Inferno* was another early idea: a game where players roleplayed in Purgatory, perhaps even taking on the roles of characters who had died in other campaigns. (A transformer explosion and the unlikely destruction of the sole manuscript led the team to decide *that* particular game was cursed.)

On the road to Gen Con '90 with Stewart Wieck and Lisa Stevens, Rein•Hagen hit upon a game that combined all of these concepts. It would be dark and moody like *Inferno*, it would be an urban fantasy with some history from *Ars Magica*, and it would be the first in a series of linked games.

The game of course was "Vampire: The Masquerade." Rein•Hagen had originally considered a licensed "Anne Rice roleplaying game," but then decided that a license wasn't necessary to create a gothic vampire RPG. However, there was one other potential obstacle: once the group arrived at Gen Con, they saw Stellar Games' brand-new *NightLife*, an urban monster game. Fortunately, they soon

decided that its more humorous take wouldn't get in their way. Mark Rein•Hagen began work on what would become his main project for the next year.

Early in 1991 — with *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) reaching completion — White Wolf pulled out all stops for a new marketing drive. They prepared a 16-page full-color glossy pamphlet that described their new game and sent 30 or 40 thousand copies to distributors to give away. This got players, retailers, and distributors alike excited about the game, priming the industry for their new release.

White Wolf was trying to evoke a very specific mood with their new game: a gothic feel that really hadn't been seen in roleplaying games before, except in TSR's classic *Ravenloft* (1983). That theming was first revealed in a textual introduction that led off the pamphlet. It began:

"She passes me by with a quick glance into the alley. I break away from the shadows. An arm's-length away, I can hear her heart pumping.

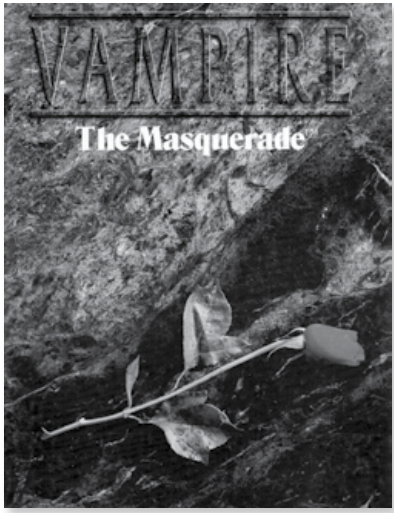
"*I have become death, the destroyer of souls*.

"Gliding toward her, the smell of her life-plasm waifs over me, arousing me. She is only inches from my caressing touch. My mind screams with lust.

"*NO!*"

Prose vignettes of this sort would become a constant feature in the White Wolf lines.

However, when *Vampire* was released, its dramatic cover — which featured a single red rose and an ankh laid on green marble — overshadowed the game's evocative prose. The cover was based on a photograph that White Wolf took after their first cover, by Dan Frazier, came in looking too much like every other roleplaying game. The spontaneous photograph of that green marble instead produced a wonderful, unique, and iconic vision of the game.



It wasn't just the cover of *Vampire* that was startling. The entire game was different from anything seen before in the roleplaying community. In the best tradition of Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire* (1976), White Wolf's new game revealed a world of politics, machinations, angst, and internal conflict. Though RPGs were already becoming more about plots and people — and less about dungeons and fighting — centering a whole game on these subjects was entirely new.

The mechanics of *Vampire* weren't quite as innovative, but they definitely contributed to the game's success. By 1990, when he started work on *Vampire*, Rein•Hagen lost his former mechanics guy — Jonathan Tweet — who left Lion Rampant the previous year. Rein•Hagen turned to a new designer for his new game: Tom Dowd, the co-designer of *Shadowrun* (1989).

As a result of Dowd's history, some *Shadowrun* mechanics inevitably seeped into *Vampire*, most notably "comparative" dice pools. This was a new method to roll dice that *Shadowrun* created. Skill values determined the number of dice to roll, but the dice pools *weren't* added up (as they were in *Champions*, *Star Wars*, *Tunnels & Trolls*, and other early games featuring "additive" dice pools). Instead, each individual die was compared to a target number and then the total number of successes was counted.

Dowd adapted the *Shadowrun* mechanic fairly exactly for *Vampire*, though the die type changed from a d6 to a d10. The resulting system had advantages and disadvantages. On the downside, the probabilities of the system are confusing. It's a rare player who can quickly say what the odds are for "rolling 3 successes on 7 dice requiring a 7+ for success." This problem was highlighted by the fact that GMs had to choose target numbers for each roll. On the upside, casual and first-time players liked the fact that skill levels were low and so could be represented by filled-in dots on character sheets — making the game look *much* less intimidating than the number-heavy standard for RPGs.

Two other game design elements were notable in *Vampire*'s success: disciplines and clans.

Disciplines — such as dominate and other vampiric powers — effectively made *Vampire* a dark superhero game rather than a horror game. Horror games had always been a hard sell, with Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) a very rare standout. Conversely, superheroes were a proven winner in roleplaying.

Clans — organizations that *Vampire*s swore allegiance to — made the game more accessible. Though Rein•Hagen's *Ars Magica* featured the similar Houses of Hermes, it was actually Chris McDonough who suggested clans for *Vampire*. It was late in the game design process, and playtesters were having troubles with character concepts. McDonough suggested that something like *D&D*'s character classes was needed. The result was the *Vampire* clans, depicting standard vampiric archetypes; they would become invaluable when *Vampire*'s gothic stylings let it reach out into new communities of players.

White Wolf's marketing blitz was successful, and the game was sent back to the printers within a week of its initial release.

Though *Vampire* marked a new beginning for the new company, 1991 also represented a time of endings for White Wolf. Steve Wieck — after graduating from

the Georgia Institute of Technology — left White Wolf to begin MBA-equivalent training at GE. Meanwhile, two of the remaining Lion Rampant staff also left: Nicole Lindroos returned to Minnesota, where she went to work for Atlas Games, while Lisa Stevens headed out to Seattle to become the first employee of a scrappy young publisher called Wizards of the Coast.

White Wolf was already growing its own staff, but with so many founding members of the company gone, it was the remaining two — Stewart Wieck and Mark Rein•Hagen — who put their mark on what would perhaps be the most creative period in the company's history: 1991–1995.

Five Years, Five Games (Plus One): 1991—1995

Following the ground-breaking release of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, White Wolf did something every bit as innovative and amazing: they put out a new roleplaying game every year — each set in *Vampire*'s World of Darkness and each using *Vampire*'s Storyteller rule system. The next four games were: *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (1992), *Mage: The Ascension* (1993), *Wraith: The Oblivion* (1994), and *Changeling: The Dreaming* (1995).

Each core book featured an abstract, iconic cover. Some of the results were attractive, but none as impressive as *Vampire*'s green marble. There were also some missteps. *Werewolf*'s first-edition cover featured die-cut claw marks that easily ripped. *Wraith* was called "noseroids" by some wags due to the game's nearly unreadable cover logo.

Behind those covers, each game built upon the core strengths of *Vampire*. They featured dark, dystopic visions of the world that centered on super-powered protagonists and included societal organizations to assist players with their character concepts. Though each of these new lines inevitably harkened back to *Vampire*, they were also each unique.

Werewolf (1992) depicted its shape-changing heroes as magical protectors of Gaia and offered a very different vision of the World of Darkness, thus showing how one setting could support two very different viewpoints.

Mage (1993) was, to a certain extent, the game that Rein•Hagen imagined way back in 1989 when he first talked about the possibility of a modern-day *Ars Magica* — though now the original game's Order of Hermes appeared as just a single tradition among many. It was also the first World of Darkness game that Rein•Hagen was not explicitly involved with. That's because White Wolf was growing beyond that initial partnership of Wieck and Rein•Hagen. As we'll see, Rein•Hagen's step back from RPG production wasn't the only change occurring in the company that year.



Wraith (1994) — which was originally called "Ghost," and which marked Rein•Hagen's return to the design of the core games — is often lauded as the most consistent and moody of the original White Wolf games. It also featured a roleplaying innovation, the "Shadow Guide," where each player acted as another character's evil side — trying to tempt and cajole him to the way of darkness. This returned to ideas of "troupe" roleplaying that Rein•Hagen introduced at Lion Rampant.

Changeling (1995) — itself originally called "Fairie" — was bright and beautiful, a real contrast to the other World of Darkness games. It was also one of the earlier full-color gamebooks. *Changeling*'s original magic system, however, was controversial. It used "Cantrip Cards," which were sold in CCG-like collectible packs.

Though the release of so many games certainly continued to capture the interest of the industry, it also had its downsides.

The biggest problem with White Wolf's rapid expansion of game lines was that the first editions of the games were often flawed, to the considerable disgruntlement of fans. As a result additional editions tended to be quickly released. Between 1992 and 2000 the core rulebooks for the more successful lines of *Vampire*, *Werewolf*, and *Mage* each received three editions, while *Wraith* and *Changeling* each received two. Some games changed more than others. *Mage* probably mutated the most, with considerable thematic changes appearing as each edition was published.

Another issue was that not all game lines were equally successful. From *Wraith* onward, White Wolf would see diminishing returns.

Besides their five RPGs, White Wolf also expanded the World of Darkness in another direction: live action roleplaying games, starting with the *Vampire*-focused *Mind's Eye Theatre: The Masquerade* (1993). Rein•Hagen had been thinking about LARPs since *Ars Magica*, but this was the first time his ideas saw print.

The pre-publication iterations of *Mind's Eye Theatre* were rough. This was often the case with Rein•Hagen designs: he has a unique, creative touch for design, but not an editor's soul. As a result additional designers were often brought in to polish his games. One of the editors for *Mind's Eye Theatre* was Mike Tinney, who had been running LARPs of his own in the Northeast. Tinney would become the *Mind's Eye Theatre* line manager and would later rise up much higher within White Wolf.

Although not as much of a commercial success as the tabletop RPGs, the *Mind's Eye* games remain influential. They were one of the very few commercially successful LARP lines, and they've likely brought many new people into the hobby, among them many women.

Five Years, Many Supplements: 1991—1995

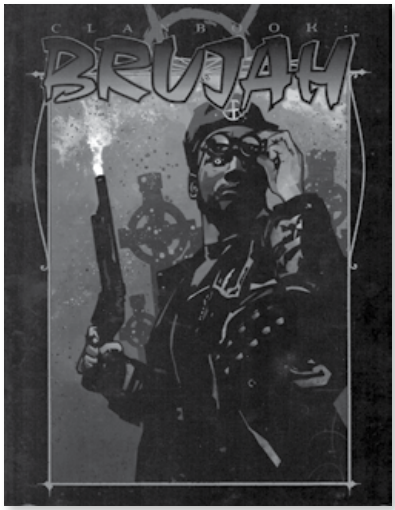
White Wolf also supported each of their new games with a full game line — meaning that by 1995 they were juggling five different World of Darkness games. Since Mark Rein•Hagen was constantly working on the *next* thing, new staff had to be brought in to manage these lines. Andrew Greenberg came on as the *Vampire* line editor, then Bill Bridges as the *Werewolf* line editor.

As the first two World of Darkness developers, Greenberg and Bridges were central to defining the look and feel of all of White Wolf's World of Darkness products. They were helped in this regard by *White Wolf Magazine*'s Rich Thomas, who began working as the art director for all of White Wolf starting in 1991; he'd later become VP of Production and Design, then creative director, before taking on an even *more* vital role starting in 2012.

> *"I think there's no doubt that Andrew and Bill have expanded on the games in a very positive way. … I try not to step on their toes, and while it was my vision that started the various games, I try to let their visions take over without getting in their way. I think that's all part of the roleplaying ethic, it's all interactive, and I like to see what changes are made."*
>
> – Mark Rein•Hagen, "Out of Character," *White Wolf #39* (1994)

Each game line was marked with a unique and distinctive trade dress, using those iconic backgrounds from the core game books. You could recognize a *Vampire* supplement by its marbled background and a *Wraith* book by its black & white chains. This is a general marketing methodology that White Wolf has carried across all of its lines, from *Ars Magica*'s tome covers to *Exalted*'s anime stylings. Product line branding is more common in the industry today, but it was notable in 1991.

The early supplements included both setting books and adventures — which were pretty common for the industry at the time — but White Wolf also popularized a new sort of supplement: the splatbook. Splatbooks detail a specific race, class, or organization for a roleplaying game. They're generally player's books, and therefore sell to the entire player base — which is usually much more profitable than selling to just gamemasters, as traditional adventures do.



Splatbooks had been around since almost the dawn of roleplaying. Chaosium's *Cults of Prax* (1979) was an early example, while GDW quietly built much of their classic *Traveller* line around splatbooks, from *Mercenary* (1978) to *Darrians* (1987). Even Lion Rampant published a splatbook, *The Order of Hermes* (1990).

However, no one had previously put out splatbooks as consistently and in such volume as White Wolf did. *Clanbook: Brujah* (1992) was the first. It focused on a single vampiric clan, leaving room for another dozen splatbooks in the same line. White Wolf would go on to produce splatbooks for all of their initial lines, and the term "splatbook" was eventually coined for White Wolf's releases.

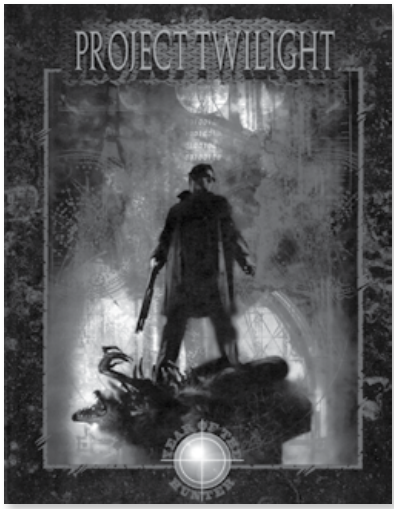
Though White Wolf generally gets the credit for this innovation, it was really an industry trend. TSR introduced similar products around the same time, beginning with *PHBR1: The Complete Fighter's Handbook* (1989).

Two other innovations were popularized in White Wolf's early supplements: metaplot and crossovers.

Metaplots have been around since GDW started publishing its "Traveller News Service" in *The Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society #2* (1979). The concept was simple: a gameworld slowly changed through a game's publications. It helped to keep the setting dynamic and dramatic — but also offered the possibility of railroading players.

The first World of Darkness rulebooks had briefly touched upon metaplot. *Vampire* mentioned an Armageddon-like "Gehenna," while *Werewolf* played up the idea of the "Apocalypse" — even including it as part of the game's title. However the metaplots really got going in the supplements, which were what introduced gradual change. For example, the setting described in *Chicago by Night* (1991) was changed when Prince Lodin was killed in *Under a Blood Red Moon* (1993), which was reflected in the second edition of *Chicago by Night* (1993). The idea of metaplot would mature and largely take over the production of the World of Darkness games in the later '90s and early '00s.

Crossovers were a bit more innovative within the game industry, mainly because not too many companies had settings that could be crossed over — with rare exceptions like Hero Games and Palladium Books. TSR's *Spelljammer* (1989),



which offered a way to connect every single *D&D* fantasy world, was one of the first true crossovers. White Wolf — with all of their lines set in the same world at the same time — would go after the idea much more aggressively.

The aforementioned *Under a Blood Red Moon* was one of the earliest crossovers, putting both vampires and werewolves into the same story. Unfortunately it suffered from a crucial flaw that would plague all multi-entity White Wolf adventures: though five game lines had been intended from the start, they were each somewhat different, and the rules never meshed entirely well.

White Wolf began to push crossovers much harder in 1995, with "The Year of the Hunter." Expanding upon the idea of *Vampire*'s *The Hunters Hunted* (1992), White Wolf produced five sourcebooks, one for each of their games. Each detailed the background for a group hunting the game's title characters. It was a clever way to encourage collectors to look at all of White Wolf's lines and to encourage cross-fertilization from one game to another. It also avoided the problems of true crossovers, like *Under a Blood Red Moon*, because it was thematic crossover rather than an actual mixing of different characters.

Many more yearly crossovers would follow, beginning in 1997. Some would be thematic like this one — presenting similar books for different lines — but many others would instead be largely plot-driven, as we'll see.

Licensing the World of Darkness: 1994—1995

As White Wolf approached their original five-game goal, two other notable World of Darkness products appeared — both from licensees.

The first license was for the inevitable CCG. After the release of *Magic: The Gathering* (1993), Wizards of the Coast started gobbling up licenses to produce RPG-based CCGs. Among the licenses that Wizards secured was one to White Wolf's *Vampire*. It was an obvious choice as White Wolf's fame had been skyrocketing over the previous few years.

The *Vampire* CCG was called *Jyhad* (1994), but this name was quickly changed to *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle* due to concerns over offending Muslims. It was designed by Richard Garfield, the creator of *Magic*, and was an innovative CCG design that worked very well for multiple players — not just two. *Vampire: The*



Eternal Struggle was published by Wizards of the Coast from 1994–1996.

Vampire: The Eternal Struggle would not be the only World of Darkness CCG. White Wolf produced their own *Werewolf*-based CCG called *Rage* (1995–1996), which they even tied into the *Werewolf* RPG with a *Rage: Warriors of the Apocalypse* (1996) character book. The *Rage* CCG was successful enough that the *Werewolf* RPG actually did better than *Vampire* in the 1995–1996 time frame — something that was unprecedented and suggests why RPG publishers were so eager to put out CCGs. White Wolf later licensed rights to *Rage* out to Five Rings Publishing, who followed it up with an incompatible second edition (1998–1999).

Meanwhile, White Wolf picked up the rights to *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle* and published it on their own (2000–2010), until "licensing problems" with Wizards brought it to an end. However these CCGs lie largely outside this history of RPGs.

White Wolf's second World of Darkness license had the potential to be even bigger than a CCG. They sold the rights to produce a World of Darkness television show to Aaron Spelling, the man behind *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990–2000). Spelling's *Kindred: The Embraced* (1996) didn't make the fall 1995 schedule, but it eventually ran from April 2 to May 8, 1996. Like Spelling's other works, it mixed drama and soap opera.

The show was cancelled after just eight episodes. Many folks thought it was quite bad, but nonetheless it was a real laurel for the industry. The *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon (1983–1985) and the *Battletech* cartoon (1994) marked roleplaying's two previous forays into television; *Kindred* was its first prime-time outing.

The interest that both Wizards of the Coast and Aaron Spelling showed toward *Vampire* highlights White Wolf's position in the mid-'90s as a prime producer of intellectual property. But they weren't just some indie idea house. Due to the great sales of their various lines, White Wolf became a top-tier RPG company.

TSR was still #1, but in the few years since they'd exploded onto the scene, White Wolf Game Studio had gained considerable market share. Only Palladium and FASA were really competing with them for the #2 spot, but White Wolf consistently put out more new top sellers. By 1995 it's fair to say that White Wolf was the #2 publisher of roleplaying games.

The Merger Remnants: 1991–1995

When looking at White Wolf from 1991 to 1995, it's easy to see a trend of entirely upward movement. White Wolf was constantly releasing new products lines — including five RPGs and one LARP. What's more easily forgotten is what was left behind: the two products that had gotten Lion Rampant and White Wolf Publishing started: the *Ars Magica* game and *White Wolf Magazine*. In 1991, White Wolf certainly didn't intend to abandon them, but by 1995 that's exactly what would happen.

At first, it looked like *Ars Magica* would be an important element of the World of Darkness because it was used as part of the setting's historical backstory. One of the Houses of the Order of Hermes — the Tremere — was even made into a *Vampire* clan, while the rest of the Order of Hermes survived into the modern day and became a part of the *Mage* game. Of course this all required changes to *Ars Magica* as well. As a result, the historical setting became darker — much to the dismay of many existing fans.

> *"The one thing I hear more than anything else is that demons were out of control in White Wolf's ArM."*
>
> – Jonathan Tweet, "Interview with Jonathan Tweet," *Redcap v2 #*3 (Autumn 1994)

Just a year after the release of *Vampire*, White Wolf displayed their commitment to *Ars Magica* by publishing a massive third edition of the rules (1992). It was developed by Ken Cliffe, the *Ars Magica* line editor for much of its time at White Wolf. Like *Vampire*, this new core book was publicized with a color booklet made available to stores.



White Wolf's support didn't end there. They put out over 20 *Ars Magica* supplements (1991–1994). Some of these books were published in series, much like their World of Darkness splatbooks. These included two "Tribunal" books — each of which detailed a portion of Mythic Europe — and a trio of books that together described the divine, infernal, and faerie realms of power. Though *Ars Magica* has gone through two more publishers since its days at White Wolf, these themed series continue to this day, highlighting White Wolf's success at imagining supplement lines.

White Wolf definitely gave *Ars Magica* a fair shake, but by 1994 it was obvious that the game couldn't measure up to White Wolf's much more successful modern horror games. Fortunately *Ars Magica* still had a big fan in Lisa Stevens, who you might recall joined Wizards of the Coast back in 1991. Since then, Wizards of the Coast had done very well with *Magic: The Gathering*. As a result of their new funds, they were now talking with a game designer who they wanted to bring in to head up their RPG Department: Jonathan Tweet, former founder of Lion Rampant and co-author of *Ars Magica*. Soon Wizards and White Wolf reached an agreement and *Ars Magica* was sold to the CCG giant. Despite the shared history of the games, *Ars Magica* and The World of Darkness were now forever separated.

And that brings us back to *White Wolf Magazine*. Tasked with Stewart Wieck's promise to "remain independent," it faced an ever-increasing problem as White Wolf published more games.

With *White Wolf Magazine #31* (1992), the magazine underwent a graphical redesign that brought it more into tune with the trendier visual presentation of the post-*Vampire* White Wolf. Afterward the magazine paid more attention to White Wolf's own games. It didn't become a house organ, but it always featured at least one White Wolf article thereafter. At the same time, Stewart Wieck stepped down as editor of the magazine that he founded his company upon; business affairs were taking up an increasing amount of his time, a topic we'll return to shortly.

The new editor of the magazine was Ken Cliffe — who seemed to be overseeing all of the company's legacy products in those years. Given free rein, he opted to take the magazine through a series of transformations. First, he made it monthly, beginning with issue #39 (January 1994). Afterward he worked to make *White Wolf Magazine* more "cutting edge." Articles became trendier — filled with casual language and topical references. Articles on White Wolf games proliferated, while support for competing companies slowly faded. Finally, the company's long-running slogan highlighting its "independent roleplaying coverage" disappeared with issue #47 (September 1994).

> *"Just so you know, we're looking at some cool changes in the near future and are going to an overall higher page count. That means new ideas, new stuff and more pages to do it in. Oh, baby!"*
>
> – Ken Cliffe, "Runes," *White Wolf Inphobia #50* (1995)

With issue #50 (1995), *White Wolf Magazine* made a final metamorphosis, changing its name to *White Wolf: Inphobia*. By now the magazine was almost unrecognizable to anyone who had seen its black & white fanzine origins. Instead, full-color pages covered the whole spectrum of "cool" culture, including comics, music, books, and TV. Cover slogans blithely offered up cryptic statements like

"induce vomiting if taken internally" (#53) and "Die, Danny, Die!" (#56). *Inphobia* didn't last long. It was cancelled by issue #57 (1995).

Between the transfer of *Ars Magica* in 1994 and the death of *White Wolf Magazine* in 1995, White Wolf came to a crossroads. The company was increasingly centered around a single product line, the World of Darkness. However — between lower sales on later lines and the end of the original five-game vision — that line was no longer maintaining its upward momentum.

New directions were needed.

White Wolf Fiction: 1993–1998

As we saw, Stewart Wieck was becoming increasingly focused on the business of running White Wolf by 1992. That's because his partner, Mark Rein•Hagen, was spending his time designing games. Stewart wasn't thrilled about this division of labor, but he stuck with it until 1993.

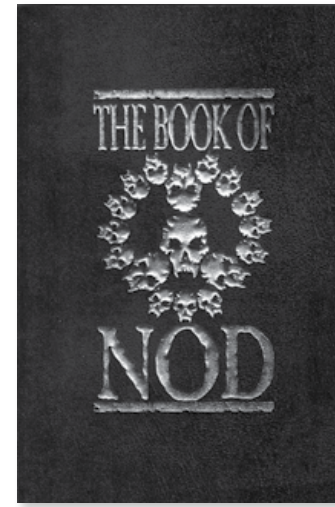
Re-enter Steve Wieck, back from GE with two years of business training and eager to put it to use. Stewart didn't waste any time in handing over the reins of power to his brother, who would be the CEO of White Wolf from 1993 to 2002.

That left Stewart with plenty of time for more creative pursuits — which, after all, was why he'd got into publishing in the first place. He helped to edit the various White Wolf lines — to their benefits — but even more notably he got White Wolf into a whole new business: fiction.

The line kicked off with *Drums Around the Fire* (1993), a collection of *Werewolf* short stories that was entirely typical for the RPG fiction genre. Authors associated with the game line wrote gaming fiction for a gaming audience (though a few named authors did show up in this and other early works).

However, White Wolf's fiction wouldn't stay typical for long. *The Book of Nod* (1994) got some attention not just for its great gothic writing, but also for the fact that it pretended to be an ancient book from within the World of Darkness itself.

It was *Dark Destiny* (1994), published that same year, that really put White Wolf on the fiction map. Edward E. Kramer — a professional from outside the hobbyist industry — edited *Dark Destiny*. It featured World of Darkness stories by Robert Bloch, Nancy Collins, Harlan Ellison, and many other authors from beyond the gaming field. They didn't slavishly devote themselves to White Wolf's continuity, and they presented original and innovative views of the World. The result was actually noticed by book critics — who typically had ignored game-related fiction. Now they were paying attention, and White Wolf stories got mentioned in various "Year's Best" anthologies. *Dark Destiny* also helped White Wolf to attract a higher caliber of fiction authors, because it gave them a reputation for giving their writers real creative freedom — a rarity in gaming fiction.



White Wolf wasn't content publishing just fiction related to their games. The Wiecks had long loved classic science-fiction and fantasy, and they decided to use their increasingly successful platform for publication to give something back to the SF community. The result was the "Borealis" fiction line that featured original books like Neil Gaiman's *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish* (1997).

White Wolf also introduced a "Borealis Legends" series that reprinted science-fiction and fantasy classics. Borealis Legends' most notable publications were: a 15-volume set of books reprinting all of Michael Moorcock's Eternal Champion stories (1994–1999); a 4-volume series reprinting all of Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories (1995–1998); and the first four volumes of a series that had been intended to reprint 40 Harlan Ellison books (1996–1997). White Wolf also produced original stories in these settings, including the Eternal Champion collections *Tales of the White Wolf* (1994) and *Pawn of Chaos: Tales of the Eternal Champion* (1996) and the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser novel *Swords Against the Shadowland* (1998).

Unfortunately, White Wolf's fiction lines got started at a very bad time. In 1995–1996 book chains like Borders and Barnes & Noble were shutting down mall stores to open up "super" stores. All books sold to bookstores are returnable, meaning that the stores can send any unsold books back to the publisher for credit. As mall stores closed, record numbers of returns were sent back to publishers, while new purchases for super stores accounted for just a fraction of those numbers.



This caused severe financial problems for White Wolf, affecting the whole company beginning in 1995 and 1996. The problems were worsened by overhiring and a downturn in the CCG market. Painful layoffs were required each year. Worse, the stress of the financial issues caused a fracture in the company itself that would cause one of its founders to leave forever, a topic we'll return to. Though Borealis struggled on for a few years more, it finally tailed off in 1998–1999, amid ever increasing financial issues.

"We're selling more than we ever have." said Mage line developer Phil Brucato. "But people got into a 'prosperity mentality,' there was bad judgement, and the company expanded too quickly."

– Allen Varney, "The Current Clack," *Dragon #227* (March 1996)

World of Darkness novels and story collections, more typical of RPG publishers, were the main focus of White Wolf fiction. Many later novels would either connect directly to sourcebooks or would help to push along the metaplot. Even those disappeared around 2006, until a more recent revival.

Ultimately, the fiction of the '90s was not financially successful. However, it was an area of major growth of White Wolf and at the time every bit as revolutionary for the company.

Beyond the World of Darkness: 1994–1995

Fortunately, fiction wasn't White Wolf's only new line during the last years of its original five game lines. Just as the company was showing *Ars Magica* the door in 1994, they were also considering their first ever non-World-of-Darkness RPG. It would be the kick-off to four years of new creativity. It would also move the company toward some dark times — starting with the Borealis return problems of 1995–1996 and continuing on to even bigger issues in 1998.

But in 1994, things were still looking up, and that's when White Wolf released *Streetfighter* (1994). Though based on a video game license, it used a variant of the Storyteller game system. Despite support and marketing from White Wolf, it was never a hit. White Wolf let the license for it lapse in 1996.

HoL (1995) was White Wolf's second new RPG — though it was actually only "new to them." It had previously been published by small press Dirt Merchant Games (1994) and had received good acclaim as a satirical indie publication. *HoL* was a science-fiction game set in a distant penal colony — the Human Occupied Landfill. It was funny and profane — even offensive — and it went against the tropes of many RPGs. Though it was probably never played that extensively, *HoL* did prefigure the wacky directions that indie RPGs would take in the '00s — and now White Wolf had it in their stable of games.



However, *HoL* also presented a problem. It was sufficiently adult that it might damage White Wolf's reputation as a publisher of entertainment intended for young adults. Therefore it was published under a new imprint, the Black Dog Game Factory, named after a corporation in the World of Darkness.

White Wolf also used the Black Dog imprint to put out World of Darkness supplements that would otherwise have been considered too adult. *Vampire*, *Werewolf*, *Mage*, and *Wraith* all got the Black Dog treatment in 1995, then the imprint dropped down to an average of two books a year through 2000.

In many ways, these Black Dog books represented a return to form for White Wolf. They offered up new ways to present innovative material, just as *Vampire* had been cutting edge back when it appeared on the gaming scene in 1991. Some of that innovation was noticed. *Charnel Houses of Europe: The Shoah* (1997) — which adapted the Holocaust for *Wraith* — and the four-volume, award-winning *Giovanni Chronicles* (1995–1999) — which traced a family from the 1400s to the modern day — both earned attention and acclaim for White Wolf.

Despite that critical acclaim, Black Dog's smaller audience and the chance that it could *still* damage the reputation of White Wolf with its more intense and grittier subject matter eventually spelled the end for the imprint. Like *Streetfighter*, Black Dog was another attempt to break new ground in the late '90s that ultimately went nowhere.

Science-Fiction, from an Exile to a Trinity: 1997—2001

Streetfighter and *HoL* both trailblazed new ground for White Wolf, but neither was a major initiative. The same can't be said for White Wolf's push into science-fiction roleplaying games, which was led by Mark Rein•Hagen himself. *Exile* (originally *Parsec*) was announced in 1996, with publication intended for 1997. This Mark Rein•Hagen design used a brand-new rule system and was set in a brand-new universe — the Null Cosm. It would have been the first of a series of games, just as *Vampire* had been.

Exile was described as "a moody, cultured, stylish space opera, rife with mystery and adventure." It was said to include concepts from David Brin's *Uplift* books, Frank Herbert's *Dune* and the works of Orson Scott Card and Gene Wolfe. Rein•Hagen again showed his interest in metaplot by saying, "Null Cosm is a setting and game line designed as a saga, a complete story that will transpire over a number of years."

By the end of the year, White Wolf also announced that the property would be owned by a non-profit called the "Null Foundation," which in turn would be owned by the artists and authors who actually created the game world. It was a

unique way to keep creators invested in their creation. Rein•Hagen also hoped it would protect *Exile* from the corrupting influence of commercial pressure.

Unfortunately *Exile* ran straight into a problem that we've already met: White Wolf's 1995–1996 economic downturn, caused by bookstore returns and other factors. These economic problems in turn caused a falling out between Mark Rein•Hagen and the Wiecks. In the end, Rein•Hagen left the company (though he'd remain an owner for another decade). He took *Exile* with him.

Mark Rein•Hagen stayed briefly involved with the gaming field after leaving White Wolf. Rein•Hagen's Null Foundation put out a playtest draft of *Exile* in 1997, but after that the game disappeared. A few years later Rein•Hagen turned up at the head of Atomoton, Inc. The new company produced Rein•Hagen's *Z-G*, or *Zero-G* (2001), a collectible action figure game that also used the Null Cosm background.

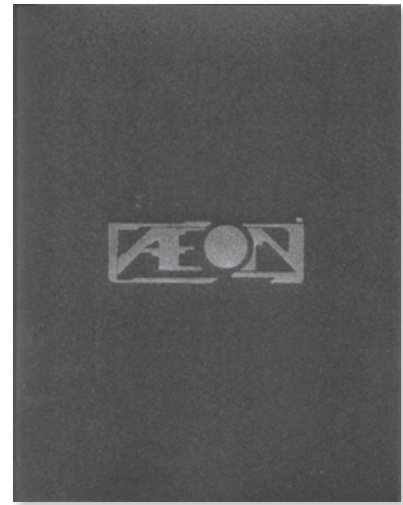
> *"Z-G is not just a game; it's an entire world, based on an exquisitely detailed 'meta-plot.' Set 100 years in the future, the zCosm and story will unfold by paralleling time in the real world, day by day, hour by hour, based around the adventures of four primary characters – Seren, Jett, Zak-9, and Lucy – as well as their foes."*
>
> – "About Atomoton™, Inc.," atomoton.com (2001)

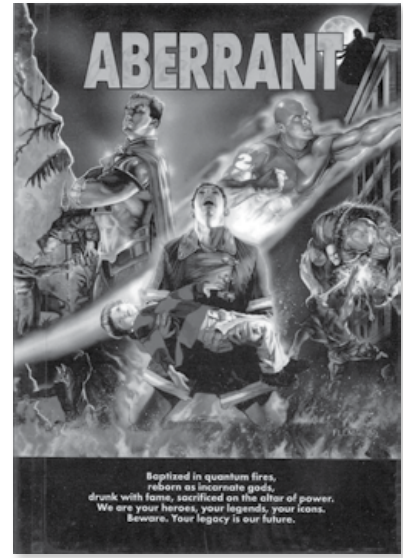
Z-G's figures had both exchangeable pieces *and* collectible cards, which offered some interesting innovation. The game mechanics were also rather ... *unique*. One of the game's most notable elements was that figures' poses had game effects.

Despite these innovations, *Z-G* didn't last long. Both it and Atomoton were dead by 2003, after which Mark Rein•Hagen permanently exited the history of the RPG field — except for a brief return in 2007 to sell his shares in White Wolf. More recently he's tried his hand at board game production through Kickstarter. Currently he lives in Georgia — the country, not the state.

Meanwhile, White Wolf was faced with a dilemma. There was an RPG-sized hole in their 1997 schedule. CEO Steve Wieck asked designer Andrew Bates to fill it. The result was a new game, *ÆON* (1997), which went from first conception to publication in just 10 months. Like *Exile*, *ÆON* was a science-fiction game intended to create a whole new series of games — to be precise, a trilogy. Though it used a variant of the Storyteller game system, *ÆON* was meant to appeal to a totally different, more action-oriented audience than the World of Darkness.

In order to support this new audience, *ÆON* made one major change to the Storyteller game system: it fixed die targets at "7" so that storytellers didn't have





to think both about success levels *and* target values. It was a simple but notable improvement that would be carried through most future White Wolf RPGs — beginning with the revised versions of core books that appeared in 1998 and 2000 and continuing into the "New World of Darkness."

Unfortunately *ÆON* ran into troubles almost immediately due to a lawsuit from Viacom, who felt that it violated the trademark of their TV show, *Aeon Flux* (1991–1995). The names on the first printing of *ÆON* actually had to be stickered over with the game's new name, *Trinity*.

Afterward two more games in the series followed like clockwork. Rather uniquely, they covered a variety of genres and time periods. Rob Hatch's near-future, superheroic *Aberrant* (1999) was the first. It had already been in development and was remolded to fit the "*Trinity* Universe" setting.

Critical acclaim but insufficient sales seemed to be a continuing pattern for White Wolf's new RPG lines of the late '90s. By the time the third *Trinity* book was published, it was obvious that this was the fate of the *Trinity* line as well. Therefore, *Adventure!* (2001), the pulp component of the RPG trilogy, was released as a standalone book. Except for some PDFs that ran through 2004, it marked the end of White Wolf's Storyteller-based *Trinity* games.

Before we leave White Wolf's science-fiction games of the late '90s, we should touch upon one final gothic RPG: *Fading Suns* (1996). It was a science-fiction game created by Andrew Greenberg and Bill Bridges, who we've already seen creating the foundations upon which the World of Darkness was based. However, White Wolf did *not* publish Fading Suns. This new RPG with a "White Wolf feel" was put out by a new publisher: Holistic Design (who are the subject of their own history).

Overexpanding the World of Darkness: 1996—1998

Though White Wolf was trying to branch out in new directions, they were still supporting the World of Darkness. Based on the game model they'd originated in 1991, that meant putting out a new World of Darkness game each and every year. Though the original sequence of games had been "used up" in 1995, the staff at White Wolf figured out a new model for game releases that would take them through 2000: historical RPGs, each based on one of the original World of Darkness Games.

This soon resulted in three more game lines: *Vampire: The Dark Ages* (1996), *Werewolf: The Wild West* (1997), and *Mage: The Sorcerers Crusade* (1998).

Two more historical game lines were scheduled. "Wraith: The Great War" was to be the fourth historical game line. Internet rumor mills suggest that the fifth would have been a *Changeling* setting for the free love and flower children of the '60s. However, White Wolf's second five-game sequence instead came to an abrupt halt. As we'll see, White Wolf was facing continued economic problems and would hit a new crisis in 1998.

During these years of historic releases, White Wolf also created its second "Year of" event, using the same model as 1995's Year of the Hunter. Now they presented 1997's Year of the Ally, which offered new companions for the protagonists of all of White Wolf's current games — then the five core RPGs plus *Vampire: The Dark Ages* and *Mind's Eye Theatre*.

It would be the last yearly event in this older style, where the crossover books were only thematically linked. As we'll see, the premise underlying the World of Darkness crossovers would be revamped the next year.

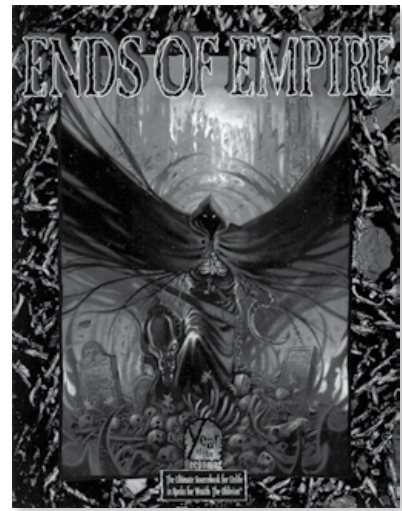
The historical RPG cancellations and the yearly event revamps were just two parts of a general overhaul of the World of Darkness. By 1998 the game lines were increasingly in need of a housecleaning. Of White Wolf's last five World of Darkness games — from 1994's *Wraith: The Oblivion* to 1998's *Mage: The Sorcerers Crusade* — only *Vampire: The Dark Ages* sold well.

Worse, these low-selling RPGs were part of a general downward trend for the company. The book-trade problems of 1995–1996 flowed right into the CCG bust of 1996–1997, creating a real financial crisis in 1998. Beyond that, the company had lost its core creative force, thanks to Mark Rein•Hagen's departure.

A change was necessary.

Downturn & What It Brought: 1998—2001

On September 14, 1998, White Wolf announced that they were restructuring their business.



To start with, the *Wraith* line was cancelled outright. However, White Wolf didn't let it go without finishing its story — metaplot was becoming even more important to the company by that time. First, they *did* offer up *Wraith*'s historical cousin, *Wraith: The Great War* (1999). However, unlike the other historical RPGs, this one was a short-lived line — which was a new trend at White Wolf by 1999. Then they published *Ends of Empire* (1999), which was not only the last *Wraith* book, but also a dramatic finale to the line. It allowed player characters to play out the last story in *Wraith*, ultimately resolving the game's metaplot — an almost entirely unprecedented event, notably preceded only by the revamps of TSR's campaign settings in 1989 and West End's finale to *Torg* in 1995.

White Wolf also decided that they couldn't afford to keep publishing *Changeling: The Dreaming*, *Werewolf: The Wild West*, or *Mage: The Sorcerers Crusade*. However, they had an innovative solution for what to do with these three games.

The real problem with those games was not that they weren't successful, but rather than they weren't successful *enough*. It was all about "comparatives"; though those lesser lines didn't sell well enough to support White Wolf's cost of doing business, they would have done just fine at a smaller company.

So White Wolf created a smaller company. Sort of.

Based on a proposal by Mike Tinney — now vice president of Licensing and Marketing — White Wolf created a new imprint called "Arthaus." This imprint took much of the cost of creating supplements "out-of-house" (meaning that it wasn't being done on White Wolf's payroll, and therefore at White Wolf's scales of cost). This let White Wolf make supplements for these lesser lines more affordable while simultaneously kept the advantages of White Wolf's name recognition and distribution.

> *"What is Arthaus? It's White Wolf's newest imprint. White Wolf's mission has always been to create art that entertains; White Wolf Arthaus is the embodiment of that ideal. Modeled after small press, the Arthaus team strives to create games and projects that are new, experimental and unique. White Wolf Arthaus now manages whole game lines, supports others and creates specialty projects whenever possible, all in keeping with White Wolf's regular games and books."*
>
> – White Wolf catalog

The *Changeling* line did well at Arthaus, as did *Mage: The Sorcerers Crusade*. Only *Werewolf: The Wild West* was unable to succeed even given the cheaper costs of the imprint.

Because of Arthaus' success, other acclaimed but low-selling games were added to the imprint over the years. *Trinity* came to Arthaus in 2000 and *Aberrant* in 2001. By that time, Arthaus had definitively become the back lot for White Wolf's second-tier games — but in 2001 that would change dramatically.

Marketing, Minor Lines & Metaplot: 1998—2003

The cancellation of *Wraith* and the foundation of Arthaus left White Wolf proper with just three games lines: the original *Vampire*, *Werewolf*, and *Mage*. Despite eight years of development on the World of Darkness, it was those first three games that continued to define the company. In the next couple of years, White Wolf showed their continued support for these lines with the release of third editions of the *Vampire* (1998), *Werewolf* (2000), and *Mage* (2000) rule books.

Despite the de-emphasis of their five later RPGs, White Wolf wanted to continue putting out new games. They just needed a new model to do so, one that would hopefully bring them more attention and more success. And that brings us back to those yearly events that White Wolf decided to revamp following 1997's Year of the Ally.

Moving forward, White Wolf made the events into real crossovers focused not on shared themes but instead on the expanding metaplot of the World of Darkness. Perhaps more importantly, they began using these crossover events to launch new RPGs and other important books. Theoretically, these crossover events could bring new releases to the attention of players of *Vampire*, *Werewolf*, and *Mage* alike.

The Year of the Lotus kicked things off in 1998. It offered up Asian counterparts to the existing World of Darkness lines in books like *Werewolf*'s *Hengeyokai: Shapeshifters of the East* (1998) and *Changeling*'s *Land of Eight Million Dreams* (1998). The centerpiece of the year was a handsome hardcover release, *Kindred of the East* (1998).

Kindred of the East was a different sort of supplement for White Wolf. In previous years, a book like that would certainly have formed the core of a whole new RPG line. However, White Wolf instead used a new model that they'd played with when they put out *Mummy Second Edition* (1997) the previous year. As a single major rulebook — but one that required another World of Darkness rulebook to play — *Kindred of the East* could attract some of the same attention as a new core RPG, but without the need to support a new line. This offered White Wolf an alternative to the yearly churn of new game lines — though a few new lines *would* still appear in the following years.



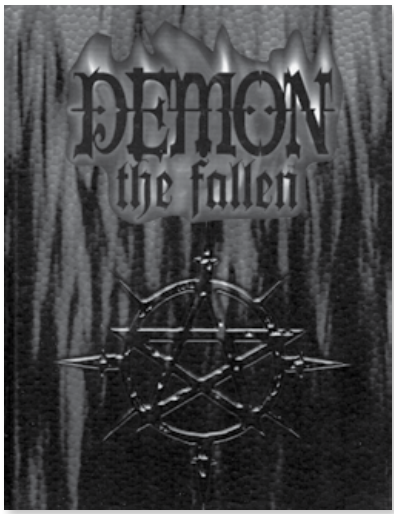
1999's event was the Year of Reckoning. This event was focused on metaplot and set off the end of *Wraith* in *Ends of Empire*, something that we've already encountered. White Wolf also used 1999's yearly event for a larger purpose: to launch their next RPG line. *Hunter: The Reckoning* (1999), the sixth modern World of Darkness game, allowed players to take on the role of humans in the World of Darkness. It was well-lauded, and increasingly it looked like White Wolf had their mojo of the early '90s back.

In 2000, White Wolf presented the Year of Revelations, which was the only one of their events in the period from 1998 onward that didn't launch a major book or line. Instead, this event was (again) metaplot focused — as all of the White Wolf books increasingly were by this time. Six releases revealed secrets of the World of Darkness. One of them was *House of Tremere* (2000) — a *Vampire: The Dark Ages* supplement that detailed the vampiric magicians of the house of Tremere in White Wolf's new Medieval reality, which was better separated from its *Ars Magica* roots.

The Year of the Scarab, in 2001, focused on Egypt and the Middle East. It also gave White Wolf the opportunity to republish *Mummy*, this time as a more comprehensive sourcebook, in the same style as *Kindred of the East*. The new book was called *Mummy: The Resurrection* (2001).

White Wolf's last "Year" event came in 2002. The Year of the Damned — again heavy on metaplot — was used to release White Wolf's seventh and final modern RPG line. That was *Demon: The Fallen* (2002), a much-anticipated game about the fallen angels that had been set free way back in 1999's Year of Reckoning.

That same year, White Wolf returned to historical RPGs. First, they published the lightly supplemented *Victorian Age Vampire* (2002). More notably, they



relaunched their only truly successful historical line of the '90s: *Dark Ages: Vampire* (2002) was published as a core rulebook. Supplements then appeared for other magical groups, each requiring *Dark Ages: Vampire* to play. Over the new few years, all of the surviving World of Darkness games got Dark Ages attention in this way, resulting in *Dark Ages: Mage* (2002), *Dark Ages: Inquisitor* (2002), *Dark Ages: Werewolf* (2003), and *Dark Ages: Fae* (2004).

By 2003, White Wolf was seeing diminishing returns in their yearly marketing events. In addition, the original Storyteller games were all starting to show their age. Despite the new editions of 1998–2000, White Wolf's games weren't in sync with either the highly polished tactical games of the d20 era or the new small press indie games that were starting to proliferate. White Wolf needed something bigger than a "Year" metaplot to keep pushing their company forward ... something much bigger.

However, before closing up this look at what has since become known as the Classic World of Darkness, we should touch upon the final Classic World of Darkness game. *Orpheus* (2003) — which had no subtitle — presented a new look at ghosts, set after the *Wraith* finale. However, it was neither a full-fledged line (like the traditional games), nor a one-off core supplement like *Kindred of the East* or *Mummy: The Resurrection*.

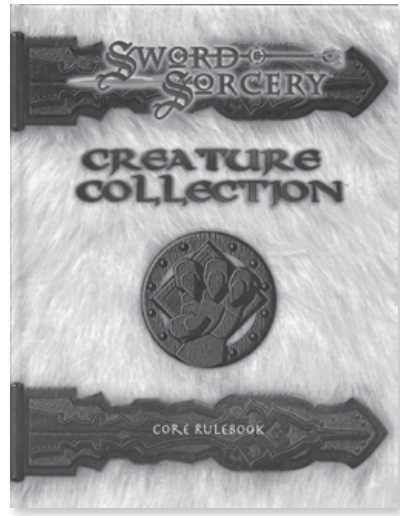
Instead, *Orpheus* was something new: the start of a limited-run book line, with just six books planned from the start. It was a new way to manage a major release without getting bogged down in supporting it forever. It also offered the opportunity for a more coherent and constrained metaplot: six releases could tell a complete story, with a beginning, middle, and end.

As we'll see, in the days following White Wolf's major event of 2003, this new model would become very important for the company.

A Time of Swords & Sorcery: 2000—2008

Meanwhile White Wolf was back to the same problem that they'd faced in the '90s. They didn't want all of their eggs in the World of Darkness basket. They needed something more — and as it happens something more was just then hitting the industry: the d20 Trademark License.

Still, White Wolf faced a bit of a problem: though they had a great Creative Department, they didn't have the d20 expertise gained by the other people who had participated in internet discussions of the d20 system, the d20 Trademark License, and the Open Gaming License throughout 2000.



Fortunately, they were able to find a partner who did have these expertise: Necromancer Games, who'd released the first d20 adventure as a PDF on the night the d20 license went live, but who was missing something of their own — a print publisher.

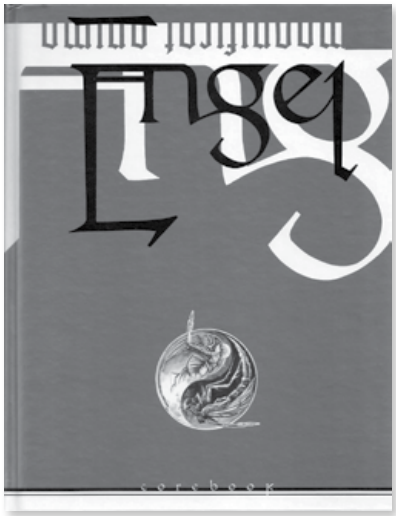
> *"Sword & Sorcery Studio and Necromancer Games have allied with White Wolf Publishing, Inc. to distribute the new studios' products to hobby game stores and book stores world-wide. White Wolf Publishing, Inc. is the sales and administration division best known for marketing White Wolf Game Studio's World of Darkness product lines such as Vampire: The Masquerade."*
>
> – White Wolf Press Release (September 13, 2000)

When White Wolf announced their partnership with Necromancer Games, they also stated that they were working with a third partner, the "Sword & Sorcery Studio." In truth, that was a bit of misdirection. The "Sword & Sorcery Studio" was a division of White Wolf dedicated to producing d20 content. However, it gave its name to White Wolf's new d20 imprint: Sword & Sorcery.

White Wolf produced the first Sword & Sorcery book — the *Creature Collection* (2000), a book of monsters — almost immediately. Clark Peterson and Bill Webb of Necromancer Games put *Creature Collection* together, but the writing came from White Wolf. The book's large array of authors included many familiar names, such as Andrew Bates, Ken Cliffe, Mike Tinney, Steve Wieck, and Stewart Wieck.

Creature Collection was a product that directly competed with Wizards' own rule books and was not the sort of thing that Ryan Dancey intended when he created the OGL; however it was *exactly* the sort of thing that an adept publisher like White Wolf wanted to put out to make a big splash in the d20 market.

As if to emphasize that competition, White Wolf cheekily labeled *Creature Collection* as a "core rulebook," matching the dress and style of Wizards of the Coast's *Dungeons & Dragons* 3E rules. More "core" books formed one element



of White Wolf's d20 publishing over the third edition period, with other major books including *Creature Collection II: Dark Menagerie* (2001) and *Relics & Rituals* (2001). White Wolf even extended these books into the 3.5 years, which saw the publication of *Creature Collection Revised* (2003) and *Creature Collection III: Savage Bestiary* (2003).

Creature Collection was more than just a monster book. It also offered up the first view of a setting that White Wolf would detail throughout their d20 releases: the "Scarred Land," a post-apocalyptic fantasy world, set 150 years after a war among Greek-influenced gods. Those publications would form the second element of White Wolf's d20 strategy.

Gazetteer: Ghelspad (2001) and *Gazetteer: Termana* (2002) kicked things off by describing the world's two main continents. They would be supported by both adventures and more localized setting books. The Scarred Lands line lasted through 2004, when White Wolf brought it to an end in style with books like: *Scarred Lands Campaign Setting: Termana* (2004), which revised the continent for 3.5E; *Strange Lands: Lost Tribes of the Scarred Lands* (2004), which described the three previously unknown continents of the world; *Echoes of the Past: The Slarecian Legacy* (2004), which examined the world's prehistory; and *Edge of Infinity: The Scarred Planes* (2004), which revealed the Scarred Land's multiverse.

Perhaps the most unusual d20 book published directly by White Wolf was *Engel Corebook* (2002), a very early OGL-licensed release that took a German post-apocalyptic fantasy game (think: *Tribe 8*) previously published by Feder & Schwert and converted it to d20. It was notable as a rare German game that (sort of) made it to the American market, but ultimately failed because of a lack-luster d20 conversion.

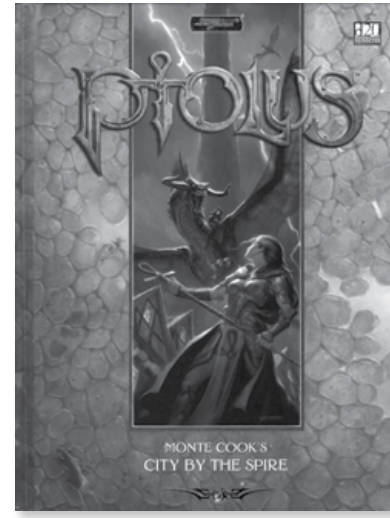
Though White Wolf created a few score d20 products based on the two lines they kicked off in 2000, they could only spend so much time on them without impacting the production of their World of Darkness games. They came upon an interesting solution that would allow them to multiply their publications and maintain their position as a big dog in the d20 arena: they agreed to publish the works of other notable d20 companies, beginning with their partner, Necromancer Games.



Necromancer Games' Sword & Sorcery output largely consisted of adventures, but they also put out some notable hardcovers in the same style as White Wolf's own — including another monster book, *The Tome of Horrors* (2002, 2005), and a trap collection, *The Wurst of Grimtooth's Traps* (2005). Necromancer additionally produced a few very popular books that updated Judges Guild's classic Wilderlands background. Unfortunately as the d20 market cooled, White Wolf became more reluctant to publish all of Necromancer's material, and Necromancer had to seek out other publishing partners, working first with Troll Lord Games, then Kenzer & Company, while simultaneously releasing other material through White Wolf.

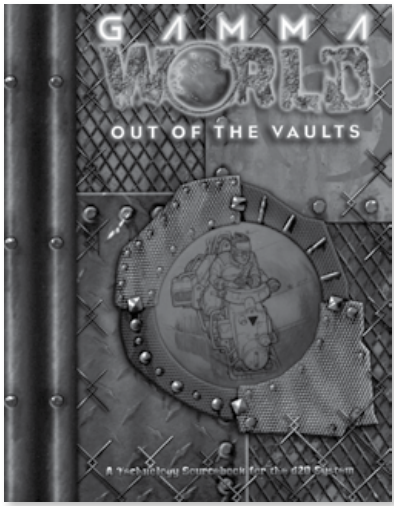
Two other companies helped to fill out the Sword & Sorcery imprint during its heyday: Fiery Dragon Productions and Malhavoc Press.

Fiery Dragon Productions was a small press that had gotten its start publishing adventures in 2000, at the start of the d20 boom. When they joined White Wolf in 2001, they put out a new product, *Counter Collection I: The Usual Suspects* (2001) — which included illustrated chits of monsters for use with d20's tactical rules. Fiery Dragon didn't turn out to be a good fit for Sword & Sorcery, so they returned to self-publishing in 2002.



Malhavoc Press was a new company formed in 2001 by Monte Cook — one of the authors of third edition *Dungeons & Dragons*. Like Necromancer, Cook didn't want to fool with publication himself, and so the Sword & Sorcery imprint was a perfect fit.

Cook kicked things off with *The Book of Eldritch Might* (2001), a volume full of feats, prestige classes, spells, and other expansions for the *Dungeons & Dragons* game. Like White Wolf's *Creature Collection* and Fiery Dragon's *Counter Collection*, *Eldritch Might* pushed the boundaries of the topics that d20 books could cover. It also inspired hordes of imitators.



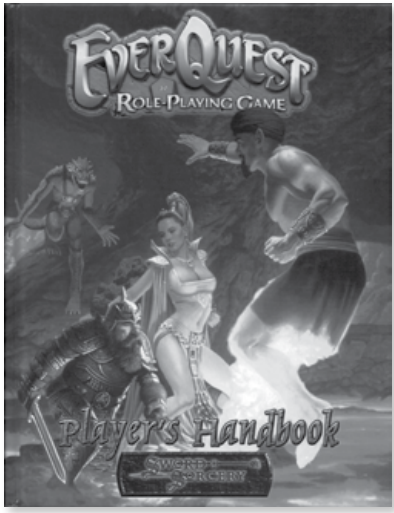
In later years Malhavoc Press' books were mainly adventures, like the rest of the d20 industry. However it's their *other* volumes that are best remembered in retrospect. This included several more *Books* — which covered *Experimental*, *Hallowed*, and *Iron Might* — as well as two OGL releases of complete, standalone games of the sort that were becoming popular as the d20 brand weakened.

Arcana Unearthed (2003) was a "variant player's handbook" that offered different d20 rules set in Monte Cook's world of "The Diamond Throne," a giant-dominated setting. It was revised in *Arcana Evolved* (2005).

Iron Heroes (2005) was a game by Mike Mearls that featured a rule set that was based on combat, not the magic of traditional *D&D* games.

However, Malhavoc's most impressive Sword & Sorcery book was, without a doubt, *Ptolus: City by the Spire* (2006), a massive 672-page RPG book that *fully* detailed a city and included adventures to bring characters all the way from level 1 to 20. It was and remains one of the biggest and most impressive roleplaying volumes in existence.

Meanwhile, yet another division at White Wolf got involved in d20 production too. White Wolf's Arthaus division opted to create some d20 lines that the main company might not have been able to. Arthaus licensed two of Wizards of the Coast's old settings — *Gamma World* in 2001 and *Ravenloft* in 2002 — and produced a series of supplements for each. By this time, Arthaus was also in charge of the old "Trinity" line, so they also produced d20 *Trinity* books to test the waters for White Wolf's *other* universe. *Aberrant d20* (2004), *Adventure d20* (2004), and *Trinity d20* (2004) came and went in a time when the d20 market was already weakened; the universe hasn't been heard from again since (though the recent sale of those lines may soon cause this to change, as we'll get to).



White Wolf proper also saw the possibilities of licensing and created yet two more d20 lines based on popular computer games. *EverQuest* (2002) was an early standalone OGL game (though it cleverly worked a d20 into its logo), while *WarCraft: The Roleplaying Game* (2003) was a rare product that actually carried Wizards of the Coast's "Dungeons & Dragons" logo — and as a result was a sourcebook, not a full game. When it was revamped as *World of WarCraft: The Roleplaying Game* (2005), it became OGL-based as well.

By 2004, the d20 market was plummeting into full crash mode. However, White Wolf and Sword & Sorcery had sufficient name recognition that they weren't as deeply impacted as some other publishers. They closed down some lines — like Scarred Lands and their "core rulebooks" — then slowed down Necromancer Games' production, but *EverQuest*, *WarCraft*, the Malhavoc books, *Gamma World*, and *Ravenloft* were strong enough to support continued production.

Simultaneously, White Wolf published materials for a few other d20 publishers who were struggling to release books of their own. White Wolf put out Goodman Games' *DragonMech* (2004) and *Etherscope* (2005), as well as Guardians of Order's *A Game of Thrones* (2005).

However, 2004 was the last truly successful year of d20 production through Sword & Sorcery. Though White Wolf had been able to hold on a year or two more than most, in the end they too had to bow to the inevitability of the d20 collapse. D20 lines thereafter began to disappear.

In 2005, White Wolf signed rights to *Gamma World* and *Ravenloft* back to Wizards of the Coast — who would get around to using them some five years later. Though the *EverQuest* RPG had just been reinvented as *EverQuest II* (2005), White Wolf cut off its production without ever printing the magic rules; those instead appeared as a PDF (2006). Malhavoc finished its work with White Wolf in 2006 on the high note of *Ptolus*, while the last few Necromancer products trickled out in 2007. That left *World of Warcraft* as Sword & Sorcery's last line standing. It finished up one year later with *Dark Factions* (2008).

That same year White Wolf licensed the Sword & Sorcery trademark and the Scarred Lands setting to their old partner, Fiery Dragon, who has since published *Creature Collection Fourth Edition* (2009).

Two Years of Changes: 2001—2002

The creation of Sword & Sorcery Studio and its first publications would have been enough to keep most companies busy. However in the two years that followed, White Wolf proper also created a new game line, a new company, and saw a revolutionary change in management. They *weren't* resting on their laurels any more.



The new game line was a swords & sorcery fantasy RPG called *Exalted* (2001). White Wolf's decision to put out a new fantasy game right in the middle of the initial d20 frenzy was a brave one, but one that ultimately paid off due to the quality of the game.

Exalted was designed by Robert Hatch, Justin Achilli, and Steve Wieck. It used the original Storyteller Game System by way of the rules variations that had appeared in the *Trinity* trilogy of games. Just as the World of Darkness games were superheroes RPGs with horror trappings, Exalted was a superhero RPG set in an ancient world with fantasy trappings. Players took on the role of the Exalted, who were demigods imbued with power by greater entities.

Exalted also incorporated other strengths found in the original World of Darkness games. Though the PCs were heroes, they were also flawed thanks to the "Great Curse," which introducing the possibility of tragedy into the game. Furthermore, the Exalted were divided into castes, which were groups that helped to provide character direction — and also offered up the possibility of the inevitable splatbooks. At first, the world of *Exalted* was even offered up as the pre-history of the World of Darkness, much as *Ars Magica* once had been, but that was dialed back in later years.

Unlike many later White Wolf games, *Exalted* was both well-received *and* commercially successful. Although it's hard to compare the different economies of the two periods, it seems likely that *Exalted* was White Wolf's biggest success since *Vampire: The Masquerade*. About three dozen books were published through 2006, under the watchful eye of developer Geoffrey C. Grabowski.

White Wolf's second major change of the era was the 2001 creation of a new company called Publisher Services, Inc. (PSI). It was set up — much like Chaosium's less-successful Wizard's Attic — to distribute books for other publishers that wanted to get into the book trade, building on White Wolf's expertise there. In the following years it would grow, expanding into the hobby market in 2004, then taking over warehousing and distribution entirely from White Wolf in 2005 — allowing them to concentrate on the business of making games.

"I think that organizations risk becoming too stagnant if they have the same leader for more than a decade. That risk is exacerbated when you have the perception of a family-run business. I felt it was important to show internally at White Wolf and externally to our business partners that White Wolf was not about Stewart or Steve Wieck; it was its own entity and it was run by its capable and experienced staff, not by its family owners."

– Steve Wieck, "The RPGnet Interview #17," rpg.net (February 2008)

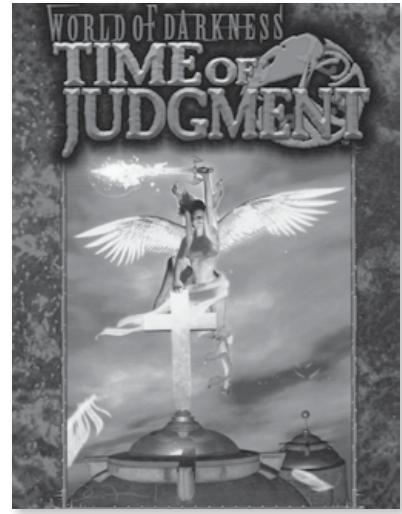
The next year White Wolf underwent an even larger change: a momentous changing of the guard. In 2002, Steve Wieck, president of White Wolf for nine years, relinquished that role. He would take a few years off, then return to the industry in 2004 with a new company. That's when he created DriveThruRPG — an online PDF distributor for RPGs. DriveThruRPG has since merged with RPGnow, another digital content provider, and today is the most notable publisher of RPG PDFs.

To replace Steve, Mike Tinney was named the new president of White Wolf. It was Tinney who would kick off the next revamps at the company, starting with the massive renovations to the World of Darkness that we've been edging around for a while.

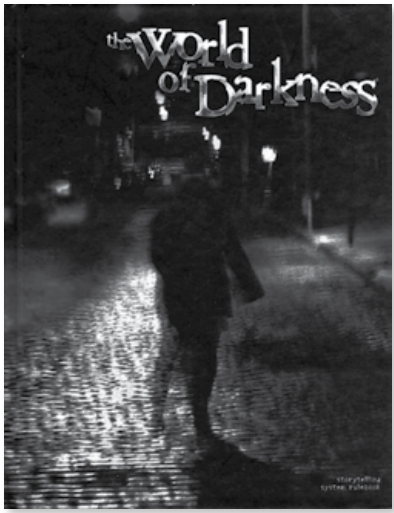
And for Mike Tinney, there were no sacred cows.

The Days of Judgment & Rebirth: 2003—2004

In many ways the World of Darkness had been floundering for years. The decision to release a game a year — which had looked so good back in 1991 — had mostly failed after 1993's publication of *Mage: The Ascension*. Likewise, the metaplot was increasingly a point of contention among players — and in all likelihood was one of the reasons behind the lines' slow decline. As with serial TV shows, many consumers felt like they couldn't keep up and dropped White Wolf products as a result.



In 2003, White Wolf announced the Time of Judgment — the final major event for the Classic World of Darkness. Just as they'd done for *Wraith* a few years before, White Wolf was going to publish a series of adventures that brought all of



their metaplots to a conclusion, in the process ending all of their modern World of Darkness game lines.

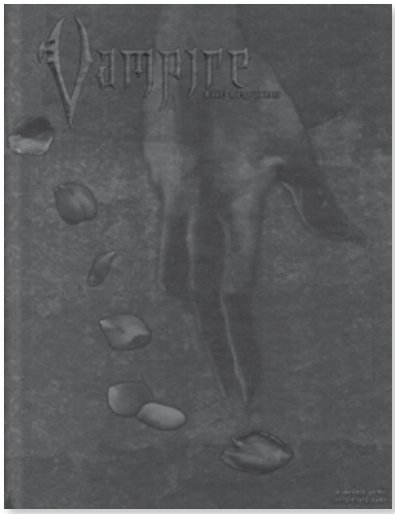
Response to the announcements about the Time of Judgment was entirely incredulous. Some companies had staged major events to bridge editions, such as TSR's *Avatar* series (1989) for the Forgotten Realms. However, no one had ever completely destroyed their setting and closed down their game lines, as was being done here. The closest analogy was GDW's bridge from *Megatraveller* to *Traveller: The New Era* (1993), when they jumped the timeline forward almost a hundred years following a major disaster — much as Wizards of the Coast has since done with the fourth edition Forgotten Realms. Given the failure of GDW's *New Era* line — partially because players were infuriated with the scrapping of their setting and game system — that wasn't necessarily a good model.

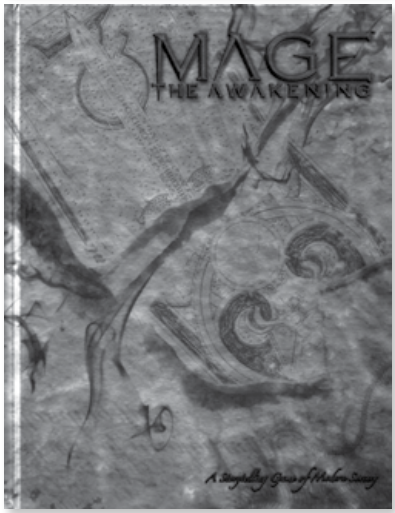
Undaunted, White Wolf pressed on, publishing a series of preludes, then the final books: *Vampire*'s *Gehenna* (2004), *Werewolf*'s *Apocalypse* (2004), *Mage*'s *Ascension* (2004), and *World of Darkness: Time of Judgment* (2004), which ended *Changeling*, *Demon*, *Hunter*, *Kindred of the East*, and *Mummy: The Resurrection*. The Time of Judgment books sold very well — largely on par with older books before the lines had declined — and the Classic World of Darkness went out with a bang like no other in the history of the roleplaying industry.

White Wolf rebooted their entire World of Darkness line, setting aside *everything* that had come before and creating both a new continuity and a new game system.

The new setting — called either the World of Darkness or the New World of Darkness (depending on how long you've been a White Wolf fan)— featured many of the same names and groups as the Classic one, but with entirely new details. Most notably, the New World of Darkness was less cosmic, less gothic, and less punk. Instead it depicted a universe more like the one outside *our* door. Horror was once more pushed into the shadows, while humans were presented as viable characters from the start.

The new rule system — called the Storytelling System (as opposed to the Storytell*ER* System) — took the old mechanics, slightly simplified in the *Trinity* games, and streamlined them even more; the combat system was particularly cleaned up. In addition, the design considered some of the advances of the indie community and therefore created new mechanics related to vices, virtues, and morality that better integrated roleplaying with the game systems.





This new setting and rule system were combined in a single game book, *The World of Darkness* (2004), developed by Bill Bridges and Ken Cliffe. This showed off another difference in the new game: it was centered on a single rulebook for all the old games — conquering the problems that the Classic World of Darkness had with its 5+ different rule systems. White Wolf showed how the new line would work by simultaneously releasing *Vampire: The Requiem* (2004), a sourcebook that supplemented *The World of Darkness* by offering up all the rules needed to play a *Vampire* in the setting. A new *Vampire* product line soon followed, edited by former Atlas Games employee Will Hindmarch.

> *"We finally ended our quest with a streamlined, consistent and open-ended Storytelling system. Its foremost emphasis is drama and character, but the rules are solid and represent proper dice probabilities without anybody ever needing to resort to calculators or charts."*
>
> – Bill Bridges, "The World of Darkness,"
> *White Wolf Quarterly #2.3* (Summer 2004)

The reaction to the new line was mixed. Over time, players have come to accept the new Storytelling System as a more modern design than the '90s original and decided that it really improved the game. However, there's never been the same consensus about the New World of Darkness setting. Some

people prefer the original's more epic and fantastic feel, while some prefer the more realistic setting of the modern games. In other words, White Wolf probably got the best reaction they could possibly have hoped for, given the completeness of their overhaul.

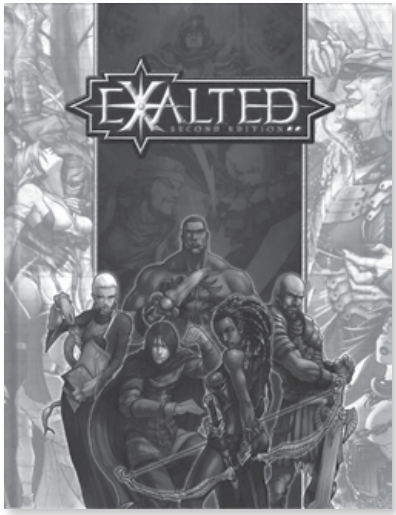
However, sales reports weren't as encouraging, as they showed most of the lines' sales quickly dropping to pre-*Time of Judgment* levels. If White Wolf had been hoping that their lines would see a Mummy-like resurrection to their early '90s heights, they were to be disappointed.

Five Years, Seven Games (Plus Two): 2004—2009

The next year White Wolf put out their other core supplements, *Werewolf: The Forsaken* (2005) and *Mage: The Awakening* (2005). All three lines (including *Vampire*) were well-supplemented for the next few years, though *Werewolf* got less attention than its siblings.

After that, White Wolf went back to their one-game-a-year plan, but with a twist. Each of their yearly games was to be a "limited edition" of just six books. As with *Orpheus*, this gave White Wolf the ability produce small metaplots with a beginning, a middle, and an end. That's how White Wolf put out *Prometheus: The Created* (2006) — a game of Frankenstein-like monsters and golems that received huge critical acclaim — and *Changeling: The Lost* (2007), which did sufficiently well enough that it has been supported following its original six-book run.

Meanwhile, White Wolf was returning to non-Darkness waters with a new edition of *Exalted*. The first edition had been supplemented up through 2005, but fans (and staff) had eventually come to the conclusion that the original game system ran a bit slowly. Therefore White Wolf released the full-color *Exalted Second Edition* (2006), which polished up the rules and pushed the setting from its swords & sorcery beginnings toward a more steampunk-oriented future.



Unfortunately, the updated game system had flaws. The combat system ended up being *even slower* because the design resulted in stalemates. The problems with the game system were accentuated in the supplements that followed, when some writers produced what John Mørke much later called "non-functional mechanics."

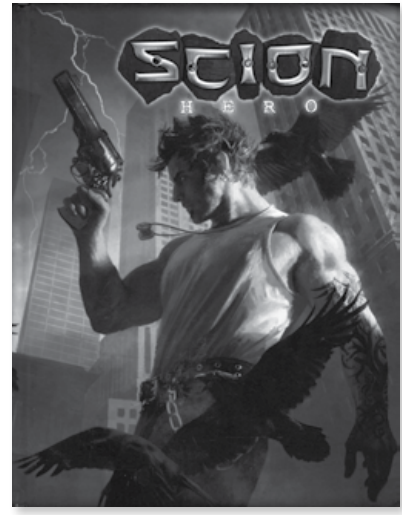
These non-functional mechanics probably came about because of the hands-off

attitude of new *Exalted* line editor John Chambers, who believed in giving writers their head. The results were at best mixed. Without a strong creative vision, many *Exalted* 2e books were simply repeats of 1e, and without a strong editorial vision, problems frequently crept into the books.

Chambers' largest contribution to *Exalted* was doubtless an extremely careful and organized plan for 2e's game line. It constrained the game's books into several series: "The Manual of Exalted Power," which was a traditional series of splatbooks; "The Compass of Terrestrial Directions," which detailed the world of Exalted; "The Compass of Celestial Directions," which described more mystical lands; and "The Books of Sorcery," which covered magic and other practical game elements. Most of these lines continued through 2009, but then they started to peter out because Chambers' plan was complete. As the various series came to an end, the question would be "Where do we go from here?"; the planned production for *Exalted* 2e was more or less done. But that will be a problem for the future, amongst much larger problems in that time period, which we'll return to shortly

To fans' surprise, *another* non-Darkness RPG appeared the next year. "Scion" was published via three thick hardcover books: *Scion: Hero* (2007), *Scion: Demigod* (2007), and *Scion: God* (2008). Building on *Exalted*'s game system, *Scion* was set in a modern world where players took on the roles of the children of the gods. It received a fair response, but sales were good enough to also continue that game past its original short run.

By 2007, when both *Changeling* and *Scion* were published, things were changing at White Wolf in a big way, for reasons that we'll see momentarily. Some of those changes led to White Wolf becoming more interested in PDF and electronic publication. The result was the "Storytelling Adventure System" (SAS), a methodology for creating standardized PDF adventures. The first SAS was Will Hindmarch's *The Resurrectionists* (2007) for *Vampire: The Requiem*. By the time the New World of Darkness' sixth RPG, *Hunter: The Vigil* (2008), came out, the SAS program was in full swing. While *Hunter*'s short-run line only received four print books in its first year, it was supplemented by numerous PDFs, including about a half-dozen adventures. Longer-term, the game was successful enough that two more print books would eventually emerge: *Horror Recognition Guide* (2009) and *Block by Bloody Block* (2011).



When *Geist: The Sin-Eaters* (2009), yet another look at spirits in the World of Darkness, was published the next year, things changed even further. The seventh New World of Darkness book received just two print books plus three PDFs. If you were a fan of White Wolf's roleplaying games, it might have been a rather disappointing release — and unfortunately part of a trend that changed the whole company.

Meanwhile, At Arthaus: 2000—2007

When last we left Arthaus, around 2001, it had been an imprint for White Wolf's second-tier games. However as we've already seen, their priorities changed shortly thereafter when Arthaus picked up the rights to first *Gamma World* and then *Ravenloft*. In light of these new licenses, the old White Wolf games disappeared entirely — other than the d20 *Trinity* universe experiments of 2004. When Arthaus reverted the *Gamma World* and *Ravenloft* rights in 2005, they found themselves without any products to print.

Arthaus hasn't been a major factor at White Wolf since, but they have released a couple of major books that came their way from publishers who could no longer afford to publish them.

First, they acquired the rights to Chaosium's *King Arthur Pendragon* game from Green Knight Publishing. Arthaus released a new fifth edition of the game (2005), then published the much more notable *The Great Pendragon Campaign* (2006) — in which creator Greg Stafford detailed a massive RPG campaign from the year 485, under the rule of Uther, to 566, at the end of the "Twilight Period." The 429-page book was almost twice the size of the rulebook and presented the epic RPG story Stafford had been envisioning for 20 years. Like *Ptolus*, published by White Wolf that same year, *The Great Pendragon Campaign* remains one of the most epic and impressive RPG campaigns to date.

Arthaus also acquired some of the assets of Guardians of Order during the latter company's 2006 bankruptcy. They've since published a new third edition of the anime game *Big Eyes Small Mouth* (2007) and hold rights to *BESM*, *Silver Age Sentinels*, and *Hong Kong Action Theatre!*

White Wolf had only published an externally created RPG once before, with *HoL* a decade previous. The appearance of *Pendragon* and *Big Eyes Small Mouth* were representative of how much Mike Tinney was willing to change White Wolf — if not quite as awe-inspiring as the reboot of the World of Darkness itself.

The CCP Years: 2006—2011

We've already seen that things were changing (again) for White Wolf by 2008. The *Hunter* line was slow to complete, while the mini-renaissance of game systems at Arthaus ended (along with the imprint).

The reason dates back to November 11, 2006. That's when CCP Games — the Icelandic producer of the *EVE Online* MMORPG (2003) — acquired White Wolf Game Studios. CCP's reason for the acquisition was the World of Darkness, which they thought could be made into a compelling MMORPG, quite distinct from anything else on the market.

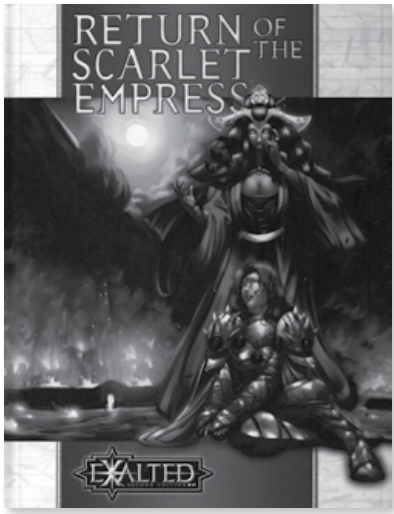
At first it seemed like business would continue as usual at White Wolf proper. Mark Rein•Hagen did show up to sell his shares in 2007, but he hadn't been involved in the company for years. However, Stewart Wieck stayed with White Wolf while Steve Wieck took a seat on CCP's board of directors (though his main focus continued to be DriveThruRPG).

The White Wolf lines also continued on through 2007 and 2008 without much change. The SASes appeared just a few months after the CCP acquisition, but they'd already been in process, thanks to Steve Wieck's cutting edge work on digital content at DriveThruRPG. In fact they may have been another factor in CCP's decisions to purchase White Wolf. However, White Wolf's move toward e-publishing certainly accelerated *after* the CCP purchase; it would be the first mark of changing times.

In 2009, it became even more apparent that CCP was demanding changes of its new subsidiary. Midway through the year, White Wolf's priorities shifted as CCP moved staff over to MMORPG production, and both White Wolf's print and PDF schedules ground to a halt. Some saw the future of White Wolf in an interview that CCP's Ryan Dancey gave to gamasutra.com that November, claiming that White Wolf had been gutted and what was left was seen as the way of the past.

> *"It's just an imprint. … White Wolf used to have a fairly large staff. It doesn't anymore. It's focusing primarily on the World of Darkness RPG products. It's not doing some of the things it used to do; board games and other card games and things. The focus of the company [CCP] is on making MMOs and our legacy table top business is a legacy business."*
>
> – "Q&A: CCP On Keeping *EVE Online* Fresh and Growing," gamasutra.com (November 2009)

However, Dancey's predictions weren't entirely in sync with CCP and White Wolf management. Though CCP had planned some downtime for White Wolf



production, they never carried through on that decision. The tenor of White Wolf books *did* change in the next year, though, with many of their "new" releases being collections of reprinted PDFs — but there were a few new books too.

Among these new books were several suggesting that White Wolf was closing down its RPG production entirely. *Return of the Scarlet Empress* (2010) was a metaplot adventure for *Exalted* that was meant as a finale for the second-edition line — which seemed appropriate given that all of the Chambers game lines had now come to an end.

Mind you, White Wolf was already thinking about new *Exalted* products, including a third edition of the game, but that wasn't obvious to anyone outside the company, or even to most of the company's developers. Around the same time, White Wolf produced *World of Darkness: Mirrors* (2010) — which gave Storytellers a toolkit to "hack" their own World of Darkness game — and *The Danse Macabre* (2011), a "capstone" book for *Vampire*.

Yet despite the "capstone" nature of these releases, White Wolf kept publishing.

If one could describe the CCP White Wolf of 2009–2011 in one word, it would be "confused"; CCP's decision-making with regard to its subsidiary was quite slow — and made it obvious that the White Wolf RPGs were in grave danger.

Meanwhile, the old guard was fading away. Stewart Wieck left White Wolf in 2010, resulting in the company being without any of its founders for the first time ever. Stewart immediately founded a new company. Nocturnal Media picked up White Wolf's rights to *Pendragon* — which by then was consigned to PDFs because the Arthaus books had gone out of print. *Pendragon* creator Greg Stafford is working with Nocturnal Media and has created a 5.1 edition (2010) of his classic game.

2011 would unfortunately mark the last year that White Wolf released print publications into distribution, in part as a response to big-box book stores going under around the same time. However, the CCP incarnation of the company had one last hoorah in them. It started with the *Vampire Translation Guide* (2011), a PDF published in May that allowed players to translate elements between *Vampire: The Masquerade* and *Vampire: The Requiem*. It did quite well and helped to set the stage a few months later for White Wolf's publication of *Vampire: The Masquerade 20th Anniversary Edition* (2011), a rather surprising return to the Classic World of Darkness.

Though published in a print edition, *V20* (as it's called by fans) was only available through online preorders, and not through stores. This was part of a general trend on White Wolf's part to leave distribution and retail behind. It was aided in early 2011 by Steve Wieck's introduction of print-on-demand (POD) options to DriveThruRPG — a plan that had been in process for several years. This let Nocturnal get Greg Stafford's new *Pendragon* into print in 2011, but more notably it allowed White Wolf to move to an all-digital business plan. Since then, White Wolf products have been available primarily through DriveThruRPG as PDF and POD products.

> *"The dream of the DriveThruRPG is having everything ever published for RPGs available for immediate download 24/7/365."*
>
> – Steve Wieck, "The RPGnet Interview #17," rpg.net (February 2008)

The publication of *V20* didn't mark an abandonment of the New World of Darkness. Though the quarterly schedule that White Wolf published in the fall of 2011 showed a *Dust to Dust* PDF (2011) for *V20*, it also included support for *Vampire: The Requiem*, *Mage: The Awakening*, and *Exalted*. *V20* did, however, mark the end of the CCP era of White Wolf. We can trace the reasons back to escalating problems with CCP's big money maker, *EVE Online*.

EVE Online's biggest problem was likely that it was no *World of Warcraft*. By the end of 2010 CCP's game had around 350,000 subscribers, compared to approximately 12 million for *WoW*. However, *EVE Online* had also been beset by any number of public relations disasters over the course of 2011. First there was the infamous "18 month" comment when CCP staff told players they wouldn't be fixing bugs or expanding content for a year and a half due to other commitments. Then, in the summer of 2011, they released *Incarna* (2011), an expansion five years in the making and intended to introduce human avatars into a game that had previously been about spaceships. It bombed due to a lack of gameplay. Simultaneously, CCP was figuring out how to monetize *EVE Online* in other ways than subscriptions — but when players learned about $99 API fees, a $60 monocle, a $20 dress shirt, and many other microtransactions that were anything but "micro" ... they became increasingly rebellious.

This put CCP into crisis response mode for much of 2011. By the end of the year, CCP had clearly decided their subscriptions and microtransactions weren't going to pay their current costs. So in October 2011 they announced large-scale layoffs. About 20% of their worldwide staff was cut. A certain "imprint" in Georgia was particularly hard hit.

That move seems to have been the right one for *EVE Online*. Their subscriber numbers afterward flourished — hitting 400,000 users in March 2012 and 500,000 in February 2013. The same can't be said for White Wolf. The staff developing the *World of Darkness MMORPG* was significantly reduced — a 2012 report stated there were still 60 developers working on the game, about half of what the team had before the layoffs. Worse, White Wolf was left with almost no resources to publish tabletop RPGs.

Onyx Path Publishing Years: 2012—2014

That could easily have been the end of White Wolf as a publisher of tabletop RPGs. Every indication suggests that CCP was ready to give up on them. However, it's likely that CCP was convinced by strong sales of *V20* and White Wolf's back catalog to look at a new offer when it came in ...

That offer came from White Wolf creative director Rich Thomas — who we first met way back in the earliest days of *White Wolf* magazine. He knew that the White Wolf division of CCP could no longer successfully publish RPGs, but he wasn't willing to let the company's RPGs go. Despite getting just two days' notice of the layoffs in October 2011, within hours of their announcement, he was talking to former White Wolf staff about a new corporation to carry the flame forward. He officially incorporated that company, Onyx Path Publishing, on December 29, 2011 — though their exact goals and relationship to White Wolf would stay hidden from the public for over half a year.

Onyx Path Publishing quickly licensed the Classic World of Darkness, the New World of Darkness, and *Exalted* from CCP. In addition they out-right purchased two of White Wolf's smaller lines, *Scion* and *Trinity*. Finally, they indicated an interest in publishing new properties of their own, beginning with Rose Bailey's *Cavaliers of Mars* (2012) — a swashbuckling Martian setting.

To go with his White Wolf properties, Thomas also brought on an all-star cast of latter-day White Wolf developers, including: Justin Achilli, Rose Bailey, Joe Carriker, Matt McFarland, John Mørke, Ian A.A. Watson, and Stew Wilson. Eddy Webb, who'd been the World of Darkness line developer during White Wolf's final CCP days, continued to work for CCP and act as Onyx Path's liaison.

> *"Everyone's just finding out about it, but OPP's been behind the curtains since the beginning of the year."*
>
> – Ian A.A Watson, forum.rpg.net (August 2012)

Some of Onyx Path's plans have continued directly on from the old White Wolf, including the publication of PDFs and PODs that were announced in CCP's final White Wolf publishing scheduling. Onyx Path helped to finish up *Imperial*

Mysteries (2012) for *Mage: The Awakening*, while the *Werewolf Translation Guide* (2012) — which appeared on April 10, 2012 — was the first book to actually carry the Onyx Path logo. *Victorian Lost* (2012), *Shards of the Exalted Dream* (2012), and *Blood Sorcery* (2012) followed, though much more slowly than CCP had planned.

The delays were in large part because the Onyx Path was pushing on its own plans too, and that included a third publication path — Kickstarters — which would allow the Onyx Path to publish bigger and more notable publications.

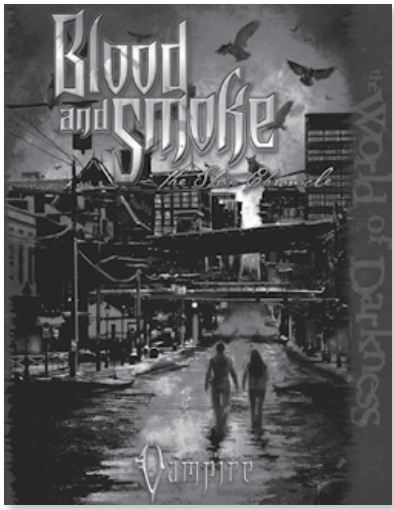
The data on the Onyx Path's first nine World of Darkness-related Kickstarters presents an extremely clear view of their business in their first two years:

Date	Product	Setting	Goal	Raised	Backers
3/16/12	*V20 Companion*	CWOD	$50,000	$96,326	1,134
6/10/12	*Children of the Revolution*	CWOD	$50,000	$55,394	589
11/1/12	*Werewolf: The Apocalypse 20*	CWOD	$85,000	$380,015	2,108
1/10/13	*Mummy: The Curse*	NWOD	$30,000	$104,831	1,767
2/18/13	*The Hunters Hunted II*	CWOD	$33,000	$69,856	950
7/25/13	*Changing Breeds*	CWOD	$40,000	$114,155	1,405
12/12/13	*Demon: The Descent*	NWOD	$40,000	$150,235	2,076
2/21/14	*Anarchs Unbound*	CWOD	$40,000	$56,731	710
4/2/14	*Mage: The Ascension 20*	CWOD	$70,000	$672,899	3,926

Though the majority of Onyx Path's Kickstarters have been for Classic World of Darkness releases, that hasn't been the overall direction for the Onyx Path — which has also published plenty of New World of Darkness PDFs. The *Werewolf* and *Mummy* Kickstarters even suggest that the two settings may have pretty similar numbers of backers — though the extreme success of the 20th anniversary editions of *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (2013) and *Mage: The Ascension* (2015?) show that Classic World of Darkness fans may have more money to spend.

Nonetheless, Onyx Path's biggest plans going forward are for new games for the New World of Darkness, following on *Mummy: The Curse* (2013), which had been the first new New World of Darkness game in four years. *Demon: The Descent* (2014) was the next new NWOD release, but a pair of other rulebooks may end up being more innovative.

The *God Machine Chronicle* (2013) and *Blood and Smoke: The Strix Chronicle* (2013) are meant to reinvent the *World of Darkness* and *Vampire: The Requiem* rules, respectively. Each line kicked off with an anthology of fiction, followed by a rulebook that updated the Storytelling System for nine years of development. In addition, each of the rulebooks has a strong setting and a strong plot.



The rumor mill suggests that one of the reasons behind the rerelease of these games as "Chronicles" was that CCP wasn't willing to approve actual new editions of the core games. Curiously, *Strix* doesn't require *Vampire: The Requiem* to play, which makes it sound sort of like a new edition with a different name. One of Onyx Path's staff underlined the problems that lead to this sort of convoluted decision by saying "CCP's approval system has been a learning process." Being a licensee is *always* a bit tricky.

Onyx Path isn't just revitalizing the Classic and New Worlds of Darkness. It's also returning to White Wolf's other hit: *Exalted*. A third edition is nearing completion (2014?) under developers John Mørke and Holden Shearer. They plan to fix the mechanical problems of the second edition, move the setting back to its swords & sorcery origins, and revitalize the line in general, hoping to return it to its glory days. A Kickstarter in May 2013 raised $684,755 — making *Exalted 3e* considerably more successful than any of the World of Darkness Kickstarters that preceded it.

> *"As we were confronted with the last three proposed Second Edition books – Masters of Jade, Shards of the Exalted Dream, and Scroll of the Monk II – it was clear to me that the idea mill was winding down and we were almost certainly going to end up redoing Second Edition books and packaging them with errata – a situation I dearly wanted to avoid."*
>
> – John Mørke, Interview, Charisma Bonus (December 2012)

If Onyx Path has one major obstacle going forward, it's probably its lack of traditional brick & mortar distribution. To date they are the largest company to go this route. They're doing it very intelligently, with their combined PDF, POD, and Kickstarter strategy, but it still makes it hard to get new fans into the business — something that Onyx Path Publishing acknowledged in late 2012 when they announced the new company.

Overall, it's a dangerous path. Columbia Games tried it for a while and then attempted to return to retail stores. Steve Jackson has seen *GURPS* slowly wither since they moved exclusively to digital distribution. Other companies like Chaosium and Paizo Publishing have been successful only because they've

combined direct sales with traditional retailing. Whether Onyx Path can buck the trends with its large fan base and its strong internet know-how is still to be seen.

Things didn't go as well for the folks remaining at White Wolf. On April 14, 2014, CCP officially cancelled the *World of Darkness MMORPG* and laid off the remaining 56 staff members of the "Atlanta studio." By every count, the White Wolf that was founded in 1990 was now dead.

Fortunately Onyx Path Publishing continues to carry White Wolf's flame, and so far has not been affected by CCP's exit from the World of Darkness. However going forward it will be Onyx Path's history that is written, not that of the defunct White Wolf Game Studio.

What to Read Next

- For another closely connected company from White Wolf's early days, read ***Atlas Games***.
- For another urban fantasy RPG that got its start in 1991, read ***Metropolis.***
- For the future history of *Ars Magica*, briefly read ***Wizards of the Coast,*** but then move on to its more permanent home at ***Atlas Games.***
- For *Fading Suns,* a White Wolf-like science-fiction game, read ***Holistic Design.***
- For the origins of d20 and the OGL, read ***Wizards of the Coast.***
- For Arthaus' latter-day RPG acquisitions, read ***Green Knight Publishing*** and ***Guardians of Order.***

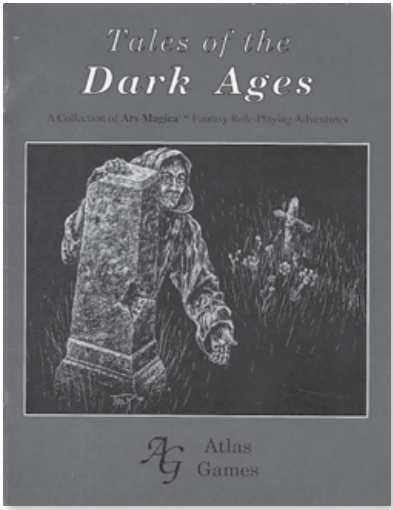
In Other Eras

- For the other half of White Wolf's origin story, read ***Lion Rampant*** *['80s].*
- For the Wiecks' first publisher, read ***FGU*** *['70s].*
- For other notable independent magazines, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s],* ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s],* and ***AEG*** *['90s].*
- For White Wolf Magazine's early independent love interests, read about *SkyRealms of Jorune* in ***SkyRealms Productions*** *['80s],* about *Ars Magica* in ***Lion Rampant*** *['80s],* and about *RuneQuest* in ***Chaosium*** *['70s]* and ***Avalon Hill*** *['80s].*
- For indie companies focusing on morality, read ***Adept Press*** *['00s]* and ***Lumpley Games*** *['00s].*
- For more on White Wolf's d20 publishing partner, read ***Necromancer Games*** *['00s].*
- For what happened to another publisher who sold their RPG IP to create an MMORPG, read ***Hero Games*** *['80s].*

Or read onward to the publisher of one Vampire supplement, ***Atlas Games.***

Atlas Games: 1990–Present

Atlas Games is a small press publisher that has produced over 200 products since its inception in 1990, including many designs that foreshadowed the indie movement. More than any other company, the story of Atlas is really the story of a sequence of innovative game lines published over the years.



1990: Tales of the Dark Age

Licensed Beginnings: 1990—1992

John Nephew, the soon-to-be founder of Atlas Games, got his start as an RPG professional in high school, when he began freelancing for TSR as a *Dungeons & Dragons* author. Like many authors of the time, he came to TSR through their magazines, first writing "The Ecology of the Pernicon" for *Dragon #108* (June 1986), then "Grakhirt's Lair" for *Dungeon #1* (September/October 1986). As he continued to write for the magazines, he was also invited to contribute to larger projects such as *Kara-Tur: The Eastern Realms* (1988) and *WG7: Castle Greyhawk* (1988). A year later, he published

his first solo book, *PC1: Tall Tales of the Wee Folk* (1989) for the *Basic Dungeons & Dragons* line.

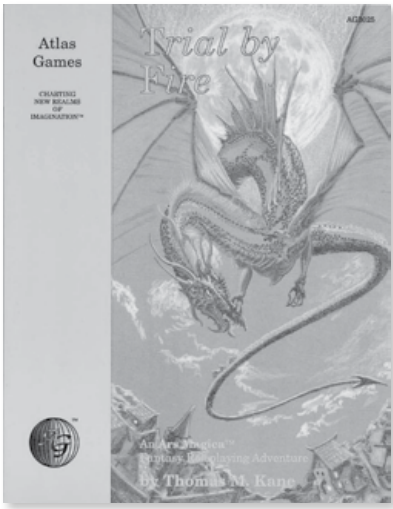
It was when Nephew got to Carleton College, in Minnesota, that he was introduced to the broader RPG world that lay beyond *D&D*. There he met the Lion Rampant crew, publishers of the independent-minded RPG *Ars Magica* (1987).

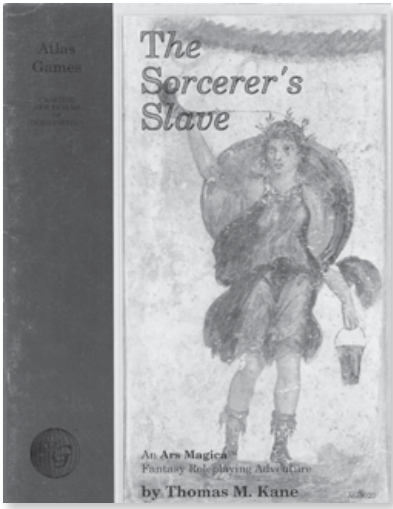
Nephew had already been trying to emphasize story and narrative in his *D&D* writings, and Lion Rampant reflected many of the same "storytelling" ideals in their own RPG designs. Therefore it was entirely natural that John Nephew joined the Lion Rampant team. Nephew acted as acquisitions director, editor, and (briefly) president at Lion Rampant during his tenure with them from 1988–1990. However by 1990 Nephew was finding himself too scattered. Not only was he attending college, but he was also continuing to freelance for TSR — now as both author and editor — to pay for his education. The (largely unpaid) *Ars Magica* work on top of that was too much. He decided to leave Lion Rampant.

Things might have gone very differently if Nephew hadn't bought a photocopier. It had been a $1,000 machine badly needed by Lion Rampant, but not really needed by Nephew at all. In 1990, when Lion Rampant decided to head south to Georgia, a deal was struck to allow them to keep that photocopier. They couldn't pay for it, so instead they offered Nephew a license. It allowed him to publish supplements for Lion Rampant's *Ars Magica* game, with the price of the photocopier used as an advance on royalties. Using that license, Nephew founded Atlas Games with some help from other Lion Rampant alumni such as Nicole Lindroos and Darin "Woody" Eblom.

> *"Heck, at Lion Rampant and in the earliest Atlas books, we used photocopiers to resize artwork and then pasted it manually into the layout for press."*
>
> – John Nephew, "A Chat with John Nephew of Atlas Games," gamegrene.com (2005)

Nephew had definite plans for his *Ars Magica* license. He intended to publish an "Atlas Europa." Like the Tribunal books put out a few years later by White Wolf, these books would have detailed Mythic Europe, but unlike the Tribunal books, these would have roved space and time. The first was to be "Ship of Fools," which would have detailed a floating covenant on the Rhine. A book on Merovingian Gaul prior to the formation of the Order of Hermes was another idea for the line. However, Nephew *still* didn't have enough time for *Ars Magica*, TSR, and college. The Atlas Europa would never appear; instead Nephew published material from other authors.





From 1990–1991, Atlas Games produced five different licensed adventure books for the *Ars Magica* RPG. These included: *Tales of the Dark Ages* (1990), a set of short adventures and Atlas' first product; *Festival of the Damned* (1991), a well-loved adventure by *Ars Magica* designer Jonathan Tweet, who had left the industry just two years earlier; and *South of the Sun* (1991), an interesting look at Mythic Africa, which we'll see was not Atlas' final take on the dark continent.

Atlas Games also used its Lion Rampant connections to produce one other early product: *Blood Nativity* (1991). It was the only licensed product ever created using White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade* game system, written (pseudonymously) by White Wolf staff and published simultaneously with the release of *Vampire* itself.

These early licenses did decently well. The *Ars Magica* books sold through two or three thousand units in a couple of years — until White Wolf decided not to renew Atlas' license while preparing for the third edition of the game. *Blood Nativity* sold through an initial print run of two thousand or more books, and went to a reprint that sold thousands more over the next decade.

However, Atlas did much better with another licensed line: a series of adventures for R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk 2020* (1990), beginning with *The Arasaka Brainworm* (1991). Nephew would later report that these adventures sold better than many d20 supplements at the height of the d20 craze.

Although Atlas Games was still something of a hobby in 1992 — and would remain so for a few more years — they'd nonetheless now published and sold around a dozen successful products.

Over the Edge: 1992—2001, 2012-Present



It's common for a small publisher to start out producing licensed supplements for someone else's game and then begin creating game lines of their own. This was exactly what Atlas Games did. Their first original game was Jonathan Tweet's *Over the Edge* (1992).

Though Jonathan Tweet left the role-playing industry in 1989 to start a more "respectable" career, he couldn't give up the hobby entirely. Besides freelance work like *Festival of the Damned*, he continued to run a game for a group in Rock Island, Illinois. The game was called "Al Amarja" and though Tweet wasn't intending to do anything professional with it, he couldn't help but write about it in *Alarums & Excursions* (1975-Present), an APA that he contributed to.

John Nephew saw Tweet's *A&E* articles, and he followed a pattern that would take Atlas through the '90s. He saw a great looking RPG property and figured out how to publish it.

Getting started was pretty simple, as Nephew and Tweet had previously worked together. Nonetheless Tweet would later describe *Over the Edge* as "the roleplaying game that I tried to talk John Nephew out of publishing."

While *Over the Edge* was being prepared for publication, future star designer Robin D. Laws also came aboard. He'd talked with Tweet about the game in *A&E*, and he contributed to the final product as well. It was Laws' first notable contribution to the industry and also the first of three Atlas games that he was involved in. (*A&E* also led Laws to write *GURPS Fantasy II* for Steve Jackson Games that same year.)

> *"Since I thought I'd never design professionally again, I made the game as weird and as free-form as I liked, without a thought to whether it would be publishable."*
> – Jonathan Tweet, Interview, *Redcap v2 #3* (Autumn 1994)

Over the Edge is one of the earliest examples of a simple roleplaying game, cut down to the very bone. Tweet's former partner, Mark Rein•Hagen, was then following a similar design path with *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991), but Tweet went much further.

Mechanically, an *Over the Edge* character is described by four entirely freeform "traits." For example, a character might have a central trait of "Private Investigator" [4], two side traits of "Brawling" [3] and "Intelligent" [3], plus a flaw of "Heavy Smoker." Each of those traits is determined by a player — not drawn from a list — a pretty amazing idea for 1992, though it's now appeared in other games, such as Ron Edwards' *Sorcerer* (1996, 2001), Tynes and Stolze's *Unknown Armies* (1999), Laws' own *Hero Wars* (2000), and numerous *Fate* games (2003-Present). Other than rolling up some hit dice, those four traits could be the entire basis of an *Over the Edge* character.

Over the Edge also falls squarely into the early "storytelling" branch of RPGs. These storytelling ideals are clearly shown in the character creation system. For example, "signs" in character creation help players to visualize traits. A private investigator might have the signs "always sits with his back to a wall" (for the PI trait), "large muscles" (for the brawling trait), "wire-frame glasses" (for the intelligent trait), and "stinks of tobacco" (for the heavy smoker flaw). Together these signs help to present a coherent picture of a character. Other descriptive elements — including motivation, a secret, important people, and a character drawing — all serve to expand the story of each character.

Over the Edge complements its simplistic characters with a simplistic game system. Each trait's value represents a pool of dice. This is an additive dice pool, like that found in older games like *Champions* (1981), which wasn't much of an innovation in itself. However, modifiers to a skill introduce something new: "bonus" or "penalty" dice. These are extra dice you add to your pool, but you still only end up keeping the original number of dice — either the best or the worst, depending on whether you added bonuses or penalties. It was a clever way to introduce subtle changes to additive dice pools.



The other notable and original feature of *Over the Edge* is its setting. It's a "game of surreal danger," featuring conspiracies, cultish organizations, and many secrets. From the far side of *Delta Green* (1997) and *The X-Files* (1993–2002) this all sounds more staid, but *Over the Edge* was a trailblazer in the genre.

Over the Edge was quite different from any of Atlas' earlier output. It was edgy and very definitely "indie" — in a time before there really were indie games in the industry; many note it as an influence for later indie designs, such as the aforementioned *Sorcerer*.

It also did a good job of defining the path that Atlas Games would follow throughout the '90s.

Atlas' first RPG was supported with numerous supplements over the next couple of years, and then enjoyed a brief revival after a second edition (1997) of the game was published. The last supplement for *Over the Edge* proper was published in 2001.

After many years of quiescence, the game was revived in honor of its twentieth anniversary. Atlas released *Over the Edge*'s game system under OGL as the WaRP (Wanton Role-Playing) System and also published a limited *Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (2012) of the game. A PDF called *Warped Adventures: Invasion* (2013), by Robin D. Laws, may mark a new Al Amarja-less direction for the gameline.

Meanwhile, the second edition of the game and most of the *Over the Edge* supplements also remain available from Atlas.

Other Interests: 1993—1996

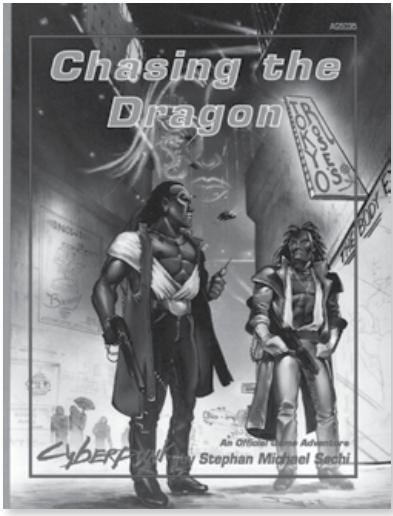
While Atlas was kicking off its *Over the Edge* line, it was also exploring the world of board and card games. Their first release in this genre was *Once Upon a Time* (1993), a card game by James Wallis, Andrew Rilstone, and Richard Lambert. It's most notable because it too features a storytelling basis: players try and use cards with faerie tale elements to drive a shared story toward their own ending. Wallis would later publish many other games that placed story over characters through his "New Style" line of story games at Hogshead Publishing.

Shortly after publishing *Once Upon a Time*, Atlas Games got into the CCG business as one of the earlier companies to follow Wizards of the Coast into the breach. Together, John Nephew and Jonathan Tweet designed *On the Edge* (1994), a CCG based on Tweet's *Over the Edge* roleplaying game. However, Atlas didn't have the finances to publish the game. They partnered with Jerry Corrick and Bob Brynildson of The Source Comics & Games — a Twin Cities game store — and formed a new corporation called Trident, Inc. to publish the game. Eventually Atlas would be subsumed into Trident; Bob, Jerry, and The Source continue to support Atlas with their business experience and perspective to the present day.

The initial release of *On the Edge* was a huge success. It changed Atlas Games from a sideline to a real company. A few friends and freelancers — including Robin Jenkins, C. Brent Ferguson, Paul Nurnberger, Woody Eblom, and college student Jeff Tidball — became full-time employees. Up to this point, Atlas had been working out of an apartment and storage unit, but now they rented a real office and warehouse, bought computers, and even set up a health plan.

Atlas supported *On the Edge* through the next year, but by mid-1995 it was obvious to Nephew that the CCG bubble was ready to burst. Atlas started shifting toward other projects. The company's experience with *On the Edge* gave them the expertise to produce more card games, including a new, more professional second edition of *Once Upon a Time* (1995) and a new game called *Lunch Money* (1996), one of their most successful and lauded card games — primarily because of the darkly disturbing art that accompanied this game of schoolyard fighting. (If Atlas was trying to make a name for themselves as a publisher of modern surrealism, they were succeeding.)

When the CCG scene imploded in 1996, Atlas was sort of ready — which is to say it didn't kill them. However, it took many years for Atlas to pay their final *On the Edge* printing bills and all of the staff other than John Nephew and Jeff Tidball was let go. If not for *Once Upon a Time* and *Lunch Money*, Nephew believes that Atlas might have gone under. Instead, they learned a hard lesson in faddish booms and busts that would serve them well a few years down the line when d20 appeared.



Meanwhile, as a result of the financial hardships, Atlas Games' existing RPG lines were slowing down. They published their last licensed supplements in 1996, including books for *Cyberpunk* and *Champions*. *Over the Edge* was temporarily shut down too, until the new edition would release in the next year.

Jeff Tidball — who would adopt the title of director of Creative Development — would soon be tasked with preparing Atlas' *next* RPG for market.

Ars Magica Fourth Edition: 1996—2004

In 1995, Wizards of the Coast was shutting down their RPG lines too, but for the opposite reason. Their CCGs were so successful that they couldn't be bothered with RPGs any more. So Wizards put their existing game lines up for bid. Atlas Games offered to take over two of these lines: *Everway* and *Ars Magica*.

Everway was another Jonathan Tweet game of innovative storytelling. It seemed like a natural fit for the company. *Ars Magica*, meanwhile, was the game that gave Atlas Games its start. Since Nephew had left Lion Rampant, the game had passed

on to White Wolf and then (thanks to another former Lion Rampant employee) to Wizards of the Coast. Now it needed a new home once more.

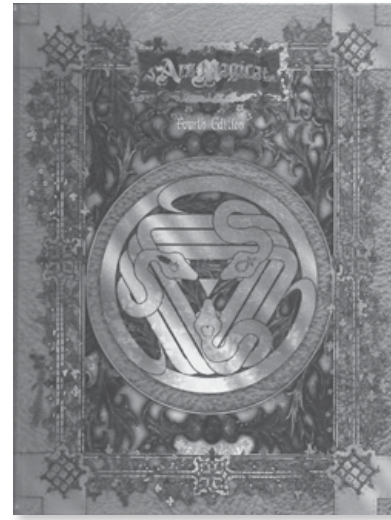
On February 12, 1996, Nephew withdrew his bid for *Everway*, saying, "It is unlikely that we would be able to absorb both the *Everway* and the *Ars Magica* product lines into our publishing plans this year." (That game would pass on to Pagan Publishing, who would hold the game for less than a month before they decided that they couldn't publish it either.) On March 6, Wizards announced that Atlas Games had acquired *Ars Magica*.

Much as with *Over the Edge*, Nephew saw a great game that he wanted to publish and figured out how. This time Nephew also did a bit of what he calls "bargain shopping." Under Wizards, a new fourth edition of *Ars Magica* had been almost completed, and start-up costs for the new line were considerably reduced.

Well, that was the theory anyway. Enter the "Secret Masters of Ars Magica," an internet mailing list full of fans who'd come together to support Wade Racine when he was developing the game for Wizards of the Coast. Now they were ready to help Jeff Tidball when he began developing the game for Atlas.

Under Tidball's guidance, the Secret Masters ripped apart the Wizards draft of the game — replacing some chapters entirely and considerably updating others. With a large group of people working on a rule system and bringing it to completion in just six months, the results *could* have been disastrous (see, for example, the design of *T4* in the history of Imperium Games). Fortunately the Secret Masters were not just very enthusiastic, but also very knowledgeable about the game.

Later that year, Atlas published the fourth edition *Ars Magica* (1996) rules. The layout was somewhat austere compared to the previous White Wolf edition and the piecemeal methodology of the design sometimes showed through. Nonetheless, it was a solid new release of an already-classic game with some notable updates of older mechanics. It would serve Atlas for the next eight years.



Though there had still been a lot of work after Nephew's "bargain shopping," the new edition of *Ars Magica* had still enjoyed a quick turnaround. Atlas would also receive complete rules for their next two games, and they'd keep those more intact. It would be another reason for Atlas' ability to succeed as a small business.

"I don't intend to make any changes that are so drastic that a fourth edition supplement will be unusable with 3rd edition rules, and vice versa. But a few guiding goals are: making the game more accessible to new players, increasing player freedom in character design, and, I've said, bringing the realms back into balance, without Hell getting out of control and without Reason horning in on the game."

– Jonathan Tweet, Interview, *Redcap v2 #3* (Autumn 1994)

From 1996–2004 *Ars Magica* was Atlas' best supported RPG. Most notably, Atlas continued to expand the background of *Ars Magica*'s Mythic Europe, from *The Dragon and the Bear: The Novgorod Tribunal* (1999) to *Sanctuary of Ice: The Greater Alps Tribunal* (2003). There were also splatbooks on hedge magic (1997), Judaism (1998), and Hermetic mysteries (2000), a scant few adventures, and several other background books.

Though the books were generally well-received, Jeff Tidball — now *Ars Magica* line developer as well — would later admit that "the lack of a grand personal vision and [a] relatively low creative pay scale for freelancers conspired to scatter releases ... across the board, content-wise."

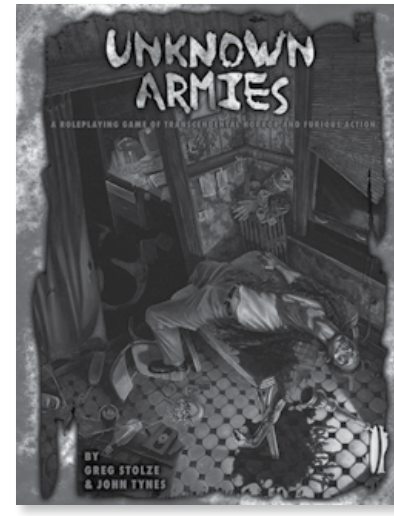
In 2000, Tidball headed off to an MFA script-writing program at the University of Southern California. Damelon Kimbrough, then editor of *Ars Magica* fanzine *Mythic Perspectives*, took the line over — and within a year things would change even more dramatically.

That's because by 2001 sales were getting a little tight for smaller press RPGs like *Ars Magica*. This was primarily due to the d20 boom, which was contracting the industry for all game lines that *weren't* d20. Just one *Ars Magica* book appeared that year, *The Medieval Bestiary* (2001). But then Nephew figured out a new way to help keep a third-tier RPG line profitable: he moved publication to hardcovers. The sales price of books increased, which drove the revenues up too; in turn Nephew was able to give readers a little bit more (with the hardcover binding), so that the *Ars Magica* books didn't look expensive without reason. The first book to follow this new pattern was *Blood & Sand: The Levant Tribunal* (2002).



Around the corner, Nephew had even bigger ideas for how to revitalize the line, which we'll return to.

Unknown Armies: 1999—2003



Following the acquisition of *Ars Magica*, Atlas Games' next major project was *Unknown Armies* (1999), a new RPG by John Tynes — of Pagan Publishing fame — and Greg Stolze. Ironically, the two met when working together on *Wildest Dreams* (1993), an early supplement for *Over the Edge*.

Tynes had first thought of *Unknown Armies* — originally titled *The New Inquisition* — back in 1994. After a night of drinking he'd come up with the idea of occult-related coincidences forming the basis of a game. He wrote some fiction about it in 1995 and scripted a comic book in 1996, then in 1997 he decided to finally try and design the RPG he'd originally considered. Being a background guy, Tynes needed a mechanics guy to help him write the game, and that was Greg Stolze.

Atlas Games expressed some early interest in *Unknown Armies*, but Tynes decided to instead go with Archon Games — then publishers of the *Noir* RPG — based mainly on their promises to market *Unknown Armies* in a big way.

By Gen Con '98 (1998), *Unknown Armies* was ready to go, as were the first couple of supplements, but Archon founder Lisa Manns disappeared. Some preview copies of the game were displayed at the convention, but afterward Tynes and Stolze learned that Manns was shutting down Archon. She paid off the *Unknown Armies* artists, and then returned the rights to Tynes and Stolze, who went out seeking new publishers. They approached Dream Pod 9, Hogshead Publishing ... and Atlas. With *Unknown Armies* already ready for press, Atlas Games was quite happy to publish it, which they did in January 1999.



Unknown Armies owes a lot to Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* (1981). The setting, which is much of what makes the

game successful, is modern-day conspiratorial horror. Though it's entirely original, it's still reminiscent of Tynes' work on *Delta Green* (1997).

Unknown Armies' game system, which centers on percentage-based skills, is similarly reminiscent of the Chaosium house system, BRP. However, it's sleeker, it's cleaner, and it introduces a few innovations. One is to "overload" die rolls: for example combat die rolls show both whether something hit and how much damage the blow did — an idea used only occasionally in other games like TSR's *Top Secret/S.I.* (1987). The game also introduces some opportunities to "flip-flop" rolls (changing the 1 and 10 digits of a roll) and gives bonuses for rolling doubles. It generally adds nice color to the fairly staid percentile-system conventions.

Unknown Armies also introduces some of the most exhaustive emotional rules in the industry. Passions provide each character with specific stimuli that can trigger fear, rage, or nobility. Madness meters, meanwhile, codify how characters react to stressors of violence, the supernatural, helplessness, isolation, and threats to self-image. They allow characters to either harden themselves to these stressors or crumble before them. Similar ideas had been included in *Pendragon* (1985), which featured simple passions, and in *Call of Cthulhu*, which allowed for simple insanity. However *Unknown Armies* takes a much more systematic, complex, and psychological approach to these ideas.

> *"The one thing I hadn't liked about the treatment of madness in RPGs was the 'roll for your lunacy' business. 'Oooh, nymphomania! Too bad!' I wanted to have it be an integrated aspect of character. And I'd just come off a year or so working as a secretary for a group of social workers. I'd seen a lot of people in crisis and heard a lot of awful stuff about mental trauma and coping mechanisms, and I put that into UA. I had to put it somewhere – I couldn't have stayed at that job indefinitely. I'd have burned out."*
>
> – Greg Stolze, Interview, examiner.com (2009)

Generally, *Unknown Armies* has been the best acclaimed of all of Atlas' games, which says a lot when almost all of their games are very highly regarded designs. John Tynes was officially brought on as a line editor for *Unknown Armies* in 1999. It was thereafter supported with a couple of supplements each year up to 2003, including a second edition (2002) of the game.

Since then, Atlas has kept the game in print, up through a fourth printing (2010) of the second edition's rules. More recently, Atlas Games put out a call for new material for the game, to be developed by Jeff Tidball and experimentally premiered as PDFs, but problems with the editorial process caused those projects to be cancelled in 2011.

Feng Shui: 1999—2004

By now Atlas had picked up three different RPGs from three different sources, and so it was no surprise when they announced a fourth, *Feng Shui*, on March 22, 1999. *Feng Shui* is a game of "Hong Kong Action Cinema" that was originally published by Daedalus Entertainment in a beautiful full-color rulebook. It was written by Robin D. Laws and edited by John Tynes — both now members of the Atlas family.

Following Daedalus' implosion, Nephew told Laws that he'd be happy to bring *Feng Shui* back into print, and so when Laws was able to free up the rights, he brought it to Atlas.

The game system behind *Feng Shui* is simple, but otherwise not notable. It features templates (classes) and schticks (feats) as well as a simple *FUDGE*-like skill-rolling mechanism where a positive die and a negative die are added together

Mini-History

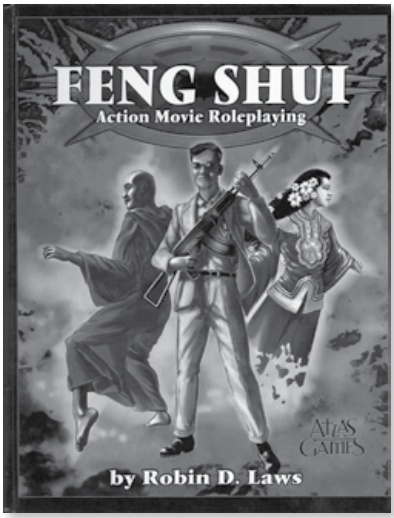
Daedalus Entertainment: 1994—1997

In large part the story of Canadian RPG company Daedalus Games begins with a 1993 meeting between Robin D. Laws and Jose Garcia. At the time Garcia was working on an RPG called *Nexus: The Infinite City* (1994). Laws, meanwhile, was still pretty new to the industry and wanted to do more. He approached Garcia with an idea of his own: a Hong Kong Action Cinema RPG, filling a niche that Hong Kong Action Cinema fan Laws felt was currently empty.

Garcia liked the idea, but his own *Nexus* was first priority. It was published in 1994, and though Garcia was the main designer and developer, he collected together many authors to help fill out the game. This included not only Laws, but also other future notables like Bruce Baugh and Rob Heinsoo. *Nexus* was a multi-genre game of the sort that was in vogue in the '90s following the release of *Rifts* (1990) and *Torg* (1990). Unlike many of the others, it provided a strong, singular base for the game: the city of Nexus, which touched all realities.

Nexus was supported with just one supplement, *Nexus Life* (1994). Meanwhile, Daedalus had also picked up the rights to the *Talislanta* game, but they'd never publish anything at all for that property. That's because Daedalus Games was on to bigger things. More specifically, bigger Hong Kong action things – but not quite what Laws had intended. Garcia liked the setting that Laws was working on, and so decided to use it as the basis of a CCG, hoping to ride the newest wave sweeping the RPG industry. In preparation, Daedalus Games was incorporated as Daedalus Entertainment.

Daedalus' Hong Kong Action Cinema CCG, *Shadowfist* (1995), premiered to good acclaim, getting some of the best attention accorded to any CCG other than those



with a skill to get a result (which, on average, is the skill itself).

Feng Shui really distinguishes itself in its clever writing and great theming, which together evoke the ideals of Hong Kong Action Cinema. Players are encouraged to be creative and crazy in describing their fights, and the background cleverly highlights all of the interesting eras of Hong Kong cinema by imagining a secret war fought throughout time, with major stops in a magic China of 69AD, a Victorian 1850, a modern 1996, and a futuristic 2056.

published by Wizards of the Coast. Thanks to an influx of CCG cash, Daedalus was able to hire Pagan Publishing's John Tynes as its RPG line editor. This allowed the company to publish their *next* RPG, Laws' *Feng Shui* (1996) – which used a variant of the *Nexus* game system. It was published in a beautiful full-color printing – something still pretty rare in the industry of 1996.

Both the CCG and the RPG were supported by a handful of supplements through 1997, but by then the financial realities of the CCG crash had caught up with the company. *Feng Shui* was reprinted in black & white, though its retail price wasn't changed. Staff were laid off or quit, leaving Jose Garcia (and sister Maria) as the only people working for the company. Tynes – who lasted just a year at Daedalus, from 1995–1996 – would later say that the big problem was "lack of business administration skills."

Daedalus' last hoorah was a license to Ronin Publishing that let Ronin publish *Blood of the Valiant* (1998), a supplement that Chris Pramas wrote for *Feng Shui*. Daedalus not only didn't publish it, they never even sent Pramas a contract – apparently because the company was having difficulty buying stamps.

Daedalus filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 1997. A few years later the company sold off a few of its properties. *Feng Shui* went to Robin D. Laws, who brought it to Atlas Games, while *Shadowfist* went to newcomer Z-Man Games, a company created primarily to bring the CCG back into print. After that Jose Garcia disappeared to Europe, where he's reputed to be a "ski bum." Because he has no remaining connections to the RPG industry, *Nexus* has disappeared as well.

"I wanted to recreate the wild and woolly feel of the source material, while also creating a fun, distinctive world that could be spun off into other media."

– Robin D. Laws, Interview, gamingoutpost.com (1999)

Greg Stolze was brought on as the line editor for *Feng Shui*. After Atlas released a new black & white version of the rules (1999) they heavily supported the game in 2000, but then backed off to one or two supplements a year through 2004. A one-off sourcebook, *Glimpse of the Abyss* (2007), appeared a few years later, but otherwise the game was unsupported until 2013, when Atlas announced that they were rebooting *Feng Shui* with the help of Hal Mangold's Atomic Overmind Press. New material may appear in 2014, a decade after the game's second run ended.

Furry Pirates: 1999

1999 was a busy year for Atlas. Besides their big-name tickets — *Unknown Armies* and *Feng Shui* — they also released a third RPG. It was called *Furry Pirates* (1999) and as the name suggests is a simple game combining anthropomorphism with piracy. *Furry Pirates* was the product of San Diego company Furry Games, who had previously produced *Furry Outlaws* (1994) using the same game system.

The game befuddled some fans of the company and amused others. Even developer Jeff Tidball wasn't entirely sure how they came to publish the game. Unlike all of Atlas' other RPGs, it was entirely unsupported, though it sold through its print run, producing a profit. *Furry Pirates* dropped out of print for some years, but it recently reappeared from Atlas thanks to print-on-demand publishing.

Rune: 2001—2003

Atlas' most recent RPG line, *Rune* (2001), is the only game designed entirely by and for Atlas. Nonetheless the generative idea for the game again came from outside the company.

Tim Gerritsen, business development manager at Human Head Studios, was interested in creating a wider world for their *Rune* computer game (2000). He decided to license a *Rune* RPG, which could then generate IP that could be used in later releases of the computer franchise.

Gerritsen scouted out possible licensees in at the 1999 Gen Con Game Fair and selected Atlas Games as the best choice. He wanted a small company, who would give more attention to the design of the game — rather than just churning out another product — and he liked Atlas' connections with star designers like Laws, Tweet, Stolze, and Tynes.



John Nephew was originally skeptical about producing a licensed game, but Atlas creative director Jeff Tidball convinced him to give it a try. Atlas then contracted Robin D. Laws to write the game, which was published in 2001. Tidball had by this time left for film school, so the editing and development was done by Atlas' newest employee, John's wife, Michelle Nephew.

Rune's mechanics are loosely based on *Ars Magica* — and in fact *Rune* was imagined as a gateway that could lead people to Atlas' other RPGs. The two games use similar characteristics, skill mechanisms, and die rolling mechanics. However *Rune* varies widely from *Ars Magica* in how the game is played. It's in fact the only truly competitive RPG in existence — or at least the only truly competitive RPG since the '70s, when gamemasters and players were more often seen as rivals.

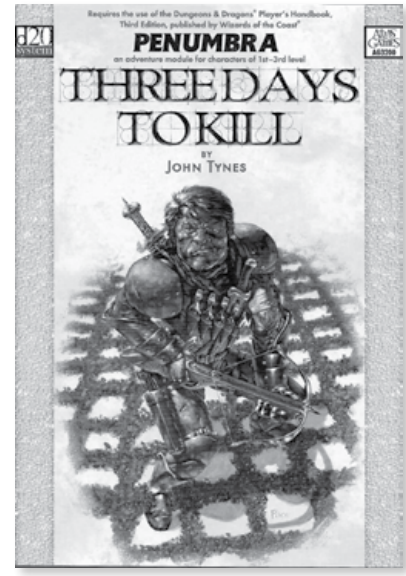
There's no single gamemaster in *Rune*. Instead the players take turns presenting encounters, each of which is built used a point-based system. The encounters are organized into standard plot structure with *set-up*, *development*, and *climax* encounters; at the end the player with the most victory points is the winner.

> *"[Seasoned roleplayers are] used to seeing roleplaying games as kind of weak-livered cooperative storytelling nonsense in which players who like killing monsters and taking their stuff are forced to suffer through all kinds of plot development and play-acting before they get to haul out their battle-axes. But, by Odin's frosty beard, this is a Viking game!"*
>
> – Robin D. Laws, *Rune* (2001)

Rune didn't have the critical acclaim of Atlas Games' other RPG lines. Despite the lack of acclaim or attention, *Rune* was probably Atlas' most innovative game, changing *how* RPGs are played — and also moving dramatically away from the storyteller games that both Robin Laws and Atlas Games were best known for. Instead *Rune* went back to the industry's roots in the '70s, when RPGs had evolved from wargames. For whatever reason, Atlas' readers weren't particularly interested in this development.

Though *Rune* was originally intended to be unsupported, three supplements were printed through 2003. The game and its supplements are now out of print.

The d20 Explosion: 2000—2005



By 2000, Atlas Games had three active game lines — *Ars Magica*, *Unknown Armies*, and *Feng Shui* — each of which was receiving some support every year. *Rune* was announced on March 16, and the game was in development. Atlas had also been continuing to express some light interest in the board and card game market with releases like Jeff Tidball's Cthulhu-influenced *Cults Across America* (1998) and the early eurogame *Corruption* (1999), by Bruno Faidutti.

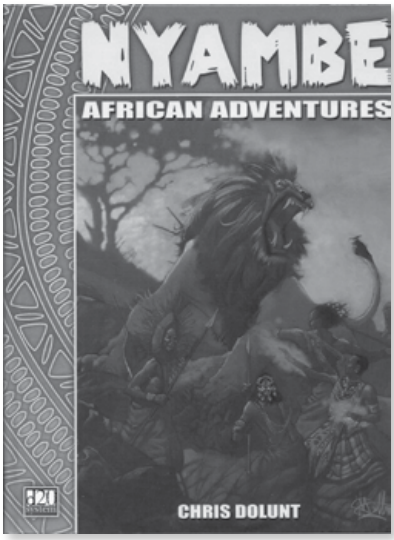
Then Wizards of the Coast changed everything with the release of their d20 license. Suddenly any game company could create supplements for the newest edition of the *Dungeons & Dragons* game.

Given their strong independent pedigree, it might seem a bit odd that Atlas Games decided to get involved with d20, but then-president John Nephew *had* gotten his start freelancing for TSR, making d20 in some ways a return home. Besides, Atlas felt like they could produce high-quality products that would shine amid the many d20 offerings.

Michelle Nephew became Atlas' d20 line editor, and this may have been another strength of the line because she was new to *D&D* (despite experience with *Shadowrun*, *Vampire*, and other RPGs), and brought a new perspective to the genre. She'd recently completed her PhD in English and Atlas' d20 books were her first major project. She was soon joined by d20 art director Scott Reeves.

Atlas named their first d20 brand "Penumbra" and it got a very early start. Atlas' *Three Days to Kill* (2000) adventure, by Pagan Publishing's John Tynes, was the first print d20 product ever offered for sale. It was a rush to get it out in time because everyone had been waiting to see whether the d20 license was actually going to happen or not. When Atlas got the OK, they immediately produced a cover for their book, though they were still laying out the interior. The interior was then printed at a local Kinko's and collated by hand. *Three Days to Kill* went on sale at The Source a week before Gen Con 2000, and was then the first d20 book available at the convention as well.

Later *Penumbra* books included *Beyond the Veil* (2001) — which was an adventure by D&D designer Monte Cook — and many more adventures and



sourcebooks. Atlas' second d20 line, "Nyambe" (2002–2003), got even more positive acclaim as a short-lived line of African themed fantasy adventures.

Atlas' d20 lines sold well. They helped the company to expand, bringing in new employees such as young developer Will Hindmarch. The d20 books also made retailers more aware of Atlas' *other* RPGs and increased the speed with which they reordered Atlas merchandise.

Unlike many other d20 publishers, Atlas worked hard to spread that d20 success to their own core lines. They established a third d20 line called "Coriolis" that published dual-statted books, each of which provided game info for both d20 and one of Atlas' existing games. These books included *Burning Shaolin* (2001) for *Feng Shui*, *The Ascension of the Magdalene* (2002) for *Unknown Armies*, *The Black Monks of Glastonbury* (2002) for *Ars Magica*, and *Last Hero in Scandinavia* (2003) for *Rune*.

> *"We saw the downtrend early on, and when we could see that the supply of new d20 titles in the industry wasn't going to slow, and profitability was going to vanish, we decided to wind down our lines. This was in the summer of 2003. At the time we were still publishing d20 profitably, but we saw no reason to see a change in the underlying trend of too many new books each month competing for a finite pool of gamer dollars."*
>
> – John Nephew, "A Chat with John Nephew of Atlas Games," gamegrene.com (2005)

By 2003, Atlas saw the d20 market was weakening. Their experience with CCGs taught them how to react. They were one of the few publishers to get out before the crash and avoid some of the results of the following downturn. A few final products were published in 2004, but then Atlas canceled the rest of their d20 line. Some new employees, such as Will Hindmarch, moved on.

There was one exception to Atlas' cessation of d20 publication: *Northern Crown* (2005), an American fantasy setting that Atlas published the next year. Atlas knew the d20 bubble had already burst, but they were excited enough about the product that they wanted to publish it even if it was only to break even. It was the same

attitude that Atlas had taken with many of its RPG lines, starting with *Over the Edge* way back in 1992.

Atlas kept selling the remnants of their d20 publications until the end of 2008, when the d20 trademark license came to an end. A massive fire sale over the last year kept Atlas from sending most of their remaining products to be recycled. Early in 2009, Atlas announced that all of their d20 products were officially out of print.

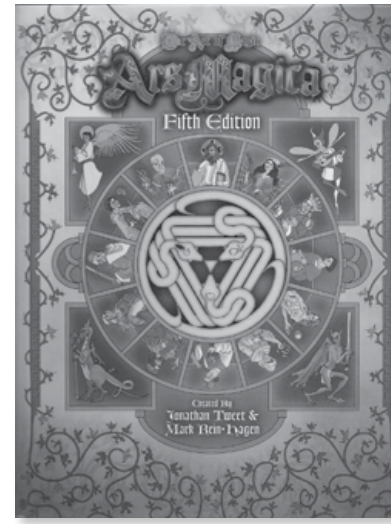
Though Atlas got out in time, the d20 boom and bust had done major, perhaps permanent, damage to the overall RPG industry. Distributors and retailers alike developed a more frontlist attitude during the d20 years and became less interested in carrying high-quality but slow moving books. All of this worked against Atlas' strengths. As a result, Atlas' various lines slowly ended production during this time frame, as we've already seen. *Over the Edge* ended in 2001 (though it had really finished up a few years earlier when Atlas turned its attention to newer lines), *Rune* and *Unknown Armies* ended in 2003, and *Feng Shui* ended in 2004.

Of Atlas' RPG lines, only *Ars Magica* remained active, but in 2004 the venerable fourth edition was tailing off too.

Ars Magica Fifth Edition: 2005-Present

Secret Master David Chart took over as *Ars Magica* line editor in 2002. But a bigger change came on March 17, 2003 when Atlas Games did something entirely unprecedented: they made their *Ars Magica Fourth Edition* rulebook available for free as a PDF download. Rulebooks tend to be the best "evergreen" sellers for any gameline, and in fact Atlas had sold 12,000 copies of the rules since they'd picked up the line just seven years before. But now anyone could get a free copy.

In a press release, John Nephew called it a "gift to the fans" but it was also a marketing experiment: Nephew wanted to see if making the rulebook available for free could increase sales of supplements — which were otherwise falling in this era of d20. Since a new fifth edition of the rules was now on the way, the potential damage seemed limited if he was wrong.



Shortly thereafter sales of the print edition of the fourth edition of the rules plummeted — though it's impossible to say if that was because of the free PDF or the announcement of a new fifth edition of the rules. However the experiment may have paid off when those new fifth edition

Ars Magica Fanzines

Ever since its 1987 publication, *Ars Magica* has been one of the best fan-supported RPGs in existence. Much of this enthusiasm has taken the form of a series of fanzines that have appeared over the last two decades.

Organized fandom was actually founded around 1988 when David Martin created the *Ars Magica* Mailing List, hosting it at his school, UC Davis. It was one of the earliest worldwide electronic forums for an individual game. When Martin graduated around 1990, Shannon Appel (the author of these histories) moved the *Ars Magica* Mailing to UC Berkeley, where it remains to this day. It's popularly called the "BerkList."

A few years later, Peter Hentges created *Redcap: News from the Order of Hermes*. This print *Ars Magica* fanzine ran seven issues, from 1992 to 1994. As is often the case with fanzines, *Redcap* popped up during a fallow period in the game's production – In this case when White Wolf was printing *Ars Magica* material that didn't match the desires of its long-term fans.

Mythic Perspectives, the second print *Ars Magica* fanzine, ran from 1997 to 2001. However, editor Damelon Kimbrough found the economics of a print magazine to be increasingly daunting as the years went on. The final issue, *Mythic Perspectives #11* (Summer 2001), was only printed and distributed thanks to the help of Atlas Games. Kimbrough, meanwhile, went to become Atlas' second *Ars Magica* line editor.

These histories are primarily about roleplaying games in the United States, but a French *Ars Magica* fanzine, *Ars Mag*, run by Eric Kouris, deserves special notice because it ran for an impressive 23 issues. It only came to an end when Kouris decided to create a new English language periodical: *Hermes' Portal*. Unlike the previous fanzines, *Hermes' Portal* was a PDF magazine. Kouris still charged a subscription fee, however, so that he could pay authors and artists – a rarity in the fanzine field. *Hermes' Portal* ran for 15 issues, from September 2001 to October 2005. Back issues are now available for free online.

A few years later, the fourth and to date final *Ars Magica* fanzine appeared. *Sub Rosa* was created by Alex White to fill the gap left by *Hermes' Portal*'s conclusion. It originally ran five issues – all published as subscriber-supported PDFs, much like *Hermes' Portal* – from April 2007 to July 2009. Mark Lawford and Ben McFarland revived it with a sixth issue (December 2010) and have continued to publish three to four issues a year.

A pair of yearly mini-conventions – Grand Tribunal America and Grand Tribunal UK – marks yet another element of *Ars Magica*'s organized fandom. Combined with the long history of fanzines and mailing lists, they show the depth of interest possible for even a small RPG line.

rules came out. Sales were considerably stronger than expected, and have stayed strong through the supplements released since.

In the gap before the release of the fifth edition rules, Atlas released an interesting product that they'd been holding for a while: *The Fallen Fane* (2004), an *Ars Magica* LARP. Lion Rampant had thought about publishing an *Ars Magica* LARP as far back as the late '80s. Now, 15 years later, the product had finally come to light.

The fifth edition rules themselves (Fall 2004) — overseen by David Chart — polished up the system that was rapidly created for Atlas' previous version of the game, resulting in what some called "Fourth edition done right." Changes to the background were more notable. The setting wasn't quite rebooted — as White Wolf was even then doing with Mark Rein•Hagen's *other* game, *Vampire* — but Atlas took a free hand in revising and sometimes rewriting 20 years' worth of background material to create a more comprehensive and evocative whole.

> *"I would like someone to be able to play the game within hours of seeing the rulebook for the first time, without any assistance from experienced players. This will require the most substantial changes. Some changes will have to be made to the rules, but most changes will be in presentation. How do you play Ars Magica? What makes a good magus character? What can you do with magic? And so on."*
>
> – David Chart, "Notes from the Line Editor," *Hermes Portal #6* (October 2002)

The rulebook was also printed in two colors — red and black — a trick that Atlas had learned when producing some of their *Penumbra* books. The idea of two-color printing dates back to at least *Journal of the Travellers' Aid #1* (1979), which was also red and black. TSR had used two-color printing extensively in the late '80s, but generally the trend hasn't caught on with the RPG industry as a whole — where most books are one-color or four-color, with nothing in between. Combined with the hardcover binding that Atlas continued to use, the two-color printing gave the new *Ars Magica* rulebook a highly professional look.

Since the release of the new rulebook, Atlas has released about 30 supplements for the game. Generally, the fifth edition's release schedule had been much more coherent than the fourth edition's schedule was, driven by editorial mandate rather than what freelancers proposed. This has resulted in a few series, including: *The Houses of Hermes* (2005–2007), a three-book set of splatbooks covering all the magi organizations formerly found in *The Order of Hermes* (1989); *Realms of Power* (2005–2009), detailing the various powers of Mythic Europe; and a continuation of the Tribunal book series begun so long ago by White Wolf.

David Chart has also actively worked to expand the pool of writers for *Ars Magica* with "open calls," which anyone can submit drafts for. The first of these was *Living Lore* (2004), which appeared in the waning days of fourth edition. *Covenants* (2006), *Magi of Hermes* (2009), and *Grogs* (2012) have continued the idea since the publication of fifth edition.

In all, Atlas Games has published three to five *Ars Magica* books every year since the release of fifth edition, which is quite impressive for a niche game in that time period.

In 2010, Atlas Games made a small change to their successful *Ars Magica* line. Atlas has always strongly believed in keeping both rulebooks and supplements in print. However, the hardcover books that helped make the *Ars Magica* line viable were also making it hard to reprint, because they couldn't be printed economically in the small quantities required for reprints. Though Atlas is continuing to publish new books as hardcovers, reprints are now appearing as square-bound soft-cover volumes.

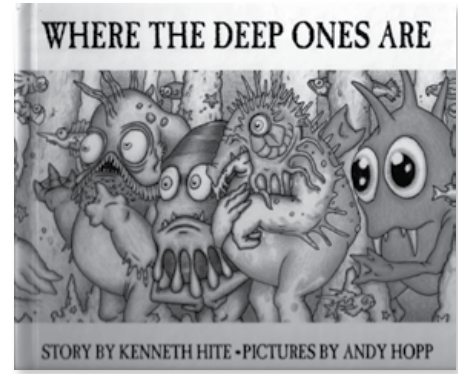
Latter Days: 2003-Present

Since 2003, *Ars Magica* is the only RPG line that Atlas Games has regularly supported with new releases. Thanks in part to the decline of d20 specifically and the RPG industry in general, Atlas has instead turned largely to board and card games.

Among the board and card games that Atlas published in the period are:

- *Dungeoneer* (2003), an RPG dungeon crawl given strategic life by Thomas Denmark. Over half-a-dozen sets were produced through 2007.
- *Gloom* (2005), a well-themed gothic game by Keith Baker that uses unique see-through cards, a material that Atlas created for the industry. The game has remained highly popular, seeing multiple printings and expansions. It also led to the release of a second "transparent card game," *Ren Faire* (2009), by Michelle Nephew.
- *Grand Tribunal* (2006), an *Ars Magica* card game with heavy Eurogame influence, designed by Phil R. Chase.
- *Pieces of Eight* (2006), a coin-based game designed by Jeff Tidball.
- *Recess!* (2006), a well-designed abstract by Morgan Dontanville.
- *Seismic* (2006), another game with Euro-influences, this one by Ted Alspach.
- *Mad Scientist University* (2007), an *Apples to Apples*- like game, with a storytelling twist, recalling Atlas' early work on *Once Upon a Time*. It was designed by Zachary William Anderson.





In 2007, it looked like Atlas Games was making a big push toward board games, much as Steve Jackson Games and others have. Then two things happened that have together substantially reduced Atlas' output. First, John Nephew won a seat on the Maplewood, Minnesota, City Council in 2007. Second, Michelle Nephew gave birth to twins in 2009.

Despite the Nephews' new priorities, Atlas is keeping things in print and continuing to release supplements for their best-selling card games. More recently, they've also started to ramp up their production again, including: the *Cthulhu Gloom* (2011) variant of *Gloom*; a third edition of *Once Upon a Time* (2012); and a simple card game by Thomas Denmark and Eduardo Baraf called *Murder of Crows* (2012).

On the roleplaying front, David Chart continues to line edit *Ars Magica*, producing a few supplements each year.

Meanwhile, the Nephews continue to keep their ears out for especially interesting projects that they might want to publish. In the last few years they've put out: *40 Years of Gen Con* (2007), an excellent collection of interviews and photographs edited by Robin D. Laws; and *Where the Deep Ones Are* (2008), *The Antarctic Express* (2009), *Cliffourd the Big Red God* (2011) by Kenneth Hite, all parody kids' books featuring the Cthulhu mythos.

> *"The most surprising element of the whole project, in both cases, was how easy the fit was. 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth' really is about a young man who visits a dangerous place and discovers he belongs there; 'Mountains of Madness' really is about a magical voyage to the Pole, and getting a gift you can't share or prove."*
>
> – Kenneth Hite, "Interview with Ken Hite," flamesrising.com (2009)

Unlike most companies that slowed their production or moved away from roleplaying, Atlas Games really does seem like it could bounce back into the industry at any time, when the stars are right.

Beyond their own publications, Atlas' influence continues to be felt. Former Atlas Games employees Will Hindmarch and Jeff Tidball have formed a new small press since leaving the company called gameplaywright. It has published three thoughtful books about gaming: *Things We Think About Games* (2008), *The Bones: Us and Our Dice* (2010), and Robin D. Laws' *Hamlet's Hit Points* (2010). More are planned for the future.

What to Read Next

- For Jonathan Tweet's future influence on the whole industry, read ***Wizards of the Coast.***
- For James Wallis' New Style games, read ***Hogshead Publishing.***
- For John Tynes' best-known work and for other work by Greg Stolze, read ***Pagan Publishing.***
- For the history of *Ars Magica* prior to Atlas' acquisition, read ***Lion Rampant*** *['80s],* ***White Wolf,*** and ***Wizards of the Coast.***
- For the origins of the d20 Trademark License, read ***Wizards of the Coast.***

In Other Eras

- For John Nephew's origins in the roleplaying industry, also read ***Lion Rampant*** *['80s].*
- For Atlas' early licensors, read ***Lion Rampant*** *['80s],* ***White Wolf*** *['90s],* and ***R. Talsorian Games*** *['80s].*
- For Jonathan Tweet's past works, read ***Lion Rampant*** *['80s].*
- For other very early storytelling games, read about *Paranoia* in ***West End Games*** *['80s], Toon* in ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s],* and *Pendragon* and *Prince Valiant* in ***Chaosium*** *['70s].*
- For the more recent indie movement, read ***Adept Press*** *['00s].*
- For another computer game whose publishers sought out an RPG publisher, read about *Dragon Age* in ***Green Ronin Publishing*** *['00s].*
- For other RPGs by Robin Laws, read ***Issaries*** *['00s]* and ***Pelgrane Publishing*** *['00s].*
- For the other competitors in the "first d20 adventure" contest, read ***Necromancer Games*** *['00s]* and Green ***Ronin Publishing*** *['00s].*
- For a possible *Dungeoneer* RPG, read ***Goodman Games*** *['00s].*
- For another game designer who went into politics, read about Rob Bell in ***Hero Games*** *['80s].*

Or read onward to top *Call of Cthulhu* licensee, ***Pagan Publishing.***

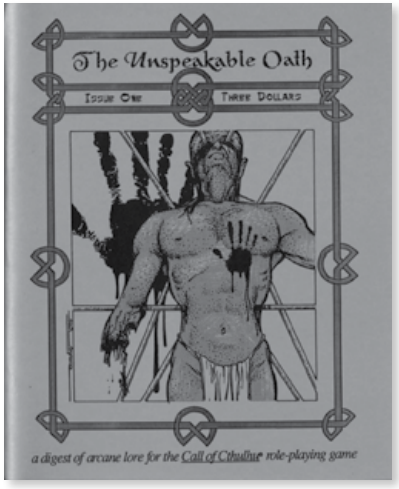
Pagan Publishing: 1990–Present

Pagan Publishing was the hottest creator of Cthulhiana in the '90s, and though they've tailed off in more recent years, they still have a toehold in the RPG scene.

The Unspeakable Oath: 1990—2001

There's a common entry path into gaming publishing that goes something like this: A group of gaming enthusiasts decide that they're going to publish a gaming magazine. They put out their first issue, and it gains some acclaim, so they continue publishing. Once they have a few issues under their belt, they realize that this publishing thing is pretty easy, so they put out a game supplement too, possibly drawing upon material originally printed in their periodical.

The gaming supplement does even better than the magazine itself. It's easier to produce, and it nets even more acclaim. Better — especially in those days before d20 — the supplement goes into backlist, which means that it continues to sell in game stores



1990: The Unspeakable Oath #1

well past its publication date, where the magazine had only sold as frontlist in game stores, with each new issue replacing the last one.

It's a story that that you can read about in the histories of AEG, Metagaming, Steve Jackson Games, White Wolf, and others. And it's certainly a solid framework for the history of Pagan Publishing as well.

> *"The creative work I did then was so intensive and so exciting that, four years later, I still haven't finished mining the vein I first opened back then. Though it drove me mad for a little while, when I came back I at least had something worth going mad for."*
>
> – John Tynes, "The Dread Page of Azathoth," *The Unspeakable Oath #13* (1995)

Pagan Publishing was founded in 1990 in Columbia, Missouri, the brainchild of John Tynes. He was a scrappy, young 19-year-old studying journalism at the University of Missouri-Columbia in his sophomore year. He also just attended his first Gen Con — where he survived by sleeping in a parking garage and eating stolen junk food.

Tynes had a love for H.P. Lovecraft and for Robert Chambers, two writers of weird tales. He was also "going a little crazy" — which one must admit is an excellent credential to found a Cthulhoid company upon. Perhaps it explains some of the energy that Pagan brought to the field.

When he created Pagan Publishing, Tynes didn't enter the field alone. A volunteer staff of the who's who of gamers from Columbia surrounded him. First and foremost was Jeff Barber, who would collaborate with Tynes on early adventures and other games. Other early staff members included Brian Bevel, John H. Crowe III, Les Dean, and Chris Klepac.

Together this crew created *The Unspeakable Oath #1* (December 1990), the company's premiere publication. It set the template for the magazine as a digest-sized quarterly full of *Call of Cthulhu* goodness. That first issue caught the enthusiastic attention of Chaosium's Keith Herber, which gave Tynes the foothold to recruit *Cthulhu* writers like Scott David Aniolowski and Kevin Ross. Meanwhile, Pagan published *The Unspeakable Oath #2* (Spring 1991) and *The Unspeakable Oath #3* (Summer 1991). The latter issue led to another recruit, Dennis Detwiller, who soon moved to Columbia to join the Pagan household.

In the beginning, *The Unspeakable Oath* was a solid Cthulhu magazine that perhaps emphasized theme and mood a bit more than the average Chaosium publication of the time did, but it was nothing extraordinary. The first six issues (1990–1992) were semi-professional, with black & white cardstock covers. Writers included several past and future Cthulhu names, including Steve Hatherly,

The Top Ten Censored RPG Books

Over the years, a handful of RPG books have been withdrawn by their publishers and a larger number have been banned by some entity or another.

1. *Palace of the Silver Princess,* 1st Printing (TSR, 1981)

The original orange-covered edition of *B3: Palace of the Silver Princess* by Jean Wells was probably the earliest RPG book to be withdrawn from the market and today is one of the best-known "banned" RPG books.

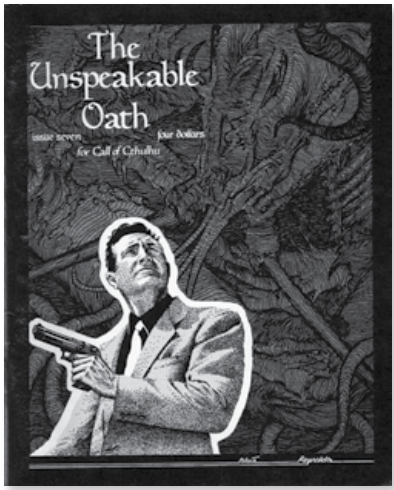
In 1979, Gary Gygax handpicked Jean Wells as one of the first two members of TSR's new Design Department; he felt that she could bring a new, female perspective to the hobby. As a result of this close connection, Wells' first major work, *Palace*, didn't get edited much – and therefore didn't receive much attention by anyone until it came back from the printers. At that point one of the executives at TSR (most likely Kevin Blume) decided that the book was inappropriate. By then, copies of the book had gone out to some distributors and many TSR employees had taken it home, but TSR destroyed as many copies of the book as they could.

The artwork, mostly by Erol Otus, is typically named as the main problem with the book. One piece called "The Illusion of the Decapus" showed a woman being tortured while another showed a three-headed, three-armed hermaphrodite.

However, the text was also troublesome. Most notably, the adventure was laid out in the same freeform style as *B1: In Search of the Unknown* (1979) – meaning that actual monsters, treasures, and traps were not listed, so that each GM could fill them in – a style not used by any of the later TSR supplements. Some also found the many new monsters silly, like that aforementioned three-headed thingamabob, called an "ubue." Finally, the text may not have been up to the level of professionalism that TSR was then shooting for.

Following TSR's recall of the original *Palace*, a second printing (1981) was quickly released. It was largely rewritten by Tom Moldvay himself and swapped out a lot of the art. This green-covered edition is the one that remained in print for years, through at least three printings, and which most *D&D* players of the era are probably familiar with.

As an interesting footnote, *Palace of the Silver Princess* in its first (and banned) edition has usually been noted as the first RPG product written solely by a woman, following at least three books co-authored by women: Wee Warrior's *Palace of the Vampire Queen* (1976), Metro Detroit Gamers' *Quest for the Fazzlewood* (1978), and DayStar West Media's *Rahasia* (1979). That turns out to not be the case, as "Lee" Russell's *Labyrinth* (1977), a *T&T* solo, predated it by a few years. *Labyrinth* hasn't gotten its due credit previously because of "Lee's" obfuscatory pen name, but it was indeed an earlier all-female RPG supplement.



Keith Herber, and Scott David Aniolowski. The adventures — such as *The Unspeakable Oath #2*'s "Grace Under Pressure," by Tynes and Barber — got some good attention, and the covers by Blair Reynolds were well-executed and disturbing.

The Unspeakable Oath #7 (Fall 1992) was the first to feature sturdier covers. The big upgrade, however, came with *The Unspeakable Oath #10* (Fall 1993), when the magazine jumped to RPG-book size. That was also the first full-color cover, and it was used to good effect to display what was perhaps Pagan's most disturbing cover ever, an Anson Maddocks picture of a flesh-covered book. At the same time as these upgrades, the magazine's frequency dropped. As we'll see, that's because Pagan began publishing supplements. The next four issues were published from 1994–1997, averaging just one a year. After that only one more issue, *The Unspeakable Oath #16/17* (2001), appeared from Pagan themselves.

Pagan had begun to enter the wider world of *Call of Cthulhu* when John Tynes stayed with Keith and Sharon Herber in Spring 1992 and had worked briefly in the Chaosium office. Around the same time he spent a long weekend in Iowa with Kevin Ross and Scott David Aniolowski, where they came up with the idea for *Stark Raving Mad!* (1991), a 10th anniversary collection of interviews that was Pagan's first non-*TUO* publication.

Then starting in 1992, Pagan would publish a few supplements a year for close to a decade.

2. *GURPS Cyberpunk* (Steve Jackson Games, 1990)

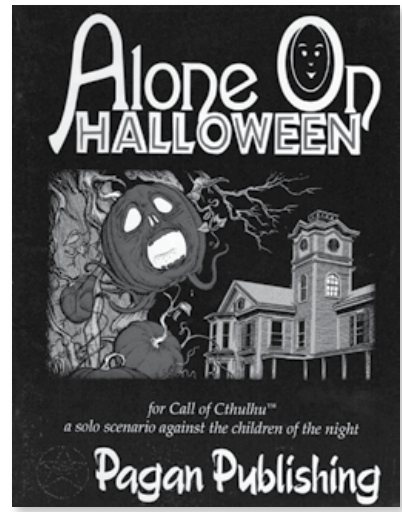
Although *GURPS Cyberpunk* wasn't the cause of the March 1, 1990, raid on Steve Jackson Games, the Secret Service agents involved in the raid were soon holding it up as their greatest prize, calling it a "handbook for computer crime." They wouldn't even return the manuscript, making it the only example on this list of a censored publications that was actually held back by the government – likely in violation of the First Amendment. Steve Jackson Games was able to recreate the book from backups and release it.

The entire disgraceful affair is covered in considerable detail in the history of Steve Jackson Games.

The Early Books: 1992—1993

Pagan Publishing got into game books the same way that most periodical publishers do. They published compilations of material from their magazine, including: *Courting Madness* (1992), an anthology *of The Unspeakable Oath* material; *Creatures & Cultists* (1992), a reprint of a card game that appeared in *The Unspeakable Oath #4* (Fall 1991); and *The Weapons Compendium* (1993), which contained Crowe's weapon stats from *The Unspeakable Oath* — and a lot of new ones too.

Courting Madness was notable because it got Pagan some real attention — not because of the content, but because of the cover. Blair Reynolds' artwork was often the most striking part of early Pagan publications. This cover showed a nude woman either worshiping a Mythos creature or performing a sexual act on it. It was banned from sale by TSR at Gen Con '92.



Pagan started publishing original supplements around the same time, beginning with *Alone on Halloween* (1992), a solo adventure. However, it was another year before Pagan put out the first supplement that really foreshadowed their later success: *Devil's Children* (1993), an adventure with chapters set in 1692 Salem and 1992 Arkham. By this time Chaosium had already

3. *Killer* (Steve Jackson Games, 1982)

Steve Jackson's *Killer* (1982), a codification of the public domain Assassin game, may be the most censored RPG (or at least LARP) of all time. Numerous college campuses across the country have banned it because they don't want students running around pretending to kill each other. Following the sharp increase in gun violence at schools that kicked off in the late '80s and especially since the Columbine Massacre (1999), one can understand their point.

Killer also earns the distinction of being one of the earlier games banned by TSR at Gen Con. According to one source, Ernie Gygax came over to tell Steve Jackson that *Killer* had to be pulled because it violated "Gen Con Product Standards." When Jackson protested that he'd never heard of such a thing, Gygax told him that the standards hadn't been written down yet, but nonetheless *Killer* was in violation. It's unclear whether *Killer* was actually pulled as a result, but it certainly set TSR up as an uneven arbiter of what was allowed at Gen Con, a topic we'll return to.

extended the core *Call of Cthulhu* game in the 1890s and the '90s, but for Pagan's first book-length scenario to make a one-off stop in a totally different time period was original and innovative.

In 1993, Pagan announced even bigger plans: a new Cthulhu RPG called *End Time*, where players would "take the roles of humans in a makeshift colony on Mars" after escaping from an Earth that had been destroyed by the Mythos.

> *"End Time is Pagan Publishing's first role-playing game. It is set in the year 2094, after the stars have come right and Cthulhu and the other Great Old Ones have risen and laid waste to humanity. It's a sequel of sorts to Chaosium, Inc.'s award-winning Call of Cthulhu RPG, and is based in the same universe – a universe of cosmic horror, as created by writer Howard Phillips Lovecraft, in which malevolent entities beyond the understanding of humans bring unspeakable terrors to our world."*
>
> – Press Release (October 31, 1993)

However, Pagan was just on the edge of big changes that would throw all its plans into disarray.

The WotC Years: 1994—1995

In May 1994, John Tynes took a job with Wizards of the Coast, who was really pushing into the RPG industry now that they were flush with *Magic: The Gathering* money. He was to be a "lieutenant" to new Wizards RPG Department lead, Jonathan Tweet.

Despite the fact that he'd soon be uprooting his whole life, Tynes refused to let go of Pagan; in fact, he had big plans for the company's expansion in 1994. He'd put out a schedule two months earlier that showed off the scope of his ambition.

4. *Alma Mater* (Oracle Games, 1982)

In the '80s, *Alma Mater* (1982), a small press high school roleplaying game, was almost synonymous with the idea of forbidden gaming. After being released at Origins, it was banned at Gen Con – which would have been the same year that TSR was trying to ban sale of *Killer* at that con. The banning was a result of *Alma Mater* showing off the rougher side of high school – with sex, drugs, and violence front and center. However, it was probably the artwork by Erol Otus (again!) pushing the game right over the edge, including one drawing of a student shooting up and another demonstrating very heavy petting.

Tynes said that three publications were immediately forthcoming: an adventure called *Walker in the Wastes*, another book of *The Unspeakable Oath* reprints, and a new issue of *The Unspeakable Oath* itself. For August, he forecast an introductory set of adventures called *End Time: Glimpses*. By December, he promised *End Time* itself, plus a player's guide and a scenario book. Two other books, mysteriously named *The Golden Dawn* and *Delta Green*, were also listed on the year's publication schedule — for a total of at least nine publications in 1994.

The move to Seattle offered both opportunity and problems for this expansion.

On the one hand, Pagan had previously had a strong presence in Columbia, Missouri. Many of the Pagan volunteers lived together there — and not all of them wanted to move. Jeff Barber and others would leave Pagan as a result. Sadly, their departure was not entirely amicable. They went on to form Biohazard Games, whose core game, *Blue Planet* (1997), shared at least a little inspiration with Pagan's planned *End Time* game. The credits from *Blue Planet* were also filled with early *The Unspeakable Oath* contributors, representing those who had been left behind. Some of the story of Biohazard continues in the histories of Fantasy Flight Games and RedBrick.

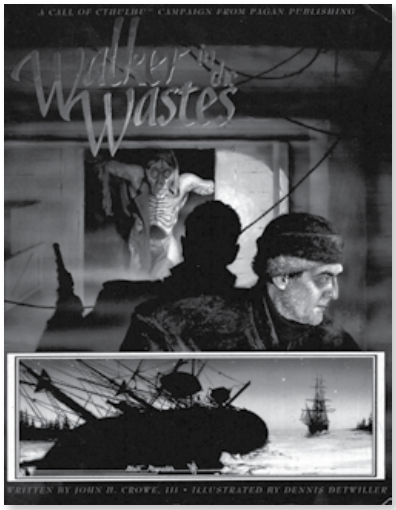
On the other hand, Tynes would now be at the innovative center of the gaming industry in the mid-'90s, and that was enough opportunity to tempt some of the old Pagan crew to join him there. Dennis Detwiller, Brian Appleton, John H. Crowe III, and Chris Klepac all agreed to move to Seattle with Tynes. There, they intended to turn the all-volunteer Pagan Publishing into a real company.

Unfortunately, the upheaval of the move was enough to scuttle most of Pagan's plans for 1994. Though Pagan Publishing was officially incorporated after Tynes, Detwiller, Appleton, Crowe, and Klepac moved to Seattle, the company would never become the fully professional publishing house that Tynes had envisioned in March 1994.

5. *Book of Erotic Fantasy* (Valar Project, 2003)

When word got around that Valar was working on a *Book of Erotic Fantasy*, Wizards of the Coast went out of their way to introduce "community standards of decency" to the d20 Trademark License, just so that Valar couldn't use it. It was like a reenactment of *Killer*'s experience at Gen Con in 1982.

Valar used the OGL instead. So Wizards didn't technically ban this book, but it certainly received censure and that was surely part of an attempt to keep it out of print. There's a bit more on the book and how it affected the d20 marketplace in the history of Wizards of the Coast.



Most notably, Pagan's *End Time* did not come out in 1994 — nor would it come out in the years that followed. Later Pagan would admit that their *End Time* project was officially dead, in part due to contractual issues with Chaosium and in part due to the loss of Jeff Barber. Many years later Michael C. LaBossiere — the original co-author, alongside Tynes — released an *End Time* setting book (2004) as a Chaosium monograph.

Other than two issues of *The Unspeakable Oath* and a book of reprints, Pagan Publishing only managed to publish two supplements over the next year: *Walker in the Wastes* (1994) and *Coming Full Circle* (1995), both by John H. Crowe III. The first was a massive Ithaqua campaign, and the second a set of linked scenarios. Both pushed the standard 1920s setting into the 1930s, again showing off Pagan's willingness to take *Call of Cthulhu* into unusual places.

Coming Full Circle also marked the last of Pagan's "early" and less ambitious supplements. None of these early releases are among Pagan's top-rated books, with the possible exception of *Walker in the Wastes*. However, they did include a few elements that helped them stand out. The grayscale artwork was better quality than that in most of the Chaosium publications at the time, and the time periods were just slightly varied.

Though it didn't come across strongly in the printed publications, Pagan adventures also often made good use of sound effects and other props. For "Grace Under Pressure," for example, they suggested using three tape decks during the adventure, one containing whale songs, another containing SONAR pings, and

6. *Wings of the Valkyrie* (Hero/ICE, 1987)

Wings of the Valkyrie was a Champions time travel adventure with a twist: time travelers have gone back in time and killed Hitler and by doing so created a much worse future. The players are faced not only with an adventure, but also a moral dilemma: do they allow Hitler to kill millions in order to save the future?

Unfortunately, the premise caused major offense to some – possibly including a major distributor. As a result, ICE decided it was in their best interest to recall the adventure wholesale, and they did.

7. *Theatrix Presents Ironwood* (Backstage Press, 1994) & Other Gen Con Casualties of the '90s

In the early '90s, TSR was running scared from angry mothers who thought that *D&D* was evil. Demons and devils disappeared from *AD&D* and guidelines for what could be shown at Gen Con grew stringent, surpassing the early years when there was no code of product standards. This was the atmosphere when *Theatrix Presents Ironwood* (1994) got banned from the convention.

Ironwood – based on an "adult" comic series by ex-TSR employee Bill Willingham – has been singled out for attention here because Backstage Press co-founder Andrew Finch made a lot of hay on the internet about the banning. Thanks to that, we have a list of the criteria that TSR used to ban products in 1994, which included anything that:

- Portrays mutilation or open torture.
- Portrays nudity.
- Portrays any current religion in a negative capacity.
- Portrays any older religion as an ongoing and useful activity.
- Portrays any law enforcement individual in a derogatory manner.
- Uses bad language.

Finch said that *Ironwood* met all of the criteria except the first.

Other games known to have been banned at Gen Con under TSR in the '90s are: David Nalle's *Suburban Slasher* strategy game (1992); some or all of Mayfair's *Demons* sourcebooks for *AD&D* (1992–1993); the *Mort Sourcebook* for *SLA Industries* (1995), due to a purported picture of genitalia on the back cover; and *The End* by Scapegoat Games. The last banning resulted in Scapegoat staff marching outside Gen Con with placards saying "The End Is HERE!," offering another example of censorship being the best marketing.

There were probably many more banned Gen Con books (included a few noted in points 8 and 10 of this list). Word has it that one year TSR even banned a guillotine that Ral Partha had created to decorate their booth!

Meanwhile, games like *Kult* (1993), *HoL* (1994, 1995), and the *Redemption* CCG (1995) had no problems, showing the vast arbitrariness that continued to exist in TSR's Gen Con censorship. In fact, the folks at Backstage Press later said that if they hadn't shown *Ironwood* to the Gen Con showrunners, there wouldn't have been any problem.

By all indications, Gen Con rules have been much less harsh since the con passed on from TSR, though in recent years at least *Morton's List* (2001) – a quest game – was banned, purportedly because it included "real life magic spells."

Angry Mother Syndrome and TSR's cowering reaction to the moral minority in the late '80s and early '90s is discussed more in their own history, while TSR's problems with Mayfair's *Demons* line is discussed primarily in Mayfair's history.

a third containing specific radio communication. When Pagan actually ran their adventures at cons, they were better able to show off this style of GMing.

Despite small advances like the sound effects and the varied time periods, by the end of 1995 Pagan really hadn't done anything to distinguish their take on *Call of Cthulhu*. They were just another licensee publishing modules, as Games Workshop, Grenadier, TOME, and Triad had done before them.

That was about to change.

In June 1995, Tynes resigned from Wizards of the Coast, sickened by new corporate ideals of branding. He'd later discuss the evolution of Wizards during his year there in his famous article, "Death to the Minotaur."

It was just as well that Tynes decided to leave because six months later Wizards cut their entire RPG division. Meanwhile, Tynes moved on to Daedalus Games, though that position would be equally short-lived.

> *"The more Peter [Adkison] explained branding to us, the more it seemed like some kind of Zen koan, an enigma wrapped in a riddle. We identified the core values of our brand using words like 'smart' and 'fun' and 'social' that told us nothing we didn't already know, yet somehow they made us feel good. We lived in dread of 'juvenilizing' the brand, though a card game full of knights and dragons already seemed pretty juvenile to me. We selected 'iconic characters' for different products, which didn't actually have to be important to the story or the game but just had to look good."*
>
> – John Tynes, "Death to the Minotaur," *Salon* (March 2001)

8. *Courting Madness* (Pagan Publishing, 1992) & Other Pagan Casualties

Courting Madness, one of Pagan Publishing's earliest releases, was yet another Gen Con casualty of the '90s – in its case because of implied fellatio of a headless monstrosity. It gets a special mention apart from the other Gen Con bannings because it wasn't an isolated case for Pagan.

The Unspeakable Oath #5 (Spring 1992), whose cover featured a gory dog's head, got into almost as much trouble: Pagan was told they could sell it, but only "under the counter," which meant they couldn't display it. *The Unspeakable Oath #4* (Fall 1991) showed breasts, while *The Unspeakable Oath #10* (Fall 1993) featured an altogether icky cover showing a human-skin book cover, so it's likely that those releases were troublesome too.

The element that most of these Pagan covers had in common? Blair Reynolds, certainly one of the most disturbing artists that the hobby had seen to date in the '90s.

By 1996, Tynes would have his focus squarely back on Pagan, but with lessons that he'd learned from his time working Wizards — including a new take on graphic design. In the coming years, Pagan would publish what are widely considered their best *Call of Cthulhu* supplements, and the ones that truly marked Pagan as their own company.

The Creative Peak: 1996—2000

Pagan Publishing started its new era by picking up the rights to Jonathan Tweet's innovative game, *Everway* (1995), from Wizards' dead RPG Department. It gave Pagan a second chance to publish an actual RPG, not just supplements for someone else's game.

Unfortunately, it would never come to fruition.

Pagan announced the acquisition on March 6, 1996. Just 19 days later, on March 25, Pagan reported a change of plans, saying "the company's goals were incompatible with acquiring *Everway*," which allowed Rubicon Games to try their hand at Tweet's masterpiece.

Instead, Pagan Publishing pursued their core business of producing *Cthulhu* supplements. They had two supplements on the backburner, both of which Tynes had promised back in 1994: *The Golden Dawn* and *Delta Green*. Each sought to solve the same problem, which was how to get characters together in a *Call of Cthulhu* game.

9. *Delta Green: Countdown* (Pagan Publishing, 1999) & Other Nazi Casualties

However, Pagan Publishing didn't get into problems just due to the sex and violence shown on their early covers. Their *Delta Green: Countdown* (1999) had problems selling in Germany because of the Nazi imagery on the cover.

Germany has very draconic censorship laws related to Nazism. Many games over the years have fallen prey to this problem. Among the reported victims are Steve Jackson Games' *GURPS Supers IST* (1991), Nightshift Games' *Hidden Invasion* (1995), and Battlefield Press' *Luftwaffe 1946* (2003) RPG.

However, the German censorship is apparently easy to get around: Steve Jackson Games went over a few covers of IST with sharpies to remove objectionable content while Crunchy Frog put post-its over the picture of Adolf Hitler in *Hidden Invasion* that was causing problems.

> *"In the course of playing through Masks of Nyarlathotep and other campaigns, it became clear to me that the biggest problem CoC had was the lack of a credible narrative structure. That is, a reason why a group of people would band together to fight the Mythos. This problem became acute during a campaign, where characters would die and we'd somehow have to justify new characters joining this group of paranoid monster-hunters. I wanted to develop ways to make this work, to provide a structure in which characters could come and go."*
>
> – John Tynes, Interview, yog-sothoth.com (March 2002)

The Golden Dawn (1996) answered this problem for the 1890s. It described a Victorian occult society full of period luminaries. Like many of the Pagan Publishing supplements, it dripped with theme and historical detail.

It was also the first truly beautiful Pagan Publishing supplement, featuring full-page bleeds, background textures, and textured maps, all of which combined to give the supplement a highly professional, artistic look that wasn't common in the industry at the time. Tynes picked up these new layout ideas from Wizards and Daedalus artist and graphic designer Daniel Gelon's beautiful work on Wizards' *Faeries* (1995). The style wouldn't be mimicked by *Call of Cthulhu*'s core publisher, Chaosium, for a few more years.

But the next supplement was the one that would truly break new ground.

10. *Faeries* (White Wolf, 1991) & Other White Wolf Casualties

White Wolf is another roleplaying company who had troubles with their books more than once. *Faeries* (1991) for *Ars Magica* is spotlighted because it was probably their first book that was censored. The issue was the cover that showed not just a breast but a nipple – a real *faux pas* for many game store owners. When Wizards of the Coast revised the book a few years later (1995), they put old guys on the cover instead.

Vampire, not surprisingly, caused many more problems for White Wolf than *Ars Magica* ever did. Some stores wouldn't carry *Clanbook: Brujah* (1992) because it used the "f" word, while *Clanbook: Tzimisce* (1995) was apparently yet another book with the old "genitalia-on-the-back-cover" problem. Such an easy mistake to make. As a result, *Tzimisce* shipped to some game stores with shrinkwrap that hid part of the back cover from view.

White Wolf had problems at Gen Con too. *Clanbook: Malkavian* (1994) was definitely banned from the convention because a picture of designer Chris McDonough was taken to be a disparagement of Jesus. There were probably others.



Way back in *The Unspeakable Oath #7* (Fall 1992), Tynes proposed a solution for the problem of getting characters together in the modern day. Tynes, Dennis Detwiller, and newcomer Adam Scott Glancy now expanded this idea of a secret modern military organization into their other long-promised supplement: *Delta Green* (1997).

The easy description of *Delta Green* is that it's a combination of Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos and *The X-Files* (1993–2002). It was able to break new ground by merging Lovecraft's pulp horror with modern conspiracy. It also did something else that Tynes thought was important: it provided a cohesive and compelling modern-day background for *Call of Cthulhu* that went far beyond the *Delta Green* organization — something that Chaosium had never done despite several books set in the era.



Delta Green won the Origins award for Best Supplement in 1997, as well as the acclaim and interest of many fans.

Before moving on, it's worth briefly talking about the origins of ideas.

Though *The X-Files* was popular by the time *Delta Green* was finally released, that was after many years of development. *Delta Green*'s first appearance in *The Unspeakable Oath #7* actually predated *The X-Files* by about nine months. It's a case of simultaneous generation, and a clear indication that ideas lay heavy upon the human psyche and are just waiting to be developed.

Ornery Mention: *Violence* (Hogshead Publishing, 1999)

It wasn't just the games that got banned by Gen Con that took advantage of the censorious publicity. Though *Violence* was never actually censored by Gen Con, James Wallis was pretty sure it violated the con's guidelines, and he was happy to tell people so. If they asked, he was willing to sell them a copy of the book from under the counter in a sealed brown paper bag.

Years later, ex-*Fiend Folio* contributor Charles Stross would detail a similar idea in a novel called *The Atrocity Archives* (2004), which focused on a British intelligence agency investigating Mythos-like horrors. He'd say in an afterword to the book: "All I can say in my defense is ... I hadn't heard of 'Delta Green' when I wrote 'The Atrocity Archive' ... I'll leave it at that except to say that 'Delta Green' has come dangerously close to making me pick up the dice again." So it goes.

Continuing the circle of RPG life, Cubicle 7 has since published *The Laundry* (2010), a BRP-based RPG about Stross' Cthulhu hunting organization.

> *"Lovecraft wrote about the 1920s and 1930s because that was the modern day for him–it wasn't a historical period. I think his ideas have enough vitality that they flourish in the light of the present day, whatever that happens to be, and they are important enough to deserve ongoing reinterpretation as time goes by."*
>
> – John Tynes, Interview, yog-sothoth.com (March 2002)

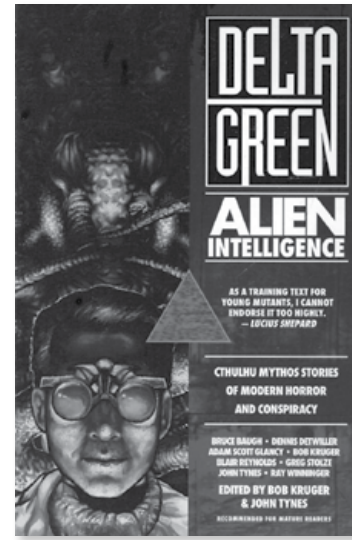
Meanwhile, over the next few years, Pagan published a few more well-regarded supplements — *The Realm of Shadows* (1997) and *Mortal Coils* (1998) — and the penultimate original issue of *The Unspeakable Oath*. They maintained their creative peak's high standards for artwork and layout and they investigated new eras, from the 1900s to the 1940s.

However, nothing generated the same energy as *Delta Green*, and so several more products were released for that line as well. A series of three chapbooks by Dennis Detwiller (1998–2000) provided additional background, but the best-received book was a massive supplement three years in the making, *Delta Green: Countdown* (1999), in which Detwiller, Glancy, and Tynes massively expanded their setting.

A widely distributed story suggests that Chaosium limited Pagan's publication of *Call of Cthulhu* books to three or four books a year following the success of *Delta*

Honorary Mention: *GURPS Bili the Axe: Up Harzburk!* (Steve Jackson Games, 1989)

Although not actually banned, this *GURPS Horseclans* solo adventure is one of the three RPG books known to be recalled by the publisher (following *Palace of the Silver Princess* and *Wings of the Valkyrie*), so it deserves some note on this list. Steve Jackson Games explains the problem, saying "The Horseclans solo adventure *Up Harzburk!* was recalled soon after publication, in early 1989, because it contained so many path errors that we did not feel it could be adequately corrected by an errata sheet." More specifically, there were apparently sufficient errors in the way the paragraphs were linked to make the solo unplayable. Current Price: $30-$50.



Green. While Chaosium might have reminded Pagan of an *existing* limitation — probably dating back to the start of their supplement publication a few years earlier — it's relatively unlikely that such a limit ever had a real effect. Pagan never put out more than two professional gaming supplements during any year. If you count in magazines, they sometimes got out five books in their first few years, while gaming chapbooks got them up to three RPG publications in 1996 and 1998. However, Pagan probably couldn't have put out more than four mass-market RPG books in any year even if they'd tried.

Nonetheless, a four-book limit may have been one of the factors leading to the creation of Pagan's fiction arm, Armitage House, in the years after *Delta Green*'s release. Pagan had been publishing fiction chapbooks for a few years, but *Delta Green: Alien Intelligence* (1998) was their first professional fiction publication. It and the other Armitage House productions would be free of any Chaosium licensing restrictions (and probably more importantly: licensing fees).

Further stretching their wings, Pagan Publishing also put out *The Hills Rise Wild!* (2000), a miniatures Cthulhu game, which might well have been their last notable publication.

Ultimately, the year 2000 would mark the end of Pagan's creative peak, for reasons to be described momentarily. However, at its height, Pagan Publishing was arguably much more successful than Chaosium — the actual owners of *Call of Cthulhu* — in capturing the attention and interest of the most serious Cthulhu fans. Some of this can probably be attributed to Keith Herber — Chaosium's former *Call of Cthulhu* line editor — leaving Chaosium in the early '90s, but the vast majority of Pagan's success can be attributed to themselves alone.

There are a number of reasons for this:

First, Pagan Publishing managed to gather together a very talented group of individuals. John Tynes is a notable author, with *Call of Cthulhu d20* (2002), *Delta Green* (1997), *Delta Green: Countdown* (1999), and *Unknown Armies* (1998) all being top-rated games. Dennis Detwiller proved that he was likewise skilled with the later releases of *Godlike* (2001) and *Wild Talents* (2006), which we'll return to shortly. Meanwhile, both Dennis Detwiller and Blair Reynolds provided Pagan Publishing with high-quality art that truly set it apart from other RPG publishers.

Second, Pagan Publishing was able to look in different directions from the norm of the *Call of Cthulhu* line, and was also willing to try bold new experiments. This was seen early on with their alternative settings, and it really culminated in *Delta Green*, which managed to reimagine the Cthulhu Mythos in a very modern, yet still very recognizable form and one which offered a truly viable alternative era for *Cthulhu* games.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, Pagan Publishing had the huge advantage of never actually being a professional publishing house, despite their attempt in 1994. This isn't reflective of the quality of their publications, which were generally top-notch. Instead it reflects the fact that Pagan Publishing didn't have to worry about paying the bills. They didn't have staff, nor warehouses, nor offices. If they wanted they could take a whole year working on a single book, and they often did; if a full-time publishing house had tried the same, they'd quickly be out of business. Years later Tynes would say that he wished he'd set Pagan Publishing up as a non-profit, and that really encapsulates the feelings that the Pagan authors had about making top-quality books — not a living. Any largely volunteer organization, given the appropriate skills and talents — which Pagan had in spades — can easily produce better products than any second- or third-tier RPG company as a simple matter of economics, and that's the superior position that Pagan Publishing was working from.

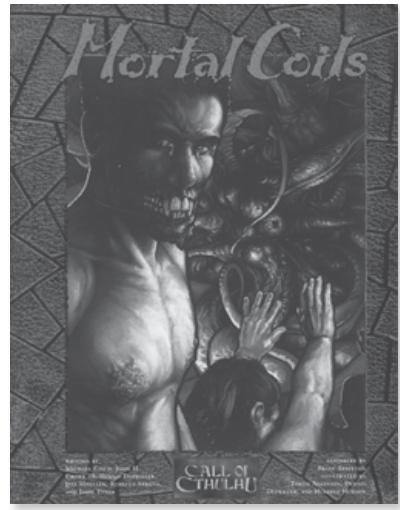
Unfortunately, spending years sweating over products for a company that ultimately doesn't show profit can also quickly lead to burnout, and that too seems to be what happened at Pagan Publishing.

By 2002, all of the original Pagan authors would have largely moved on from the company they founded.

The Time of Transition: 1998—2004

The Pagan staff started moving on to other things in 1998.

Blair Reynolds, the original inspirational artist behind Pagan Publishing, had left the gaming industry in 1994 due to general discontent. Most of his focus afterward went to his erotic Cthulhu comic, *Black Sands*. The first issue was published in 1996 and never followed up on. He made a brief return to the industry in 1997, illustrating Biohazard's *Blue Planet* (1997), *The Realm of Shadows* (1997), and painting the cover to *Delta Green: Countdown* (1999) — which appears to be his final published RPG work for the next decade. He also contributed a story to *Delta Green: Alien Intelligence* (1998).



John H. Crowe III, one of the most prolific authors at Pagan, published his last book, *Mortal Coils*, in 1998. For the next decade, he remained involved only as a member of the editorial staff.

Brian Appleton likewise remained on primarily as a member of the editorial staff. He was the editor for Pagan's last reprint book, *The Resurrected III: Out of the Vault* (2002), which collected 10 adventures from the first 10 issues of *The Unspeakable Oath*.

John Tynes went to work for Daedalus following his year with Wizards of the Coast. Unfortunately, they were gone by 1997. In 1998, Tynes put out his first major publication for a publisher other than Pagan: *Unknown Armies*, which he co-authored with Greg Stolze, and which was published by Atlas Games, who had acquired some of Daedalus' properties. The Atlas history talks more about *Unknown Armies*.

Another original RPG system, *Puppetland*, would follow in 1999, this time for Hogshead Publishing; the rights to it were later purchased by Sweetpea Entertainment, the owner of Imperium Games and the maker of the *Dungeons & Dragons* movie. The Hogshead history contains some additional notes on the game.

Meanwhile, Dennis Detwiller was working on a new RPG called *Godlike*, a superhero game set in the 1930s and 1940s. Tynes had originally suggested its development to Detwiller so that Pagan could finally (again!) put out their own RPG. However, Pagan wouldn't produce this third attempt at an RPG either. Instead it would ultimately be published in 2001 by newcomer Hobgoblynn Press — primarily because of Pagan's very slow production schedule. Detwiller has since formed Arc Dream Publishing, which we'll return to momentarily.

On January 1, 2001, John Tynes announced to his partners that he was getting out of the roleplaying biz. He said that he expected to be done with the field by 2002. Adam Scott Glancy, who had joined Pagan to write *Delta Green*, was named the new president of Pagan, but he inherited a company that had lost most of its creative force.

At the last moment, John Tynes was offered a final hoorah. He was contracted by Wizards of the Coast to write the background material for the d20 version of *Call of Cthulhu*, which had been licensed to Wizards by Chaosium. Tynes accepted

the contract and produced the material with help from the Pagan crew. While writing the book, he continued to try and work against the *Call of Cthulhu* status quo. In particular, he rebelled against the codification of the Cthulhu Mythos so prevalent in the Chaosium RPG material, and instead tried to imbue the game with a new sense of wonder and horror.

The book was completed in 2002, meeting Tynes' deadline.

Meanwhile, Pagan Publishing was putting out the last books that would define its original run, including their final magazine, *The Unspeakable Oath #16/17* (2001), the aforementioned final *Resurrected*, and Armitage House's final books: a collection called *Delta Green: Dark Theatres* (2001) and Dennis Detwiller's novel, *Delta Green: Denied to the Enemy* (2004).

By the time of that final publication, Pagan was already becoming a brand for the individual creators, rather than its own publishing house. Volunteer-run or not, in 2004 Pagan Publishing was effectively gone.

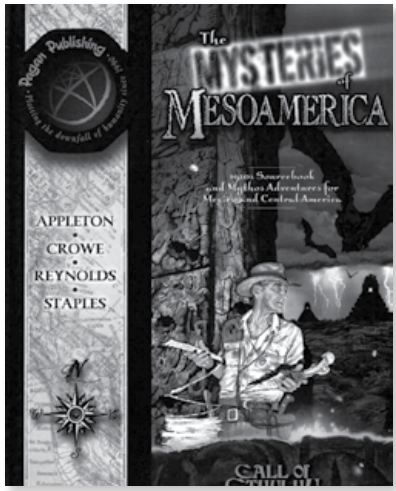
Which Can Eternal Lie: 2004-Present

For a while, it looked like Pagan Publishing was gone forever after its final 2004 release. However, some of its principals — most notably Adam Scott Glancy, Dennis Detwiller, and John H. Crowe III — have stayed in the business and through their more recent enterprises they've managed to provide Pagan with publishing partners who have been able to continue writing and/or publishing material for Pagan.

The first of Pagan's partners was EOS Press, the 2003 resurrection of Hobgoblynn Press. Not only were they based in Seattle — like the Pagan crew — but they were also connected to them through Dennis Detwiller, whose game *Godlike* (2001) was the basis of the company. EOS published a new edition of Pagan's *Creatures & Cultists* (2004) themselves, but when EOS printed a d20 edition of *Delta Green* (2007) — years after Wizards' d20 *Call of Cthulhu* had dropped out of print — it was with Glancy and using the Pagan trademark.



By 2008, Crowe and Appleton were willing to get back into the *Call of Cthulhu* game. They published *Final Flight* (2008), *The Mysteries of Mesoamerica* (2009), and *Bumps in the Night* (2012) through Pagan. Though the first was a disappointment in its rudimentary layout, the three books showed



that five years later, Pagan was willing and able to put out original books.

However, the true future of Pagan seems to be with a new publishing partner, Arc Dream Publishing — Dennis Detwiller's RPG company. Arc Dream kicked things off with a collection of Detwiller's old Delta Green chapbooks, *Delta Green: Eyes Only* (2007), which they created and Pagan published. They've more recently developed *Delta Green: Targets of Opportunity* (2010) — the first entirely original Delta Green RPG material in over a decade — and taken over the publication of Pagan's premiere magazine, starting with *The Unspeakable Oath #18* (December 2010). Their own history talks more about their various roleplaying efforts.

Two decades after its creation, Pagan has died and (sort of) been reborn. Through the enthusiasm of its principals, it looks that their high-quality Cthulhu products will continue into their third decade.

What to Read Next

- For the future of *Blue Planet*, read ***Fantasy Flight Games*** and ***RedBrick*** *['00s]*.
- For John Tynes' one-time employer, read ***Wizards of the Coast,*** and for his other-time employer, read the ***Daedalus Games*** mini-history in ***Atlas Games.***
- For other major publishers of Tynes' works, read ***Atlas Games*** and ***Hogshead Publishing.***

In Other Eras

- For Pagan's main licensor, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For the future of Dennis Detwiller and *The Unspeakable Oath,* read ***Arc Dream Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For more recent new takes on the Cthulhu Mythos, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** *['00s]* and ***Pelgrane Press*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to another company that got its start with a magazine, ***AEG.***

AEG: 1990–Present

Alderac Entertainment Group — or AEG — started off as a magazine publisher and ended up influencing the direction of the entire industry — ironically including themselves.

Shadis Beginnings: 1990–1991



1990: Shadis #1

The Story of Alderac Entertainment Group — or The Alderac Group, as it was called in its earliest incarnation — begins with a magazine, as is the case with many young publishers. *Shadis* began publication in January 1990. In his first editorial, editor Jolly R. Blackburn noted the fact that there were only two RPG magazines on the market — presumably talking about *Dragon* and *White Wolf*, and probably bemoaning the loss of *White Dwarf*, which was just then moving fully over to miniatures support. *Shadis* made three.

"Shadis was conceived from our opinion that the Role-playing hobby is in serious need of more magazines, fanzines, newsletters, etc. devoted to the cause."
– Jolly R. Blackburn, "Backroom Murmuring," *Shadis #1* (January 1990)

The original *Shadis* magazine was a black & white digest, more a fanzine than a professional magazine. Besides gaming articles — largely written by Blackburn — each issue also featured several pieces of fiction collectively called the "Alderac Anthology," all detailing Blackburn's world of Alderac. The name of the magazine also referred to this game world, with Shadis being one of Alderac's moons.

For its first year, through *Shadis #6* (December 1990), the magazine continued in this vein, though with one notable addition: in *Shadis #2* (March/April 1990), Blackburn began to publish a comic that he was writing called "Knights of the Dinner Table." It depicted the humorous interactions of a gaming group, and though other similar comics such as John Kovalic's *Dork Tower* have since appeared, at the time Knights was ground-breaking ... and a hit. When Blackburn published that first Knights, he thought that he was just filling a blank page, but when he tried to replace it with more professional strips beginning with *Shadis #6*, there was an outcry.

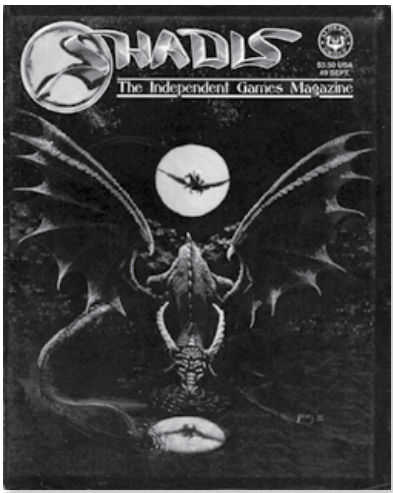
Because of that outcry, the Knights soon returned, but in the meantime the Alderac Group faced its first major setback: Operation Desert Storm (January-February 1991), the first US invasion of Iraq. Blackburn was then a sergeant in the army, and the new conflict took him to the Middle East. The result would be a long hiatus, with nothing more appearing from Alderac for a full year and a half.

It could easily have been the end.

Shadis After the War: 1992—1995

Surprisingly, Blackburn and Alderac reappeared in 1992, and they decided not just to continue from where they'd stopped, but also to move onward and upward. To begin with, the Alderac Group expanded, taking on two more partners, John Zinser and David Seay; they would be pivotal to the future of the company. In addition, when *Shadis #7* (Summer 1992) was published, it not only had become full-sized, but it also sported a three-color cover.

Things continued to improve from there. For *Shadis #9* (September 1993) the magazine's cover went full-color. The Alderac Anthology was dropped at the same time, and *Shadis* truly became a professional magazine. 10,000 copies were given out at Gen Con '93, the exact same technique that *White Wolf Magazine* had used six years previous when they broke into the ranks of professional publication. Issue #9 was also when *Shadis* adopted the slogan "The Independent Games Magazine";



over the next issues they made serious promises of future independence, much like *White Wolf* had in its early days.

By *Shadis #11* (January/February 1994) The Alderac Group had officially become "Alderac Entertainment Group" and had taken another step up in professionalism with a new logo and a new art director, Kristy Keefe. Mark Arsenault, best known for his work at Gold Rush Games, also started writing for *Shadis* with that issue.

Alongside these Alderac expansions, *Shadis* was riding the CCG wave that was cresting over the whole industry. This began with *Shadis #10* (November/December 1993), which featured the first ever CCG collector's list. Alderac got even more attention with *Shadis #15* (September/October 1994), which was *supposed* to contain original promotional *Magic* cards from Wizards of the Coast.

Unfortunately, Wizards backed out of the program almost as soon as they announced it. This rapid-fire reneging clearly demonstrated the volatility of the industry during the initial CCG boom. 120,000 orders came in for the magazine in the first three days after *Shadis*' announcement of the promos — and were promptly cut back afterward. Alderac ended up buying *Magic: Legends* (1994) cards on their own and inserted them into the magazine. They continued this trend with *#16* (November/December 1994), which included *Magic: The Dark* (1994) cards.

Around the same time, *Shadis* began doing one of the weirder things ever done by an RPG magazine. Though *Shadis* was at the time bimonthly, following issue #17 (January/February 1995) Alderac began filling the odd months with *Shadis Presents*. This "new" magazine continued the *Shadis* numbering, but each of the *Presents* issues was a half, beginning with #17.5. *Shadis Presents* was mostly like *Shadis*, except each issue focused on a specific topic: #17.5 (February 1995) was "The World of Collectible Card Games"; #18.5 (April 1995) was "It Came from Hollywood"; #19.5 (June 1995) was "All Things Dark and Dangerous"; and #20.5 (August 1995), the last, was "On Tour." To a certain extent, the idea was doomed from its infancy, because Alderac was giving away all the *Shadis Presents* issues to subscribers for free. However, by August 1995 there were bigger changes looming for *Shadis* and Alderac alike.

As far back as 1994, it had been obvious that Blackburn and his partners were heading in different directions. Zinser and Seay were more interested in hitting it big in the burgeoning CCG industry, while Blackburn preferred the small,

fun business he began in 1990. Blackburn explained it best by quoting a friend, who said, "Jolly, you wanted a grass-roots company and your partners are aiming for the stars."

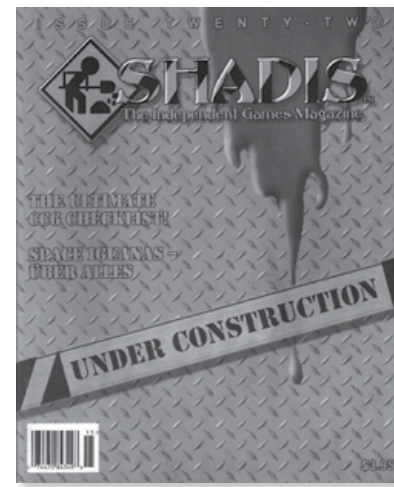


This split was best seen in the 1994 production of Alderac. Zinser was working on an original CCG — which we'll return to shortly — while Blackburn was instead working to publish *Knights of the Dinner Table* as a comic book, the first three issues of which appeared from Alderac over the next year (1994–1995).

> *"So to say it was a bit of a shock when I told my partners I wanted them to buy me out is something of an understatement. In fact, I had a hard time convincing them that I was serious."*
>
> – Jolly R. Blackburn, "Cries from the Attic," *Knights of the Dinner Table #100* (February 2005)

As a result of these different interests, Jolly Blackburn left Alderac, the company he had founded, in 1995. His final issue was *Shadis #21* (October/November 1995), after which the magazine came under the editorship of D.J. Trindle. Trindle opted not to run a *Shadis Presents #21.5*, instead revamping the magazine with issue #22 (December 1995) and then taking it monthly.

Though he'd left Alderac, Blackburn kept the rights to the Knights of the Dinner Table. He went on to publish *Knights of the Dinner Table #4* (1996) on his own, then formed a new partnership with Kenzer & Company, as is more fully described in that company's history.



Meanwhile the rest of the Alderac Entertainment Group — now known as AEG — was indeed aiming for the stars. Remarkably, they'd reach them and would end up having a pivotal influence on the entire industry as a result.

Five Rings, A CCG Interlude: 1994—2000

AEG's new CCG project would eventually be called *Legend of the Five Rings* (*L5R*). It was born of a conversation between John Zinser and David Seay that lamented the loss of FGU's old RPG, *Bushido* (1980). That got them thinking about producing a *Bushido* CCG, and AEG began to negotiate for the property.

Unfortunately, many of the properties of former publisher FGU remain in limbo, and AEG may have run into this issue. There was definitely some problem because AEG newcomer John Wick — brought on board thanks to his high-quality contributions to *Shadis* — described the acquisition as "in flux" when he joined the company. Wick also had considerable experience with Japanese history and culture; this provided the impetus for AEG to create their own Asian-influenced fantasy world, which would be the foundation of *Legend of the Five Rings*.

The whole company became involved in the project — including Ryan Dancey, the owner of an ISP called ISOMEDIA, which was helping to fund the game. The *L5R* CCG was released in 1995. It was generally well-received, both because it had an original game system that wasn't derivative of *Magic* and because it had a colorful and coherent storyline that was advanced from set to set.

However, for the RPG industry, what happened next was much more important.

In 1996, the principals behind the *L5R* CCG realized that they didn't have the money to print a *L5R* expansion. They then decided that they could better serve the game by creating a new, better-funded company. The result was Five Rings Publishing Group. Robert Abramowitz headed a pool of investors funding the group, and became the president of the new company. Alderac and ISOMEDIA each gave over their rights in *Legend of the Five Rings* for appropriate ownership. Ryan Dancey became VP of Product Development and John Zinser became VP of Sales. Alderac still continued to do much of the design and development work for *Legend of the Five Rings*. They were also granted a license to produce a *Legend of the Five Rings* RPG game — which we'll return to shortly.

Over the next year, Five Rings Publishing was very active in the industry. They signed an agreement with Last Unicorn Games to develop and publish Last Unicorn's *Dune* CCG and a license with Pinnacle Entertainment to create a *Deadlands* CCG called *Doomtown*. They also obtained the rights to publish a *Star Trek* collectible dice game.

Then, in early 1997, Five Rings Publishing stumbled upon the opportunity of a lifetime. As is more fully documented in the histories of TSR and Wizards of the Coast, TSR was by this time on the verge of bankruptcy and looking for a buyer. After Dancey looked over TSR's financials, Abramowitz was able to negotiate a deal for the purchase of TSR, which they then brought to Peter Adkison at

Wizards of the Coast. As part of the deal Adkison not only purchased TSR, but also Five Rings Publishing itself.

> *"Bob calls Peter and says, 'I want you to loan me a million dollars.' Peter says, 'There's nothing in the world you could tell me that would get me to loan you a million dollars.' So Bob faxes Peter the cover letter of the letter of intent to buy TSR. And Peter calls him back in 10 minutes and says, 'Would you accept a company check?'"*
>
> – Ryan Dancey, *40 Years of Gen Con* (2007)

At Wizards, Five Rings Publishing continued as a separate entity until the end of 1998. Last Unicorn's *Dune* CCG (1997), the *Doomtown* CCG (1998), a *Five Rings* spin-off called the *Legend of the Burning Sands* CCG (1998), and a new version of White Wolf's *Rage* CCG (1998) all saw print over the next few years. The *Legend of the Five Rings* CCG also saw continued publication, with design work still coming from AEG.

During this time period, Five Rings also experimented with one of the most innovative changes to CCG distribution since Wizards had kicked it off several years earlier. *Five Ring's Scorpion Clan Coup* expansion (November 1997-January 1998) pioneered a sales mechanism called "Rolling Thunder." Instead of publishing big CCG supplements a few times a year (as was common at the time), Five Rings instead planned to release smaller supplements for nine months solid, then take three months off. At the same time, they flattened the rarity of the *Five Rings* releases — under the theory that card rarity would be replaced by the scarcity of supplements that were come and be gone in a month.

Five Rings was so confident that they quickly expanded Rolling Thunder to *Doomtown*, *Legend of the Burning Sands*, *Rage*, and *Dune*. It flopped. The problem was that CCG players *really* wanted rarity. By expanding the idea immediately to five games, Five Rings also ensured that they had no time to debug the concept.

At the end of 1998, the Five Rings group was dissolved as a separate entity. Ryan Dancey became the business head of the Roleplaying Department at Wizards, effectively making him the major decision-maker in brand-related RPG issues. In that position he not only contributed to the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* — which was announced that summer at the 1999 Gen Con Game Fair — but also conceived of an open gaming d20 license that would impact the entire industry for years to come.

Ryan Dancey's rise from ISOMEDIA through Five Rings Publishing to Wizards of the Coast is astounding, as is the impact he's had on the industry, and it can all be traced back to the decision to create a *Bushido*-like card game in 1994 and before that to Jolly Blackburn's decision to put out a little fanzine called *Shadis*.

Five Rings & Seven Seas, The RPGs: 1997—2000



Meanwhile, AEG was continuing to publish *Shadis* magazine. Following the death of *White Wolf Magazine* in 1995, it was really the only independent magazine around. Beyond *Shadis*, much of the company's attention had been focused on Five Rings Publishing Group and the *Legend of the Five Rings CCG*. That changed in 1997, thanks to the license AEG had received to publish a *Five Rings* RPG.

To take advantage of this license, John Wick led an RPG design team that created a system that was fairly typical of game design in the late '90s — with White Wolf's Storyteller System and West End's d6 system the most obvious inspirations. The main mechanic was the "roll and keep" die system, with the all-important "keep" contributed by Marcelo Figureroa. For task resolution, players roll additive dice pools based upon the sum value of an appropriate skill and trait; however they can only keep a number of dice equal to the value of the trait. These remaining dice are added together and compared to a target number.

The *Legend of the Five Rings RPG* (1997) was generally well-received — as much because of the *L5R* setting of Rokugan as the game system. It was the first successful Asian-influenced RPG since ancient products from the '80s like the aforementioned *Bushido* and TSR's *Oriental Adventures* (1985). An astounding 30 supplements followed over the next few years, capped by a second edition of the rules (2000).



Meanwhile AEG had published a second RPG, *7th Sea* (1999), co-designed by John Wick, Jennifer Wick, and Kevin Wilson. It followed the successful recipe of *Legend of the Five Rings* to a tee. Its background centered on a popular, visceral genre (here swashbuckling rather than martial arts)

adapted to a fictional world (here Théah rather than Rokugan). Like *Legend of the Five Rings*, *7th Sea* used the roll and keep game system, and even moreso than its predecessor, it received a lot of critical acclaim. It was supplemented by the inevitable (and long-lived) CCG (1998–2005). *7th Sea* was Wick's last major work for AEG. He'd go on to found three indie companies and self-publish numerous RPGs, as is detailed in the history of John Wick Presents.

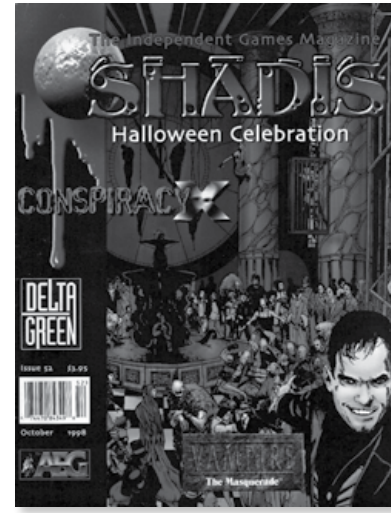
AEG was simultaneously increasing their focus on RPGs in their other business dealings. This was demonstrated when the AEG principals invested in Pinnacle Entertainment Group, the publishers of *Deadlands* and the licensors of Five Rings' *Doomtown* CCG. At the same time, AEG took over most of the business dealings of Pinnacle, leaving them as a design house.

The deal is more closely detailed in Pinnacle's history. In the end it didn't work out because of the distance between the two companies — with Pinnacle working out of Virginia and AEG working out of California — and because AEG was putting more focus on their *own* RPGs.

Shortly before Pinnacle and AEG dissolved their relationship, Matt Forbeck — one of the Pinnacle partners — left his company and came over to AEG. He simultaneously sold a dystopic superhero RPG called *Brave New World* to AEG. Over the next year, Forbeck worked at AEG on salary to produce over a half-dozen books for his RPG, starting with *Defiants* (1999). It was a strong third roleplaying line for AEG.

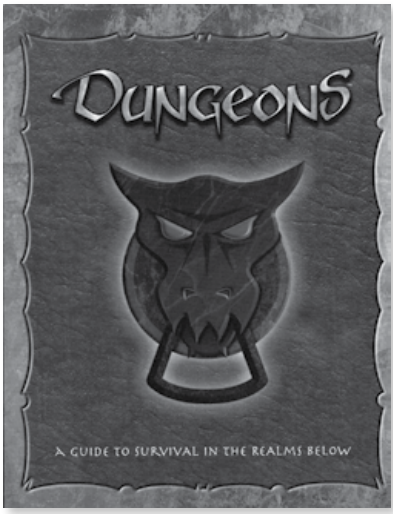
As they were ramping up their RPG production, AEG closed down their magazine, *Shadis*. As is often the case, AEG decided that a magazine was too expensive and time-consuming to put out when compared to higher-return supplements. *Shadis* came to an end with issue #54 (December 1998).

Sailing into the year 2000, AEG was following a path that would have been entirely successful for an RPG company of the '80s. They'd created a successful house system and used it to publish two colorful, original RPG worlds. Each had won the Origins Award for "Best Roleplaying Game" for its year of release, showing the games' general appeal with fans. However, the whole industry was changing, and these old formulas no longer guaranteed success.



The d20 Years: 2000—2004

As we are reminded of in every company history that crosses over into 2000, at the 2000 Gen Con Game Fair, Wizards of the



Coast released the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* alongside the d20 license. It changed the industry. AEG jumped onto the d20 bandwagon that December with the production of their "Adventure Keep" adventures.

These pamphlet-sized adventures were just 16 pages long and released for the low price point of $2.49, the cost of a comic book or a cup of coffee. There was nothing particularly stand-out about them, but they got AEG into the d20 system through volume. Eight different adventures were published that December — from *Castle Zadrian* (2000) to *The Crypt of St. Bethesda* (2000) — and more sets of adventures continued to pour out over the next few years. By the time AEG brought their flood of d20 adventures to an end in 2002, they had published about 50 of them.

Generally, AEG did a good job of managing the changing state of the d20 market. When the adventure market was thoroughly glutted in 2002, they got out. Simultaneously, they began publishing more general sourcebooks, running from *Dungeons* (2001) through almost two dozen books to *Secrets* (2004).

AEG also began producing their own d20-based RPGs. The first was the *Farscape RPG* (2002), a d20-based game focused on the sci-fi TV show (1999–2003). However, AEG's most innovative d20 work came through *Spycraft* (2002), a modern-day d20 espionage game. It was the first modern d20 game to hit the market — predating Wizards' own *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game* (2002) by a few months — and would ultimately be one of the most successful. *Spycraft* was followed by *Stargate SG:1 RPG* (2003) — also based on a TV show (1997–2007) — which was entirely compatible with first-edition *Spycraft*.

Farscape never got any support, perhaps due to the impending cancelation of the show. *Spycraft*, conversely, received over a dozen supplements in the next two years, including *Shadowforce Archer* (2002), which created an espionage and conspiracy setting for the game. Finally, *Stargate SG:1* started receiving season guides and other supplements, but just when AEG was getting into the swing of things, MGM decided to pull their license —the result being that the RPG never got to cover more than the first two seasons of the show.

Perhaps it was for the best, because the d20 market was growing increasingly weak, and AEG was on its way out of it. 2004 saw the final publications for AEG's first edition of *Spycraft*. Likewise, AEG's last few d20 sourcebooks appeared. If the

Stargate SG:1 license hadn't been pulled by MGM, AEG would probably have had a hard time keeping it alive in the post-d20 market anyway.



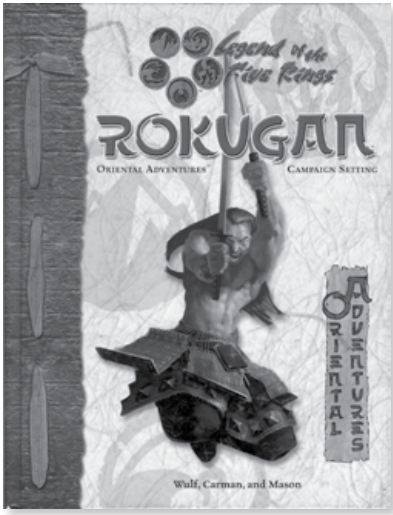
Before it got out of the d20 business entirely, AEG released two final publications of note, almost a coda to their four years of d20 work. The first was *The World's Largest Dungeon* (2004), advertised as being the largest d20 sourcebook ever produced. It contained 960,000 words of text and every monster in the d20 SRD, spread out over 840 pages. AEG estimated that it would provide two years' worth of adventuring and was not just the largest d20 book, but also the largest RPG book ever (to that date). *World's Largest City* (2006), a 704-page book, followed a few years later.

Keeping Roll and Keep: 2001—2005

AEG's dip into the d20 pond did not stop the production of their own games — but those games were heavily influenced by the d20 industry. That started with *Legend of the Five Rings*, which was on particularly shaky ground because AEG's *L5R* RPG license from Five Rings ended in 2000 Though the new owner of *L5R* — Wizards of the Coast — decided that AEG could continue to publish second-edition material for *L5R*'s original gaming system, Wizards was simultaneously working on a d20 campaign setting book for the world of Rokugan.

However, Wizards at the time often didn't know if it was coming or going — probably a result of the clash between the creative culture of Wizards and the corporate culture of Hasbro. At the same time Wizards planned to increase their investment in Rokugan through CCG and RPG products, Wizards was also divesting itself of less successful lines ... lines like *Legend of the Five Rings*.

AEG was able to win back rights to all of the *Legend of the Five Rings* properties in early 2001. Over the course of that year, they published a number of second-edition books including *Winter Court* and "*Way*" supplements — expanding two splatbook lines that had started with the previous edition — but it sort of felt like they were treading water. Then, in October 2001, Wizards finally produced the setting book they had in process for over a year: James Wyatt's *Oriental Adventures* (2001), which offered new d20 rules for Asian-influenced realms, some of them specific to the world of Rokugan.



After that, all of the *L5R* rights were back in AEG's hands. Showing remarkable coordination, AEG immediately began supplementing Wizards' *Oriental Adventures*. Their first release, *Rokugan Oriental Adventures Campaign Setting* (2001) — which expanded upon Wizards' sourcebook and in some places superseded it — came out just two months after *Oriental Adventures*, in December 2001. Two more d20 books followed over the next couple of months: *Creatures of Rokugan* (2002) and *Magic of Rokugan* (2002). After that, the rest of AEG's second-edition *L5R* books were published with dual stats for d20 and *L5R*'s original system and with Wizards' *Oriental Adventures* branding.

This dual-statted line continued into 2005.

AEG did the same thing to their *7th Sea* game, replacing the original game line with a new *Swashbuckling Adventures* (2002) line; like the *Oriental Adventures* books, these books were dual-statted for "roll and keep" and for d20. As we'll see, it sort of continued into 2005 too.

Sadly, *Brave New World* didn't survive the d20 years. Its last publication was *Covenant* (2001). After that AEG let the line lapse — though Forbeck himself recently used Kickstarter to fund the production of a trilogy of *Brave New World* novels (2012) as part of his "12 for '12" initiative where he wrote 12 novels in 12 months. AEG, meanwhile, has occasionally talked about Hollywood deals for *Brave New World*, suggesting that their interest in the line isn't dead either.

Roleplaying Retrenchment: 2005—2008

2001 and 2002 probably saw the height of AEG's RPG publication. After that, as the d20 market has slowly faded away, so did AEG's roleplaying output. But it didn't disappear entirely. Starting in 2005, AEG retrenched their most important lines by moving further away from d20 and instead highlighting their own unique properties.

Legend of the Five Rings came back in a third edition (2005) that returned the game to its roll and keep roots. It took another year to get things really rolling, but a trickle of games slowly increased. 2008 was the best year for the new edition of the game, seeing a revised edition of the rules (2008), a companion game called *Legend of the Burning Sands* (2008), plus three supplements, with two more out at the printers: *Masters of Magic* (2009) and *Fealty and Freedom* (2009) would appear in January of the next year.

Spycraft also got a second edition (2005). It changed the game from a d20 supplement, dependent upon the tyrannies of Wizards of the Coast releases, to a full-fledged OGL game. It was the same path that other d20 games were taking in the wake of the d20 crash. The new edition also expanded the espionage focus of the original game to cover more types of modern gameplay. Unfortunately, shortly afterward AEG decided that they couldn't support any of their old lines except *Legend of the Five Rings* in the tough post-d20 market, and so ended *Spycraft* support. This gave the creators of *Spycraft* the opportunity to buy their game; they did, forming Crafty Games to manage its future.

Swashbuckling Adventures sadly didn't get the dignity of a new edition. Its last few dual-statted publications were released as PDFs in 2005, and then the line was closed down. AEG still owns the rights to it.

Despite periodic *Legend of the Five Rings* RPG supplements, AEG's main business once more became CCGs. This focused on the *Legend of the Five Rings CCG* and *Warlord: Saga of the Storm* (2001), a CCG that drew some game mechanics from the d20 system. Although not as heavily story-oriented as its other CCGs, AEG also supported *Warlord* with a series of RPG supplements called *Warlords of the Accordlands* (2006). Production on the *Warlord* CCG continued up through 2008.

Toward the Future: 2009-Present

By 2009 AEG was down to just one RPG, *Legend of the Five Rings*. Based on the output of the previous 12 months, you might have assumed that it would be well-supported, but it was not to be; *Fealty and Freedom* would be the last *L5R* book for at least a year and a half.

But AEG wasn't abandoning the line; instead they had decided that another new edition was necessary. In his design document for that new edition, Shawn Carman highlighted four goals for *L5R*'s latest iteration: "divorcing the story from the mechanics"; "simplification and streamlining of mechanics"; "intuitive organization"; and "unified voice."



Since the release of the fourth edition (2010), Carman has stayed closely involved with *L5R*'s fans through a monthly column on RPGnet. He's also shepherded about one *L5R* book to publication each quarter, with highlights including the *Second City* (2012) boxed set and the *Imperial Histories*

(2012), which considerably expands the game by offering up different eras for play. A similar production schedule has long served Atlas Games well, allowing them to constantly support their well-received *Ars Magica* game despite having turned their production mainly toward card games. Therefore, the future of *L5R* currently looks bright.

> *"The RPG market has changed dramatically over the past few years. A combination of factors, the most significant of which is likely online gaming, has dramatically reduced sales across the board for the industry. In order to survive in this environment, a fourth edition of L5R is going to have to expand its customer base beyond the loyal following we have developed over the years. New customers are essential to the game's ongoing success, and in order to gain them, we must follow several clear mandates."*
>
> – Shawn Carman, "Legend of the Five Rings Fourth Edition Design Document," alderac.com (2009)

Mini-History

Crafty Games: 2005-Present

Though AEG decided in 2005 that *Spycraft* wasn't profitable, the designers of the second edition weren't so sure. As a result, Alex Flagg and Patrick Kapera purchased the rights to the game from AEG and formed Crafty Games to control them. For the first year and a half they supported the game with a PDF line, but in 2007 that changed.

That year Crafty Games signed an agreement with Mongoose Publishing, who was just then putting together their "Flaming Cobra" imprint, which would print books by independent publishers via Mongoose's own presses (or so the theory went at the time; Mongoose's own history discusses the problems with the process). The result was a new revised second printing of *Spycraft 2.0* (2008).

Despite a deal with Mongoose, Crafty Games never published a lot through them. Instead, they continued to publish numerous PDFs. However, Mongoose got their biggest products and made sure they got out to larger audiences than PDFs could reach. This was important, because it meant that when Crafty retrofitted the mechanics of what they were now calling their "Mastercraft" system into a fantasy game, it got great distribution. As a result *Fantasy Craft* (2009) was one of the great post-d20 hits of the year (the other being Paizo's *Pathfinder*, which was admittedly a *bigger* hit). The *Mastercraft* logo, however, has been a bit less successful – while Crafty intends to use it to mark games that share some core ideas, fans seem more intent on those games being fully compatible.

Meanwhile, AEG also seems to be planning for a post-CCG market. In 2009, they kicked off a major new line of board games, intended to sell to the increasingly large market pioneered by eurogames over the past decade. They published almost a dozen board and card games that year, but there was only one of particular note: *Thunderstone* (2009).

Thunderstone was a descendent of Rio Grande Games' *Dominion* (2008), which had opened up a new genre of entertainment: the "deckbuilding game." The idea of deckbuilding games was originally drawn from *Magic: The Gathering* (1993) and other CCGs, where players build competitive decks from a larger set of cards. *Dominion* moved that deckbuilding into the actual gameplay. Over the course of a game, *Dominion* players buy cards, shuffle them into their decks, and play them to improve their buying capabilities.

Whereas *Dominion* offered generic medieval play, *Thunderstone* instead presented a fantasy setting, making it one of the most interesting deckbuilding games for roleplayers. *Thunderstone* players use standard deckbuilding mechanics to gather together groups of adventurers (and weapons) that can

After the release of *Fantasy Craft*, Crafty Games devoted most of its attention for the next year to the release of PDFs for their new game. They then ended their agreement with Mongoose in March 2010, feeling newly ready to go it on their own. *Fantasy Craft* print books followed.

Amidst continued *Fantasy Craft* support in recent years, Crafty Games also published a brand-new RPG, *Mistborn Adventure Game* (2011, 2012) – a licensed release based on Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn* novels.

Mistborn was a big departure for Crafty because it features a new game system rather than a d20 derivative. The system is intended to be rules-light and narrative-based – creating the basis of what Crafty Games calls their "indie line." It features a dice pool that's uniquely resource-based – meaning that you decide how much of the pool to use, saving some dice for things like defense. The heart of the game is (like Sanderson's books) a strong and unique magic system. *Mistborn* has been well-received and seems to have gotten more retail notice than most of Crafty's other releases to date, likely due to its strong license.

Crafty's releases appear to have slowed down since the print releases of *Mistborn* in summer 2012. However, they have lots of plans for the future, including a third edition of *Spycraft* and a street-crime noir *Mastercraft* game called *Ten Thousand Bullets*.

With slow production of high-quality releases, Crafty seems likely to continue as a small press publisher that's a strong survivor of the d20 era that spawned it – and one that's likely to continue on into the foreseeable future.

then delve down into dungeons to slay hordes of monsters ... and eventually capture the Thunderstone!

In the years since the release of *Thunderstone* (2009), AEG has published several supplements for it. They've also gotten deeper into the deckbuilding genre with the production of a second game, *Nightfall* (2011), which varies more from *Dominion*'s mechanics by adopting even more ideas from *Magic*, like creatures that attack other players.

Since 2012, deckbuilding has taken up the majority of AEG's production, though their recent publication of the *Smash Up* (2012) and *Lost Legacy* (2014?) card games suggests that they're still willing to publish other big-box card releases that are expandable.

Between *L5R*, *Thunderstone*, *Nightfall*, *Smash Up*, and *Lost Legacy*, AEG seems well-positioned to continue into the future. However, RPGs are a relatively minor component of the company's production, especially when compared with the company's past.

What to Read Next

- For the other major RPG magazine of the '90s, read ***White Wolf.***
- For what Jolly Blackburn got up to next, read ***Kenzer & Company.***
- For AEG's one-time partner, read ***Pinnacle Entertainment Group.***
- For the *Dune* CCG, read ***Last Unicorn Games.***
- For the purchase of TSR by Wizards of the Coast, read ***Wizards of the Coast.***
- For *Legend of the Five Rings* during the Five Ring years and Ryan Dancey's future influence on the RPG industry, read ***Wizards of the Coast.***
- For a Rolling Thunder-like release that worked better, read about LCGs in ***Fantasy Flight Games.***
- For another publisher able to continuously support a niche RPG focusing on card games, read ***Atlas Games.***

In Other Eras

- For major independent RPG magazines of the past, read ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]* and ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For the old *Bushido* RPG that influenced *L5R*, read ***FGU*** *['70s]*.
- For what John Wick got up to next, read ***John Wick Presents*** *['00s]*.
- For the Flaming Cobra program, read ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]*
- For the origins of the eurogame movement, read ***Mayfair Games*** *['80s]*.

Or read onward to the world's only diceless roleplaying company, ***Phage Press.***

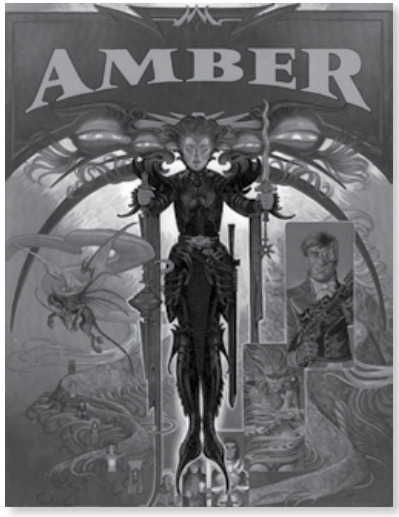
Phage Press: 1991–2005

Although it only published two roleplaying products, Phage Press not only introduced a whole new sort of gaming, but also influenced the creation of at least two other roleplaying companies.

Erick Wujcik in Detroit: 1980–1986

Erick Wujcik first emerged as a mover and a shaker in RPG circles during his college days at Wayne State University. There, he was a prominent member of the Wayne State Weregamers, a gaming club that ended up with a whole house to game in on campus. However, as college days waned, Wujcik began to think to the future and where he'd be gaming *then*. He dreamed of duplicating the coolness of the Weregamers' Monteith House, but outside the university environment.

The result was the Detroit Gaming Center, a 6,000 square-foot off-campus gaming center that Wujcik was able to rent on the cheap from a non-profit business. Wujcik



1991: Amber Diceless Role-Playing

was the director of the center for the next few years and even took the opportunity to publish a gaming book of his own — *Sector 57* (1980), a generic science-fiction adventure — under the Detroit Gaming Center banner.

With experience in both management and publishing, Wujcik could have easily started his own roleplaying company in the early '80s — especially given the roleplaying innovation that had spread across the Great Lakes region in the previous decade. Instead, it was one of Wujcik's best friends — and the assistant director of the Detroit Gaming Center — who did so: a man by the name of Kevin Siembieda. His story lies in the history of Palladium Books.

> *"If you want to be a game designer, you need to design games. Not just for publication, fame and/or glory, but just for the pleasure of it. Design games for your buddies, for your local convention, and just for the heck of it. The more you write, the more you design, the more you experiment, the more skilled you'll become."*
>
> – Erick Wujcik, Interview, *Places to Go, People to Be #25* (August 2004)

For years afterward, Wujcik made small contributions to Palladium products, including adventures and artwork alike. He'd take the next step in 1985 when Siembieda had a problem with a freelancer who was supposed to be writing a *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* RPG. With just a month left on his own deadline, and no RPG in hand, Siembieda asked Wujcik if he'd like to author the new game. Wujcik agreed and five weeks later produced *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles & Other Strangeness* (1985), Palladium's first "mega-hit" roleplaying game.

Authoring the *TMNT* RPG gave Wujcik a real taste for writing, encouraging him to move beyond the small contributions that he'd made to that date. In the years afterward, he wrote a few more RPGs for Palladium, including *Revised Recon* (1986), *After the Bomb* (1986), and *Ninjas and Superspies* (1988). He also wrote numerous supplements ... and not just for Palladium. He also freelanced for West End Games — the publishers of a new RPG called *Paranoia* (1984). Working with them, Wujcik wrote one of *Paranoia*'s earliest adventures, *Clones in Space* (1986), and also contributed to the *Acute Paranoia* (1986) supplement.

This would lead directly to the RPG that Erick Wujcik and Phage Press are now synonymous with.

The Creation of *Amber*: 1986–1991

While working with West End, Erick Wujcik discovered that they held a license for Roger Zelazny's *Amber* novels (1970–1978, 1985–1991). These high-fantasy novels of politics, warfare, and magic were among Wujcik's favorites, so he was very excited to hear that an Amber roleplaying game was in the works.

At least, he was excited until West End told him that they just wanted to publish an *Amber* board game.

So Wujcik — with a few game designs now under his belt — offered to design an Amber roleplaying game for West End. They said that he was welcome to try, but they wouldn't make any guarantees about actually publishing it. Nonetheless, it was enough to get Wujcik working on what would become his masterpiece, "Amber Diceless Role-playing."

By the late '80s, games like Chaosium's *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985) — which took the correlation between game system and setting to a new height — had already appeared. Wujcik opted to go this same route by tightly integrating the feel of the Amber setting into his game. This integration kicked off with an "attribute auction," which expanded *Amber*'s point-based character creation in an interesting way: some of these points were spent in auctions where players bid against each other to get the rankings they wanted in *Amber*'s four core attributes. The end result was a world where people could explicitly state who was the "best" swordsman and who was the "best" magician, just as was the case in the original *Amber* novels. Wujcik hoped that the competitive character creation would also introduce intra-player rivalries, but that would take some actual play to prove.

Wujcik tested out his attribute auction at the Michigan Gaming Center — the next incarnation of the Detroit Gaming Center. He let 19 players bid against each other to see who would be the best in the game's scant categories. By the end of the session some players were cutting deals with each other, while others were harboring long-term grudges against those who had forced them to bid too many points. It was exactly what Wujcik wanted.

After that, Wujcik split players up into two groups and began playtesting the actual game. He'd *been* intending to use dice, but soon realized that he'd only rolled them twice during the first session. So he tried out *Amber* as a *diceless* game. It was a daring idea, but also fitting given the details of Zelazny's novels. Amberites were so powerful that they could usually do whatever they wanted against mortals. If they contested with each other, the results were usually entirely deterministic — as some people were just better at some things than others. After running *Amber* for a few months without dice, Wujcik decided that they really weren't needed.

West End, however, didn't agree. When Wujcik brought them his diceless game, they thought he was insane. So Wujcik acquired the RPG rights to *Amber* and took the game over to R. Talsorian. But there were creative differences there as well, and Wujcik withdrew the game from their consideration. By this point Wujcik's old friend Kevin Siembieda was encouraging him to just create a company and publish *Amber* on his own.

Wujcik founded Phage Press, bringing on his cousin Lisa Seymour and Ron Seymour to deal with the business side of things. It was solely a part-time gig for all of them.

Wujcik published *Amber Diceless Role-playing* (1991) in November 1991. The book itself looked a lot like a Palladium production, with two plain columns of text broken up by very occasional illustration. The contents, however, were entirely groundbreaking. The attribute auction and the diceless mechanics were the biggest innovations. Nothing like them had been seen before (and very little since). A total lack of skills was another surprise — because Amberites could learn to do whatever they needed to. *Amber* was also one of the first games to encourage players to really contribute to the story of the game by creating character diaries, drawings, or other artistic elements in exchange for in-game awards. Beyond that the game was surprisingly rules-light — perhaps even shockingly so for the time period, when the industry was *just* starting to move toward games like *Ars Magica* (1987) and *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) that were intended to tell stories, not just arbitrate conflict between a gamemaster and players.

Perhaps because of its innovation, *Amber* was also quite controversial. Many players rebelled against it, saying that they'd only let their dice be pried "from their cold, dead hands." Others weren't up to the freewheeling style of gamemastering that the game required — or else didn't trust their own GMs with that freedom.

Fortunately, there were also many players that loved *Amber Diceless*. Somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 copies of the game were sold in its first year, making it a major RPG release in the 1991 marketplace. However, the fanaticism for this new gaming system was most evident at the conventions that sprang up around the game.

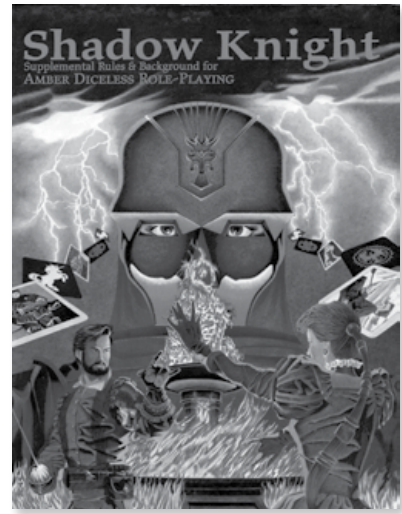
These "Ambercons" began in 1989 while the game was still being playtested. Twenty years later, there are multiple Ambercons held every year. Active cons include the original Ambercon (held in Detroit), Amber Central (in Michigan), AmberCon Northwest (in Oregon), and Ambercon UK. Those Ambercons create huge nexuses of creative energy. For example, Evil Hat Productions — one of the more notable indie companies of the '00s — originally came together to run AmberCon Northwest events.

Sadly, as we'll see, Phage Press itself wasn't as successful as the gaming movement that it created.

The Rest of Phage: 1992—2005

At first things looked good for Phage Press. *Amberzine #1* (March 1992) appeared shortly after *Amber Diceless* was released. However, the digest-sized magazine wasn't *exactly* a gaming supplement. Instead it focused on inspirational material,

like character diaries and discussions of elements of the *Amber* universe. It managed between one to three issues a year from 1992–1997 and even had the privilege of publishing an original Roger Zelazny Amber short story, "The Salesman's Tale," which appeared in *Amberzine #6* (February 1994).



Phage Press didn't do as well in producing actual game material. *Shadow Knight* (1993) — a supplement focusing on the "Merlin" cycle of *Amber* books — did appear at the very end of 1993, but it was almost two years late. Wujcik hadn't liked the manuscripts that several different freelancers had produced, and so ended up rewriting the book himself. It's a strikingly similar story to that told by freelancers at Palladium — where Kevin Siembieda has often rewritten material he received from freelancers — and something that would cause Phage Press problems going forward.

> *"Several writers had attempted the project, but I ultimately ended up doing it myself. When I started working on it, I felt like I had to redesign it to get it right."*
> – Erick Wujcik, Interview, *Pyramid #6* (March/April 1995)

At least one other book was completed for the *Amber* line: Mark Jason Durall's *Rebma*, detailing the undersea twin to the city of Amber. However, Wujcik decided that it wasn't what he was looking for when he got the final draft and so never published it. Almost a dozen other *Amber Diceless* books were in process at various times, including books called *The Beyonders*, *Chaos Rules*, *The Engines of Bright*, *Not the City of Brotherly Love*, and *Amber Master's Guide to Trump*. None of those were ever published either.

In the meantime, Phage Press was playing with the idea of publishing a second diceless game. In 1992, James Wallis — who had previously written books for Palladium — brought Phage a game called *Bugtown*, which was based on the comics of Matt Howarth. Unfortunately, creative differences kept Wallis and Wujcik from seeing eye-to-eye on the game. Wallis pulled out of Phage in 1994 and went on to create his own company, Hogshead Publishing, but then in 1996 Wujcik convinced Howarth to relicense the *Bugtown* rights to him. As a result, Wallis could no longer publish his game. Wujcik never published a *Bugtown* game either, though Howarth did write and draw a *Bugtown*/*Amber* comic crossover

called "Amber Raves of Pain," which appeared in *Amberzine #6* (February 1994) through #9 (January 1997).

In the mid-'90s a number of factors conspired to essentially bring Phage Press to an end. First, *Shadow Knight* received some poor reviews that impacted Wujcik creatively. The criticism was probably equally divided between readers that didn't like the Merlin books — which had always been controversial among Amber fans — and those who didn't like *Shadow Knight* itself. Second, Wujcik found himself caring for a relative dying of cancer. Finally, Roger Zelazny himself died of complications from cancer in 1995.

A combination of those elements left Wujcik creatively blocked on Amber for the rest of his life, though he kept *Amberzine* going until 1997 — when he made a major career move. That year Wujcik took a job with Sierra Studios, where he worked on the *Return to Krondor* computer game (1998). His move into computer games largely marked the end of his roleplaying career. He would later move on to other game companies such UbiSoft China and Totally Games. He even taught game design for a year at Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

In these later days, Wujcik also returned to his friend's company, Palladium. Before kicking off his computer career he wrote Palladium's *Mystic China* (1995), which rather uniquely was based on a cover painting that Siembieda had received that wasn't appropriate for the book it was intended for. Starting in 2000, Wujcik was also a consultant for Palladium; he ended up writing two further books for them: *Rifts World Book 24: China 1* (2004) and *Rifts World Book 25: China 2* (2004).

Wujcik published *Amberzine #11* (2003) several years later, but then decided that he was done being a publisher. At the end of 2004, he licensed the rights to *Amber Diceless Role-playing* to Guardians of Order — a company that had actually been named after an Amber Diceless character. Phage then published a final quadruple-sized *Amberzine #12–15* (2005) to fulfill its obligation to subscribers and to publish all the final material that Wujcik been sitting on.

Then Phage Press came to an end.

The Future of Amber: 2006-Present

When Wujcik passed off the Amber line to Guardians, it was in part because he came to the realization that he was a designer and writer, *not* a publisher. By getting rid of the publishing work, Wujcik hoped to get back to his creativity. His plans included a second edition of *Amber Diceless Roleplaying* and his own Rebma sourcebook.

Sadly, Guardians of Order never reprinted anything for Amber, because they went out of business in 2006. After that the Amber Diceless rights passed on to a new company called Diceless by Design, who has since kept the game available as a PDF, but nothing more.

That changed in 2010, when Diceless by Design licensed Rite Publishing to create a game using the *Amber Diceless* game system. "Lords of Gossamer and Shadow" was designed by Jason Durall, author of the unpublished *Rebma*. Unfortunately what was intended to be a 60-page book came in at 160 pages, straining Rite's resources. By this time, however, Kickstarter appeared, and Rite was able to easily fund the project with an April 2013 Kickstarter, blowing past the project's initial goal of $1,000 almost immediately.

Erick Wujcik passed away on June 7, 2008. Like Zelazny, he was only in his late 50s and succumbed to complications from cancer.

Today, his influence on the gaming industry remains: in the fans of *Amber Diceless*; in other designers who have created their own diceless designs; in companies like Evil Hat and the late Guardians of Order who were influenced by *Amber Diceless* in their pre-publication days; and now in a new game based on the Amber system, *Lords of Gossamer and Shadow* (2013).

It's not a bad legacy.

What to Read Next

- For other early storytelling publishers, read ***White Wolf*** and ***Atlas Games.***
- For *Bugtown, FRUP,* and *Nobilis,* three other diceless systems, read ***Hogshead Publishing.***

In Other Eras

- For the other company that Wujcik was regularly associated with, read ***Palladium Books*** *['80s].*
- For the people that passed on *Amber Diceless Role-playing*, read ***West End Games*** *['80s]* and ***R. Talsorian*** *['80s].*
- For other publishers founded due to interest in *Amber,* read ***Evil Hat Productions*** *['00s]* and to a lesser extent ***Guardians of Order*** *['90s].*
- For another take on fantasy politics, read about *Houses of the Blooded* in ***John Wick Presents*** *['00s].*

Or read onward to a Canadian publisher of anime RPGs, ***Dream Pod 9.***

Dream Pod 9: 1985–Present

Dream Pod 9 was an acclaimed RPG publisher through the late '90s, but today they are primarily a miniatures company.

Before the Pod: 1985—1995



1992: Night's Edge

Dream Pod 9 is a company that had a long and varied history before it ever got into roleplaying. It began with a Montreal-based company called Ianus Publications, which was founded by Claude J. Pelletier to first publish historical papers and later a science-fiction fanzine called *Samizdat* (1986). The company name of Ianus referred to this duality, for the Greek god of portals had two faces, one looking back to the past and one looking forward to the future. When Pelletier was introduced to the *Robotech* TV show in 1987, he decided to publish a *Robotech* fanzine as well, *Protoculture Addicts* (1987).

After a bit of a legal spar with Harmony Gold, *Protoculture Addicts* became the official, licensed magazine of *Robotech*, and that put Ianus on its path to growth. By issue #2 (1988), the professionalism and graphic design of the magazine notably improved. Then in issue #10 (1990) Ianus dropped their *Robotech* license and announced that *Protoculture Addicts* would now be covering the entire anime scene. As part of this expansion Pelletier brought in a new partner, graphic designer Pierre Ouellette.

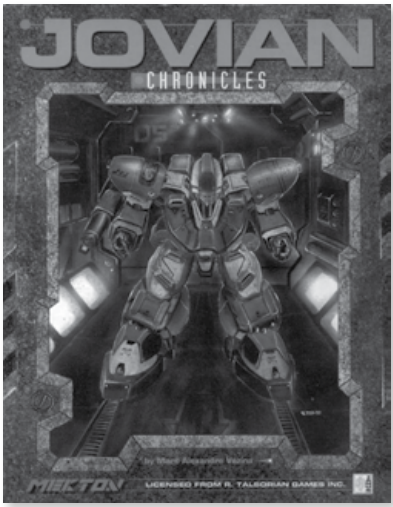
1991 was the year that got Ianus Publications moving toward gaming. Prior to that, *Protoculture Addicts* paid some attention to Palladium's *Robotech RPG* in its early issues, but gaming had always been subsidiary to the anime itself. Now, however, the revamped *Protoculture Addicts* was causing Ianus to move away from the *Robotech* anime, and the company was simultaneously launching a new magazine *Mecha Press* (1991), which focused on mechs; both of these changes offered more opportunity to talk about the intersection between gaming and anime. R. Talsorian's *Teenagers from Outer Space*, FASA's *Battletech*, and Seventh Street Games' *Mecha!* all became topics of conversation. This also encouraged Ianus to think about gaming products of their own.

In the early '90s, R. Talsorian remained a leader in the genre of anime roleplaying, even though their anime presence wasn't as strong as it had been in the '80s. It's not surprising that Ianus got into the gaming space through a license from R. Talsorian. What is surprising is that they initially decided to license R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk* RPG (1988) rather than one of its anime systems.

The result was *Night's Edge* (1992), Ianus' first full-fledged roleplaying publication. Written by Justin Schmid, it uniquely defined an alternate reality for *Cyberpunk*, mixing vampires and werewolves into *Cyberpunk*'s technological core to create a techno-horror game.

Although Ianus later released a few supplements set in *Cyberpunk*'s main timeline, the *Night's Edge* universe is what caught the attention of players. As a result Ianus devoted most of their new RPG production to *Night's Edge* supplements starting in 1993, resulting in over a dozen "alternate reality universe" books through 1995 — including *Grimm's Cybertales* (1993), *Dark Metropolis* (1994), *Sub-Attica* (1994), and others. They were very well-received, and were considered by many to be better than R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk* work at the time.

Meanwhile, Ianus also licensed R. Talsorian's other games — the anime ones. This started with the publication of Hans Guevin's space opera comedy RPG, *Star Riders* (1993), which was based on the comic by Etienne Gagnon and R. Talsorian artist Alex Racine. It used R. Talsorian's *Teenagers from Outer Space* (1987) game system.



Ianus' next publication, *Jovian Chronicles* (1994), was an original setting for R. Talsorian's *Mekton* game (1984, 1987). It had originally been created by the "ogre in chief" at *Mecha Press*, Marc A. Vézina, for publication as a serial in that magazine. Instead, it was released as its own game book. Vézina, meanwhile, would end up spending the next 10 years as chief developer and editor for Dream Pod gaming. The *Jovian Chronicles* setting was quickly supplemented with *Europa Incident* (1994).

It's worth noting that *Jovian Chronicles* had big exo-suits — a style of giant robot inspired by *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979). They'd be important to the future of the company.

Beyond its own roleplaying publications, Ianus was now also taking on work as a design house. The company created three sourcebooks for Palladium's *Macross II* RPG (1994), further solidifying their connections to anime gaming.

These trends came to a head with the release of Jimmy Mah's *Project A-Ko: The Roleplaying Game* (1995). Though the game showed its ties to the past of Ianus Publications with the label "Protoculture Addicts Presents," it also showed a path to the future with a new logo, which read "Dream Pod 9."

Dream Pod 9 & *Heavy Gear*: 1995—1998

The story of Dream Pod 9 proper actually begins two years before the publication of *Project A-Ko*, at Gen Con '93. That's when the Ianus team decided to create a brand-new gaming system called "Silhouette," so that they could begin publishing their own RPGs rather than just following in other companies' footsteps. *Project A-Ko* was the first Silhouette game; the "Dream Pod 9" logo helped to show Ianus' new beginning with the new game system.

The Silhouette game system that premiered in *Project A-Ko* was a purposefully simple design meant to be quick and easy to play. It centered on comparative dice pools — as was common in the '90s — but used them in a unique way: when the pool of six-sided dice was rolled, only the highest result was compared to a target number to determine success, but each additional "6" result added one to that target number. There was also a clever differentiation between stats and skills: where a skill determined how many dice were rolled in pool, stats acted as modifiers to those rolls.

As Ianus pushed forward with its new Silhouette titles, it became obvious that there was a division between anime and roleplaying interest at the company, and so in December 1995 it split entirely in two. A newborn company called Protoculture retained *Protoculture Addicts* and two of the former Ianus staff, Claude J Pelletier and Martin Ouellette; the magazine remained in print through issue #98 (July/August 2008) and is still active on the web today.

Meanwhile, the now fully independent Dream Pod 9 kept the majority of Ianus' dozen employees, overseen by Pierre Ouellette. They kept the roleplaying titles too, of course, including the brand-new *Project A-Ko*.



The newly independent Dream Pod 9 didn't ever supplement *Project A-Ko*. Instead they created a second Silhouette game, *Heavy Gear* (1995). This game of armored suit combat clearly followed in the footsteps of R. Talsorian's *Mekton* (1984), FASA's *Battletech* (1984), and Palladium's *Robotech* (1986). Of those three, it was probably the most like *Mekton*, because it similarly imagined an anime-influenced yet original gameworld.

The action in *Heavy Gear* centered on the world of Terra Nova, Sol's first colony, and a world sitting on the precipice of civil war. In another nod to the RPG trends of the '90s, *Heavy Gear* was built around a metaplot. In a unique twist Dream Pod 9 claimed that their metaplot would have a single beginning, middle, and end. They highlighted this by incorporating a "timewatch" into their products that showed how *Heavy Gear*'s storyline was progressing, promising that "Once the clock reaches zero, that's it. ... Support will still be provided, but the timeline will move no further." It was a reaction against the ever-changing and growing metaplots at White Wolf and elsewhere, but also a system that was ultimately abandoned when it became obvious that players didn't want a limited set of sourcebooks.

"We're already seeing power assisted frames for soldiers in the field. Looking at the other DARPA projects, it's not too far fetched to see something like Heavy Gears out in a few decades."

– Jason Dickerson, Interview, robotviking.com (July 2010)

Besides its roleplaying system and its colorful background, *Heavy Gear* also included a tactical system for robot combat, an absolute requirement for a game in this category. Conversion between the human and robot scales of combat was simple, involving just a 10x multiplier.

Heavy Gear was well-received. As Palladium's *Robotech* line slowly wound down, *Heavy Gear* surpassed it, becoming the second most popular RPG in the genre, trailing only *Battletech*. Under line editor Marc A. Vézina, numerous supplements were produced, including equipment books, sourcebooks, and eventually a second edition (1997) of the rules — which would become the best and best-supported version of the game. *Heavy Gear* also picked up some early licensees: resin model producer Fusion Models and miniatures maker RAFM.

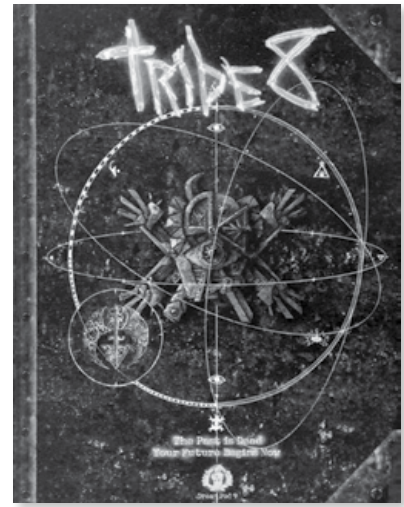
Though *Heavy Gear* never explicitly tried to ride on *Battletech*'s coattails, some of its success was ultimately the result of FASA's older game. Much of this came about by accident, such as in 1995 when FASA terminated their computer game license with Activision, the publisher of *MechWarrior 2* (1995). Looking for a new game that could fit into the same niche, Activision stumbled upon *Heavy Gear*.

The result was a pair of computer games. *Heavy Gear: The New Breed* (1997) was partially based on *MechWarrior 2* code; *Heavy Gear: Black Talon* (1999) — built on a new gaming engine — soon followed. These games led to even greater success for Dream Pod 9 because they got the company noticed by Sony, who ended up producing *Heavy Gear: The Animated Series* (2001–2002). Unfortunately, Dream Pod 9's small size and inexperience with licensing kept them from realizing huge rewards from the licenses. Much of the money ended up in the pockets of agents and lawyers.

Despite the rapidly snowballing (and lucky) success of *Heavy Gear*, Dream Pod 9 was still looking to expand their gaming portfolio. As a result, a few new RPGs were appearing right in the middle of *Heavy Gear*'s period of greatest success.

Other RPGs: 1998–2001

Dream Pod 9's next game was *Jovian Chronicles* (1998), a Silhouette-based version of the game setting that Vézina had previously created for use with *Mekton*. The new edition was notably revamped. To start with, there were changes to the theme of the game, which was now marketed as: an anime mecha game; a space opera starfighter game; *and* a near-future game built on hard science. There were also considerable revamps to the designs of the mecha. Many of them were made "blockier" to better accommodate a potential Activision game that never came to be.



After that, however, Dream Pod 9 decided that they didn't want to get pigeon-holed as the "giant robot guys." So their next release was something entirely new: *Tribe 8* (1998), a swords-and-sorcery post-apocalyptic fantasy that was primarily the work of Phil Boulle, Josh Mosqueira, and Stephane Brochu.

In the near future, creatures from beyond the River of Dream invaded the world; the players — exiles from their tribes — find themselves caught in between the warring factions as they try and form a fabled eighth tribe.

The game was very well-received for its combination of evocative setting, interesting metastory, and non-linear play. The simplicity of the Silhouette system also continued to be lauded.

Following *Tribe 8*'s 1998 release, Dream Pod 9 shifted much of their new RPG production to the new line, making the new game Dream Pod's top RPG from 1999–2001. Some of the sourcebooks were quite well-received, such as the *Vimary Sourcebook* (1998), which provided a description of post-apocalyptic Montreal and is recognized as one of the industry's top setting books.

Tribe 8 was able to eclipse the *Heavy Gear* RPG in part because Dream Pod 9 was putting more focus on strategic gameplay. The tactical mech combat system from the *Heavy Gear* second edition's rulebook was re-released as the standalone *Heavy Gear Tactical Combat Boxed Set* (1998), and later supplemented by a series of non-RPG "Tac Packs." Meanwhile, Dream Pod 9 was also producing rules for smaller-scale tactical combat in the *Duelist's Handbook* (1996, 2000).

Furthering the more combative side of the game, Dream Pod 9 ended their license with RAFM and began producing *Heavy Gear* miniatures in-house in 1999. As we'll see, this would mark the start of a shift in Dream Pod 9's priorities, especially as the roleplaying market became more chaotic in the early '00s.

Just as *Tribe 8* support was starting to fade, Dream Pod 9 came out with their fourth RPG, *Gear Krieg* (2001). It was an alternate-history RPG set during World War II. The biggest change in this alternate history was that technology was more advanced; the game featured walking tanks and other technological anachronisms. Like *Heavy Gear*, the game could be played either as a roleplaying game or a tactical one, which returned Dream Pod 9 to more familiar ground — ultimately the ground that the 21st century company maintains as its core.

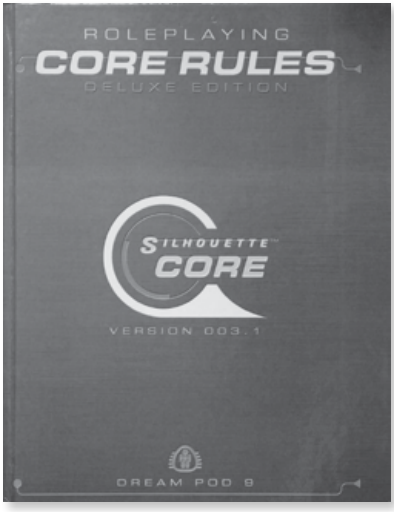
Gear Krieg wasn't Dream Pod 9's only push back into wargaming in 2001. That same year they published the *Tactical Miniature Rules* (2001), which allowed for tactical mech combat without the hex maps required by *Heavy Gear* and the previous *Tactical* rules. This allowed for more freeform gameplay. Though the new *Tactical Miniatures Rules* would ultimately mark Dream Pod 9's future direction, there would first be a few years of distraction, thanks in part to the newest fad overtaking the industry.

The d20 Bubble: 2001—2004

Just as Dream Pod 9 was putting out *Tactical Miniature Rules*, their RPG production sputtered to a halt. That's because Dream Pod 9 was in the same boat as many other RPG publishers that released new games in the latter half of the '90s. Though they'd found some audience with their original releases, they were now unable to sustain that audience against the onslaught of d20 products. Dream Pod 9 was also initially unwilling to make use of the d20 license, which made things harder for them. It seemed too good to be true, and they were waiting for the other shoe to drop.

After a lean RPG year in 2002, in 2003 Dream Pod 9 decided to give d20 a shot after all. Unfortunately, this choice was ill-timed, as the d20 bust was just beginning. The *Silhouette CORE Rulebook* (2003) offered a new standalone version of Silhouette that turned it into a generic system like *GURPS* or *Hero*. It also contained rules for converting d20 to Silhouette.

The "SilCORE" book — as it was called — was immediately followed by the *Mecha Companion* (2003), which offered d20 stats for all the mecha from *Heavy Gear*, *Jovian Chronicles*, and *Gear Krieg* using Guardians of Order's *d20 Mecha* (2003) mech description rules. The *Mecha Companion* also introduced several new mecha settings. Together the *SilCORE* book and the *Companion* were clearly intended to get the attention of d20 players and bring them over to Dream Pod 9's own lines. It was a similar tactic attempted by Atlas, Chaosium, and others.



The *SilCORE* game system would ultimately prove unpopular to Dream Pod fans, while the d20 market was on a downslope that meant the d20 support wasn't bringing in new readers. Dream Pod 9 didn't know that at the time, though, and they began to rerelease all their old games in dual-statted d20 and *SilCORE* form. The next year saw

the publication of *Jovian Chronicles* second edition (2003), *Gear Krieg* second edition (2003), *Heavy Gear* third edition (2003), *Tribe 8* second edition (2004), and the brand-new *CORE Command* (2003), a Rifts-like space fantasy. *Heavy Gear* and *CORE Command* each received a few dual-statted supplements (2003–2004), but after that Dream Pod ended over a decade of RPG production.

Several final RPG products were announced — including a new steampunk game called *City of Clocks* — but were never produced.

Back to Miniatures: 2004-Present

The years of the d20 boom and bust had been hard on Dream Pod's staff. Many had moved to the computer game industry beginning in the late '90s. Perhaps most notably, Marc Vézina left in 2003, shortly after the release of the d20 *SilCORE* books. By 2004, Robert Dubois — now the president of the company — was the only early staffer that remained.

Amidst the d20 bust, Dubois decided to take the company in a new direction by creating Dream Pod Entertainment, which was intended to extend the company's creativity to movies and televisions. Their most notable work to date has been on Frank Miller's *300* (2007).

> *"In 2003 the team behind Dream Pod 9 started a new project to work on action scenes for movies. Dream Pod Entertainment was created along with the Shadow Squad Stunt Team."*
>
> – Robert Dubois, Interview, robotviking.com (July 2010)

Dream Pod 9 has since used movie industry money to help fund hobbyist interests. By the mid-'00s, the d20 market was almost entirely dead, so Dream Pod went back to the tactical path that they'd been trailblazing as far back as 1998 with the *Heavy Gear Tactical Combat Boxed Set*. Dream Pod 9's return to the hobbyist industry was marked with the publication of the *Silhouette Core Heavy Gear Miniatures Rules* (2005), which revamped their 1998 tactical system. It was in turn replaced by *Heavy Gear Blitz!* (2006) a year later. Approximately two hundred 1/144 scale *Blitz* miniatures have since flooded forth from Dream Pod 9. Together line editors John Buckmaster and Jason Dickerson and chief modeler Philippe LeClerc have aided in these endeavors.

Although Dream Pod 9 hasn't been as successful as Games Workshop or Privateer Press — the big two companies that moved from roleplaying to miniatures — they've done well enough to continue producing and supporting miniatures games. Most recently they went back to the dueling setting found in their old *Duelist's Handbooks* and created a new tactical combat game: *Heavy Gear Arena* (2010).

Here, rather than controlling entire armies, players oversee small sports teams of fighting 'bots that they can improve as they compete.

RPG support has been almost, but not entirely, dead since the days of d20, at least in part due to the company's loss of Vézina — who was the main creative force behind *Heavy Gear*. Dream Pod 9 claims that they will support RPGs again when market conditions improve — and even included some RPG support in their *Gear Up!* (2010-Present) magazine, as well as some online support. However, that's been the full extent of Dream Pod 9's RPG focus post-d20.

There have nonetheless been hints that a new edition of *Heavy Gear* might eventually appear. Steve Jackson licensed the rights to produce a fourth edition in 2008, but returned them within a couple of years. More recently, Dream Pod 9 announced that they'd be releasing the game themselves in Fall 2011. They said it would build on second edition, not *SilCORE*, and it would be compatible with *Heavy Gear Blitz!* To date Dream Pod 9's new *Heavy Gear* hasn't appeared either — but it seems obvious that there is continued interest in returning the game to the world of roleplaying.

Some day.

What to Read Next

- For another licensee whose publications were often considered better than their licensor, read ***Pagan Publishing.***
- For another anime publisher of the *'90s, read* ***Guardians of Order.***
- For the d20 Trademark License, read ***Wizards of the Coast***, and for *d20 Mecha*, again read ***Guardians of Order.***

In Other Eras

- For more on Harmony Gold and Robotech, read ***Palladium Books*** *['80s].*
- For more legal posturing by ***Harmony Gold***, read ***FASA*** *['80s]*
- For *Cyberpunk, Mekton*, and *Teenagers from Outer Space*, read ***R. Talsorian*** *['80s].*
- For top anime publishers of the '80s, read ***R. Talsorian*** *['80s]* and ***Palladium Books*** *['80s].*
- For Battletech, the other leading game of giant robot combat, read ***FASA*** *['80s],* ***FanPro*** *['00s],* and ***Catalyst Game Labs*** *['00s].*
- For miniatures competitors, read ***Games Workshop*** *['70s]* and ***Privateer Press*** *['00s].*

Or read onward to the company that dominated the '90s (and the '00s), ***Wizards of the Coast.***



Part Two:

The Other Half of the Story

(1992)

In the '70s and the '80s, the story of TSR was the story of the industry. Though faltering financially by the mid-'90s — thanks to a declining RPG industry, book industry returns, and a certain new trend that was sweeping the industry — they were still doing some of their best creative work ever, including *Birthright* (1995) and *Dragonlance: Fifth Age* (1996).

Creativity and critical acclaim though wasn't enough in the era of the newest giant, Wizards of the Coast, who created a whole new sort of gaming with the release of *Magic: The Gathering* (1993). The CCG trend that followed *Magic* battered the entire hobbyist industry as distributors, retailers, and manufacturers all tried to get in on the boom, neglecting roleplaying along the way, and then got caught up in the bust.

The severe instability of the time eventually killed TSR too. However, whereas past giants like Avalon Hill and SPI were largely ignored after they were bought out, TSR would continue to be supported as the king of roleplaying after their purchase by Wizards of the Coast in 1997.

The history of Wizards of the Coast truly tells the second half of the story started by TSR in the '70s — how *Dungeons & Dragons* was rereleased in its most polished form ever, how it became an industry-wide phenomenon, and how it crashed and burned, in part due to unreasonable expectations from its new corporate masters.

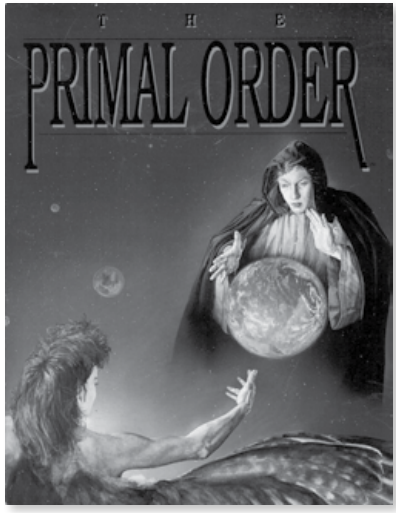
Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Wizards of the Coast	1990-Present	*The Primal Order* (1992)	127
Nightfall Games	*1991-Present*	*SLA Industries* (1993)	139

Wizards of the Coast: 1990–Present

Wizards of the Coast had an amazing trajectory in its first decade of existence. It created a new hobbyist genre, bought out the past genre leader, and was eventually sold off to corporate interests. In many ways, it's similar to the story of TSR itself — the company that Wizards of the Coast replaced.

The Road to the Coast: 1978—1990

Every game publisher's story has numerous beginnings, and that is certainly the case with Wizards of the Coast. Perhaps it began in 1978, when Peter Adkison started playing *Dungeons & Dragons*. Or it might have started somewhere between 1979 and 1982 when Terry Campbell suggested to his friends — Adkison among them — that they start a gaming company; they even came up with a name, "Wizards of the Coast," based on a guild that one of their PCs was a part



1992: The Primal Order

of. Or maybe it began sometime between 1981 and 1983 when Adkison used the Wizards of the Coast brand to self-publish a wargame for fantasy RPGs called *Castles & Conquest*.

> *"Our byline was 'What's D&D without C&C?' It was really really amateur, made Arduin and Judges Guild stuff look like Time Magazine, but I managed to sell enough of them to make my way at conventions and such."*
>
> – Peter Adkison, Forum Post, rec.games.frp.misc (January 1993)

As this chronology shows, Adkison and friends long thought about making their hobby into a career, as many gamers do. But it was just that: thinking. For the most part, Adkison really concentrated upon his own campaign set in his own world of Chaldea. Those adventures continued through his years at Walla Walla College and into his professional career — after he began working as a systems analyst at Boeing.

Unlike most gamers, however, Adkison returned to his dreams to make them a reality. In April 1990, he was talking with Ken McGlothen — the only one of those friends who discussed Wizards of the Coast 10 years before that had not drifted away — and he suggested that they "DO it." On May 23, 1990, a group of gamers came together and began brainstorming ideas for new products.

What came before was prologue; now the story of Wizards of the Coast definitely began.

The Primal Order of Wizards: 1991—1993

The newly-founded Wizards of the Coast began work on their first project, "The Primal Order," using an "office" in Adkison's basement. It was a book of religions and deities that was intended to be the first of a series of "capstone" books. Each would provide general rules for a broad class of gameplay, alongside conversions for many different systems.

The young Wizards of the Coast *thought* that they were done with *The Primal Order* near the end of 1990. They gave it and another early project, "The Compendium of Mages and Magic," to editor Beverly Marshall Saling. Unfortunately, she had to let them know that they "weren't even close" to publication. She also told them they *could* do better. It would be over a year and a half more — and at least two major redrafts — before *The Primal Order* was actually done.

Meanwhile, the first hints of another problem began to surface. The history of Mayfair Games describes some of the troubles that a company can run into when producing an unofficial supplement for another company's game. The problems

of producing a multisystem gamebook are, if anything, more daunting. By most peoples' reading of IP laws, game companies can protect the actual text of their games via copyright and their system names via trademark. However, they can't protect the game systems themselves unless they file patents for them as inventions ... and very, very few game companies do. By that reading, a book like *The Primal Order* can be produced without permission from the original publishers, as long as care is taken in the use of the trademarks.

Adkison clearly knew the dangers of producing a multisystem book because he consulted with an intellectual property attorney early on. Nonetheless, when he posted on the Internet in 1991 — looking for system experts to help out in his first redraft of *The Primal Order* — Steffan O'Sullivan (who would later author FUDGE) warned him that he'd better get publishers' permissions.

It was a prescient statement.

Meanwhile, Adkison had more concerns than just Wizards' intended product line — which by this time included *The Primal Order*, three "Compendium" books, and a "Tao of GMing" book. He was also trying to figure out how the industry worked. In 1990, he went to a local gaming convention called DragonFlight. There he met FASA's Tom Dowd, who told him to go to the GAMA Trade Show. When March 1991 rolled around — and with it the next GTS convention — Wizard's Rich Kalaas was the one who attended. There he met Lisa Stevens of Lion Rampant and White Wolf.

Stevens offered lots of advice to Kalaas during the con — and later through email and phone calls. She was the one who suggested that the company put all of its focus on *The Primal Order*. Furthermore, she suggested that Wizards make it the heart of a line of products — which she said would be easier for retailers to support than a random collection of FRP supplements. Adkison and Wizards decided to follow her advice.

Stevens continued supporting Wizards at Gen Con '91 and afterward asked if Wizards would like to hire her. It took some time to work out the finances — as the rest of the Wizards crew was still working at their normal jobs at the time — but shortly thereafter Lisa Stevens became full-time employee number one of Wizards of the Coast.

Meanwhile, *The Primal Order* (1992) finally came to fruition. Dave Howell and Beverly Marshall Saling finished it while working from Adkison's spare bedroom, each taking half-day (!) shifts during the final two-and-a-half weeks. Following the completion of the book's fourth (!) and final draft, it was released on April 1, 1992, as a dense, technical book.

The Primal Order was one of the best examples of a multisystem book since Chaosium's nine-system *Thieves' World* (1981) — a supplement that publishers

had given their OK for. It sold 2,500 copies within six months — not great for a core rulebook in the early '90s, but not bad for a newcomer's first product. Three supplements — *Pawns* (1992), *Knights* (1993), and *Chessboards* (1993) — quickly followed that premiere release. From there, Wizards began to expand upon their multisystem ideas. They announced a second capstone book, "The Military Order" — which would be based on Adkison's old *Castles & Conquest* game — and also began work on Envoy, a generic stat system.

> *"Frankly, my attitude at first was mercenary. They wanted to pay me, I wanted to eat, and we got along fine."*
>
> – Jonathan Tweet, "Interview with Jonathan Tweet," *Redcap v2 #3* (Autumn 1994)

Meanwhile, Lisa Stevens' influence was being felt at Wizards in other ways. Just as she had recommended producing a series of books centered on *The Primal Order*, she now suggested the purchase of an existing roleplaying line — she believed that the acquisition of a known line with an existing fanbase would further retail interest in the young new company. Thanks to Stevens' industry connections, Wizards was able to license the rights to *Talislanta* (1987, 1989) — an RPG published by the recently deceased Bard Games. Stevens also suggested that star indie designer Jonathan Tweet, a former co-worker of hers, be hired to revise the *Talislanta* rules and write its first new adventure.

Wizards agreed, and Tweet joined them as a freelancer. His original goal was to make *Talislanta* friendlier to beginning players, but as he got further into the game's rulebook, he and editor Saling realized it would require more work to bring it up to the highly-polished standards of *The Primal Order*. Despite a slipping schedule, Jonathan Tweet's revision of the *Talislanta Guidebook* (1992) made it to press around May after just one series of revisions. It was soon followed by Tweet's adventure *The Scent of the Beast* (1992); Wizard's first fiction book, *Tales of Talislanta* (1992); and other *Talislanta* releases. Wizards also published a new edition of Bard Games' premiere (non-*Talislanta*) release, *The Compleat Alchemist* (1993).



"Were it not for Talislanta, Magic: The Gathering would probably never have happened, because Wizards of the Coast might not have survived long enough to produce it."

– Rick Marshall, "Wizards: Peter on the Cusp, Part Five," oathsandfates.blogspot.com (July 2011)

All told, Wizards had around nine RPG publications out by the end of the year — with *Talislanta* forming a solid core just as Stevens had hoped. Since Wizards also inherited Bard Games' old stock, they actually had quite a solid catalog for such a young publisher — though as we'll see, by the end of the year they had a really big problem too.

Wizards of the Coast vs. Palladium Books: 1992—1993

On June 17, 1992, Kevin Siembieda and his company, Palladium Books, jointly sued Wizards of the Coast for copyright and trademark infringement due to the inclusion of Palladium system integration notes in *The Primal Order*. It was a hard lesson, of relevance to any publisher. Whether your lawyers say you're in the right or not on a legal issue, the other side will often have lawyers offering the exact opposite opinion, and the result will usually be a lawsuit that will be won by whoever has the most money (and so, in an industry our size, no one truly wins).

"The further and further we got into 1992 the more time and resources this started to consume, and a cloud started settling over our office that sapped our energy and caused us to start doubting the future of the company."

– Peter Adkison, Posting, rec.games.frp.misc posting (January 1993)

The Palladium lawsuit almost put Wizards of the Coast out of business. It cost them not just money, but an even more precious resource — time. Even if Wizards wanted to settle, they felt unable to do so because Kevin Siembieda consistently demanded an "acknowledgement of guilt," which Wizards was unwilling to sign. (If they had, they might have been liable to every other publisher whose game had been featured in *The Primal Order*.) On December 14, 1992, the judge refused to throw out the case through a summary judgment. Two weeks later, Adkison told his staff that he was writing what he expected to be their last payroll checks for a while. It could easily have been the end of a young company.

But they returned from the nadir. Some of the staff started picking up freelance work to pay their bills while continuing to work for Wizards — much of it at White Wolf, thanks to Stevens' connections there. This resulted in 60- or 80-hour

work weeks for some, but they believed in what they were doing, and it held them over just long enough. By January 1993, GAMA was talking about stepping in. Mike Pondsmith of R. Talsorian — the GAMA president — was ultimately able to arbitrate between the parties and bring them to an out-of-court settlement.

> *"The lawsuit between Kevin Siembieda, Palladium Books, Inc. and Wizards of the Coast, Inc. has been settled. All three of them want to put the suit behind them, and hope that their fans will do the same. In the spirit of industry harmony, Wizards requests that there be no boycotts or other action against Palladium. Thanks to all who have shown concern and support to both sides."*
>
> – Wizards of the Coast, Official Statement on Lawsuit (April 1993)]

Wizards put out a conciliatory statement, admitting no guilt, but asking for harmony. The statement even asked for fans to call off boycotts of Palladium. Later reports suggest that this was part of the settlement agreement — which also involved Wizards paying Palladium an unspecified amount of cash, and promising not to mention Palladium in their games ever again.

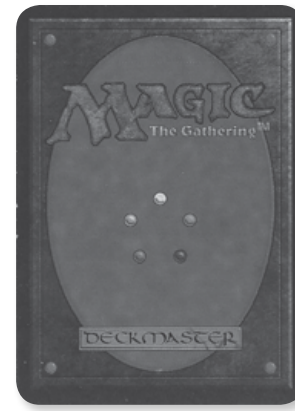
Wizards was greatly relieved by the ending of the lawsuit because it let them concentrate on ... something else.

The Coming CCG Storm: 1991—1995

That *something else* had begun easily enough. As early as 1991, Wizards of the Coast had been talking to Mike Davis and through him Richard Garfield about a board game that Garfield was shopping around. It was an innovative game of programmed movement called *RoboRally*, but it looked too expensive for a young company like Wizards to produce. So Adkison asked Garfield to develop something cheaper to manufacture — something that might be more portable, even easy to carry around to conventions. Garfield said that he *did* have an interesting idea about combining baseball cards with a card game. Over the next week, he turned that rough idea into a complete game — building on older prototypes dating back to at least 1982, when Garfield had created a *Cosmic-Encounter*-inspired card game called "Five Magics." He pitched it to Adkison on August 23, 1991.

This was, of course, the genesis of the first collectible card game (CCG), then called "Manaclash." It was the first of its type — a unique game design that offered players the ability to purchase small, randomized packs of cards that could be used to build play decks. Garfield and Adkison worked on Manaclash throughout the Palladium lawsuit, protecting the IP within a shell company called Garfield Games — in case Palladium did win its case. By the time the lawsuit closed, the game was a few months away from release.

The game that would become *Magic: The Gathering* (1993) was very nearly not released. Adkison's original request for a "cheaper" game ended up being an ironic one, because a huge investment was required to produce a collectible card game. Wizards was already in the hole due to the Palladium lawsuit, and they needed money badly. So they sent requests for investment throughout the industry and across the Internet.



Shares were sold in Garfield Games, then (after the lawsuit) merged into Wizards of the Coast at an 8:5 premium. Wizards sold so much stock that it would cause them problems a few years later, when they neared 500 individual shareholders — which would have forced them to begin reporting publicly. (A stock buyback at the time reduced the shareholder number and resolved the problem.) However, the requests for investment got Wizards the printing money they needed.

> *"In August of this year Wizards of the Coast will be releasing a new game called Magic: The Gathering. … I think this is the most innovative game since Dungeons & Dragons. Why? Because it isn't just a new game, it's a new gaming form."*
>
> – Peter Adkison, "The Apothecary," *Cryptych v1 #1* (1993)

Magic was demoed in July 1993 at Origins '93, then Adkison made a trip down the West Coast in August, going from store-to-store and seeding them with prerelease copies of the game. From there he continued his journey cross-country until he arrived at Gen Con '93. The full 2.6 million card alpha print run of *Magic* was still being held up in customs, but it was released just in time to go on sale for the second day of Gen Con — Friday, August 20. As they say, the rest is history. 7.3 million beta cards soon followed, and then in December the 35 million-card *Unlimited* edition appeared. The supplements starting rolling out too: *Arabian Nights* (1993) in December, *Antiquities* (1994) the next March, *Legends* (1994) in June, *The Dark* (1994) in August, and *Fallen Empires* (1994) in November.

One cannot overstate how much CCGs changed the hobbyist industry back in 1993 and 1994. Gamers were lining up at stores on release day, purchasing the new sets by the $100 box. There was so much money in the fad that new game stores popped up just to get in on the booming industry. Print runs kept increasing, but pre-orders were locked in months ahead of each release, and Wizards couldn't afford to print much above them. Therefore, retailers and distributors were constantly limited in their purchases, though their desires typically had grown by release date.

The hype even pushed Wizards into a new industry: fiction. Book packager Bill Fawcett arranged a deal between Wizards of the Coast and HarperCollins to publish novels set in *Magic*'s multiverse of Dominia. The first of these, *Arena* (1994), was hyped with a mail-in offer for a unique *Magic* card available nowhere else. Similar offers were repeated in the next few HarperCollins *Magic* books. Though some players doubtless read the novels, many more purchased them just so that they could rip out the last page, mail it in, and get a new card for their *Magic* collection.

Whatever the reason, the books sold well enough that HarperCollins published 10 through 1996. It's likely that over a million copies of all the novels were sold in those few years. They were also translated into Czech, Dutch, French, German, and Italian. The books only stopped when Wizards reclaimed the rights because they grew confident in shepherding a fiction program on their own — for reasons that will become clear when we reach 1997.

Unsurprisingly, Richard Garfield joined Wizards in early 1994. Meanwhile, the company's upward momentum kept building until late 1994 and the release of *Fallen Empires*. Wizards promised to print that supplement to order — after some disagreements with distributors over *The Dark* — and so they felt compelled to match all the orders for *Fallen Empires*, even though they were very, very high. The new supplement required so much production that printing temporarily stopped on the core *Magic* game. Perhaps Wizards should have known better, and should have reneged on their original promise, but this isn't the only time in the histories of the RPG industry that companies gave distributors more products that they should have.

By January 1, 1995, it was obvious that there was way too much *Fallen Empires*. Wizards stopped the presses on the rest of the print run, but the damage had been done. The result was one of the periodic crunches hitting the hobbyist industry, and it had bad effects on RPG and CCG producers alike.

Even before this bust, the CCG storm had affected roleplaying publishers. Money that retailers would have used for RPG purchases was instead being set aside for the next CCG release, starving roleplaying manufacturers. Some distributors even stopped accepting new RPG lines, because their focus was now on collectibles. At the same time, RPG manufacturers were leaping on the bandwagon, each ready to produce their own CCG. TSR's *Spellfire* (1994), Atlas Games' *On the Edge* (1994), Decipher's *Star Trek Customizable Card Game* (1994), and Steve Jackson's *Illuminati: New World Order* (1995) were some of the first games to appear from hobbyist publishers. The remainder of 1995 would see many, many more, despite the post-*Fallen Empires* market contraction. It may have been the peak year of the CCG fad.

Meanwhile — either to stifle competition or to have plenty of possibilities, depending on whom you ask — Wizards of the Coast was licensing RPG settings right and left for use in new CCGs. They soon had the rights for FASA's Battletech, ICE's Middle-earth, R. Talsorian's Cyberpunk, and White Wolf's Vampire.

Wizards published Richard Garfield's *Vampire*-based *Jyhad* (1994) even before the problems caused by *Fallen Empires*. It was a complex but strategic game that supported multiple players — not just two. It also gave Wizards of the Coast a second *DeckMaster* game — back at a time when they thought they might need more than one game to defeat their competitors. Unfortunately, the name suggested Islamic extremism and had to be changed. Despite the problems that differing card backs would cause, Wizards reprinted the game as *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle* (1995) the next year.

V:TES was certainly no *Magic* and Wizards only would support the line through 1996. However, in 2000 the rights passed to White Wolf, who supported it through 2010. That made Wizards' second CCG one of the longest-lived in the whole industry.

However, it was *Magic*'s success that resulted in huge growth for Wizards of the Coast. A handful of employees working out of Peter's house in 1993 became 50 working out of a real office in 1994 and then 250 in 1995.

Roleplaying Expansion & Contraction: 1993—1995

Entering 1993, Wizards of the Coast was continuing to expand their RPG lines despite the increasing problems being caused by Palladium and the increasing work being put toward *Magic*. Their *Compleat Alchemist* was intended to be the first of a "Pandevelopment" line of generic fantasy products. They'd also started distributing a small press RPG called *Interstellar Elite Combat* (1991), with the intent of putting out a new edition themselves in 1994, and had begun marketing and distributing an independent roleplaying magazine with *Cryptych #1* (1993). Meanwhile, supplements for *The Primal Order* and *Talislanta* continued on.



The CCG storm pummeled Wizards' roleplaying plans. As a result, just about all of their RPG lines went on hiatus in 1993. However, Wizards didn't neglect roleplaying games entirely; instead they were busy hiring new staff that would be ready to revamp

roleplaying when the initial CCG demand receded. Jonathan Tweet — to that point a freelancer for *Talislanta* — became a full-time employee and the head of RPG development in June 1994. He was slightly preceded, in May, by his new lieutenant, John Tynes of Pagan Publishing.

When work began again in 1994, it was with a more limited set of titles. The most obvious casualties were the *Pandevelopment* and *Interstellar Elite* lines, which Wizards declared dead toward the start of the year. The former meant there would be no more of Bard Games' "Compleat" books, nor any more revisions of the generic Envoy system. The latter meant there would not be a second edition of *Interstellar Elite*.

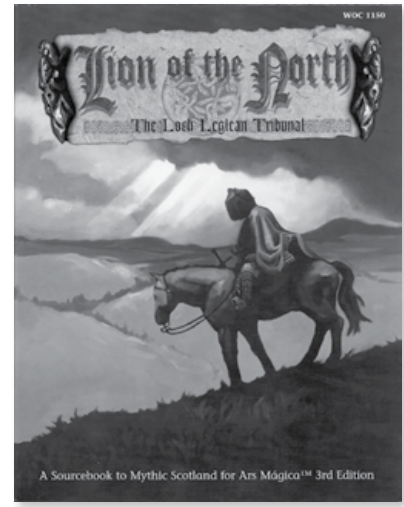
> *"Roleplaying games at WotC have been practically on hold for months as WotC shifted gears to meet the demand for Magic: The Gathering. This near standstill is actually a blessing for us because it has allowed the RPG R&D team time and space to choose a new direction."*
>
> – Jonathan Tweet, "Roleplaying at WotC," *Cryptych v2 #1* (1994)

CCGs also killed *Cryptych*, though in a more roundabout way. *Cryptych*'s creator, ILM International, struck out on their own around April 1994 — severing their distribution relationship with Wizards. This was probably due in part to the fact that they were working on a second magazine. Peter Adkison had sent the *Cryptych* staff some *Magic* cards when the game was still young and had encouraged them to check the game out. The *Cryptych* staff did, and they were impressed — hence their decision to publish *Scrye*, a new magazine dedicated to CCGs.

The first issue of *Scrye* came out that summer, and shortly thereafter *Cryptych v2 #2* (1994) became the last issue of ILM's original publication. The publishers claimed it was just on "hiatus." *Scrye*, meanwhile, did much better; it was successfully published by ILM for the next five years, before they sold it to Krause Publications in 1999; Krause then published the magazine through issue #131 (April 2009). However, with the death of *Cryptych*, ILM International leaves our history.

The capstone books were never quite canceled, despite the middling outcome of the lawsuit with Palladium. In 1994, Wizards announced they wouldn't be publishing any new material for *The Primal Order* but also that they'd keep books in print — and in fact did produce a second printing (1995) of the book. They also promised that The Military Order would be out in 1996, though as we'll see, that never happened.

That left just one of Wizards' early RPG lines: *Talislanta*. It saw a few more publications in 1994, but then Wizards returned the rights to creator Steven Sechi



on October 1; he licensed them to Daedalus Games on October 2.

However, that didn't mark the end of Wizards' roleplaying experiment, at least not quite yet.

Magic gave Wizards plenty of money, and they weren't afraid of using it to purchase RPGs — even if they didn't end up doing a lot with their new purchases. Wizards' next two RPGs would be kicked off with acquisitions this way.

Wizards' first RPG purchase was Jonathan Tweet's own *Ars Magica*. Lisa Stevens — who had previously worked on the game at Lion Rampant — suggested the acquisition. Wizards consulted with Tweet, and after some thought, he recommended the purchase — which was completed around January 1994. Ironically, the game that Tweet co-created would end up being one of Wizard's least supported lines, with just two books: *Houses of Hermes* (1994) and *Lion of the North* (1994). Nonetheless, Wizards *did* make a very permanent mark on the *Ars Magica* line. They put together a massive, cleaned-up, and codified fourth edition. They just never published it.

Wizards' second RPG purchase was Nightfall Games' *SLA Industries* (1993) RPG. Wizards started out just being a US distributor for Nightfall, but then they came to an agreement to buy the company outright. By mid-1994, Nightfall was officially "Wizards of the Coast UK." As with *Ars Magica*, Wizards put out just a few *SLA Industries* books — running from a reprint of *Karma* (1994) to the *Mort Sourcebook* (1995). Wizards of the Coast UK, however, still exists today — primarily as a coordinator of *Magic* tournaments.

Wizards was also working on a new RPG of their own, though it was never published. It was to be a *Magic* RPG set in the multiverse of Dominia. Some of the first *Magic* novel writers were even brought in to offer advice on their characters and worlds. The project was to be released in 1995, but never appeared.

Wizards' second new RPG had slightly better success. That was *Everway* (1995), an entirely innovative RPG design by Jonathan Tweet. It introduced a very unique visual randomizer; Tarot-like Vision cards, used to determine the results of character actions. They meant that the gamemaster had a tremendously free hand, and the result was almost as freeform as Phage Press' *Amber Diceless Roleplaying* (1991). It was another step in the early evolution of indie/storyteller games, which placed



story ahead of game or character. However, this new freeform system required a very good gamemaster, and not everyone was a Jonathan Tweet or a John Tynes — who had run playtests for the Wizards crew — which meant that gamers out in the wild didn't all get the same experience from the game.

Unfortunately, *Everway* was dramatically overprinted, with pre-orders totaling 17,000. Wizards staff figured that sales of 5,000–10,000 were much more likely (and indeed, much more in line for a new RPG line), but couldn't really allocate an RPG game, so they printed to the demand. The result was much the same as *Fallen Empire*'s demand-driven overprinting. The game didn't go anywhere.

By the end of 1995, Wizards seemed poised for continued roleplaying expansion, with four different lines — *Ars Magica*, *SLA Industries*, the (lagging) *Magic* RPG, and *Everway*. Then in December, Adkison made a very startling announcement: Wizards of the Coast was laying off 30 of its 275 employees and dropping all of its roleplaying games.

If the turnaround seemed abrupt, it apparently was. Some sources report that the decision was made less than a day before the announcement. The speed of the change could be best seen in the *Ars Magica* line, where a new edition of the game was just 10 days from being sent to the printers.

> *"Note that I do not look at this as a disservice to RPGs. I think we WERE doing a disservice to RPGs by not giving them adequate support. We simply do not seem to be able to do a great job in the RPG business. We have never admit[t]ed this before, but we have lost money on every single RPG product we've published, from The Primal Order and Talislanta all the way up until now with Ars Magica and Everway. But no matter how much you love an industry, if you can't make money at it eventually you have to walk away from it and let others carry the torch."*
>
> – Peter Adkison, "Statement from Wizards of the Coast," Everway Mailing List (December 1995)

Mini-History

Nightfall Games: 1991-Present

Nightfall Games has one of the most tangled histories in the industry. The Scottish company was founded in 1991 solely to publish their first game, Dave Allsop's *SLA Industries* (1993). The system was pretty typical of the '90s, with a skill system and point-based character generation. It stood out, however, thanks to its setting, a grim and gritty future of the type you'd expect to see from the British Isles.

In 1994, Nightfall Games got caught up in the *Magic*-induced Wizards of the Coast-rollup. The company became Wizards of the Coast UK and Wizards took over their RPG. Wizards published a few *SLA Industries* supplements through 1995, after which Wizards got out of the RPG business, leaving Nightfall Games without a publishing partner. After that, rights temporarily went to a new company founded by Allsop and three ex-Wizards employees, Jageeda Publishing. They never published anything, so two years later, the rights to the line reverted *back* to Wizards.

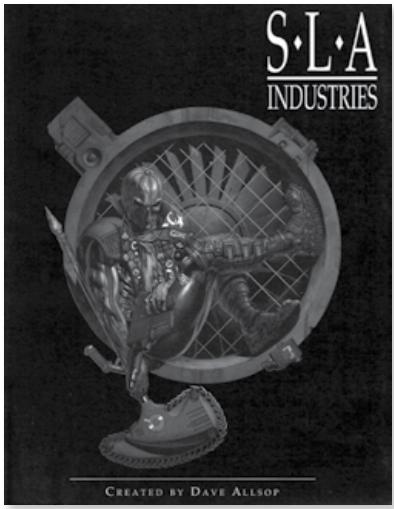
In 1998, two of the three founders of Nightfall re-founded the company and got the rights to the game back from Wizards. They began publishing new supplements through British publisher Hogshead Publishing, starting with a revised rulebook (2000). Once again this relationship was short-lived, only resulting in a few supplements through 2001. After Hogshead Publishing left the RPG business in 2002, the line again went on hiatus.

In 2003, Dave Allsop co-founded Cubicle 7 Entertainment with Angus Abranson, with *SLA Industries* planned as the company's lead game. However, Allsop decided to leave the industry in 2004, marking what appeared to be the true end of Nightfall.

Cubicle 7 did eventually publish two new *SLA Industries* books, *CS1: Cannibal Sector 1* (2006) and *Hunter Sheets Issue One* (2007). After that, the line went quiescent until 2011, when new PDFs began to appear from Nightfall Games – alive and independent once more. Their most notable release, *Hunter Sheets Issue Two* (2012) is intended for a print release, but hasn't come about yet.

A 2012 television and film deal with Romark Entertainment may point to a new future for *SLA Industries*, but to date it hasn't yet been fulfilled.

Wizard's early failure as a roleplaying producer wasn't really a surprise given their economics. Roleplaying games tend to be small-business, while Wizard's CCG business was selling at a totally different level. The same economics of salary and office cost couldn't possibly be shared across both of these product lines, and when they were, it was no surprise that the roleplaying lines showed losses. In order for this sort of thing to work, Wizards needed to be a top-level RPG producer, producing something like *D&D* rather than a series of high-quality niche games — and that wouldn't be possible for a few more years.



To mark the end of an era, the Wizards staff gathered in a courtyard on the Friday following the announcement, to hold a wake "complete with bagpipe, candles, and expressions of grief."

Wizards actively sought new publishers for their RPG lines. *Ars Magica* had good luck, and went straight to Atlas Games, who published Wizards' fourth edition (1996) and a later fifth edition (2004), and who continues to support the game to this day. *Talislanta* had several false starts and wouldn't see print again until 2001, as is discussed in Bard Games' history. *SLA Industries* eventually went right back to its original publishers, a resurrected Nightfall Games. Finally, *Everway* went on to Rubicon Games, who published several supplements (1996–1997) and later transferred the rights to a successor company, Gaslight Press. Gaslight promised a second edition starting in 2002, but it has never appeared.

The *Magic* RPG game that was in production got a bit of a reprieve. The design team of Wolfgang Baur, Teeuwynn Woodruff, and Mike Selinker remained working on a prototype through March 1996, but Wizards ultimately decided not to go forward with it.

And after that, Wizards leaves our history of roleplaying games.

For a year and a half.

CCGs and Cons: 1995—1997

Over the next couple of years, Wizards kept publishing expansions for Magic. *Ice Age* (1995), *Chronicles* (1995), *Homelands* (1995), *Alliances* (1996), *Mirage* (1996), and *Visions* (1997) were the next several. However, the CCG business wasn't as trouble-free for Wizards as it had been in its first couple of years.

Fallen Empires was still causing some problems due to overprinting. *Chronicles* reprinted many out-of-print cards to the horror and derision of collectors — though to the enjoyment of players, highlighting the constant balance CCG publishers must consider. *Homelands* was generally unappreciated by fans due to its low power level and a lack of new systems, to the point that many people call it the nadir of Magic design. After that, there was an eight-month gap before the release of *Alliances*, the longest such gap in Magic's history.

However, the delay wasn't necessarily due to weakness in Wizard's (very large) corner of the CCG industry. It's more easily attributable to the fact that Wizards was pushing out *other* CCGs.

Netrunner (1996) was Richard Garfield's CCG based on R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk 2020* (1990) game. He continued to develop new ideas, as he had with *Jyhad*. *Netrunner*'s most unique element was that it offered an entirely asymmetrical game, with the two players — the Corp and the Runner — having different cards, abilities, and goals. However, *Netrunner* was minimally supported, with one supplement released in 1996, then a smaller set published in 1999. It's since been redeveloped by Fantasy Flight Games as *Android: Netrunner* (2012).

The *BattleTech Collectible Card Game* (1996) was also drawn from the RPG industry, under a license from FASA. It reportedly went through three different designs by a half-dozen people before Richard Garfield stepped in to create the published version of the game. *BattleTech* wasn't as notably innovative as its predecessors and was only supported through 2001.

These RPG-licensed CCGs marked some of Wizards' tenuous connections to the RPG industry from 1995–1997. Another came about from their 1995 purchase of Andon Unlimited. Andon was a convention company and at the time was licensed to run GAMA's Origins Game Fair — which probably explains Wizards' interest in the company. After the purchase, Wizards took a convention that was traditionally about miniatures and wargames and began using it to run *Magic* tournaments — to the consternation of some of con-goers. But, Origins did still support wargames ... and even some roleplaying games as well.

Though its newer CCGs were only moderate successes, Wizards of the Coast was considering one other method for controlling the rest of the CCG industry: litigation. As has been discussed elsewhere in these histories, there's only one surefire way to protect game mechanics, and that's through patents. On September 2, 1997, Wizards of the Coast was issued patent #5,662,332 for "trading card game method of play." It was an attempt to protect basic CCG techniques.

> *"(b) entering one or more trading cards into play by placing the one or more trading cards face up in a first orientation on a playing surface, and at the player's option, using one or more trading cards that have been entered into play in accordance with the rules and tapping each trading card used in play so all players are aware the trading card is in use by turning the trading cards from the first orientation to a second orientation on the playing surface"*
>
> – "Trading Card Game Method of Play," Claim 2b, filed October 17, 1995

After receiving their patent, Wizards began sending letters to other CCG manufacturers asking for a modest royalty. A few people signed on to Wizards' patent licensing agreement, but not many. No lawsuits ultimately arose over the issue.

Though the CCG patent did get Wizards a lot of attention, it surprisingly *wasn't* the biggest news about them in 1997.

The TSR Purchase: 1997

While Wizards was continuing to expand their CCG business, TSR, the former big dog of the RPG industry, was facing financial insolvency. By the end of 1996, they were over $30 million in debt. There's no doubt that the CCG explosion hadn't helped: TSR's *Spellfire* (1994) was never a success, and there were full truckloads of the collectable *Dragon Dice* (1995) game stored in the TSR warehouse. However, many other factors contributed to TSR's downfall. They were selling books at a loss, overpaying for licenses, publishing too many settings, not listening to their customers, and otherwise engaging in all manner of poor business practices.

A number of different companies were considering whether a TSR acquisition might be possible. Peter Adkison approached them the previous year at Gen Con '96, while Sweetpea Entertainment — discussed in the Imperial Games history — was also looking at the RPG industry's founding company. A book publisher and a Japanese toy manufacturer were among TSR's other suitors. However, it was ultimately a small firm who was successful at putting together a TSR acquisition. As is more fully described in the histories of AEG and TSR, Bob Abramowitz and Ryan Dancey of Five Ring Publishing Group brokered a deal for the purchase of TSR and then brought it directly to Peter Adkison.

Adkison couldn't resist: this was an opportunity to get back into the roleplaying field with a property that was more in tune with the economics of Wizard's CCG publication.

> *"Bob and Ryan played the situation out very well. They didn't tell the TSR owners I was involved at first, but negotiated the rough outline of a deal. Once the TSR owners were excited that there was a serious buyer for their company, Bob let them know I was the person willing to fund it. By this time the company was already not printing products and in a serious cash-flow lockdown and was running short of attractive options. The owners conceded to my involvement."*
>
> – Peter Adkison,
> *30 Years of Adventure: A Celebration of Dungeons & Dragons* (2004)

On April 10, 1997, Wizards of the Coast announced their purchase of all of the assets of TSR, including *D&D* and the *other* major gaming convention, Gen Con.

As part of the deal they also agreed to buy Abramowitz and Dancey's company, the Five Rings Publishing Group, which gave them another successful CCG, *Legend of the Five Rings*. These two deals were both closed that June.

Five Rings Publishing was initially given a bit of autonomy, staying on as a separate unit — though they were fully absorbed by Wizards within a few years. Even afterward Five Rings' parent, AEG, continued to independently produce *Legend of the Five Rings* supplements for Wizards through 2000 — and would also continue publishing roleplaying products set in the world.

TSR was more completely absorbed, but Wizards was nonetheless generous with existing staff. They transplanted those who wanted to move from Milwaukee to Seattle — along with those truckloads of *Dragon Dice* now motoring to the West Coast. That gave Wizards continuity and a strong foundation to build upon.

Adkison selected some of TSR's new leaders from among those old staff members. Mary Kirchoff, responsible for some of TSR's early success in the book trade, was brought back to manage TSR's book publishing division. Bill Slavicsek, an old hand in TSR's Roleplaying Department, was made the head of RPG research and development (R&D).

However, Adkison brought in new staff as well. This largely resulted in Wizards employees moving over to TSR. For example, Lisa Stevens became the brand manager for the RPGA and Greyhawk (which would lead to fan Erik Mona being brought on as a creative consultant for Greyhawk). Adkison also merged in staff from Five Rings. Ryan Dancey was then put in charge of TSR's business and marketing concerns. This would prove crucial for some of the amazing growth of the entire RPG industry in the early '00s.

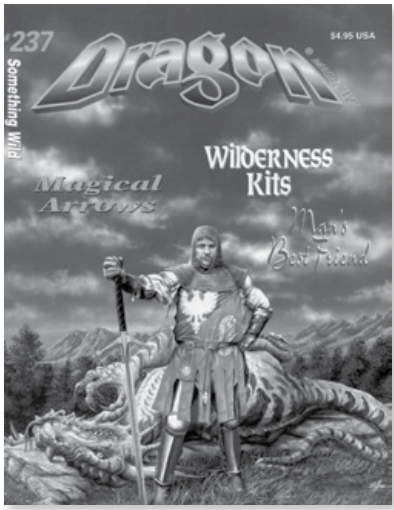
Wizard's big welcome back to the industry party came August 7–10 at the 1997 Gen Con Game Fair — a massive convention that Wizards now had to organize and run. It was a challenge to get the large convention going in just two months, but Wizards managed it by an amazing effort — and by placing their priorities on the convention rather than on TSR's queue of pending products.

That August, the con kicked off with a free concert by the Violent Femmes. It heralded the beginning of a new era for the entire RPG industry.

Printing Product & Mending Fences: 1997

Adkison would later claim that the biggest fix required by TSR was just paying off its debt. That was certainly an important element, but it was just the start. The issues of relocation and departmental organization have already been discussed. Beyond that, there were two more major obstacles.

First, products had to get back into production. TSR's dire straits had been epitomized in its two magazines. *Dragon* and *Dungeon* had each seen a near-crippling



six-month hiatus, where before they'd been as regular as day. Wizards printed *Dragon #237* (1997) and *Dungeon* #63 (1997) almost exactly as they'd been prepared by TSR — including out-of-date product listings and industry news — because they didn't want to delay the release any further. It wasn't until the following issues that Wizards started exerting any control over the editorial content.

Similarly Wizards quickly began publishing RPG books that TSR had queued up, including new releases for *AD&D* like *The Sea Devils* (1997), Birthright's *King of the Giantdowns* (1997), and Ravenloft's *Domains of Dread* (1997), and products for the *SAGA*-based Dragonlance game like *Heroes of Defiance* (1997). All of these new RPG books carried the TSR logo and would continue to do so through 2000.

Second, Adkison had to repair the damage to TSR's talent pool, from ancient feuds with Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson all the way up to some of the bone-headed moves that had been made by the last administrators of TSR in their waning days. After listing out TSR's top talents that had moved on, Adkison began mending fences with the best of them.

> *"Soon after acquiring TSR I sat down and made a list of 'the most famous celebrities ever associated with D&D.' The top five on my list, in no particular order, were the following people: Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson, Margaret Weis, Tracy Hickman, and R.A. Salvatore."*
>
> – Peter Adkison,
> *30 Years of Adventure: A Celebration of Dungeons & Dragons* (2004)

He started with *D&D*'s creators: Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson.

The legal issues involving Gary Gygax were complex, but Adkison was able to write a check and clarify some issues of ownership, improving *D&D*'s relationship with one of its creators. By this time, Gygax was working with Hekaforge on his own *Lejendary Adventures* game — as is described in its own history — so he didn't write any new supplements or books for TSR, but he did contribute an "Up on a Soapbox" column from *Dragon #268* (January 2000) until *Dragon #320* (June 2004).

The biggest remaining issue with Dave Arneson was that *D&D* had been called *AD&D* for 20 years mainly to avoid paying him royalties. Adkison wrote another check here, this one to free up the *Dungeons & Dragons* game from royalties owed to Arneson. This was what allowed Wizards to get rid of the word "Advanced" when they revamped *D&D* a few years later.

The other three talents that Adkison wanted to mend fences with were authors: Margaret Weis, Tracy Hickman, and R.A. Salvatore.

The last major work that Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman had written for TSR had been the semi-disastrous *Dragons of Summer Flame* (1996), wherein what should have been a trilogy was crammed into a single book. After that, TSR handed Jean Rabe the writing reins for the next major event in Krynn history, resulting in the "Dragons of a New Age Trilogy" — which began with TSR's *The Dawning of a New Age* (1996). Though Wizards *did* publish the rest of Rabe's trilogy, afterward they had Weis and Hickman return as the main chroniclers of Dragonlance. The two wrote a new trilogy called "War of Souls," which began with *Dragons of a Fallen Sun* (2000).

The schism with R.A. Salvatore — creator of the popular dark elf Drizzt — was the most boggling of all. According to TSR staff, TSR's management went out of their way to alienate Salvatore following the publication of Salvatore's *Passage to Dawn* (1996) by picking a new author to write stories about Salvatore's famous dark elf. Mark Anthony's Drizzt novel, "The Shores of Dusk," was completed by the time Wizards acquired TSR, but Wizards opted *not* to publish that one. Instead they brought Salvatore back to write more about his iconic character, beginning with *The Silent Blade* (1998).

All of this work rebuilding TSR's reputation was of course just the backbeat to the continuing drum roll of production. Wizard's three years of *AD&D* publication may be forgotten in the glare of what came afterward, but nonetheless they represent a nice coda to TSR's 23-year-long history.

The End of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*: 1997—2000

The publication of *The Sea Devils* and those other books in the summer of 1997 was the beginning of Wizard's first era of *AD&D* production, which ran from 1997–1998. During that time, Wizards published a year's worth of material that TSR already had in process.

Because they were printing TSR's backlog, Wizards published books for a *lot* of different settings — but it wasn't as bad as it would have been a few years before. TSR's final days *had* been marked by a severe fragmentation of fan attention across a multitude of settings, but they'd already started paring down their lines in the years before their demise. Mystara and its Red Steel spin-off finished their runs

in 1995, then the Dark Sun and Lankhmar lines ended in 1996. When Wizards picked up TSR's production in 1997, they "only" had six settings to support: Birthright, Dragonlance (through *SAGA*), the Forgotten Realms, Planescape, Ravenloft, and the unconnected "Odyssey" series.

After Wizards finished publishing TSR's remaining products, they trimmed these product lines from six to two. Birthright ended almost immediately, though PDFs of some unpublished books would appear in 2000. Planescape continued through 1998, as did the Odyssey series — whose final publications were three books about the island of Jakandor, all by Jeff Grubb (1997–1998). Though Ravenloft carried on into 1999, the last few books — *Carnival* (1999) and *Children of the Night: The Uncreated* (1999) — appeared under an "Advanced Dungeons & Dragons" logo rather than a setting-specific logo. They also stated that they were "for use with Ravenloft or any *other AD&D* campaign setting," suggesting their utility as general horror-themed supplements. That left Wizards with Dragonlance and the Forgotten Realms as the only remaining settings from TSR's six — a notable reduction from the bloated height of 1995 or 1996.

Wizard's second era of *AD&D* production ran from 1998–1999. It was marked by the publication of books that demonstrated Wizard's unique take on *AD&D*. Though this was a very pivotal moment — the first time *anyone* got to (officially) play with TSR's properties since the Judges Guild license of the '70s and '80s — Wizards didn't do a lot to develop the line. That innovation would be saved for the third edition of the game, even then a gleam in designers' eyes.

Instead, Wizards renovated *D&D* by creating new products that remembered old favorites.

Most notably, they returned to TSR's original setting, Greyhawk. This began with *Player's Guide to Greyhawk* (1998) by Anne Brown and *Return of the Eight* (1998) and *The Adventure Begins* (1998) by long-time staffer Roger E. Moore. These three books moved Greyhawk's metaplot well beyond the Greyhawk Wars to a new era that was lighter and more magical than that of TSR's *From the Ashes* (1992–1993). Wizards did a bit more original work with Greyhawk, such as the *Lost Tombs* trilogy of adventures (1998), but after that they'd turn to the classics, as we'll see.



While publishing new Forgotten Realms books and setting-less *AD&D* books, Wizards brought back another old favorite:

demons and devils. Sure, they'd been part of the second edition as "tanar'ri" and "baatezu," but Wizards proved that they weren't afraid of angry mothers by placing them forefront in publications like *Hellgate Keep* (1998) for Forgotten Realms, *A Paladin in Hell* (1998), and *Guide to Hell* (1999). This was an ironic move, as Wizards had removed demons and devils from *Magic: The Gathering* in 1995 and wouldn't restore them until 2002.

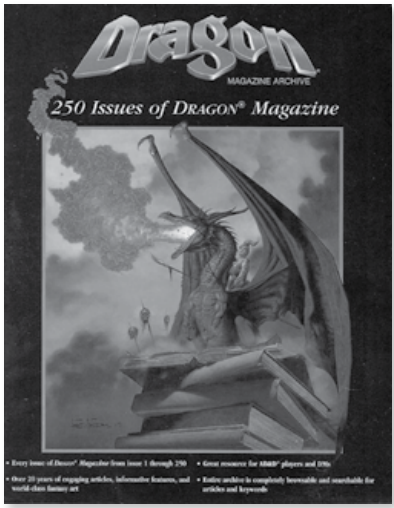
The reintroduction of demons and devils was part of a general trend of aiming *D&D* toward older players. WotC also replaced TSR's positively antiquated Code of Ethics (based on the 1953 Comics Code!) with a much less restrictive Code of Conduct.

Two things of particular note happened in 1999 that would herald Wizards' third and final era of *AD&D* production. First, Wizards began to celebrate the 25th anniversary of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Second, at the 1999 Gen Con Game Fair, Wizards announced that they were working on a third edition of their fantasy game, which would be published the next year. Though some news organizations incorrectly reported this as a third edition of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, thanks to their deal with Dave Arneson, Wizards would be removing the word "Advanced," allowing for the publication of "*Dungeons & Dragons*" as TSR's main RPG line for the first time in decades.

> *"In the 10 years since the release of the Dungeons & Dragons 2nd Edition roleplaying game – and in the 25 years since the initial release of the game – Dungeons & Dragons has gone through continuous evolution and growth. Originally released in 1974, Dungeons & Dragons received the first facelift to its rules and game mechanics (2nd Edition) in 1989. Now with 3rd Edition, Dungeons & Dragons is back – redesigned for the new millennium, for a new generation of game players and for its legions of existing fans worldwide."*
>
> – Wizards of the Coast Press Release (1999)

As a result of the upcoming third edition, Wizards knew that they were publishing the final supplements for the old, beloved *AD&D* game. At the same time, they wanted to celebrate 25 years of history. The result was two years of *AD&D* publication that paid tribute to the past even moreso than the books of 1998–1999.

In 1999, several supplements updated the best-loved adventures from the past, among them *Against The Giants: The Liberation of Geoff* (1999), *Dragonlance Classics 15th Anniversary Edition* (1999), *Ravenloft* (1999), *Return to the Keep on the Borderlands* (1999), and *Return to White Plume Mountain* (1999). The *TSR Silver Anniversary Collector's Edition* (1999) — which contained facsimile reprints of TSR's most notable products — was even more impressive. A new series





of Greyhawk fiction books highlighted many of these same adventures. Finally, the *Dragon Magazine Archive* (1999), which digitalized 250 issues of the magazine, was another look backward — though one that would (maybe) cause Wizards some problems, as is discussed in the history of Kenzer & Company.

The next year continued Wizards' nostalgic publications with a few final products such as the adventure *Slavers* (2000) and the novel *Descent into the Depths of the Earth* (2000). Even after third edition came out, final "anniversary" products such as *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil* (2000) appeared.

However, Wizards had something else in mind for the end of the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* line: an original adventure that touched upon the oldest locales and the most ancient myths of the *D&D* game, while still presenting something entirely new. The result was Bruce Cordell and Steve Miller's *Die Vecna Die!* (2000), an adventure that played two ancient artifacts — the Eye and Hand of Vecna — against the demigod Iuz and which featured a trek through the campaign settings of Greyhawk, Ravenloft, and Planescape. It was the final product published under the TSR brand, the final book for *AD&D*, and truly the end of an era.

The next time *D&D* would be published, it would be as a new third edition.

SAGAs and Other Alternate RPGs: 1997—2000

Though *AD&D* books represented the majority of its RPG production from 1997–2000, Wizards also published for a pair of alternate game systems, both carried over from TSR.

The Dragonlance *SAGA* RPG had started production in 1996. It was one of the last great hoorahs for TSR, a story-oriented RPG with more opportunity for player interaction than most games of the period — as is more fully described in TSR's history.

Unfortunately, it faced two problems: first, many old *AD&D* players of Dragonlance did not want to go over to a new system, and second, many of those same old players were displeased with the new "Fifth Age" that was then being chronicled in Jean Rabe's novels.

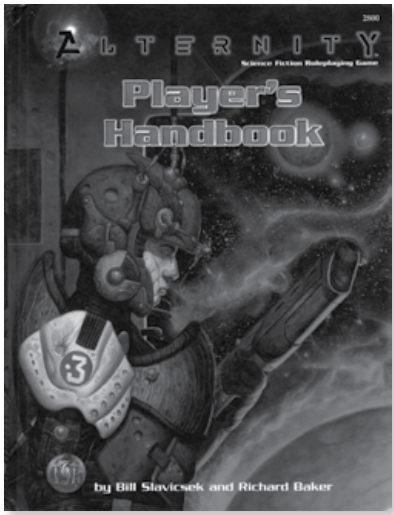
It took until late 1998 for Wizards to finish publishing TSR's aggressive 1997 schedule of SAGA books. Afterward Wizards released a brand-new adventure, *Seeds of Chaos* (1998), which changed two elements of the game — a gesture toward both the fans and Weis and Hickman themselves.

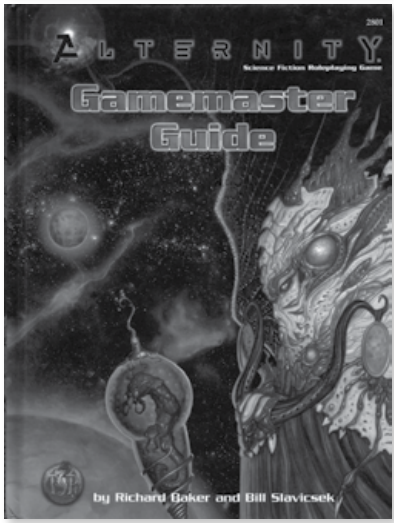
First, the era of the game was moved back from Rabe's New Age to the slightly earlier Summer of Chaos that Weis and Hickman had described in *Dragons of Summer Flame*. Second, the products all started being double-statted for both *SAGA* and *AD&D*. When Weis and Hickman's "War of Souls" became sufficiently fleshed out, Wizards changed the era of the SAGA games one more time to this new time period — set a full generation later. This was the basis for their last two Dragonlance *SAGA* adventures, *The Sylvan Veil* (1999) and *Rise of the Titans* (2000).

Wizards also showed their dedication to the original fans of Dragonlance by publishing the aforementioned *Dragonlance Classics Fifteen Anniversary Edition* (1999), a massive revision of the original Dragonlance storyline from the '80s. Though it was also dual-statted for *SAGA* and *AD&D*, it was clearly marketed toward the *AD&D* crowd.

Wizards' dual-statting of their Dragonlance books *might* have been interpreted as a lack of confidence in the *SAGA* system, but in actuality Wizards was simultaneously increasing their investment in the system through the publication of the *SAGA*-based *Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game* (1998). This new RPG helped to fill the void left by the cancellation of TSR's *Marvel Super Heroes* game six years earlier. Like the Dragonlance *SAGA* game, Marvel *SAGA* lasted into 2000. After that, TSR's long history with Marvel came to an end. The next Marvel RPG — even more short-lived — would be *The Marvel Universe Roleplaying Game* (2003), published by Marvel itself.

Wizards' other alternate RPG system of the late '90s was *Alternity*, designed by Richard Baker and Bill Slavicsek. It was completed at TSR and was intended to be their generic science-fiction system, a replacement for *Amazing Engine* (1993). Rather uniquely, the *Alternity Player Handbook* was released in a limited edition (1997) at the 1997 Gen Con Game Fair, and then in a regular edition (1998) — along with the *Alternity Gamemaster Guide* (1998) — the next spring. The reason for the first release being limited was — of course — the death and rebirth of TSR, but the delay also gave Wizards the chance to get feedback on the original printing and revise the system a bit before its full roll-out.





"Since alternate genres of science fiction are part of our design philosophy, and we want the game to be wide-reaching, we combined alternate with eternity to create a new term, and that term stuck – 'Alternity!'"

– Bill Slavicsek, Interview, *Troll Magazine #2* (1998)

Alternity was a skill-based game system that used a d20 for unified task resolution — though not quite in the way that later Wizards products would. Each task roll started with a d20 control die. Then a variable type of situation die — which reflected the difficulty of the task — was either added to or subtracted from the control die. From there, *Alternity* was a pretty standard roll-under task-resolution system.

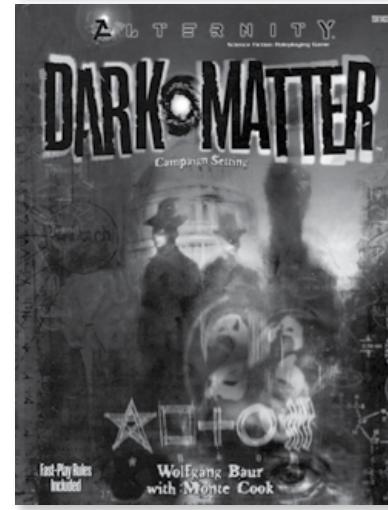
Alternity had a few other elements of note. Character generation was point-based. It included "archetypes" instead of classes, which increased costs of some skills, but didn't entirely limit them. There was also lots of effort spent on tech systems, like cybernetics, netrunning, mutations, and psionics.

The way that the *Alternity* line was put together was at least as notable. The game was a serious attempt to mimic the success of *Dungeons & Dragons* in a science-fiction environment. To do so, the designers laid out their products just like the *AD&D* line. There was a player's book and a gamemaster's book. Though the core game was generic, lines for specific settings were also planned — just like *AD&D* had lines for Forgotten Realms, Greyhawk, and others.

Alternity's first setting was detailed in Steve Eckelberry and Richard Baker's *Star*Drive Campaign Setting* (1998). It was a well-received space opera setting that was well-supported with both supplements and fiction over the next few years. *Alternity*'s other major setting launched with Wolfgang Baur and Monte Cook's *Dark•Matter Campaign Setting* (1999). This was a more modern-day setting

— highlighting paranoia, intrigue, and conspiracy in the fashion of *The X-Files*. It was even more well-received than its predecessor.





Wizards published two additional, largely unsupported campaign settings during *Alternity*'s last year. One was the *Gamma World Campaign Setting* (2000), effectively the fifth edition of that venerable old game. The other was the *Alternity Adventure Game: StarCraft Edition* (2000), which *didn't* go over that well because it was a standalone game with a simplified version of the *Alternity* rules. But that was the only notable complaint about a RPG system that was generally enjoyed by fans and critics alike.

So, with all that acclaim, why was *Alternity* cancelled in 2000 — the same year that both the *SAGA* games disappeared? Jim Butler, *Alternity*'s brand manager, wrote an open letter in 2000 announcing the line's cancellation and explaining the reasons. They were equally applicable to the cancellation of *SAGA*.

The biggest issue was the ever-popular problem of comparative scales. Though a smaller publisher would have been very happy with the sales of *Alternity*, they weren't good enough to support the scale of the company that was also producing *AD&D*. The fact that Wizards was overprinting the *Alternity* books just made things worse — though the numbers that they were printing at reflected the numbers they needed to sell for the line to be viable.

Wizards also decided that it needed to have a single, consistent gaming system for all of its games. The words "third edition" had already been spoken at the 1999 Gen Con Game Fair, but Jim Butler's open letter in 2000 was one of the first hints that Wizard's third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* would be unlike anything that had come before it. Ironically, though *Alternity* was canceled in part to make way for third edition, the lessons learned from *Alternity* would be crucial to the design of third edition itself — particularly the ideas of a unified task-resolution system and of less restrictive classes.

> *"The legacy of Alternity lives on in the new D&D rules. Many of the important lessons learned in developing Alternity, like the importance of a standardized core mechanic, the use of a flexible skill system, and an emphasis on balance at all power levels have been carried over to the D&D development effort. In this sense, the new edition of D&D is a hybrid of the classic Dungeons & Dragons game and the modern Alternity rules. We will be referring to this foundation in the future as the 'D20 System'; a game that is neither fantasy nor science-fiction but has the potential to be used for both kinds of role playing successfully."*
>
> – Jim Butler, "What's Happening with *Alternity*?" (2000)

Two interesting things came out of Wizard's cancelation of *Alternity*.

First, thanks to heavy politicking from the *Alternity* staff at Wizards, the company decided to release *The Externals* (2000) — the final Star*Drive setting book, which revealed many of the setting's secrets — as a PDF, rather than not releasing it at all. This was one of the company's first interactions with electronic publishing — a media that they've had a somewhat rocky relationship with. A few other PDFs appeared around the same time, such as those unpublished Birthright books.

Second, Wizards said that they'd be turning *Alternity* over "to the fans to be supported as an official online campaign setting." This was an entirely new concept — and one entirely at odds with TSR's adversarial relationship with online fan content. Wizards stayed true to their word and has made not only *Alternity*, but also several of their other old settings available for fan expansion online.

Alternity can today be found at *alternityrpg.net*, a site with hundreds of fan resources. Planescape can similarly be found at *planewalker.com*, and Dark Sun at *athas.org*. There have been other official fan sites past and present.

CCGs & What They Brought: 1997-Present

With the purchase of TSR, we have largely left behind discussion of Wizard's CCGs. As we've already seen, Wizards was slowly closing down support of their smaller CCGs: *Netrunner* in 1999, *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle* in 2000, and the *Battletech Collectible Card Game* in 2001.

Their relationship with *Legend of the Five Rings* was more confusing. It came over to Wizards with the Five Rings/TSR purchase and from 1997–2000 Wizards published CCG sets for first the Clan War Imperial Edition (1995–1998) and then the Hidden Emperor Jade Edition (1998–2000) — all of which prepared by AEG. In mid-2000, Wizards announced that they'd be taking over development from AEG following the upcoming Four Winds Gold Edition, but by the end of

the year they had reversed direction and announced they'd instead be selling the game. As we'll see, this would also affect some of Wizards' RPG products.

Meanwhile, *Magic: The Gathering* continued strong. After that long gap prior to *Alliances*, Wizards started putting out CCG sets like clockwork. From 1996 to the present, there have been at least three expansion sets every year. Similarly, the base game has expanded from the fifth edition (1997) through *Magic 2010* (2009) — a major revision of both the game rules and the way that Wizards releases the *Magic* game — to *Magic 2014* (2013). Though these releases might deserve a history of their own, they won't be recorded in this RPG history, because they no longer drove Wizard's RPG production, as Wizard's CCG work did in the '90s. Unlike Wizard's early RPGs, *D&D* was large enough to drive itself.

However, there was one final CCG that would have a major impact on Wizards of the Coast as a company, and therefore Wizards of the Coast as an RPG producer. This was the *Pokémon Trading Card Game* (1998), which had its basis in the *Pokémon* Game Boy video game (1996) from Nintendo. Unlike Wizards' other CCGs, this one was developed externally, in Japan. By 1998, *Pokémon* fever was starting to build in the States, and Wizards made a bid to become the US manufacturer for the game. Some sources suggest that Wizards was able to use its CCG patent — which hadn't gotten much traction among US CCGs companies — as leverage to acquire the license. Whatever the reason, Wizards was able to release the *Pokémon Trading Card Game Base Set* (1998) just as the year came to a close.

Wizards would publish over a dozen additional sets over the next five years. After that, Nintendo recovered the rights to the game for usage by Pokémon USA, Inc. — an affiliate of Nintendo set up in 2001 to manage *Pokémon* licensing in the United States. This resulted in an October 1, 2003, lawsuit in which Wizards accused Nintendo of poaching employees *and* violating its patent. As with most corporate cases, this lawsuit was resolved out of court.

Though Wizards lost the *Pokémon* license, by 2003 it already did its job. The initial height of the *Pokémon* craze had probably been 1999–2000, right when Wizards kicked off the CCG. As a result, they sold millions of cards, making more money on *Pokémon* in five years than they had on *Magic* in ten.

Enter Hasbro, a megacorp, slowly taking over the gaming world. They were the owner of Milton Bradley, Parker Brothers, Selchow & Righter, Coleco, and most recently Avalon Hill — the company that once ruled the wargaming world. Now they wanted to add Wizards of the Coast (and *Pokémon*) to their portfolio. Ironically, they expressed interest in Wizards of the Coast once before, way back in 1994, at the Nuremberg Toy Fair. However, they hadn't been interested in paying the millions of dollars that Wizards would have cost them at the time. Now, with *Pokémon* off to a high-flying start, they'd need to pay much more. In September

1999, Hasbro closed a deal to buy Wizards for an announced $325 million dollars. Shares of Garfield Games purchased in 1993 for $5 were worth well more than $1,000 just six years later.

> *"There is no end to the opportunities we see from cross-fertilization of our respective game portfolios, including the fast-growing areas of interactive software and on-line gaming. Plus, the year-round nature of these businesses will help to balance the seasonality of our diversified portfolio."*
>
> – Alan G. Hassenfeld, Hasbro Press Release (1999)

And for the second time in just two years, *D&D* had a new master.

Hasbro's corporate influence was quite quickly felt, but they knew better than to interfere with Wizard's plans for a new edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, which was already well underway at the time of the purchase.

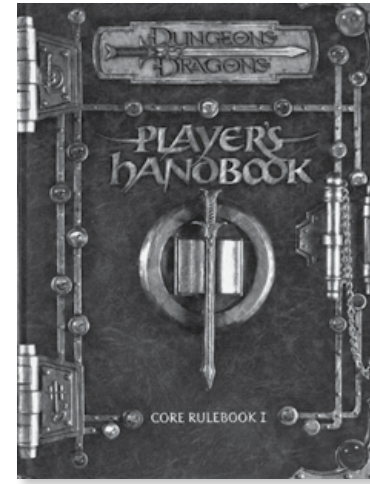
Third Edition and d20: 1997—2002

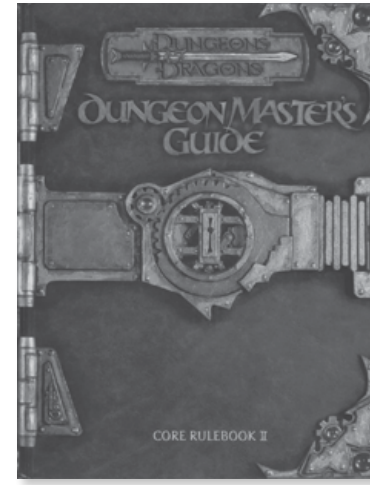
Though Wizards announced the third edition of *D&D* in August 1999 — just a month before the Hasbro purchase — they'd been planning it for years. Peter Adkison was thinking about it even before the TSR acquisition was complete; he announced it internally the day after the purchase. By that summer, he brought other people onboard and started getting serious about the project. Despite this work, information about 3E was managed carefully, with no one officially talking about it until the company was ready for its full announcement.

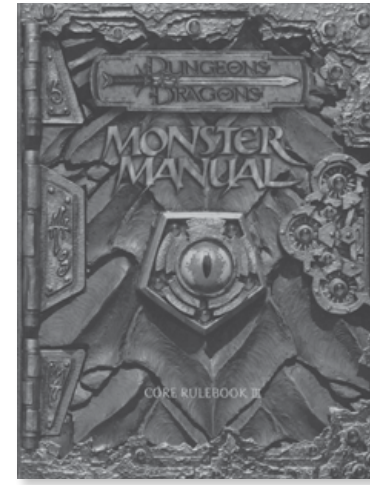
That's because there was a *lot* of work to be done. To start with, there were many questions needing answers before work on a third edition could begin at all. Most importantly, what was the purpose of the new edition? Would the result be a minor revision, a massive streamlining, or a big overhaul that kept things complex? Even as work began on third edition, this core point hadn't been decided, and some of the initial work was going in different directions.

Because of that initial chaos, Peter Adkison — who previously left third edition design work to Bill Slavicsek and a group of ex-TSR employees — decided to write a basic philosophy for the new edition that would guide future work. Because Adkison was in the third camp — which wanted to produce a complex but revamped game — that's what was reflected in his document. He called for a new game that would keep the feel of the original *D&D* rules, but would throw out things that didn't make sense. He also named Wizards of the Coast RPG head Jonathan Tweet as the new leader of the third edition project. It would be under Tweet's leadership that the revamped version of *D&D* would come to fruition.

"Complexity wasn't the issue – the problem was that too many rules just didn't make sense."
– Peter Adkison,
30 Years of Adventure: A Celebration of Dungeons & Dragons (2004)







Third edition was probably the most widely playtested RPG to that date. Over a thousand players tested it out over a year and a half. The *Player's Handbook* (2000) came out on time at the 2000 Gen Con Game Fair. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* (2000) and the *Monster Manual* (2000) both followed in the months afterward.

The new edition of the game was truly a revision of the old *D&D* game in a way that *no* previous edition had been. Using lessons learned from *Alternity*, it offered a unified task-resolution system. The core mechanics were drawn from the "die + bonus" skill system that Tweet had created for *Ars Magica* (1987) over a decade before. Its main difference from *Alternity* was that it was a roll-over system rather than roll-under: skills were added to die rolls and compared against either target numbers or opposed skills.

Many other game systems were likewise standardized. Monsters, for example, could now be improved just like player characters could. Magic items had regularized systems for where they could be worn as well as what type of effects they produced. Finally, the game offered the most tactical combat system — with a heavy basis in miniatures — that the game had seen since the original *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) box.

For all those changes, the new *D&D* system wasn't actually what transformed the RPG

industry. Instead, the biggest game changer would be a new license released by Wizards for its RPG game, a license that was largely the brainchild of Ryan Dancey.

As we've already seen, Dancey came into Wizards via the Five Rings Publishing purchase that was part and parcel of the TSR purchase. He was quickly made TSR's brand manager, but he wasn't content to rest on his laurels. Instead, he started thinking about how the industry *really* worked and how that could be used to benefit Wizards of the Coast.

This constant innovation was seen in many different ways. For example, Dancey was one of the forces championing Wizards of the Coast's purchase of Last Unicorn Games, which occurred around the time of third edition's release, in 2000 — as is better chronicled in the history of Last Unicorn. Dancey saw a smaller and more efficient RPG R&D force at Last Unicorn, and he wanted to bring them in to compete with Wizard's own RPG force.

However, Dancey's most important innovation was without a doubt the Open Gaming License (and the more restrictive d20 Trademark License). It originated in Dancey's belief that the strength of *D&D* was not in its game system, but instead in its gaming community — the set of all the people who actually played the game. This supported his belief in an axiom presented by Skaff Elias, who had been at Wizards working on *Magic* since the early days. Elias' "Skaff Effect" suggested that other companies only enhanced the success of the RPG market leader, which was now Wizards. Yet another Dancey theorem — that the proliferation of game systems weakened the RPG industry — also influenced his planning. When you put that all together, there was an obvious answer: let other publishers create supplements for *Dungeons & Dragons*. Of course, this was all aided and abetted by Peter Adkison himself, who wanted to ensure that *D&D* could never be "imprisoned" again, as it had been before its near death at TSR's hand in 1997.

> *"The downside here is that I believe that one of the reasons that the RPG as a category has declined so much from the early 90s relates to the proliferation of systems. Every one of those different game systems creates a 'bubble' of market inefficiency; the cumulative effect of all those bubbles has proven to be a massive downsizing of the marketplace. I have to note, highlight, and reiterate: The problem is not competitive product, the problem is competitive systems. I am very much for competition and for a lot of interesting and cool products."*
>
> – Ryan Dancey, "Open Gaming Interview," wizards.com (2000)

The result was a pair of licenses released by Wizards in 2000, prior to the publication of third edition itself. The Open Gaming License (OGL) made the *D&D* 3E mechanics (minus stat rolling and experience) forever open and available for

use as a set of "system reference documents." The d20 Trademark License built on this by letting publishers use Wizard's official "d20" mark to show that their products were compatible; unlike the OGL, the d20 Trademark License could be canceled at some point in the future, a topic we'll unfortunately return to down the road. Dancey expected that most publishers would take advantage of the d20 license, not the OGL, and he was right — at least at first.

There was some initial public skepticism about 3E. Some worried that *Dungeon & Dragons* was going to become *Magic: The Gathering*-afied, whatever that meant. However, when the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* — credited to Jonathan Tweet, Monte Cook, and Skip Williams — was published at the 2000 Gen Con Game Fair, it was an immediate success. There are always naysayers for every edition revision, but a vast majority of players realized that *AD&D* had become pretty clunky, since it was built upon a foundation that stretched back over 25 years. The new game's success wasn't really a surprise.

What was surprising was the *huge* boom the d20 license caused in the RPG industry — though it wasn't immediate. There was initially some skepticism about

d20 Firsts

Publication of third-party d20 products started a few minutes after midnight on August 10, the day that the third-edition *Player's Handbook* went on sale at the 2000 Gen Con Game Fair. In those halcyon days of late 2000 and early 2001, publications appeared fast and furious, and no one was really keeping score of who did what first. However, in the years since, a widely-accepted chronology has appeared, carefully delineating how many different publishers each had their own "first" d20 product.

The first third-party d20 product is usually said to be *The Wizard's Amulet* (2000), published by Necromancer Games as a PDF a few minutes into August 10. Atlas Games' *Three Days to Kill* (2000) probably technically beat it out, because it was available locally a week early, but it "officially" went on sale at Gen Con, typically earning it the title of first print d20 book. Green Ronin's *Death in Freeport* (2000) seems to have trailed *Three Days* by a few hours, though it also went on sale at Gen Con on August 10.

Later PDF publications are a little harder to track, but 0one Game's *The Legend of the Steel General* (2001) might have been the first commercial d20 PDF. Monte Cook's *The Book of Eldritch Might* (2001) was more of a game changer, as it was the first commercial book published exclusively as a PDF released by a print publisher – in this case White Wolf. Though *Legend* showed there was some value in PDF publishing, *Eldritch Might* was the book that revealed that major manufacturers might be able to profitably publish PDF-only.

the d20 license, too. Given TSR's litigious relationship with third-party producers of *D&D* material, some publishers actually thought that *it was a trap* (!). However the more courageous (and ultimately successful) publishers proved otherwise by late 2000 and soon everyone was jumping on Wizards of the Coast's bandwagon to produce their own d20 supplements. There were just three d20 sellers at the 2000 Gen Con Game Fair — Wizards, Green Ronin, and Atlas. Ryan Dancey estimates that number had climbed to 75 by the 2001 Gen Con Game Fair; by 2002's Gen Con, practically *everyone* was selling some d20 material.

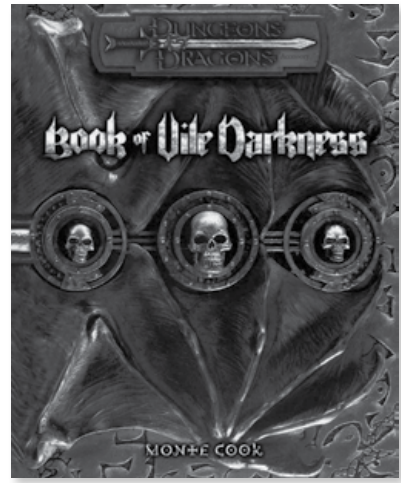
Some far-looking companies used the d20 system to try and boost the sales of their own proprietary systems. Atlas Games released a line of "Coriolis" products that each supported d20 and one of their core lines (2001–2003), while Chaosium produced *Dragon Lords of Melniboné* (2001), a d20 game for their *Stormbringer* setting and allowed Wizards of the Coast to produce a d20 adaptation of their own *Call of Cthulhu* (2002). Newer publishers like AEG, Guardians of Order, Holistic Design, and Pinnacle Entertainment were practically forced to dual-stat their gamebooks to stay alive during the d20 boom.

More publishers exclusively produced d20 content. Fantasy Flight Games and White Wolf were two older companies who started up heavy d20 production. Goodman Games, Green Ronin, Mongoose Publishing, and Troll Lord Games were the most successful companies publishing d20 content from the start. There were dozens, perhaps hundreds of others like 3AM Games, Adamant Entertainment, Adamantium Games, AirWeaver Games, and many, many more. Printing RPG books hadn't been so akin to printing money since the original *D&D* boom of the late '70s and early '80s.

The success of the d20 license also helped launch the RPG PDF industry. There was such a demand for d20 products that players would take it any way they could get it, and electronic delivery offered a very quick and cheap way to distribute content. The first PDFs were books offered for free or for sale from individual sites in 2000. Then, in 2001, James Mathe used his existing RPGHost network to seed RPGnow — creating the first large-scale electronic shopping mall of RPG PDFs. Monte Cook, one of the co-authors of *D&D*, showed how large PDF sales could be for a "name" author. He published very successful PDFs through White Wolf's Sword & Sorcery imprint, and later through his own Malhavoc Press. Through all these methods, a new medium for RPG publication came into existence.

In a hundred different ways, third edition and the d20 Trademark License changed the industry. In 2001, it all seemed to be for the good.

d20 Days: 2000—2002



Wizards meanwhile continued to publish their own *Dungeons & Dragons* material, and lots of it. A bit of this support went toward Greyhawk, including the *Dungeons & Dragons Gazetteer* (2000) and the *Living Greyhawk Gazetteer* (2000). Greyhawk was now the official setting of both the *D&D* core books and the RPGA's Living Campaign, but other than being *D&D*'s "default world," it wouldn't receive a lot of attention from Wizards thereafter. The Greyhawk revival of 1998 fizzled and with new corporate direction, Wizards could no longer support it solely out of love.

> *"It turns out that the whole 'use the Greyhawk pantheon' thing had been a huge internal fight tangentially related to the cancellation of Second Edition settings and somewhat forced on the game by management."*
>
> – Erik Mona, "Who the Hell is Erik Mona," enworld.org (September 2009)

The Sunless Citadel (2000) was another notable release during third edition's first year. *D&D*'s first third-edition scenario was part of what Wizards called an "adventure path." It would span eight books, ending in *Bastion of Broken Souls* (2002), and could be used to level characters all the way from 1st level to 20th. Wizard's adventure path wasn't particularly connected; there was no big-picture story, but it was a model that would be expanded in creative ways by Paizo Publishing.

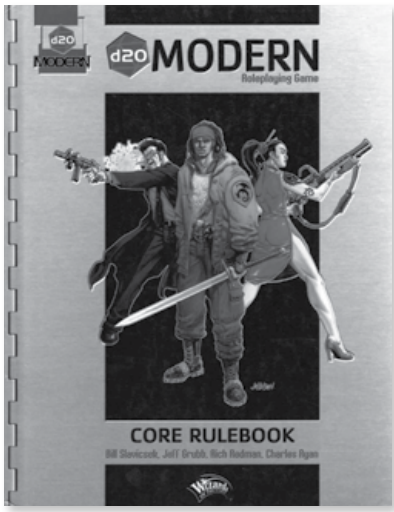
The Sunless Citadel didn't have a strong setting, nor did many of the supplements Wizards published in the next year, including adventures, the *Enemies and Allies* (2001) NPC book, and a series of doubled-up splatbooks that included *Defenders of the Faith* (2001), *Sword and Fist* (2001), and *Tome and Blood* (2001). Wizard's most notable (and controversial) book of the time period was the *Book of Vile Darkness* (2001) — an "adults only" book that looked at not just archdevils and demon lords but also the nature of evil itself. As they had shown in their late *AD&D* days, Wizards wasn't afraid of publishing controversial topics for *D&D*, not even with their new corporate leadership.



Meanwhile, Wizards didn't waste any time showing that their new "d20 system" could be used for more than just fantasy games. The *Star Wars Core Rulebook* (2000) took advantage of their new license to the Star Wars universe as well as the attention being garnered by *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999). Some derided it as "*Dungeons & Dragons* in space." Though it did use all of the core systems of *D&D*, it also had extensive Force rules and rules for spaceships, vehicles, and other technology. The game was well-supported through 2004, including a second-edition rulebook (2002) that took advantage of the theatrical release of *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002). However, it never achieved anywhere near the success of *D&D*.

> *"For a time, the d20 Modern design team tinkered with rules from the Star Wars Roleplaying Game (vitality points and wound points, for example) but ultimately abandoned them in favor of 'tried and true' D&D mechanics. Why? The D&D mechanics had survived extensive playtesting and found an impressive audience, and the business team wanted to 'cast the net' as wide as possible."*
>
> – Christopher Perkins, "Behind d20 Modern," wizards.com (2002)

At the same time they were revamping *Star Wars*, Wizards of the Coast released the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game* (2002), pushing the d20 system into another new genre and opening up even more possibilities for settings. The core book included "Urban Arcana," a modern fantasy akin to the World of Darkness, and two more scientific settings: "GeneTech" and "Agents of PSI."



In three years, Wizards showed how much breadth their new d20 system allowed. But it could go much further than new settings and new genres. The d20 system also offered the possibility of new *mediums* of play, starting with miniatures wargaming.

Chainmail & The Return of Miniatures: 2000—2002

Dungeons & Dragons had a very long history with metal miniatures. Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren's *Chainmail* (1971) — which was the combat system for the original *Dungeons & Dragons* — was of course miniatures-based. Though later editions of *D&D* prior to third edition played down tactical combat, there were almost always official *D&D* miniatures for sale.

Minifigs of the UK appears to have been the first *D&D* miniatures licensee, even producing a World of Greyhawk line from 1977–1978. After that, Grenadier, Citadel, and finally Ral Partha held the *D&D* miniatures license at times, while TSR manufactured their own miniatures for a short period during the Blume regime.

TSR also tried to produce a mass-combat game that might compete with Games Workshop's *Warhammer* (1983). *Battlesystem* went through three editions (1985, 1989, 1991) and was the secret agenda that lay beneath *AD&D* supplements such as the *Bloodstone Pass* adventure series (1985–1988) and the *Dark Sun* line (1991–1996). Though those supplements were well-received, *Battlesystem* never caught on. Given that TSR stopped manufacturing their own miniatures just when they published the first edition of *Battlesystem*, it probably wouldn't have been a huge money maker for TSR anyway.

Miniatures and miniatures games were together largely a missed opportunity for TSR.

In 1999, with third edition moving toward final development, Wizards of the Coast decided to attack this long-standing problem. Wizards had already ended Ral Partha's license for *D&D* miniatures (1987–1997) and now they began producing figures of their own with help from Bob Watts, formerly of Heartbreaker Hobbies and Games. However, Wizards wanted to do more than just sell miniatures to players. They also wanted to sell to the miniatures gaming crowd, which required a new wargame.

Work began on the product that would eventually be called the "*Chainmail Miniatures Game*" as early as the start of 2000. Jonathan Tweet oversaw the team while Skaff Elias did the main design work. The result was a simplified version of the d20 system that added rules for command, allowing leaders to give benefit to their followers.

> *"I think the coolest thing about D&D Chainmail for D&D players is that it'll let them have a D&D experience with as few as two people."*
>
> – Chris Pramas, Designers' Roundtable, wizards.com (2001)

Chris Pramas designed the world for *Chainmail*, which he called the "Sundered Empire." It was an ancient land destroyed by a "Demon War," which was now inhabited by conflicting factions. Pramas had originally wanted to set his Sundered Empire in Greyhawk, the "official" setting of third edition, but he was told it was now under the control of the RPGA and "off limits." So Pramas set about creating a standalone setting ... until new management asked him if he could place the Sundered Empire in Greyhawk. He did, and it became Western Oerik, a subcontinent west of the better-known parts of the Greyhawk setting.

Mike McVey, formerly of Games Workshop, created the high-quality metal miniatures for *Chainmail*. One other member of particular note arrived late in the design process. Rob Heinsoo joined Wizards of the Coast as a member of the "*D&D* Worlds" team, with his main focus being on the third edition of Forgotten Realms. However, Heinsoo enjoyed playtesting the nascent *Chainmail* game at lunch, and he soon became a member of the team as well. Over a half-dozen additional people contributed to the game in some way.

As *Chainmail* moved toward its release date, there were multiple points of friction between the design team and Wizards management. We've already seen issues of the game's integration with the world of Greyhawk. There was even contention over using the name "Chainmail"; that decision was handed down from above against the wishes of the design team. However, it was the scope of the game that sparked the biggest arguments.

Many members of the design team envisioned a large-scale combat game, where players could preside over the fates of armies of tens or hundreds of people — as in TSR's original *Battlesystem*. Something like that *might* have been able to compete against Games Workshop. Wizards management, however, was more focused on the idea of organized play, which had always been very successful for *Magic: The Gathering*. They wanted smaller scale "skirmishes" that could be played quickly with just a handful of figures on each side. Until late in the design process, the plan was to release *Chainmail* as a skirmish-level game, then ramp it up to a full mass-combat game after 3–6 months. However, that plan was never fulfilled and in the end *Chainmail* would only be a medium-scale combat game.

Chainmail debuted with the *Chainmail Miniatures Game Starter Set* (2001) at the 2001 Gen Con Game Fair, one year after the release of *Dungeons & Dragons* third edition. It hit stores a few months later, in October, and after that miniatures appeared on a monthly basis. The miniatures were arranged into "sets," with rules for the first few sets appeared in 32-page booklets, beginning with *Blood & Darkness: Set 2 Guidebook* (2002) and *Fire & Ice: Set 3 Guidebook* (2002). Wizard's marketing for the new game was surprisingly low-key, given the potential that it offered.

Starting in *Dragon #285* (July 2001) Chris Pramas wrote a short column called "Chainmail" that mainly detailed the history of the Sundered Empire. He was joined by Rob Heinsoo, who wrote mostly about tactics and rules in "Command Points," and Mike McVey, who discussed how to paint miniatures in "Role Models." Other than those four or so pages in each issue of *Dragon*, it would have been pretty easy to miss the existence of *Chainmail* at all.

Chainmail started to stretch its initial boundaries in its third supplement, *The Ghostwind Campaign* (2002), which offered rules for advancing the same "warband" over an extended series of 20 scenarios.

However, *The Ghostwind Campaign* would turn out to be the final supplement for *Chainmail*.

Corporate Casualties: 1999—2002

The various problems that the *Chainmail* team faced while trying to match their designs with the new corporate priorities of Wizards were endemic of the problems being faced by the rest of the company at the time, as the cultures of Wizards and Hasbro met and sometimes clashed.

This had been felt as far back as 1999. Wizards traditionally offered profit-sharing to its employees, but this sort of idea was totally alien for Hasbro. A bullet point in the Hasbro merger had been a guarantee that everyone would get their last year's profits (particularly from *Pokémon*). That profit-sharing ended in spring 2000. Afterward employees began to leave because of changes they were seeing at Wizards.

Though profit sharing disappeared in the spring, it was in the fall that Wizards saw an even larger downside of being a corporate subsidiary. That's when they received an arbitrary order from Hasbro to cut 10% of their staff — the first of many happy-holiday Hasbro layoffs. Ironically, Wizards was one of Hasbro's few divisions doing well that year. Nonetheless, 10% had to go.

Lisa Stevens, Wizards' employee #1, was among those laid off. However, the majority of the casualties came from the employees brought over from Last Unicorn Games, costing Wizards much of the value of its acquisition of the company. As is more fully described in the Last Unicorn Games history, the end result was simply another competitor for Wizards, as the Last Unicorn unit moved straight over to Decipher Games, where they began working with new licenses for *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Trek*. However, there were other casualties of note that year, such as Roger E. Moore — a TSR employee since 1983 and the editor of *Dragon* during its later golden age.

"I am the Roger Moore you are looking for, but after I was let go from Hasbro, Inc. in December 2000, I let role-playing games go from my life. I sold, gave away, or threw out almost all my gaming materials, then moved on."

– Roger E. Moore, Email (2004)

Toward the end of 2000, Hasbro cost Wizards one more employee: Peter Adkison, the founder and president of Wizards. Though Adkison was enthusiastic about all the RPGs that Wizards released in 2000 — and there were a lot when you included 3E, the core d20 system, and the *Star Wars* RPG — he also believed that the future of the company lay not in tabletop games, but in computers. He was hard at work on a *Dungeons & Dragons* Massively-Multiplayer Online RPG (MMORPG).

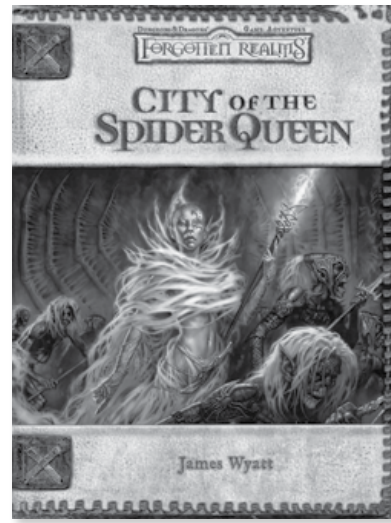
It could have been a great move into a fresh market for Wizards. Though the big three MMORPGs of the '90s — *Ultima Online* (1997), *EverQuest* (1999), and *Asheron's Call* (1999) — were already out, there was plenty of room for expansions, as more recent games like *Dark Ages of Camelot* (2001) and especially *World of Warcraft* (2004) have shown. Furthermore, Adkison had what he considered a great design from Richard Garfield and Skaff Elias and was plowing Wizards' profits back into a 25-person development team in Austin, Texas.

Wizards *could* have leapfrogged its success in RPGs and CCGs into the even larger MMORPG market — except that Hasbro pulled the rug out from under them. The *D&D* computer rights were folded up into Hasbro Interactive and then sold off wholesale to Infogrames — now known as Atari. Wizards suddenly found themselves with no input of their own, without any rights to publish *D&D* computer games, with all of their MMORPG work wasted.

"When you start a company and run it as CEO for many years you think of it as your own. Yes there are other shareholders and a board of directors you answer to, but your vote is always the biggest vote. Then you sell the company and you go along trying to make the best of the situation, telling yourself that you still have the same responsibilities as before, plus a vote in something even bigger. That works for awhile until something happens that you object to and in spite of your best efforts you find yourself powerless to stop it. At that point you are forced to accept the fact that the company is no longer yours, that you no longer carry the biggest vote, and that can be difficult to take."

– Peter Adkison, open letter to the internet (December 2000)

Peter Adkison tendered his resignation, effective December 31, 2000.



The next few years would see Wizards shed more of its less profitable enterprises as they concentrated on "core competencies" and also lay off more staff in what has become a yearly tradition. The corporate influence was clearly being felt.

In late 2000, Wizards announced that they were selling the *Legend of the Five Rings* IP, even though they stated their attention to support it in-house just a few months earlier. By early 2001, they concluded a deal for AEG — the original owners — to buy back all the rights. Wizards *had* been planning to launch a new *Five Rings* RPG line. As we'll see, they published a new *Five Rings* RPG product in October 2001, half a year after the sale, but it would be their final *L5R* release.

Around the same time, Wizards also dropped their support of Origins — to the consternation of GAMA, who had to pick up the pieces and start running the show again. Then in early 2002 they sold off Gen Con. Peter Adkison — who told Wizards to call him if they ever sold part of the company — bought the latter, describing it as "the second time he bought Gen Con." A short-lived online store got cut around the same time.

RPG adventures were another casualty of this era. While he was rolling out the OGL in 2000, one of Dancey's expectations had been that lots of third-party publishers would create adventures, relieving Wizards from the burden of creating necessary but less profitable books. Though Dancey and Wizards were surprised by the sourcebooks that third-party publishers put out, there were plenty of adventures too. After the *City of the Spider Queen* (2002) adventure failed to meet its sales targets, Wizards put out official word that they were cutting back to a "mega-adventure" or so a year — and some years they didn't even meet that target. It would be 2005 before Wizards published another Forgotten Realms adventure and 2006 before adventures became a notable publication category again at Wizards.

Finally, it was no surprise when the *Chainmail Miniatures Game* got its walking papers in June 2002. Any number of reasons was offered for its failure: the miniatures had been too expensive; that they were of too low quality; that the game couldn't be integrated well with *D&D*; that the skirmish-level combat didn't satisfy miniatures gamers; or that the unpainted miniatures

didn't satisfy RPG gamers. However, the biggest problem was clearly *Mage Knight* (2000). Newcomer WizKids' collectible miniatures game was based on pre-painted plastic figures. Wizards management decided they wanted to be in *that* category, and so *Chainmail* had to die to make room for a successor, which we'll return to.

A week after the announcement cancelling *Chainmail*, it won the Origins award for "Best Fantasy or Science-Fiction Miniature Rules."

Meanwhile, year by year, more Wizards staff disappeared. When *Chainmail* was cut, for example, Mike McVey and Chris Pramas were among those laid off. McVey moved on to Privateer Press, where he helped them build a *successful* traditional miniatures game. Pramas went full-time with his own Green Ronin Publishing. Wizards could hardly let staff go in these early years without creating new competition.

Wizards' entire Magazine Department was also cut in 2002 — the same week that *Chainmail* was cancelled — but this was a largely friendly divestiture. When she'd left Wizards in 2000, Lisa Stevens let it be known that she'd like to get the rights to Wizards' magazines if they ever came up. So, as Wizards bowed to corporate pressure in 2002 to cut their less profitable lines, an obvious solution suggested itself. *Dungeon*, *Dragon*, and *Star Wars Insider* were all licensed to Stevens' new company, Paizo Publishing. Most of the Wizard's magazine staff moved right over to the new entity, even working out of Wizard's office space for a time. Their continuing saga is, of course, recorded in Paizo's history.

In many ways, 2002 was the end of a (very brief) era. Ryan Dancey — the founder of the Open Gaming License still transforming Wizards and the industry — was among those laid off at Wizards toward the end of the year. He'd already moved back to "consultant" status, but now that last tie was gone.

The lack of a strong proponent for open gaming would eventually cause big changes at Wizards, but for now the OGL and the d20 trademark license remained the law of the land.

Worlds Beyond: 2001—2006

With its new RPG system out in 2000, Wizards could start thinking about another area of interest: what game worlds it would support with *D&D* third edition.

As we've already seen, the Greyhawk rebirth stumbled before 2000 and was largely confined to the RPGA afterward. Following the death of *SAGA* in 2000, Wizards ignored Dragonlance's world of Krynn — except through fiction — until they published the *Dragonlance Campaign Setting* (2003); after that they licensed the RPG rights to Margaret Weis, as is described in the history of Margaret Weis



Productions. Ravenloft was licensed out too. White Wolf published *Ravenloft Campaign Setting* (2002) and several supplements. Planescape was briefly touched upon in the third edition of *Manual of the Planes* (2001), but that was the only support the Outer Planes would get in years. Birthright and other settings that had been cancelled way back in TSR days — like Mystara, Red Steel, Dark Sun, and Lankhmar — weren't even being considered.

So that left Wizards with ... the Forgotten Realms. Some people were worried that even the Realms might be coming to an end, because of Wizard's 2002 announcement that they were discontinuing its adventures. It was a pretty big change from TSR's wanton days of setting publication, and a clear sign that Wizards needed something more.

Wizard's first push toward a new campaign world was actually a return to an old one. They published a new edition of their *Oriental Adventures* (2001) setting book in October of 2001 — but now it was based in the *Legend of the Five Rings* world of Rokugan. However, as we've already seen, Wizards returned the *L5R* property to AEG months earlier. It would be AEG who took advantage of d20 Rokugan, not Wizards.

As a result, in 2002 Wizards began looking for an entirely original campaign world. They did so in an innovative way — by going out to their fans. Wizards sponsored a design contest that allowed designers to submit their campaign worlds to Wizards. They promised the winner a lucrative $100,000 payment to fully describe the world for them.

The contest got attention. Lots of attention. It also resulted in a stunning number of submissions: 11,000 total. Out of those many submissions, Wizards finally chose the world of Eberron by Keith Baker, a professional designer best known at the time for his thematic work for Atlas Games. His new setting for *D&D* — a pulp-influenced world of mystery, adventure, and steampunk stylings — was both original and evocative, and would make for a very different sort of *D&D* setting ... eventually.

As we'll see, Wizards didn't actually publish Eberron for third edition, but when they got around to it, they'd support it from 2004–2009. The importance of Eberron to *Dungeons & Dragons* would be underlined when Atari's *Dungeons*

& Dragons Online Game (2006) — the MMORPG that replaced Wizards' own efforts of five years earlier — was based in that world.

> *"I love both pulp and film noir, and I tried to instill the flavor of both genres into the one-pager. As for specific inspirations, well, the one-sentence description was 'Indiana Jones and The Maltese Falcon meets Lord of the Rings,' and that holds true today. There aren't bullwhips and revolvers, but there is the same potential for conspiracy, mystery, and intrigue combined with high action and adventure, all set in a familiar fantasy world."*
>
> – Keith Baker, "Eberron Campaign Setting Designer Interview," wizards.com (2004)

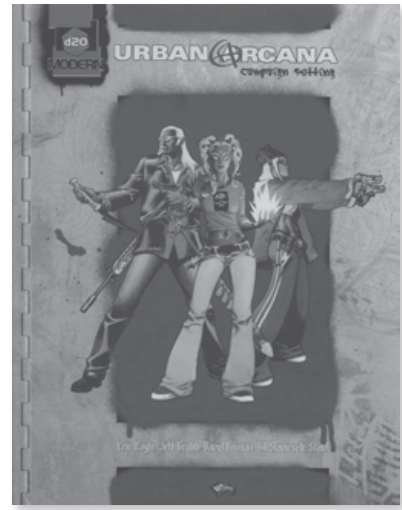
The outpouring of designs for the Setting Search represented so much creativity that it couldn't be contained in Wizard's one new campaign world. Nothing is known of the designs of the other two finalists, Nathan Toomey and Rich Burlew. They each produced a hundred or more pages of descriptions for their worlds under non-disclosure agreement with Wizards. After Baker's setting was chosen, Toomey and Burlew's disappeared — possibly forever — into the vaults of Wizards. Perhaps one will appear next time Wizards decides their current settings are tapped out.

However, some of the eight other *semi-finalists*' designs have been made public. "Cappedocio" and "Reign of Ashes" were both published online. A few others became the sources for published game books: Fantasy Flight Games released their own *Dawnforge* (2003); Goodman Games published R. Scott Kenna's *Morningstar* (2003); and Gary Pratt used his "Sunset Kingdoms" setting as the basis for *Code of Unaris* (2004), a rather unique online-based roleplaying game. The *d20Zine*, an online magazine, published a special edition (2002) featuring a few dozen additional entrants.

Though Rich Burlew has not been allowed to talk about the 125,000 words he wrote for his unpublished setting, he was able to leverage the attention he got from the contest into real success better than any entrant except Keith Baker himself. Burlew launched a website, "Giants in the Playground," in the wake of his Setting Search popularity and has used that to build one of the most successful comics in the history of roleplaying: *The Order of the Stick* (2003-Present).

While Eberron satisfied Wizards' desire for a new fantasy setting, they were still looking for new settings in other genres, expanding on their work with the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game* in 2002. Most notably, they developed one of *d20 Modern*'s settings into a full sourcebook: the *Urban Arcana Campaign*

Setting (2003). Afterward they extended d20 even further with two notable supplements: the science-fiction *d20 Future* (2004) and the historical *d20 Past* (2005). When they closed out the line in 2006, it would be with another campaign setting, one of their old classics, *Dark•Matter* (2006) for *d20 Modern*.



Third-party publishers were happy to use the *d20 Modern*, *d20 Future*, and *d20 Past* genre books as the basis of their own campaign settings too, and one of those was particularly notable to Wizards. White Wolf used the *d20 Modern* rules to publish a licensed *Gamma World Player's Handbook* (2006) — now the sixth (!) iteration of the game — as well as a few supplements.

Games Beyond: 2003–2011

Following 2002's corporate cutbacks, 2003 was a bumper year for Wizards of the Coast expansion. The biggest news was in the roleplaying arena, which we'll return to momentarily, but Wizards was also expanding into board games and (back) into miniatures.

Wizards of the Coast toyed with board games back in their early days when they'd (finally) published Richard Garfield's *RoboRally* (1994), but they'd mostly ignored the medium since. In 2003, however, they were offered a huge opportunity. Hasbro gave Wizards of the Coast the catalog and trademark of one-time gaming giant Avalon Hill, who Hasbro purchased in 1998. Though the status of a lot of Avalon Hill's IP was poorly documented, what remained was still quite valuable.

Over the next couple of years, Wizards published an eclectic mix of original board games using the brand. This included modern-day adventure game *Betrayal at House on the Hill* (2004), pure beer and pretzel game *Monsters Menace America* (2005), light wargame *Nexus Ops* (2005), and even the eurogame-style *Vegas Showdown* (2005). The last was particularly notable because *Games Magazine* named it Game of the Year for 2007. Within a week, Wizards of the Coast announced they were closing down their Avalon Hill board game line and remaindering all of its games.

The Avalon Hill brand has since been used by Hasbro mainly to market their *Axis & Allies* games.

As we'll see, Wizards of the Coast has more recently returned to publishing board games under their own brand, but it would be 2010 before anything original and of relevance to the RPG industry appeared.

Wizards' return to miniatures gaming came via a brand-new product called the *Dungeons & Dragons Miniatures Game* (2003) — primarily the work of Jonathan Tweet (now head of the miniatures group), Rob Heinsoo, and Skaff Elias. Actually, it was only sort of new, as the game system was a simplification of the *Chainmail* rules. Like *Chainmail*, it was a skirmish-level game. That may have disappointed miniatures gamers, but it was obvious that Wizards was now marketing to the RPG audience; the miniatures that went with the game were all pre-painted plastic figures, which made them more accessible to RPG fans. They were collectible too, with various figures being common, uncommon, or rare. In other words, the *Dungeons & Dragons Miniatures Game* was an attempt to compete directly with *Mage Knight*.

The new miniatures were also being marketed to RPG players by a few other methods. First, each miniature came with double-sided stat cards. D20 stats appeared on one side, "skirmish" stats on the other. The *D&D Miniatures* rules were soon complemented by a *D&D* supplement called the *Miniatures Handbook* (2003). It contained variants for the *Miniatures* rules — covering everything from dungeon crawls to mass battles — and also offered up third edition crunch in the form of warlike prestige classes. The book got mixed reviews and some things like the mass battle rules — which may have dated back, in part, to Wizard's unpublished "Military Order" book — were derided as not working well with the random nature of the miniatures. Still, the book probably served its purpose of cross-marketing *Dungeons & Dragons* and the *Miniatures* game.

> *"It seems that the era of the collectible mini is nearing an end after only a decade. Mage Knight, the pioneer in the field, was ironically one of the first to die. … Few other games are left standing. The more traditional minis companies survive and in many cases thrive. Games Workshop still dominates the field. Privateer has experimented with a pre-painted plastic game but their bread and butter seems to still be Warmachine and Hordes. Reaper looks solid as a rock and they still do great business selling pewter minis to D&D players."*
>
> – Chris Pramas, "A Look Back at *D&D* Minis,"
> freeport-pirate.livejournal.com (January 2011)

Though the *D&D Miniatures* game flourished for several more years, support started dropping in 2008, and Wizards killed the line entirely in early 2011. Chris Pramas offered a few possible reasons on his blog. He agreed the new *Miniatures*

game had largely been directed toward roleplayers and suggested that was ultimately a deficit to the line. Whereas miniatures players would have kept buying miniatures year after year, roleplayers were more likely to be satisfied with their collection after a few years of purchasing. Beyond that, the cost of pre-painted plastic miniatures had been rising dramatically over the course of the previous 10 years.

Neither of Wizards' *other* major expansions of 2003 lasted out a decade. In the end, these lines slowly ramped down — but without causing any particular crash. The same could *not* be said of Wizards' roleplaying expansion that year.

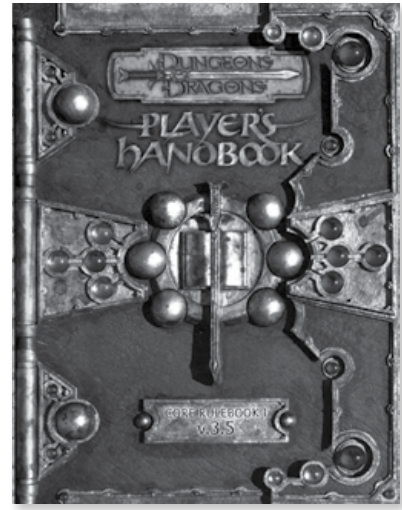
d20 — A Loss of Faith: 2003–2007

Looking back, it almost seems that the hobbyist industry undergoes a contraction every 10 years — from the original RPG crash of the early '80s, to the CCG-related crash of the '90s, to the d20 crash of the '00s, an event that we've skirted around so far in our discussion of Eberron, *d20 Modern*, board gaming, and miniatures.

In 2003, the RPG field was still red-hot, and it was d20-d20-d20 all the way. However, by the end of the year there would be a severe loss of faith in the d20 Trademark License and by the next year, the industry would be in a freefall that would endanger every publisher, whether they were publishing d20 or not.

There were two major events that weakened the d20 trademark.

The first event came about due to a single book, the *Book of Erotic Fantasy* (2003), published by the Valar Project. Just about *everyone* was still publishing using the d20 mark at the time, as it was considered much more salable than a more nebulous "OGL" brand, and Valar wanted to partake of that perceived cornucopia. However, Wizards of the Coast — perhaps growing more wary due to its corporate overseer — felt like a sexual roleplaying book might damage their own brand. So, before Valar could publish, Wizards quickly changed the d20 license to require that publications meet "community standards of decency." Valar simply moved their book over to the OGL, and was probably better off for the all of the free publicity that Wizards gave them. The other d20 publishers, however, had to look at the event with much more trepidation, for it became suddenly obvious how much control Wizards had over them.



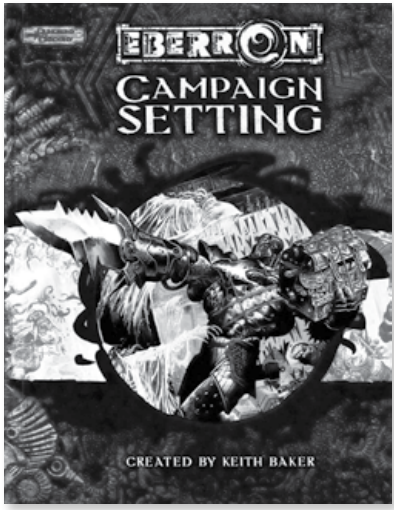
And they had reason to be wary, for the second event occurred at about the same time. At Gen Con Indy 2003, Wizards

published the new 3.5 edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Its changes really amounted to a professional and careful polishing of the system, including minor modifications like: changing the magnitude and methodology for damage resistance; upgrading some monsters; better balancing a number of spells; and rebuilding some classes like the ranger. Though small, there were *enough* changes that it was difficult for gamemasters to precisely update a 3.0 book to 3.5 on the fly.

Wizards got to enjoy great new sales of the sort that RPG companies typically see when they revamp their core books. However, the effect on the d20 market was disastrous. Third-party publishers had very little warning of the update, and so some books were out-of-date as soon as they were published. Worse, Wizards didn't offer any particular update for the d20 trademark, and third-parties were left to their own methods to tell readers that their books were intended for 3.5, not 3.0.

Lots of 3.0 books sat on shelves. Meanwhile, consumers became more careful in making their 3.5 purchases, as they were simultaneously being forced to repurchase many of their core books from Wizards. This caused a cascade effect, and probably contributed to the downfall of consolidation companies like Wizard's Attic, Fast Forward Entertainment, and Osseum — who in turn took more gaming companies with them when they went down. It also poisoned the d20 trademark: retailers began to see it as a liability, therefore it *became* a liability for publishers.

The result couldn't have been worse for Wizards. Though many d20 publishers died and many others like AEG and Fantasy Flight left the field, most of the ones who remained abandoned the d20 trademark entirely, publishing instead under the OGL. This meant that Wizards no longer had any control over them. It also helped publishers to realize that they could publish d20 games that did not depend upon Wizards of the Coast's core books without losing their audience. Mongoose's *Babylon 5* is an example of a game that went from a d20 first edition (2003) to an OGL second edition (2006).



Even worse, some publishers began to create direct competitors to *D&D* using the OGL. One of the most notable is Troll Lord's *Castles & Crusades* (2004), which pointed the way for the whole retroclone movement. More recently, Paizo Publishing's OGL-based *Pathfinder* (2008, 2009) pretty much took over the 3.5 market after Wizards moved on — as we'll discuss shortly.

As the rest of the industry reeled, Wizards revamped their *D&D* line. From 2000–2003, the 3.0 support was uneven. They had put out plenty of books, but those books weren't tightly focused. Wizards had published class splatbooks, for example, but each had paired a few different classes, and the naming of the books was inconsistent. Similarly, there were lots of one-off books like *Book of Vile Darkness* (2001), *Book of Challenges* (2002), *Stronghold Builder's Guidebook* (2002), and *Savage Species* (2003). Though Wizards might have been producing interesting books, they weren't following the marketing lessons taught to the industry by White Wolf and others, which centered on lines full of splatbooks that encouraged continual purchases.

Under 3.5, Wizards carefully aligned its books into well-recognized and salable series. They produced the "Complete" series of class books (2003–2007), the "Races of" series of race books (2003–2006), and a more continuous set of *Monster Manuals* (2003–2007).

Meanwhile, Wizards finally got to introduce the world to Eberron. The *Eberron Campaign Setting* (2004) — produced by Keith Baker alongside James Wyatt and Bill Slavicsek — was the first of many background books focused on the new setting. Wizards further supported the new world with fiction and nearly their only adventures published at the time. People were enthusiastic about the new and unique setting, and Wizards seemed happy with it for a time.

Overall, 3.5 was a best-of-times and worst-of-times sort of thing. It was pretty good to be Wizards — though they had introduced some problems for the future — and pretty bad for just about everyone else.

Hasbro — A Loss of Faith: 2003–2005

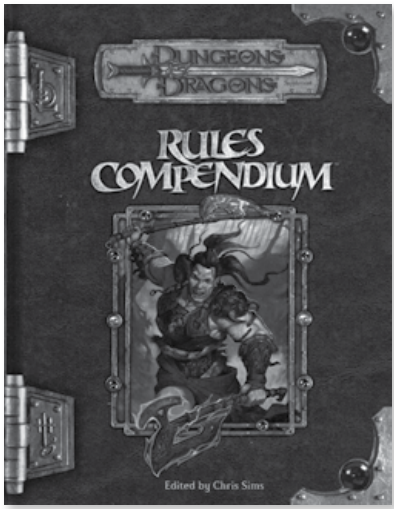
When we last talked about Hasbro in 2002, Wizards' parent company was busy mandating layoffs and product line cuts. Other corporate problems continued to appear in the early '00s, such as a fight within Hasbro about who was allowed to make CCGs. Wizards eventually retained their exclusivity, but only after the fight went all the way to Hasbro's Board of Directors — costing Wizards some of their independence along the way.

However a bigger problem would arise for Wizards around 2005. At that time, Hasbro was looking at their successful licensing of a *Transformers* (2007) movie and trying to figure out how to duplicate that success for other product lines. Hasbro's answer was to divide their properties into "core" and "non-core" brands. The core brands were those that grossed at least $50 million dollars a year and had the possibility of doubling that income. They'd be given support for continued expansions and development. The non-core brands were everything else, and they wouldn't get good support.

Wizards *could* have tried to convince Hasbro that they were a single brand — a brand that grossed over $100 million a year. For a variety of reasons, however, their various brands got divided up on Hasbro's ledgers. *Magic* was clearly a core brand, but *D&D* was probably grossing just $25 or $30 million at the time — in large part because they didn't have their computer game rights — so it had a ways to go.

To get *D&D* the resources it needed, Wizards would need to roughly double their business — a pretty tall order. In order to achieve this goal, Wizards would have to create a new edition of their game, and to do so in a very clever way.

Whispers of 4E: 2006—2008



Though they didn't know about the internal conflicts between Hasbro and Wizards, by 2006 players were starting to wonder if a fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* might be around the corner. It was quite natural after the surprisingly short three-year reign of 3.0. The release of *Expedition to Castle Ravenloft* (2006) might also have offered a clue to the changing winds that lay ahead. First, it was a new line for 3.5, suggesting that their original series of 3.5 books was coming to an end. Second, it was a fond look back at one of the most notable adventures from the *AD&D* days, just the sort of thing that Wizards published in the waning days of 2e. More *Expedition* books followed the next year, including *Expedition to the Ruins of Greyhawk* (2007), a long-awaited return to the most famous dungeon in roleplaying.

Because Wizards had published a compilation of spells called the *Spells Compendium* (2005) a few years earlier, the *Magic Item Compendium* (2007) wasn't part of an entirely new series like the *Expeditions* were. However, when the *Rules Compendium* (2007) showed up on Wizard's schedule as a collection of all the basic rules for the game in a new format, it had a sense of finality to it (and by the time it was published, the cat was already out of the bag, as we'll see).

> *"Rules Compendium is aimed at those who want a concise rules reference for 3E. It's intended for people who might continue a 3E campaign until or even after 4E comes out. Those people deserve a book that'll be authoritative and help lighten the load at a game session."*
>
> – Chris Sims, Interview, wizards.com (October 2007)

Meanwhile, Wizards seemed to be calling all licenses home. On April 20, 2007, they announced that they would be taking *Dungeon* and *Dragon* magazines back from Paizo. A few weeks later, on May 1, 2007, another announcement stated that Margaret Weis' license to Dragonlance was coming to an end. Wizards was very polite in both of these reclamations. Paizo got to finish their third and final *D&D* adventure path, Savage Tide, while Margaret Weis was allowed to finish their conversion of the original Dragonlance trilogy to 3.5E — even though it took quite a while for the last book to be published. When word got out on July 12 that Kenzer & Company's *D&D* license was ending too, people became very certain that *the game was afoot*, even after Jolly Blackburn publically stated that their *D&D* license had always been scheduled to end at this time.

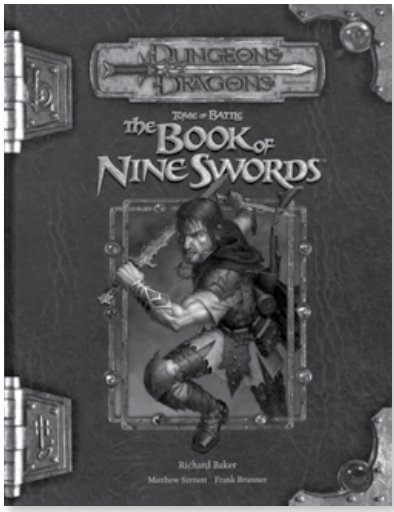
The internet was buzzing. Wizards changing its publishing priorities and gathering back its IP four years after the publication of 3.5E *seemed* to point toward a quickly onrushing new edition of the game — but Wizards stayed tight-lipped. Nonetheless, *something* clearly was in the air, which meant that major d20 publishers had to figure out how they could prepare for a world where Wizards might pull the d20 license at almost any time. The idea of the d20 Trademark License being revoked offered up the possibility of a cataclysm even worse than the 3.5E crash, because publishers could be disallowed from selling any backstock marked with a d20 with very little notice.

The response of d20 publishers varied based on their particular situations. PDF publishers were the least affected, since it would be a minor issue to strip d20 logos from their products and continue selling them, even if the d20 Trademark License was rescinded. Many publishers that had abandoned the d20 license for the OGL in previous years — primarily due to the poisoning of the trademark following the release of 3.5E — probably breathed a sigh of relief over their decision. Green Ronin could continue forward with its OGL *Mutants & Masterminds* (2002, 2005) and *True20* (2006) without concerns, just as Paizo could keep publishing their d20-less *D&D* adventures. However, there were also companies who had ridden too hard on the heels of Wizards and had not planned for what to do when the d20 trademark came to an end: Necromancer Games put themselves on hiatus in 2007 when it seemed obvious that 4E was in the works, while Goodman Games began experimenting with new RPG designs like the *Eldritch Role-Playing System* (2008) and the unpublished *Dungeoneer* RPG.

All speculation built to a fever pitch at Gen Con Indy 2007. A countdown to "A4venture" (or perhaps "Adventure") appeared on the Wizards website. It dropped to zero just as a Wizards of the Coast Gen Con panel began — where they revealed that a fourth edition was indeed scheduled for release at Gen Con Indy 2008 — the next summer.

"[A]s Mike Mearls pointed out once, Gen Con is the anti-Internet. Almost everyone at the show seemed excited by the news and hung on every word we let slip about the new game."

– James Wyatt, Interview, *Kobold Quarterly #5* (Summer 2008)



With fourth edition now a sure thing, speculation turned toward what it would include. Many players suggested the new *Star Wars Roleplaying Game Core Rulebook* (2007) — aka the "Saga Edition" — as a possible testing ground for new materials that might be included in fourth edition. In addition, several recent *D&D* rulebooks were put under close scrutiny, among them the *Player's Handbook II* (2006), *The Complete Mage* (2006), and (especially) *Tome of Battle: The Book of Nine Swords* (2006) — as they all included new rule systems that changed the way *D&D* worked in dramatic ways. We'll return to what those and other books like *Unearthed Arcana* (2004) might have revealed in a bit.

The *Expedition* books that had begun publication in 2006 were revealed to indeed be part of Wizard's slow slide into 4E. Since Wizards had known that 4E was coming as far back as 2005, they were no longer worried about "evergreen" books — like the various splatbooks — which made their money year over year. Instead they wanted simple, nostalgia-inducing books that could generate quick sales. This water-treading mentality was even more obvious in the year between Gen Con Indy 2007 and Gen Con Indy 2008. *D&D* production ground to an almost total halt, as Wizards didn't want to produce books that would be out of date within a year. After all, they'd seen what that had done to other publishers back in 2003. The few books that came out, such as *An Adventurer's Guide to Eberron* (2008) and the poorly-received *Dungeon Survival Guide* (2007), were pure fluff books with no stats at all.

The third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* faded away with scarcely a whimper — at least from Wizards' point of view. However, there was plenty of drama surrounding how Wizards would change its licenses as the era of a new *D&D* game dawned.

Open Questions, Game System Answers: 2007—2009

Though many fans were interested in the mechanics of *D&D*'s upcoming fourth edition, many were more interested in whether Wizards would continue to support a d20 Trademark License and the OGL when they released their new game. Though Wizards could not revoke the OGL, they certainly didn't have to release fourth edition under those terms. Fans started asking pointed questions about licensing the moment that 4E was announced at Gen Con Indy 2007. The responses could at best be called "evasive."

One of the problems was that Ryan Dancey — the main proponent of the OGL — was long gone from Wizards. His successors — *D&D* brand manager Scott Rouse and *D&D* licensing manager Linae Foster — appeared genuinely committed to making a new OGL work, but they didn't have Dancey's clout, leaving final decisions on 4E licensing to stall at Wizards.

As 2007 faded into 2008, the clock was running out. Books usually need to be announced to game distributors four months early and to bookstores six months early. *D&D* 4E had been scheduled for release on June 6, 2008, now just five months away. If something wasn't done fast, third-party publishers would have no opportunity to actually get books ready before the release of the fourth edition.

On January 8, 2008, Foster finally posted Wizards' plans for the 4E OGL. There weren't a lot of details, other than the fact that the new "OGL" required publishers to pay a $5,000 fee to earn the right to publish their books on August 1 — two full months after the 4E release. Otherwise, they'd have to wait until January 1, 2009, to publish — an eternity if the immediate excitement around the 3E release had been any indication. Foster's initial note on the new OGL also contained one shudder-worthy bit of Orwellian double-speak, stating "We are making the OGL stronger by better defining it." It showed a dangerously poor understanding of what the word "open" actually meant.

Wizards' pseudo-announcement meant that third-party publishers had to decide whether to buy a pig-in-a-poke. Wizards asked for $5,000 from publishers who wouldn't get a chance to see either the new 4E rules *or* the new OGL in advance. But the money wasn't actually the biggest obstacle for top-tier third-party publishers. A larger problem was the fact that Wizards' announcement was just a placeholder — a promise of things to come. Publishers were being asked to continually keep their production plans on hold as the 4E publication date rushed forward headlong.

It was sufficient for some. Fantasy Flight Games soon put out word that they were hiring fourth edition developers. Goodman Games likewise signaled that they'd be signing on as a "tier one" developer. Most other publishers were deeply

concerned, however. Foster's post made it clear that the "OGL" for 4E would be nothing like that for 3E.

Wizards continued backroom discussions with top d20 publishers, but it became increasingly obvious that Rouse and Foster were flying by the seat of their pants while working on the new OGL. Then, the first defection occurred. On March 18, 2008, Paizo Publishing announced that they would be publishing their own *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game* as a continuation of the 3.5 edition of the rules. Paizo also made it obvious that this decision was the result of months of unhappiness — not just a few moments' pique — when they immediately offered the "Alpha" release of the *Pathfinder* rulebook for download.

On April 17, 2008, Wizards finally revealed some of the details of the fourth-edition license. It was no longer called the OGL, but instead the Game System License (GSL). Wizards had also made changes to combat the extensive criticism that they'd received since their January announcement. Publishers no longer had to pay to get early access in the program, but that was because *no one* was permitted to release books for Gen Con Indy 2008. Instead, the GSL didn't kick in until October 1.

Some publishers got early access to the actual GSL license and discussion of what it contained quickly leaked out. However, most had to wait until June 17 — a week *after* the publication of the fourth edition — to see the license's full content. They discovered that it contained several shocking elements.

First, as had already been announced, the "D&D GSL" was a fantasy-only license. A "d20 GSL" for other genres was promised but never released.

Second, it had content restrictions — but after the later years of the d20 license, this should not have been a surprise.

Third, the GSL was more like the d20 Trademark License than the OGL — meaning that third-party materials had to depend on the three core *D&D* rulebooks. There would be no original games built using 4E's mechanics.

A "poison pill" contained in the GSL was its most controversial element. The license said that as soon as a company published a product line under the GSL, they were prohibited from using the OGL for that line ever again. Of course, there was no definition as to what constituted a line, so publishers who wanted to continue publishing OGL materials would find themselves at the mercies of Hasbro's lawyers.

Worse, Wizards hadn't considered how this provision would affect non-d20 games like Evil Hat Productions' *Spirit of the Century* and Gold Rush Games' *Action! System* — both of which adopted the OGL as a licensing tool. Under the new rules, the companies might have to kill those products entirely if they wanted to publish 4E materials.

The only real advantage that the GSL had over older licenses was that it allowed publishers to actually use a *Dungeons & Dragons* logo — but there were restrictions, the most notable of which was that the logo couldn't be put on the front cover, massively decreasing its usefulness.

The response to the GSL was not kind, and most of the biggest d20 publishers quickly bowed out. On July 14, Green Ronin simply and politely said, "Green Ronin will not be signing the Game System License (GSL) at this time."

Wolfgang Baur on July 17 said that the GSL was "absolutely terrible for *Kobold Quarterly*," as there would be no way for the periodical to publish both 3E and 4E material.

Clark Peterson of Necromancer Games had been a big supporter of the new GSL when it was officially announced in April, but by July 31 the reality of the new license had set in, and he said, "The bottom line, in my view, is that the GSL is a total unmitigated failure." At some point, Fantasy Flight quietly closed up shop for their planned 4E publications as well (though their call for designers resulted in the hiring of their *Warhammer 40k* line editor).

If the GSL was intended to get third-party publishers to create adventures and other supplements that wouldn't have been cost-effective for Wizards, it was indeed a total and unmitigated failure. Worse, Wizards set themselves up for the exact problem that the d20 license had resolved in 2000: third-party publishers releasing *D&D* products in an uncontrolled way, without the need for a license — as had been done by Mayfair Games and others in the '70s and '80s.

Kenzer & Company led the pack here. President David Kenzer, himself an IP lawyer, was happy to put out a book with no license at all, stating clearly that his 4E *Kingdoms of Kalamar* (2008) was allowed under US Copyright law. It was released as a PDF on June 23. Adamant Entertainment followed suit with a series of "Venture 4th" PDFs, the first of which, *Ice River Battle* (2008), was published on June 30. Open Design's *Kobold Quarterly* was soon featuring both d20 and 4E material with no GSL in sight — not that they could have used it, as the GSL forbade magazine publication.

> *"Copyright infringement is basing your work on someone else's creative expression. Rules are not creative expression. Also, it is not 'based' on their rules. It happens to 'work with' their rules."*
>
> – David Kenzer, internet posting (July 2008)]

Goodman Games offered perhaps the most creative solution. Though Joe Goodman said, "I support the GSL," that support was tempered by the inability to release books at Gen Con Indy 2008. He decided that the OGL gave him an

even more defensible position than IP law itself, and so he used it to release his first 4E products, saying, "What we're doing is essentially using the third-edition OGL to produce modules that are not third-edition compliant, but follow the rules of fourth edition." Green Ronin ended up using the same methodology when they published a new *Character Record Folio* (2009), revamped for 4E and GSL free.

By Gen Con Indy 2008, Wizards knew that the new GSL had been bungled. The majority of publishers considering 4E publication were brand-new companies publishing PDF-only. Mongoose was one of the very few members of the d20 crowd who put out a GSL product — their *Wraith Recon* (2008) adventure setting — but even they wouldn't stick around for long. The GSL's limited success was probably what caused Wizards to promise a revision of the license.

This revamp happened on the same schedule as the original release — which is to say, slowly. The rest of 2008 passed. Linae Foster was laid off and her "licensing manager" position was entirely eliminated, highlighting how little Wizards cared about the third-party market. On March 2, 2009, an updated GSL was finally released. It eliminated the poison pill and made some other tweaks, but there were still major limitations when compared to the OGL. Goodman Games finally came over to the new license, but they may have been the only publisher to change their tune based on the revision. Generally, it was too little too late. Scott Rouse, the final stated proponent of open gaming at Wizards, left Wizards on October 12, 2009.

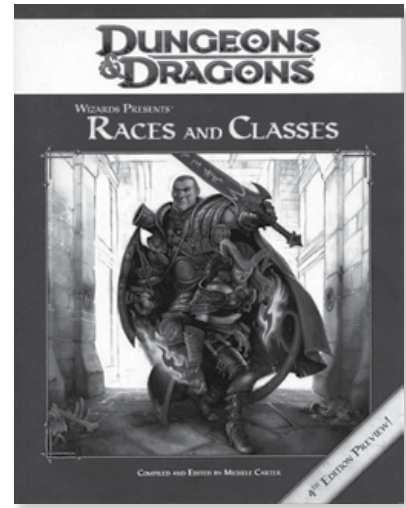
Though the vibrant d20 community had been badly damaged following the d20 crash of 2003, the new fourth edition of *D&D could* have reinvigorated it. Instead, Wizards so badly mishandled both the construction and the release of their new license that they all but killed it — though as we'll see shortly, the *Dungeons & Dragons Insider* could and did do some additional harm. By 2010, there were probably more books being produced under Paizo's *Pathfinder* license than under Wizards of the Coast's GSL license. Even some of the young PDF companies that popped up to publish for 4E moved over to *Pathfinder*. Alluria Publishing is one of the most notable, having converted over a dozen of their "Remarkable Races" to Paizo's RPG system.

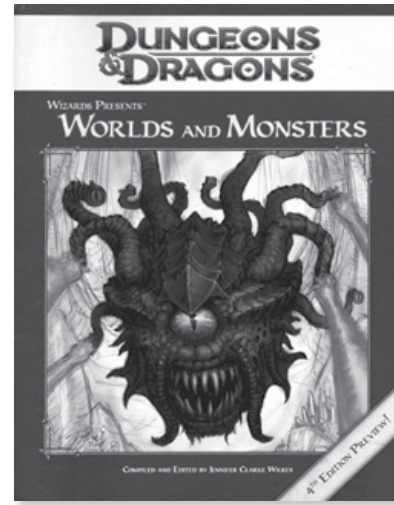
The drama over the GSL also created a severe crisis of faith among fans going into the release of fourth edition in June 2008. From the start, there had been nay-sayers, unwilling to support a new edition, and Wizards managed to create more bad publicity for themselves with two years of back-and-forth and the abandonment of most of their third-party publishers.

As a result, 4E would have to truly stand on its own — on the strength of its mechanics and its designers.

But could it?

Fourth Right Game Design: 2005—2007





The 21st century is truly the age of information, and therefore it should be no surprise that we know more about the design of *Dungeons & Dragons* 4E than perhaps any other roleplaying game before it. A lot of that is due to a pair of books published by Wizards: *Wizards Presents: Races and Classes* (2007) and *Wizards Presents: Worlds and Monsters* (2007). Their discussions of 4E's design helped to build interest in the upcoming release and also contributed to Wizard's final year of third-edition publication, when they were loath to publish any actual game books. However, interviews, blogs, journals, tweets, forum posts, and just about every other sort of high-tech information dispersal available to the modern world have supplemented those books.

Bill Slavicsek, *D&D*'s director of R&D, started seriously thinking about a fourth edition early in 2005. That's when he organized a team to work on some early designs, headed up by Rob Heinsoo and also containing Andy Collins and James Wyatt. These three would form the core fourth-edition team, though many others would help them in the years that followed.

"Rob is our Mad Genius, James is the Storyteller, and I'm the Stat Junkie."

– Andy Collins, Interview,
Kobold Quarterly #5 (Summer 2008)

When Heinsoo sat down to create the new game, he had a number of goals in mind, generally oriented toward making "a game that played the way [he] thought *D&D* was going to play, back before [he] understood the rules." He wanted it to capture the epic sense of wonder of *Lord of the Rings* and to make

roleplaying a truly enjoyable activity that would capture new players from their first session.

In interviews and articles, Heinsoo enumerated a number of more specific goals.

First, he wanted to "expand the sweet spot," making the game more fun to play at all levels. Whereas third edition had been overly deadly at low levels and increasingly unbalanced (and complex) at high levels, he wanted fourth edition to be an equally great experience everywhere.

Second, he wanted to make "all classes rock," which meant ensuring that *everyone* — not just the magic-users — had interesting tactical abilities. This was largely solved by what he called "powers for everyone," a topic we'll return to.

Third, he was convinced by Wyatt and Collins to lock down "character roles." Whereas characters like clerics, fighters, rogues, and wizards had well-understood places in an adventuring party, the same wasn't true for bards, monks, and other variant character classes.

Work on fourth edition progressed through both design and development stages in 2005 and 2006. Much of the initial work was done through a pair of "Orcus" design teams led by Heinsoo — the first from June through September 2005 and the second from February to March 2006. After each stage, Robert Gutschera's development team helped to sift through what the design team had done, suggesting ways forward. Heinsoo's "Flywheel" team of Andy Collins, Mike Mearls, David Noonan, and Jesse Decker did the final big-picture work from May 2006 to September 2006. After that, writing began on the actual fourth edition of the *Player's Handbook* and *Monster Manual*, which would lead to playtesting starting in June 2007.

> *"Jonathan Tweet: A heavy thing that spins in circle and slows the engine down?"*
> *"Rob Heinsoo: In your case, a little mechanical knowledge is a dangerous thing."*
>
> – "An Email Exchange about the Flywheel Name," *Wizards Presents: Races and Classes* (2007)

A lot of the expansion done by these various teams consisted of the sort of polishing and development that you'd generally expect from a *major* revision of an existing RPG. Rules got simplified and mechanics got mashed together. Some gamers would be surprised by just *how* major some of these changes were — changes that resulted in the removal of age-old rules like "saving throws" and "skill points."

The introduction of those character roles suggested by Wyatt and Collins exemplified the same sort of reductive thought going into fourth edition. Now each character class was defined by a *role* and a *power source*.

Roles defined what a character did within a party. Defenders, such as fighters, were front-line fighters who could hold the line; controllers, such as wizards, attacked large numbers of foes at once; strikers, such as rogues, did huge amounts of damage in one shot; and leaders, such as clerics, helped out party members in various ways.

Power sources described the origins of characters' abilities. Arcane and divine power sources had long been known in *D&D*, but fourth edition also introduced the "martial" power source, for warriors of different types. Other power sources such as primal, psionic, elemental, ki, and shadow were later added (or at least hinted at).

The goal of giving powers to everyone probably caused the most dramatic changes to fourth edition. Now, just as the newly simplified game system ensured that each class got the same ability bonuses and the same feat bonuses at the same levels, each class also got the same number of "powers" at each level. Where before clerics and wizards both had spells, now clerics had prayers, wizards had spells, and martial characters had exploits — all of which offered tactical options.

> *"Given how much fun 3E's spellcasting characters had choosing spells, we knew that giving all player classes interesting power selection choices was probably the way to go. I wanted a game in which playing a high-level fighter could offer interesting choices for power selection and round-by-round choices in combat."*
>
> – Rob Heinsoo, Interview, wizards.com (March 2009)

Powers were further divided between "at-will" powers that could be used constantly, "encounter" powers that could be used once in a combat, and "daily" powers that were the biggest effects and only available once a day. Together, they resolved many of the problems the designers had seen in previous versions of the game.

"At-will" powers meant characters could always do something appropriate for their classes, so that wizards never had to fall back on daggers and darts. "Encounter" powers eliminated what some people called the "5 (or 15) minute workday," where adventurers would go into a dungeon, blow through their spells, and then camp out until the next day. Finally, "daily" powers meant that the wizard with his fireball wasn't your only big gun. Every class got tactical powers that were similarly powerful. The various powers — with names like "weapons of the gods," "dizzying blow," and "clever riposte" — also allowed for better theming for fourth edition's tactical maneuvers; strong theming would run throughout the new game.

Many, many additional changes supplemented these big picture items, including: "healing surges" for all players; "skill challenges" for non-combat encounters;

three "tiers" of gaming for heroic, paragon, and epic characters; and streamlined combat. Just as third edition had been the biggest update ever to the *D&D* core system, fourth edition was even moreso.

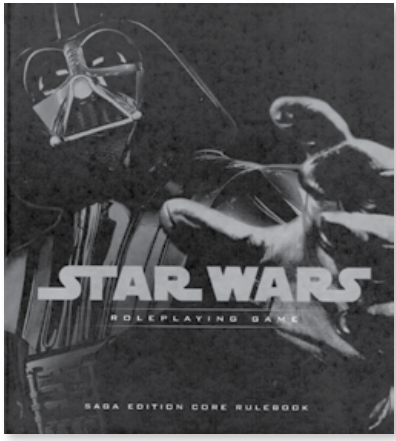
Though many of 4E's changes introduced new systems or streamlined old ones, some specifically turned back changes made in third edition. Much of this went toward another of Heinsoo's goals, which was to make fourth edition more fun — not just for *all* character types, but also for the GMs. Therefore, the carefully designed monsters of third edition — which incorporated monster stats, monster templates, and character levels — disappeared, replaced with more off-the-cuff monster designs, which also allowed for more thematic variety. Encounter design and the addition of minions to combats were also intended to make life easier (and more enjoyable) for GMs.

Wherever you looked, 4E was change, and it was all done with the best of intentions.

Secret Origins of 4E: 2004—2007

As fans had suspected, ideas for fourth edition *had* come from a lot of 3E books. *Unearthed Arcana* (2004) was one of the oldest sources, though it only contained the germs of ideas — including a more complex way to make skill checks (presaging skill challenges) and reserve healing (foreshadowing healing surges). Similarly, the reserve feats of *The Compleat Mage* (2006) were like the at-will powers that eventually appeared in 4E, while the *Magic Item Compendium* (2007) offered one of the first categorizations of magic item by level, an idea heavily pushed in 4E.

However, there were two third-edition era books that were explicitly derived from fourth-edition development.



The first was (as fans had guessed) *Tome of Battle: The Book of Nine Swords* (2006). Between the Orcus I and Orcus II design phases, Mike Mearls spliced the encounter-power mechanics of 4E into this book, then in process. As such, it offers a fascinating view of fourth edition in mid-design. Though the fighters of *Nine Swords* have encounter powers much like they would in the next edition, their abilities include unique recharge requirements, allowing them to refill in the middle of an encounter

if certain conditions are met. Before the release of 4E, Heinsoo would decide this detail was too complex and remove it.

The second was *Star Wars Saga Edition* (2007), though it was influenced by 4E in a more organic way. Ideas had flowed freely back and forth between the 4E team and Chris Perkins — who was working on *Star Wars*. Among the 4E mechanics that first appeared in *Star Wars* were more powerful first-level characters, simplified skills, simplified saving throws, and the first iterations of systems for "bloodied" status, healing surges, and even encounter powers. Other mechanics such as *Saga*'s condition track were tested out and then cut before 4E's own release.

> *"My only fond memories from the days of the multi-track system were moments of dialogue I recorded in our quotes file. Someone said, 'What's the opposite of the petrification track?'*
> *"'The liquification track. Aboleths: be very worried when they bring out the straw.'*
> *"'No, we don't have a liquification track because it's part of the swallow-whole track.'"*
> – Rob Heinsoo, Interview, wizards.com (March 2009)

So, when fans were watching for hints of 4E in the waning days of third edition, they were on the right track — but in the end the changes were likely greater than anyone had expected.

Fourth Right World Design: 2006—2008

It wasn't just the game system that was changing with fourth edition. The setting and cosmology of *D&D* also received a massive update. These changes came about largely thanks to the SCRAMJET team, led by Rich Baker, and including James Wyatt, Matt Sernett, Ed Stark, Michele Carter, Stacy Longstreet, and Chris Perkins.

The team started out by reconceiving the default setting of *D&D*. Greyhawk was out, replaced by a more abstract setting called "Points of Light" — a world where mighty empires had once ruled, but where darkness had now seeped over much of the land, leaving cities and towns as individual points of light against a backdrop of black. Though the Points of Light setting would be generally described in the core 4E books, it would only be detailed through individual adventures and small-scale setting books — much as Greyhawk had organically evolved in the '70s, before the first *World of Greyhawk* folio (1980). Over the next four years, the Points of Light setting would remain relatively open-ended — enough so that there's not even an official name for the world. Some called it "Nentir Vale," after its most-frequently visited location, while other called it PoLland.

"The Great Wheel cosmology was an expression of needless symmetry – a structure of infinite planes based on the symmetrical alignment grid. Mechanus existed purely because the structure demanded a plane for the Lawful Neutral alignment. Modrons existed purely because that plane needed inhabitants. Neither of them was particularly good for the play of the game."

– James Wyatt, Interview, *Kobold Quarterly #5* (Summer 2008)

The changes to the cosmology of *D&D* were more shocking. For decades, the multiverse had been modeled by the "Great Wheel," which codified all of the planes of the gods based upon the core nine alignments of *D&D*. Now, that was all changed. A new multiverse was created that included evocative planes like the Shadowfell, the Feywild, and the Elemental Chaos. The Far Realms — a Lovecraftian plane of madness created by Bruce Cordell for TSR's *The Gates of Firestorm Peak* (1996) — got a place in the new design too.

Perhaps the most impressive work done by the world designers of fourth edition was their reconception of *D&D* monsters. They carefully looked at hundreds of monsters — from dragons and giants to demons and devils to troglodytes and mind flayers — and redesigned many, helping to differentiate various races while also providing them with unique cultures and backgrounds.

"In 3E, a kobold was a kobold. You could apply templates or classes with some effort, and distinguish different kobolds by personality (hello Meepo, I'm looking at you). In 4E, right off the bat you get several pre-designed kobolds handed to you, of different power levels. Saved are the nitpicking hours of coming up with new stat-blocks – now personality can be focused on exclusively, if that's the way you want to go."

– Bruce Cordell, Interview, wizards.com (May 2008)

The amount of work was staggering and the resulting changes — which touched almost every element of the 4E game — were no different in scope from the changes to the game system itself.

The Digital Initiative: 2006-Present

Having now exhaustively discussed the genesis of the most public revision of *D&D*, we should take a step back and look into another reason that the new game came to be. As we've already learned, around 2005 Hasbro decreed that all "core" brands needed to earn at least $50 million dollars a year. *D&D* was crippled in that regard because of its lack of computer games rights, but Wizards' staff nonetheless had a plan: the digital initiative.

Wizards made their first presentation to Hasbro on the topic around 2006. The idea was to build upon what Bill Slavicsek called "convergence." The new fourth edition of *D&D* was to be created with the specific intent of integrating it with an online service that would include a virtual tabletop for play. From there, all Wizards had to do was convert a fraction of *D&D*'s players to paying online subscribers, and *D&D* would hit its $50 million dollar goal. Then, if Hasbro was able to recover the *D&D* computer game rights, an MMORPG would carry them the rest of the way to $100 million.

Unfortunately, the digital initiative began inauspiciously on October 10, 2007, with the unveiling of Gleemax — a community website for roleplaying that was intended to be the central hub for all of Wizards' digital properties. The name of the site (which came from a *Magic: The Gathering* card), its juvenile attitude, and its site design all turned off existing players. Constant delays in the release of features contributed to the problem.

> *"Of course, Wizards says that D&D will have its own web site that ties in to Gleemax but seeing how the green abomination is plastered all over their web site I don't see much difference."*
>
> – Charles Dunwoody,
> "Crisis of Faith Resolved: From Gleemax to RuneQuest," rpg.net (July 2007)

Wizards was also having problems with *Dungeons & Dragons Insider* (DDI), which was the critical RPG side of the digital equation. They had advertised it as containing a "character visualizer," a "character builder," a "game table," a "dungeon builder," a "compendium" of all the rules from printed books, and the new digital incarnations of the *Dungeon* and *Dragon* magazines.





Unfortunately, they were barely able to support the magazines, let alone the rest. The first few magazines, starting with *Dragon #360* (October 2007) and *Dungeon #151* (October 2007), appeared only as HTML files. Worse, Wizards had to drop their monthly schedule for the magazines back to bi-monthly and even then they ended up with issues of *Dragon* that were largely 4E promotions, while *Dungeon #154*

(May 2008) consisted of just *two* articles. The magazines did get back on track with full PDF issues starting in June 2008 — even taking a page from Paizo's book by releasing the 19-path "Scales of War" adventure path (2008–2010). In the meantime, however, Wizards alienated their fans — some of whom were already upset with the loss of the print magazines.

Wizards finally started to set things right on July 28, 2008, when they announced that they were shutting down Gleemax to concentrate on *Dungeons & Dragons Insider*. Tragically, this decision was followed by one of the more shocking events in the roleplaying industry's history, when the former head of the Gleemax project murdered his estranged wife, and then killed himself the following day.

D&D Insider moved on. As it matured, it went to a monthly subscription fee in October 2008. The Compendium — a searchable database of all 4E's rules — was available by then, and would soon be followed by a well-received downloadable Character Builder. Each of these products, however, had unexpected consequences — showing Wizards was now working on the bleeding edge of technology.

The problems with the Compendium arose due to corporate issues. More specifically, the Compendium had been something the roleplaying group never actually wanted, because it took all of their core book material and gave it away online. Though users had to pay, the money was going to the digital group, not the roleplaying group, causing problems within Hasbro's bureaucracy. As a result, the RPG division had to take over *Insider*, but still found themselves supporting a product that they weren't sure was in their best interests.

The problems with the Character Builder came from the fact that it was so good. Making characters with it was much easier than doing so by hand, and so it quickly became the *de facto* method for many game groups. However, *DDI* only included rules for Wizards' rulebooks. This meant that third-party sourcebooks became worthless to *DDI* groups — which was probably the final nail in the coffin of the already shaky third-party support for 4E.

From 2009 until late 2010, Wizards slowly gained experience in the digital arena, offered new products like Monster Builder, and began to overcome their early missteps — though most of the programs promised back in 2007 were still absent from the *DDI* platform. Then, in late 2010, they began to rework *DDI* from the ground up.

It began when Wizards replaced the downloadable Character Builder with a new, online-only Character Builder. At the time, they claimed that the newest character classes introduced in *D&D* supplements couldn't be supported under the downloadable Character Builder. Fans proved this wrong by almost immediately cracking the data file for Character Builder and incorporating all the newest data themselves.

A month later, in January 2011, Wizards made another change, when they dropped the compiled PDFs of their two online "magazines." Instead, they'd only be available through individual web pages. This time, they said it was because fans weren't actually downloading the completed PDFs in sufficient quantities. Hundreds of angry fans said otherwise.

Though Wizards offered a reason for each of these changes, they rang hollow for many. Some suspected that the true motive was to keep fans continuously paying for *DDI* subscriptions, rather than paying only once in a while, downloading the newest magazines and software, and then cancelling.

In the end, *DDI* was a success, but probably not what Wizards had hoped. Some products such as the Virtual Tabletop *never* appeared, despite constant promises. Worst of all, *DDI* never met the goals that Wizards set. Fan estimates from early 2013 suggest that 81,000 then-active subscribers might be generating Wizards about $500,000 a month. Though $6 million dollars a year isn't chump change, when compared to the high cost of computer equipment and software professionals it's not necessarily a lot. More notably, it only reflected about a quarter of the increase that Hasbro needed to turn *D&D* into a core brand.

Which all goes to suggest *Dungeons & Dragons* 4E might have been doomed before it ever got off the ground.

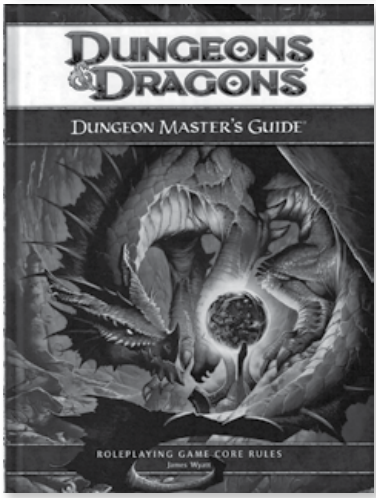
At Last, Going Fourth: 2008—2010

The fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* was previewed in May 2008 in a quick-start adventure, *H1: Keep on the Shadowfell* (2008), which introduced both the 4E rule system and the Points of Light setting. The full game was then released on June 26, 2008, in the usual set of three books: a *Player's Handbook* (2008), a *Dungeon Master's Guide* (2008), and a *Monster Manual* (2008). Afterward, the fourth edition went on to be another best-selling RPG — the strong centerpiece of the entire roleplaying industry, played by millions. There was no d20-like boom, but the game was nonetheless a success. Despite that, the new edition of the game was also quite controversial — a topic that we'll return to shortly.



Meanwhile, Wizards began working on a publishing plan that was, if anything, even more rigid and carefully designed than their 3.5E publishing schedule had been. The centerpiece of the plan was a series of six books







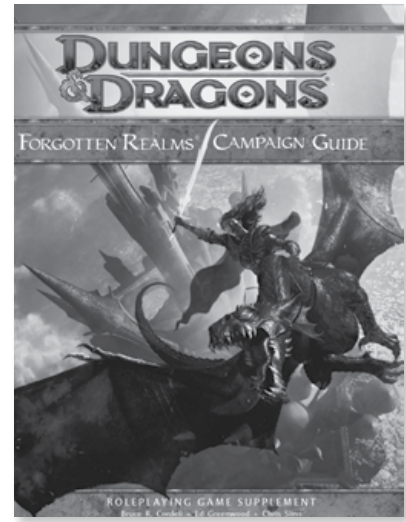
that would appear every year: three core rulebooks and three setting books. We've already seen the core books for 2008, the central rulebooks for 4E. The setting books that year detailed the Forgotten Realms.

The way that Wizards decided to deal with settings in 4E was — like the new rules and the new setting — a very drastic change. Previously Wizards (and TSR) created long-lived lines to support settings; Wizards was now following in the footsteps of companies like Margaret Weis Productions and Pinnacle Entertainment Group, creating setting lines that were a few books deep. Wizards planned to publish just three books *ever* for each setting: a campaign guide, a crunchier player's guide, and a single adventure. After that, they would start on a new setting in the next year.

The *Forgotten Realms Campaign Guide* (2008), the *Forgotten Realms Player's Guide* (2008), and *FR1: Scepter Tower of Spellgard* (2008) kicked off the cycle ... and were some of Wizards' worst-received supplements ever. This was largely because Wizards decided to destroy the old Forgotten Realms to make it fit into their "Points of Light" concepts. Old gods and NPCs were gone, kingdoms fell, the timeline was dramatically advanced, and the Realms lay in ruins. From the scathing reviews that the new setting books got, the *Forgotten Realms* books generated just as much controversy as the core rules.

The next year saw the clockwork production of *Dungeon Master's Guide 2* (2009), *Monster Manual 2* (2009), and *Player's Handbook 2* (2009), as well as the reappearance of Eberron through the typical two books and an adventure — plus an additional adventure released for Free RPG Day. These setting books were

much better accepted than their Forgotten Realms predecessors.



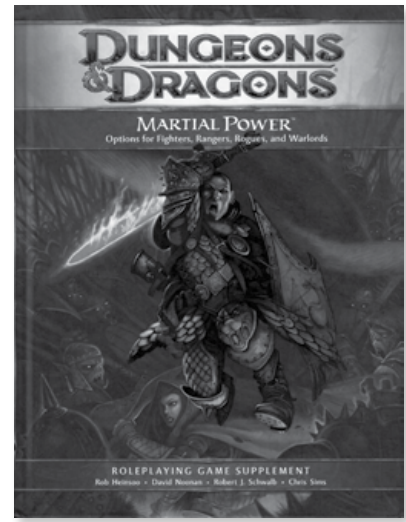
However, 2010 showed the first weakening of the new plan for *D&D*, when the *Dungeon Master's Guide 3*, which should have focused on the epic tier of play, was cancelled. Nonetheless, the other five books appeared as normal — including setting books that reintroduced the world of Dark Sun, which had not been seen since TSR days.

Three other product lines of note began during the first years of 4E.

The first product line was a set of "power" books that offered new options for players, organized by the power sources of 4E. *Martial Power* (2008), *Arcane Power* (2009), *Divine Power* (2009), and *Martial Power 2* (2010) all focusing on "standard" power sources; *Primal Power* (2009) and *Psionic Power* (2010) focused on more esoteric power sources, each of which was introduced in the *Player's Handbook* published earlier the same year.

The second product line was a loosely connected adventure path that started with *H1: Keep on the Shadowfell* and ran to a total of nine books, ending with *E3: Prince of Undeath* (2009). They could be played together to take players from 1st level to 30th.

The third product line was a set of "power cards," released in conjunction with each *Player's Handbook* and with each *Power* book. These cards detailed the different tactical abilities that characters possessed, making it easier for players to keep track of everything their characters could do. The cards were an interesting acknowledgement that the new edition of *D&D* had taken on some board game component design — though Wizards didn't go nearly as far as Fantasy Flight Games did in this aspect when they released *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay Third Edition* (2009).



The consistency that underlay the 4E line during its first two years was almost unheard

of in the RPG industry. However, that would start to fall apart in 2010 as 4E's brilliant beginning swiftly turned to ash. We've already seen the first step of that, with the cancelation of *Dungeon Master's Guide 3* — a schedule change that would never have happened in the 3E days.

There would be more.

The Death of 4E: 2008—2012

Though the first years of 4E appeared successful, its problems started the day it was published, due to the considerable controversy it generated among players. The core reason was doubtless the large amount of change that was incorporated into the new game. Some players complained about specific elements — saying that 4E felt too much like an MMORPG, that class powers took away from the unique nature of magic users, that the ever-more-tactical game focused too much on combat, that the balanced classes no longer felt individual, or even that the new formatting of powers turned them off. Other players were upset over the loss of their favorite classes or races. Some yearned for the old *D&D* cosmology.

> *"[S]hifting both the world and the mechanics at the same time proved difficult for some of the D&D faithful to swallow. But that difficulty in swallowing is all mixed up with missteps involving the OGL/GSL and electronic publishing plans."*
>
> – Rob Heinsoo, Interview, *Kobold Quarterly #14* (Summer 2010)

Corporate issues also caused some of the unrest. We've already seen the issues initiated by the GSL licensing fiasco. There were also fans that were still smarting over favorite publishers like Margaret Weis Productions and Paizo losing their licenses. The changes to *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines caused particular problems, because many wanted print periodical, not digital ones.

Finally, the marketing coming out of Wizards seemed determined to create a schism, as sales pitches for fourth edition often began with a discussion of how *bad* third edition had been — such as when Bill Slavicsek opened the *Wizards Presents* volumes by saying "as we move deeper into the [third] edition, its flaws and fun-ending complexities become more pronounced, more obvious to players and Dungeon Masters alike" (a mere sentence after stating that 3E was "the most robust and fun roleplaying game system ever designed").

Player complaints likely damaged 4E's sales over the long-term, but they might not have had a direct effect on Wizards. However, the lack of a d20-esque boom and the problems with *DDI* probably did. By the end of 2008, there were signs of discord at Wizards greater than any since the first days after the Hasbro purchase. Though layoffs had been as regular as clockwork at Wizards ever since 2000, the

people let go in 2008 are particularly shocking. Most notably Jonathan Tweet — Wizards' star RPG designer for over a decade — was shown the door that year, as was director of Digital Game Design Andrew Finch, who had been working with Wizards since 1996 in a variety of positions. One of the eVoices of Wizards, *D&D* podcaster Dave Noonan, was also among those cut.

> *"I'm extremely surprised to see Jonathan Tweet and Andrew Finch on the layoff list (assuming the list I've seen is accurate). Both are among the sharpest minds not just at Wizards of the Coast, but in the gaming business in general. It's difficult not to see their loss as a significant blow to WotC's ability to innovate. More to the point, the idea of either of these guys getting laid off four years ago or even two years ago would have been unthinkable. They were as close to untouchable as you could get. Clearly, something's changed over there."*
>
> – Erik Mona, "Must Be December: WotC Layoffs," lemuriapress.livejournal.com (December 2008)

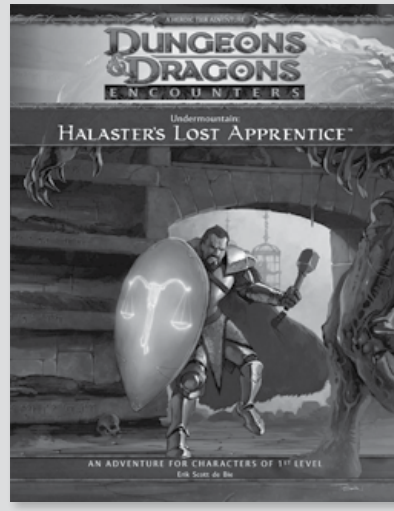
Just as shocking, Rob Heinsoo was among the layoffs in 2009, which means that Wizards had now sacrificed the lead designers from both of their editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Following Heinsoo's departure, Mike Mearls — who came to Wizards through the community of third-party d20 designers — stepped up to become the new *D&D* lead designer.

2010 appears to be when Wizards came to their do-or-die moment for 4E. *Dungeon Master's Guide 3* fell off the schedule, showing that the company lost some of their faith in the new edition, and at the same time Wizards started pushing hard on initiatives designed to draw new players into the game.

The first was their *D&D Encounters* organized play program. The idea was simple: every Wednesday night, gamemasters all across the world would run a 60–90 minute play session as part of an ongoing arc called a "season." The program kicked off on March 17, 2010, with the first part of "Halaster's Lost Apprentice," a 12-part story set in the Forgotten Realms. It was followed by 10 more "seasons" over the course of the 4E era.

The *Encounters* format has a lot of interesting advantages (and resulted in some good publicity, from CNN and others). With its short run time, it encourages players who left *D&D* behind to try it again. The Wednesday-night format was also an interesting choice in the world of social networking; players could leave their *Encounters* session and talk with their friends across the world about how their game went via journals, blogs, tweets, and other public formats. Finally, it allowed Wizards to promote current products. Wizards demonstrated this in

The 4E Encounters



Wizards of the Coast produced a total of 11 seasons of Encounters during their 4E era, consistently running it every week for over two years. The program was clearly quite successful, and it's been supplemented in more recent years with the newer *D&D Lair Assault* (2011) – a more expert-level organized play.

Season 1: Halaster's Lost Apprentice (2010, 12 weeks). An introduction to the *D&D Encounters* concept, set in the infamous dungeons of Undermountain, beneath Waterdeep.

Season 2: Dark Sun: Fury of the Wastewalker (2010, 14 weeks). An introduction to the *Dark Sun* setting and the city of Tyr, intended to complement the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* (2010).

Season 3: Keep on the Borderlands – A Season of Serpents (2010–2011, 20 weeks). Despite the name, this season only had thematic connections to the classic *B2: The Keep on the Borderlands* (1979) adventure. Instead, it focused on the Chaos Scar then being developed in *Dungeon* magazine. This season also used *Essentials* characters to push 4E's next big thing.

Season 4: March of the Phantom Brigade (2011, 13 weeks). Though set in the Points of Light world, this adventure also revisited *C2: The Ghost Tower of Inverness* (1979) – but again in a minimalistic way. This Season was the first to push *Encounters* to go beyond simple dungeon delves; it also introduced Wizards' collectible *Fortune Cards* (2011) to *Encounters* play.

Season 5: Dark Legacy of Evard (2011, 13 weeks). This Season told a ghost story that focusing on the Shadowfell and the related *Heroes of Shadow* (2011) release.

Season 6: Lost Crown of Neverwinter (2011, 14 weeks). As with Season 2, Wizards used Season 6 to highlight their newest (and last) campaign book for 4E: the *Neverwinter Campaign Setting* (2011). They made a big deal of it, kicking it off with the *Gates of Neverdeath* adventure at *D&D* Games Day (August 2011), and then continuing into the 14-week series of Forgotten Realms *Encounters*.

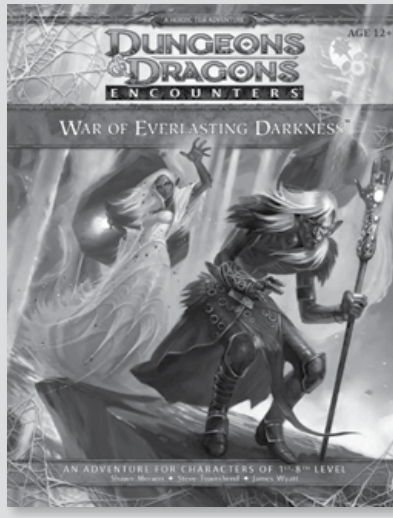
Season 7: Beyond the Crystal Cave (2011–2012, 13 weeks). Another callback to an old *AD&D* module, this time *UK1: Beyond the Crystal Cave* (1983). The original adventure is expanded to take adventures into the Feywild and it also references *Heroes of the Feywild* (2011). Much as with the original adventure, this Season featured considerable roleplaying and puzzles, unlike most of the *Encounters*.

Season 8: The Elder Elemental Eye (2012, 11 weeks). This Season continued its focus on the *Player's Options* books with tie-ins to *Heroes of the Elemental Chaos* (2012). Beyond that it's a cross-world saga that touches upon the Elder Elemental God, one of Gary Gygax's Greyhawk deities that he never quite got around to defining – despite mentions in the famous "GDQ" series (1978–1980).

Season 9: Web of the Spider Queen (2012, 13 weeks). The start of a trilogy of Seasons that would close out the 4E *Encounters* and confront players with the entire drow race. Tied into *Into the Unknown: The Dungeon Survival Guide* (2012), a general look at the Underdark.

Season 10: Council of Spiders (2012, 8 weeks). The continuation of the drow series of *Encounters*. This one ties into *Menzoberranzan: City of Intrigue* (2012), and players actually take on the role of drow!

Season 11: War of Everlasting Darkness (2012, 8 weeks). The finale of the three-part "Rise of the Underdark" and the final 4E *Encounter*. Wizards took out all the stops by having the game span two years of gametime and by letting players level every week – where the previous *Encounters* had just played out over the first few levels of play. By this point 4E was basically dead, so it was without a tie-in product.



After a month-and-a-half break, Wizards continued *Encounters* with *Season 12: Against the Cult of Chaos* (2013). It draws on *B2: The Keep on the Borderlands* (again) and well as *N1: Against the Cult of the Reptile God* (1982) and *T1: The Village of Hommlet* (1979), but more notably GMs who had signed NDAs for the *D&D Next* playtest were able to play with the *D&D Next* rules – truly marking it as the start of something new for the *D&D Encounters*.

Encounters Season 2, which was integrated with the brand-new Dark Sun books; the trend would continue through the rest of the Seasons.

> *"The same way that the Red box is to get RPGers involved with D&D, [Castle Ravenloft Board Game] can get board gamers involved."*
>
> – Mike Mearls, Interview, livingdice.com (August 2010)

A few smaller initiatives appeared over the course of the year. The *Castle Ravenloft Board Game* (2010), by Bill Slavicsek and Mike Mearls, simplified the 4E rules for a board game format — offering both *another* new entry for players and a new revenue stream for Wizards. It would be followed by two more board games in the same format through 2011. Meanwhile the newest *Gamma World Roleplaying Game* (2010), written by Rich Baker and Bruce Cordell and also based on the 4E *D&D* rules, added trading cards to the mix with collectible mutation and tech cards. It was one of the few times a roleplaying game tried to mix in CCG mechanics since White Wolf's *Changeling: The Dreaming* (1995). *D&D*'s collectible *Fortune Cards* (2011) soon followed. Though this expansion wasn't oriented toward new players, the opportunity for Wizards to earn more money from its existing players was obvious.





Wizards' final major expansion of 2010, *Essentials*, was the biggest change for *D&D* since the 2008 release of the 4E rules. Intended to offer an easier entry point to 4E *D&D*, the line kicked off with the boxed *Dungeons & Dragons Starter Set* (2010) — whose cover looks almost exactly like Frank Mentzer's iteration of the *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Rules* (1983). Though the box only took players up to second level, additional *Essentials* products quickly supplemented it.

Books like *Heroes of the Fallen Lands* (2010) offered rules for a variety of character classes in digest-sized trade paperbacks that were each about half the price of one of fourth edition's hardcover books; boxed sets like *Monster Vault* (2010) added to the boardgame-like components

of 4E by including not just a book of monsters, but also tokens to represent those monsters in-game. In addition to making *D&D* cheaper and simpler for new players, *Essentials* also walked back some of the changes made by the 4E rules, such as getting rid of fighters' daily powers, to once more increase the differentiation between fighter and spellcaster classes.

> *"If you look at the Fighter and the way he works in D&D Essentials, we removed the Daily powers to get more of a sense that 'fighters and wizards should look really different,' because that's how D&D originally approached it."*
>
> – Mike Mearls, "Red Box Renaissance," escapistmagazine.com (September 2010)

Unfortunately, *Essentials* also had its own problems. To start with, Wizards never seemed able to articulate what it was. Some players thought it was a 4.5 edition of the rules, while others thought it was intended to replace the 2008 rulebooks. Neither of these turned out to be the case, but much of Wizards' fanbase was confused in the meantime. Then the whole *Essentials* line trailed off entirely in 2011. The "Class Compendium," which was intended to bridge the core 4E rules with the *Essentials* variant, was canceled. After that, *Essentials*-like books — starting with *Heroes of Shadows* (2011) — were returned to the more expensive hardcover format.

Meanwhile, *D&D* 4E was showing increasing signs of weakness throughout 2011. Two more books were outright canceled early in the year, and in all Wizards only managed to publish three 4E books before Gen Con. Even by the end of their year, their total only climbed to eight — making it perhaps the worst year for *D&D* publication since the '70s. Meanwhile, Bill Slavicsek — the head of *D&D* development — was unceremoniously let go in June. It was part of an uncharacteristic mid-year layoff that showed an astounding lack of faith in the 4E product.

Wizards still seemed intent on correcting things. Perhaps most notably, they changed up their campaign-a-year format with the release of the *Neverwinter Campaign Setting* (2011), which returned to the Forgotten Realms rather than breaking new ground. However, you could see *D&D*'s continued weakness by the fact that the *Campaign Setting* wasn't accompanied by an adventure or a player's book.

By mid-2011, some reports suggested that Paizo's *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game* was outselling *Dungeons & Dragons* — particularly online and in some hobby stores. These reports weren't entirely consistent — and *Pathfinder*'s comparative success was certainly aided and abetted by *D&D*'s shaky production schedule that same year — but it was nonetheless a serious slap in the face for the world's top

tabletop roleplaying game. Worse, *D&D* wasn't the only Wizards game having problems in 2011. As we've already seen, *D&D Miniatures* also met its end that year. It was a bad year all around for Wizards' RPG-related product lines.

Even the year's annual layoffs seemed worse than usual (though perhaps not worse than layoffs of 2008 and 2009). Two more stars inherited from TSR were let go: Rich Baker and Steve Winter — respectively the co-designer of *Birthright* (1995) and the editor who shaped 2e *AD&D* (1989).

There was *one* bit of light for *D&D* in 2011. In August, Hasbro and Atari settled a lawsuit over the *D&D* computer game rights. Hasbro claimed that Atari breached their licensing contract and now they were able to reclaim the *D&D* computer game rights — putting the brand in a better position going forward.

It wasn't enough.

On January 9, 2012, *The New York Times* led off an article sourced to them by Wizards of the Coast with the words: "True believers have lost faith. Factions squabble. The enemies are not only massed at the gates of the kingdom, but they have also broken through." It was an announcement that 4E failed and was to be replaced with a new edition.

> *"4E is broken as a game and business and it needs to go away."*
>
> – Scott Rouse, Forum Post, enworld.org (January 2012)

Over the course of 2012, a few final 4E books trickled out, but for all purposes the game was dead as of that announcement — just three and a half years after its creation. Compared to 3E's 8-year reign, 2e's 11-year reign, and 1e's 12-year reign, it was a horrendously short time span and the clearest sign that the product line had been badly mismanaged.

The next question would be: could *Dungeons & Dragons* survive the catastrophe? Could the RPG industry?

What's Next?: 2012-Present

Work on 3E began in 1997, shortly after Wizards of the Coast's purchase of TSR. Similarly, work on 4E began around 2005. In each case, Wizards had about three years to put together an entirely new game system.

Meanwhile, Wizards gave their first indication that they were thinking about a fifth edition of *D&D* (henceforth 5E, though Wizards has used the ill-defined name "D&D Next") in September 2011. That's when they rehired Monte Cook — an architect of 3E that had left the company in 2001 to form his own Malhavoc Press. Cook's possible work on 5E was confirmed on January 9, 2012, when Wizards listed the design team behind 5E. Though Mike Mearls was leading the

team, Monte Cook was the head of the designers, who also included Bruce Cordell and Robert J. Schwalb.

Putting these facts together suggested a rather disturbing correlation: that 5E might not be out until 2014 — at least two years after that *New York Times* announcement. If anything, Wizards' time frame was probably made worse by Monte Cook's rather sudden departure on April 25, 2012. He cited "differences of opinion with the company." Mike Mearls afterward picked up the Design Team Lead position that Cook left vacant.

Cook's departure may reflect an increasingly controlling Wizards intent on making its Hasbro goals. However, some suggest instead that Cook's work with Wizards might have interfered with his desire to Kickstart a personal project. His *Numenéra* RPG (2013) — which Cook Kickstarted *after* he left Wizards — raised $517,255 from 4,658 backers; it was one of the biggest RPG successes of the year on Kickstarter. Whatever the precise reasons, Cook's defection wasn't the last for the 5E team: designer Bruce Cordell left on July 16, 2013, though he remained positive about the 5E project, calling it "a kick-ass set of *D&D* rules." He afterward joined Cook to work on *Numenéra*.

Previous to the work on 5E, Wizards always carefully managed the transition between *D&D* editions, but following the rather sudden cancelation of 4E, they found themselves in a more difficult position because they needed to fill not just a year of dead air, but now two and a half years.

Wizards kept on with their fiction line and their system-independent *Dungeon Tiles*. They also continued with their newest push into board games, with some of their releases being the wargame *Conquest of Nerath* (2011), the well-received eurogame *Lords of Waterdeep* (2012), and a new edition of the classic *Dungeon!* (2012). However, Wizards also introduced three new products lines to keep the money flowing while working on their next big thing.

First, Wizards began releasing old *D&D* products in new premium editions. The first-edition *AD&D* books appeared first (2012), followed quickly by new premium editions of the 3.5E books (2012). Following the success of those releases, Wizards reprinted some classic *AD&D* adventures as well as premium versions of *AD&D* 2e (2013) and *OD&D* (2013).

Second, to complement the various reprints, Wizards got back into the PDF business by releasing much of their old catalog through DrivethruRPG on the new DnDClassics.com site (2013). Wizards previously sold PDFs through Paizo and DrivethruRPG, but withdrew them in 2009, claiming that they were afraid of pirates. The new deal with DriveThru represented another reversal for Wizards — but one that was very in tune with their work at the time.

Third, Wizards returned to the world of miniatures with the new *Dungeon Command* line (2012). Unlike *D&D Miniatures*, these new pre-painted miniatures were sold in non-collectible packages. The components were also compatible with *Castle Ravenloft* and the rest of the "D&D Adventure System" board games. Then, in February 2014, Wizards revamped their miniatures plans again by turning to WizKids for pre-painted miniatures.

These new initiatives may be enough to keep Wizards going until 5E appears, but meanwhile the rest of the industry is languishing. As early as 2011, some publishers were complaining about how Wizard's wavering schedule was damaging the industry. As the industry leader, *Dungeons & Dragons* had long driven customers to hobby shops, which tends to encourage those customers to pick up products from other companies too. The severe reduction in *D&D* products in 2011 seems to have led to a similar reduction in other purchases that year. That in turn hurt the cash flow of other publishers and reduced *their* releases in 2012. It's a nasty spiral likely to continue until 5E comes out.

So what's going to be in 5E? As of this writing, that's still the industry's biggest question. Wizards originally advertised it as the edition that would bring together the gameplay of every previous edition of *D&D* — which seems to be an all-but impossible promise. A public playtest began under NDA on May 24, 2012. Within a year, 120,000 players had signed up. The playtest continued through September 19, 2013.

The general public only got to see a playtest draft of 5E at Gen Con Indy 2013, with the limited edition release of *Ghost of Dragonspear Castle* (2013), a proto-*D&D 5E* Forgotten Realms adventure. Surprisingly, this product was not sold by Wizards of the Coast, but instead by Gale Force Nine — Wizards' licensed producer of *D&D* accessories. Wizards *couldn't* sell it themselves because they decided not to run a booth at Gen Con Indy 2013; it was the first time that the producer of *D&D* didn't have a retail presence at Gen Con since the advent of the game, and it was yet another sign of how far *D&D* had fallen in the previous two years.

> *"I think we're finding consistently that it's the story element, it's that idea of what a character is, that's really important. And the mechanics, as long as they are easy to understand and easy to use, they just kind of have to go in the background."*
>
> – Mike Mearls, forbes.com (May 2013)



Despite the non-disclosure agreements surrounding 5E, some details have leaked out from players and designer diaries.

To start with, on January 7, 2013, Mike Mearls said that the new game's two most important guiding principals were to "[c]reate a version of D&D that embraces the enduring, core elements of the game" and to "[c]reate a set of rules that allows a smooth transition from a simple game to a complex one." A modular game system with "basic," "standard," and "advanced" levels of play seems intended to support much of this. Beyond that, playtesters say that 5E is the closest in mechanical feel to 3E, with some of the veneer and theming of the second edition. Certainly the players of 4E seem the most disappointed — and are the most likely to feel that they're being left behind, which wouldn't be a big surprise given the (comparative) commercial failure of their game system. However, Mearls says that the mechanics aren't the most important part of the game; instead, he says it's the ideas of character and story that carry *D&D*.

After years of speculation, D&D 5e was finally revealed in the *Dungeons & Dragons Starter Set* (2014) in July 2014. How well it will fare is another question, as it now has some powerful competition in the form of Paizo Publishing's *Pathfinder* and Pelgrane Press' *13th Age* (2013) — the latter a d20 fantasy game designed by Jonathan Tweet and Rob Heinsoo, the designers of 3E and 4E respectively.

Nonetheless, it's almost certainly *D&D*, not its competitors, that will shape the industry in the '10s. Because if nothing else, the last few years have proven that there *must* be a *Dungeons & Dragons* for the industry to exist.

What to Read Next

- For Lisa Stevens' origins in the industry, read ***Lion Rampant*** *['80s]* and ***White Wolf***.
- For Jonathan Tweet's earlier work, read ***Lion Rampant*** *['80s]* and ***Atlas Games***.
- For John Tynes' earlier work, read ***Pagan Publishing***.
- For the rest of the story of *Ars Magica*, read ***Lion Rampant*** *['80s]*, ***White Wolf***, and ***Atlas Games***.

- For the rest of the story of *SLA Industries*, read ***Hogshead Publishing*** and ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** *['00s]*.
- For the future of *Netrunner*, read ***Fantasy Flight Games***.
- For other views of the TSR and Five Rings purchase, read ***TSR*** *['70s]* and ***AEG***.
- For another company that Wizards purchased and what happened to them afterward, read ***Last Unicorn Games***.
- For what Gygax was working on when he returned to write for Wizards, read ***Hekaforge***.
- For companies that produced d20 products under a direct license from Wizards, read ***AEG, Kenzer & Company, Margaret Weis Productions***, and ***Paizo Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For companies that published d20 versions of their existing games and afterward produced dual-statted books, read ***AEG, Holistic Design***, and ***Pinnacle Entertainment Group***.
- For other existing companies that dove into d20 in a big way, read ***Atlas Games***, ***Fantasy Flight Games***, ***Guardians of Order***, and ***White Wolf***.
- For Monte Cook's work after Wizards, read about Malhavoc Press in ***White Wolf***.

In Other Eras

- For the company that sued Wizards in its early days, read ***Palladium Books*** *['80s]*, and for Michael Pondsmith, who mediated the dispute, read ***R. Talsorian*** *['80s]*.
- For other publishers that went out to the Internet for publishing funds, read ***Issaries*** *['00s]* and anyone who used Kickstarter *['10s]*.
- For the licensors of some of ***White Wolf***'s *other* CCGs, read ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*, ***R. Talsorian*** *['80s]*, and ***FASA*** *['80s]*.
- For companies that published CCGs of particular note to their own histories, read ***AEG*** *['90s]*, ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*, ***ICE*** *['80s]*, and ***Mayfair Games*** *['80s]*. Most of them don't turn out that well.
- For the rest of the story of *Talislanta*, read ***Bard Games*** *['80s]*.
- For the first half of the history of *Dungeons & Dragons*, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For companies that got their start publishing d20 games, read ***Goodman Games*** *['00s]*, ***Green Ronin Publishing*** (more or less) *['00s]*, ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]*, ***Necromancer Games*** *['00s]*, ***Privateer Press*** *['00s]*, and ***Troll Lord Games*** (again, more or less) *['00s]*.

- For more on Chris Pramas' work at Wizards and afterward, read ***Green Ronin Publishing*** *['00s]*. Alternatively, read about his effect on Greyhawk in the Greyhawk setting history found in ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For a bit on Peter Adkison's next gaming job, read about Hidden City Games in ***Memento Mori Theatricks*** *['00s]*.
- For the fate of Wizards' Magazine Department, for the expansion of the "adventure path" idea, and for Wizards' biggest competitor in the 4E age, read ***Paizo Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For a company killed by the advent of 4E, read ***Necromancer Games*** *['00s]*.
- For how 4E licensing has worked out for other publishers, read ***Goodman Games*** *['00s]*, ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]*, and the ***One Bad Egg*** mini-history in ***Evil Hat Productions*** *['00s]*. Most of them don't turn out that well.
- For the few people who kept supporting 4E, read ***Goodman Games*** *['00s]* and ***Open Design Press*** *['00s]*.
- For *D&D*'s biggest competitors going into the future, read about *Pathfinder* in ***Paizo Publishing*** *['00s]* and *13th Age* in ***Pelgrane Press*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to scary RPG publisher, ***Metropolis***.



Part Three:

A New Generation

(1993–1996)

After the release of *Magic: The Gathering* (1993), the whole industry changed. One of the results was that it was a lot harder for a roleplaying publisher to get noticed — even if you were an existing publisher, and especially if you were a newbie.

As a result, the *next* generation of publishers that came into the industry were all doing pretty innovative things. Technically, you could look at them and say that they were a motley collection of ***original RPG producers, licensees***, and ***unofficial supplementers.*** However, the way these new publishers approached those old niches made them much more pioneering.

Metropolis was the first company created to publish a foreign RPG, while Imperium really expanded on the idea of ***second-generation roleplaying publishers*** by acting as the first company to continue on with a ***major*** RPG from a now-defunct company. Last Unicorn Games published an RPG that was unique in conception, while Grey Ghost Press released a game that was uniquely created on the internet. Hogshead was probably the first ***indie publisher*** — a half-decade before any others — while Kenzer & Company was the first major ***comics publisher*** in the RPG industry. Even Daedalus was unique for its work with full-color printing, something unknown before the '90s.

Unfortunately, the CCG boom that hit the industry at the same time as these companies — as well as the d20 boom that was to follow seven years later — made it quite hard for these new companies to prosper, especially since few of them participated in those trends. About half of them expired in each era. Of them, only Kenzer & Company continues with much vigor, while Grey Ghost continues as a small press.

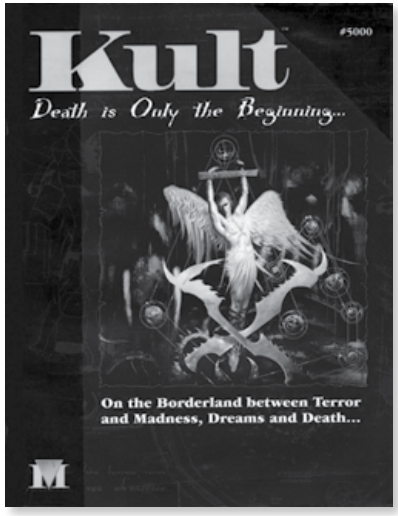
Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Metropolis	1993–1996	*Kult* (1993)	207
Daedalus	1994–1997	*Nexus: The Infinite City* (1994)	63
Hogshead Publishing	1994–2002	*Interactive Fantasy #2* (1994)	218
Last Unicorn Games	1994–2000	*Aria Worlds* (1994)	230
Decipher Games	1983-Present	*Star Trek Roleplaying Game* (2002)	238
Kenzer & Company	1994-Present	*The Kingdoms of Kalamar* (1994)	240
Grey Ghost Press	1995-Present	*FUDGE* (1995)	254
Imperium Games	1996–1998	*Marc Miller's Traveller* (1996)	260

Metropolis: 1993–1996

Metropolis was a short-lived RPG publisher of the mid-'90s that's notable for introducing one of the first foreign-language RPGs into the American market.

Foreign Beginnings: 1982–1992

These histories have mainly detoured around the topic of foreign roleplaying publishers. That's not because there aren't any. Numerous foreign companies have published roleplaying games — with French, German, and Italian offerings being some of the best known. Many of these publishers mainly reprinted English-language games, but that shouldn't denigrate their importance. Reprints did a lot to advance the roleplaying hobby in foreign countries. In addition, beginning in the early '80s, work on foreign reprints has sometimes influenced English-language publishers.



1993: Kult

Most notably, French designer François Marcela-Froideval joined TSR around September 1982. There, he acted as a

right-hand creator to Gary Gygax and Frank Mentzer. He introduced ideas such as the comeliness stat and the modron race to *AD&D* before returning to France to continue his translation work. Similarly, Bruce Heard began working for TSR as a French translator, but went on to orchestrate the massive expansion of the Known World seen in the *Gazetteers* (1987–1992) and his own "Voyage of the Princess Ark" (1990–1992, 2006).

Moving through the rest of the foreign field, you could discover many more designers and publications that influenced US releases. In particular, the high quality of the foreign graphical work was another notable influence for American companies, especially from the '90s onward.

However, foreign influence on the American RPG field goes beyond immigrating designers and influential graphics. Beginning in the '90s, original RPGs from foreign shores also began to (occasionally) reappear in the United States. And so the story of Metropolis Ltd. truly begins with the story of Swedish publisher Target Games.

On Target: 1979—1992

In Sweden, the RPG business also began with translations. It all started in 1979 when Fredrik Malmberg founded a small company called Target Games. It wasn't Malmberg's first hobbyist company, as he'd previously run two small press board game companies, Swedish Game Production and Wellington Wargames.

Around 1980, Malmberg spent a year in the United States, where he rented a room from Steve Perrin and spent some time at Chaosium. Then, in 1981 — after returning to Sweden — Malmberg used his connections with Chaosium to forge a licensing agreement with them. As a result, he was able to publish Target's first (Swedish language) roleplaying game — a book that combined *Basic Role-Playing* (1980) with the "Magic World" book from Chaosium's *Worlds of Wonder* (1982). However, Target published it under their own name, *Drakar och Demoner* (1982), which means "Dragons & Demons," and is often abbreviated "DoD." Target revisited the game just a few years later when they published their "black-box" second edition of *Drakar och Demoner* (1984), which completely reworked the rules but maintained the *Basic Role-Playing* (*BRP*) foundation. It was perhaps their best-selling edition ever and the start of a great new era for the company.

Because of this unique first publication, Sweden's roleplaying culture is quite different from that of the US — it *wasn't* heavily influenced by *D&D*. Instead, *Drakar och Demoner* was Sweden's best-seller, going through numerous editions and selling over a hundred thousand copies.

1984 was overall a banner year for Target. To start with, Malmberg spun off the roleplaying arm of Target into a new company, called Äventyrsspel. The new

company name literally meant Adventure Games — reflecting an alternate name for RPGs that was used in the '70s and early '80s. Äventyrsspel was formed in conjunction with Johan Arve and Lars-Åke Thor. That same year, Target hired their first full-time employee, Klas Berndal. Anders Blixt, Nils Gulliksson, and Henrik Strandberg followed in 1985 and 1986. Perhaps more importantly, Target published its second RPG and the other foundational roleplaying game for Sweden — *Mutant* (1984).

Mutant once again was based on Chaosium's *BRP* game system, but it adopted a setting similar to TSR's *Gamma World* (1980) — full of mutants and mutated animals in a post-apocalyptic Scandinavia. It was updated by *Mutant* 2 (1986) and published throughout the '80s. By the end of the decade, the game was looking a bit juvenile due to the newest SF trends hitting the industry, so Target published a cyberpunk version of the game called "nya" (or "new") *Mutant* (1989). *Mutant RYMD* (1992) or "space mutant" changed the setting once again, taking it out into the solar system. It also updated the game system to something more *Warhammer*-like. Some fans resisted the change, preferring the old setting — in a story of fan rebellion common in the time period. This was likely one reason behind the rapid release of the *next* version of *Mutant*, which we'll get to shortly.

Meanwhile, *Drakar och Demoner* was developing its own game system too. This began with *Drakar och Demoner Expert* (1985), which replaced Chaosium's d100 with a d20, and otherwise expanded the game. The "Expert" rules became *DoD*'s *de facto* system several years later with the release of the fourth edition (1991) of the game system.

Though they had two well-respected games by the mid-'80s, Target didn't rest on their laurels, but instead reprinted several other US products, such as *Chill* (1985), *Middle-earth Role Playing* (1986), *Grimtooth's Traps* (1987), and *Star Wars* (1988). Around the same time, they brought the *Lone Wolf* (1985) gamebooks in from the UK, and even started translating fantasy novels, the first of which was Robert E. Howard's *Conan*. These lines were both particularly important for Target: the *Lone Wolf* books sold quite well, resulting in Target publishing the first 12 books in the series, through 1990. *Conan*, on the other hand, would be very important to Target's *future*, as we'll see in the '00s.

Meanwhile, competitors appeared. Titan Games — who got their start with a licensed *DoD* book (1983) — began officially distributing *D&D* in Sweden. A few years later, they translated the Frank Mentzer *Basic D&D* (1986) and *Expert D&D* (1987) sets into Swedish.

However, Titan couldn't get much traction. The earliest Swedish RPG fans had played using English-language *D&D* books, while slightly younger fans enjoyed

Drakar och Demoner instead. There just wasn't a lot of room for Swedish-language *D&D* in between. Worse, the importance of *DoD* was sufficient enough that when the *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon (1983–1985) was brought into Sweden, the distributor renamed it *Drakar och Demoner*! Titan Games eventually closed up shop in 1990 after a failed *AD&D* 2e release.

Despite the advent of competitors, Target continued to dominate the Swedish roleplaying market until the '90s — by which time we'll be leaving behind Target to look at Metropolis proper.

Targeted Independence: 1991—1994

If Target Games became the first major Swedish roleplaying company in the '80s, in the '90s they moved on to become a major independent publisher — reflecting trends then being seen in the United States. We've already seen how *Drakar och Demoner* developed its own game system in 1991, just as *Mutant RYMD* did in 1992. However, Target's move toward original RPGs at the same time was even more important.

That started with *Kult* (1991), by husband and wife Michael Petersén and Gunilla Jonsson. It's the game at the heart of Metropolis' history. Petersén and Jonsson previously wrote *Mutant* for Target, but then they went off to form their own company, Ragnarök Speldesign (Ragnarok Game Design), which they used to publish two games of their own in the late '80s.

En Garde! (1987) was a swashbuckling game covering the years 1500–1800; it shouldn't be confused with the GDW game of the same name. *Skuggornas mästare* (1988), or *Shadow Master*, was Ragnarok's second release; it's a game of modern weirdness and secret identities. With their wild oats sown, Petersén and Jonsson were now returning to Target to produce what many would consider their masterpiece.



The game system of *Kult* — derived partly from the authors' two Ragnarok games — is notable mainly for its simplicity. It uses a "roll under" mechanism on a d20 — the sort more popular before the release of *D&D* 3E (2000). There's also a magic system that supports complex, ritualistic magic.

Kult's horror stylings are immediately obvious from its inclusion of a sanity (or mental balance) rule. However, unlike games such as *Call of Cthulhu* (1980) or *Unknown Armies* (1999), where sanity is almost entirely

a negative thing, the sanity of *Kult* is a balance where high sanity characters can be virtuous and low sanity characters can be positively evil. Mind you, moving too far to either side can make a character pretty strange (and allow them to see the "real" world).

However, it wasn't *Kult*'s game system that gained it acclaim, but instead its setting. *Kult* is an occult-based game that combines Gnosticism with the kabbalah. All of reality is an illusion created by the Demiurge, and it's now falling apart. There's a whole cosmology underlying that story, with the Demiurge acting as the prime mover and Archons and Death Angels sitting in opposition to each other.

Kult was released in Sweden the same year White Wolf published the better-known *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) in the United States. As such, it was one of the first RPGs in the urban fantasy movement. It also presented a weirder and perhaps more authentic-feeling world, of the same sort that would be seen in other foreign games translated back to English — including Steve Jackson's *In Nomine* and Chaosium's *Nephilim*.

These histories have often talked about the "hysteria" that erupted in the United States in the '80s over *D&D*. It may not be a surprise that *Kult* caused its own "moral panic" in Sweden in the '90s. Various fear mongers claimed that the game encouraged Satanism and magic rituals. Storeowners became afraid to carry it. *Kult* even reached the Parliament of Sweden in 1997 when law makers tried to eliminate funding for youth groups that roleplayed because (allegedly) *Kult* caused two teenagers to murder a third.

That all may have contributed to the fact that *Kult* was only a fair success in Sweden — though attempted censorship of *D&D* certainly had the opposite effect on RPGs in the US. If so, it didn't stop *Kult* from being Sweden's most successfully exported RPG. Translations would appear in the English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish markets. *Kult* successfully moved Target from being a Swedish business to being an international business — allowing them great success through the rest of the decade.

The English translation of *Kult* will (at long last) bring us to the story of Metropolis Ltd. proper. Before we get there, however, we should first touch upon Target's two other major releases of the early '90s.

The first was *Mutant Chronicles* (1993), yet another iteration of Target's *Mutant* RPG. This new edition was actually a synthesis, combining elements of *Mutant RYMD* and *Kult* — but removing all the religious elements from the latter. It was released almost simultaneously in Sweden and in the US, with the English translation done by Heartbreaker Hobbies and Games — a company that we'll soon meet again. Matt Forbeck wrote or edited much of the line that followed, until Paul Beakley took over for the last few books. The result was quite successful, especially thanks to some ancillary products.

Target's last major game of the era was *Drakar och Demoner: Chronopia* (1994), the fifth edition of the company's premiere game. It introduced a new setting — showing the importance of settings by the '90s — but wasn't as groundbreaking as Target's two other premieres of the decade. Worse, it was released during a time of increasing weakness for RPGs — in Sweden and the US alike. One of Target's staff later commented that they were seeing previous sales of 12,000 copies decrease to 2,000 or 3,000 — a pretty precipitous drop.

The setting was also problematic because it caused another schism among Target's fans — much as *Mutant RYMD* had. This time the conflict was between those who liked the game's previous setting of Ereb Altor — which had been introduced through adventures — and the new core setting of Chronopia. The big, multicultural city at the core of the Chronopia setting also had the bad luck of coming out the same year as the *Planescape Campaign Setting* (1994).

Target nonetheless survived through the end of the '90s, and we'll return to them in time. For now, though, we finally have all the puzzle pieces in place to describe how Target and *Kult* got into the United States — and how Metropolis Ltd briefly published the game here.

The Metropolis Story: 1993—1997

The story of Metropolis — the company that published *Kult* in the US from 1993 to 1996 — has at least three beginnings.

To start with, you have Target Games/Äventyrsspel, who we've covered extensively because they laid the foundation of everything that went into *Kult*.

Next, you have ICE, the well-known publisher of *Rolemaster* (1982) and *MERP* (1984). Some of the principals of ICE were friends with Malmberg, and so Target offered them the opportunity to translate *Kult* into English. Unfortunately some of the ICE board members believed that *Kult* was too edgy, and may have had religious issues with it as well. Terry Amthor — an ICE founder and the creator of Shadow World — didn't have those concerns, and decided to take on *Kult* as a freelance project. The problem was that such a project would need funding.

Enter the third and final company who aided in the creation of Metropolis: Heartbreaker Hobbies and Games. Bob Watts formed Heartbreaker in 1992 after many years of working for Grenadier Models and a year of running GW North America; he hoped to create a competitor for the UK miniatures giant. By 1993 Heartbreaker was producing generic fantasy miniatures as well as minis for *Magic: The Gathering* and *Earthdawn*, but they were interested in spreading their wings further. Heartbreaker was already working closely with Target on the aforementioned *Mutant Chronicles*, and so it was probably natural for them to offer some

financial aid to get *Kult* going as well. Heartbreaker would remain involved even after the initial funding, acting as the distributor for Metropolis while Terry Amthor worked the creative end of things.

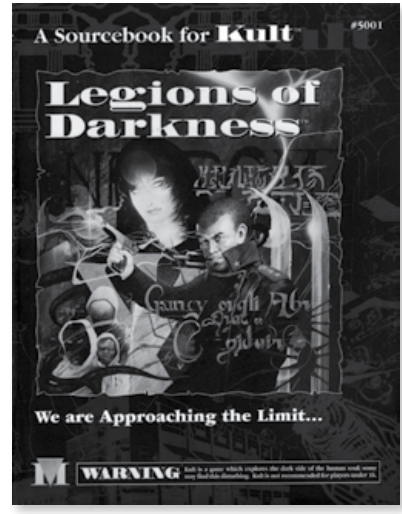
Put together Target, one of ICE's principals, and Heartbreaker and you get Metropolis Ltd. — a company dedicated to the production of *Kult* in the United States. The name came from *Kult*'s original home of humanity, a realm beyond the "illusion" of the Demiurge.

Metropolis was the teeniest of roleplaying companies, run by president Amthor and a group of proofreaders who were spread out across the company. They soon produced their own version of *Kult* (1993) for the American market, based on Target's second edition of the game (1993).

Just by publishing *Kult*, Metropolis made their first notable impact on the RPG industry, because it was one of the first foreign RPGs to actually make it to the US market. The other leader was *Mutant Chronicles*, out that same year. These two games were followed by several other releases in the '90s, such as Chaosium's *Nephilim* (1994) and Steve Jackson's *In Nomine* (1997), but Metropolis (and Heartbreaker and even more notably Target) was there first.

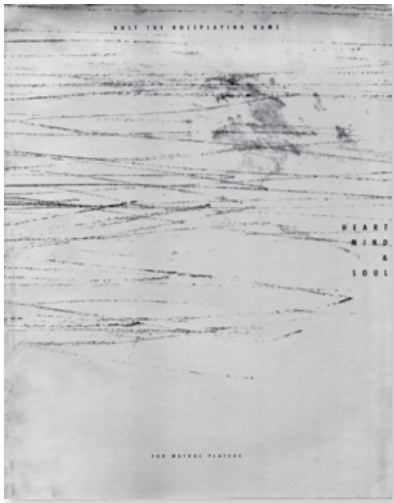
Metropolis was also the first American RPG company formed specifically to translate and publish a foreign-language RPG. Even today, the idea is pretty unprecedented, though FanPro LLC and the second incarnation of West End Games (when it was owned by the French Humanoid Publications) both offer up similar examples of foreign publishers being very involved in the publication of English-language games.

Given the satanic hysteria that impacted the American RPG industry in the '80s, you might expect that *Kult* would cause even larger problems in the United States than it did in Sweden. Surprisingly, it didn't. A few stores opted not to carry it due to content concerns, but the frequently censorious TSR let the game be sold at Gen Con, and there was no external uproar.



Metropolis published *Kult* products for four years, from 1993–1996. They were never a particularly big publisher, but they averaged two or three books each year. Through 1995, Metropolis reprinted books from Target, including two of the lines' most important books: *Legions of Darkness* (1993), a sort of "monster manual" that also considerably expanded the cosmology of the game; and *Metropolis* (1995), the games' only look at a realm beyond the "illusion."





Unfortunately, *Kult* had never been much of a commercial success for Target, and they ended their own Swedish-language production of the game in 1994. By the end of 1995, Metropolis published all of the Target books except than the *Black Madonna* adventure box — which was announced but never appeared in English. The lack of additional material left Metropolis in a bit of a quandary.

Fortunately, Target was willing to step back up and started producing new English language material. Metropolis staffers Terry Amthor and James Estes contributed some of the new material published that year, such as the *Kult Player's Companion* (1996), while Gunilla Jonsson and Michael Petersen returned with other new material such as *Heart, Mind, and Soul* (1996) — a book about magic that would soon become a foundation of the second edition's rules. Stefan Ljungqvist, a new Target editor, also dramatically updated the graphic design of the later books, creating extremely evocative and innovative layouts that made them look more like art books than RPGs. Some of the artists involved went on to notable success afterward, including Jens Jonsson, who later became a well-known film director.

Surprisingly, Metropolis itself slowly faded away over the course of the year — with Target eventually using the name themselves for continuity purposes. There were likely several reasons for this slow fade. The RPG market was cooling, and investor Heartbreaker was working more on CCGs. Most notably, however, Target Games expressed interest in doing a second edition of *Kult* on their own.

Metropolis' finances were likely also affected by the fact that they never got to publish some of the most profitable material. Instead much of that success went to Heartbreaker. Most notably Heartbreaker got to produce the *Kult: Reality is a Lie* CCG (1995) along with the *Dark Eden* CCG (1997) for *Mutant Chronicles* — just two of the CCGs that they created in conjunction with Target. They also

were able to produce the *Warzone* (1995) miniatures game, also based on *Mutant Chronicles*, which for a time looked like it might be Heartbreaker's answer to GW's *Warhammer 40k*. Meanwhile, Target itself was licensing video games for both *Mutant Chronicles* (1995) and *Drakar och Demoner* (1999). In the '80s a beautiful and evocative RPG was enough to carry a company, but in the '90s high-profile (and high-return) ancillary products like video games and CCGs were needed, and Metropolis didn't have them — in part due to the limitations of their licensing.

Target produced their *Kult: Second Edition* (1997) the next year. Like those final *Kult* supplements, they released it exclusively for the English market — not in Swedish — marking the end of an era both for Metropolis and for Swedish *Kult* gaming. The second edition was reprinted in the Italian and Spanish markets by various licensees, but after that *Kult* largely died.

Metropolis, of course, was gone already.

The Rest of the Story: 1997-Present



The various companies, game lines, and peoples involved in the story of Target and Metropolis have had varied success in the years since Metropolis shut down.

In 1997, Heartbreaker was bought out by Target — a pretty natural union given Heartbreaker's role in so many of Target's CCG successes. So it's not a surprise that in the late '90s Target moved further away from RPGs, a trend that began in the middle of the decade.

Target saw some successes late in the decade — such as the *Drakar och Demoner: Själarnas Brunn* (1999) computer game — but they were soon running into problems of their own. The culprit was uncontrolled growth (apparently including the purchase of a Swedish candy division!) not matched by growing revenues. Some conflicts between the owners might have contributed. As a result, Target Games opted to reorganize itself using the Swedish equivalent of Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Two companies emerged: Paradox Entertainment, with Malmberg at the helm, which picked up Target's assets; and Target itself, which moved into the telecom industry (!) before dying a few years later.

Paradox has since moved far beyond RPGs, into the literary and movie businesses. They own the rights to Robert E. Howard's literary properties and have

produced films for *Solomon Kane* (2009) and *Conan the Barbarian* (2011) ... and *Mutant Chronicles* (2008). Malmberg is still the CEO and president of the Paradox Entertainment Group.

Since they're more focused on other sorts of entertainment nowadays, Paradox has licensed or sold rights to Target's properties to several other publishers.

Drakar och Demoner is the only property that was outright sold. It went to Riotminds, who published sixth (2000) and seventh (2006) editions of the game. The game briefly considered moving closer to *D&D* by adding levels to its sixth edition, but they were soon removed at least in part due to public outcry. In 2010, Riotminds went digital only, then they closed up shop the next year, briefly ending the reign of Sweden's best-selling RPG. More recently they returned to produce an eighth/anniversary edition (2013).

The original post-apocalyptic *Mutant* game was picked up by Jänringen (The Iron Ring), who published *Mutant: Undergångens arvtagare* (2002) and supported the line through 2008. They've since moved on to their own SF RPG, *Coriolis* (2008). The *Mutant Chronicles* line, meanwhile, was picked up by COG Games, who held the rights from 2006–2009 without actually producing anything. Mōdiphiüs Entertainment is now working on a third edition (2014?), funded by a Kickstarter that raised £151,072 from 1,199 backers. The most far-flung *Mutant* release was probably FFG's *Mutant Chronicles* (2008) collectible miniatures game, though that line lasted just more than a year.

COG Games, Järnringen, and Riotminds were all Swedish companies, keeping Targets' games "in the family" as it were. However, the license for *Kult* instead went to 7eme Cercle Publishing Company, a French company known best for *Qin: The Warring States* (2005). 7eme provided extensive support for the game in French, including publishing the *Black Madonna* adventure (2005). They also published two English-language books: *Kult: Rumours* (2002), a player's book with cut-down rules; and *Kult: Beyond the Veil* (2004), essentially a third edition of the rules following directly from Target's English-language second edition.

Meanwhile, the Swedish RPG industry has continued forward, even without its progenitor. Neogames may today be the largest FRP publisher in the country, thanks in large part to their *Eon* (1996, 2000, 2004) RPG; a fourth edition of the game is now in process. *Noctum* (2005, 2007), an urban horror game, is also of note, primarily because it got a larger audience when Mongoose published an English-language version of it (2009) through their Flaming Cobra program.

And over at Chaosium — the company that got Target and then Metropolis its start — a brand-new 272-page page *Magic World* (2013), by Ben Monroe, Mark Morrison, and the late Lynn Willis, recently appeared. Thirty years after it became Sweden's biggest RPG, Chaosium decided to give a similar game a try in the US.

Finally, we should turn to the principals involved with Metropolis.

Bob Watts, the head of Metropolis' investor, Heartbreaker, went on to work for Wizards of the Coast, where he formed a new miniatures division for them. He later founded Sabertooth Games, who produced CCGs for Games Workshop, and then cofounded Titanic Games, a board games spin-off of Paizo Publishing.

Terry Amthor, the founder of Metropolis, has spent most of the last few decades working with a variety of image and graphic companies. However, he still does occasional RPG work through his own Eidolon Studio. Most recently, he's continued to expand Shadow World in conjunction with the Mjolnir ICE and with Guild Companion Publications.

The wave of foreign translations that Metropolis headed in the early '90s mostly fizzled out by the end of the decade. One of the biggest problems was cost. Even with computers able to provide the first cut of translations, the cost of translating a supplement was about the same as producing something totally new.

What to Read Next

- For a better-known urban fantasy game from 1991, read ***White Wolf***.
- For another new horror game from the '90s, read about *Unknown Armies* in ***Atlas Games***.
- For a contemporary publisher that had employees spread across the US, read ***Imperium Games***.

In Other Eras

- For a little bit on French influence on RPGs, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For the company that got Target its start, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For other foreign involvement in the American RPG field, read about the second ***ICE*** *['80s]* and ***FanPro*** *['00s]*.
- For other major publishers of foreign RPGs, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]* and ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*.
- For the company that could have published *Kult* and more on Terry Amthor, read ***ICE*** *['80s]*.
- For more on *Qin* and 7eme, read ***Cubicle 7*** *['00s]*.
- For Flaming Cobra, read ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]*.
- For Titanic Games, read ***Paizo Publishing*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to the creator of the "New Style" RPGs, ***Hogshead Publishing.***

Hogshead Publishing: 1994–2002

Games Workshop in the '80s and Mongoose Publishing in the '00s together overshadow the story of roleplaying publishers in the UK. However, another publisher existed between those two: Hogshead Publishing, who could indeed call itself "the largest RPG publishing company in the British Isles" during the '90s.



1994: Interactive Fantasy #2

The Path to the Pig: 1981–1994

As is often the case with small publishers, the story of Hogshead begins with the story of its founder, James Wallis. Wallis got his start in roleplaying in 1981 through a pair of games imported into the UK by Games Workshop: *Dungeons & Dragons* and

Traveller. They piqued his interest, and he was soon publishing his own fanzines, first *Werman*, which apparently wasn't so good, then *Sound & Fury*, which was. By the mid-'80s, Wallis had moved onto professional magazines, writing articles such as "Starting Your Own Fanzine" for *Adventurer #4* (October 1986) and "UFANS NOITAREPO," a Paranoia adventure for *White Dwarf #84* (December 1986).

Then another game designer entered Wallis' story: Erick Wujcik. Wujcik got to know Wallis through *Sound & Fury* and even let Wallis stay with him when Wallis was visiting Detroit in 1989. At Gen Con '89, Wujcik introduced Wallis to Kevin Siembieda of Palladium. The result was Wallis' entry into the world of supplement authorship through two different Palladium books: *Mutants in Avalon* (1990) and *Mutants in Orbit* (1992).

> *"The Dying of the Light credits for James Wallis stated that he did not like to mention his previous work. The dark secrets in his gaming cupboard turn out to be supplements for Palladium."*
>
> – "The Warpstone Interview" (April 1996)

That same year, Wallis began working on his own RPG — a game that would foreshadow the path of his roleplaying career better than those early Palladium books. He based his "Bugtown" RPG on the "Those Annoying Post Bros." and "Savage Henry" comics by Matt Howarth. However, the system was to be at least as exciting as the license. Not only was it diceless — two years before that was even thought to be a possibility — but it was also numberless. The actual mechanics were all text-based, something that is pretty unknown to the industry even today. Years later, Robin Laws' *Hero Wars* (2000) used text as an intermediary to produce numbers, but not only was that a decade later, it also didn't go as far as Wallis had envisioned.

The problem, of course, was that Wallis didn't have a publisher for his game.

We return then to Wujcik, who at that time was creating Phage Press to publish his own RPG, *Amber Diceless Role-playing* (1991). After his game was published, Wujcik began looking for other games to publish under his label. Wallis' own diceless project seemed a natural fit, so in 1992 Wallis brought *Bugtown* to Phage. Unfortunately, creative differences kept the project from coming to fruition, and it stalled for two years.

Meanwhile, Wallis had other irons in the fire. One of them was a storytelling card game called *Once Upon a Time*, which Wallis coauthored with Andrew Rilstone and Richard Lambert way back in 1990. Thanks to Nicole Lindroos playing a sample copy of the game at Gen Con '91, it made its way to Atlas Games, who eventually published it. *Once Upon a Time* (1993) was well-received and has

since been supported by Atlas with two more editions (1995, 2012) and some supplements. It's also picked up a few awards over the years, suggesting that Wallis' move toward the storytelling side of gaming was already paying off.

> *"This innocent little card game of telling fairy stories is one of the best ways I've ever found to grab a non-gamer by their imagination and fling them into our world."*
>
> – Marc Gascoigne, "Once Upon a Time," *Hobby Games: The 100 Best* (2007)

The publication of *Once Upon a Time* had another benefit: it brought Wallis into contact with Atlas designer Jonathan Tweet, who soon after became the head of RPGs at Wizards of the Coast. Like Phage, Wizards was looking for new roleplaying lines. Frustrated by years of futile development with Wujcik, Wallis brought *Bugtown* over to its second potential publisher. Unfortunately, Wallis didn't have any success there either, for a reason that was likely even *more* frustrating: cartoonist Matt Howarth couldn't come to an agreement with Wizards of the Coast for royalties — not for royalties related to the game, mind you, but rather for royalties on t-shirts that Wizards might someday produce related to *Bugtown*.

Fortunately, Wallis' *other* projects continued to payoff. By then, he'd published *Inter*action #1* (Summer 1994), the first issue of an RPG magazine co-founded with editor Andrew Rilstone. *Inter*action* included articles by Robin D. Laws, Greg Porter, and other RPG luminaries, and it immediately received some good attention because of its thoughtful and analytical coverage of roleplaying.

Just as Wallis lost his second *Bugtown* publisher, he simultaneously proved his ability to publish products on his own. Together, those two facts added up to an opportunity.

The Hammer Strikes: 1994—2002

Before Wallis could take advantage of this opportunity to publish *Bugtown* (and other games) on his own, he had to answer two challenges.

The first challenge was that Wallis' company would be based in the UK. Especially back in the '90s, that *could* have meant that it was difficult for the large RPG markets in the US and Canada to get his products and pay for them. Wallis resolved to pretend that his company wasn't located in the UK at all. He would take advantage of the internet, invoice in dollars, and even shift his sleep schedule so that he could be awake to talk to distributors all the way out on the United States' West Coast. It was a smart move, and one that Wallis would later suggest to other UK roleplaying entrepreneurs. Today Mongoose Publishing has American warehousing, while Cubicle 7 Entertainment uses Georgia's PSI for their stock.

Wallis' second challenge was that *Bugtown* was unlikely to get the attentions of retailers and distributors right off the bat. It probably wouldn't be well-placed to pay the bills either. Fortunately, Wallis knew of another huge opportunity that he could take advantage of: UK publisher Games Workshop had stopped publishing the *Warhammer Fantasy RPG* in 1992 and was now looking for a licensee. Wallis phoned up Phil Gallagher at Games Workshop and secured the license. With a high-profile RPG line, he would now be able to get *all* of Hogshead's products noticed — *Warhammer* and *Bugtown* alike.

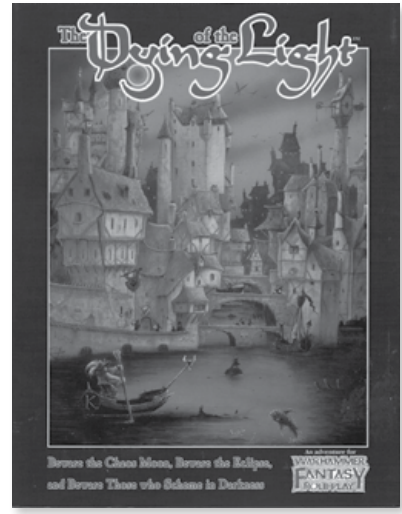
With those two core problems solved, Wallis created Hogshead Publishing in October 1994. The company had three staff members when it got rolling: James Wallis, Andrew Rilstone, and Jane Mitton (who formerly worked for TSR UK).

Due to trademark concerns, Wallis and Rilstone's magazine, *Inter*action*, became *Interactive Fantasy* with its second issue (November 1994), which was also Hogshead's first publication. It would run for two more issues, through November 1995 — after which Wallis would hand it off to Rilstone because of the problems we'll run into shortly.

Meanwhile, *Warhammer* was Hogshead's major focus in that first year. In many ways, it was *the* reason for the company's existence, because without the attention brought by that major license, nothing else was possible.

A new edition wasn't in the cards, as Wallis didn't feel his company could stand the two-year turnaround that such a revision would take. However, he did have a reprint of the rules ready for the GAMA Trade Show in 1995. By the end of the year, he also published three very different supplements for the game.

Shadows over Bögenhafen (1995) was the first in a series reissuing GW's well-respected *Enemy Within* campaign, while *Apocrypha Now* (1995) reprinted lost *Warhammer* material from old issues of *White Dwarf* magazine. However, *The Dying of the Light* (1995) was Hogshead's most notable publication that first year, because it was the company's first original addition to the *Warhammer* universe. The episodic campaign included adventures by James Wallis, Andrew Rilstone, Phil Masters, Chris Pramas, and others. It proved the creativity that Hogshead was bringing to bear on *Warhammer*.



From 1995–2002, Hogshead published *Warhammer* books every year. It was always their major line. Some of these publications



were very well-received, such as the updated *Enemy Within* campaign (1995–1999), and others less so, such as the updated *Doomstones* campaign (1996–1997, 2001). Perhaps most notably, Hogshead published *Realms of Sorcery* (2001), which finally updated the rushed and poorly loved magic system in the *Warhammer* rulebook.

Of course throughout all of this, Hogshead was a licensee, with all the troubles that can entail. For example, they were never allowed to publish their "Realms of Chaos" book, because Games Workshop didn't want players taking on the roles of nasty chaos beings. GW subsidiary Flame Publications had run into the same problems years previous, when their own supplement was rejected.

The line was surely worth the problems, though, because *Warhammer* sold well — and its supplements sold even better than expected. That meant that Wallis had a strong foundation to build Hogshead upon and therefore gain the opportunity to publish *Bugtown* and other games of his own.

Unfortunately, Hogshead was running into problems, too. They started with a distributor who guaranteed 14 days' payment on all of Hogshead's invoices in return for getting an exclusive to *Warhammer* RPG products in Europe.

And they wanted a *lot* of *Warhammer*.

Hogshead extended a line of credit to pay for the printing of the extra books, promptly shipped them off ... and then waited for payment that didn't appear. By the summer of 1995, the company's cash flow was in shambles. Payment *did* finally show up, but it came in months late and the distributor simultaneously cancelled their deal with Hogshead, leaving them with tons of extra product.

As a result, Wallis had to lay off all the staff ... including himself. He would end up working unpaid for the next nine months while paying off the overdraft. In the process, Hogshead ended up a part-time enterprise. That wasn't enough to stop the company altogether, but it certainly delayed some projects and killed others — which would prevent Hogshead from reaching the potential that Wallis had originally envisioned.

A New Style: 1998—2002

Based on the original schedule, Hogshead was to begin its publication of Wallis' games in 1995 with "FRUP," a satirical fantasy roleplaying game mocking D&D and was based on a subset of the *Bugtown* rules. Unfortunately, Hogshead now had no cash flow for new lines.

Bugtown itself would have been a "major prestige release" in 1996, but this possibility was entirely doomed by Cartoonist Matt Howarth, who decided that he'd prefer to have Erick Wujcik and Phage Press do the release and pulled Wallis' license. Wujcik never published the game; a few years later Wallis destroyed all his notes for *Bugtown*'s game system ... ensuring that neither FRUP (which depended on those same mechanics) nor *Bugtown* would ever come out from Hogshead.

Not that Wallis had much time for writing games. By 1996 he was *also* working in the computer industry to pay the bills, and shortly after that, moved into magazine publishing. Hogshead was running out of his spare bedroom on evenings and weekends. What little time Wallis had was spent on administration, producing a few *Warhammer* products in 1996 and 1997, but none of those original RPGs he had originally envisioned.

Fortunately, things began to look up by the end of 1997. The overdraft had been repaid in 1996, and a year later, cash flow was improved. Wallis moved the company to an office — shared with ProFantasy Software — and hired another employee, Matthew Pook. He was also finally able to publish a game of his own: a slim volume called *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1998).

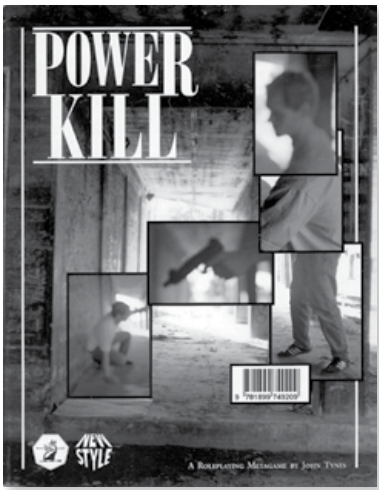
Munchausen was the first of what would later be called Hogshead's "New Style" RPGs. They all went far beyond the normal boundaries set for roleplaying games and expanded the art form; in fact many would call them "story" games, not "roleplaying" games, because they tended to focus on an overall tale, not continuing (or even ongoing) characters. Most of Hogshead's New Style games didn't have dice or even gamemasters.

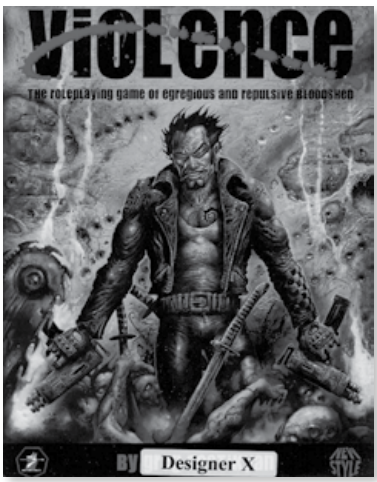


Though Hogshead was probably best known in its lifetime for its *Warhammer* books, in the history of roleplaying games, it's surely their New Style RPGs that will be the most important.

The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen (1998), by James Wallis, began the New Style's focus on storytelling: each







player improvises a story on a suggested topic, then deals with interruptions and complications introduced by other players over the course of his tale. There also tends to be *some* roleplaying within the game, as players are encouraged to stay "in character" when they interject themselves into the stories of their fellows. The game is theoretically competitive, as were most of the New Style RPGs, but at game's end, each player gives away all their winnings to the best storyteller. The connections to Wallis' previous game of storytelling, *Once Upon a Time*, were obvious.

Wallis never expected *Munchausen* to be the start of a series of books, but it gained a fair amount of acclaim, including an Origins nomination for Best New RPG. Besides that, Wallis also knew of a few other games that would fit within the same line, including the web-published *Puppetland* and a game idea that Greg Costikyan had discussed. He began sending out requests to designers, and the New Style line of games was born. They would be both unique and *small*, with the games usually running a scant 24 to 32 pages.

Puppetland (1999), by John Tynes, is a more traditional roleplaying game. At least it's traditional in the fact that players take on the role of characters — though the characters are actually puppets. The gaming system is more unconventional because it's entirely "narrativist," to use the terminology of Ron Edwards. There are no dice and no stats, just a simple set of rules: the GM states events in the past tense; and the PCs respond in character in the present tense. All games are also constrained by a one-hour time limit, real time. A second game, *Power Kill*, was included in the same book, but was more social commentary than game.



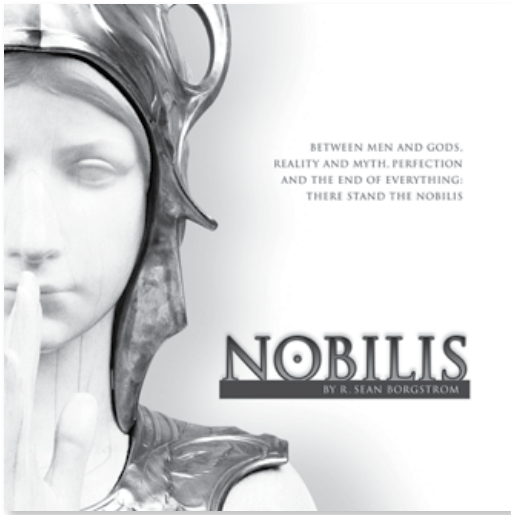
Violence (1999), by Greg Costikyan (aka Designer X), is probably the least well-loved of the New Style games. Like *Power Kill* it is largely social commentary. It uses humor and satire to critique violence in RPGs, and is sufficiently biting that Wallis thinks of it as a "Modest Proposal" for the RPG industry. Set in the modern day, *Violence* lets players do dungeon crawls into places like the homes of illegal immigrants, kill them, and take their stuff. However, satire didn't necessarily produce a playable RPG on its own.

Pantheon and Other Roleplaying Games (2000), by Robin Laws, includes a total of five different competitive storytelling games — or five different scenarios, if you like, as they all use the same "Narrative Cage Match TM" system. In these games players have characters, but they don't exactly play them. Instead, they engage in storytelling, like in *Munchausen* or *Once Upon a Time*. On his turn, a player tells one sentence of a story, during which he must mention "his" character. Players can challenge sentences using a combination of die-rolling and bidding. When everyone runs out of bidding tokens, players wrap up the story and then see who earned points based on a score sheet.



> *"Some people get all tangled up in definitions of what is and isn't a roleplaying game. We call the five games in this book roleplaying games in order to annoy these people. If you see anyone getting hot and bothered over this issue on the Internet, be sure to mock them for us."*
>
> – Robin Laws, *Pantheon and Other Roleplaying Games* (2000)

De Profundis (2001), by Michael Oracz, was the last of the New Style games. It's a Lovecraftian-styled game, but about as far from *Call of Cthulhu* as you can get. It's best remembered for its correspondence rules, which allow players to rather uniquely play the game through the exchange of in-character letters. Like most of the other New

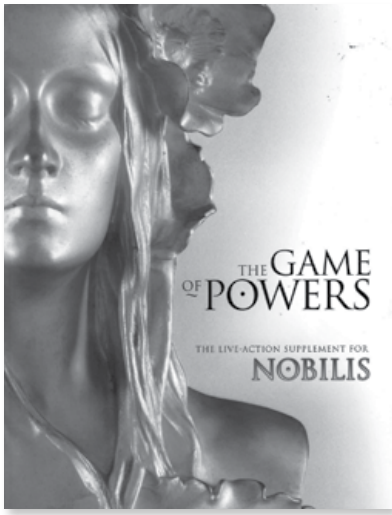


Style games, it didn't include a gamemaster and was oriented toward telling stories.

Nobilis (2002), by Rebecca Borgstrom, isn't considered one of the New Style line, perhaps because Pharos Press had previously published a first edition (1999), perhaps because it was more oriented toward roleplaying than storytelling, and perhaps because it was a humongous book at 304 pages, 10 times the length of many of the New Style releases.

Nonetheless, *Nobilis* was an equally innovative game. PCs are formerly human divine beings called Powers who protect reality (and feud with each other). On the one hand, it was a modern urban fantasy of the sort that was common in the '90s. However, it also had a particularly evocative background and a notable game system — diceless. The resource management of Miracle Points supplements a rank-based contest system — similar to that used by *Amber Diceless Role-playing*. Hogshead's square rulebook was also beautifully produced, making a nice final RPG for Hogshead.

The Game of Powers (2002), a supplement that supported *Nobilis* LARPs, soon followed.



The New Style RPG line was intended to change the way people thought about role-playing. It may still be too early to say how well it succeeded, but the New Style definitely made an impression on people reading the books that Hogshead was producing from 1998–2002, and we do see some of the same themes in the indie movement that's continued past the death of Hogshead.

We can also look at the success of the New Style in another way: by how well its games have survived over the years. Both *Baron Munchausen* and *Puppetland* were reprinted as part of the scholarly *Second Person* (2001,

2007), part of a series of books on narratives published by MIT Press. Wallis also reprinted *Baron Munchausen* through Magnum Opus Press (2008), while John Tynes sold the rights to Puppetland to Sweetpea Entertainment — who was considering a movie. Greg Costikyan has made *Violence* widely available under a Creative Commons license, and *De Profundis* has been reprinted by Cubicle 7 (2010). Finally, *Nobilis* bounced to first Guardians of Order, then EOS Press, who published a third edition of the game (2011).

And so, the New Style lives on.

Small Projects: 1999—2001

Toward the end of its life, Hogshead supplemented its official *Warhammer* books and its New Style releases with a few new projects.

In April 1999, they took over the distribution of *Warpstone*, an "unofficial" *Warhammer* magazine. It was a good partnership for Hogshead as it allowed them to publish material that they couldn't put into official *Warhammer* books.

Shortly thereafter, Hogshead began publishing *SLA Industries* books created by Nightfall Games — a fellow UK game publisher. This resulted in the appearance of a new edition of the *SLA Industries* rulebook (2000) and two original supplements: *The Key of Delhyread* (2001) and *The Contract Directory* (2001).

This is the End: 2002—2004

By the end of 2002, Hogshead Publishing was flying high. *De Profundis* and *Nobilis* had both been very well-received, really showing the interest in New Style, while *Warhammer* continued happily on.

However, another problem lurked in the wings. Hogshead's slogan had always been "Brevior vita est quam pro futumentibus negotium agendo," which roughly translates to "Life is too short to do business with idiots." Sadly, in a hobby that's run more often by enthusiasts than businessmen, there are idiots. And idiots would finally kill Hogshead.

> *"What's the point of making six proof-check passes on a game like Nobilis if the marketplace is going to chew it up and shit it out by Christmas? More importantly, how can you make a profit on that?"*
>
> – James Wallis, Interview, ogrecave.com (2002)

On November 26, 2002, James Wallis announced that he was shutting Hogshead down, saying that "we are bored, creatively frustrated, and increasingly despondent about the future of the specialist games industry." He also stated that he did not believe that Hogshead could improve on the games it produced in the

last year. There were many other factors, as is usually the case. Wallis had never been happy with the administrative work the company required, and it was obvious to him that d20 was pushing out independent publications. So, he decided to stop.

Hogshead shut down in an orderly and professional manner. Their last product was *Fear the Worst* (2002), a *Warhammer* adventure that they released for free on the web. It was written by none other than Mike Mearls, who was just getting his start as a d20 freelancer. Afterward, properties were returned to their previous owners. As we've seen, many of them have continued publication since.

There are two epilogues to Hogshead's story.

The first epilogue involves the company name. Mark Ricketts bought it in early February 2003. He claimed he was buying the company, but there wasn't anything notable left. Some product, a mailing address, and one staff member carried over — but none of the innovative ideas that had made Hogshead notable. Ricketts published two d20 lines, "Crime Scene" and "Fright Night" (2003–2004). Every single Crime Scene and Fright Night supplement methodically chunked out six d20 character classes for a new setting. Though they stopped producing new product in 2004, the new Hogshead continued selling Crime Scene, Fright Night, and New Style books until around 2009, when they disappeared off the net.

The second epilogue involves James Wallis. He couldn't stay out of the field, and in 2007 started up a new company, Magnum Opus Press, in a familiar way — by getting a license for a classic old British FRPG, in this case Dave Morris' *Dragon Warriors*. Magnum Opus published a new 1.1 edition of the game with lots of supplements for a few years (2008–2011) until problems with the licensor brought it to an end on April 1, 2011. The books were all widely available thanks to distribution through Mongoose Publishing's Flaming Cobra. A new company called Serpent King Games — founded by Gareth Hanrahan, Jon Hodgson, and Ian Sturrock — picked up the property after Magnum Opus' license lapsed. They've begun putting the *Dragon Warriors* books back in print through POD at DriveThruRPG.

While publishing the *Dragon Warriors* line, James Wallis put out a few other books through Magnum Opus, including Jonny Nexus' debut novel, *Game Night* (2007) and a new edition of Wallis' own classic, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (2008). He also gathered a "dream team" to create new rules for his long-envisioned FRUP game — replacing the *Bugtown* rule set that had been destroyed over a decade before. The team included Gareth Hanrahan and Jonny Nexus (both of whom had long histories with Mongoose Publishing) as well as Rebecca Borgstrom (author of *Nobilis*). Sadly, the project never really got going. Wallis thought that it might be because *D&D* — long past its clunky *AD&D* days — was no longer an object of scorn.

More recently, James Wallis made his *second* return to gaming, this time thanks to Kickstarter. He raised £24,061 from 1,164 backers to produce *Alas Vegas* (2014?), which he called "Ocean's Eleven directed by David Lynch." It's very much an indie game, but in a new style. Where many indies support one-off adventures, *Alas Vegas* is instead built around a four-session game, allowing more room for plot and character development. It could be a notable innovation for the field, just like the New Style RPGs were in the late '90s.

Alas, *Alas Vegas* does not mark the return of either of James Wallis' companies. The Kickstarter was run under his own name, while the publication of *Alas Vegas* will come about thanks to Pelgrane Press. Still, as Wallis' first new RPG in 15 years — since *Baron Munchausen* — it represents a surprising return to the field for Wallis, and perhaps the start of something new.

What to Read Next

- For Erick Wujcik's company, read ***Phage Press.***
- For the publisher of *Once Upon a Time*, read ***Atlas Games.***
- For the past of *SLA Industries*, read ***Wizards of the Coast,*** particularly the ***Nightfall Games*** mini-history.
- For the future of Mike Mearls, also read ***Wizards of the Coast.***

In Other Eras

- For the past and future of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, read ***Games Workshop*** *['70s],* ***Green Ronin Publishing*** *['00s],* and ***Fantasy Flight Games*** *['90s].*
- For ProFantasy Software, read ***Pelgrane Press*** *['00s].*
- The New Style game authors have produced other influential games in the industry. For a comprehensive history of John Tynes, read ***Pagan Publishing*** *['90s]*; for the major works of Greg Costikyan, read ***West End Games*** *['80s]* and ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*; and for the major works of Robin Laws, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s],* ***Issaries*** *['00s],* and ***Pelgrane Press*** *['00s].*
- For Ron Edwards' GNS theory, read ***Adept Press*** *['00s].*
- For later publishers that have released "New Style" type games, read ***Adept Press*** *['00s],* ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** *['00s],* and ***Evil Hat Productions*** *['00s].*
- For the company that reprinted *De Profundis*, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** *['00s],* and for the company that printed third edition *Nobilis*, read the ***EOS Press*** mini-history in ***Arc Dream Publishing*** *['00s].*

Or read onward to a publisher that moved from a very indie RPG to the mainstream, ***Last Unicorn Games.***

Last Unicorn Games: 1994–2000

Last Unicorn Games is best known for the two years when it produced Star Trek games, but Wizards of the Coast proved the end of them.



1994: Aria Worlds

Aria & *Heresy*: 1994–1996

In 1994 Christian Moore and Owen Seyler — both recent college grads — were rooming together in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Moore was working on the design of a set of miniatures rules and this got them into the gaming mindset. The result, as it turns out, wouldn't be a miniatures game at all, but instead an entirely new roleplaying game, and a company to publish it: Last Unicorn Games.

On their way to publication, Moore and Seyler were joined by others. Greg Ormand helped to fund the company, while Marc

Radle offered graphic design and printing know-how. Bernie Cahill, an entertainment lawyer, provided contacts that would *eventually* prove crucial to the company's future. Those entertainment contacts would come later, however; for now, the new company was concentrating on a game that they thought would change the industry.

Scores of companies founded in the '80s and '90s were convinced that they were creating a roleplaying game that was entirely new and innovative. Most of the results were "fantasy heartbreakers" — games built on the one- or two-decade old designs of *Dungeons & Dragons* and already obsolete themselves. Amidst all those failures there was one RPG that really was new, innovative, and groundbreaking. That was the initial fantasy game produced by Last Unicorn, *Aria: Canticle of the Monomyth*.

Aria was a massive undertaking released as two volumes, *Aria Worlds* (1994) and *Aria Roleplaying* (1994). It grew from a concept of creating societies for game worlds and evolved into a game system containing some of the most innovative ideas found in 20 years of game design.

The biggest difference between *Aria Roleplaying* and other RPGs was that it allowed for play at many different scales. You could play characters, as in a normal roleplaying game, but you could also play societies, orders, or even countries. The idea of playing entities at different scales was mirrored by an ability to play using different time scales from "action" time at one end to "mythic" time on the other.

> *"Before Aria Roleplaying, Chaosium's King Arthur Pendragon (1985) was one of the few games that had looked at all beyond the idea of individual characters, by offering the opportunity to play families. Now, a decade later, Aria massively expanded the idea of who you could play and how.It was the Aria Worlds book that best highlighted the possibilities implicit in the Aria system. It not only rigorously defined societies, but also discussed what sort of 'trials' (task resolutions) these larger entities might become involved in. The societal character sheets it provided were every bit as thorough as those usually created for player characters. I don't think the average kid is going to be willing to do the amount of work that this game fosters."*
>
> – Christian Moore, "An Interview with Last Unicorn Games," *The Canticle #1* (1995)

Some have described *Aria* as the industry's first "intellectual" roleplaying game. This was clearly a strength of the game's design, but also a weakness. Many found the books hard to understand, a problem exacerbated by the decision to redefine many common roleplaying terms, turning the group into an "ensemble," the gamemaster into a "mythguide," and NPCs into "mythguide personas." There were also new terms intended to explain unique concepts, such as "Arias," "canticles,"

"chapters," and "episodes" — all of which denoted different timeframes within a roleplaying campaign. *Aria* got some critical acclaim and generated quite a bit of attention for Last Unicorn Games — though it was probably one of the most-lauded yet least-played games ever in the industry. Last Unicorn soon announced plans for an entire line of *Aria* supplements including *The Canticle* magazine, the *Aria Mythguide Pack*, *Aria Worlds Companion I: Terraforming*, and others. Marc Radle edited *The Canticle* (1995) for two issues, but that marked the end of Last Unicorn's *Aria* support.In the first issue of *Canticle*, Last Unicorn mentioned another project they were working on, *Heresy: Kingdom Come* (1995), a post-apocalyptic/cyberpunk/modern-fantasy collectible card game. It was released shortly thereafter. *Heresy* was a very attractive game, produced uniquely with tarot -sized cards — which made it easier for players to really enjoy the artwork, but harder for collectors to play, because of the lack of tarot-sized card sleeves. It was also very successful.

Upon *Heresy*'s release, all RPG work at Last Unicorn came to a halt, as the founders instead rode the newest fad of the industry. There was some talk of more *Aria* books and also discussion of a possible *Heresy* RPG, but neither emerged.

Last Unicorn would not return to the roleplaying industry for three years.

A *Dune* Interlude: 1996—1997

Over the next couple of years another big change happened at Last Unicorn Games: the company started acquiring licenses to fantasy and science-fiction properties. Last Unicorn's first license was to Frank Herbert's *Dune* novels. The story behind the company's acquisition of the license is an interesting one, because it describes the sort of disconnect that can occur when the gaming and publishing industries meet.

Last Unicorn was interested in a license to *Dune* because they wanted to create another CCG. In order to acquire it, they went to the owner of the literary estate, Brian Herbert. He requested samples of Last Unicorn's work, and they sent him some cards from *Heresy*. Among the samples were cards featuring art from Boris Vallejo. Herbert thought that they were degrading toward women and decided not to work with the young company.

Enter Bernie Cahill, entertainment lawyer extraordinaire. He was able to use his industry contacts to get a license derived from David Lynch's 1984 *Dune* movie. Last Unicorn was soon producing art inspired by the movie, and used that to create *Dune* demo decks for Gen Con. When Brian Herbert heard that he was missing out on an opportunity, he decided that maybe the (supposed) degradation wasn't such a big deal and entered into new negotiations. And that's how Last Unicorn Games ended up with their 1996 license to the *Dune* novels. The license was a

good break for Last Unicorn Games, but not unprecedented given their success in the CCG industry. They soon completed the design of their *Dune* collectible card game (1997); it was developed and published by Five Rings Publishing Group.

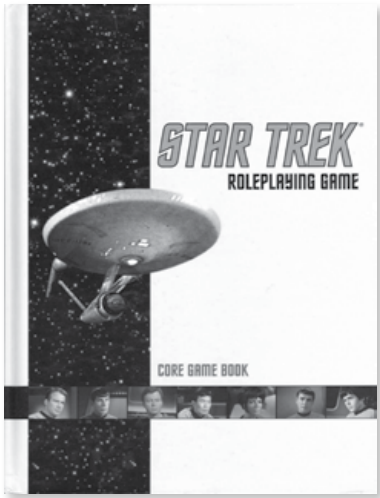
By 1997, however, the CCG boom was beginning to fade. Though they were still talking about publishing *Aria* supplements, Last Unicorn Games' return to the RPG field would take a different form when they received one of the biggest science-fiction licenses around: the RPG rights to the entire *Star Trek* franchise from Paramount. To do this license right, Last Unicorn would relocate from Pennsylvania to Los Angeles, California ... and kick off the most successful role-playing era in the company's history.

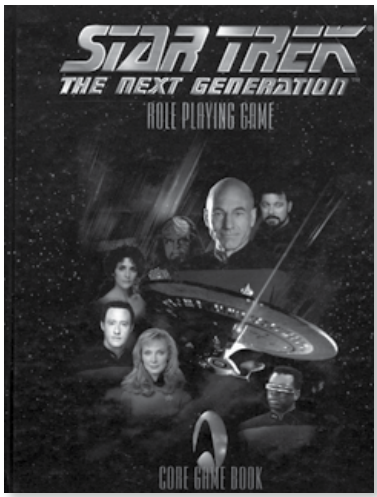
Return to Roleplaying: 1998–2000

It had been almost a decade since FASA's *Star Trek* RPG (1983–1989) came to an end, and now the franchise's universe was considerably richer through 10 more years of televised adventures. At Paramount's request, Last Unicorn Games began work not on a single roleplaying game, but rather a series of roleplaying games, one for each different Star Trek television show, which then included *Star Trek* (1966–1969), *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994), and *Star Trek: Deep Space 9* (1993–1999). They would be released in the style of White Wolf's games of the '90s, with all of the games sharing a common system, but each being specifically designed for the particular styles and themes of its setting. In order to produce the new *Star Trek* games, Moore and Seyler were joined by a trio of authors whose professional careers spanned a who's who of hobbyist companies in the '90s, including AEG, Chaosium, Hero Games, Holistic Design, Steve Jackson Games, and White Wolf. Ross Isaacs came onboard first, as LUG's newest employee, and did the initial work on the "ICON" system with Moore and Seyler. Freelancers Kenneth Hite and Steve S. Long soon joined them — and were even flown out to Los Angeles for two weeks to help get the *Star Trek: The Next Generation Roleplaying Game* ready for the 1998 Gen Con Game Fair.

The collection of designers — whose work ranged from authentic-feeling magic to crunchy superheroes — was eclectic, but together they created the system that would be the heart of all three Star Trek games. The system had some kinks and problems, including character creation that many found overly complex, but its resolution system was quite clean.

> *"Basically, Christian had a central mechanic and some design goals – the system had to be simple, replicate Star Trek type action, and use six-sided dice."*
>
> – Kenneth Hite, "Kenneth Hite Interview," trektoday.com (November 1999)





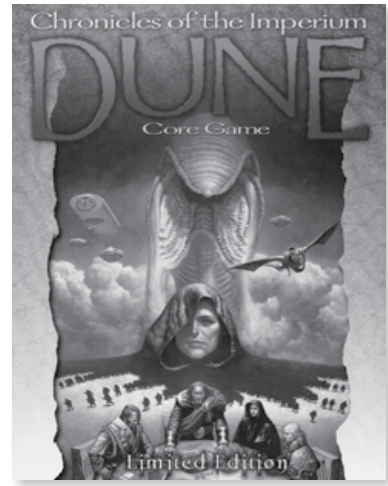


The ICON system made a relatively unique use of dice pools. A number of six-sided dice equal to an attribute were rolled, but then only the best die was kept, and added to a skill in a typical "die + bonus" test. It was reminiscent of both Dream Pod 9's Silhouette system and AEG's "roll and keep" (1997) mechanic. It generally showed the ways in which non-additive dice pools were evolving and changing in the decade since the release of *Shadowrun* (1990).After the design of ICON was done, the three newer co-designers were made line developers for the three games — with Hite taking *Star Trek: The Original Series*, Isaacs taking *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and Long taking *Star Trek: Deep Space 9*. By 1999, both Hite and Long also became full-time Last Unicorn employees, alongside another new recruit, art director George Vasilakos of Eden Studios.

Though largely compatible, the three games did each have their own style. The *Star Trek: The Next Generation Role Playing Game* (1998) had the most intellectual and sophisticated theming, the *Star Trek Role Playing Game* (1999) had the roughshod feel of the original series, and the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine Role Playing Game* (1999) had a dark, sometimes amoral feeling that was also more separated from Starfleet than the other games.The *Star Trek* license quickly made Last Unicorn Games an important mover in the RPG market. They put out 20 total *Star Trek* publications through 2000 and also finished work on a *Dune* roleplaying game, taking advantage of their old Herbert gaming license.

However, things were about to change ...

The Wizards Year: 2000



Despite its success, Last Unicorn was still a small company. In 2000, it had just five full-time employees, two of them working offsite. It also had too much debt — at least according to Decipher, who considered buying them. Cash flow issues were made worse by the fact that the *Dune* RPG was sitting around unprinted due to legal wrangling over the Herbert license.

Fortunately, Last Unicorn had another suitor: Wizards of the Coast. They had two different people suggesting a purchase: Peter Adkison, who was an old friend of Christian Moore; and Ryan Dancey, who was unhappy with the efficiency of Wizard's RPG Department and thought that Last Unicorn was a cleaner and leaner organization. On June 5, 2000, Last Unicorn Games announced that they signed a letter of intent to be acquired by Wizards of the Coast. The acquisition was completed by July. Last Unicorn Games effectively ceased to exist at this point, but the Last Unicorn office remained intact as a remote satellite of Wizards of the Coast.

As part of the deal, Wizards agreed to release Last Unicorn's last two projects.

One was the ICON-based *Dune: Chronicles of the Imperium* (2000), which was published in a limited release of just 3000 copies, most of which were made available at the 2000 Gen Con Game Fair and other cons overseas. The print run wasn't enough to satisfy demand; though prices have come down, it regularly sold on secondary markets for $100–200 for a while.

The other was *Star Trek: Red Alert!* (2000) — a tactical wargame using Fantasy Flight Games' *Disk Wars* (1999) system. It was literally the last game that Last Unicorn worked on before the acquisition, and also the game that they sank more money into than anything else. If not for the acquisition, it could have either saved or sunk the company.

That same Gen Con weekend, Decipher put out an announcement that marked the beginning of the end for Wizard's brand-new Last Unicorn division. Though the Last Unicorn *Star Trek* license was due to expire at the end of 2000, Wizards hadn't bothered to negotiate with Paramount about an extension; they just assumed that they'd get it. Now Decipher was announcing that they'd licensed the rights to *all* Star Trek gaming — supplementing a CCG license they'd held since 1994. Wizards tried to negotiate with Paramount *afterward*, but it was too late. More than a dozen *Star Trek* supplements Last Unicorn had in process were never printed.

Netbooks

In the late '80s and early '90s, the first hints of what would become the internet emerged on college campuses, at military bases, and through early services like AOL and GEnie. These nascent networks gave fans new ways to talk about their favorite RPGs and new opportunities to share their own contributions to those games. Where before players might have kept the monsters, spells, and items made up for their own campaigns to themselves, now they could spread those creations across the world.

Editors soon began to collect these contributions from numerous authors and use them to create "netbooks," which were large sourcebooks covering individual topics. Though a few net-distributed RPGs and at least one set of net-distributed *Champions* characters (by none other than Aaron Allston) can be traced back to 1989, the first "netbook" collection was probably *The Net Spellbook* (1990), a collection of *AD&D* spells prepared by Matthew Presley. By the next year it was joined by *The Net Prayer Book* (1990?), the *Net GURPS Spell Book* (1991), the *Net Monster Manual* (1990), the *Munchkins Handbook* (1991), the *Net Names List #1* (1991), the *Net Plots Book* (1991), the *Net Stupid Character Book* (1991), and the *Net Traps* book (1991). These books tended to be formatted as either plain text or "LaTeX" (an early layout language). They soon became so popular that by 1991 flamewars were being fought over the posting of massive net books to USENET news groups. That didn't stop this new medium of RPG creativity. Netbooks have continued to proliferate in the last twenty-plus years.

Last Unicorn Games' *Star Trek* games have been particularly well-served by netbooks. The first was James David Maliszewski and Patrick Murphy's *LUGTrek Netbook* (1998), a pretty typical collection of templates, overlays, starships, and rules variants. However, after the sudden death of Last Unicorn's *Star Trek*, the netbook community for the game really went crazy. This resulted in numerous single-author books highlighting areas left incomplete by the game's cancellation. Among them are an impressive series of books written by Volker Maiwald that cover *Star Trek: Voyager* (2000?), the movies (2001?), and *Star Trek: Enterprise* (2002, 2004). Extensive *Star Trek* netbooks by other authors cover the Maquis, artificial lifeforms, Cardassians, Trill, and much more. As of this writing, they are all available at coldnorth.com/memoryicon, along with considerable other ICON information, including some unpublished material from Steven Long and links to unpublished material by Steve Kenson and S. John Ross.

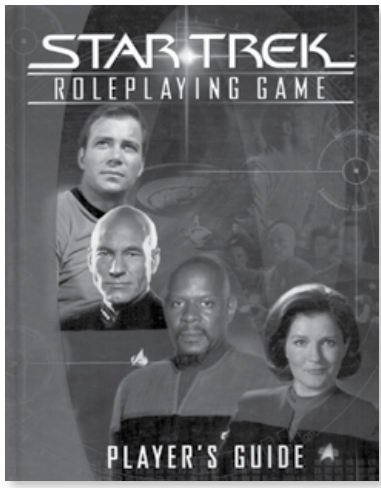
Wizards had no better luck with the *Dune* license. The Frank Herbert estate offered to renegotiate the license, but they wanted much larger fees from Wizards than they had received from Last Unicorn Games. The *Dune* license was lost as well. A d20 *Dune* book that the Last Unicorn team was working on was subsequently shelved.

The end result was that Wizards got very little value from their purchase of Last Unicorn. They still had the ICON system, but were now moving to d20, so it joined games like *DragonQuest* and *Dangerous Journeys* — both acquired by TSR — in Wizards' dark basements. Meanwhile, the licenses were all lost.

One of the few benefits that Wizards saw was *The Wheel of Time Roleplaying Game* (2001), created by the Last Unicorn team and built upon their licensing expertise. However, they wouldn't be around to see it published.

In December 2000, Hasbro told Wizards that they had to cut 10% of their staff. Bill Slavicsek at that time oversaw a team of about 60 people in Wizards' Roleplaying Department; to meet his numbers, he opted to close down the "LA Office" of Last Unicorn. Most of the employees were given the chance to relocate to Seattle, but only Charles Ryan — a later hire — did. For the rest, their time with Wizards came to an end.

The Decipher Years: 2001—2004



What's really astounding is that the Last Unicorn stayed intact for years afterward. As you might recall, there had been another interested party back before the Wizards' acquisition: Decipher Games. They hadn't liked Last Unicorn's debt level, but now Wizards had helpfully taken care of all that debt, then freed up the Last Unicorn staff from contractual obligations. Meanwhile, Decipher went to the trouble of picking up the *Star Trek* RPG license on their own.

In February 2001, Decipher offered the remaining Last Unicorn staff jobs in their new Roleplaying Department. The Last Unicorn crew once more operated as a satellite office — keeping the digs they'd been using while working for Wizards of the Coast. At the time of the acquisition, Last Unicorn was still led by Christian Moore and included Matthew Colville, Kenneth Hite, Ross Isaacs, Steven S. Long, Owen Seyler, and George Vasilakos.

The old Last Unicorn crew created a totally new gaming system for Decipher and released it in a single *Star Trek Roleplaying Game Player's Guide* (2002) that covered all the various eras. They simultaneously created a game for another Decipher "dream license," *The Lord of the Rings Roleplaying Game* (2002).

Last Unicorn had three successful years working for Decipher, during which they produced another 20 or so RPG books. It was a surprising mirror to the years when they published piles of their own books prior to the Wizards acquisition.

Mini-History

Decipher: 1983-Present

Though they only worked in the RPG industry during the Last Unicorn years, Decipher is an old gaming company with a long history. It was founded in 1983 by Warren Holand. Though the company started out producing puzzles, it soon moved on to its well-known "How to Host a Murder" games. The first was *The Watersdown Affair* (1985). Decipher would produce 16 mysteries – through *An Affair to Dismember* (2003) – plus a trio of teen mysteries.

In 1993, Tom Braunlich and Rollie Tesh – both world champions of *Pente*, an old Parker Brothers game that Decipher now published – came to the company with their idea of a licensed CCG. The result was the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* CCG (1994). Over the next years Decipher published CCGs for many of the other Star Trek properties, the *Star Wars CCG* (1995), and eventually the *Lord of the Rings Trading Card Game* (2004). This brought them into the RPG industry's sphere of industry and made them aware of Last Unicorn Games.

Decipher tried to purchase RPG company FASA in 1999, but couldn't come to terms. After Wizards of the Coast laid off the Last Unicorn team in 2000, Decipher snatched them up, and from 2001–2004 used the team to create RPGs for the *Star Trek* and *Lord of the Rings* properties.

When Decipher closed down their RPG Department in 2004, one reason was that the original Last Unicorn team had scattered. However, the company's financial situation had also weakened due to the increasing shrinkage of the CCG market, and that was further worsened by money they invested with Warner Brothers for a *Matrix* CCG license that the Wachowski brothers said they didn't have time to approve – killing the entire potential line.

Decipher's CCG problems were clearly seen in constant changes in the lines from 2001 forward. The *Star Wars CCG* ended just before RPG production began, in late 2001. The *Star Trek CCG* and the *Lord of the Rings TCG* both completed their runs in 2007. During those last years, Decipher tried to recapture their earlier success with a series of new CCGs, from the *Jedi Knights CCG* (2001) to the *WARS Trading Card Game* (2004), but only the *.hack//ENEMY Trading Card Game* (2003) lasted for more than a year.

In 2008, one final reason for Decipher's financial problems became obvious when they were forced to write off $8.9 million dollars in losses, including $1.5 million dollars that they said their VP of Finances had directly embezzled. Though a judge ordered the ex-VP to pay Decipher the full $8.9 million, the company doesn't seem to have recovered. Over 90 employees were laid off at the time and today the company's sole property is *Fight Klub* (2009), a CCG supported by just three sets in the year after its introduction.



However, as time went on, the Last Unicorn Games staff slowly dissipated. Christian Moore and Owen Seyler both got jobs at Upper Deck. Matthew Colville went into the video game industry. Kenneth Hite joined the Steve Jackson Games staff. Ross Isaacs returned to New York. George Vasilakos did too, where he opened a game store and began to concentrate more on his own Eden Studios. Steven S. Long bought Hero Games and moved on to run his own company.

By January 2004, the Last Unicorn Games RPG division of Decipher Games consisted of just Jeff Tidball and Jess Heinig, two designers hired in the interim. Decipher then decided to shut down its RPG division and lay off the remaining staff.

And that was really the *last* of Last Unicorn Games.

What to Read Next

- For another very innovative FRP of the '90s, read ***Phage Press.***
- For the *Dune CCG* publisher, read ***AEG.***
- For companies with dice pools similar to those in ICON, read ***Dream Pod 9*** and ***AEG.***
- For the company that bought and destroyed ***Last Unicorn Games,*** read ***Wizards of the Coast.***

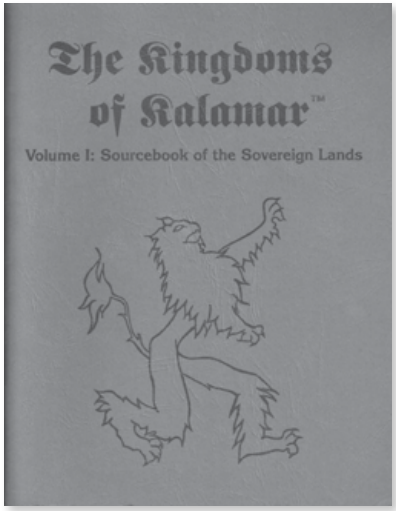
In Other Eras

- For another early game that changed the potential scope of roleplaying, read about *King Arthur Pendragon* in ***Chaosium*** *['70s].*
- For other innovative indie takes on FRPs, read ***Adept Press*** *['00s]* and ***Burning Wheel Headquarters*** *['00s].*
- For the first *Star Trek* game, read ***Heritage Models*** *['70s]*; for the longest-lived *Star Trek* RPG, read ***FASA*** *['80s]*; and for a sort-of *Star Trek* RPG, read ***Task Force Games*** *['80s].*
- Last Unicorn's staff has scattered. For more on Kenneth Hite, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]* and ***Pelgrane Press*** *['00s].* For more on Steven S. Long, read ***Hero Games*** *['80s].* For more on Jeff Tidball, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s].* For more on George Vasilakos, read ***Eden Studios*** *['90s].*

Or read onward for the *Knights of the Dinner Table,* with ***Kenzer & Company.***

Kenzer & Company: 1994–Present

Kenzer & Company is best-known as the publisher of Jolly Blackburn's Knights of the Dinner Table, but it has also put out a variety of RPG books.



1994: The Kingdoms of Kalamar

Before the Knights: 1994—1996

Kenzer & Company was the creation of David Kenzer who — with friends Brian Jelke and Steve Johansson — decided to start a game company. Their initial project was *The Kingdoms of Kalamar* (1994), a systemless fantasy setting. Though small press, it was lauded for its colorful maps and its attention to details — making it in some ways like a more fantasy-oriented version of Columbia Games' classic Hârn.

Being a lawyer, Kenzer actually knew how trademark law worked, and he wasn't afraid to say that his new setting was "suitable for use with *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*" right on the back cover — a stance that had been previously taken by Heritage Models and Mayfair Games, both companies run by an attorney. Kenzer even used almost the same disclaimer text as Mayfair, saying, "*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* is a registered trademark of TSR Hobbies, Inc. Use of this trademark is NOT sanctioned by the holder." However, unlike Mayfair's *Role Aids* products, *AD&D* compatibility wasn't really the core of Kalamar, which genuinely could be used with a variety of game systems.

Kalamar was soon supplemented by an adventure called *Tragedy in the House of Brodeln* (1995), which featured Kenzer's new "ImageQuest Adventure Illustrator." This was basically a pull-out book of illustrations that players could see during the game. It wasn't a new idea; some of the first TSR adventures, including *Tomb of Horror* (1978), did the same thing, but by 1995, the idea was entirely out of vogue, and therefore new again. Kenzer & Company has occasionally used these ImageQuest books throughout their products.

With the CCG explosion ongoing, Kenzer & Company was also working on another project: the *Monty Python and the Holy Grail CCG* (1995), designed by Jelke and Johansson. This new game probably would have been the high point of Kenzer & Company's production ... if not for what came next.

Following publication of *The Kingdoms of Kalamar*, David Kenzer formed a casual relationship with a young RPG company called AEG, who was then putting out *Shadis* magazine. Reviews for the first two *Kalamar* products appeared in *Shadis* and Kenzer also ran ads there. The editor of *Shadis* was a man named Jolly Blackburn.

In 1995, Blackburn decided to leave AEG behind, for reasons more completely described in their history. As part of the agreement he made with his former partners, he got to take with him "Knights of the Dinner Table," a comic strip about a gaming group he drew for *Shadis*. AEG also published three issues of a proper comic book about the Knights (1994–1995).

Now on his own, Blackburn formed a new company called KODT Enteractive Facktory, which was to publish the *Knights of the Dinner Table* comic monthly. While Blackburn was working on getting that new company together, he received a call from the editor of TSR's *Dragon* magazine, asking if the Knights of the Dinner Table strip was now available following Blackburn's departure from AEG. Although Blackburn had originally planned to continue the strip in *Shadis*, he wasn't about to turn down an offer from the most prestigious roleplaying magazine in the business. *Knights of the Dinner Table* began appearing in TSR's house organ with *Dragon #226* (February 1996). Here it would catch the attention of hundreds

of thousands of readers, contributing to the future success of Blackburn's own comic book production.

> *"There was only one problem – it was never my intent to be a one man company. From the outset I had made it known in the industry, I was looking to partner up with someone."*
>
> – Jolly Blackburn, "Cries from the Attic," *Knights of the Dinner Table #100* (February 2005)



While working on *Knights of the Dinner Table #4* (1996), Blackburn came to the conclusion that he really didn't want to go it on his own. Fortunately, he was now being wooed by David Kenzer and the staff of Kenzer & Company — who wanted to get Blackburn to join their company. The turning point came in November 1996 when David Kenzer and others were visiting Blackburn over the course of a local con. On the way to the con that Sunday morning, they stopped by a Dunkin' Donuts. When the Kenzer staff realized they had no cash, one of them suggested that they borrow money from the company cash box, but Kenzer replied, "No. That's company money." That moment convinced Blackburn that Kenzer had the sort of business sense and integrity he was looking for in a partner.

On December 9, 1996, Blackburn announced that he was joining Kenzer & Company. They reprinted issue #4 of *KotDT* in January 1997, and thereafter the company was changed forever.

The Early Years: 1997–2000

Over the next four years, Kenzer & Company had three main product lines. *The Kingdoms of Kalamar* received a couple more expansions (1997), went on hiatus for a few years, and then returned with a set of cheap and small *Kalamar Quest* adventures (1999–2000). *Monty Python & The Holy Grail* continued to sell throughout the late '90s, even receiving one expansion. However, the biggest expansion for Kenzer & Company came through *Knights of the Dinner Table*.

Jolly Blackburn's comic book changed in several ways at Kenzer & Company.

First, it became a group effort. Starting with issue #5 (February 1997), it wasn't just the work of Blackburn, but instead of the "KotDT Development Team," which consisted of Jolly Blackburn, David Kenzer, Brian Jelke, and Steve Johansson.

> *"I had been looking for someone to handle the business side of KODT when I started out. What I hadn't bargained on was the pool of talent that would be brought to bear on the comic along with it."*
>
> – Jolly Blackburn, "Cries from the Attic," *Knights of the Dinner Table #100* (February 2005)

Second, the publication began to expand past its comic book roots, something that Blackburn had promised from the start. In the early issues the most notable expansion came in issue #14 (December 1997), which featured a 16-page pull-out "Game Master's Workshop" section. This sort of material increased as time went on. In issue #30 (April 1999) the table of contents page began to call the comic *Knights of the Dinner Table Magazine* and starting with issue #41 (March 2000), that full text went on the cover too.

Third, *Knights of the Dinner Table* became an integral part of the Kenzer & Company product lines, which were constantly being cross-marketed. For example the "Game Master's Workshop" that appeared in #14 was in part intended to sell the third Kalamar expansion, *Game Master's Workshop, Volume One* (1999), and did so by detailing background from the Kalamar setting.

Fourth, as *Knights of the Dinner Table* grew in popularity at Kenzer — first hitting a circulation of 5,000, then continuing to climb to 10,000 and 20,000 — it was also becoming a cultural phenomenon in the gaming industry. Jolly Roger Games put out *Orcs at the Gate* (1998), a licensed *Knights of the Dinner Table* board game. *Knights of the Dinner Table* miniatures appeared as well. Kenzer & Company themselves put out *Fairy Meat* (2000), a satirical miniatures game derived from the comic strip.

Fifth, the characters and background of *Knights of the Dinner Table* started to take on a life of their own as a sort of alternate reality roleplaying world. Brian van Hoose (of the Knights) was listed as a developer of the *Fairy Meat* game, while Gary Jackson, fictional game designer, wrote forewords for the *HackMasters of Everknight* comic books that Kenzer & Company put out. Playing with this line between the world of the Knights and reality would underlie Kenzer & Company's major 2001 release, as we'll see.

Throughout this time period, Kenzer & Company also tried to launch a few new comic books, without much success. *Avelon* and *The Travelers* were both

comic books by other authors that ran for short times in the late '90s. The aforementioned *HackMasters of Everknight*, its sequel *Everknights*, and *Knights of the Dinner Table Illustrated* were all comics connected to the in-game world of the Knights; they were more successful, with *Everknights* running about 30 issues (over two series) and *Knights of the Dinner Table Illustrated* running 41.

However nothing could compare to the success of the original *Knights of the Dinner Table* — until Kenzer & Company got an even bigger break in 2000.

Dungeons & Dragons, Kalamar & Comics: 2000—2001

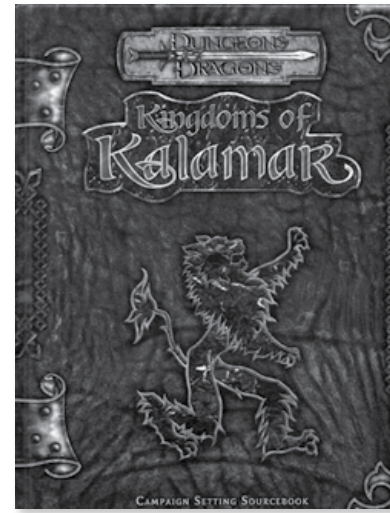
In late 2000, Kenzer & Company rather remarkably picked *three* licenses to *Dungeons & Dragons*: they licensed the rights to publish Kalamar books with the *Dungeons & Dragons* logo, to publish *Dungeons & Dragons* comics, and to use the old *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* system (and many of its supplements) as the basis for a new RPG line.

This sort of thing was entirely unprecedented. TSR had held the *Dungeons & Dragons* trademark close since the early '80s, and now Wizards was doing the same. The scant other companies using *D&D*-related trademarks in the early 2000s had much closer connections to Wizards than Kenzer & Company did: Paizo Publishing got to use the *D&D* trademark itself, but they were basically a continuation of Wizards' Magazine Publishing Department; AEG got to use the "Oriental Adventures" trademark, but only because it went with *Legend of the Five Rings* when they repurchased it; and Sovereign Press got to use the Dragonlance trademark because it was being run by one of the creators of Dragonlance. Kenzer & Company sort of stood out as the odd man out, getting access to Wizards' best trademarks despite little past connection.

It's entirely possible that David Kenzer convinced Wizards to license him these various rights with his cleverness and his legalistic negotiating skills. Whatever the story within the industry, Kenzer & Company neither confirms nor denies (but might wink at if queried) and goes like this:

As part of the 25th anniversary *Dungeons & Dragons* celebration, Wizards of the Coast released the *Dragon Magazine Archive* (1999), which contained the first 250 issues of *Dragon* (plus the 7 issues of *The Strategic Review*). The entire contents of these issues were presented, which happened to include numerous *Knights of the Dinner Table* strips, from issue #226 up.

If the stories are to be believed, Wizards didn't actually have the rights to reprint the Knights strips in this format, and as you'll recall David Kenzer was a lawyer who knew about this sort of thing. Supposedly, this was the lever that he used to get Kenzer & Company its three *D&D* licenses.



Generally rumors, innuendo, and unconfirmed reports have been kept out of these histories, but this one is too fun to pass up, and it's been included with appropriate caveats.

However they did it, in 2001, Kenzer & Company was able to start publishing *Dungeons & Dragons*-related products.

The Kingdoms of Kalamar line was relaunched as a brand-new, hard-cover campaign setting book (2001). It beat Wizards' *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* (2001) and AEG's *Rokugan Campaign Setting* (2001) to market, and was the first official third edition campaign setting to be released. Thanks to its early market position and the *Dungeons & Dragons* trademark, the new Kalamar line did much better than its first incarnation. Over the course of *D&D* 3E, Kenzer & Company published over 40 Kalamar publications and supported a Living Kingdoms of Kalamar setting run by the RPGA.

The *Dungeons & Dragons* comic line was not as successful. Kenzer & Company ran four mini-series — *In the Shadow of the Dragon* (2001–2002), *Tempest's Gate* (2001–2002), *Black & White* (2002–2003), and *Where Shadows Fall* (2003–2004) — before canceling the line. Though all of these comics were set in the "default" *D&D* setting of Greyhawk, they didn't have the strong setting details of the DC comics of 1988–1991, and have since been forgotten. The comic rights were next picked up by Devil's Due Publishing, who was able to more successfully print comic adaptations of *Dragonlance* and *Forgotten Realms* novels, and have since moved to IDW.

This brings us to the third set of rights that Kenzer & Company acquired in late 2000, rights which would allow them to produce their first RPG: *HackMaster*.

Enter *HackMaster*: 2001

HackMaster was the imaginary game played by the characters in the *Knights of the Dinner Table* comic strip. When Blackburn joined Kenzer & Company, David Kenzer got in on the joke too. In one of his early *Kingdoms of Kalamar* ads, he wrote "suitable for any rules system, including, but not limited to *HackMaster* and *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*."

Blackburn had been toying with the idea of making *HackMaster* into a real game for at least half a decade. In 1995, when he was working on his own, he'd

even hired a freelancer writer to produce a one-off satirical product, but that fell through. More recently, Kenzer & Company had considered licensing *HackMaster* to White Wolf and Palladium, but neither of those possibilities came through either — probably to Kenzer & Company's ultimate benefit.

In order to correctly adapt Blackburn's imaginary game to the real world, Kenzer & Company decided that they needed access to the original *AD&D* game, which was the source of most of the jokes in *Knights of the Dinner Table*; this was the final license that David Kenzer acquired from Wizards of the Coast.



HackMaster (2001) — officially released as a "fourth edition" to stay a step ahead of Wizards — was an odd duck. It was essentially a third edition of the original *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* game, but a subtler third edition than Wizards' own 3E. Its changes from second edition *AD&D* were expansions, not the total rewrites of 3E — and more like the changes between the first edition and second edition of the original *AD&D* game. Though *HackMaster* felt a lot like *AD&D*, it featured a more comprehensive game system that included character flaws and a few other new ideas.

Beyond that, the main differences between *HackMaster* and the original *AD&D* were stylistic.

First, *HackMaster* was explicitly a satire written in the mold of the jokes from *Knights of the Dinner Table*. You had swack-iron dragons, +12 HackMasters, a d10,000 critical hit table, and other silliness. It was, in fact, purposefully silly, as that was a requirement of the license.

> *"Just to clarify, our previous license required that HackMaster 4th Edition be a 'parody' and approval for HM product required a certain bit of 'silliness' to be sprinkled about."*
>
> – "HackMaster Basic," kenzerco.com (2009)

Second, *HackMaster* mirrored the *Knights* comics by more explicitly positioning the game as a conflict between the gamemaster and the players. In particular the *Game Master's Guide* (2001) gave the gamemaster specific rules for tormenting players through the flaws that they'd chosen for their characters.

The result was an immediate success. Part of this was because readers had been amused by the second-hand tales of *HackMaster* for a decade, and now wanted to see the actual game. However, Kenzer & Company was also able to take advantage of a backlash against the third edition of *D&D*. Though it was nothing like the backlash the *fourth* edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* would face, there *were* people who wanted to keep playing *AD&D*, and *HackMaster* was the first release that allowed them to do so — years before Goodman Games' *Dungeon Crawl Classics* (2003), Troll Lord Games' *Castles & Crusades* (2004), or the many retroclones that followed it.

The 3E Years: 2001—2008

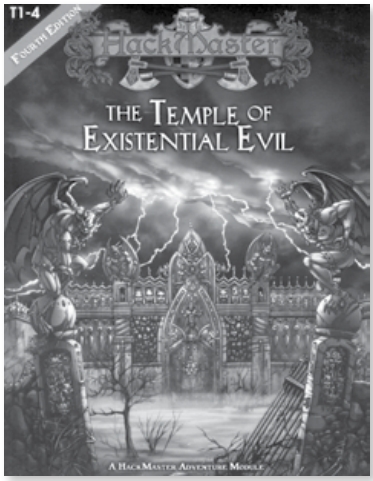
Over the 3E years, Kenzer & Company was one of the major FRPG publishers, a much better position than what they enjoyed in the '90s — and quite possibly better than what they'll see from here on out. However, there were ups (particularly in the early days) and downs (particularly in the later days).

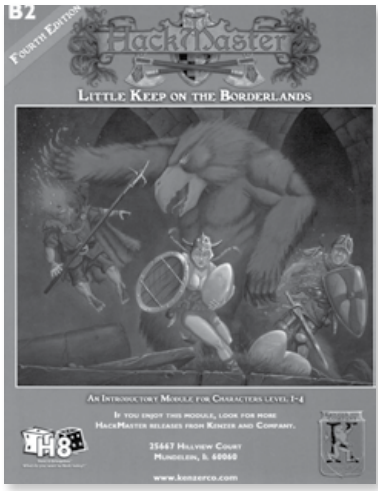
As noted already, Kingdoms of Kalamar continued through over 40 supplements. The earliest Kalamar releases were hefty hardcover books that proudly portrayed logos for both *Dungeons & Dragons* and Kingdoms of Kalamar. However, 2005 was the last year where Kenzer would get to use the *D&D* trade dress, which appeared for the final time on books like *Black as the Brightest Flame* (2005), *Friend & Foe: The Elves and Bugbears of Tellene* (2005), and *Perils of Pekal* (2005). Afterward, the Kalamar line was released in a scaled back form. The books were primarily available as PDFs, with black & white artwork on their covers. It was a notable drop, but not a surprising one considering the considerable decline in the d20 market by that time.

Just when they were cutting back on Kalamar, Kenzer & Company added a second d20 line to their catalog. Necromancer Games had been looking for a new publisher, and so Kenzer & Company printed some of their adventures for a short time, from *K1: A Family Affair* (2005) to *K9: Elemental Moon* (2007). *Elemental Moon* was one of Necromancer's final publications, as is described more completely in their own history.



Meanwhile, Kenzer & Company was supplementing *HackMaster* in an innovative and unusual way. When they'd licensed the rights





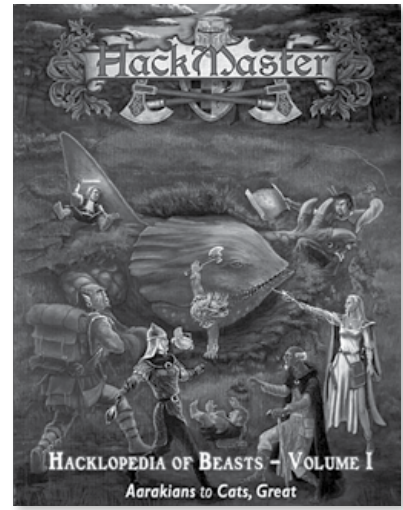


to *AD&D*, Kenzer & Company also licensed the rights to many of *AD&D*'s original adventures. This meant most of the early *HackMaster* modules were satirical "rehacks" of classic adventures, from *G1–3: Annihilate the Giants* (2002) to *White Doom Mountain* (2005). The rehacks weren't the entirety of Kenzer's *HackMaster* production in its first several years, which also included: an eight-volume *Hacklopedia of Beasts* (2001–2002); several splatbooks, from *The Combatant's Guide to Slaughtering Foes* (2003) to *The Zealot's Guide to Wurld Conversion* (2003); and even a "mysterious all original" adventure, *Road to Aster* (2004). However, they were the majority — and what people remembered the most.

As with Kalamar, the *HackMaster* line changed after 2005. There were no more rehacked adventures afterward. In addition, just like Kalamar, new adventures were presented with a black & white cover and available primarily as PDFs. Though these new adventures were no longer rehacked satires, Kenzer & Company still maintained the numbering of the old TSR modules with releases like *B3: House of Madness* (2008), *S5: Dead Gawd's Hand* (2007), and *S6: Isle of Death* (2008).

"Tens of thousands of fans who embraced the game figured it out, many of whom considered HM4E to be what D&D 3e SHOULD have been – the next iteration of Gygax's masterful RPG."

– *Hackmaster: A History* (2012)





Kenzer & Company also published some products uniting Kalamar and *HackMaster* as they began to search out new product lines following the license losses of 2005. This included a PDF series that ran from *YK1: The Hungry Undead* (2007) to *YK3: Sometimes They Come Back* (2007), which reprinted some of the adventures from the long-ago *Kalamar Quests* books (1999–2000).

Though it appears that Kenzer & Company lost their *D&D* brand license and their rehacking license at the end of 2005, they maintained their rights to publish the *AD&D*-derived *HackMaster* for a few years thereafter. Then, on July 12, 2007, word got out that Kenzer & Company's remaining license from Wizards of the Coast was expiring. Some fans thought it a sign that D&D 4E was on the way, but Kenzer & Company said that their license had just come to a natural end. They would continue publishing their final *HackMaster* products, as we've seen, through the end of 2008.

During the years of 3E, *Knights of the Dinner Table Magazine* continued publishing at Kenzer & Company on a monthly schedule. The magazine celebrated its 100th issue in February 2005, becoming one of the very few RPG periodicals to hit that benchmark — a small club that included *Dragon*, *Dungeon*, (arguably) *White Dwarf*, and the classic APA *Alarums & Excursions*. A few years later, when Wizards of the Coast cancelled *Dungeon* and *Dragon* in September 2007, *Knights of the Dinner Table* also become the longest-running professional RPG magazine still in print, starting with issue #134 (October 2007).

But that success was against a backdrop of Kenzer & Company's other lines slowly fading away. As we're already seen, starting in 2006 the d20 and *HackMaster* lines were notably scaled back, in 2007 Necromancer's books ended, and finally in 2008 the Kalamar line and the *HackMaster* fourth edition line came to a final end.

If Kenzer was going to stay in the RPG business, new products were needed.

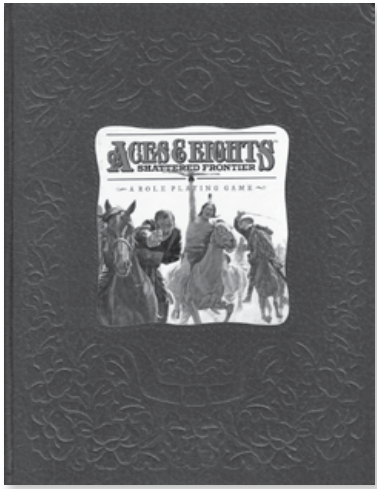
An Independent Future: 2005-Present

Kenzer & Company was looking at the possibilities of game lines that didn't depend on Wizards' trademarks as early as 2005. That's when they published *Aces & Eights: Showdown* (2005). *Showdown* was a clever western man-to-man combat system that centered on a clear plastic overlay called the "Shot Clock." The overlay was placed over the picture of a gunslinger and showed where your shot hit if you missed your roll. The next year Kenzer & Company tried something else unique: a pair of fantasy "SoloQuest" adventures — *Brothers by Blood* (2006) and *Fallen from Grace* (2006) — which each used cut-down versions of the *HackMaster* rules.

Though the *SoloQuests* didn't go anywhere, the Shot Clock was soon expanded into a full roleplaying game: *Aces & Eights: Shattered Frontier* (2007). It was a handsome book, printed with a leather-bound cover and high-quality period illustrations — some of them printed as full-color plates. Generally, the book's stylistic nuances got high praise.

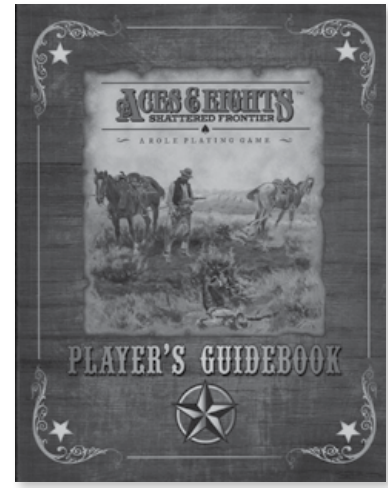
Mechanically, the characteristics in the game are largely derived from *HackMaster*, but from there *Aces & Eights* diverges from Kenzer's first RPG. It features a percentile-based skill system, the aforementioned Shot Clock combat system, and a unique set of supplemental rules. These modular supplements are where the game really shines, as each module represented a large-scale system of the sort that most RPGs only use to model combat. In *Aces & Eights*, you can additionally engage in barroom brawls, horse chases, prospecting, cattle drives, and gambling — each using different game systems.

Generally, the mechanics of *Aces & Eights* are pretty traditional — the sort you found in the '90s, with lots of emphasis on exhaustive detail. However, the mechanics are well-considered, thorough, and at places innovative.



Though a western, Aces & Eights is based in an alternate history called the "Shattered Frontier." It's basically the Old West with a lot more opportunity for conflict, since the Civil War ended in a stalemate and the Indians are still strong.

With its good mechanics, attractive form, and interesting setting, *Aces & Eights* was well-received. It even won the 2007 Origins award for Best RPG. Since its release, *Aces & Eights* has been supported by a couple of adventures or supplements each year.



Kenzer & Company's next new line was based on a Wizards of the Coast property: as *Dungeons & Dragons* 4E blossomed in 2008, Kenzer & Company decided to give it a try. However, David Kenzer was entirely unwilling to sign the GSL that Wizards of the Coast was offering. He published an impressive 501-page PDF of *Kingdoms of Kalamar* (2008) for *D&D* fourth edition without authorization from Wizards. It was of course the same thing he'd done with his Kalamar supplements in the '90s, and Kenzer was again happy to explain that Wizards of the Coast didn't have to give any approval for other publishers to create supplements for their game system.

> *"[T]hat is not copyright infringement. [C]opyright infringement is basing your work on someone else's creative expression. Rules are not creative expression. Also, it is not 'based' on their rules. It happens to 'work with' their rules. Should every programmer that writes a program that works with a computer have to pay the owner of the OS it runs on? I think not. I could be wrong, but fortunately, the US and International copyright laws agree with me."*
>
> – David Kenzer, Open Posting (2008)

Kenzer & Company never followed up on their one *D&D* 4E release, suggesting that they learned the same lesson that most 4E publishers did: it wasn't nearly as successful as d20 had been.

Most recently, Kenzer & Company published a new edition of *HackMaster*, to replace the line that they'd closed down at the end of 2007 when their final license from Wizards of the Coast expired. Work on the line actually began way back in 2004, when Kenzer saw the end of its licenses fast approaching. However, Kenzer & Company decided to initially develop their new gaming engine for a western setting ... which of course resulted in *Aces & Eights*. Only afterward did the company begin to apply its new system to *HackMaster* itself.

As the years went by following the publication of *Aces & Eights*, it became increasingly obvious to Kenzer & Company that there was going to be a considerable gap in their production due to the continued development on the new *HackMaster*. They decided to release an introductory version of the game.



HackMaster Basic (2010) covered the first five levels of play for the new *HackMaster* system. Though the main goal was to give players a first look at the new *HackMaster*, Kenzer & Company felt like *HackMaster Basic* also helped to resolve the problematic entry cost of their game — as players had complained that the previous version of *HackMaster* was too expensive with its $80 cost for three books (about $100 in today's dollars).

Shortly after the publication of *HackMaster Basic*, Kenzer & Company supplemented it with *Frandor's Keep* (2010), which featured adventures for all five levels of *Basic* play. The resulting mini-campaign was set in the Kingdoms of Kalamar and though it evoked the feel of TSR's *B2: The Keep on the Borderlands* (1980), it was definitely not a satire — really differentiating it from the humorous books of *HackMaster* fourth edition. Other than that, fans had to depend mainly on *Knights of the Dinner Table Magazine* and the long-running *HackJournal* (2002-Present) for more *HackMaster* information ... until the full system came out.

The complete release began (much as with *AD&D*) with the fall release of *Hacklopedia of Beasts* (2011), a single massive hardcover volume. It was followed by the *HackMaster Player's Handbook* (2012), like its predecessor produced as a large hardcover — though with a leatherette cover, rather than the *Hacklopedia*'s "dragonscale." A *HackMaster GameMaster's Guide* (2014?) is intended to finish the set.

The new *HackMaster* (called "Advanced HackMaster" in its early days and called "5e" by many fans) maintains some of its foundation in *AD&D*, and so you'll find the basic six stats, standard races and classes, and saving throws. However, the new *HackMaster* changes at least as much as it keeps the same. Skills remain a percentile-based roll-under system, but are less esoteric than in *HackMaster* fourth edition. There are still "quirks and flaws," but they're not ridiculous as in the previous system. Mages now use Spell Points when casting. Many dice are now "exploding," meaning that if you roll a maximum result, you roll again and add. There's also been a heavy push toward realism, particularly in combat. Combat further tries hard to keep players involved by having all movement be simultaneous and occurring second by second. Perhaps more notably, almost all actions in the

new *HackMaster* depend upon opposed roles — including combat, saving throws, and even skill tests.

The overall result feels a lot like a game of *AD&D* twisted into a fantasy heartbreaker, as it would have been done in the '80s. One reviewer calls the result, "Old-School Feel with New-School Mechanics."

> *"In many ways HackMaster Basic is the anti-4E. D&D 4E is about maintaining a near-perfect balance between the classes, strict adherence to rolls, and maintaining it all through an exceptions-based rules engine. HackMaster is about randomness tempered by mechanics. "*
>
> – Kenneth Newquist, "Initial Thoughts About HackMaster Basic," *Nuketown* (July 2009)

The long-term success of the new *HackMaster* game is still to be seen. Kenzer & Company certainly had an audience that might be interested in an *AD&D* variant back when their RPG lines were at their heights in the early '00s. It's clear the interest isn't as high now, given Kenzer & Company's very slow production schedule — but it very well could be enough to support a new, niche RPG line.

However, whether the new *HackMaster* ultimately succeeds or fails, it's likely that Kenzer & Company's biggest line in the '10s will be the same as their biggest line in the '90s: *Knights of the Dinner Table*.

What to Read Next

- For Jolly Blackburn's former company, read ***AEG.***
- For the creator of d20 and Kenzer's licensor during the *HackMaster* "fourth edition" years, read ***Wizards of the Coast.***

In Other Eras

- For the producers of Hârn, read ***Columbia Games*** *['80s]***.**
- For other companies sure of their legal right to create *D&D* supplements, read ***Heritage Models*** *['70s]* and ***Mayfair Games*** *['80s]***.**

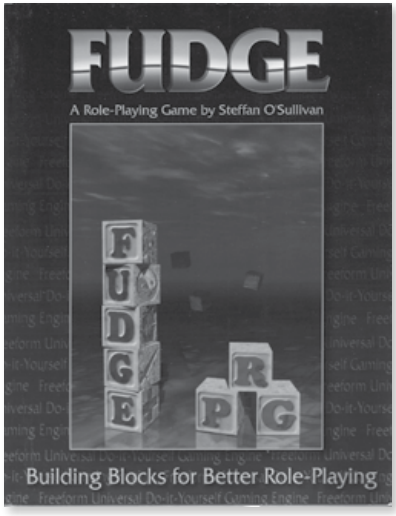
Or read onward for the publisher of *Fate*'s precursor, ***Grey Ghost Press.***

Grey Ghost Press: 1995–Present

Grey Ghost Press is a small RPG company that publishes FUDGE, which in 1992 became the first open-source RPG, eight years before d20.

Before Grey Ghost: 1992—1995

In the early '90s, the Internet was still the non-commercial domain of colleges and the military. Because of that collegiate presence, it's only natural that as the Internet grew, it became a place for talking about games. David Martin's *Ars Magica* Mailing List, Walter Milliken's *GURPS* Digest, Andrew Bell's *RuneQuest* Digest, and James Perkin's *Traveller* Mailing List were among the first forums created to discuss specific games.



1995: FUDGE

Beyond these specialized mailing lists, more general, global newsgroups supported a variety of topics. One of these was the rec.games.design USENET group, where readers would occasionally try to create a "net.rpg," which was to be a tabletop roleplaying game designed by consensus on the Internet.

Of course, nothing *ever* gets done by consensus on the Internet.

Enter Steffan O'Sullivan. He was a *GURPS* writer with projects like *GURPS Swashbucklers* (1990) and *GURPS Bunnies & Burrows* (1992) under his belt. However, he grew just the slightest bit dissatisfied with *GURPS* because of its rigidity: it didn't scale well — as *GURPS Bunnies & Burrows* made obvious when it had to manipulate the system to support a rabbit game — and it also didn't allow freeform play. A project that O'Sullivan had been working on called "GURPS Faerie" fell apart for similar reasons.

So when the topic of a net.rpg came up in rec.games.design (again), late in 1992, O'Sullivan decided to take a controlling hand. He proposed a more freeform game system than was generally being considered and also announced that he'd be taking a leadership role to make sure it got done — which made him responsible for all final decisions, *not* a committee.

> *"So the third time it came up (November 1992), and people were happily debating about incredibly detailed and complex skill rules, I decided to try an experiment. As I said, I wasn't consciously dissatisfied with my current RPG, so I'm not sure what unconscious forces prompted the experiment. Nevertheless, I posted a statement to the effect that I was creating a splinter group: I wanted to create a rules-light, freeform type of game, and I wanted people's input in such a game to make it the best possible game we could."*
>
> – Steffan O'Sullivan, "Fudge Designer's Notes," panix.com/~sos (2001)

This post, made on November 17, 1992, included quite a few system details in a document just 1,600 words long. O'Sullivan also gave his system a "catchy name": SLUG, which stood for "Simple, Laid-back Universal Game." Although O'Sullivan's SLUG was a complete standalone game, it also represented a first look at what soon became known as *FUDGE*, or the "Freeform, Universal Donated Gaming Engine," which was itself released for free as a more comprehensive game on December 7, 1993.

As a game system, *FUDGE* was simple and freeform. Really, it was more a toolkit than an actual game. It didn't define specific attributes or skills, but instead provided mechanical systems that game masters could adapt as they saw fit. The action resolution system was equally simple: a player rolled two dice that modified a skill or attribute up or down — with the value of the original skill or attribute being the average result. We'll talk more about the specifics of the game momentarily, when it reaches its "final" form. But for now we can say that in 1993 — compared especially to wargame-influenced games like *GURPS* — *FUDGE* was a breath of fresh air.

Even more notable is the fact that *FUDGE* was released under what was effectively the industry's first open gaming license. Though it was copyrighted by O'Sullivan, *FUDGE* could be freely distributed or supplemented. O'Sullivan even offered a "FUDGE Commercial License," which allowed people to print *FUDGE* games as long as they sent O'Sullivan two of the resultant hardcopies. (Unlike the OGL that would come out of the d20 movement, the *FUDGE* license required a signed contract from O'Sullivan, primarily to protect him from any litigation.)

Grey Ghost over the Years: 1995—2003

Here Ann Dupuis enters our story. She was a friend of Steffan O'Sullivan's who was interested in starting a game company. She wanted to use *FUDGE* as her flagship game, and O'Sullivan willingly agreed, provided that the game also remain free on the Internet. Dupuis then created Wild Mule Games and released a limited print edition (1994) of *FUDGE*.

The next year Dupuis incorporated her company first as Ghostdancer Press, then changed that name to Grey Ghost Press. She also convinced O'Sullivan to polish up a new rule set for *FUDGE*, which was released to the Internet in June 1995. Afterward, Grey Ghost published this new edition as their first large-scale *FUDGE* release (1995). The system name had now changed as well, becoming the "Freeform Universal *Do-It-Yourself* Gaming Engine."

There were quite a few changes to *FUDGE*'s mechanics in this new edition, but one of the most notable had to do with the dice. Previously, *FUDGE* used a few different methods to generate results that ran from -4 to +4, but they all required more math than was desired. Then O'Sullivan had seen Koplow dice that simply contained "+" and "-" signs. He modified them slightly, and the result was "FUDGE dice," each of which contained two plusses, two minuses, and two blank sides. A player rolled four of them and got a result from +4 to -4; even better, the result could be assessed with a quick glance. *FUDGE* dice have since become iconic of the game system — literally so, as they are depicted on the modern *FUDGE* logo.



With these final tweaks, *FUDGE* coalesced into its "finished" state, which would be used and reused by a variety of people over the years. However, despite that finalization, the game was still a toolkit — and sufficiently abstract that it was more of

a game system toolkit than a game toolkit. At best, it gave long lists of possibilities for core mechanical values like attributes and skills, not specifics that could form the basis of an actual game. However, all the tools were there, in the form of a number of simple and effective mechanics.

Much of the *FUDGE* game system centers on a set of seven "trait levels." Running from best to worst, *FUDGE*'s "suggested sequence" of traits is: superb, great, good, fair, mediocre, poor, and terrible. Though these traits could be expressed as numerical values from -4 to +4, *FUDGE* instead used words to make the game more approachable. It was a similar to what Jeff Grubb did when designing *Marvel Super Heroes* (1984) for TSR.

To take an action in *FUDGE*, a character uses an attribute or a skill and rolls a set of four *FUDGE* dice. The average result of those dice is +0, but the sum can vary from -4 to +4. The result modifies the original trait level up or down, revealing the final level of success. For example, a character with a "good" attribute that rolls a +1 could accomplish a "great" task — or overcome some opponent who only rolled a "good" result.

FUDGE also includes the idea of "FUDGE points." Much like the many varieties of "luck" or "drama" points that danced through spy games of the '80s before going mainstream with *Star Wars* (1987), *FUDGE* points allow players to choose to reroll or even automatically succeed at some tasks when they think it's in the best interests of the narrative or their characters to do so.

The rest of the *FUDGE* rules are an unlikely mishmash of very crunchy mechanics (including a "scale" attribute for size that applies multipliers to mass and speed and a complex combat system) and very narrative gaming ideas (including an alternative combat system that's more story-focused), the latter of which foreshadow the indie movement of the '00s. Altogether, *FUDGE* was unique and that's exactly what Ann Dupuis needed to get her company going in the '90s.

Grey Ghost Press is — and has always been — a very small press. Since 1995, Dupuis has regularly shown up at trade shows and kept *FUDGE* in print, but new publications from Grey Ghost have been pretty rare.

Over the years, her scant products have included: *Gatecrasher Second Edition* (1996), a small press science-fiction game converted to *FUDGE*; *A Magical Medley* (1997), a collection of *FUDGE* magic systems; *Santa's Secret* (1998) and *Another Fine Mess* (2000), both *FUDGE* adventures; *Fudge Expanded Edition* (2000); and the *FUDGE*-based *Terra Incognita* game (2001). Ironically after many years of Origins Award nominations, it was Grey Ghost's one non-*FUDGE* book that won an award, Aaron Rosenberg's *Game Mastering Secrets* (2002).

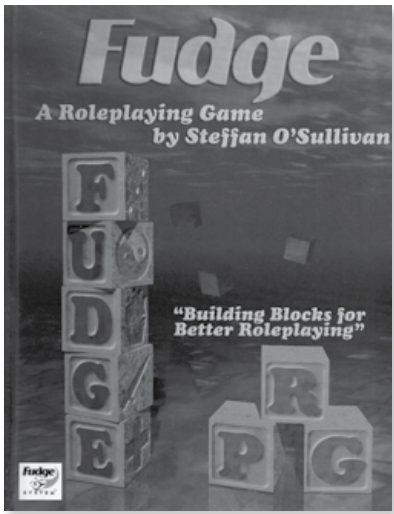
You'll note that in the year 2000, the name of O'Sullivan's game changed from *FUDGE* to *Fudge*. "Just Fudge it" had always been the philosophy behind the

game; in truth, the original acronym had been derived from the philosophy. Besides, O'Sullivan didn't like the fact that the game name always seemed to be SHOUTING.

OGL & Other Trends: 2004-Present

In the last several years, things have changed at Grey Ghost. Steffan O'Sullivan officially transferred *Fudge* rights to Grey Ghost in March 2004; Dupuis continues to support O'Sullivan's ideals by making *Fudge* available for free from the Grey Ghost website.

In 2005, Grey Ghost released its largest books ever, both hardcovers: the *Fudge Tenth Anniversary Edition* (2005), which included piles of options, and *The Deryni Adventure Game* (2005), a new *Fudge* RPG based on Katherine Kurtz's novels. To date, they remain Grey Ghost's latest products. However, they by no means represent the final word on *Fudge*.





Besides these big 2005 releases, Grey Ghost also took advantage of its new ownership to change the way in which *Fudge* was licensed. Dupuis prepared a Fudge system resource document (SRD), which was essentially the text from the *Expanded Edition*, and released it under the Open Gaming License and a Fudge System Trademark License. This brought O'Sullivan's old (and visionary) ideas about free gaming into the 21st century realities that had earlier been defined by Ryan Dancey at Wizards of the Coast.

A half-dozen publishers have since registered their Fudge games and Fudge conversions with Grey Ghost. Full Fudge games include Carnivore Games' *Now Playing* (2004) and *The Unexplained* (2010), ComStar Media's *Mecha Aces* (2005), Avalon Games' *Fudge Horror: Vampires* (2007), and Seraphim Guard's *HeartQuest* (2002). Some of the older games, such as *HeartQuest*, remain licensed under the original license, instead of the OGL.

"As fond as I am of Fudge, it's always come off pretty half-baked to me. I'm not going to get into the Is It A Complete System Or Not argument again – though I think it's enough of one as to render that argument as only so much noise – but if there's one thing we did a lot of in FATE and did well, it was examples. Fudge has occasionally seemed pretty light on that front – it wanted to offer a world of options to GMs, but didn't do a lot to help guide their decision making process regarding those options."

– Fred Hicks, "The FATE Interview," rpgblog.typepad.com (2005)

However, it was Evil Hat Productions who made modern interest in *Fudge* explode when Fred Hicks and Robert Donoghue created a *Fudge*-variant called *FATE*, or *Fantastic Adventures in Tabletop Entertainment* (2003) — as is more fully described in the history of Evil Hat. The preliminary third edition of *FATE* as embodied in Evil Hat's *Spirit of the Century* (2006) was used by a variety of modern-day publishers — including Adamant Entertainment, Cubicle 7 Entertainment, and VSCA Publishing — producing some of the most acclaimed indie games of recent years, including Cubicle 7's *Starblazer Adventures* (2008), VSCA's *Diaspora* (2009), and Evil Hat's *The Dresden Files* (2010). Meanwhile, Evil Hat has recently produced their fourth edition of *FATE* as *Fate Core* (2013).

It's unclear how much influence Grey Ghost or the original *Fudge* will have on gaming as it continues into the '10s, but the recent proliferation of *FATE* games makes it obvious that Steffan O'Sullivan's 20-year-old free gaming system is still alive and well.

What to Read Next

- For another freeform game of the era with ranked traits, read ***Phage Press.***
- For how Steffan O'Sullivan foresaw a lawsuit, read ***Wizards of the Coast.***
- For the OGL more recently used by Grey Ghost, read ***Wizards of the Coast.***

In Other Eras

- For the company Steffan O'Sullivan freelanced for, read ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]***.**
- For the future of *FUDGE* in *Fate*, read ***Evil Hat Productions*** *['00s]*
- For another company making major use of *Fate*, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** *['00s]***.**

Or read onward for an unsuccessful attempt to resurrect *Traveller*, at ***Imperium Games.***

Imperium Games: 1996–1998

Imperium Games at first looked like it would be the successor to GDW as a premier publisher of new Traveller merchandise. Unfortunately, it soon became apparent that Imperium had core problems with its production model, and that there was a discontinuity between Imperium and its true owners.

GDW & Far Future: 1996



1996: Marc Miller's Traveller

On January 5, 1996, GDW — the former publishers of the one-time top science-fiction roleplaying game, *Traveller* — closed up shop. Rights for GDW's games reverted to various creators, and for *Traveller*, that was Marc Miller.

Marc Miller by this time had been out of the industry for five years — since his departure from GDW in 1991. In his absence, GDW had completely revamped his game by publishing a new (third) edition: *Traveller: The New Era* (1993). This updated game threw out the original rule system and even destroyed Miller's original setting,

moving the universe's timeline up 75 years, to a period after a devastating computer virus destroyed interstellar civilization.

Now, after five years of changes he disagreed with, Miller had a chance to make *Traveller* his own again. He wasted no time. Two days after GDW's announcement — on January 7, 1996 — he published a letter to an Internet mailing title called "Where *Traveller* is Going."

> *"Traveller needs to be revitalized with a wider audience who will appreciate and love the game as much as its dedicated fans have in past years."*
>
> – Marc Miller, "Where *Traveller* is Going," hiwg-list (1996)

Miller envisioned a future for *Traveller* that went back to its original rules system, as used in *Traveller* (1977) and *MegaTraveller* (1987). He also envisioned supporting no less than 10 different *Traveller* Universe campaign settings, among them the "Civil War" (second edition) era, the "Virus" (third edition) era, and a few others, one of which he called the "Early Imperium." Finally, he talked about a wide variety of products — not just roleplaying games, but also novels, computer aids, CD-ROM compilations, and more. His letter was no more than an outline for future development, but it highlighted the basic idea that *Traveller* was back, and it was going to be pushed hard.

Frankly, it was exactly what the franchise needed, because by 1996 *Traveller* was no longer the top science-fiction RPG. *Star Wars* (1987) usurped that position, while *Cyberpunk* (1988) and other netrunning games made a space opera SF game like *Traveller* look outmoded. Finally the dark, gothic stylings of *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) were driving yet another innovation of the SF roleplaying genre, with *Fading Suns* (1996) and White Wolf's "Exile" then moving toward publication (though it made it into print). *Traveller* could no longer rest on its laurels; it needed a strong, new product line to get back its momentum, and to remind everyone that it had been the industry's top SF game for a full decade.

With these goals in hand, Miller kicked things off by creating a new company — Far Future Enterprises — to hold the rights to *Traveller* (and two other RPGs that Miller inherited from GDW). Though Miller's FFE would reprint classic *Traveller* material in "floppy" books and on CD-ROMs, it didn't have the man-power to do the big roll-out of new *Traveller* material that Miller envisioned. For that he'd need a new partner; FFE would just be a license holder, foreshadowing a role that other first-generation RPG publishers like FASA, Judges Guild, and Chaosium (through Issaries) would soon follow.

That's where the actual story of Imperium Games begins.

Whitman & Sweetpea: 1996

We should now turn our attention to Ken Whitman. He was a graphic designer from Kentucky who got into the RPG business by forming his own Whit Productions to publish *Mutazoids* (1989), a post-apocalyptic RPG. He followed that up with a second company, Whit Publications, and two licensed games: Edward Bolme's *Ralph Bakshi's Wizards* (1992) and David Clark's *WWF Basic Adventure Game* (1993). When Whitman's investors took over his second company in 1994, he moved on to work at TSR as Gen Con Convention Coordinator.

Whitman was able to make lots of contacts in the game industry at Gen Con, among them Marc Miller. It's then no surprise that Ken Whitman — already a serial entrepreneur — joined with Marc Miller in the creation of the new company that actually *would* publish new *Traveller* releases: Imperium Games. The company came into existence in February 1996. Though it was billed as being co-founded by Marc Miller and Ken Whitman, the truth was actually quite a bit more complicated than that.

> *"Ken Whitman got let go from TSR and wanted to start his own publishing company. But what to publish? He had several ideas, wanted to license some other product lines, but the deals just weren't working out."*
>
> – Timothy Brown, "The Classic Science-Fiction Roleplaying Game Returns," *Pyramid #25* (May/June 1997)

In his new role as an IP holder, Miller partnered with a Los Angeles film production company called Sweetpea Entertainment. They already held the option for a *D&D* movie and now they were looking for a science-fiction property that could be the basis of a television series or perhaps an MMORPG. Sweetpea advanced Imperium Games the money to get started in exchange for an "equity position" and media rights that Sweetpea owner, Courtney Soloman, required. Through this, Imperium Games was able to get off the ground.

Miller particularly liked the deal because Imperium Games would be solely dedicated to *Traveller* and because they promised at least a book a month. It offered the opportunity for just the sort of large-scale *Traveller* revival that Miller felt was needed.

Miller himself was only peripherally involved in the new version of *Traveller*. Despite acknowledging Miller as a co-founder, the new venture was primarily the work of Imperium's president, Ken Whitman. He gathered together an impressive group of roleplaying professionals to run the new company — though most of them acted as freelancers rather than regular staff, perhaps hinting at future

problems. Imperium's list of creators soon included Timothy Brown, Larry Elmore, Chris Foss, Jean Rabe, Don Perrin, Greg Porter, and Lester Smith. Most were (like Whitman) ex-TSR employers with excellent industry experience. Both Brown and Smith directed game development at GDW prior to their stints at TSR, and so they had professional experience with *Traveller* as well.

Though the arrangement with Sweetpea was unusual for the RPG industry, the future nonetheless looked bright for *Traveller*.

T4: 1996

Work on the fourth edition of *Traveller*, called *Marc Miller's Traveller* (1996) — or, less formally, *T4* — began in February of 1996. By May, Imperium had a web page up. Most amazingly, by July they announced that the new rulebook was on its way back from the printers, and sure enough the first copies of that rulebook arrived at the Imperium Games warehouse on August 2, 1996 — less than five months after development on the rules had begun.

And that's *where* the problems began.

In retrospect, it's hard to figure out how Imperium even got the game out. To receive a book on August 2, they must have sent it off to their (US) printer around July 2. A 192-page book like *T4* would have taken about a month in final production — including layout, cover work, final editing, and other polishing. Imperium Games' layout was actually pretty rudimentary, so that might have sped things along. Nonetheless, it likely entered layout no later than June 2.

Counting backwards to February, it's clear that the whole rulebook was written in about four months. This amazing feat was probably thanks in part to the rather unusual way in which *T4* was produced. It wasn't quite designed by committee, but it *was* the product of a large number of people — all working on distinct parts of the rules. Timothy Brown wrote about aliens, Greg Porter wrote about equipment and vehicles, Ken Whitman about psionics, and Don Perrin about starships. It fell upon line editor Tony Lee to put many of the pieces together. The entire team met only once before the writing — at Winter Fantasy, held February 9–11 in Milwaukee that year. After that, they carried out their design discussions primarily via the internet and phone until June. They met one or two more times in Lake Geneva during the ramp-up to the final editorial work.

This piecemeal design was clearly what got the book written in just a few months, but with the whole team geographically separated, the editors faced logistical problems when the pieces were combined. Though writing a 192-page book in a short time was entirely reasonable, writing, playtesting, and rewriting a whole *game system* — while simultaneously collating changes and managing

interrelations from multiple authors scattered across the country — was all but unthinkable.

And that's *why* the problems began.

Time and time again, RPG companies have learned, to their detriment, that rushing a roleplaying book out for Gen Con can produce short-term benefits in the way of increased revenue, but long-term deficits in the way of poorly playtested rules and poorly edited books — which can ultimately kill a line. Unfortunately, these were both problems that now faced *T4*. As a result of the rushed development period — combined with late submissions of drafts and the occasional decision to use text straight from the original *Traveller* game — *T4* was riddled with errors that required massive errata. It was a sadly ironic result because the massive errata required for the second edition of the game, *MegaTraveller*, was likely one of the many elements that started the decline of GDW's *Traveller*. Now, almost a decade later, Imperium made the exact same mistake.

Even beyond obvious mistakes, there were two additional issues that made *T4* a hard sell.

First, the system was quaint. Just as Miller promised, the game went back to its original *Traveller* roots, but as a result the game didn't reflect the game design advances of the previous 20 years. Worse, because of Miller's decision to focus on first-edition *Traveller*, it didn't even reflect some of the positive advances found in the later editions of *Traveller*, such as the innovative Universal Task Profile of the second edition.

Second, the layout of the rulebook was rudimentary. Solid pages of text were occasionally broken up by full-page illustrations, but little else. Much of the black & white interior art was by Larry Elmore, and that fact had been greatly built up by Whitman. However the sketchy grayscales didn't live up to expectations. Whitman oversold the quality of the content — a continuing problem for him — and it raised expectations that were then dashed upon publication. There was *some* color art in the rules too, thanks to the fact that Chris Foss was turning out piles of concept art for Sweetpea's whole *Traveller* franchise, but that would turn out to be a detriment as well because the (beautiful) color Foss pieces were entirely random, and had almost nothing to do with the actual book.

Despite errors, system concerns, and plain-looking rules, *Traveller* was back. The adventure in the rules even referenced the year 1105, which was the Classic era of *Traveller* roleplaying, prior to the cataclysmic events of *MegaTraveller* and *Traveller: The New Era*.

Once these initial growing pains were out of the way, it looked like the good times might be back again.

Early Supplements: 1996

Following the release of *T4*, Imperium Games promptly hit another stumbling block for a new game: a lack of releases. Over the next few months, Imperium Games announced their first supplements several times, then failed to publish them. In fact, they weren't even able to deliver the hardcover edition of their new rulebook — originally promised for release around Gen Con — for a few months.

One of the reasons behind the initial delays was an office move, though that didn't happen until September and the first supplements should have been at the printer a month earlier. Another problem was a disconnect between Sweetpea and Imperium — which began to flare up around September — about who had the right to spend money and on what. Some supplements sat around without being printed, despite editing and layout being complete. One designer of an early supplement was approached *while his book was already at the printers* with a request to reduce his author's fee by a full two-thirds.

Fans grew increasingly rebellious because of the continued overpromising of products that didn't appear. Finally Whitman posted a letter telling fans to "GET A GRIP!"

It wasn't received well.

> *"I feel that others who like starting rumers are only showing their own insecurities and anger to the world. Just because you have failed several time in you life, dont belive everyone else is like you." [Sic]*
>
> – Ken Whitman, "Imperium Games & *Traveller*," rec.games.frp.misc (1996)

Sweetpea became concerned about Imperium back in August, when they saw what the *T4* rulebook looked like. However, they hadn't intervened for two reasons: first, it was already at the printer, and second, they had no experience in the RPG field, and so weren't willing to step in.

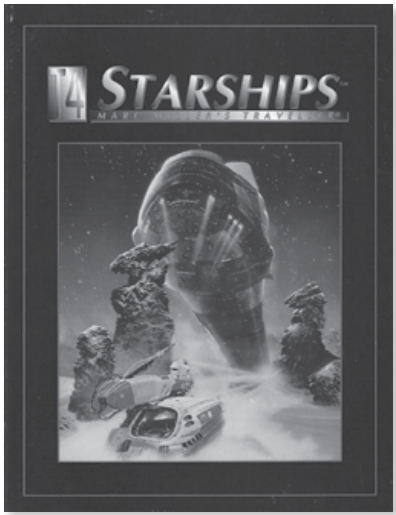
Now, however, schedules were slipping, and there was a growing financial disagreement. Imperium was having a hard time managing its own bills, apparently because money was supposed to be sent to Sweetpea before operating expenses were paid. Sweetpea, meanwhile, felt that money was going missing, apparently because some operating expenses were being paid directly. Ken Whitman was at the heart of these disagreements and ultimately quit over them.

Sweetpea then decided to buy out the stock of the many creators who worked on *T4* and take over some of the day-to-day operations of the company. Under Sweetpea's guidance, Timothy Brown took the helm of the troubled company. He

was now the only official staff for Imperium, as the rest of the *T4* team continued to work as freelancers.

Starships (1996), the first *Traveller* supplement, finally came out in November. A three-month gap before the first supplement wasn't terrible, but Imperium's continued posting of inaccurate schedules (and Whitman's defenses on them on the internet) had made things appear worse.

Unfortunately, this first supplement didn't hold up to fans' expectations any more than the rulebook had. The 108-page book included 64 pages of huge deckplans and 12 pages of beautiful but irrelevant Chris Foss artwork. The only actual rules in the book — a ship design system — ran a mere 26 pages, less than a quarter of the book.



The book was also pricy for the mid-'90s, at $20.00 for 108 pages. A few books down the line, Imperium would settle on an even higher price point of $22.95 for 112 pages, approximately a *fifty* percent increase from the price of GDW's *Traveller: The New Era* books published the previous year.

After that first publication, additional supplements for Imperium started coming out quite quickly. However many of these early supplements were also controversial:

Aliens Archive (1996) returned to a fertile ground for *Traveller* publications — aliens — but rather than highlighting any of the well-loved *Traveller* races, it instead described 12 minor races. Worse, it did so in a generic manner, saying "Homeworld locations are purposely left vague so that you can place the aliens anywhere in the region of the Imperium." Increasingly, the strength of *Traveller* was its background setting, not its game system (as we'll see in the post-Imperium era), and here Imperium was largely ignoring that strength — though they *did* intend to cover major races in future releases.

Milieu 0 (1996) fully revealed something that had been hinted at before: despite the inclusion of a "classic era" 1105 adventure in the *T4* rulebook, the new game was actually set in a new time period for *Traveller*: the era of the Third Imperium's founding. This was a possibility that Miller had mentioned in his initial letter, but it also served to further alienate old players. After 10 years of Rebellions and computer viruses, fans were hoping to get their old Imperium back, and instead they were given yet another setting.



First Survey (1996), the final book copyrighted 1996, was probably the worst (and ugliest) book published for the game system. It contained 112 pages of computer-generated statistics for all the worlds of the Imperium in Milieu 0, laid out in unattractive row after row. There were two copies of all the stats: one for players, and one for the gamemaster, making the book that much more redundant. Worse, due to an error in programming, every single planet's Universal World Profile (UWP) was *wrong*. The fifth and sixth digits of each UWP — which represented the government and law level of the planet — were all identical.

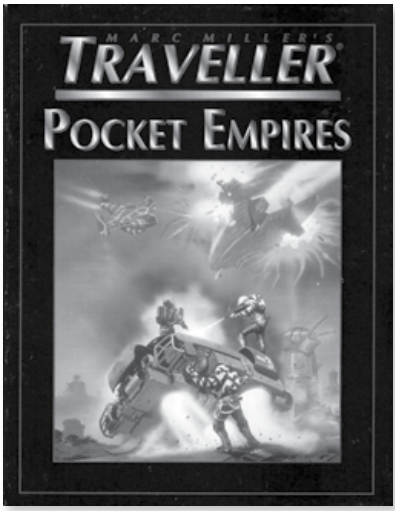
Despite these issues, there were good books in that first year. There was nothing implicitly wrong with *Aliens Archive* or *Milieu 0*; they just covered areas of little interest to old fans. The *Central Supply Catalog* (1996) was a fine source of equipment, and fans were enthusiastic about the publication of *Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society #25* (1996), which was the resurrection of an old *Traveller* magazine last published by GDW in 1985.

However, problems were quite numerous as well, and fans were growing increasingly leery of the new *Traveller* publisher. 1997 would be the year that Imperium would have to do or die.

A Slow Death: 1997—1998

By 1997, Imperium Games solved their initial scheduling problems. They published nine more full-size supplements, three 64-page adventures, one hardcover omnibus, and their second and final issue of the *Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society* that year — more than meeting that early promise of a book a month. In fact, the production schedule might have ended up being *too* quick. The schedule speed was now being largely driven by Sweetpea and was faster than either Marc Miller or the freelancers were comfortable with — resulting in books that no one was entirely happy with. Still, they weren't bad.

1997's supplements included a few more equipment books and *Fire, Fusion & Steel*, an extensive vehicle creation system; together these were just the sort of thing you'd expect to find in a *Traveller* line. *Pocket Empires*, which gave rules for ruling worlds, and *Psionic Institutes*, which gave the best description ever of psionics in



the Imperium, were more ground-breaking, and suggested the new sorts of things that Imperium could detail.

There were also a total of five adventure books: two longer collections of adventures and the aforementioned three short adventures. The first two short adventures were revisions of material originally produced by new licensee, British Isles *Traveller* Support (BITS). Adventures are always badly needed when a new game launches, to help define gameplay behind the setting. Waiting until 1997 to print any probably didn't help *T4*'s initial push, but that year Imperium Games made up for their initial neglect in spades.

Starting that year, the layout of the books began looking a tad more professional — though still pretty rudimentary. Unfortunately, the game books also had a feeling of sameness to them that became more apparent as more were published. This was partly because of the largely interchangeable Chris Foss covers and the identical branding on all the book covers.

The later 1997 books were all labeled "edition 4.1." This was because Imperium Games began to promise a new edition of the main rules that would resolve numerous errors in the original printing. Fans called it "Traveller: The Apology."

Unfortunately *T4.1* would never appear. Another trouble had surfaced at Imperium: the company started having troubles paying it freelancers. Sweetpea decided to hold out just a bit longer. Though they were having serious problems with Imperium, Sweetpea was working on a larger plan.

> *"[I]t looks like most of the adjustments are behind us. As with any production schedule, the tasks are large, but the rewards are many."*
>
> – Timothy Brown, "The Classic Science-Fiction Roleplaying Game Returns," *Pyramid #25* (May/June 1997)

At the time, TSR — the original producer of *Dungeons & Dragons* — was headed toward bankruptcy, and Sweetpea was in negotiation to purchase it. If they were able to buy TSR, Sweetpea felt they could roll Imperium Games into TSR, and thereby create a world-class roleplaying company with strong science-fiction *and* fantasy games — and therefore be able to create plenty of IP for future movies, TV shows, and computer games alike.



Then, on April 10, 1997, Wizards of the Coast announced their intention to purchase TSR. Sweetpea's bid was out, their opportunity lost. Sweetpea similarly missed out on a chance to purchase White Wolf around the same time. *That* company was also troubled, but Sweetpea was unable to broker a deal with them.

Imperium Games stumbled along through the middle of 1997. Finally, between the loss of the *D&D* bid, the poor production of the *T4* line, and the financial issues, Sweetpea pulled the plug. They cancelled the *Traveller* license, closed Imperium Games, and shut down the work that had been ongoing for a *Traveller* MMORPG. Imperium Games was still selling their backstock at least into 1998, but the game was dead. A licensed *T4* novel from Pocket Books called *Gateway to the Stars* (1998) appeared that next year, but it was *T4*'s final hoorah.

Some of the freelancers working for Imperium didn't find out about the company's demise until they read about it on the Internet. Years later, freelancers still bitterly discussed the thousands of dollars owed to them by Imperium.

Traveller, Whitman, and Sweetpea Futures: 1998-Present

Most game companies have offered something to the industry. Imperium Games primarily offered lessons in what not to do and pointed out the problems created by trying to mix the niche world of roleplaying with the high-finance world of media production. The partnership had originally looked good — as Miller, Whitman, *and* Soloman were all gamers — but ultimately the goals, plans, and businesses of the three principals were too far apart for the company to survive.

In the years since, all of the principals have moved on:

Far Future Enterprises has done lots of other *Traveller* licensing since the fall of Imperium Games, as is described in the GDW history. At least two of these licenses — to Steve Jackson Games and to Mongoose Publishing — have resulted in more publications than the Imperium Games corpus of books. Those companies' histories therefore include some discussion of *Traveller*'s later history. More recently, Far Future produced *Traveller: The Fifth Edition* (2013) following a Kickstarter that raised almost $300,000. It was most directly intended as a response to Imperium Games' *T4*.

Despite his failure at Imperium, Ken Whitman continued creating new game companies. His next ventures — Archangel Entertainment (1997–1998) and Dynasty Presentations (1998–2001) — are both RPG publishers who get some focus in the Sovereign Press history. More recently he's created Rapid POD (2005–2007) and Sidekick Printing (2010-Present), controversial print companies that raised complaints concerning missed deadlines and poor quality products.

Sweetpea Entertainment eventually came out with their *Dungeons & Dragons* movie (2000), directed and produced by Courtney Soloman. Sadly, it currently has a Rotten Tomatoes rating of 10%. The top reviewers at the site are more lenient and give it an 11% freshness rating. Sweetpea later licensed two low-budget made-for-TV sequels, *Dungeons & Dragons: Wrath of the Dragon God* (2005) and *Dungeons & Dragons: The Book of Vile Darkness* (2012). A lawsuit, *Hasbro & Wizards of the Coast vs. Sweetpea Entertainment* (2013), erupted after Sweatpea licensed Warner Brothers to do a new big-budget picture simultaneous with Hasbro licensing Universal to do the same. Though Sweatpea has a 1993 contract that gives them rights to *D&D* films as long as they produce a sequel every 5–7 years, Hasbro contends that the TV movies don't count and even if they did, *The Book of Vile Darkness* wasn't a sequel because it didn't have any "characters, storylines, settings or events" from the previous movies. As of this writing, the matter has not been settled, and both new *D&D* movies are on hold.

Neither a *Traveller* TV series nor an MMORPG was ever made by Sweetpea. However, over a decade later, a massively-multiplayer "augmented reality" game for *Traveller almost* appeared for the iPhone. It was to be called *Traveller AR* (traveller-ar.com). Unfortunately, the publisher ran out of money and was forced to put the game on hold in May 2012.

What to Read Next

- For more on Ken Whitman and the game companies of Wisconsin, read ***Margaret Weis Productions.***
- For the hot new SF games of the '90s, read ***White Wolf*** and ***Holistic Design.***

In Other Eras

- For the origins of *Traveller*, read ***GDW*** *['70s].*
- For how the second edition of *Traveller* went wrong, read ***DGP*** *['80s].*
- For the future of *Traveller*, read ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s].*
- For an alternate future of *Traveller*, read ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s].*

Or read onward to an RPG publisher that started off with computer games, ***Holistic Design.***



Part Four:

Prelude to d20

(1996–1999)

Historically, the most notable publisher from the last four years of the '90s might be Holistic Design. Where the decade started with White Wolf totally revamping what it meant to be a roleplaying publisher, the decade ended with White Wolf's first major spin-off.

Holistic Design was also the newest iteration of the ***old guard*** phenomenon, as it was built on existing White Wolf designers forming their own company. Some of the older old guard also returned in the late '90s at companies like Margaret Weis Productions and Hekaforge. Meanwhile, Green Knight Publishing took the opposite tactic; as a ***second-generation roleplaying publisher,*** they continued on with the *King Pendragon* RPG previously published by Chaosium. The reason for so many people (and games) getting ***back*** into the industry may have been the cooling of the CCG marketplace. Though there was still a lot of chaos in the industry (and though old companies were dropping like flies), there was also a bit of room for expansion for the first time in years.

Meanwhile, ***original RPG producers*** were continuing to enter the industry. Pinnacle and Eden created innovative new games in the horror and urban fantasy genres that White Wolf opened up, while Guardians of Order returned to the increasingly neglected anime genre. The huge success of Fantasy Flight Games, who started off as a small-time ***licensee,*** is perhaps the most surprising, but they wouldn't hit it big until the '00s.

What none of these companies knew is that they were about to hit a brick wall. When the d20 license came out in 2000, these new publishers weren't mature enough to hold their own against the industry's new onslaught. Some like Green Knight and Hekaforge didn't make it, but all the rest were forced to at least partially set aside their core lines for d20 in order to survive. The tombstones (and near tombstones) alongside the road to success unfortunately show the mixed success of that strategy.

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Holistic Design	1992–2006	*Fading Suns* (1996)	273
Pinnacle Entertainment	1994-Present	*Deadlands: The Weird West* (1996)	280
Fantasy Flight Games	1995-Present	*Nocturnum: Long Shades* (1997)	294
Guardians of Order	1997–2006	*Big Eyes, Small Mouth* (1997)	317
Eden Studios	1997-Present	*Conspiracy X* (1997)	330
Margaret Weis Productions	1998-Present	*Sovereign Stone Quickstart* (1998)	341
Green Knight Publishing	1998–2003	*Tales of Chivalry & Romance* (1999)	356
Hekaforge Productions	1998–2006	*The Lejendary Rules for All Players* (1999)	364

Holistic Design: 1992–2006

Holistic Design is best known as the publisher of the evocative science-fiction game Fading Suns — but they also created quite a few other products over a fifteen year lifetime.

Computer Beginnings: 1992–1996

Many companies were founded specifically to publish RPGs; however companies founded for other purposes have expanded into the RPG market almost as frequently. Over the years we've seen PBM moderators, wargame designers, board game publishers, and even book printers get into roleplaying. Holistic Design was a far more unusual situation where a *computer* game company decided to publish RPGs as well.

Holistic Design got its start as "Several Dudes Holistic Gaming," a computer game development company founded in 1992 in Atlanta, Georgia. Over the next few years they published several computer games.



1996: Fading Suns

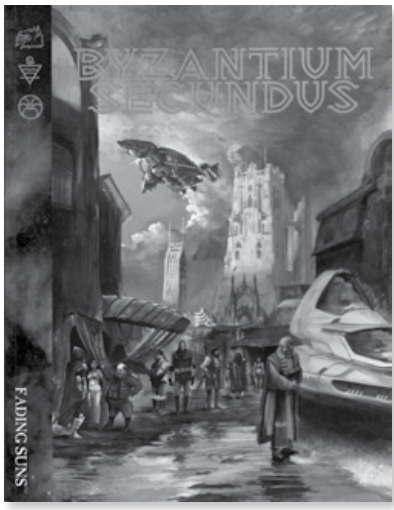
These included: *Battles of Destiny* (1992), a *Risk*-like wargame; *Merchant Prince* (1993), a Renaissance simulation of trade and exploration; *Hammer of the Gods* (1994), a strategic wargame that may have been an influence on the bestselling *Heroes of Might & Magic*; and *Machiavelli the Prince* (1995), a remake of *Merchant Prince*.

After *Machiavelli*, Holistic decided to do something new. To aid in the production of their new space strategy game — which would eventually become *Emperor of the Fading Suns* (1996) — Holistic brought in two experienced world designers from the RPG field: Andrew Greenberg, the former line editor of White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade*; and Bill Bridges, the former line editor of White Wolf's *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*. These two were hired to create a cohesive and interesting universe for *Emperor of the Fading Sun* ... and then use that setting as the basis for a tabletop roleplaying game, to be released simultaneously with the computer game.

Enter Fading Suns: 1996–1999

The roleplaying game *Fading Suns* (1996) quickly caught peoples' attention because it had "the White Wolf style." The artwork, the game's organization, and gothic space setting all reminded people of White Wolf's publications. This wasn't because Bridges and Greenberg were trying to be derivative. Instead, it was because they *defined* that style in their early days at White Wolf.

Ironically, Holistic barely avoided being faced with a competitive science-fiction RPG produced by White Wolf itself. At Gen Con '96, where Holistic release *Fading Suns*, White Wolf premiered a very early draft of Mark Rein•Hagen's next RPG, the science-fiction game *Exile*. Fortunately for Holistic, *Exile* was never completed due to Mark Rein•Hagen leaving White Wolf later that year. As a result, White Wolf didn't get a science-fiction game out until they published *Trinity* (1997) over a year later — and that gave *Fading Suns* plenty of time to gain traction.



Fading Suns is unique mainly for its distinctive setting. It's a hard science-fiction game, but much of the universe has fallen back to medieval technology. Noble houses, guilds, and a monolithic church control most of the power in the universe. Many people compare the universe to Frank Herbert's *Dune*, though Bridges points to

Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*, Isaac Asimov's *Foundation*, and others as his inspiration.

Whatever the inspiration, this vision of a gothic future offered a very different type of space adventure for the RPG industry, which had previously seen the space opera stylings of GDW's *Traveller* (1977) and the high adventure of West End's *Star Wars* (1987). *Fading Suns* was also the first major science-fiction release to return RPGs to space — after a heavy emphasis on cyberpunk throughout the late '80s and early '90s.

> *"Much of what we are trying to play with in Fading Suns are both the highs and lows of human interaction. Humanity now faces the greatest threat it ever has – the fading of the stars – yet even that can't seem to bring people together."*
>
> – Andrew Greenberg, Interview, rpg.net (1999)

Fading Suns was also notable for its emphasis on people. Greenberg said that the game "would show humans at their most and least noble," while both designers called it a "passion play," wherein heroes would show their nobility through suffering. Some people say *Fading Suns* is the *Pendragon* (1985) of space. Though *Fading Sun*'s themes reflect those of White Wolf, it offers up a *human* face.

Over the next few years *Fading Suns* was supported extensively with many supplements. For a time, the line did well. The background was broad and appealing; the computer game was attracting new people into the hobby; and support was as regular as clockwork — a sometimes undervalued element in the success of a line.

It was a recipe for success ... at least for RPGs in the '90s.

Other Projects: 1997—1999

It's easy to look back at Holistic and see only the publisher of *Fading Suns*, but the company was undertaking other projects from the moment their premiere RPG released.

For one, they kept producing computer games. Their next project was *Final Liberation: Warhammer Epic 40,000* (1997) — the first computer game for Games Workshop's popular *Warhammer 40k* line and a nice match, thematically, for *Fading Suns*. It looked like a great new direction for Holistic, combining their knowledge of the RPG and computer industries, but it would unfortunately be their last such crossover title.

The next year brought a slew of tabletop miniatures game releases. The first, *Noble Armada* (1998) — co-designed by Holistic founder Ken Lightner and marketing guy Chris Wiese — was a spaceship combat game compatible with *Fading Suns*.

It was the latest in a long line of spaceship combat games supporting SF RPGs — ground that had previously been tread by both *Traveller* and *SpaceMaster* — but the difference was that Holistic really pushed it as a *miniatures* game by producing a fully supported miniatures line along with it. Whereas most past spaceship combat games had been standalone, Holistic was instead figuring out how to take advantage of the lucrative miniatures market.

Noble Armada also had one other unique element: it combined spaceship combat with shipside boarding actions — where soldiers fought through the interior of an enemy ship once they'd brought it down.

A high ($55) price point and muddy rules marred the first edition of *Noble Armada*, but they weren't enough to stand in the way of the game's success. Better, both of these elements would be resolved in a second edition (2002), which cleaned up the rules and lowered the price point by splitting the *Ships of the Line* miniatures apart from the rules. Because of *Noble Armada*'s success, work also began on a computer adaptation, which would have been the second *Fading Suns* computer game.

The other miniatures games published that year were *Carnage* (1998), a fantasy miniatures game that was too silly for many players, and *Combat Section* (1998), a near-future SF combat game.

After that, it was back to roleplaying. *Passion Play* (1999), a LARP for *Fading Suns*, was likely published due to the success that Bridges and Greenberg had seen with similar products at White Wolf. It represented a *fourth* way to play games in the *Fading Suns* universe.



With an RPG, a LARP, several computer games, and three miniatures games all in their portfolio, Holistic Design ended 1999 looking like a well-balanced publisher ... but even that wouldn't be enough to keep the company afloat amidst the rapid boom and bust of d20.

Changing Times: 2000—2003

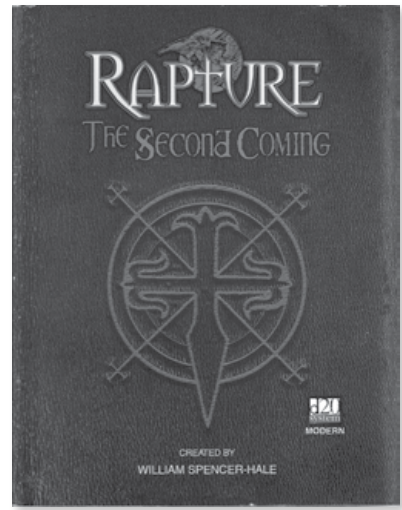
As 2000 dawned, Bill Bridges was still line editing *Fading Suns*. The previous year had been a great one for the game, with the release of the second edition (1999) and several supplements; the RPG line continued forward in 2000, as did the *Noble Armada* miniatures game.

Meanwhile, Andrew Greenberg was directing video game development, while Ken Lightner was head of programming. The computer side of the Holistic business published two computer games in the next years, *Merchant Prince II* (2001) and *Mall Tycoon* (2002).

However, times were changing thanks to Wizards of the Coast, who in 2000 released their d20 game system for general use. Holistic Design didn't hop on board immediately, but by 2001 they were deeply immersed in the newest gaming trend, probably to their ultimate detriment.

The company's first exploration of d20 was their *Fantasy Encounters* (2001) sets, which featured pre-painted miniatures — drawing on Holistic's miniatures expertise — along with d20 stat cards.

Fantasy Encounters represented a small excursion into the d20 field. However, Holistic very quickly decided to go "all in" by printing a d20 version of their *Fading Suns* rules (2001). They then dual-statted subsequent *Fading Suns* supplements to use both d20 and their own "Victory Point System." Although the decision clearly gave *Fading Suns* a surge of popularity in 2001 and 2002, it would ultimately be to the game's deficit when the d20 trademark became toxic.



Meanwhile, Greenberg and Lightner dove into the d20 field even deeper by creating still more lines specifically for d20 publication.

Greenberg produced a new d20 edition of an old roleplaying game called *Rapture: The Second Coming* (2002). It was a post-apocalyptic religious game written by William Spencer-Hale — another White Wolf alum — and previously printed by Quintessential Mercy Studio (1995).

Lightner, meanwhile, released a new line of d20 military adventure set in the modern world. The first was called *Afghanistan* (2002).

By 2003, the face of Holistic Design was entirely changed. They now had three d20 lines — *Rapture*, *Real-Life Roleplaying*, and the dual-statted *Fading Suns*. Only *Noble Armada* still received support in its original form. Meanwhile, computer game production had ended; *Mall Tycoon* had been (and would be) Holistic's last computer game.

And the whole industry was about to hit the d20 crash.

Epilogue: 2002-Present

Wizard's release of the d20 license might have been enough on its own to effectively shut down Holistic. It had a stifling effect on much of the industry in the '00s, as the boom and bust first forced out smaller publishers and then dramatically changed retailer and distributor practices for the worst. Holistic's strong push into d20 certainly made things worse for them in the 2003 crash.

However, another factor led to their downfall: on February 12, 2002, Bill Bridges returned full-time to White Wolf to act as line editor for *Mage: The Ascension*. He was instrumental in the birth of the New World of Darkness — developing both the new *Mage: The Awakening* (2005) and the well-lauded *Promethean: The Created* (2006) — and has since moved on to work on the *World of Darkness MMORPG*.

Likely due to all of these factors, all of Holistic's RPG lines shut down new production in 2003. In light of that, Lightner and Greenberg both moved on as well. Lightner co-founded a new computer game company, Blue Heat Games, and then moved on to CCP, where he also came to work on the *World of Darkness MMORPG*. Greenberg meanwhile has been teaching video game design and is now the president of the Georgia Game Developers Association. Chris Wiese — though technically still president of Holistic Design — has been spending time with GAMA and his own new company, World Builders.

Despite the exodus of Holistic's staff, promises of new *Fading Suns* releases were made through the mid-'00s. Over the next few years, Holistic announced a third edition of *Fading Suns* as well as new games called variously "Diaspora," "Dystopia, Inc.," and "Sathranet." These new games would have looked into different periods in the *Fading Suns* history. They were to be designed using d20 Modern, not Fading Suns' Victory Point System. However, due either to the general state of the industry or to Bridges' commitments at White Wolf (more likely both), none of these products saw the light of day under Holistic.

A few final Holistic products dribbled out: one set of deckplans for *Noble Armada* in each of 2005 and 2006. Then in 2007, Holistic Design appeared to finally recognize their own demise. Holistic licensed *Fading Suns* to RedBrick Limited, who was also publishing new material for FASA's *Earthdawn*. RedBrick promised new supplements using the original Victory Point System, plus the eventual release of the third edition of the game. However, they got no further than a few PDF adventures published in 2007.

"… while the demand for d20 products has been strong, we feel our resources are best spent focusing on the primary system. To that end, we will be actively working on the long-touted Third Edition of the Fading Suns game, smoothing out some of the mechanics and bringing previously published and new products into the line."

– James Flowers, "Fading Suns Reborn," Press Release (2007)

Fortunately, things have turned around for Holistic's game in the '10s.

First, Mongoose Publishing began producing *A Call to Arms: Noble Armada* (2011), a new version of Holistic's classic miniatures game. More recently, RedBrick finished up their "revised" edition of *Fading Suns* (2012), though it was actually published by RedBrick's successor, the new FASA Games.

Looking back from the '10s, we can now say that Holistic Design was ultimately a fatality of the d20 boom and bust. However, their main property was strong enough to live on.

What to Read Next

- For the origins of Holistic's RPG staff, read ***White Wolf.***
- For the d20 Trademark License, read ***Wizards of the Coast.***
- For games that fill the niche that *Fading Suns* once did, read about the *Warhammer 40,000 Roleplay* line in ***Fantasy Flight Games.***

In Other Eras

- For the previous big SF games, read about *Traveller* in ***GDW*** *['70s],* about *Star Wars* in ***West End Games*** *['80s],* and about *Cyberpunk* in ***R. Talsorian*** *['80s].*
- For the future for *Fading Suns*, read ***Mongoose Publishing*** *['00s]* and ***RedBrick*** *['00s].*

Or read onward to the publisher of the *Weird West*, ***Pinnacle Entertainment Group.***

Pinnacle Entertainment Group: 1994–Present



1996: Deadlands: The Weird West

Pinnacle has lived two lives, as the producer of Deadlands *in the 20th century and as the publisher of* Savage Worlds *in the 21st.*

Chameleon Beginnings: 1994—1995

Shane Lacy Hensley got his start in the gaming hobby through *Dungeons & Dragons*. He'd discovered the game in a series of comic strip ads that were running in comic books in the '80s. When he couldn't find the game

locally in the small town of Clintwood, Virginia, he got his parents to order it for him from the Sears Catalogue.

Hensley got his start in the gaming *business* through West End Games. He sent them an unsolicited *Torg* adventure he'd written. It was soon published as *The Temple of Rec Stalek* (1992). That first sale was quickly followed by more work for FASA, TSR, and West End over the next few years.

> *"Gaming led to writing. I started with D&D like most of us in high school and began writing my own adventures. The first one I wrote was 'The Quest for the Holy Grail,' which I'm somewhat embarrassed to admit, included 'kowe.' Yup. That's 'ewok' spelled backward."*
>
> – Shane Hensley, Interview, rptroll.blogspot.com (April 2010)

Meanwhile, the college town of Blacksburg, Virginia — home of Virginia Tech — was becoming a hotbed of game design. Greg Porter's BTRC had already published *CORPS* (1991), while Charles Ryan's Chameleon Eclectic had published *Millennium's End* (1992) and *Psychosis* (1994) — though they'd soon become best-known for the short-lived *Babylon 5* RPG, *The Babylon Project* (1997). When Hensley decided that he wanted to create a 19th century miniatures game, he contacted Chameleon Eclectic about publishing it.

The result was *Fields of Honor* (1994). Ownership of the game remained with a new company that Hensley created, called Pinnacle Entertainment Group, but it was published in conjunction with Chameleon Eclectic, who dealt with distribution and other such things that Hensley didn't want to worry about (yet).

Hensley had called Pinnacle a "group" because he had friends who were aspiring designers too, and he figured that they could publish their games under the same label. This was exactly what happened the next year, when Pinnacle and Chameleon Eclectic published *The Last Crusade* (1995), John Hopler's World War II CCG. It was also the last product produced jointly by Pinnacle and Chameleon Eclectic, because by now Hensley was ready to get more directly involved with publishing. More importantly for this history of the roleplaying industry, he intended to do so via a brand-new roleplaying game.

Deadlands Beginnings: 1994—1998

Another idea for a great game had come to Shane Hensley just as he was setting Pinnacle up. At Gen Con '94, he saw a Brom painting of a Confederate vampire. It was the cover to White Wolf's then-unreleased *Necropolis: Atlanta* (1994). Seeing this weird combination of horror and the south gave Hensley a vision of a game

centering on cowboy and zombies. He then began writing what would eventually become *Deadlands*.

> *"That image stuck with me during the long 14 hour drive home through the night. I frequently have neat ideas during this long trip after being surrounded by so much creativity at GC, but this one just wouldn't die (literally!)."*
>
> – Shane Hensley, Interview, gamingoutpost.com (Date Unknown)

Hensley began by detailing a world where, in 1863, a Sioux shaman performed the Great Ghost Dance and in doing so opened up the Earth to a spiritual realm inhabited by the "Reckoners." Feeding on fear and other negative emotions, the Reckoners began to bring horror to the world by resurrecting the dead and creating monsters of all sorts. The actual *Deadlands* game was to be set 13 years after this apocalyptic event, in 1876.

With a first draft in hand, Hensley flew in two friends and game designers, Greg Gorden and Matt Forbeck — the latter a western author himself, having written *Outlaw* (1991) and *Western Hero* (1991) for the ICE/Hero Games consortium. Forbeck and Gorden both liked what they saw, and asked to buy into the company. Though Gorden later had to leave for personal reasons, Forbeck would move to Blacksburg to help Pinnacle get going. *Deadlands: The Weird West* (1996) was shortly thereafter published as Pinnacle's first RPG and its first independent publication. It had a cover by Brom.

Deadlands was very thematic, just oozing spaghetti western style. It was well-received, and would soon become the best supported western RPG ever — though that wasn't really saying much in a world where TSR's *Boot Hill* (1975) and even White Wolf's *Werewolf: The Wild West* (1997) were at best, minor successes. *Deadlands* was also clearly reflective of the post-White Wolf era of gaming. Much as Holistic Design's *Fading Suns* (1996) was science-fiction gaming with a darker tone, this was a classic western, turned darker and weirder.

Deadlands' game system was also reflective of White Wolf's games, with its core mechanic of a comparative dice pool where only the best single result was kept. However, there was a twist: characteristics defined die type and skill determined how many to roll. The *Deadlands* game system also went far beyond that, adding on novel mechanics that introduced a western theme through the use of poker cards and chips. The cards were used in character creation, but also to determine combat initiative and to resolve whether spells and inventions were successful. The chips were "Fate Chips," which gave the players the opportunity to influence events. Though several RPGs used cards in the mid-1990s, beginning with R. Talsorian's *Castle Falkenstein* (1994), and though an economy of this type existed since at least

TSR's original *Top Secret* (1980), *Deadlands* integrated these systems into the "feel" of the game better than most of its predecessors; the result was an authentic western atmosphere that really wowed players.



Deadlands was lightly supported through 1997 with a few large supplements. Simultaneously, Pinnacle developed a new sort of supplement, the "dime novel," which combined fiction and adventure. The first dime novel was *Perdition's Daughter* (1996). Later dime novels included rare gaming crossovers. The three-volume *Under a Harrowed Moon* (1997–1998) crossed over with White Wolf's *Werewolf: The Wild West*, while *Adios A-Mi-go* (1998) crossed over with Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu*.

However, following the *Deadlands* rules themselves, Pinnacle's biggest early hit wasn't an RPG supplement, but instead a miniatures game, *The Great Rail Wars* (1997). It sold through 5,000 copies in just half a year, and as we'll see its gaming system would be critically important to Pinnacle's future.

Despite 10 publications in its first two years, Pinnacle's schedule was increasingly slipping by the end of 1997. Fortunately, the company would soon be offered the opportunity to really move forward their publication schedule — and bring Pinnacle up to the next level of publication.

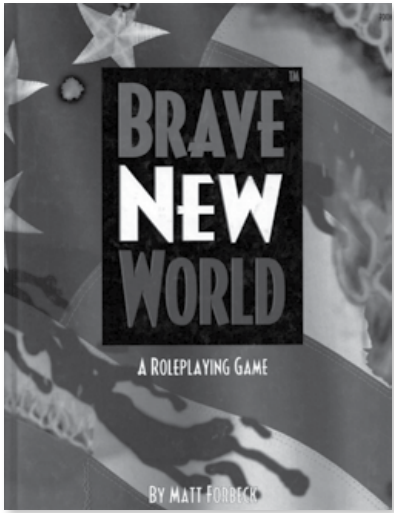
The AEG Years: 1997—1999

Fortunately, Pinnacle already started to work with the principals of AEG, the Alderac Entertainment Group, which was located on the opposite coast from Pinnacle. This relationship began when Pinnacle licensed Five Rings Publishing Group — an interest co-owned by AEG — to produce *Doomtown* (1998), a *Deadlands* CCG.

Afterward, AEG and Pinnacle decided to create a more permanent partnership. The AEG principals became investors in Pinnacle and AEG took over the business side of Pinnacle's publication, freeing Pinnacle up to concentrate on the creative side of things.

The long-term plan was to move the Virginia-based Pinnacle staff out to Ontario, California, where AEG was based, to form a single publishing interest — a literal "group," one could say. Though the plan never got serious traction, AEG helped





Pinnacle out as best they could at a distance. Reflecting the increasing integration, John Zinser of AEG was listed as providing "advice" on Pinnacle's next big release.

It was their second standalone roleplaying game, *Deadlands: Hell on Earth* (1998), which Pinnacle premiered at the 1998 Gen Con Game Fair. They marketed the *hell* out of it, bringing in purple- and green-robed "doomsayers" who marched across the con with signs that said "The End is Already Here." MTV-2 even got into the act, filming the spectacle.

Hell on Earth used the familiar *Deadlands* gaming system, but it moved the setting up a few hundred years. Here the Reckoners provoked a nuclear war in the 21st century. Afterward they came to Earth and ravaged the globe — before mysteriously vanishing. The game was set 13 years later in a post-apocalyptic horror-filled wasteland.

Hell on Earth was also the first game to show the cracks in Pinnacle's original *Deadlands* system. Where the bullet-by-bullet combat of *Deadlands* had been evocative and fast-paced for a game with six-shooters, it began to bog down with the fully automatic weaponry of the *Hell on Earth* era — a topic we'll return to.

With AEG's help, Pinnacle was able to publish numerous products for the original *Deadlands* and for *Hell on Earth* over the next couple of years. They also grew their staff to over a dozen. Like so many new companies in those years right before d20, Pinnacle really seemed to have made it. However, by 1999 things were changing.

One change was the publication of another RPG. Matt Forbeck's *Brave New World* (1999) used a simplified version of the familiar *Deadlands* game system, but was placed in an entirely new setting. The dystopic superhero game raised serious and thought provoking questions about the state of the world. However, with its

emphasis so heavily on the two *Deadlands* lines, Pinnacle really didn't have the resources to support this new RPG.

The other changes originated at AEG, who was now getting into the roleplaying game business themselves with *Legend of the Five Rings* (1997) and *7th Sea* (1999), and didn't have as much time to spend on *Deadlands* as they had when the deal was struck.

Finally, the Pinnacle move to California had never occurred, and it was increasingly obvious that it wasn't going to occur.

This resulted in two splits.

First, Matt Forbeck left Pinnacle, taking with him the rights to *Brave New World*, which he then sold to AEG, who thereafter published another half-dozen supplements.

Second, AEG and Pinnacle amicably split a short time later, in October 1999. AEG was given full rights to *Doomtown* — which sold better than any of Pinnacle's own products, ever — and Shane Hensley was left the sole owner of Pinnacle, with the rest of the *Deadlands* rights.

Though the AEG deal had opened up some new venues to Pinnacle and allowed them to publish a lot of product, it had also left them in debt, and this was a problem that would worsen over the next couple of years.

CCG & d20 Downfall: 2000—2002

Unfortunately, from there things went from bad to worse for Pinnacle. Shane Hensley would later recount that this happened, in part, because he listened to what other people told him he should be doing — especially that he should put out a CCG. The result was *Deadlands: Lost Colony — Showdown* (2000), released at the 2000 Gen Con Game Fair. It was a collectible card game taking place in a third setting for *Deadlands*, the colony of Banshee, set at the same time as *Hell on Earth*. The CCG didn't make much of an impression, which wasn't a surprise given its release date, years after the CCG boom.

As a result, Hensley had to dig deeper for a way to save Pinnacle. On September 13, 2000, it was announced that Pinnacle had been sold to an all-new entity called cybergames.com. Hensley said that, "We have several all new projects coming down the pipe that we just couldn't do alone." He also stated that it would let him return to writing rather than "shuffling money."

The story of Cybergames is more completely documented in the history of Hero Games, which was much more closely associated with the company. It was an online entertainment company rolling up a number of different game companies with the intent of leveraging their intellectual property into online success. However, it failed from almost the start, as acquisitions' income was used to buy





other companies, harming the individual companies' cash flow and destroying production schedules. Hensley got out as quick as he could, announcing on January 12, 2001, that the acquisition had been "undone," but not before considerable damage had been done to Pinnacle. By now, there were just a few employees left.

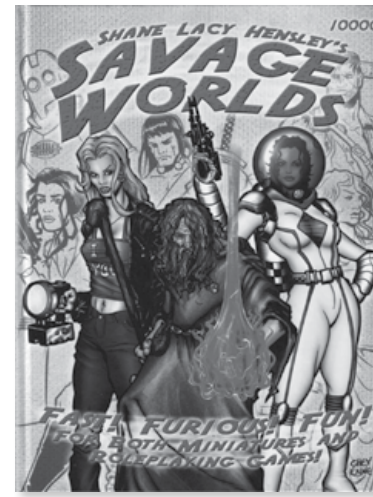
That year, Hensley listened one last time to what he "should" be doing, and he became a part of the new d20 boom. *Blood on the Rhine* (2001) kicked off a new d20-based weird war campaign. More importantly, Pinnacle also released d20 editions of *Deadlands* (2001) and *Deadlands: Hell on Earth* (2002).

Though Hensley didn't intend to replace his original game lines, he immediately began supporting the d20 system, to the detriment of the original *Deadlands* system. This led fans to believe that Pinnacle was switching over to d20 entirely, with unfortunate results. Though the d20 books themselves did well, sales of the original *Deadlands* supplements — which had topped $60,000 a month at the company's height — dropped to half that.

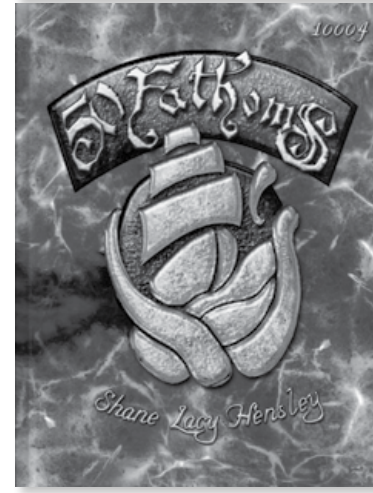
Pinnacle's last hoorah was the conclusion of their *Hell on Earth* story arc in *The Unity* (2002), followed by the long-delayed release of the *Deadlands: Lost Colony* RPG (2002), at last completing the intended trilogy of *Deadlands* roleplaying games. There were a couple of supplements to follow, but then Pinnacle closed up shop. Besides being in debt, there were also lingering questions about the divorce from Cybergames, and Hensley opted to ensure that the company's properties could not be taken by them.

The Great White Revival: 2003—2005

That should have been the end of Pinnacle ... but Shane Hensley decided to give things one more try. He formed a new company called Great White Games — named after his love for sharks — and transferred all the old Pinnacle IP to it. However, Great White was more than just a renaming of Pinnacle. None of the *Deadlands* lines were revived by the new company in their original forms; instead, Hensley decided to stop doing what the industry was telling him and instead pushed out a new game: *Savage Worlds* (2003).







Well, it was kind of a new game. The core mechanics of *Savage Worlds* were cut down from *The Great Rail Wars* miniatures game, which was itself cut down from *Deadlands*. You still had Fate Chips ("bennies") and a card-driven combat initiative system, but the basic skill mechanism was simplified: you rolled a specified die and if you totaled four or more, you succeeded — with each additional four providing a margin of success. Beyond that, there were just five attributes and 15 skills. The whole rulebook fit into a mere 144 pages. Combat now ran faster, resolving the problem that *Deadlands* started hitting when *Hell on Earth* was published. In fact quick-to-run mass combat was one of the well-touted advantages of the game.

The result wasn't just "rules light" but also "management light," meaning that it was easier for GMs to run — a topic we'll return to. It was also simple and quick to play, as was shown in *Savage Worlds*' slogan of "Fast! Furious! Fun!" Whether it was intended by Hensley or not, *Savage Worlds* looked a lot like a response to the increasing complexity

of games that was (again) overtaking the RPG market in post-d20 days. Instead, *Savage Worlds* went rather forcibly in the opposite direction.

Though *Savage Worlds* offered a generic system that could be used in a variety of settings, Great White soon began offering original settings that could be used as the background of entire campaigns. They included: the fantasy of *Evernight: The Darkest Setting of All* (2003); the swashbuckling of *50 Fathoms: High Adventure in a Drowned World* (2003); the superheroic *Necessary Evil: Supervillains Must Rise Where Heroes Fall* (2004); the historical horror of the new Weird Wars setting of *Tour of Darkness* (2004); another look at historical horror in *Rippers: Horror Roleplaying in the Victorian Age* (2005); and the humorously apocalyptic *Low Life: The Rise of the Lowly* (2005).

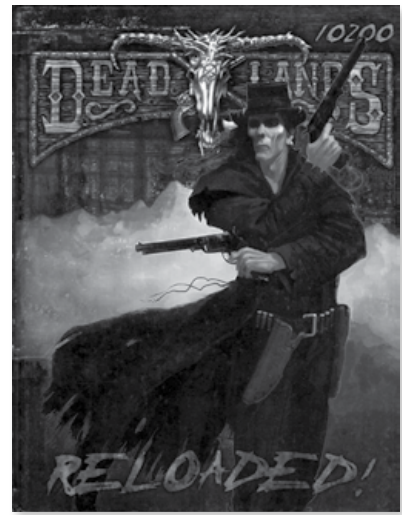
> *"Evernight has a soft spot in my heart because of its origin and the play test campaign we ran. (In brief, the origin came at the end of running the Illithid trilogy in D&D 3.5. Our group killed the hive mind that sent them to stop the invasion of the world and mistakenly plunged the world into darkness. Looks of 'Oops' were quickly replaced by 'Cool!' as I described the enslavement of the races by the evil mind flayers, and my friends envisioned the resistance that would rise to oppose it.)"*
>
> – Shane Hensley, Interview, rptroll.blogspot.com (April 2010)

The business plan for these early years at Great White Games was very different from what Pinnacle had been doing previously. Whereas before they published very "deep" RPG lines, with lots of supplements for each setting, now they published very "wide" lines, with lots of lightly supported different settings.

The second of these settings, *50 Fathoms*, also introduced a new concept: the "plot points" campaign. These complete campaigns were Great White's own answer to the adventure paths being developed by Paizo Publishing at the time. Like the adventure paths, plot point campaigns offered a complete metaplot for a long-term campaign. However, unlike the heavily scripted adventure paths, the plot point campaigns were resolved at a speed determined by the players. Each campaign contained numerous "Savage Tales," which tended to be keyed to locations; players could select among them, perhaps visiting locales important to their own characters, possibly visiting the ones that actually had the "plot points" to advance the campaign, and maybe journeying about randomly.

The plot point campaigns further highlighted Hensley's ideals of "management light" gaming. He'd later recount that he wrote *Savage Worlds* for a more "mature" gamer — not meaning anything to do with how they played the games, but instead talking about their lifestyles. He envisioned his new game being played

by players that had family and kids and didn't have the preparation time that many college-aged gamers enjoyed. The plot point campaigns — combined with *Savage Worlds*' simplified characters — were meant to be played with no prep ... practically on the fly. *50 Fathoms* contained 48 different Savage Tales, 22 sub plots, an adventure generator, and 18 pages of monsters to support this style of play. A GM could literally find out where the players were going, quickly learn about the area and its potential adventures, and then begin running.



Though some people found *Savage Worlds* insufficiently detailed for a gaming system, there were many who *liked* that simplicity, and it quickly gained in popularity. The concept of the plot point campaigns was also well-received. This success showed in 2004 when Hensley announced that Great White Games was once more in the black.

This success was thanks not just to Great White's new game system, but also their newest partnership. They joined up with Studio 2 Publishing, a fulfillment house for small publishers that also did publishing. It gave Hensley the type of solid partner that he'd been looking for since before the AEG days.

By 2005, two years after the Great White Games revival, the new company was ready to take the next step. That year, three things showed that the company was opening a new page in their history.

First, Great White Games published a second edition of *Savage Worlds* (2005) that polished and expanded the rules. It made two other significant changes. The book interior was now printed full-color, marking the future direction of the company, where they'd be putting out an increased number of full-color hardcover books. The rules also removed the original skirmish rules, marking a general direction away from the miniatures rules of *The Great Rail Wars* and toward roleplaying.

Second, Great White Games began publishing genre toolkits for Savage Worlds that allowed *Savage Worlds*' generic rules to be used by gamemasters to run a variety of types of games. These toolkits were released as PDFs, starting with the *Fantasy Bestiary Toolkit* (2005), the *Fantasy Character Generator Toolkit* (2005), the *Fantasy Gear Toolkit* (2005), and the *Fantasy World Builder Toolkit* (2005).

Third, Great White Games returned to an old setting with the publication of *Deadlands: Reloaded!* (2005), which updated Pinnacle's top RPG to the Savage

Worlds system. Simultaneously, Great White Games began doing business as ... Pinnacle Entertainment. Though the company is still officially known as Great White Games, Pinnacle is the imprint that is prominently shown.

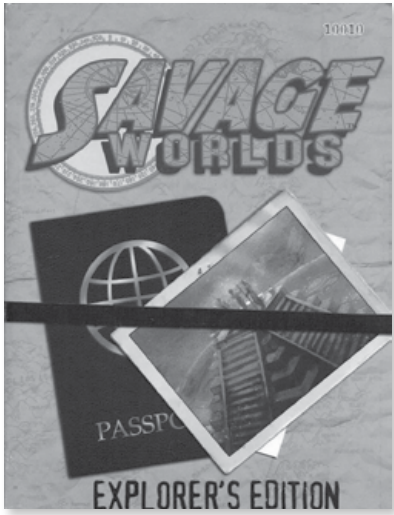
The Early Computer Days: 2004—2009

Cryptic's revitalization of *Savage Worlds* and *Deadlands* in 2005 is particularly impressive because it came about just when Shane Hensley was putting *less* focus on the company. That's because he joined Cryptic Studios in 2004 to work as a lead designer on their *City of Villains* (2005) MMORPG.

> *"Jack Emmert, the genius behind [City of Heroes], was a long-time friend and did a couple of books for Pinnacle back in the day. I started playing CoH and told Jack how much I liked it, and eventually we worked out that I should be here working on [City of Villains].*
>
> – Shane Hensley, Interview, gamersinfo.net (December 2004)

For a bit, things continued on as before at Pinnacle. There were more genre toolkit PDFs, such as the science-fiction toolkit (2006), the horror toolkit (2007), and the pulp toolkit (2008). There were also a few more settings. The science-fiction horror setting of *Necropolis* (2006) and the pulp science-fiction setting of *Slipstream* (2008), both by Paul "Wiggy" Wade-Williams, were Pinnacle's final original settings for *Savage Worlds* for several years.

Pinnacle also tried out a few third-party settings, publishing *Pirates of the Spanish Main* (2007), licensed from WizKids, and *The Savage World of Solomon Kane* (2007), licensed from the Robert E. Howard estate. However, these licenses would be the exceptions, not the norm for the company going forward.



Instead, the possibility of a bigger change for Pinnacle came about through Hensley's continued work in the computer industry. After his first stint at Cryptic, Hensley went to work at Superstition Studios from 2006–2009 with the goal of producing a *Deadlands* MMORPG. Sadly, it was cancelled when Superstition's parent company failed. What could have been a *huge* boost for Pinnacle's roleplaying properties — similar to what Hero Games saw in the same time period — instead fizzled.

Fortunately, Pinnacle was simultaneously innovating internally. This began with the publication of a new edition of their rulebook, this one called the *Savage World Explorer's Edition* (2007). It was a small, digest-sized version of the rules that sold for just $9.99, making it one of the cheapest games on the market. This was a daring move at the time, since a core rulebook is often one of the best-sellers for an RPG company — but it's a move that's apparently worked well for Pinnacle, resulting in the sales of over 50,000 copies in just four years. They weren't MMORPG level numbers, but they were pretty impressive for RPG sales in the late '00s.

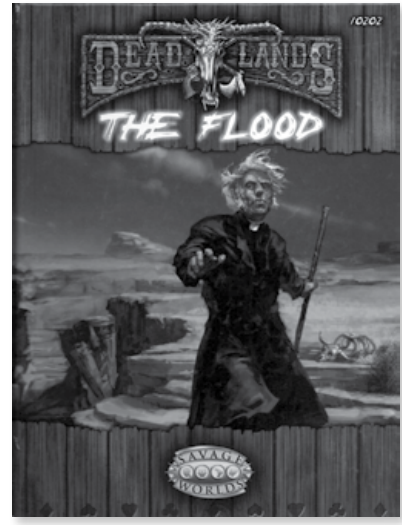
And Pinnacle had more ideas for change just around the corner.

Pinnacle Reloaded: 2008-Present

In its early days, the modern Pinnacle primarily built its business on short-run product lines — much like Margaret Weis Productions and much of the indie community. Its catalog was wide, featuring many different setting books, but not particularly deep. As early as 2008, this would begin to change.

One result was that Pinnacle's old PDF toolkits came into print as expansions for the new *Explorer's* rules. This began with the *Fantasy Companion* (2009), the *Super Powers Companion* (2010), and the *Horror Companion* (2011). Pinnacle also supported their *Solomon Kane* line more than their other lines of recent years, with supplements like *Travelers' Tales* (2008), *The Savage Foes of Solomon Kane* (2010), and *The Path of Kane* (2011).

However, it was *Deadlands* that best highlighted Pinnacle's new direction and which would be the largest beneficiary of that new focus. It started in 2008 with a short adventure called *Coffin Rock* (2008), something that hadn't really been seen for the one-shot products that previously comprised the catalog. However, *The Flood* (2009) was much more notable, because it was advertised as the start of a four-part plot point campaign. That extended campaign has since continued with *The Last Sons* (2010).



In 2010, shortly after the death of the *Deadlands* MMORPG, tabletop support for the old line really took off. That year, *Deadlands* became Pinnacle's best-supported setting for the first time since around 2001. Since then, Pinnacle has produced several *Deadlands* products every year.

More recently, that support spread beyond even the Weird West, when two new

Deadlands settings appeared. *Deadlands Hell on Earth: Reloaded* (2012) returned to the second *Deadlands* setting, but *Deadlands Noir* (2012) was something entirely new. It's a combination of urban fantasy and noir, set in the *Deadlands* universe in 1935. Rumor says that a reloaded *Lost Colony* is planned for the future as well.

Despite the heavy focus on *Deadlands*, Pinnacle continues to do a bit of work on other settings too. *Weird War II* (2009) provided a new look at Pinnacle's d20 setting while *Weird Wars Rome* (2013) presented a new venue for battle. *The Wild Hunt* (2011) offered a "Savage Worlds Test Drive" for Free RPG Day 2011 while Pinnacle's new Wendigo Tales (2013-Present) line publishes e-book fiction set in worlds such as the *Weird Wars* and *Necessary Evil*. Pinnacle's most interesting "new" release of recent years is probably *Space 1889: Red Sands* (2010), an updated look at GDW's well-beloved steampunk setting whose game system was always a bit "heavy" for it. Now, thanks to *Savage Worlds*, it had more appropriate mechanics and a new chance to shine.

> *"I have everything written for Space 1889 and was thinking of running a game for my friends. I thought "Why not call Frank?," so I did. The rest … will be in your hands this summer."*
>
> – Shane Hensley, Interview, stargazersworld.com (May 2010)

Today, Pinnacle Entertainment is run by a small group of people spread out across the United States — using a distributed model that dates back to at least Imperium Games, but is easier since thanks to Internet. Shane Hensley is still president. He works with *Savage Worlds* brand manager Clint Black, *Deadlands* brand manager Matthew Cutter, art director Aaron Acevedo, and a variety of other editors, writers, and staff.

Hensley has also continued working in the computer industry. Recently, he headed Dust Devil Studios where he brought *Zombie Pirates* (2010) to market, executive produced *Neverwinter* (2013) for Cryptic, and executive produced *End of Nations* for Petroglyph Games before it was "put on hold" in late 2013.

Though Pinnacle continues to vamp and revamp its business, it's nonetheless clear that *Savage Worlds* has done well for the company in the decade since its rebirth. Pinnacle's continued, high-quality production alone would tell us that, but the success of the system is even more obvious from how well Pinnacle's Savage Worlds licensing program has gone.

Pinnacle freely licenses their *Savage Worlds* game system to other publishers, but only after giving initial approval to each company. After he watched Wizards of the Coast's d20/OGL program quickly succumb to waves of poor-quality

products, Hensley wanted to make sure that *Savage Worlds* didn't suffer the same problem, hence his initial gate keeping.

To date about two dozen companies have risen to Pinnacle's challenge, including: 12 to Midnight, Adamant Entertainment, Atomic Overmind Press, Daring Entertainment, Reality Blurs, Savage Mojo, Silver Gryphon Games, and Triple Ace Games. Of those, Triple Ace may be the most notable, as it's run by Paul "Wiggy" Wade-Williams, former creative director of Pinnacle; at Triple Ace, he's been creating and expanding plenty of savage settings. All told, *Savage Worlds* looks to be eclipsing the old d20 rules as the choice rule system for creating new worlds.

For a company that looked dead a decade ago, that's a pretty fine second act.

What to Read Next

- For one of the most recent westerns, read about *Aces & Eights* in ***Kenzer & Company.***
- For Pinnacle's one-time partner, more on ***Five Rings Publishing Group,*** and the future of Matt Forbeck and *Brave New World*, read ***AEG.***
- For a look at other licensable game systems that have been widely used, read about d20 in ***Wizards of the Coast*** and *FUDGE* in ***Grey Ghost Press.***
- For another company focusing on short-length game lines, read ***Margaret Weis Productions.***

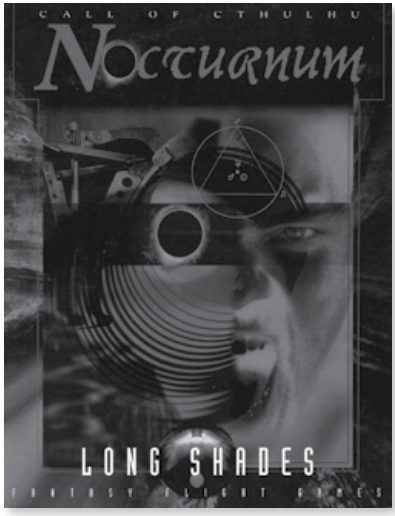
In Other Eras

- For the primordial western RPG, read about *Boot Hill* in ***TSR*** *['70s].*
- For an indie take on the Old West, read about *Dogs in the Vineyard* in ***Lumpley Games*** *['00s].*
- For the sad story of cybergames.com, read ***Hero Games*** *['80s].*
- For adventure paths, another campaign model, read ***Paizo Publishing*** *['00s].*
- For the gaming property that Cryptic Entertainment bought, and what could have happened if that *Deadlands* MMORPG had gotten made, also read ***Hero Games*** *['80s].*
- For the origins of *Space: 1889*, read ***GDW*** *['70s].*

Or read onward to a major publisher of board games … and some RPGs, ***Fantasy Flight Games.***

Fantasy Flight Games: 1995–Present

Fantasy Flight Games today is best known as a top American publisher of hobby board games, but they've also been in and out of the RPG field — and are now in again.



1997: Nocturnum: Long Shades

Comic & Twilight Beginnings: 1995—1997

Though US-born, Christian T. Petersen — who would eventually found Fantasy Flight Games — grew up in Denmark. He was still in high school there when he founded Pegasus Spil Import — a company that imported Avalon Hill games into Scandinavia — and Games Weekend — Denmark's second gaming convention. One of the most notable elements of Games Weekend was a massive 35-group *Call of Cthulhu*

tournament; as we'll see, *Call of Cthulhu* would play an important factor in the evolution of Fantasy Flight as well.

Petersen returned to the United States in 1991 and began studying for his BA in Economics at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota — coincidentally, the same college that spawned Lion Rampant Publishing almost a decade before. It was in June 1995, after four years of college, that Petersen founded Fantasy Flight Publishing.

The name for Fantasy Flight originates with Petersen's first company, Pegasus Spil Imports. Petersen originally wanted to call his new company Pegasus Publishing, but he found the market already glutted with pegasi; instead he choose a name that was representative of the pegasus: a fantasy flight.

Surprisingly, Fantasy Flight did *not* get its start in gaming. Instead, Petersen's love of European comics contributed the company's first business model. He began thinking about bringing these European publications over to the United States while in college, and when he graduated he decided to give it a shot. By negotiating with European publishers, Petersen came up with the rights to three comic books: *Lucky Luke*, *Spirou & Fantasio*, and *Percevan*. With those in hand he did something that very few hobbyist companies do: he wrote a business plan, and then he started seeking out the $150,000 in investment that his plan required.

"They're not comics as we think of comics in the U.S. They're more like illustrated books – sometimes funny, sometimes serious, and almost always absolutely great."
– Christian Petersen, quoted in Fantasy Flight Games News (March 2009)

Unfortunately, Petersen got into the field at a terrible time. The whole comic market was crashing in the mid-'90s due to a recently busted collector's boom. Distributors were going out of business and being gobbled up by each other, until only Diamond Comics remained. Fantasy Flight's comics never had a chance in this market; from the start, sales were terrible — and they didn't improve.

To Petersen's immense credit, he didn't give up, and he also remained agile enough to respond to the interests of the public. Though he started out publishing the comics he'd licensed, he began importing and distributing more popular European comics like *Asterix* and *Tintin* when he discovered that there was interest in them. Then — when he learned that people wanted him to distribute even more books — he started doing that too, creating Downtown Distribution. None of this was particularly profitable, but it helped to stabilize Fantasy Flight's cash flow — which is what gave them time for their *next* big change.

The whole time that Petersen was working on his comics business, he was also reading a trade magazine called *Comics Retailer* — which later became *Comics*

& Games Retailer. Even before that name change, *Comics Retailer* was covering games, so Petersen had good data about the gaming field constantly available to him. Combining this with his Danish gaming expertise, Petersen starting thinking about getting into game publication.

The result was *Twilight Imperium* (1997), a massive wargame that Petersen designed in the style of Milton Bradley's *Gamemaster* series (1984–1986). Unlike the older MB games, *Twilight Imperium* used a hex-based game board that was different every time — based upon the similar design of Avalon Hill's early adventure game, *Magic Realm* (1979).

The release of *Twilight Imperium* was a notable change for Fantasy Flight Publishing, now more commonly known as Fantasy Flight Games (FFG). By early 1998, Fantasy Flight sold off Downtown Distribution — which represented the last remnant of its comic business — and thereafter focused almost entirely on the gaming market.

But they weren't focused on board games alone ...

Cthulhu Twilight: 1997–2001

As we've already seen from his work with Games Weekend, Christian T. Petersen was a long-time fan of Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* RPG. Because of this interest, Petersen decided pretty early on that he wanted his new publishing company to expand beyond comics to produce *Call of Cthulhu* material — so he acquired a license from Chaosium to publish a series of supplements. Throughout the darkest days of Fantasy Flight — while Petersen was trying to make comics work and simultaneously developing *Twilight Imperium* — he was also writing a series of *Call of Cthulhu* adventures with Darrell Hardy, who would end up being a long-term FFG employee.



The *Nocturnum* trilogy of adventures was published over the next three years as *Long Shades* (1997), *Hollow Winds* (1998), and *Deep Secrets* (1999). They were all modern-day Cthulhu adventures, very different from the core game's conservative 1920s setting. The books introduced a new mythos race and set it against a darker, more conspiratorial background. It was much the same direction that Pagan Publishing was moving with *Delta Green* (1997), but it ultimately

would not be nearly as successful. After these three publications, FFG's *Call of Cthulhu* line came to an end.

In the meantime, FFG had picked up another Lovecraftian game: *Cthulhu Live*. Chaosium published this Cthulhu LARP in its first edition (1997), but was now facing their own financial problems and was unable to support it; instead, Fantasy Flight did, publishing four different supplements (1999–2001) — including a *Player's Guide* (1999) and a *Delta Green* (2001) sourcebook. Afterward the line moved on to Skirmisher Publishing, who produced a third edition (2006). Though FFG's *Cthulhu Live* line was as short-lived as its *Nocturnum* adventures, it nonetheless showed a continued dedication to H.P. Lovecraft's works that has since become much more obvious in FFG's board and card game publication.

Throughout their lifetime FFG has been very good at cross-marketing their products — adapting them for different systems and different mediums — and this was obvious from their earliest publications. The *Nocturnum* books were later reprinted for d20 (2002), while the *Twilight Imperium* board game spawned a fantasy variant called *Battlemist* (1998). After FFG published Tom Jolly's *Disk Wars* game (1998), it was mashed up with AEG's Rokugan setting to produce *Disk Wars: Legend of the Five Rings* (2000) and with Pinnacle's *Deadlands* to produce *Doom Town Range Wars* (2000). It's not surprising that FFG's first original RPG — coming on the heels of their *Nocturnum* work — was exactly this sort of adaptation.



Twilight Imperium: The Role-Playing Game (1999) was (of course) based on FFG's premiere board game. Unfortunately, the ubiquitous element that made the board game fun — its mixture of elements reminiscent of *Dune*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and many other well-known settings — couldn't support the increased scrutiny required for a roleplaying setting, and a simplistic rules system wasn't enough to save it. After the *Mecatol Rex* (2000) supplement, the game was doomed to fade away.

But that was the doom of almost any roleplaying game that had the misfortune to be released just before the year 2000 ...

Board Game Expansion: 2000—2003

The history of Fantasy Flight Games has always been about change. Just as Christian T. Petersen slowly adapted his comic book business, he was now slowly adapting his gaming business as well — always seeking out new and more successful niches. So as the *Call of Cthulhu*, *Twilight Imperium RPG*, and *Cthulhu Live* lines trailed off in 1999–2001, FFG was simultaneously planning for new game lines.

Some of this growth and innovation was on the board game side of things. There were some original productions, like *Twilight Imperium Second Edition* (2000), but FFG was also expanding into the growing eurogame field, which had been introduced into the United States by Mayfair Games and Rio Grande Games in the late '90s. The history of Mayfair discusses eurogames in more depth, but generally they were games originating in Germany or France that had a new focus on tight mechanics and quick gameplay. Mayfair's *The Settlers of Catan* (1995) may remain the best-known example of the genre.

FFG's expansion into the eurogame field is most notable for the fact they published two foundational games in the genre during their first year of attention to the field: Bruno Faidutti's *Citadels* (2000) and Reiner Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* (2000). Financially, both games were quite successful — as is shown by the fact that they remain in print over a decade later. However what may be more notable is how pivotal both games were to the eurogaming scene, foreshadowing FFG's future influence on the whole board game field.

> *"Lord of the Rings has given us a huge leg up in being taken seriously."*
> – Christian Petersen, Interview, nggnet.com (September 2002)

Citadels was the game that introduced the mechanic of "role selection" to the mass market. Here, a player chooses a specific role during his turn, which grants him special powers, and his opponents follow in the action he initiated. It's been used in many games, the most notable of which is *Puerto Rico* (2002). More recently, it's been revamped into the mechanic of "worker placement" — where players instead claim multiple powers on a turn — which premiered in *Caylus* (2005). However, as we'll see, FFG didn't share in the *later* success of these mechanics due to their changing focus; Rio Grande Games instead published both *Caylus* and *Puerto Rico* in the United States.

Lord of the Rings, meanwhile, represented the return of an old sort of play: the cooperative game, where the players work together against either the game system or a single adversarial player. In *Lord of the Rings*, players take on the roles

of hobbits, managing their resources, and striving to destroy the One Ring against the backdrop of J.R.R. Tolkien's novels.

The genre of cooperative games originated in the hobbyist field in the '80s, which saw releases like Chaosium's *Arkham Horror* (1987) and Games Workshop's *The Fury of Dracula* (1987). However, after the publication of Milton Bradley's *HeroQuest* (1989) and GDW's *Minion Hunter* (1992) it had largely disappeared. *Lord of the Rings* now revived the old style of game and also brought it to the attention of the wider eurogame audience. It would be followed by many others, with the most successful being Days of Wonder's *Shadows over Camelot* (2005) and Z-Man Games' *Pandemic* (2008).

After 2000, board games took a back seat at FFG for reasons that we'll soon see. However, they didn't die out entirely. Many of the company's continued board game publications focused on eurogames — especially those by Reiner Knizia, who took a particular interest in the company. This included both classics like *Through the Desert* (2000) and FFG originals like *Maginor* (2001) and *King's Gate* (2002).

However, FFG's most notable strategic games of the next few years were both licenses based on George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice & Fire* series (1996-Present). The *Game of Thrones* (2003) wargame, by Christian Petersen and Kevin Wilson, was ground-breaking for its combination of euro and American mechanics. The result was a simplified *Diplomacy* (1959)-like game that also featured auctions and other euro-mechanics. It was quite well-regarded and would eventually receive a polished second edition (2011). FFG also got into CCGs with *A Game of Thrones* (2002). They were one of the few companies to successfully break into that market so late after its inception and as we'll see would go on to redefine the field. The CCG's success would also result in FFG dividing itself up into three departments: board games (and card games), CCGs, and RPGs.

With that, we should now return to the RPGs at the heart of these histories. When we last discussed them, most of FFG's original RPG lines were winding down. At the same time however, FFG was ramping up *new* lines for what would be their most extensive RPG development for a decade — an explosion that included one game line that wasn't very successful and one that was.

The *Blue Planet* Years: 1999—2002

The less successful game was unfortunately Jeffrey Barber's and Greg Benage's *Blue Planet*. As is discussed in the history of Pagan Publishing, Barber was a former Pagan staff member who spun off his own company, Biohazard Games, when Pagan moved to Washington in 1994. Biohazard's premiere game, *Blue Planet* (1997)



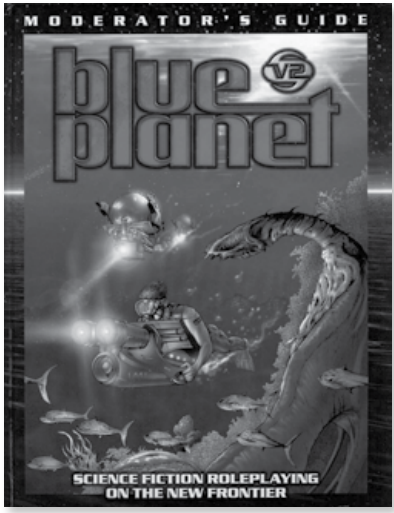
centered on a well-detailed science-fiction setting that portrayed a single world in a time of great tension.

By 1999, Biohazard had sold 2,700 copies of the original game — a respectable number for a small publisher — but was looking for a partner with better distribution and better resources. Meanwhile FFG had not yet developed a flagship RPG line (and wouldn't for a decade) and could use a unique game exactly like *Blue Planet*.

A deal was made.

FFG had two requests before they took *Blue Planet*. First, they wanted one of the Biohazard team to come over to Fantasy Flight. Barber's partner, Greg Benage, agreed; he immediately came over to work on *Blue Planet*, which would grew increasingly important to FFG over the next several years, eventually taking over their RPG Department and doing much of their other game development. Second, they wanted some event to bring new attention to the line. Since the original mechanics of the game had never been that polished, Benage decided to rewrite them entirely, which resulted in a brand-new "Synergy" system.

Over the course of 2000, FFG did an admirable job of supporting *Blue Planet* as the company's first *major* and well-supported RPG line. Including the new *Blue Planet Moderator's Guide* (2000) and *Blue Planet Player's Guide* (2000), FFG published and sold almost a half-dozen supplements for the game — far more than Biohazard ever had.

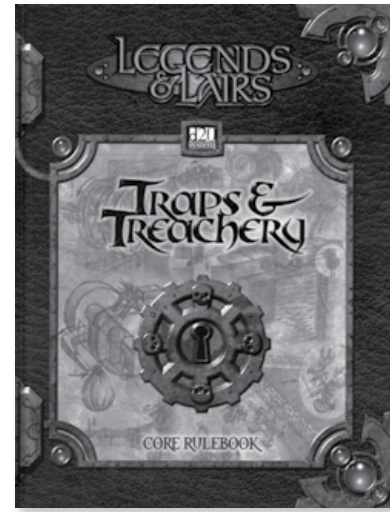


Unfortunately, problems with the sixth manuscript, *Ancient Echoes*, combined with Fantasy Flight becoming involved with the d20 boom (as we'll see shortly), resulted in the line stuttering to a halt. *Ancient Echoes* (2002) was finally published over a year late with such a sufficiently low print run that today it is a collector's item. The line died off thereafter.

In 2004, *Blue Planet* rights reverted Biohazard. Benage is no longer involved, and the rest of the principals are scattered — which would lead you to suspect the

line is dead. However, the power of the game's setting is strong enough that it's seen resurrections here and there. The '00s just saw Steve Jackson Game's one-off *GURPS Blue Planet* (2003) and a short newsletter from Biohazard, *Undercurrents #7* (2007) — which recognized the tenth anniversary of the game. However, the game might do better in the '10s. The new FASA Games released a revised edition of the game (2012) through PDF and POD that briefly supported the line, as is more completely described in the history of RedBrick.

The D20 Explosion & After: 2001—2008



Though 2000 saw the release of FFG's new *Blue Planet*, it would be another year before FFG's RPG work went into overdrive. That was because of the new opportunity offered by Wizard's d20 license. As was always the case, Fantasy Flight was eager and able to move into a new market segment, and they did so with savvy and business acumen.

FFG's first line of d20 products was the "Legends & Lairs Instant Adventure" series (2001). This line of 16-page pamphlet sized adventures was very similar to the line that AEG had begun the previous December. The booklets were priced at $3.95, and represented a fairly low investment for players — and a fairly low risk for Fantasy Flight. FFG cranked out three sets of eight adventures each (2001), for a total of 24, and then quickly abandoned the line. Unlike much of the early d20 industry, FFG didn't see adventure publication as an ends, but rather as a means to get there.

FFG's success with the *Instant Adventures* — and the experience it gave them with d20 — led them to a new line called simply "Legends & Lairs." These were hardcover sourcebooks, very much in the vein of White Wolf's core Sword & Sorcery books. The first was *Traps & Treachery* (2001). *Mythic Races* (2001) and the *Seafarer's Handbook* (2001) followed that premiere publication.

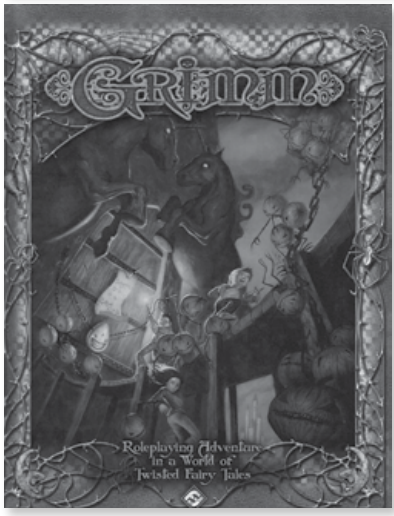
As Fantasy Flight's d20 success grew, they hired Kevin Wilson of AEG to oversee a retooling of the *Legends & Lairs* line. He split it into a number of smaller sublines filled with smaller sourcebooks. The "Lore" books, which ran from *Draconic Lore* (2002) to *Giant Lore* (2003), were bestiaries; the "Path" books, which ran from *Path of the Sword* (2002) to *Path of Faith* (2003), were character sourcebooks; and the "School" books, which included *Path of Evocation* (2003) and *Path of Illusion* (2003), were magic compendiums. These new *Legends & Lairs*

books only lasted into 2003, because by then FFG was yet again on the move. Just as the adventure market had quickly become glutted, now the sourcebook market was too. FFG's last d20 products instead would be of a type that they had begun releasing back in 2001: original settings.

Dragonstar (2001) was the first FFG d20 setting and one of the most notable. It was a space opera science-fantasy world, and unlike most d20 campaigns, it didn't just mirror the standard fantasy tropes. FFG published a half-dozen books in this setting from 2001–2003.

Dawnforge (2003) had been FFG's entrant in Wizards of the Coast's setting contest. It was one of the final 11 contestants, but it eventually lost out to Keith Baker's Eberron. *Dawnforge* envisioned the dawn of a mythic world where the players took part in the legendary first age that would lay the foundation for more familiar empires. It was only lightly supported (2003–2004).



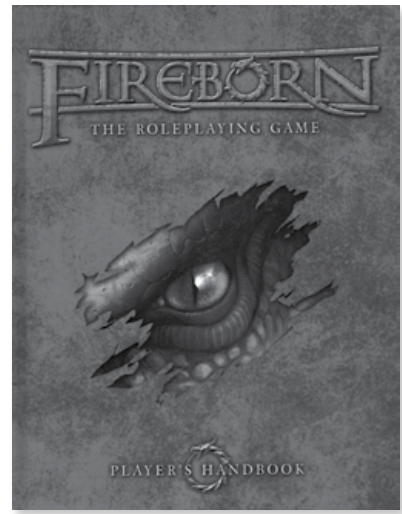


FFG's other release of the same year, *Midnight* (2003), was a bigger hit. It detailed a fantasy realm that felt broadly like Middle-earth, but with a single and notable change: the bad guys won. The result was a dark and gloomy gameworld that was the best received of all of FFG's campaign releases. It was well-supported with over a dozen supplements (2003–2007). As part of their usual cross-marketing, FFG later released a *Runebound: Midnight* (2006) board game as well. Much more notably, in April 2006 they also created a media production division to film a movie called *The Midnight Chronicles*. They later released the *Midnight Chronicles DVD* (2008), a full-length movie complete with an adventure for the fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

FFG's last major d20 line was *Horizon*, which was a set of standalone "minigames." There were five in all, and like *Dragonstar* they covered non-standard settings: the post-apocalyptic *Redline* (2003), the faerie tale-based *Grimm* (2003), the cyberpunk *Virtual* (2003), the weird west *Spellslinger*

(2004), and the giant robot world of *Mechamorphosis* (2004).

By 2004, when *Dawnforge* and *Horizon* trailed off, the overall d20 industry had dramatically weakened too, and FFG mostly moved on. The changing times were made most obvious by the fact that FFG was now willing to release a non-d20 game: *Fireborn* (2004). This new RPG was set in a modern London where the players took on the roles of reincarnated dragons and slowly rediscovered their past lives.





A similar concept had previously been seen in Chaosium's *Nephilim* (1994), but *Fireborn* really played up the storytelling aspect by involving players in actual flashbacks during play. Lead designer Rob Vaughn, assisted by Greg Benage, also worked hard to create a "cinematic" gaming system. It mixed some standard concepts like a comparative dice pool with very heavy theming, where everything centered on the four elements. *Fireborn* was critically successful despite its need for extensive errata. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for its sales; the line was cut by the end of the year after just a handful of publications.

By the end of 2004, *Midnight* was the only RPG line that FFG was still publishing, and by 2006 it looked like FFG was only holding onto it to support their movie IP. If this history had been written in 2007, it would have suggested that FFG's roleplaying years were largely behind them, with just a few final publications in the wings.

To start with, the faerie tale *Grimm* (2007) reappeared, now freed from the mechanics of d20 and given its own lightweight system instead. *Anima: Beyond Fantasy* (2008) followed; it's notable mainly for being a rare translation of a Spanish game. However, these two games were exceptions following the d20 implosion.

By now, Greg Benage was gone as head of the RPG Department (having departed FFG in 2006) — and the RPG Department was pretty much gone as

well. That's because FFG's biggest business was now in board and card games, and it was *booming*.

CCGs & Euros: 2004–2008

When we left FFG's board and card game production back around 2004, it was divided between two departments — board games and CCGs. Now, with RPG production faltering, these departments had to step back up to the plate. As one might expect, more CCGs and eurogames followed the company's newest dive into the strategy game market.

> *"Since we started our games publication with Twilight Imperium back in 1997, our roots have really been in board games."*
>
> – Christian Petersen, fairplaygames.com (2003)

The CCG Department was already developing a second release, the *Call of Cthulhu* CCG (2004) — licensed from Chaosium. Fantasy Flight supplemented the *Call of Cthulhu* CCG (as well as the *Game of Thrones* CCG) through 2006. By late 2007, however, FFG had decided their CCGs needed to be revamped. As a result they redeveloped them as "Living Card Games" (LCGs), in which cards were released in fixed decks — including large core sets and monthly "chapter packs" — rather than in random boosters.

This new format appeared in 2008 and would prove quite popular, since it simultaneously allowed for the customization of CCGs while getting rid of the most onerous (which is to say expensive) aspects of collectability. Other publishers have since mimicked FFG's Living Card Games model — including Plaid Hat Games with their *Summoner Wars* (2011) and Arcane Wonders with their *Mage Wars* (2012). FFG has also continued to push on new LCGs of their own, as we'll see in the near future. Overall, the success of the LCGs is ironic because when AEG tried the same thing a decade earlier with their "Rolling Thunder" release schedule, they were met with abject failure.

Meanwhile, Fantasy Flight's eurogame production started to slow as the company increasingly developed its own voice. Top games like Reiner Knizias' *Blue Moon City* (2006) and *Beowulf: The Movie Board Game* (2007) — the latter a redevelopment of an older FFG title — appeared, but they were a dwindling part of FFG's board game production.

A Return to the Board Gaming Past: 2004—2006

It was original board games — particularly very big-box original board games with tons of beautiful pieces — that came to represent the majority of Fantasy Flight's production. They were largely designed in-house at FFG — or at the least extensively redeveloped there — and tended to follow in the footsteps of the *Game of Thrones* board game, with its mixture of tight eurogame mechanics and deep American theming. One of them, Martin Wallace's *Runebound* (2004) — which was redeveloped at Fantasy Flight by Darrell Hardy — would be particularly important to the future of the company.

In many ways, *Runebound* was a callback to Games Workshop of the '80s. It was a new adventure game where players traveled across a fantasy world, Terrinoth, to try and win the greatest acclaim and accolades for their own character — sort of like GW's *Talisman* (1983) of two decades previous. It was also full of intricate and consistent systems, which would be another hallmark of FFG's development.

Runebound did surprisingly well for Fantasy Flight, and that was doubtless a major factor in the company's decision to push further into the adventuring gaming space in the years that followed. Two more releases solidified FFG's position as the new adventure game producer of the '00s — following up on traditions gone from the RPG industry for over a decade.

The first was their second edition of *Arkham Horror* (2005), a well-polished and expanded revision of Richard Launius' cooperative adventure game; like the *Call of Cthulhu CCG*, it was licensed from Chaosium.

The second was *Descent: Journeys into Darkness* (2006), which revised the gaming system created for Petersen & Wilson's *Doom: The Board Game* (2004). *Descent* was an evocative and tactical dungeon crawl game where the players fought against a game master. As such, it filled the same niche once held by Milton Bradley and Games Workshop's *HeroQuest* (1989). It also continued with FFG's general policy of sharing and reinforcing their IPs: *Descent* was set in Terrinoth, the same world as *Runebound* — which by then had been reprinted in a more balanced and polished second edition (2005).

As we'll see, FFG continually revisited these three games until the start of the '10s. However, these thematic continuations weren't their only interaction with Games Workshop. They also more directly licensed a few Games Workshop games of yore, resulting in new editions of *Fury of Dracula* (2006) and *Warrior Knights* (2006).

And *that* may have been FFG's foot in the door for their dramatic return to the world of roleplaying.

A Brief History of Adventure Games: 1972-Present

In late 1972, Gary Gygax was presented with two game designs that originated within Dave Arneson's gaming group in the Twin Cities. One was Dave Arneson's Blackmoor, an open-ended game of dungeon delving, and the other was Dave Megarry's The Dungeons of Pasha Cada, a board game covering the same topics.

It's easy to imagine Gygax (and by extension TSR) choosing either for what would become their flagship product. Though Gygax selected Blackmoor – and eventually redeveloped it into *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) – he still thought that The Dungeons of Pasha Cada was important. As a result, he may have offered Megarry up to 10% of TSR's stock when he published Pasha Cada as *Dungeon!* (1975) a few years later.

At the time, there was no name for what Megarry created. In fact, the term "adventure gaming" was then being used to describe roleplaying – before the latter term took hold. "Adventure gaming" as a term began to be used for games that took roleplaying ideas and themes and converted them into mechanics for board games.

A few other adventure games appeared in the '70s, with Avalon Hill's *Magic Realm* (1979) being the most prominent; however the field didn't really explode until the '80s. That decade saw the publication of three foundational adventure games that together defined three streams of adventure gaming publication. GW's *Talisman* (1983) followed in the footsteps of *Dungeon!* by using fantasy tropes to create a competitive game. Chaosium's *Arkham Horror* (1987) turned away from fantasy and instead adapted *Call of Cthulhu* (1980) gameplay; it also kicked off the field of cooperative gaming, which afterward would frequently intersect with adventure games. Finally GW and Milton Bradley's *HeroQuest* (1989) put these puzzle pieces together by combining fantasy adventure gaming with cooperative play.

The *Warhammer 40k* Years: 2008-Present

On January 26, 2008, Games Workshop's Black Industries put out a new roleplaying game. *Dark Heresy* (2008) was a game that fans waited 20 years for. Set in the gothic future of *Warhammer 40,000*, it offered the first chance to roleplay in that realm since the miniatures release *Warhammer 40,000: Rogue Trader* (1987) first flirted with roleplaying ideas — before the game shifted entirely toward wargaming with its second edition (1993).

However, *Dark Heresy* wasn't a general *Warhammer 40,000* RPG. Instead, it zeroed in on a very specific aspect of the world: players took on the roles of Acolytes of the Inquisition, to root out heresies. Some fans of *Warhammer 40k* were disappointed by the limited scope, which didn't allow them to play the space marines or the xenos — like orks and the eldar — that helped to define the setting.

Unfortunately, adventure gaming has never gone too far beyond these three core game style – and in fact the whole field largely died out in the '90s, amid the CCG boom and bust. It's only in the '00s that adventure gaming has returned, and that is largely thanks to Fantasy Flight Games.

In the mid-'00s, FFG released games for all three adventure gaming styles. *Runebound* (2004) followed on from *Talisman* as a competitive fantasy adventure game, while *Descent: Journeys in Darkness* (2006) followed on from *HeroQuest* as a cooperative game. In between, FFG acquired the rights to *Arkham Horror* and produced a second edition (2005) of the classic game.

Though FFG has been the prime mover for adventure games in recent years, they're not alone. Many others games have appeared in the genre, and some of them have once more begun to stretch the adventure gaming's envelope. Atlas Games' *Dungeoneer* (2003+) is notable for being entirely card-based, while Pegasus Spiele's *Return of the Heroes* (2003) was one of the first games to combine adventure gaming with tighter eurogame mechanics. Similarly, Kosmos' *Witch of Salem* (2008) is a very *Arkham Horror*-like game also built with eurogame mechanics.

More recently, adventure games have come full circle, with Wizards of the Coast's "D&D Adventure System Cooperative Play" series – including *Castle Ravenloft* (2010), *Wrath of Ashardalon* (2011), and *Legend of Drizzt* (2011). These games essentially use simplified versions of *Dungeons & Dragons 4E* – mirroring how Blackmoor and *Dungeon!* were closely connected so long ago.

However, many others were quickly won over by the grimly beautiful and richly evocative background of the RPG, as well as its uniquely investigative nature —*Dark Heresy* pushed into a subgenre of gaming usually dominated by *Call of Cthulhu* and other horror games and almost unheard of in the science-fiction realm.



Beyond that, players were happy enough with the game system, which was a further revision of the system previously used by *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (1986, 2005). Players could no longer change between careers in *Dark Heresy*, as they could in *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, but a branching system helped to keep each character unique. Other than that, the *Dark Heresy* game system was pretty familiar to old fans.

Two days later, on January 28, 2008, Games Workshop canceled the *Dark Heresy* line — and all the rest of their RPGs. That's where Fantasy Flight Games entered the picture. Within a month they inked a deal with Games Workshop that gave them access to GW's entire library of RPG and board game material.

Of course, if FFG wanted to continue with *Dark Heresy*, they needed an RPG Department again. They started in May by moving Michael Hurley — a senior editor for FFG who been working on *Anima* — over to become the company's new managing RPG director. By June, they'd also hired two new staff members — Ross Watson and Jay Little — who were brought in as senior RPG developers. Ironically, Watson had originally applied to FFG as a *D&D* 4E developer, but FFG very quickly killed their plans for that line when the failure of Wizards' GSL became obvious.

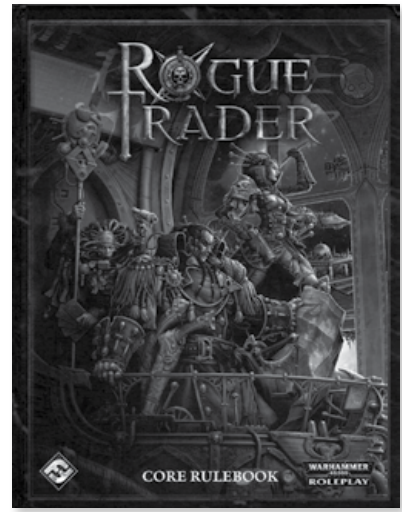
With new RPG staff in-house and a license from Games Workshop in hand, FFG was now in the driver's seat of a whole new RPG line: *Warhammer 40,000 Roleplay*. That started out with support for *Dark Heresy*. By this time, Black Industries had produced five products for the game — books that FFG was now reprinting in more prestigious hardcovers. Meanwhile, FFG was also working on releases of their own, beginning with a book of antagonists called *Disciples of the Dark God* (2008). Editorial work on that book was done by FFG's new hire Ross Watson and by Sam Stewart (who we'll shortly encounter again). Watson, who previously freelanced for GW, and had good knowledge of the *Warhammer* IPs, soon took over the *Warhammer 40,000 RPG* line.

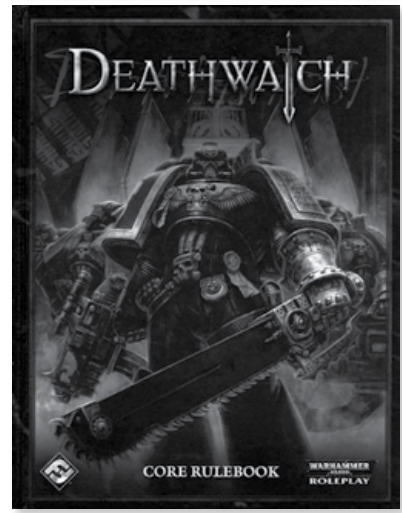
Meanwhile, FFG had bigger plans than just publishing *Dark Heresy*. GW previously announced that they intended to release a trilogy of *40k* RPGs, each of which would highlight a different aspect of the *40k* universe. When it became increasingly obvious that FFG had a hit on their hands, they opted to continue with the plan.

> *"When it comes to the Warhammer 40,000 universe, Games Workshop always has the final say. It's their IP, after all! That having been said, the Calixis Sector is pretty much open to go in almost any direction."*
>
> – Ross Watson, Interview, darkreign40k.com (2008)

FFG's second *Warhammer 40k* RPG was *Rogue Trader* (2009). Here players entered a world of ancient, enormous spaceships licensed to explore the frontier. One character would take the role of the "rogue trader" who ran the ship, while others became members of his crew — the few who stood out among thousands.

New "character origin paths" in character creation allowed for narrative and interconnecting histories, bringing the *Warhammer 40k* games into the world of





more "indie" game design. *Rogue Trader* also introduced plenty of rules for spaceships to the *40k* universe, as well as rules for acquisition (which kept traders from dealing with the minutia of coin counting) and even a mass-combat system. Despite all that, *Rogue Trader* was entirely compatible with *Dark Heresy* — though the power level, the scope, and the locations of the games were quite different. Despite these difficulties, some GMs wrote of their acolytes from *Dark Heresy* becoming explorers for the Inquisition following the release of the second game.

If anything, *Rogue Trader* was even better received than *Dark Heresy*. It gave FFG its highest volume of sales for the year and probably was what propelled FFG into the upper ranks of RPG producers, trailing only Wizards and Paizo. Following the release of *Rogue Trader*, Sam Stewart was brought over to line edit the game — showing how FFG was continuing to expand their RPG focus.

Deathwatch (2010), the third *Warhammer 40k* game, finally gave players the opportunity to play Space Marines — Space Marines that kill and kill and kill. Mechanically the game followed the core of *Warhammer 40,000 Roleplay*, with the biggest addition being "demeanors" — another indie-like addition to the game that allows characters to get bonuses for following their character's core nature. Beyond that, characters were much more powerful than those in either of the previous games, with starting Space Marines being about the same power level as the most powerful Acolytes from *Dark Heresy*. Some players have expressed concerns over the limited roleplay opportunities of a game so focused on killing, but like the other Warhammer 40k Roleplay releases, *Deathwatch* appealed most to those players looking for that sort of play. It was another big hit, grossing more for FFG in 2010 than anything else.

In putting out three games, each focused on different characters in the same universe. Fantasy Flight Games reused the old model that White Wolf created in

the '90s, but made it their own. By not trying to balance the games in any way, each of them was able to independently shine — with its power level and its scope being entirely appropriate for the respective game. What's most impressive is not necessarily how the games can be brought together, but instead how unique each is. One game is about investigation, another is about exploration, and the third is about combat. Together, they allow for a lot more variability than other linked RPGs.

Though that brought GW's original plans to an end, the *Warhammer 40k* line has since continued to expand. *Black Crusade* (2011) allowed players to play chaos foes, while *Only War* (2012) let players take on the roles of soldiers of the Imperial Guard. Meanwhile, FFG continues to support *all* of its *Warhammer 40,000 RPG* lines — a very tough juggling act, as the history of White Wolf displays.

As the *40k* lines expanded, FFG's RPG staff has expanded as well. Mack Martin took over *Dark Heresy* in 2010 and Andrew Fischer became the lead for *Deathwatch* in 2011. Overall, a team of zero in 2007 became three in 2008 grew to six in 2011.

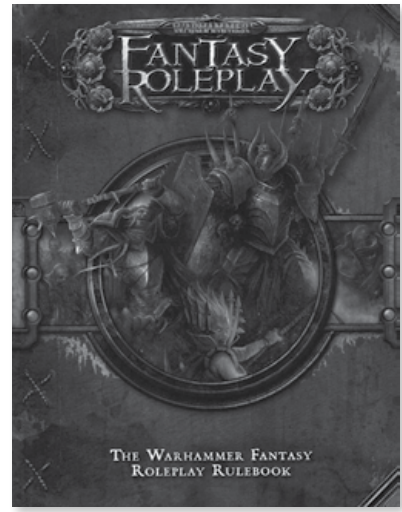
Of course some of those staff were working on *yet another* RPG brought over from Games Workshop: *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*.

The *Warhammer Fantasy* Years: 2008-2014

Following their acquisition of the Games Workshop RPG licenses, Fantasy Flight Games put out a few final supplements for Green Ronin's second edition of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*. However, they had much bigger plans for the line, as they revealed when they released *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* third edition (2009) a year later.

Designer Jay Little rebuilt the game from scratch, preserving only the grim and gritty background and some of the most general ideas — such as the "careers" that have always been so central to *WFRP*. Almost everything else changed, and the result was one of the most controversial new editions in the industry's history, perhaps only eclipsed by the fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (2008) — though the Fuzion editions of *Champions* and *Cyberpunk* are probably up there too.

> *"Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay was designed with a broad rules framework based on consistency between different game functions and applying common sense based on the current in-story circumstances. The rules were developed to empower GMs to easily modify, arbitrate, and manage the game within a set of simple guidelines, adjusting the game as he sees fit to deliver the best play experience for his group."*
>
> – Jay Little, Interview, rpg.net (December 2009)



The first *big* difference was the price of the core rules, which came in a huge box retailing for $100. That made it one of the most expensive RPGs ever, with only *Dungeons & Dragons* really coming close, and only then if you add up the price of the three $35 core books that have been the norm for the last decade. *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* third edition (*WFRP3*) was so expensive because the box was *full* of gaming components, including cardboard markers, cards, and special dice — the sort of things that you'd expect to find in one of FFG's board games, not one of their RPGs.

This inevitably led to claims from detractors that *WFRP3* actually *was* a board game — claims with no actual substance. The core of third edition was still roleplaying, but Fantasy Flight included special components to complement the roleplay. Players have cards that specify their current career and the feat-like talents that they can call upon. Wounds and insanities are rather cleverly drawn from decks of their own, allowing for a mass of differing results with no need to consult a random table. Other cards detail conditions, making it easy for players to remember what it means when their character is frightened or demoralized.

Altogether, it was quite similar to what Wizards did with the fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* — allowing you to buy *Power Cards* and *Dungeon Tiles* from Wizards of the Coast, as well as a variety of condition tokens and other components from third-party licensee, Gale Force Nine. The difference was that Fantasy Flight carefully coordinated all of its components from the start and packaged them into their core rules box.

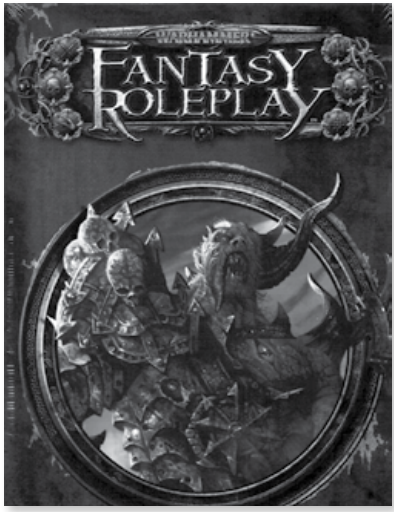
Some of that coordination was *very* tight, as is shown in third edition's task resolution mechanism. Characteristics, skills, and a character's current stance — which essentially states how aggressive the character is currently being — each place dice in a dice pool to be rolled when a character attempts a task. Instead of numbers, the dice show a variety of symbols. Some of these symbols support the occurrence of rare special cases; for example, when a character takes an aggressive stance, he may tire himself based on the result of his red "aggressive" die — resulting in an entirely intuitive fatigue system. However, the core resolution centers on good successes, bad failures, bad banes, and good boons. The result is laid out in a rather unique two-dimensional result grid. Successes and failures cancel out to tell you if the task succeeded at all, while boons and banes cancel out to tell you if there

were good or bad side effects. So not only can you succeed at a task, but you can also succeed while putting yourself at severe disadvantage, or you can fail but still get something positive out of it.

Overall, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* third edition *could have* been a pivotal game in the roleplaying industry. FFG built upon 12 years of board gaming experience that showed them how to create game components that make a game easier to play, and they applied those lessons to *WFRP3*. The product is not only quite intuitive but at times — as in their task resolution system — it gives results that would be impossible to design with "normal" components.

However, it seems unlikely that *WFRP3* actually *will* be pivotal, because the majority of the RPG industry has neither the expertise nor the means to do what FFG did with *WFRP3*, no matter how successful it actually is (or, isn't, for *WFRP3* is surely taking a chance by doing things so differently). Furthermore, there has been considerable resistance to the format, something that even FFG acknowledged when they published the *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay Player's Guide* (2010), a hardcover book that offered an alternative way to play the game, without the components. A *Game Master's Guide* (2010) and *The Creature Vault* (2011) completed a much more conventional trilogy of RPG core books.

Since third edition's release, Fantasy Flight has supported it with a number of different supplements, most of which have been sold in boxes that included more neat (and useful) components for *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* games. They also continue to try and push the envelope by developing *WFRP3* supplements in interesting ways. *Sigmar's Wrath* (2012) was an attempt to sell *WFRP3*'s fancy components in smaller quantities, sort of like FFG's "Living Card Games"; the supplement included just 15 cards. *The Enemy Within* (2012) was a "reimagining" of *Warhammer*'s best-received campaign. It was authored by Dave Allen and Graeme Davis — the latter one of the authors of the original campaign.



Unfortunately, *WFRP3* doesn't seem to have done as well as some of FFG's other RPGs of recent years. Production has slowly decreased over the years. In addition, FFG has opted to bring back *Warhammer Fantasy*'s second edition through DriveThruRPG as a print-on-demand product. On August 12, 2014, FFG finally announced that they were bringing *WFRP3*

to an end because they had "fulfilled [their] vision" for the line and had "delivered a complete game experience".

More GW Influence & Other Board Games: 2008-Present

The *Warhammer* license allowed FFG to return to the RPG field because of the question of comparative costs. It was only with a really high-flying line like GW's beloved *Warhammer* games that Fantasy Flight could make an argument for doing roleplaying development. However, the *Warhammer* license had at least one broader effect on FFG: Fantasy Flight has brought other Games Workshop IP into their board and card game production.

Most obviously, they've become the producers of *Talisman* — one of the oldest adventure games around — which they produced in a revised edition (2008) that cleaned up the fourth edition (2007) put out by GW's Black Industries just before their shutdown.

FFG has also begun to create their own *Warhammer* games. Some like *Warhammer: Invasion* (2009), *Space Hulk: Death Angel — The Card Game* (2010), and *Blood Bowl: Team Manager — The Card Game* (2011) play to FFG's strength in card games, with *Death Angel* also being a return to the cooperative gaming genre. FFG has also put out *Warhammer*-related big-box games, such as *Horus Heresy* (2010), a game in FFG's standard format of a huge box full of beautiful components. *Relic* (2013) may be even more notable because it adopts *Talisman*'s gameplay to the *Warhammer 40k* universe, effectively combining two of GW's top properties.

However, FFG hasn't let the GW products entirely take over their schedule.

Adventure games continue on, but at a slower pace. *Runebound* production tailed off in 2010 and *Arkham Horror* has slowed since 2011, but *Descent* has enjoyed an updated and polished second edition (2012). Meanwhile, the new *Middle-earth Quest* (2009) showed off an exciting new license, shared with frequent co-producer Nexus; while *Mansions of Madness* (2010) offered another way to cooperatively adventure against the Mythos.

Living Card Games are probably the largest part of FFG's latter-day production, with games like *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game*, *Call of Cthulhu Card Game*, and *Warhammer: Invasion* continuing to see supplements, while new games like *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* (2011) and *Android: Netrunner* (2012) continue to appear.

The last game is of some note because it's a thematic revamp of the old *Netrunner* (1996) CCG from Wizards of the Coast. FFG has done lots of revamps of old hobbyist games — continuing on from those GW revamps they started in 2006. It's another way that they've remained quite important to the broader hobby.

Other recent releases in this vein include *Cosmic Encounter* (2008), *Rex: Final Days of Empire* (2012) — an update of the old *Dune* (1979) board game — Tom Jolly's eighth edition of *Wiz-War* (2012), and a second edition of Avalon Hill's *Merchant of Venus* (2012).

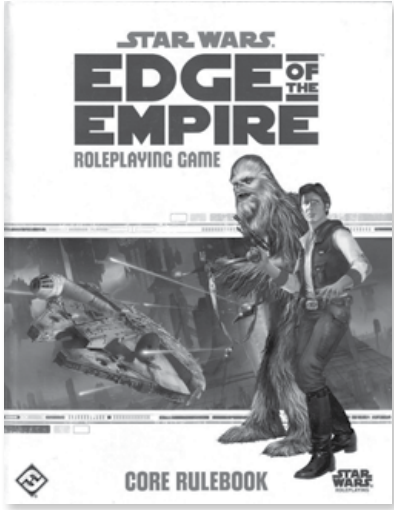
However, for the most part, FFG's current model for strategy games seems to be supplementability. They're constantly producing miniatures for *Dust Tactics* (2010), card sets for their many LCGs, and big supplements for boxed games like *Arkham Horror* and *Talisman*.

In the last few years FFG has started producing a few other strategy games for another license of some note: a gaming license for the *Star Wars* universe. This has resulted in the *Star Wars* LCG (2012), the *Stars Wars: X-Wing Miniatures Game* (2012), and ... FFG's next sequence of RPG games.

The *Star Wars* Years: 2011-Present

Fantasy Flight announced their acquisition of the *Star Wars* license for tabletop gaming at Gen Con Indy 2011. At the time, they idly mentioned the license included the rights to roleplaying games, but they didn't *currently* have anything planned. Another year passed before FFG confirmed they'd be doing *Star Wars* RPGs, this time at Gen Con Indy 2012.

When they made their announcement, the format of their releases was *very* familiar. They said *Star Wars: Edge of the Empire* (2013) would be out first, and would focus on "the scoundrels, the smugglers, the pirates, the bounty hunters, [and the] colonists" of the *Star Wars* universe. Then *Star Wars: Age of Rebellion* (2014) was to be an RPG about rebels and *Star Wars: Force and Destiny* (2015?) was to be about Force users. In other words, it was the same design that Games Workshop had planned out for the *Warhammer 40,000 RPGs* half-a-decade before. Unlike the *40k* games, however, these ones are intended to be used together if players desire.



To build on the initial excitement following their announcement, FFG did two early releases of their first game: *Star Wars: Edge of the Empire Beta* (2012) and *Star Wars: Edge of the Empire Beginner Game* (2012). They showed off a game system that also has some familiar features ... but this time harking back to Jay Little's *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* 3e design.

FFG opted not to use all of the cards and tokens that earned *WFRP3* a mixed review, but they did use what they're now calling the "narrative dice system" from the game. A variety of dice types (ability, boost, challenge, difficulty, force, proficiency, and setbacks) offer a variety of results (success, triumph, advantage, failure, despair, and threat) that can produce orthogonal gaming results — such as a successful result that can have negative side effects, or vice versa. Though *Warhammer Fantasy 3e* was full of innovative components, the dice caused the least upset, and so it's not surprising that they're what survived in a new game.

The rest of the game is perhaps the lightest and most indie-like of the *Star Wars* RPGs to date. Mechanics like character "obligations" further push into this direction. The result has gotten good reviews, but it'll take the release of the *full* RPG to say whether this is FFG's next big thing.

Overall, it's pretty surprising that FFG might have a *next* big thing when their old big things continue to do well. It's equally surprising that they now have three well-supported RPG lines when their RPG Department was dead six years ago.

> *"The key to Fantasy Flight's success is its ability to diversify, having started with board games and branched off into book-based products, playing cards and now even iPhone applications."*
>
> – Christian Petersen, paraphrased in "Fantasy Flight Games Beats Downturn by Sticking to Core Business," *Minneapolis St. Paul Business Journal* (July 2010)

But that's really been a constant throughout FFG's life. They continue to seek out new niches and continue to reinvent themselves to fill those niches, as they've done throughout their history.

The strategy has clearly worked well. In 2010, the *Minneapolis St. Paul Business Journal* highlighted Fantasy Flight's $10 million-dollar-a-year business as one of the few able to remain successful in the deep recession that hit the United States following George W. Bush's years as president. As Petersen is quoted to say in the story: "It's a mixture of stubbornness, a willingness to listen and a willingness to adapt."

In the modern RPG industry, it would be nice if more companies could say the same — but FFG's story, especially in the last six years, makes it obvious that it is *possible*.

What to Read Next

- For another publisher that got its start producing high-quality, moody *Call of Cthulhu* supplements, read ***Pagan Publishing.***
- For some of FFG's other early partners, read ***AEG*** and ***Pinnacle Entertainment Group.***
- For the origins of *Blue Planet*, also read ***Pagan Publishing***. For its future, read ***RedBrick*** *['00s]***.**
- For the d20 and OGL licenses, read ***Wizards of the Coast.***
- For other d20 publishers that followed some of the same trends as ***FFG***, read ***AEG*** and ***White Wolf.***
- For Rolling Thunder, a previous try at an LCG-like release schedule, read (once more) ***AEG***.
- For the origins of *Warhammer*, read ***Games Workshop*** *['70s]* and for its continuation read ***Hogshead Publishing.***
- For a bit more information on deckbuilding games, which like LCGs are a modern-day reinvention of CCGs, read ***AEG.***
- For another RPG that (somewhat unsuccessfully) moved toward component-driven play, read about *Dungeons & Dragons* 4E in ***Wizards of the Coast.***

In Other Eras

- For another company that grew out of St. Olaf College, read ***Lion Rampant*** *['70s]*.
- For *Call of Cthulhu*, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For the origins of eurogames in the United States, read ***Mayfair Games*** *['80s]*.
- For another faerie tale RPG, read about *The Zorcerer of Zo* in ***Atomic Sock Monkey*** *['00s]*.
- For past publishers of *Star Wars*, read ***West End Games*** *['80s]* and ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.

Or read onward to a publisher whose name originated in *Amber*, ***Guardians of Order.***

Guardians of Order: 1997–2006

Guardians of Order was an anime-focused RPG company that enjoyed 10 years of well-acclaimed roleplaying production before they self-destructed.

Big Eyes, Small Mouth: 1997

The roleplaying market has seen two explosions of anime-related games.

The first occurred in the mid-'80s, when anime first started sneaking into the United States in noticeable numbers. This brought about the creation of the giant robot roleplaying genre, which included R.Talsorian's *Mekton* (1984), FASA's *Battletech* (1984), Palladium's *Robotech* (1986), and even Hero Games' *Robot Warriors* (1986). At the time little effort was



1997: Big Eyes, Small Mouth

made to tap into the wider anime market, with R. Talsorian's *Teenagers from Outer Space* (1987) being a rare exception.

Jump forward almost a decade, and we find the next anime explosion. Palladium published a second mecha RPG, *Macross II* (1993). Newcomer Dream Pod 9 first licensed R. Talsorian's system to produce games like *Star Riders* (1993) and later produced RPGs of their own including *Project A-Ko* (1995) and what would be their biggest success, the mecha game *Heavy Gear* (1995). Finally, R. Talsorian re-entered the market with *Bubblegum Crisis* (1996), the first of several licensed anime properties, followed by a third edition of *Teenagers from Outer Space* (1997).

Despite the fact that dozens of RPG publications appeared in these two periods, anime roleplaying was still pretty limited in 1997. There were general systems for giant mecha games that were also used for the anime space opera genre. Other than the (still) unique *Teenagers from Outer Space*, almost everything else was based on licenses. There were no general anime systems, and that was a void that Canadian Mark C. MacKinnon decided to fill, so that he could run the games *he* wanted to see. MacKinnon created Guardians of Order specifically to publish his anime RPG.

The name "Guardians of Order" actually came from a non-anime source: Phage Press' *Amber Diceless Roleplaying* (1991), one of MacKinnon's favorite RPGs before he got into the business. His character in a long-running *Amber* campaign run by Jesse Scoble (who we'll meet again shortly) was the Guardian of the Unicorn, High Priest of Order, hence "Guardians of Order." MacKinnon also inherited a minimalistic game design sense — centered on simplicity and ease of use — from his interest in *Amber*. That too would be incorporated into Guardians of Order when MacKinnon got down to the nuts and bolts of his RPG.



"I prefer to describe Tri-Stat as rules-light, but options-heavy. That is, the core elements of the system are extremely simple to grasp, but there are many add-on rules and concepts you can plug into the game. It's very modular."

– Mark MacKinnon, Interview, scifi411.com (2004)

Guardians of Order released MacKinnon's anime game, *Big Eyes, Small Mouth* (1997), at the 1997 Gen Con Game Fair. It fulfilled both of MacKinnon's goals by using a simple game system, the Tri-Stat system, as the basis of a generic anime RPG. The name of the system

derived from the fact that there were only three characteristics: mind, body, and soul. The core mechanic was a roll-under resolution system where a player tried to roll two six-sided dice below an appropriate characteristic or skill. Other mechanics, such as a point-based character-creation system, were also easy to use.

Big Eyes, Small Mouth would be more widely known as *BESM* — pronounced "BEH-sim" according to those in the know. Though MacKinnon had hoped to sell the 1,000 copies of *BESM* that he printed "over [his] lifetime," he actually sold out of the 125 books that he brought to Gen Con. The rest of the print run disappeared in just six months. In addition, the game was nominated for a 1997 Origins award. Though it ultimately lost to AEG's *Legend of the Five Rings RPG* (1997), it got the attention of players.

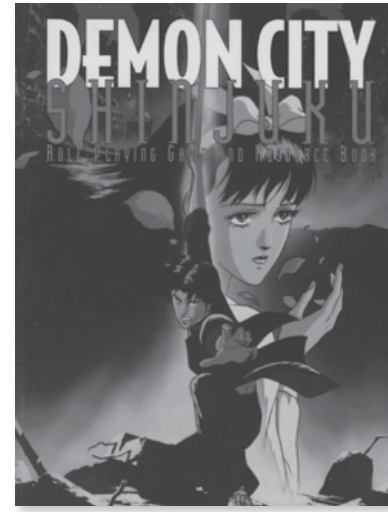
MacKinnon decided to stick around and publish more than just that one book.

Anime Beginnings, Second Editions: 1998—2000



Following the success of *BESM*, MacKinnon decided to take a shot at a licensed property. He contracted the rights for *Sailor Moon* (1992–1997) in January of 1998 and spent most of the year putting together its RPG, *The Sailor Moon Role-Playing Game and Resource Book* (1998) — using the same Tri-Stat game system at *BESM*.

The game benefited not only from interest in *Sailor Moon*, but also from its instant access to high-quality licensed artwork. It was an even bigger hit than the original *BESM*.



However, having just spent a year on a single book, MacKinnon realized that he needed employees if Guardians was ever to enjoy more than minimal production. He brought on David L. Pulver in November 1998. It was Pulver who took the lead in extending *BESM* from its simplistic start to a more complete game system. His first book,

Big Robots, Cool Starships (1999), added mecha creation rules, then *Hot Rods & Gun Bunnies* (2000) introduced skills.

Pulver was simultaneously hard at work on licensed, standalone games, resulting in releases like *Dominion Tank Police* (1999), *Demon City Shinjuku* (2000), and *Tenchi Muyo!* (2000). Sometimes these licensed books advanced *BESM*'s mechanics too, such as the magic system of *Shinjuku*.



Eventually, the many *BESM* expansions were combined into a second edition (2000) of the core rules. The book — now really a multi-genre anime system — was laid out in full color by Jeff Mackintosh, who joined the team in late 1999. Mackintosh's attention to beautiful artistic design would quickly become a selling point for the company, especially when combined with licensed anime artwork and with the attractive anime-influenced artwork that the company commissioned on its own.

Guardians proved that they made it into the big time (for the RPG industry) when they were nominated for a stunning seven Origins awards in 2000 — including not one but two nominations for Best Art, thanks to Mackintosh's work. One of those nominations was for the inevitable CCG, the *Sailor Moon Collectible Card Game* (2000), which was developed by MacKinnon but actually released by Dart Flipcards. It *won* the Origins award that year for Best Trading Card game.

1999–2000 was really a boom period, with new employees continuing to arrive, including Jesse Scoble, MacKinnon's old gamemaster. With an increasingly polished game system, a growing corpus of skilled creators, and a bit of professional recognition, Guardians of Order truly arrived.

More Hires, New Genres: 2000–2002

By 2000, MacKinnon was ready to grow Guardians of Order past the small family of creators that he brought together in previous years. This began with the hiring of John R. Phythyon Jr., who was brought on as a partner and Guardians' Sales & Marketing director. As part of this deal, Guardians also acquired Phythyon's own RPG company, Event Horizon Productions, the small press publisher of: Gareth-Michael Skarka's cinematic *Hong Kong Action Theatre!* (1996); the fantasy martial arts game *Swords of the Middle Kingdoms* (1999), also based on the same

"cinemaction" system; and Phythyon's own *Heaven & Earth* (1998), a modern-day surreal conspiratorial game.



Phythyon quickly pushed Guardians in a new direction: toward non-anime RPGs. The first of these was *Ghost Dog* (2000), a gangster Samurai Tri-Stat game by Pulver and Phythyon that was based on the movie of the same name. It was a relatively unique two-player RPG, for one gamemaster and one player.

Ghost Dog was soon followed by Tri-Stat conversions of *Hong Kong Action Theatre!* (2001) and *Heaven & Earth* (2001). Each expanded the Tri-Stat system in ways appropriate for their genres. *Heaven & Earth*'s card-based version of the Tri-Stat system was one of the more critically acclaimed variants, though none of the Event Horizon games were particularly great sellers.

Another new hire of this period was Lucien Soulban, one of the first industry veterans that Guardians brought aboard. He'd previously written for White Wolf, Dream Pod 9, and others, quickly stepping up to work on *Heaven & Earth*.



Although Guardians was growing and expanding in exciting ways, they definitely weren't ignoring their bread and butter: anime RPGs. The year after the release of *BESM* second edition, Guardians published *Cute & Fuzzy Seizure Monsters* (2000) by freelancer Emily Dresner-Thornber, a satire of the monster-fighting genre, and *El-Hazard* (2001), another licensed property, this one by Jesse Scoble.

Guardians was also looking to grow their anime connections in interesting ways. In 2001 the company announced a deal with Pioneer Entertainment — a large publisher of anime now known as Geneon — to produce "ultimate fan guides." These guides acted as season guides for various Pioneer anime series, but also included *BESM* stats for the major characters. It was an excellent leveraging of Guardians' anime RPG expertise that got them into the much larger field of anime production itself.

These guides kicked off the next year with the *Serial Experiments Lain Ultimate Fan Guide* (2002).

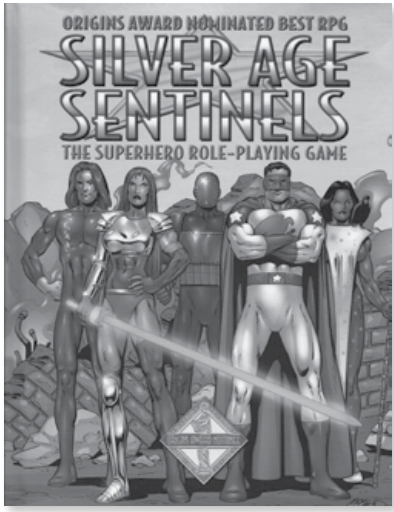
During these two years, Guardians also marked one other major turning point: they published their first original setting, the hard science-fiction *Centauri Knights* (2001), by David Pulver.

Dee Twenties, New Directions: 2002—2003

Until 2002 Guardians of Order avoided d20 publishing while much of the industry flocked to it. Mark C. MacKinnon would later acknowledge that the main reasons behind this were "pride and creativity." In short, he thought Tri-Stat was a better game system that offered more interesting *roleplaying* options for its players. However, by 2002, MacKinnon came to the conclusion that Guardians needed new sales in order to survive. The company moved into d20.

> *"Rather than saying we 'jumped on the bandwagon,' I prefer to think we built a sleeker, faster, and more attractive bandwagon of our own and asked, 'hey, do you mind if we pull our bandwagon alongside yours and travel together for a bit?'"*
>
> – Mark MacKinnon, Interview, scifi411.com (2004)

This began with Guardians' big new superhero RPG, *Silver Age Sentinels* (2002), written by Mark C. MacKinnon, Jeff Mackintosh, and Jesse Scoble, with Steve Kenson, and developed by Lucien Soulban. Guardians' move into the superhero genre was a sensible one, because fans of *BESM* had long run superheroic games with the system. In addition, the genre was just about empty, as former genre leader Hero Games was temporarily moribund at the time production began, due to an unfortunate interaction with a dot-com company.



SAS — to use the obvious abbreviation favored by Guardians — was produced in two different editions; a Tri-Stat edition was published in July and then (finally!) a d20 edition appeared at the 2002 Gen Con Game Fair. They were each notable for different reasons.

Tri-Stat *SAS* marked Guardians' biggest departure to date from the standard Tri-Stat system. Whereas the original Tri-Stat used two 6-sided dice to resolve tasks, the new *SAS* system used two 10-sided dice and

increased maximum stat and skill levels correspondingly. This created a whole new power level for Tri-Stat, but one that was entirely in line with the original game. Where d6 Tri-Stat was the core for "human" level RPGs, d10 Tri-Stat became the core for "superhuman" level RPGs. It was one of the most innovative methods the industry had seen for dividing up a generic system among multiple power levels.

D20 *SAS* was notable for its addition of point-based character creation to the d20 system — building on the same idea found in Tri-Stat itself.

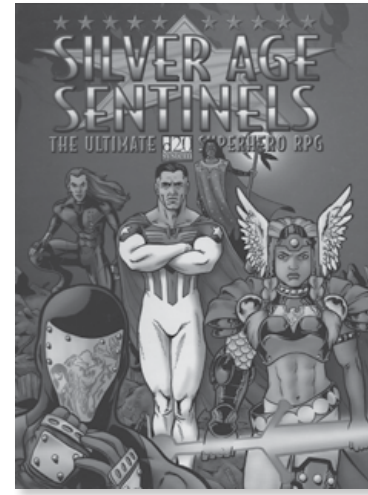
2002 was generally a good year for superhero games, with the whole genre in sudden renaissance ... though not necessarily good for Guardians, who now faced unexpected competition.

Thanks to a white-hat purchase of the Hero properties, *Hero System Fifth Edition* (2002) was released that April, while *SAS* was still in process. Aaron Allston's new edition of *Champions* (2002) also beat *SAS* to press.

The other superhero game that appeared in 2002, Green Ronin's *Mutants & Masterminds* (2002), had ironically been influenced by author Steve Kenson's work on *Silver Age Sentinels* itself. While working on *SAS*, Kenson pitched a setting called Freedom City for the game line. After Guardians turned it down, Kenson wrote *Mutants & Masterminds* partially to get Freedom City into print.

Despite the competition, *Silver Age Sentinels* did well and was well-received. MacKinnon saw his decision to print a d20 version of the game pay off when both d20 and Tri-Stat sold in equal numbers.

The next year, the *SAS* line continued to grow, including the appearance of an anthology of short stories edited by James Lowder. There were eventually two: *Path of the Just* (2003) and *Path of the Bold* (2004). These books *could* have offered Guardians some real upside in comic shops. Besides stories by RPG luminaries like Ed Greenwood and Robin D. Laws, they also featured contributions by comic book stars like Mike Barr and John Ostrander. *Path of the Bold* even won an Origins Award.



Support for d20 grew as well, following the release of *SAS*. *BESM d20* (2003) converted Guardians' core game to d20, while *d20 Mecha* (2003) created d20 systems to describe mecha. Guardian's mecha rules were made available via the OGL — another concept that MacKinnon felt strongly about — and soon became the basis of Dream Pod 9's *d20 Mecha Companion* (2003). It was also the basis of Guardians' own *d20 Centauri Knights* (2004) and a rare non-anime offering: *Military Vehicles* (2004).

d20 wasn't Guardians' only new direction in 2002. That same year they acquired *Nobilis* (1999, 2002), Rebecca Borgstrom's well-received indie game, including all of Hogshead Publishing's backstock of the game. *Nobilis* was a diceless design and it appealed to the same sensibilities that had led to MacKinnon's enjoyment of *Amber Diceless Role-playing*. Hogshead Publishing just closed up shop, which gave MacKinnon this new opportunity.

Unfortunately, some of Guardians' new opportunities of this period — like the possibility of comic store sales and of a new edition of *Nobilis* — would fail to pay out, for reasons that we'll shortly see.

Deep Dungeons, Dee Exes: 2002–2003





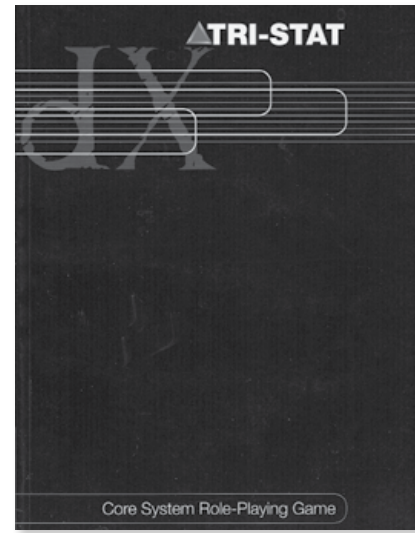
Though the years 2002 and 2003 saw a lot of new directions for Guardians of Order, they weren't forgetting their old products, including *BESM* and the Tri-Stat system.

The majority of *BESM* production during this time period went into the new Fan Guides, but the system also moved into a new genre. A "BESM Fantasy" line of products began with the *BESM Fantasy Bestiary* (2002) and would later continue into *BESM Dungeon* (2003). It also included S. John Ross' well-received *Uresia: Grave of Heaven* (2003), an original setting reminiscent of sword & sorcery anime; *Slayers* (1989–2000) and *Record of Lodoss War* (1990–1991) were suggested as possible influences.

Uresia was notable for another reason: it was one of the earlier books featuring the art of graphic designer Adam Jury, who took over work on the licensed *BESM* books from Jeff Mackintosh in 2002. His strong style showed Guardians' continued commitment to graphical excellence. Today, Jury is best known for his work at Posthuman Studios — and before it Catalyst Game Labs.

Underlining their faith in the Tri-Stat system, Guardians also created the "Magnum Opus" imprint in 2002, which gave other publishers the ability to use the Tri-Stat system. There was a

small fee, but Guardians did more than just license their game system: after receiving a final layout from the creator, Guardians also published the resultant product and distributed it. Over the next years, Guardians signed numerous Magnum Opus licenses but published just a handful of products, perhaps most notably including *Hearts Swords Flowers* (2003), the shoujo ("girl's literature") supplement for *BESM*.



Guardians followed Magnum Opus up the next year with the biggest expansion *ever* for the Tri-Stat system. At the Origins Game Fair, Guardians published *Tri-Stat dX* (2003), a 96-page core rulebook that made their game system completely generic. Cleverly connecting the systems of the original Tri-Stat d6 and *Sentinels*' Tri-Stat d10, the new generic game offered a gamut of die-rolling possibilities from the subhuman Tri-Stat d4 to the godlike Tri-Stat d20.

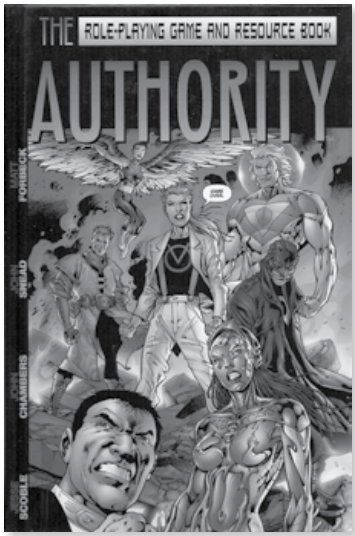
MacKinnon's continued belief in the strength of Tri-Stat was made obvious by the method in which the new rulebook was released. It was available online for free, and Guardians sold copies of the book at Origins and Gen Con that year for just $1. Besides the obvious consumer benefits of such a move, Guardians was also looking for more partners for their Magnum Opus program, then enjoying its first release.

Unfortunately this opportunity would never be fulfilled either, because offstage, the problems that would doom Guardians of Order were already starting to circle.

Weak Dollar, Sad Ending: 2004—2006

There can be little doubt that d20 cut into Guardians' market. Furthermore, Guardians' push into d20 was ill-timed; occurring as it did just when confidence in the d20 trademark was diminishing due to the 2003 d20 crash. However, other factors were also lining up against Guardians.

The worst problem was likely the simple fact that Guardians of Order was a rare RPG company located in Canada. Columbia Games and Dream Pod 9 are among the few other Canadian companies whose histories are recorded here. By 2004, all Canadian RPG companies were facing an odd problem. The massive devaluation of the American dollar at the time meant that their (primarily American) income was going down at a time when their (Canadian paid) costs



remained the same. Though Columbia Games already moved to the United States by 2003, it's notable that Dream Pod 9's main production dried up at about the same time that Guardians started having real problems.

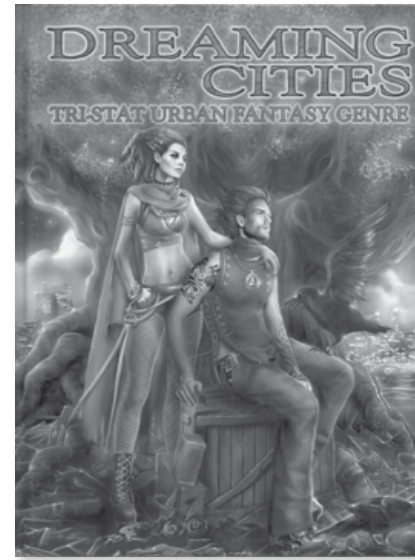
The first hints of problems for Guardians appeared in 2004, when payments to freelancers started getting delayed. Despite that, it was still a productive year for the company. Among the releases were *The Authority Role-Playing Game and Resource Book* (2004) — based on the DC/Wildstorm comic series — and *Ex Machina* (2004), a new and critically acclaimed Tri-Stat cyberpunk RPG that included settings by Bruce Baugh, Rebecca R. Borgstrom, and others. It also showed Guardians of Order's continued attention to art and graphic design with its double-page art spreads — a real rarity in RPG design.

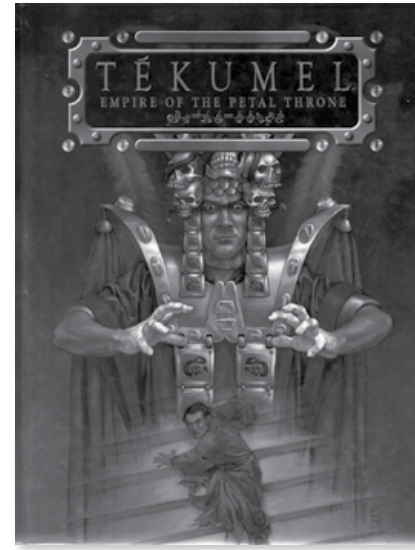


However, the cracks continued to spread. A second book for *The Authority* was promised but never delivered, while a game based on George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* books had likewise been promised for 2004 summer release but failed to appear. Toward the end of the year Guardians of Order signed a letter of intent to resurrect *Amber Diceless Role-playing*, but that would be another promise ultimately unfulfilled.

On January 3, 2005, MacKinnon announced Guardians' multiple problems and that the company had been downsized to just himself.

Despite that, Guardians published another much-anticipated license, the Tri-Stat *Tékumel: Empire of the Petal Throne* (2005), in the spring. It was the newest game based in M.A.R. Baker's classic world of Tékumel. An interesting Tri-Stat urban fantasy book, *Dreaming Cities* (2005), also appeared.





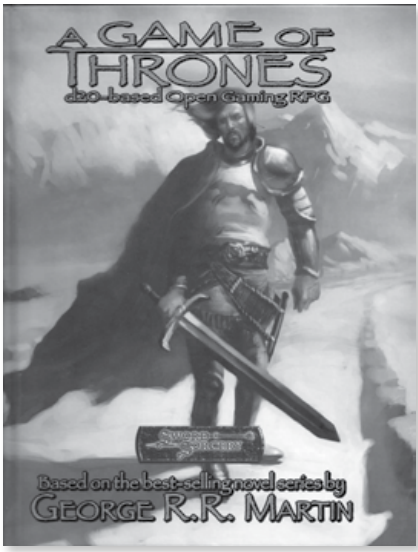
Despite the success of those publications, MacKinnon was forced to admit that he couldn't afford the expensive production of the *Song of Ice and Fire* RPG, a new game overseen by Jesse Scoble. Instead, Guardians arranged for the game's publication through White Wolf's Sword & Sorcery imprint, who published a d20-based *A Game of Thrones* (2005) while Guardians produced a limited edition (2005) on their own, which included Tri-Stat conversions. Although not quite their last book, *A Game of Thrones* was an impressive coda for the company. The deluxe edition clocked in at 576 pages and featured 17 authors and 20 artists. It may have set a new bar for Guardians' always-high standards for art and graphic design. The game was out in time for Gen Con Indy 2005, though that would be the last time Guardians attended the show. The RPG would later win three Silver ENnies.

In 2006, Guardians of Order largely disappeared. MacKinnon stopped updating the company's website or answering his email. There was increasing speculation about Guardians' demise on the net — much of it bitter and angry. Some speculation was initiated by unpaid freelancers, who would never be paid for their work, while other speculation came from fans, who would never see books that they preordered.

It was finally George R.R. Martin who was forced to announce the death of Guardians of Order on July 28, which MacKinnon then publicly acknowledged on August 1. Though the exchange rate was still blamed as the main cause, MacKinnon acknowledged that his expertise faltered when things got tough.

MacKinnon did his best to place his product lines. Among these placements:

- *Heaven & Earth* was licensed for a third edition (2004) to Abstract Nova well before the crash.
- White Wolf bought the IPs for *BESM*, *Silver Age Sentinels*, and *Hong Kong Action Theatre! BESM Third Edition* — which was ready for press when Guardians went out of business — was printed by the ArtHaus division of White Wolf (2007), who even honored preorders for the book that Guardians collected money for. The new edition of the game included an "Anime Multiverse" that could be used to connect together all of the *BESM* settings. MacKinnon originally envisioned it as something like the multiverse of Amber and its Shadows — bringing Guardians back to the setting that had been its inspiration. White Wolf proper seems to have retained the rights to these systems following the creation of Onyx Path Publishing, which unfortunately puts their future into grave doubt.
- The remaining stock of *A Game of Thrones* went to George R.R. Martin, who has since relicensed his fantasy world to Green Ronin Games, who produced *A Song of Ice and Fire Roleplaying* (2009).
- Rights to the Tékumel RPG were negotiated for a while, but nothing ever came of them. The Tékumel setting has always been published by a wide variety of publishers, most recently including the small press Tita's House of Games (who has mainly issued reprints) and Zottola Publishing (best known for their Tékumel fiction).
- *Amber Diceless* rights went back to Phage Press, who has since passed them on to a new publisher, Diceless by Design. They've in turn licensed to Rite Publishing, who Kickstarted a new diceless game called *Lords of Gossamer and Shadow* (2013). $30,090 raised from 772 backers also helped to fund several PDF supplements for the game.



- Neither James Wallis nor Rebecca Borgstrom was ever able to recover either the considerable *Nobilis* backstock entrusted to Guardians of Order or the tens of thousands of dollars owed for it. However, the rights for the game itself went back to Borgstrom, who has since published a third edition (2011) with EOS Press.



For several years, MacKinnon was absent from the gaming industry and instead working in real estate sales. However, he returned in 2013 with a new company called Dyskami Publishing and a new product — a eurogame called *Upon a Fable* (2013).

Though MacKinnon's new company certainly could be successful, the amount of anger and bitterness that filled the internet following his return was breath-taking, much of it once more from free-lancers and others who hadn't been paid by Guardians, and who were offended that MacKinnon decided not to make old debts right before starting a new venture.

Of all the bankrupt companies detailed in these books, Guardians of Order appears to be the one who has engendered the worst feelings in the modern day — which really isn't the best legacy to leave behind.

What to Read Next

- For the other major anime publisher of the '90s, read ***Dream Pod 9.***
- For a company that influenced Guardians of Order and for *Amber Diceless Role-playing*, read ***Phage Press.***
- For the past of *Nobilis*, read ***Hogshead Publishing.***
- For that final Guardians of Order publication, *BESM Third Edition*, read ***White Wolf.***

In Other Eras

- For other major anime publishers, read ***R. Talsorian*** *['80s]* and ***Palladium*** *['80s].*
- For Steve Kenson, *Mutants & Masterminds*, and the next *Song of Ice and Fire RPG*, read ***Green Ronin Publishing*** *['00s].*
- For the early history of Tékumel, read ***TSR*** *['70s]* and ***Gamescience*** *['70s].*

Or read onward to *Grrrr! Arrrgghhh!* ***Eden Studios.***

Eden Studios: 1997–Present

Eden Studios is a rare game manufacturer from the late '90s that stayed in business while largely keeping to its original game line.

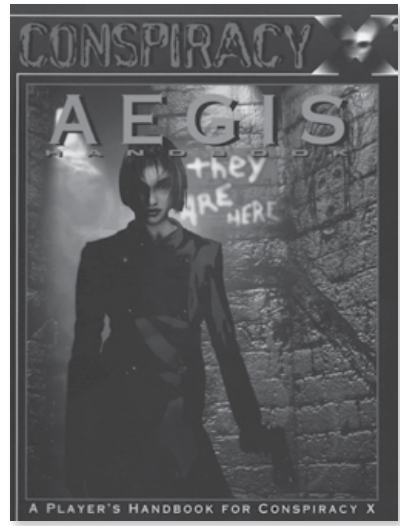
Millennium's Story of *Conspiracy:* 1995—1997

The story of Eden Studios has two beginnings in two different failed roleplaying companies from the mid-'90s: New Millennium Entertainment and Myrmidon Press, each of whom would bring different properties and talents to Eden Studios.



1997: Conspiracy X

The story of New Millennium Entertainment begins in Imagination Games & Comics, a New York game store founded by George Vasilakos in 1992 after he finished art school. At the time, *Magic: The Gathering* (1992) was hot and the entire CCG industry was booming. One day, Vasilakos and a few other folks sitting around his store decided that they should design their own CCG and make "major bucks" just like *Magic*. Attorney M. Alexander Jurkat



even had an idea for the form the game would take: he'd done some work for Larry Sims on a small press roleplaying game called *Battlelords of the 23rd Century* (1990), and he suggested licensing the property to produce a CCG.

The result was the *Battlelords* CCG (1995), a game that — when released into the increasingly glutted collectible game market — didn't sell nearly well enough and doomed New Millennium Entertainment from the start.

However, before New Millennium went under, they also published a roleplaying game, *Conspiracy X* (1996). This conspiratorial game of secret warfare against aliens clearly drew inspiration from one of the hottest TV shows on the '90s, *The X-Files* (1993–2002). Some found the rules a bit awkward — simultaneously containing simple core rules and complex special cases — but it only had a single competitor: Pagan Publishing's *Delta Green* (1997), released that same year. With its evocative take on an *X-Files*-like background, it was of interest to the TV show's audience. The first printing sold out in just two weeks, and a second printing was already part of the way gone ... when New Millennium, unable to deal with its CCG-related debts, went out of business.

That wasn't the end for *Conspiracy X*. On July 4, 1997, George Vasilakos and Alex Jurkat — together with investor Ed Healy — announced that they had formed a new gaming company, Eden Studios. They were also acquiring the *Conspiracy X* rights from their former partners in New Millennium Entertainment and would be continuing with the line.

The name "Eden Studios" had meaning to the principals. Healy suggested "Eden" because the group was trying to create their paradise job. Unfortunately, he never got to see it, as he was forced to give up his Eden ownership when he joined Deloitte & Touche later in the year, well before Eden became more than a part-time venture. Vasilakos suggested "Studios" because he wanted the new company to be a creator-owned publishing house.

Eden was quickly back in business with a third printing of *Conspiracy X* (1997) and early supplements like *The Aegis Handbook* (1997) and *Cryptozoology* (1997). Thus ends the story of Eden's first ancestor, New Millennium.

It also marked the end of Vasilakos' first game store, Imagination Games & Comics. Vasilakos shut it down that June, so that he could begin full-time work for the newborn Eden Studios.

Myrmidon's Story of *WitchCraft:* 1993—1999

We now turn to the other gaming company that would have a major influence on Eden's future: Myrmidon Press. This was a small press roleplaying company that produced four RPGs: *Manhunter* (1993), *Cosmic Enforcers* (1995), *WitchCraft* (1996), and *Armageddon* (1997).

The latter two books were both the work of C.J. Carella. He got his start in the industry with *GURPS Martial Arts* (1990), freelanced for Steve Jackson, and was later a Palladium staffer. Besides his own RPGs he also authored *Rifts Manhunter* (1996) for Myrmidon, a crossover book between Myrmidon's science-fiction game and Palladium's multi-genre RPG.

Due to bad experiences with the business end of Myrmidon, by 1997 Carella was looking for something new to do with his games. Meanwhile, Vasilakos and Jurkat were fans of Carella's work. The three of them had even talked about doing a *Conspiracy X*/*WitchCraft* crossover book. Then, moving into 1998, Eden Studios saw its sales on *Conspiracy X* supplements start to drop. Vasilakos and Jurkat realized that they needed more lines to revitalize the business.

These threads all came together in July 1998, when Eden Studios announced that they came to an agreement for an exclusive license to Carella's *WitchCraft* and *Armageddon* RPGs. Myrmidon quickly fades out of our story after that.

Having welcomed *WitchCraft* and *Armageddon* into the Eden Studios family, we should now take a moment to address these games more fully.



WitchCraft was a modern-day supernatural game. Carella described it as a "what-if" exercise imagining that every creature from horror movies and novels existed in the same world (though, as the name implied, it centered on practitioners of magic). It was clearly influenced by the World of Darkness, with its urban fantasy and horror setting, its moody black & white artwork, and prose stories intermingled with the text.

Armageddon was a connected game that described a potential future for the same setting. The prophesized

"reckoning" from the modern *WitchCraft* game has occurred, an eldritch horror has been summoned to earth, and the dead have risen. While normal folks eke out a survival in this post-apocalyptic future, the kids' gloves are off for the supernatural forces of the universe.

Both games used the "Unisystem" gaming system, which was purposefully designed as a simple system that would fade into the background and make gaming easy. The skill check mechanism, a variant of "die + bonus," exemplifies this: you roll a 10-sided die, add a skill and attribute, and try to total 9 or more. The gamemaster may also add penalties to the roll.

> *"My goal was to design an intuitive and quick game system that got out of the way of storytelling and roleplaying. If people weren't thinking about the system but about how their characters should behave, I figured I'd have succeeded."*
>
> – C.J. Carella, Interview, flamesrising.com (2005)

Following their acquisition of the Unisystem games, Eden announced that they would be publishing a new edition of *WitchCraft* that winter. It ended up being delayed until the next year, when it appeared as *C.J. Carella's WitchCraft* (1999).

Delays have been a constant problem at Eden all the way back to the beginning. As we'll see, some books have been delayed for years while others, such as "Extinction" — a game announced as early as 1998 that would push the *Conspiracy X* game forward 100 years into its own post-apocalyptic future — never saw print.

Nonetheless, by 1999 Eden Studios had two well-received lines out — *Conspiracy X* and *WitchCraft* — both of which were receiving good (if occasional) support.

Changing Time & California: 1999—2002

1999 was a year of change for Eden Studios. George Vasilakos was offered a job with Last Unicorn Games (LUG), the publishers of the *Star Trek* RPGs. Though he remained president of Eden, he moved out to California to join the LUG office.

As is more fully described in the history of Last Unicorn Games, this was a chaotic time for LUG. Early in 2000, they were bought out by Wizards of the Coast, then the whole team was laid off later that year, after which they were picked up by Decipher early in 2001.Vasilakos followed the LUG team throughout all these changes.

Remarkably, Eden Studios stayed in business and kept producing during this time. *Conspiracy X* support did tail off, but that's because the company's future was in Unisystem. There was, nonetheless, a final effort to make the game more

successful, when Eden arranged a deal with Steve Jackson Games to produce *GURPS Conspiracy X* (2002), authored by Eden's Alex Jurkat.

While Carella continued to produce *WitchCraft* material, Unisystem was also expanding under Vasilakos and Jurkat, who decided to make it Eden's house system. This intention was first displayed in a brand-new RPG conceived by George Vasilakos and Christopher Shy and ultimately edited by Alex Jurkat — who actually argued against the game when it was first suggested. Its name was *All Flesh Must Be Eaten* (2000). As the tongue-in-cheek name suggested, *AFMBE* was a zombie game where players fought against a world gone horribly wrong. It was released not just as a roleplaying game, but also as a toolkit to construct many sorts of zombie games. The rulebook provided multiple zombie worlds (or "dead-worlds") that gamemasters could use as they saw fit.



The *AFMBE* line also marked a notable format change for Eden. It was their first line published in a smaller 7x9" size. Though Eden did not use this size for their d20 and Cinematic lines — which we'll be coming to shortly — it would be more widely used in later years. Eden hoped that the smaller size would both set the Unisystem games apart and cause them to be placed front and foremost in game store displays.

AFMBE was supplemented not only by RPG material, but also by Eden's first fiction books, a set of zombie anthologies edited by James Lowder, beginning with *The Book of All Flesh* (2001). They included stories by gaming personalities such as Ed Greenwood, Robin D. Laws, and Matt Forbeck, as well as by horror writers such as Scott Edelman, Scott Nicholson, and Tom Piccirilli.

Unlike the *Pendragon* anthologies that Lowder was then working on, Eden's zombie anthologies were clearly marked as gaming fiction by the "All Flesh" branding. Also unlike most gaming fiction, they were very well-accepted by the mass market. This was in part due to the fact that the fiction remained creator-owned, something that fit with Vasilakos' idea of a gaming "studio." About half of the stories in the book — and the two that followed it — received honorable mentions in the *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* anthologies.

All Flesh Must Be Eaten had great timing, as it shortly preceded a major fad of interest in zombies highlighted by releases like the popular movie *28 Days Later* (2002) and the long-running comic *The Walking Dead* (2003-present). It immediately became Eden Studios' most popular and successful game. The first print

run sold out in six weeks. Though it was briefly eclipsed in the '00s, as we'll see *All Flesh Must Be Eaten* is once more Eden's cornerstone game today.

> *"Unlike most traditional RPGs out there, All Flesh Must Be Eaten doesn't have one set campaign setting or world background. You are presented with numerous 'Deadworlds,' each with a unique setting and reason why the dead are walking about. This style of presentation allows gamers to play in any genre, background, theme or manner they wish."*
>
> – George Vasilakos, Interview, gamingoutpost.com (2000)

Zombies weren't all that Eden Studios was thinking about as they rushed into the new millennium. They also started playing around with computer game development, leading up to the release of a computer game, *Rail Empires: Iron Dragon* (2000). This was a game based on Mayfair's popular fantasy-based *Empire Builder* variant. Unfortunately, it wasn't successful enough to support further computer development.

The California interlude for Eden Studios only lasted until August 2002, when Vasilakos — now working at Decipher — decided a new opportunity at Eden Studios required his full attention. Before we get there, however, we must first investigate how Eden Studios reacted to the other big trend of the early 2000s: d20.

The d20 Flirtation: 2001—2010

While Eden Studios was changing, with the move of George Vasilakos to California and the creation of the *All Flesh Must Be Eaten* line, the industry was changing too, with the release of Wizard of the Coast's d20 license. Eden was generally resistant to d20, but when they saw the sales potential they realized they had to get into the market. However, they were insistent that they would release something unique.

Eden published only a half-dozen d20 books. Some of them, such as *Liber Bestarius: The Book of Beasts* (2002), *Fields of Blood: The Book of War* (2003), and *Waysides: The Book of Taverns* (2004), weren't that different from what the smarter d20 publishers were putting out: they were dense supplementary books.

However, Eden did manage to put out "unique" material in their "Eden Odyssey" series of adventures, all based in their own world of "Eden." The first of these, David Chart's *Akrasia: Thief of Time* (2001), set the style of the releases as "vignette books." Each offered short adventures that could be spread over the course of a campaign, forming a larger narrative.

This sort of adventure design was occasionally seen in the past, such as in Chaosium's *Day of the Beast* (1998), but the Eden Odyssey adventures were some of the few to consistently approach the style of adventure design. Though the

sequel, Kevin Wilson's *Wonders Out of Time* (2001) appeared shortly thereafter, the final volume, C.J. Carella's *Secret of the Ancients* (2003), was published over a year later and was more typical of the delays that Eden has often experienced.

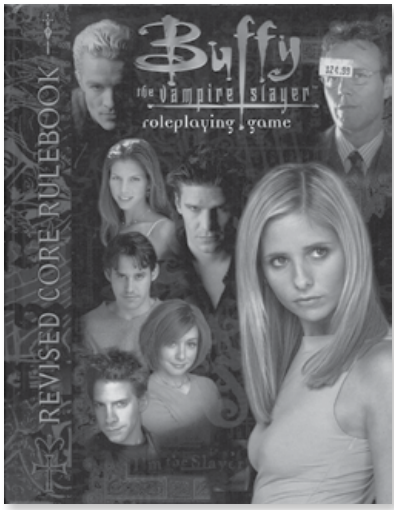
> *"Now that the d20 market has become saturated, Unisystem is still going strong, perhaps as part of a back-lash against d20."*
>
> – Alex Jurkat, Interview, scifi411.com (2003)

Christina Stiles was one of the freelancers who worked with Eden on their d20 projects. As a result, Eden Studios agreed to work with her on a project for her own company, Bizarro Games. Though this relationship began in 2002, the project, *Odyssey Prime* (2006), took years to complete. It was a d20 Modern game of world-hopping that generated some excitement. Four years later, when it was finally released, Bizarro Games was gone — having merged into Misfit Studios — and the d20 craze was largely spent. *Odyssey Prime* was eventually released as PDF and POD only. Four years after *that*, a second edition (2010) was published adding Unisystem stats, truly showing how the gaming world moved on.

And that is how Eden's long but largely sporadic flirtation with d20 finally ended.

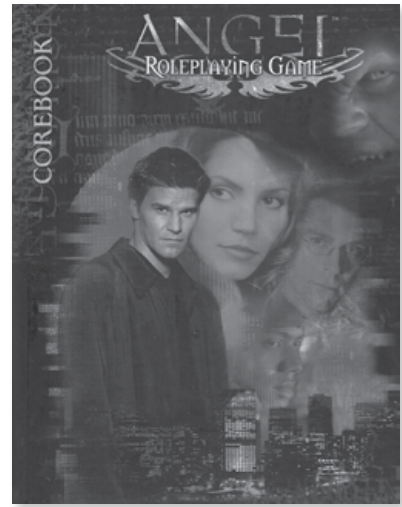
Cinematic Action!: 2001–2006

On December 21, 2001, Eden Studios announced that they'd negotiated a license with Donruss Playoff LP, the makers of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* CCG (2001), to produce a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* roleplaying game. It was thanks to hard work on the part of Vasilakos and Jurkat, aided and abetted by Christian Moore of Last Unicorn Games. The new license soon consumed the studio, as they strove to get a game out by the next summer; this time, they made their publication deadline with the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Roleplaying Game Core Rulebook* (2002).



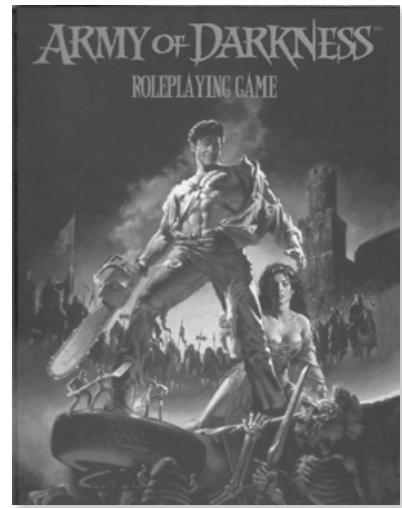
There had been serious discussions about whether to make the new game Unisystem or d20, given the tenor of the time. Probably to Eden's ultimate benefit, they choose to go with Unisystem. However, rather than using the original Unisystem system, C.J. Carella instead created a variant of Unisystem that he called the "cinematic" system. This was a simplified version of Unisystem — following the trend of ease-of-use that often

appears when creating a licensed RPG that had mass-market potential. The game also introduced "drama" points, which could be used by characters to do amazing things, harking back to any number of drama, fate, fame, and fortune systems of the past.



"Given the amount of work and attention to detail you have to do to make a license come alive, I wouldn't do it if it wasn't a labor of love."

– C.J. Carella, Interview, flamesrising.com (2005)



Buffy was very successful. It quickly became Eden's best-selling release, for a time eclipsing *All Flesh Must Be Eaten*. Supplements followed, though never in huge numbers. In many ways *Buffy made* Eden, which had largely been a part-time endeavor up to that point. Now, for the first time ever, all of the principals could work at Eden full-time. This success not only allowed Eden to pay its employees real salaries and open real offices, but it also gave them the capital to get back in the retail business. In June 2003, George Vasilakos opened a new game store in Albany, New York, replacing the one he closed four years earlier before moving to California. The new store's name was Zombie Planet.

Over the next few years, Eden Studios parlayed the success of their new cinematic game system with two more licenses. The first, a natural fit, was for the *Angel Roleplaying Game* (2003). The third was for the zombie cult movie, *Army of Darkness* (2005); the game was designed by Shane Hensley of Pinnacle. Each of the new games was hot for a while after its release. *Angel* outsold *Buffy* in 2003, and *Army of Darkness* outsold both in 2005.

Unfortunately, by 2005 things were turning bad for Eden, as we'll see, and in 2006 they opted not to renew the licenses for *Angel* and *Buffy* due to the high

licensing fees. This returned Eden to its roots as a smaller roleplaying company with a handful of highly acclaimed games.

Complementary Releases: 2003—2006

The frantic work toward the *Buffy* RPG put some other projects on hold, but they finally started to appear the next year. The long-delayed Eden edition of *Armageddon: The End Time* (2003) was published, as was a new project called *Terra Primate* (2003). The latter was a toolkit game much like *AFMBE* — except that it centered on intelligent apes instead of deadly zombies. The toolkit also included a number of different "ape worlds" players could experience. As a monkey-oriented rehash of *AFMBE* it got polar reviews: people loved it or were bored.

2003 was Eden's best year ever, mostly because of *Buffy* and *Angel*. However, Eden did not slack in work on their other lines, and as a result they published over a dozen books, their highest quantity ever. Some of the releases have already been mentioned — new RPGs *Armageddon* and *Angel* and some of Eden's last d20 books, *Fields of Blood* and *Secrets of the Ancients*. A handful of *Buffy* supplements came out this year too and even *WitchCraft* saw one release.

All Flesh Must Be Eaten got the most love, though, showing its future importance to the company. Releases included: a revised edition of the rules that included d20 conversion notes (2003); the *Atlas of the Walking Dead* (2003), practically a zombie monster manual; two *Books of Archetypes* (2003); two of the zombie setting books that Eden began to produce, the wild western *Fistful o' Zombies* (2003) and *Pulp Zombies* (2003); as well as James Lowder's final zombie short story collection to date, *The Book of Final Flesh* (2003).

However, with *Buffy* going off the air in 2003 and *Angel* wrapping in 2004, Eden's star quickly began to fade. Fortunately, Eden seemed to be preparing for the possibility of a post-*Buffy* future. They kicked off a new series of books with *Eden Studios Presents Volume 1* (2004), which offered articles for general use with Unisystem, and also pushed the heavy resurgence the *AFMBE* books.

It wasn't enough. Though Eden managed to stay very profitable through 2004, in 2005 they started to hit serious problems — along with the rest of the industry, now moving through the post-d20 doldrums. The ever-dreaded specter of "cash flow" started to keep products from going to press, as Eden waited for the money to come in to pay the printers for the next book.

The decision to end the *Buffy* and *Angel* licenses in 2006 really marked the end of an era, but Eden managed to publish the long-awaited second edition of *Conspiracy X* (2006), now built on the Unisystem. After 10 years, the two original threads of Eden came together, with their original game now merging with their most-successful game system.

Unfortunately, 2006 was Eden's last hurrah for a while. That year, they supported four different product lines with four releases. We've already discussed *Conspiracy X*'s second edition. *Worlds of the Dead* (2006), which provided 20 more "deadworlds" for *AFMBE* GMs to use, was the second of these books. The last two books were really signs of the times, because at the time they were only published in PDF and POD — not as fully professional books released widely through distribution. Both books were produced in conjunction with Misfit Studios. The first was the aforementioned *Odyssey Prime* — Eden's last d20 book — and the other was *Enemies Archived* (2006) — a monster manual for *Armageddon*.

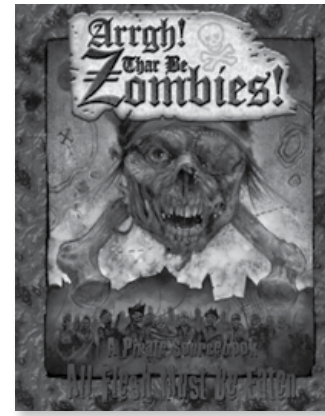
At the same time that Eden's product lines were stalling out, the company lost the second of its three owners. Alex Jurkat ceased being an owner in 2005 and left behind the day-to-day operations of the company in 2006. He's since been a freelance editor for companies like Margaret Weis Productions and Wizards of the Coast. That left George Vasilakos as the sole force behind the company.

Eden, After the Fall: 2007-Present

Eden has continued on since 2007 as an entirely part-time concern. Most of the work is being done by freelancers. David Chapman has headed work on *Conspiracy X* and Thom Marion has been line editing *All Flesh Must Be Eaten* and *WitchCraft*.

Eden's more notable release in that time period was probably their newest Cinematic RPG, Tim Brannan's *Ghosts of Albion* (2008, 2011). *Ghosts* returns Cinematic Unisystem to its *Buffy* roots. It's a Victorian fantasy based on a series of web movies and books co-created and co-authored by Amber Benson, who played the ill-fated witch Tara in *Buffy*.

Eden put considerable focus on *All Flesh Must Be Eaten* supplements for a few years in the late '00s, and it looked for a moment like that might be their last line standing. For a while it also seemed like the company might be going PDF only ... but more recently they've pushed some of the PDF-only books from that era into print as well.



As is the case for many roleplaying companies, Eden has seen a big resurgence just in the last year or two, thanks to Kickstarter. Beginning in November 2011, Eden Studios has used Kickstarter primarily to test the waters for continued work on the Unisystem *Conspiracy X*, and the results have been very successful. Eden's first *Conspiracy X* Kickstarter, *The Extraterrestrials Sourcebook* (2011), raised $8,191 from 141 backers, while their third,

The Conspiracies Sourcebook (2012), raised $23,488 from 296 backers. It's still small business, but it's enough to keep the line going.

Eden has more recently used Kickstarter to fund *Band of Zombies* (2012), an *AFMBE* supplement previously delayed for at least two years.

In a past era, Eden might have expired after it went part time, but in the modern world of crowdsourced fundraising it looks much more able to move on toward the future.

What to Read Next

- For George Vasilakos' West Coast vacation, read ***Last Unicorn Games.***
- For the origins of the d20 license, read ***Wizards of the Coast.***

In Other Eras

- For Ed Healy's next project, read ***Adept Press*** *['00s].*
- For a recent zombie game, read about *Dead Reign* in ***Palladium Books*** *['80s].*
- For other companies who have moved heavily into licensed properties, read ***West End Games*** *['80s]* and ***Margaret Weis Productions.***

Or read onward to a new publisher with an old TSR crew, ***Margaret Weis Productions.***

Margaret Weis Productions: 1998–Present

Margaret Weis Productions — originally Sovereign Press — has published a few markedly different product lines in just 15 years, from classic Dragonlance material to numerous licensed media games.

The Journey to Loerem: 1984—1998

In the early '80s, Tracy Hickman and Margaret Weis were part of a virtual conspiracy within the ranks of TSR alongside other luminaries such as Jeff Crook, Larry Elmore, and Douglas Niles. Through hard work and determination, "Project Overlord" was able to convince the higher-ups at TSR to publish something unlike anything the RPG world had seen before: Dragonlance. Through 12 adventures (1984–1986) and two trilogies of novels (1984–1986) these creators told the story of a land at war and in doing so



1998: Sovereign Stone Quickstart

debuted a new game world for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* and also created the possibility for more epic roleplaying adventures.

> *"It all really started with our private printings of Pharaoh and Rahasia – which we later sold to the Dungeons & Dragons producers – as well as perhaps our finest single adventure design, the original Ravenloft. It was from those roots that Dragonlance sprang and, by consequence, the rest of the storytelling that subsequently was imbued in games."*
>
> – Tracy Hickman, Interview, examiner.com (February 2009)

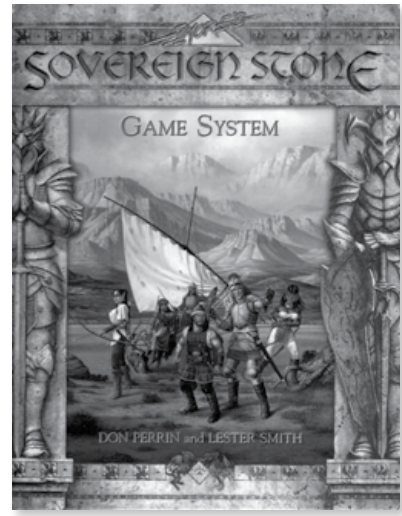
In 1987, the Dragonlance group started to scatter. Elmore became one of the best-recognized freelance artists in the business. Hickman and Weis left Dragonlance behind and went on to become freelance writers, co-authoring *The Darksword Trilogy* (1987–1988), *Rose of the Prophet* (1988–1989), *The Death Gate Cycle* (1990–1995), and others.

Then, in the late '90s, three of the Dragonlance alumni reunited. Elmore approached Weis and Hickman to pitch Loerem, a new world he'd envisioned. It was a fantasy realm with a twist. It centered on the human land of Vinnengael, which lay between many different civilizations — among them other human kingdoms and the lands of the dwarves, elves, and orks. However (and here's the twist), the non-human races of Loerem were very different from the standard fantasy tropes. Dwarves were horse-riding nomads, elves had an Asian-influenced culture, and the orks were omen-fearing pirates.

Hickman and Weis were excited by Elmore's ideas and agreed to write about Loerem in the "Sovereign Stone" trilogy of books. *Well of Darkness* (2000), *Guardians of the Lost* (2001), and *Journey into the Void* (2003) would be published over the next few years. But, that wasn't the only attention that Loerem got. Thanks to Don Perrin — Margaret Weis' then-husband — a roleplaying game was soon in the works as well.

The *Sovereign Stone* RPG: 1998—2000

At the time, Don Perrin was just leaving behind two unsuccessful companies run by Ken Whitman: Imperium Games, where he had worked on *Marc Miller's Traveller* (1996), and which is the subject of its own history; and Archangel Entertainment, where he had worked on *Zero* (1997). Now he was ready to do some work on his own, and *Sovereign Stone* offered the ideal opportunity. Lester Smith — another alumnus of Imperium and Archangel — joined Perrin in the design of the *Sovereign Stone* roleplaying game. Finally, Margaret Weis became the CEO of the company formed to publish the game, Sovereign Press.



It's worth tangentially noting that both Archangel Entertainment and Sovereign Press were part of a small game design community that — in the late '90s and early '00s — was centered in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, the former home of TSR. Besides those two companies, a few others would appear in the next few years, and they would shuffle various employees among them.

Dynasty Presentations was Ken Whitman's next venture, centering on a new magazine called *Games Unplugged*; it sometimes included writing by Margaret Weis and new *Snarfquest* comics by Larry Elmore. Meanwhile Timothy Brown, James Ward, Lester Smith, John Danovich, and Sean Everette were founding a d20 company called Fast Forward Entertainment, which later took over *Games Unplugged*, became a fulfillment house, and eventually went out of business in a messy way. They took out another Great Lakes RPG company, FanPro LLC, when they did, as is discussed in Fan Pro's own history. Still later, Ken Whitman ended up managing Elmore Production, Elmore's personal art company, and Sean Everette ended up at Sovereign. Meanwhile Sovereign Press teamed up with yet another company, Corsair Publishing — located in nearby Madison — acting as Sovereign's sales and fulfillment house for the first few years of their existence. It was a very tangled web.

The *Sovereign Stone* RPG was previewed at the 1998 Gen Con Game Fair in a quickstart rulebook (1998). The full game was released the next year as the *Sovereign Stone Game System* (1999) and then promptly revised and rereleased as *Sovereign Stone Game System Revised*, a hardcover (2000).

The game system itself was simple. Dice of various types were derived from characteristics and skills. These dice could be improved through steps. In play they were combined and rolled to meet designated target numbers. It was generally reminiscent of FASA's *Earthdawn* (1994). The magic system expanded this dice-rolling system in an innovative manner: magic could take a while to cast, so each turn a magician accumulated points toward a total until the spell finally went off.

The core of the game, however, was not the game system, but instead the beautiful artwork of Larry Elmore and the vivid and unique fantasy world that it depicted. In 2000, with their rules finally settled into their final form, Sovereign Press began to detail this world through setting sourcebooks, beginning with *Old Vinnengael* (2000), and through racial sourcebooks, beginning with *The Taan* (2000).

Unfortunately, the *Sovereign Stone* game was beset with two major problems from the start.

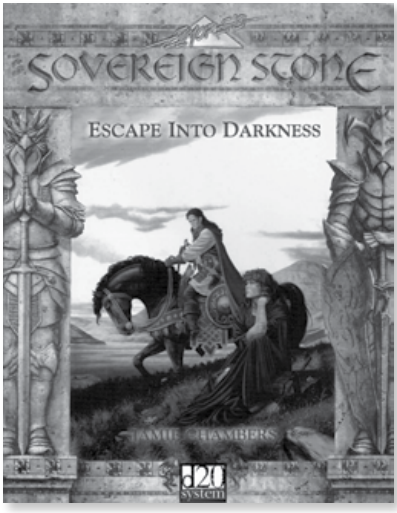
First, the novels were slow in coming. The first book didn't see print until September 2000, a full year after the original RPG release. As we'll see, the final book in the trilogy nearly postdated the entire game line. Although the names of Elmore, Hickman, and Weis could do a lot to popularize a game, a new fantasy game system was still a hard sell, and without the novels, there was no existing interest in the setting.

Second, just as the revised *Sovereign Stone* game system was published, the d20 license was also released — instantly saturating the marketplace with fantasy knock-offs and pretty much dooming any original game system to struggle while finding its niche.

Sovereign d20: 2001–2003

Though Sovereign Press persevered with their original direction through 2001, they finally had to admit defeat. On April 17, 2001, Don Perrin announced that Sovereign Press was replacing its original *Sovereign Stone* game system with a new d20-based line.

> *"The decision to abandon the current Sovereign Stone Role-Playing Game line lies simply in the numbers. We feel that the strength of our product line is in the world, and that world can be explored by so many more players under the d20 license."*
>
> – Don Perrin, Press Release (April 2001)



It was back to the drawing board, with a new d20 supplement, the *Sovereign Stone Campaign Sourcebook* (2001) and d20 reprints of the original *Sovereign Stone* releases over the next few years. There was new material too, such as a magic book, the *Codex Mysterium* (2001), various adventures and setting books, and a long-awaited race book, *Marauders of the Wolf: The Dwarves* (2003). However, the d20 switchover cost Sovereign Press at least a year's worth of momentum — an eternity in the quick-moving d20 market.





Throughout the game line's existence, Sovereign Press did their best to support it with their greatest expertise: fiction. The first piece of *Sovereign Stone* fiction, a short story by Weis and Perrin called "Shadamehr and the Old Wives Tale" appeared in *Dragon #264* (October 1999) — long before the first novel was published. Jamie Chambers and Jeff Crook also contributed to the mythos of the world through short stories, but it ultimately wasn't enough.

By 2003, the volatile d20 market was crashing, thanks in large part to the release of the 3.5 edition of Dungeons & Dragons. That was enough to cause many d20 publishers to close up shop, and it seemed likely that *Sovereign Stone* was similarly doomed. Sovereign Press continued to announce their next publications, "Rise of Might: The Empire of Vinnengael" and "Children of the Divine: The Elves," but they would never see print.

When the *Sovereign Stone* website suddenly disappeared in 2004, the fate of the game was obvious. Sovereign Press returned all rights to Larry Elmore, who afterward relicensed the game to a small press called White Silver Publishing. White Silver reprinted the core rules and gamemaster screen for d20 3.5 (2006), but after that they started putting effort into their own RPG, *The Chronicles of Ramlar* (2006) before crashing and burning amid a lawsuit and unpaid bills, and ending the story of *Sovereign Stone* for a time. The setting only returned in April 2013, when Tony Lee secured the publication rights to *Sovereign Stone* and Kickstarted a *Pathfinder* edition of the game. It reached its goal of $10,000 in just seven hours — proving the continued interest in the line.

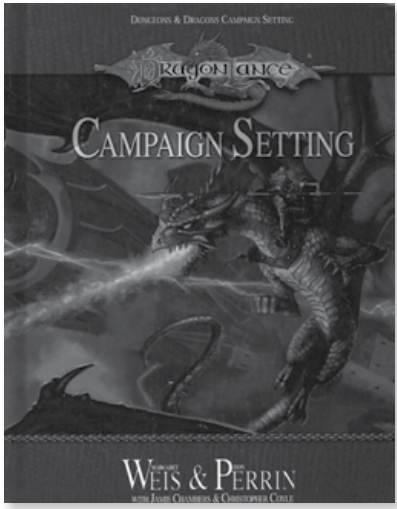
However, back in 2003, Margaret Weis' original setting was gone. The d20 bust was only one of the reasons for the end of Sovereign Press' *Sovereign Stone* line; by 2003, they were also working on another, more successful game line.

Dragonlance!: 2003–2007

To continue with the story of Sovereign Press, we must now step back in time almost 20 years to Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman's first hit, Dragonlance. As already discussed, the two creators largely left Dragonlance behind in 1987, when they moved onto fiction writing careers.

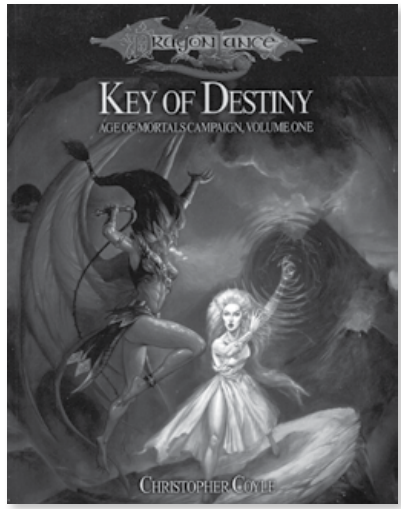
They briefly returned to the franchise just as TSR was dying, writing the first major Dragonlance book in a decade, *Dragons of Summer Flame* (1996). It set up a new era of adventure in the "Age of Mortals" — then featured in *Dragonlance: Fifth Age* (1996), TSR's resource-based SAGA game. Unfortunately, the book was hampered by TSR's worsening relationship with its book publisher, and what should have been a trilogy was compressed into a single book, much to its detriment. It wasn't particularly well-received, and afterward Weis & Hickman were pretty sure that they were done with the world of Krynn.

That changed after the acquisition of TSR by Wizards of the Coast. Weis and Hickman now envisioned a new sequence of stories set in the Age of Mortals, and Peter Adkison, the president of Wizards, was eager to have them tell it. The result was the *War of Souls* trilogy (2000–2002), each book of which hit the *New York Times* best-sellers list. After 15 years of slowly ebbing interest, the *War of Souls* brought Dragonlance back into the mainstream again.



In 2002, Wizards of the Coast also agreed to license the Dragonlance setting to Sovereign Press for RPG publication. Margaret Weis and Don Perrin, with Jamie Chambers and Christopher Coyle, wrote the *Dragonlance Campaign Setting* (2003) for publication by Wizards of the Coast; afterward Sovereign Press was allowed to expand and supplement that book using the d20 license.

The result was perhaps the most sustained and highest quality period of Dragonlance production since those original adventures in the middle of the '80s. Among the releases were core campaign books for each of the major Dragonlance settings: *Age of Mortals* (2003), *War of the Lance* (2004), and *Legends of the Twins* (2006). Sovereign Press also produced a new campaign saga in three parts: *Key of Destiny* (2004), *Spectre of Sorrows* (2005), and *Price of Courage* (2006). Totaling 730 pages and detailing major events in the Age of



Mortals, this series by Christopher Coyle and Cam Banks was a clear successor to the original Dragonlance saga.

Unfortunately, in 2007 Wizards of the Coast started drawing in its licenses. As a result, Sovereign Press announced early in the year that they lost the rights to Dragonlance. Wizards did, however, allow them to finish their final major project: a revamping of the original Dragonlance story for the d20 system. The result was another trilogy of adventures: *Dragons of Autumn* (2006), *Dragons of Winter* (2007), and *Dragons of Spring* (2008). Together they comprised another impressive campaign, this one running over 550 pages. *Dragons of Spring* was Sovereign Press' final Dragonlance publication.

For a company in business for just a decade, Sovereign Press certainly faced its share of reversals; remarkably they came back each time with new strategies and products, and that was the case again here.

The Cortex Games: 2004—2009

Today, we can divide the rise of Margaret Weis Productions into three acts. The first act was the story of *Sovereign Stone*, which ran from 1998–2003. The second act was the story of Dragonlance, which ran from 2003–2008. The third (and to date, final) act began in 2004.

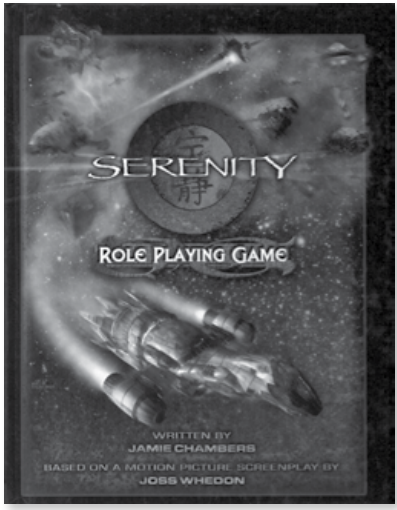
That year, Don Perrin left Sovereign Press and Margaret Weis founded a new company, Margaret Weis Productions. For a while both companies ran in parallel, but in 2006 Dragonlance moved over to Margaret Weis Productions and thereafter Sovereign Press was phased out. The change made sense: *Sovereign Stone* was now gone, leaving the old name irrelevant, while Margaret Weis' name could draw new attention to all of the company's lines.

While Sovereign had been publishing its final Dragonlance books, MWP was simultaneously doing something new: seeking out licenses and creating a new "Cortex" roleplaying game. It was this combination of media licenses and a proprietary roleplaying system that would form the basis of MWP's third act.

The new direction kicked off with a brand-new game designed by Jamie Chambers — the *Serenity Role Playing Game* (2005), which was also the first publication by Margaret Weis Productions.

The *Serenity* license itself was very hot among gamers, because Joss Whedon's *Firefly* (2002–2003) had been a well-loved TV show in the science-fiction community and interest was just resurging thanks to the *Serenity* movie (2005). When MWP put out their new game in a beautiful full-color rulebook, it was able to translate that interest in the franchise into interest in both the new company and its new game.

> *"I've been a huge Joss Whedon fan for years and I loved Firefly from the moment I saw a pirated copy of the pilot episode. I was elated when I heard there was going to be a movie. I would have never thought of going after the license, because I assumed some major RPG company would be after it."*
>
> – Margaret Weis, Interview, gamingreport.com (May 2005)



The new Cortex game brought in some ideas from the original *Sovereign Stone* system. Characteristics and skills define dice that a player gets to use, from a d2 (a coin) to a d12. A pair of dice is then rolled against a target. Everything else is pretty simple. Character creation is point-based and (as has become standard for games based on dramatic licenses) players can use plot points to influence die rolls. It's a relatively simple and elegant system.

The most original element of Cortex is likely how it deals with complications (disadvantages). Like games going back to *Champions* (1981), players get points in character creation for taking disadvantages. From there, however, Cortex's disadvantages follow in the footsteps of indie games like *Theatrix* (1993) and *Fate* (2003): players are encouraged to roleplay their disadvantages during play and are rewarded with plot points for doing so. Though most of Cortex is a pretty traditional RPG system, the interrelation of plot points and complications offered the first suggestion that MWP would be trending toward the indie side of game design.

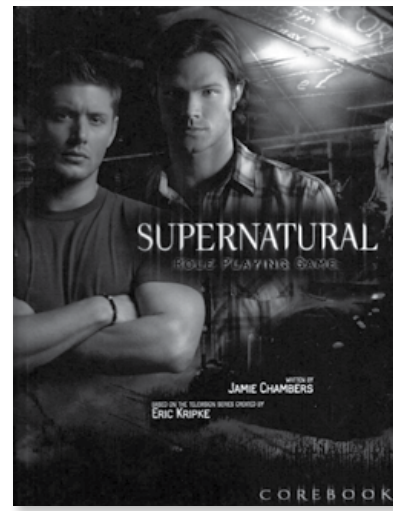
Serenity got MWP some good attention and showed that the Sovereign folks were working on more than just fantasy games. All of MWP's Cortex games have been pretty lightly supplemented, but *Serenity* received about a book a year for its first few years, from *Out in the Black* (2006), an adventure, through *Big Damn Heroes Handbook* (2009), a general companion for the game. *Out in the Black*

(2006) was particularly notable because it was by Tracy and Laura Hickman and was Tracy's first adventure design work in 15 years.

> *"We felt that the d20 system wouldn't work for our game. We wanted a system that was quick to learn, easy to play, and one that reflected the action-packed, fast-paced nature of the game and the movie. This isn't exactly a new system. Those who played the original Sovereign Stone RPGs will note that we have used elements from that game system with some modifications."*
>
> – Margaret Weis, Interview, gamingreport.com (May 2005)

In its early days, MWP played with getting back into the fantasy genre. They put out a pair of Choose-Your-Own-Adventure-like books, *Sete-Ka's Dream Quest* (2006) and *the Lost Sword* (2006) and then introduced a new setting with *A Player's Guide to Castlemourn* (2006). These publications were most notable for the ex-TSR names that moved through them, as James Ward wrote *Sete-Ka's Dream Quest* and Castlemourn was a new setting by Ed Greenwood. After its initial publication, Castlemourn got a bit more attention with the d20-based *Castlemourn Campaign Setting* (2007), but by then it was obvious that Cortex was the future of MWP, not d20. MWP put out the *Castlemourn Cortex System Quickstart* (2008) for the second Free RPG Day before closing down the line. It would be MWP's last venture into traditional fantasy for a few years.





Meanwhile, MWP started publishing one new Cortex media game each year, including: the *Battlestar Galactica Role Playing Game* (2007), the *Demon Hunters Role Playing Game* (2008), and the *Supernatural Role Playing Game* (2009). MWP also offered some support for the Cortex gaming system itself with the publication of *Cortex*

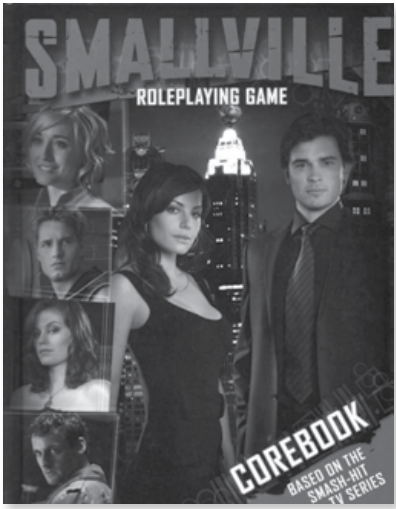
Role Playing Game System (2008) — which outlined the house system that underlay all of MWP's RPGs.

Margaret Weis Productions *could* have been content pumping out a new Cortex game every year. The licenses would have helped to maintain interest in the lines and a continued stream of them could have kept the company going. However, thanks to Cortex line editor Cam Banks, beginning in 2010 MWP started to stretch the design of its "traditional" game system.

The Coming of Cortex Plus: 2010—2011

Beginning in 2010, Margaret Weis Productions dramatically renovated its Cortex game system with a series of new RPGs that they called "Cortex Plus." These new games polished up the core system, better balancing character creation and giving the opportunity to roll more dice in order to make the results less "swingy." However, the new games went beyond that by really differentiating the system for each game to make it appropriate for its license.

> *"Leverage and Smallville … both require some new and fresh takes on Cortex's classic systems, and so I used the opportunity to do a little revision of Cortex at the same time."*
>
> – Cam Banks, Interview, flamerising.com (June 2010)



The first of these new games was the *Smallville Roleplaying Game Corebook* (2010) — co-designed by line developer Cam Banks and indie publisher Josh Roby — which rather dramatically eliminated characteristics and skills. Instead of characteristics, players have a set of six "values": duty, glory, justice, love, value, and truth. Instead of skills, players have relationships with the other PCs as well as various NPCs. These relationships are determined in part through phase-based character generation, where the players jointly design PCs, NPCs, and their environment. Furthermore, each value and each relationship is described by a simple phrase to give it additional color. One player's "duty" might be "love of country" and another's might be "loyalty to family."

(And there are superpowers too, of course.)

To take an action, a player rolls a value die and a relationship die. He may also get dice from other things, like assets — including pretty freeform 'distinctions' — and resources. In the end (as usual) he tries to beat a target number.

Smallville's value and relationship mechanic allows for the play of "soap opera" games. *Smallville*'s design pushes further into the dramatic side of episodic TV via other mechanics. Most notably, plot points became a central resource. They're not only available through the use of complications, but they're also usable to enhance superpowers, meaning that PCs build up problems, and then solve them when superpowers come out, much like on the TV show. There's also dramatic ebb and flow via the "trouble pool," which the GM rolls when the players are encountering people or problems that haven't been fully statted. The trouble pool can grow and shrink as dramatic tension waxes and wanes — and can even be supplemented by extra dice when PCs are stressed through fear, anger, exhaustion, injury, or insecurity.

The idea of all rolls being based on values and relationships is fairly new, but most of the rest of the innovation in *Smallville*'s system originated within the world of indie game design. The relationships, the descriptive phrases, and the distinctions all feel like aspects from *Fate* (as described in the Evil Hat history), while the point-plot economy fills a similar niche to *Fate's* Fate point economy. Finally, the concern for narrative tension was also explored in Robin D. Laws' *HeroQuest* second edition (2009). Despite any similarity of ideas, *Smallville* is notable for being one of the first truly mainstream games to begin exposing these indie ideas to a wider community.

Leverage: The Roleplaying Game (2011) — co-designed by Cam Banks, Evil Hat's Rob Donoghue and Clark Valentine, and others — doesn't go quite as far as *Smallville*. You do still have characteristics, but instead of skills you have roles, which define your job in capers. They include grifter, hacker, hitter, mastermind, and thief. As with *Smallville*, assets can sometimes increase the number of dice you roll. Though there are no superpowers, roles can allow players to do some exceptional things. Finally, there's still a plot-point economy, built on distinctions, and many of the other expansions of Cortex Plus show up in this system. Like *Smallville*, *Leverage* has been very well-received.



The Heroic Age: 2012—2013

Industry sources suggest that Margaret Weis may have been thinking about shutting down her company around 2011. Though their recent games had been critically acclaimed, the industry was growing increasingly difficult and the company was starting to lose licenses — a topic we'll return to. Then MWP managed to get a license to one of the best properties in the business: Marvel Comic's superheroes.

There had been three Marvel Superhero games to that date: TSR's long-lived *Marvel Super Heroes* (1984–1993); their innovative *Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game* for *SAGA* (1998–1999); and Marvel's own failed resource-management game, *Marvel Universe* (2003). By 2011, the *Marvel* RPG license had been unavailable for around a decade, but Marvel Comics themselves remained the top-seller of comic books. MWP's obtaining the license was a *big deal*.



Recognizing the importance of the license, Cam Banks — now the company's creative director — got input from several notable designers while creating the new game. According to him: Rob Donoghue and Jesse Scoble suggested structures for stories and supplements; Matt Forbeck gave advice on Marvel fans and the Marvel universe; Will Hindmarch provided numerous ideas with "narrative flavor"; and Phil Menard produced an overview of all the Cortex mechanics to date. The resulting game, *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying* (2012), came out in February 2012.

The game system uses the polished and updated Cortex Plus system that's clearly become MWP's new house system, but (once more) updated them for the particular setting and genre. Like *Smallville*, *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying* tosses out characteristics and skills. Instead, you can combine a wide variety of different abilities, including: affiliations, aspect-like distinctions, complications, and (of course) powers. The game also uses the plot point economy created for *Smallville*.

A few other elements are of particular note.

One is the game's milestone system, giving characters experience for doing specific in-character things. For example, Wolverine might get experience for being rebuked for violence or for going into a berserker rage.

Other innovative elements generated some criticism.

Marvel Heroic Roleplaying's character creation system resolves the age-old superhero problem of balancing out hugely imbalanced characters — like Spider-man and Thor — by turning character creation into a "modeling" system; the main goal isn't to balance things, but instead to adapt an existing character into the game mechanics. With its basis on modeling, this system dramatically downplays original character creation, to some gamers' discontent.

The game's superpower system is notable for the fact that it has no special rules for those powers — whereas most major superhero RPGs tend to spend tens of pages describing what each power does. Instead, powers in *Marvel* just add dice to the dice pool. Like many of the other interesting elements in *Marvel* (and other Cortex Plus releases), this was a clear move in the direction of indie games — where players and GMs are expected to resolve questions about powers and other game elements in a more narrated, freeform manner.

The criticism that *Marvel* had too narrow of a power scale might have been more valid since every power was ranked at d6, d8, d10, or d12. It doesn't provide a lot of range between Black Panther and The Sentry, nor does it allow differentiation between The Thing and The Hulk. Still, it was another example of story — not simulation — being the most important element in the game.

> *"Marvel strongly believes that all of its characters exist in context; with decades of history in some cases, as well as alternate universe versions, clones, and copycat characters, it's just as important to frame a character in terms of his or her place in this larger history as it is to describe their super powers."*
>
> – Cam Banks, "Design Diary 2: Why Events?," maragaretweis.com (May 2012)

The *Basic Game* contained relatively few heroes and villains, but that was in large part due to MWP's supplement model for *Marvel*. Banks (working with Marvel) decided on an "Event-based model" for supplements, where major supplements would focus on major Marvel events. The first two were *Civil War* (2012) and *Annihilation* (2013), with the "Age of Apocalypse" planned as the third. The core event books were then to be supplemented by additional releases like *Civil War: 50 State Initiative* (2012). These event supplements let MWP combine character stats with adventures, providing more widely sellable releases. The original plan was for a *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying* line that contained a total of 16 supplements, which would have made it much wider than *any* of MWP's previous licensed lines.

Marvel Heroic Roleplaying initially seemed to be doing very well for MWP, combining the critical enthusiasm for the Cortex Plus products with a new commercial success. In an otherwise dreary year for roleplaying brought about by the total collapse of *D&D* 4E, *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying* was a bright spot. Then,

on April 24, 2013, MWP posted that though *Civil War* "was successful and well-received ... it didn't garner the level of sales necessary to sustain the rest of the line." *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying* came to an end quite abruptly, with some PDFs like *Annihilation* never making it to print.

Worse, all sales were to end in just seven days, at the end of April.

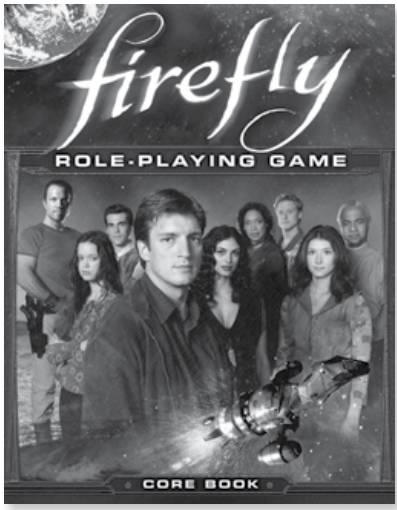
The announcement was rather shocking. Looking back, it seems obvious that Marvel had demanded a higher cost than the roleplaying industry could afford; even MWP said that it was an "admittedly ambitious license." Back when Marvel produced their own *Marvel Universe* game, the rumor mill suggested that they were expecting the game to be as successful as *Dungeons & Dragons* itself, and that when it failed to meet those high expectations, Marvel very quickly killed it. It wouldn't be surprising if similar expectations were the reasons for MWP's failure.

Whatever the reason, MWP's best-received and most apparently successful RPG in years was dead some 14 months after it appeared.

An Unknown Future: 2013-Present

If MWP truly was questioning their future before the acquisition of the Marvel license, it's likely in jeopardy again with its death. However, the company does have plans in the offing. They've announced a "Dragon Brigade" adventure (based on Margaret Weis' newest fantasy series), a new game that's said to be bringing Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman back together, and a brand-new *Firefly* RPG.

The last one is an ironic RPG, since it retreads ground covered by *Serenity*, which MWP lost its license to in 2011. However, where before the company only had the license to the movie (and had to "hide" references to the TV show via unnamed characters and other methods), now they have the license to the wider universe of the original television episodes. If that's combined with the new Cortex Plus system, it could be a whole new era for the game.



MWP also recently ran its first Kickstarter, for the *Cortex Plus Hacker's Guide* (2013), which includes the best "hacks" to the Cortex Plus system by a wide variety of designers — professional and amateur alike. Though only seeking $15,000, MWP actually raised $43,775 from 1,288 different backers. It was a good sign of the interest in the game system.

Margaret Weis Productions faces challenges too. The first is a problem confronted

by every licensee in the modern day: the slow loss of licenses. MWP's *Battlestar Galactica* license came to an end on January 31, 2011, the same day they lost their *Serenity* license. More recently, the licenses to *Smallville* and *Supernatural* ended on February 28, 2013, just two months prior to the surprise loss of their *Marvel* license. With several smaller lines from the early '00s likewise ended, that leaves the company with just one major line: *Leverage*.

Unfortunately MWP also lost creative director Cam Banks, who moved over to Atlas Games as their new brand manager. He still plans to do some work for MWP, including lead design for *Firefly*, but it's unlikely that he'll be the huge creative force he was for the last few years.

Margaret Weis Productions will be entering a new era with Banks' departure. Whether they can survive mainly on the new projects they have in the planning stage is an open question.

What to Read Next

- For Tracy Hickman and Margaret Weis' later interactions with *Dragonlance*, read ***Wizards of the Coast.***
- For more on '90s Wisconsin RPG publishers, read ***Imperium Games.***
- For the d20 Trademark License and Wizards' (brief) publication of the third-edition *Dragonlance Campaign Setting*, read ***Wizards of the Coast.***
- For a contemporary publisher with a heavy focus on licensed products, read ***Eden Studios.***
- For another company who concentrated on very shallow game lines (for a time), read ***Pinnacle Entertainment Group.***
- For Cam Banks' new employer, read ***Atlas Games.***

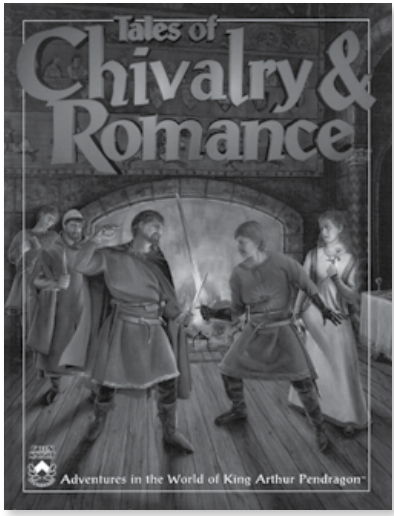
In Other Eras

- For the origins of Tracy Hickman, read ***DayStar West Media*** *['70s].*
- For the origins of Margaret Weis, Larry Elmore, and Dragonlance, read ***TSR*** *['70s].*
- For more on how Fast Forward Entertainment affected Great Lakes game companies, read ***Fan Pro*** *['00s].*
- For the indie design movement, read ***Adept Press*** *['00s].*
- For the possible indie origins of some Cortex Plus innovations, read ***Evil Hat Productions*** *['00s]* and ***Issaries*** *['00s].*
- For an older company with a heavy emphasis on licensed products, read ***West End Games*** *['80s].*
- For the past Marvel RPGs, see ***TSR*** *['70s].*

Or read onward to a short-lived *Pendragon* publisher, ***Green Knight Publishing.***

Green Knight Publishing: 1998–2003

Green Knight Publishing was a company created by a fan to hold the Pendragon properties formerly owned by Chaosium. Though it produced about 20 products in five years, in the end it would prove no more able than Chaosium to make the line successful in the post-CCG marketplace.



1999: Tales of Chivalry & Romance

Bold Beginnings: 1998–1999

In 1998, Pendragon fan and Chaosium friend Peter Corless ended up with the rights to Chaosium's *King Arthur Pendragon* RPG and the Pendragon Fiction line as the result of a loan he had made that Chaosium defaulted upon. Flush with dot-com money from his regular job at Cisco, Corless set out to create a company that would reinvigorate the *Pendragon* RPG line and bring new attention to the stories of King Arthur.

Though these histories are largely about roleplaying games, Green Knight

actually got its start with the *other* product that Corless had acquired rights for: the Pendragon Fiction line.

Chaosium created Pendragon Fiction in 1997 in the mold of their successful *Call of Cthulhu* Fiction line. It was intended to reprint out-of-print Arthurian stories that would complement and support the *Pendragon* RPG. As with the *Call of Cthulhu* Fiction line, Chaosium brought an external editor on board to select and package the fiction. This was Raymond H. Thompson, a professor and Arthurian scholar.

Chaosium began the line with a new edition of Phyllis Ann Karr's *The Arthurian Companion* (1997) — an encyclopedic reference previously printed as a game accessory shortly after the release of the first edition of the *Pendragon* RPG. They then followed that up with *Percival and the Presence of God* (1997) and had two other books in process when they lost the rights to the line.

Enter Green Knight.

When Corless received the *Pendragon* material from Chaosium, it included three roleplaying products and two books of fiction, all nearly ready for publication. The first of those fiction books, *Arthur, the Bear of Britain* (1998), was entirely ready to go to press, and had only been delayed because of cash flow problems at Chaosium. Green Knight was able to get it to print almost immediately — putting themselves on the map as a new publisher. *To the Chapel Perilous* (1999), the other fiction book, followed the next year.



After that, it would be 2000 before Green Knight made a fresh start on their fiction line. And, by then, they'd have roleplaying books out as well.

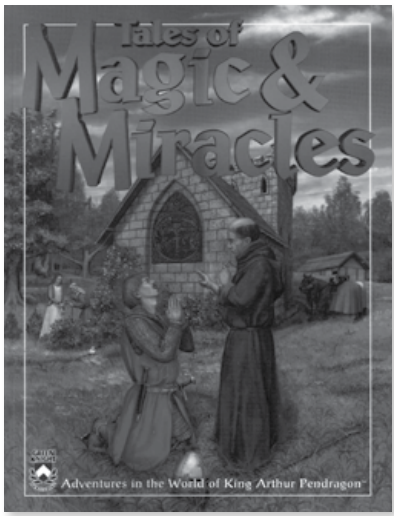
The Roleplaying Line: 1999—2001

The *King Arthur Pendragon* roleplaying line had been the heart of Chaosium's *Pendragon* production, but it also presented Green Knight with a problem. Chaosium had given the line up precisely because it wasn't popular — or at least not popular enough to offer good sales in a market battered by CCGs. This was coupled with — perhaps even the result of — *Pendragon*'s once-a-year release schedule from 1993 onward, not nearly enough to sustain a line.

In order to get the *Pendragon* RPG line back on target, Green Knight needed to make a notable new impact on the RPG scene

Unfortunately, they never did.

Green Knight did, however, publish a number of *Pendragon* RPG products over a period of three years, starting in 1999. By this time, Corless had Green Knight fully running and was able to move forward with those three RPG supplements originally intended for publication by Chaosium. This included two adventure books, *Tales of Chivalry & Romance* (1999) and *Tales of Magic & Miracles* (1999) — both produced by the author of this history, as it happens — and one setting book, Roderick Robertson's *Saxons* (2000). They were all solid enough releases, but not that different from what Chaosium had been doing.



Corless probably realized that these books wouldn't be enough to reboot the line. He also probably knew the importance of keeping a market primed through the regular release of supplements. What followed these legacy products would be much more important.

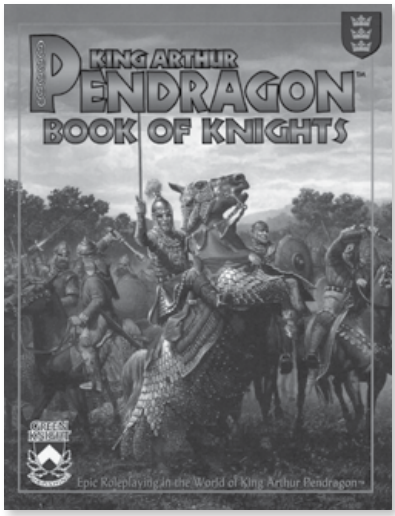
"Do you seek adventure? Have you ever wanted to yell and launch yourself into battle? Ever want to charge into combat riding a powerful warhorse? Can you imagine strapping into your armor, feeling the heft of your best weapon in hand, gripping a shield which bears your own heraldry? Ever dream of living in a world where life was more heroic?"

– Peter Corless, King Arthur P*endragon: Book of Knights (2000*

2000 was a good year for Green Knight, because it was the year that they really identified their unique vision for *Pendragon*. On the roleplaying side of things, they published *King Arthur Pendragon: Book of Knights* (2000), which advertised itself as "a complete roleplaying game in 48 pages!" In those scant pages, the book offered tight rules and a great introduction to the setting, all displayed in the best layout of any Green Knight releases. *Book of Knights* was given away and sold in large quantities. It could have helped to re-launch the line if it had been followed up with exciting new expansions.

But it wasn't.

Green Knight only printed two more RPG books, *Tales of Mystic Tournaments* (2000) and *Tales of the Spectre Kings* (2001), both "just" adventures — and both actually reprinted from previous editions of the game. After that, a variety of problems caused the RPG line to tail off entirely.



One of Green Knight's biggest problems was that all of their RPG books other than the innovative *Book of Knights* could have been published by Chaosium — except that Green Knight's layout and editing were each weaker. There was nothing to distinguish Green Knight's books, and so nothing to revitalize and revamp the line. Ironically, Green Knight's lists of upcoming books were full of exciting-sounding RPG supplements that could easily have brought new attention to *Pendragon*, including: the long-promised *The Grail Quest*; the magical *The Realm of Faerie*; the long-awaited conclusion to the *Pendragon* campaign, *Le Morte d'Arthur*; a nice crunchy *Arthurian Bestiary*; a line of location sourcebooks starting with *Camelot* and *Avalon*; and a new "Realms of Valor" series of games, each focusing on a different setting, but using the *Pendragon* system. However, they never saw print.

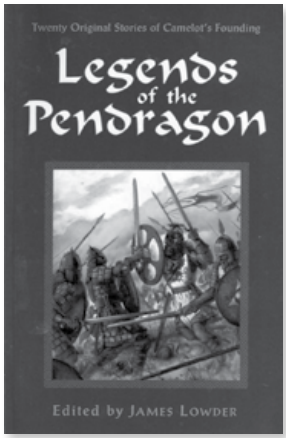
The ultimate failure of *Pendragon*'s line can be attributed to numerous factors, many of which can offer lessons to other companies.

First, the *Pendragon* RPG never had a strong line editor. A few different editors held the position at various times, until financial problems left Corless as sole RPG wrangler. None of the line editors had the experience necessary to bring books through to publication, leading to products continually slipping, and the exact books that could have saved the line were never completed.

Second, Green Knight's *Pendragon* RPG already started at a disadvantage because of the neglected state of the line Green Knight received. This was made worse by the d20 boom beginning in 2000 and 2001. Green Knight resisted the urge to produce a d20 *Pendragon* — probably to the franchise's ultimate benefit, since it had always stood upon a well-themed rule set — but this left the unenviable position of trying to fight for shelf space amidst the surge of d20 books, without using that same advantage itself.

Third, there were financial problems outside of Green Knight's control that ultimately led to the downfall of the company. These involved funding issues and the failure of two different fulfillment houses, as we'll discuss when talking about the company's final crash.

The Fiction Finale: 1999—2002



While RPG books quickly disappeared following their 2000 re-launch, the fiction line would continue boldly onward for a year more.

After publishing the two remnant manuscripts from Chaosium, Corless wanted to put his own spin on the fiction line. In 1999 he brought James Lowder — a veteran of TSR's book division — to oversee it. Lowder had good experience in publishing and editing, which ultimately allowed him to be much more successful than his counterparts on the RPG line.

As with the RPG line, the fiction line's original content started showing up in 2000. Though Lowder continued to reprint older Arthurian works — all introduced by Raymond Thompson — he also took a step beyond Chaosium's concept for the line and applied his own expertise for finding new fiction material. This resulted in two original short story collections — *The Doom of Camelot* (2000) and *Legends of the Pendragon* (2002) — and an original novel — *Exiled from Camelot* (2001). All told, Green Knight published a dozen books in its fiction line.

With their *Call of Cthulhu* Fiction line, Chaosium faced the problem of specialty science-fiction, fantasy, and horror book stores shying away from the books due to the prominence of their RPG branding. So with the Pendragon Fiction line they minimized the game connections. The name "Pendragon Fiction" could be understood as separate from the RPG, and in any case it was a very small line of type on the book's spine or back cover.

Ironically, this caused the line to have the opposite problem. Specialty stores still found the connection too tight, but now game stores were less willing to carry these fiction books because of the minimized gaming connection.

Under Green Knight, penetration of fiction books into game stores was further decreased because the *Pendragon* books were no longer connected with the more successful (and more clearly game-connected) *Call of Cthulhu* Fiction line. Sales for the Pendragon Fiction line fell a bit under Green Knight, and the success of the line was ultimately dependent upon the more mercurial book trade.

The Pendragon Fiction line still did moderately well. The books were well-reviewed, though there were some questions about audience. Casual readers sometimes found Thompson's introductions too scholarly, while scholarly readers sometimes found the content of the books too casual.

Nonetheless, the superior line editing and solid enough sales were what let the Fiction line continue a year past the *Pendragon* RPG's demise. However, by late 2002, things were turning quite bad, and not even the Fiction line would survive.

Green Knight's Camlann: 2002—2005

Ultimately Green Knight was tragically doomed to face almost every ill fate possible.

First up, leftover debts from Chaosium. Throughout its lifetime Green Knight was faced with printers, artists, and authors who were owed money by Chaosium for *Pendragon* work. Though Green Knight was under no actual obligation to resolve these old debts, in many cases, Corless choose to. Sometimes this was simply due to Corless' good nature, but in other cases Green Knight *really* needed to pay writers and artists that it wanted to continue working with. Sometimes Green Knight even faced problems from completely unrelated Chaosium debts, because people didn't understand that the two companies were entirely separate.

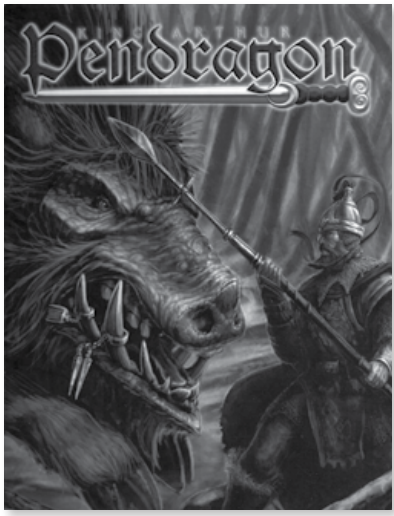
Then, beginning in 2000, the dot-com market crashed, taking with it the capital used to fund Green Knight. This was probably the biggest factor resulting in the halt of the RPG line's production. The better-organized fiction line survived *this* storm.

In late 2002, Green Knight's fulfillment house (and landlord) Wizard's Attic started floundering, resulting in increasingly late payments to all of its publishers. By 2003, when Wizard's Attic went down amid the d20 crash, Green Knight was one of many gaming publishers out considerable money. In fact, given that Green Knight never published anything following the Wizard's Attic crash, they can probably be counted among its casualties.

With their warehouse space lost and distribution in shambles, Green Knight needed to find a new company to do their fulfillment. They choose Osseum Entertainment — who themselves crashed shortly thereafter, sealing Green Knight's fate.

> *"Since the market meltdown of 2001, when I departed from Cisco Systems, lost a fortune as the stock price tumbled, and then saw the 9/11 attacks, I have mourned the world that could-have-been. In another, better, kinder world, Green Knight Publishing went on to win awards, publishing games about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table."*
>
> – Peter Corless, petercorless.blogspot.com (2008)

Despite the terrible sequence of events, Corless closed down Green Knight in a thoughtful and ethical manner.





First, he made sure that his freelancers were taken care of. Rights were generally returned to authors, and kill fees paid as appropriate. An Arthurian card game that Green Knight had been working on would eventually be released as *Camelot Legends* (2004), published by Z-Man Games, thanks to Green Knight's release of rights.

In 2004, Corless sold the rights to the *Pendragon* RPG — along with remaining stock — to White Wolf, who published a streamlined fifth edition (2005) and the long-awaited *The Great Pendragon Campaign* (2006), which details the full 80-year chronology for *Pendragon* for the first time ever.

Six years later, those rights left White Wolf with founder Stewart Wieck, who then founded Nocturnal Games (later Nocturnal Media). At first, Nocturnal didn't do much for *Pendragon* other than making the old books available as PDFs. Meanwhile new Pendragon work *was* being done by Greg Stafford, who produced brand-new monographs under license from Nocturnal through his own Greg Stafford Pendragon Productions. More recently these interests have come together, and Stafford's monographs have been made available as PDFs and PODs by Nocturnal, while Stafford has also been empowered to do new acquisitions for the *Pendragon* game.

Returning to Green Knight, in 2005 — prompted by the meltdown at Osseum — Corless remaindered the *Pendragon* fiction stock to Paizo Publishing, who got the well-reviewed works out to the public at a deep discount.

With their entire inventory gone, Green Knight was pretty much gone too.

Not Dead, Just Sleeping: 2005-Present

For all real purposes, Green Knight Publishing ceased to exist between 2002, when it published its final fiction books, and 2003, when Wizard's Attic went down in flames.

Green Knight's greatest contribution to the hobby overall was probably keeping the *Pendragon* line alive between 1997, when Chaosium ceased publication, and 2005, when White Wolf picked it up. Based upon the several years of downturn Chaosium experienced at the time, it's unlikely that any *Pendragon* books would have otherwise been published in that time period (and more likely that the line would still be languishing with them today).

The quality of *Pendragon*'s fiction line — based on its classic reprints and new anthologies — might have helped to convince some book sellers to take a closer look at fiction put out by game publishers.

Meanwhile, James Lowder's experience packaging fiction for Green Knight ultimately led him to put together fiction packages for other small companies, including a set of successful zombie anthologies for Eden Studios (2001–2003), some *Silver Age Sentinels* books for Guardians of Order (2003–2004), the pulp collection *Astounding Hero Tales* (2007) for Hero Games, and *Worlds of their Own* (2008) for Paizo Publishing. It seems unlikely that all of these publishers would be publishing fiction today if not for the experience provided by Green Knight (which itself traces a path back to Greg Stafford attending NecronomiCon in the early '90s, and his decision to publish Cthulhu fiction).

Our industry is tightly connected, and lessons learned in one segment, even from a short-lived company like Green Knight, eventually help others.

What to Read Next

- For the future of *Pendragon*, read ***White Wolf.***

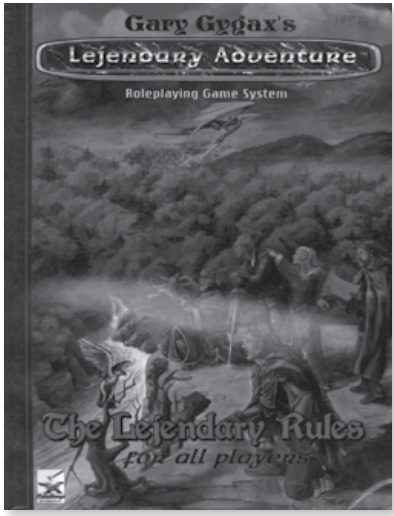
In Other Eras

- For the origins of *Pendragon*, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s].*
- For the future of *Pendragon* author Greg Stafford, read ***Issaries*** *['00s].*

Or read onward to one of Gary Gygax's triumphant returns, ***Hekaforge Productions.***

Hekaforge Productions: 1998–2006

Hekaforge Productions continued the saga of Gary Gygax after his ill-fated work with GDW prior to his final publications with Troll Lord Games.



1999: The Lejendary Rules for All Players

Forging the Hekaforge: 1981–1999

As is the case with many RPG publishers, the story of Hekaforge Production begins long before the creation of the actual company. It's a story that has its genesis in the work of two different designers.

The first of Hekaforge's designers was Christopher Clark, who in 1981 created his own small press, Inner City Games Designs, to publish his *Inner City* RPG (1981). It was a very early RPG of anti-heroes, where players took on the roles of criminals stuck in the bad police melodramas of the '60s and

'70s. In later years, Inner City Games focused more heavily on strategic designs of various sorts. Their best-known release was *Fuzzy Heroes* (1992), a set of miniatures rules for use with stuffed animals.

The second of Hekaforge's designers was Gary Gygax, one of the creators of the roleplaying industry. Unfortunately, his last experiences in the industry had been less than ideal. In 1992, he started working with GDW to produce a multi-genre game system. The first set of rules, for fantasy, had been published as GDW's *Dangerous Journeys: Mythus* (1992). From the start, the game was beset with lawsuits from TSR — as is better described in the histories of GDW and TSR — and this would eventually prove its doom. In 1994, GDW and TSR came to a settlement where TSR gained all rights to the game. GDW expired a few years thereafter, in part due to the lawsuit.

Undeterred, Gygax started work on another game called *Lejendary Adventures* around 1995. Like *Dangerous Journeys*, it was a game system intended to support multiple genres, with fantasy once again being the lead release. Though Gygax originally planned for *Lejendary Adventures* to be a computer release, it did not pan out. So instead, he began thinking about creating *Lejendary Adventures* as a tabletop game. He began running it for his local group around 1996.

By this time, Clark and Gygax were long-time acquaintances. Clark met Gygax way back at Gen Con VIII (1975), where he was one of just 1,500 attendees. They stayed in touch through the years, with Clark writing the occasional article or running the occasional event for TSR — and often stopping by the TSR parties and chatting with Gygax at the big cons.

Jumping back to 1997, we find that TSR largely stopped production due to severe financial problems discussed more in their own history. Clark, who owned his own printing press through Inner City Games, saw this as an opportunity. He approached Gygax and suggested that they get together to produce some "generic" adventures that could serve game stores that were then looking for new *D&D*-like product. The result was a pair of fantasy adventures published by Inner City Games: *A Challenge of Arms* (1998) and *The Ritual of the Golden Eyes* (1999). It was a small start, but enough to create a professional relationship between Clark and Gygax that would quickly grow.

Lejendary Publications: 1999—2003

By the time Clark & Gygax were publishing their adventures, Gygax was also thinking about how to get his *Lejendary Adventures* game published. Working with Clark again seemed like an obvious next step, so Gygax introduced some investors to Clark's publication setup around 1998.

The investors ultimately weren't willing to fund Gygax's new game. However, the meeting piqued *Clark*'s interest, so he put together a business plan that would

allow Clark and Gygax to publish the new RPG themselves. The plan called for just $7,000 to produce the core three books for the new game. Clark and Gygax formed a partnership called Hekaforge Productions, with Clark contributing the money and Gygax contributing the game. It was published as a three-volume set, exactly as intended: *The Lejendary Rules for All Players* (1999), *Lejend Master's Lore* (2000), and *Beasts of Lejend* (2000) — altogether a very familiar combination of books.

Lejendary Adventures was a skill-based, rules-light system incorporating point-based character creation and otherwise did its best to accommodate 25 years of game design advances since *Dungeons & Dragons*. Nonetheless there were also character-class-like "orders" and other *D&D*-like systems.

Unfortunately, Lejendary Adventures faced problems from the beginning — starting with the fact that Hekaforge was severely undercapitalized. Meanwhile, Wizards of the Coast resolved the old problems between Gygax and TSR, and as a result, Gygax began writing his "Up On a Soapbox" column again with *Dragon #267* (January 2000); the resurrected column would continue through *Dragon #320* (June 2004). In the column, Gygax frequently talked about his original *D&D* game, implicitly turning the focus on Gygax's design toward *Dungeons & Dragons* instead of toward *Lejendary Adventures*.

Though *Lejendary Adventures* was getting some good attention online, it was increasingly obvious that it needed something more. Clark and Gygax gave it a shot, first by publishing Clark's own adventure, *Enclave* (2000), then commissioning a series of three adventures from Jon Creffield.

By 2002, Gygax also gave Clark an encyclopedic 72,000-word text describing the Lejendary Earth. Clark split the manuscript up into five books and expanded it, with each of the final books coming to about 128,000 words. This gave Hekaforge a third *Lejendary Adventures* line, to supplement the core rules and adventures. Though the company was increasingly dependent on credit lines to publish its books, it did manage to release the first two of those Lejendary Earth sourcebooks: *Gazetteer* (2002) and *Noble Kings and Great Lands* (2003).

Hekaforge published one more adventure — *Terekaptra: Lost City of the Utiss* (2004) — but ultimately its cash flow problems prevented it from continuing. Fortunately, Clark already had a new plan in process that would help *Lejendary Adventures* continue forward.

Troll Lords & Gygax Games: 2003-Present

By 2003, Clark knew that Hekaforge's model wasn't working. This led him to ask Troll Lord Games — also working with Gygax — to become an "angel" investor by publishing new *Lejendary Adventures* books. Troll Lords agreed and was able

to successfully use their more prominent position in the d20 industry to publish about a dozen additional *Lejendary Adventures* books (2005–2008). This included *The Lejendary Adventures Essentials Rulebook* (2005), which took Gygax's original verbose text and cut it down to a simple, more approachable subset of the rules, and *A Problem of Manors* (2007) and *The Rock* (2008), two adventures that Clark had originally written as convention games for Hekaforge.

With *Lejendary Adventures* now in good hands, Clark opted to shut down Hekaforge. The company officially came to an end on January 1, 2006, though several months later; Clark was allowed to publish the third setting book, *The Exotic Realms of Hazgur* (2006), through Inner City Games. Due to Hekaforge's diminishing footprint by this point, only 87 copies of that final book were ever printed.

Troll Lord Games' work on *Lejendary Adventures* came to an end in 2008 following the death of Gary Gygax, but that appears to be primarily the result of Gail Gygax and the newly formed Gygax Games pulling the rights. Shortly afterward, Mongoose Publishing announced they'd be the newest publisher of *Lejendary Adventures* — but it was not to be. In many ways, this marked the true end of Hekaforge, as much as its official closing two years previous.

Unfortunately, these licensing changes have also left some of the *Lejendary Adventure* books in a nebulous state of ownership — particularly the five *Lejendary Earth* sourcebooks Christopher Clark wrote based on Gary Gygax's original manuscript. It seems unlikely that the final two sourcebooks, *Jewels of the East* and *The Mysterious West*, will ever see print.

As for the rest of *Lejendary Adventures*, at present, it appears that'll take a radical change at Gygax Games. However, the success of Gygax's *other* heirs in producing *Gygax Magazine* (2013-Present) suggests such things could happen.

What to Read Next

- For another return to the past around the same time, read ***Imperium Games.***
- For Gygax's relationship with *D&D* at the time, read ***Wizards of the Coast.***

In Other Eras

- For Gygax's first two companies, read ***TSR*** *['70s]* and ***New Infinities Productions*** *['80s]*.
- For *Dangerous Journeys* and TSR's lawsuits against it, read ***GDW*** *['70s]*.
- For Gygax's future, read ***Troll Lord Games*** *['00s]*.

Or read onward to some fancy appendices.

The Story Continues!

There are still plenty of topics to discuss about gaming in the '90s, 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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Other Books in *Designers & Dragons*

1970s. The Age of Origins.
How TSR, Flying Buffalo, Judges Guild and others founded the hobby.

1980s. The Age of Expansion.
How wargamers, licensees, and the small press together built the industry.

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 '90s

The '80s was the highest-flying era ever for the roleplaying industry. As it crawled into the '90s, sales were already down — even before the CCG explosion threw everything into chaos. However, if you think that means that the roleplaying hobby stopped growing and innovating, you'd be wrong. If anything, the changes that beset the roleplaying industry in the '90s were greater than those in the '80s — perhaps because innovation was *necessary* for roleplaying companies to keep their heads above water (or because a certain very innovative company appeared).

1. The Splatbook Cometh

The biggest change for the industry in the '80s may have been the appearance of the splatbook. This type of sourcebook existed as far back as the '70s, but mostly only as a minor element in game lines. In addition, early splatbooks like Chaosium's *Cults of Prax* (1979) and Lion Rampant's *The Order of Hermes* (1990) tended to focus on numerous organizations all in one book. Nonetheless, these early splatbooks offered up one of the category's biggest benefits: they could be sold to players, which formed a much larger audience than the GMs, who were the main purchasers of adventures.

The modern splatbook, as it appeared in the '90s, still offered up organizations for players, but now tended to focus on a single organization per publication. Remarkably, this sort of splatbook *had* appeared over a decade earlier at GDW. Their "Traveller Books" — *Mercenary* (1978), *High Guard* (1980), *Scouts* (1983), *Merchant Princes* (1985), and to a lesser extent *Robots* (1986) — were presented as rulebooks, but nonetheless meet the core criteria of modern splatbooks. Each one covered a singular organization and each had player rules for creating characters within that organization. The same was largely true of the *Traveller Alien Module* series (1984–1987), though those books were muddied by the inclusion of setting details as well.

However, no one followed in GDW's footsteps until the very end of the '80s. Only then did TSR kick off a new era of RPG publication with their *PHBR* series of *Complete Handbooks* for various *AD&D* classes (1989–1995). White Wolf followed and typically gets more credit for the splatbook revolution because they published a *lot* more. Starting with *Clanbook: Brujah* (1992) for *Vampire: The Masquerade*, each World of Darkness game got its own series: *Tribebooks* for *Werewolf*, *Tradition Books* for *Mage*, *Guildbooks* for *Wraith*, and *Kithbooks* for *Changeling*. In fact, White Wolf's extensive sets of splatbooks generated the term, with *book (pronounced "splatbook") referring to a book with a title noun at the start like "Clan" or "Tribe."

Other publishers played with splatbooks in the '90s and early '00s — including AEG, Dream Pod 9, Holistic Design, Last Unicorn Games, and Sovereign Press — but no one else did so as extensively or as consistently as TSR and White Wolf. If anything, splatbooks increased in popularity during the d20 era of the '00s, when numerous publishers were splatting *D&D* classes and races. Wizards of the Coast and White Wolf also keep splatbooks alive in the modern day.

2. Metaplots Took Over

Once again, it was GDW who kicked off the idea of metaplots. It started with them dating their magazine, *Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society* (1979), with an in-universe game date. Then GDW began offering the "Traveller News Services" in *JTAS #2* (1979), which revealed ongoing events in the Traveller universe. GDW showed their news could include game altering plots in *JTAS #9* (1981), which kicked off the Fifth Frontier War — an event that affected board games and adventures alike in the next year.

GDW took another step with their second edition of *Traveller* RPG, *MegaTraveller* (1987). Therein they killed their Imperium's emperor (maybe) and shattered it apart — with the ongoing civil war that resulted acting as the backdrop for their continuing publications. Mind you, GDW was also the first publisher to show the bad side of metaplot: many of their players were alienated and angered by the extreme setting changes that occurred due to the so-called "Rebellion," and GDW never figured out how to manage the Rebellion metaplot well.

White Wolf probably did more to make metaplot big than most other publishers. It started out with a major plot underlying each of their games — usually the impending apocalypse. Plot points slowly advanced through their adventures, such as the killing of Prince Lodin of Chicago in *Under a Blood Red Moon* (1993). However, metaplot really took off at White Wolf in the late '90s, when annual crossovers pushed plots across all of White Wolf's lines, and some new lines launched out of the events, such as *Demon: The Fallen* (2002).

Though splatbooks were seen in the '90s mainly through the work of TSR and White Wolf, metaplot spread much further, with many different publishers each offering their own take — and some of those takes were quite different from White Wolf's norms. Dream Pod 9 said that their metaplot would have a beginning, a middle, and an end when they announced it in *Heavy Gear* (1995); they even used a clock to show the metaplot's current position. TSR crossed over events between fiction and adventures, starting with their Forgotten Realms Avatar (1989) and Empires (1990–1991) events. West End Games let players contribute to the evolution of the metaplot in *Torg* (1990) through player surveys.

Two publishers even completed some of their metaplots in the '90s. *War's End* (1995) completed the metaplot and product line for *Torg*, while *Ends of Empire* (1999) did the same for White Wolf's *Wraith*. The idea of ending a game's product line *and* story was unprecedented at the time, but showed the new power that metaplot allowed.

3. LARPs Became a Major Focus

Live-action roleplaying games (LARPs) first appeared as a part of the hobbyist community back in the '70s. However it was the '80s when they really boomed, with numerous clubs forming in America, Australia, the UK, and doubtless elsewhere. Still, these LARPs remained distanced from the roleplaying hobby itself, saying nothing of the now growing Nordic and freefrom LARP experiences.

That changed in the '90s, a fact that many attribute to White Wolf's *Mind's Eye Theatre* LARP, *The Masquerade* (1994) — a *Vampire*-based live action game. Certainly, *The Masquerade* was wildly successful and introduced a whole new generation of players to the roleplaying community, including a much larger proportion of women than had been seen before.

However, *The Masquerade* was part of a stream of LARP publications overlapping with the tabletop RPG hobby in the '90s. Lion Rampant had been thinking about *Ars Magica* LARPs in the late '80s, though they never published one. *RuneQuest*-related LARPs were actually run at conventions beginning in the early '90s. The first major one was "Home of the Bold" (1992), run at the British Convulsion '92. Later, Gloranthan LARPs include the British LARPs "How the West Was One" (1994) and "The Life of Moonson" (1998), and the US LARP "The Broken Council" (1995), co-authored by the writer of these histories.

Though Chaosium wasn't much involved in the *RuneQuest*-related LARPs, they were aware of them, and that might have influenced them to publish some LARPs of their own, including *Nexus* (1994), *Long Ago & Far Away* (1995), and *Cthulhu Live* (1997).

Whereas splatbooks and metaplot live on into the '00s and '10s, RPG-related LARPs have faded a bit since their heyday in the '90s. That's probably in part because they're a hard sell — where you might sell a splatbook to every player and an adventure to 1 in 6 players, you might only sell a LARP adventure like *Nexus* to 1 in 20 players, which is a pretty tough business model. It's probably also because the LARP/RPG crossover of the '90s was pretty experimental. White Wolf made it work, likely due to the existing social focus of their games, while Fantasy Flight and Skirmisher Publishing have kept *Cthulhu Live* alive to the present day. Most other publishers, however, moved on to other trends.

4. The Urban Fantasy & Multigenre Genres Exploded

Though you might immediately think of White Wolf's games when you hear about the "urban fantasy" genre, they weren't actually the first participant in the category. That might have been *NightLife* (1990) by Stellar Games. Of course the

line between horror and urban fantasy is thin, so you might also count the Mayfair *Chill* (1990) as urban fantasy.

Vampire: The Masquerade (1991) and the rest of the World of Darkness clearly fits into the category too, as do apparent copycats like Precedence's *Immortal: The Invisible War* (1994). However, some really innovative urban fantasy games came out after *Vampire* too, chief among them *Nobilis* (1999) and (maybe) *Amber Diceless Role-Playing* (1991).

The multigenre genre — which brought together many genres into a semi-cohesive whole — exploded mainly due to the near simultaneous release of two RPGs: *Torg* (1990) and *Rifts* (1990). *Torg* would be gone in five years, but *Rifts* sold so well that publisher Palladium became the third largest creator of RPGs in the late '90s. *Dream Park* (1992) and *Nexus: The Infinite City* (1994) are two less successful examples in the genre that each approached the topic of multigenres in a very different way.

Since the '90s, the urban fantasy genre has done well primarily thanks to indie publishers, while the multigenre genre has faded away for everyone but Palladium — though *GURPS Infinite Worlds* (2005) focused on mixing genres more than *GURPS* had in the past.

As new genres were appearing in the '90s, one old one subgenre faded away: the space opera. It had been the prime sort of science-fiction game throughout the '70s and the '80s — including just about every big game, such as *Traveller* (1977), *Space Opera* (1980), *Star Frontiers* (1982), and *Space Master* (1985). Then R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk* (1988) undercut the technological ideas of space opera games and killed their production for a decade, until the release of *Fading Suns* (1996).

Cyberpunk also led to the explosion of a cyberpunk SF subgenre, which saw releases like *Cyberspace* (1989), *Earth/Cybertech Sourcebook* (1989) for *2300AD*, GURPS *Cyberpunk* (1990), *The Cyberpapacy* (1991) for *Torg*, and *Shatterzone* (1993). None were truly successful, however, other than *Shadowrun* (1989).

5. Templated Character Creation Took Over

Traditionally, RPG characters were created via one of several methods. *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) offered a core model of random rolls being combined with player choices. *Traveller* (1977) instead used careers, which were later developed into life paths in the '80s and '90s. *The Fantasy Trip* (1977, 1980) threw point-based character creation into the mix, while *The Adventures of Indiana Jones* (1984) introduced the (probably bad) idea of having only a few pre-generated characters to play.

Then, in the late '80s, a new method for character creation appeared: the template. The basic idea was to simplify character creation and make it easier for players to start playing a new game. A template was sort of like a character class, in that it contained a collected set of options for a character, but players had more

choices as to what to do with them, and the templates didn't tend to limit and affect characters as they later gained experience and progressed.

West End's *Star Wars* (1987) may have been one of the first template systems, but *Shadowrun* (1989) probably did just as much to popularize the idea. The use of templates really exploded in the '90s, thanks (once more) to White Wolf and *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991). After that, even older games start using templates, like *Ars Magica Third Edition* (1992) and *GURPS* through various sourcebooks.

As the decade went on, it became increasingly hard to find new games that didn't use templated character creation systems of one sort or another — then the '00s began and with it the d20 focus. Once more character classes were in vogue.

6. Everyone Loved Dice Pools

The other big mechanical revolution of the '90s was the comparative dice pool, which also snuck into the industry through the *Shadowrun* (1989) and *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) designs. The idea was that you rolled a whole pile of dice — as players had been doing since the days of *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975) — but instead of adding them up, you compared each one to a target number. You then counted up successes based on how many dice met or exceeded that number.

The earliest White Wolf games used variable target numbers, which made life difficult for GMs, as they had to decide how may dice to roll, what target number to look for, and how many successes were required. As early as *ÆON* (1997), White Wolf revamped this in their own games, to instead use a target number of "7," taking one variable out of the equation.

Many other publishers developed their own dice pools in the '90s, sometimes using very similar methods and sometimes very different ones. For example West End's d6 Prime system, which premiered in *The Hercules & Xena Roleplaying Game* (1998), used a simple comparative dice pool of d6s, where a 3+ was a success. On the other hand, *Deadlands: The Weird West* (1996) only kept (and compared) the best result. Dream Pod 9's Silhouette system similarly only saved the top die, but improved the target it hit by one for each additional "6" that was rolled using six-sided dice.

The '00s have seen "die + bonus" systems proliferate thanks to d20, but comparative dice pools still remain popular at companies like Arc Dream.

7. Alternate Resolution Methods Appeared

Though dice pools were popular, many wackier sorts of resolution also appeared in the '90s — going far beyond the dice-based resolution that the industry almost entirely depended upon prior to that decade.

The most shocking new resolution system was, without a doubt, diceless. In fact, it was so shocking that many RPG fans rebelled against it solely based on the name. The first and most prominent diceless RPG was of course Phage Press' *Amber Diceless Role-playing* (1991), which based its resolution on ranked attributes, infallible skills, and gamemaster fiat. *Nobilis* (1999) was a rare diceless alternative. It also focused on ranked attributes, with a bit of resource management thrown in.

Cards were much more popular as a new alternative to dice. One of the earliest was *Castle Falkenstein* (1994), using cards as a resource to augment skills; randomness played a role through in-suit cards being more powerful. TSR's *SAGA* system, beginning with *Dragonlance: Fifth Age* (1996), used the same general methodology. *Deadlands: The Weird West* (1996) used cards for more specific reasons — including character creation, combat initiative, and spell resolution.

Following the '90s, alternate resolutions got largely ignored by the mainstream because of the advent of d20. However they are still alive and well within the indie community. Diceless techniques have gone far beyond the simple idea of ranked resolution. Cards have mostly disappeared — though they do reappear in some places, such as James Wallis' Tarot-based *Alas Vegas* (2014?) — on the whole they've been replaced by a wide variety of other resource management mechanisms.

8. Product Lines Discovered Marketing

RPG companies began thinking about product line branding at least as far back as GDW's *Traveller* (1977), with its immediately recognizable black-covered books (though one suspects that was at least in part an accident of branding that came about due to financial necessity, as books without cover art were easier and cheaper to produce).

The first explicit attempt to brand a line probably came about in 1983 when TSR revamped all of its *D&D* lines. The *AD&D* hardcovers got a more consistent cover design and a matching orange binding, while TSR's adventures upgraded to a more attractive cover look. *WG5: Mordenkainen's Fantastic Adventure* (1984) took the next step by providing specific branding for one of TSR's sublines. You could now glance at an adventure and see that it was designed for the World of Greyhawk.

Other than that, product line branding had been pretty weak in the '80s, mostly limited to game logos and lines drawn here and there on the cover. Among the few games that did more to mark their game lines were DGP and GDW's *MegaTraveller* supplements (1987), West End's *Star Wars* (1987), GDW's *Space: 1889* (1988), and West End's second edition of *Paranoia* (1988). These branding ideas were all quite late in the decade ... and were still pretty minimalistic.

It took until the '90s for someone to *really* show how it should be done. White Wolf (again!) was the company that knocked it out of the park. That began with the evocative green-marble-and-rose cover of *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991), which White Wolf then applied to the rest of their *Vampire* products. They'd do the same for all the rest of their lines. White Wolf's work on Lion Rampant's *Ars Magica* (1987, 1989) really showed how the world was changing. When they inherited the line in 1990, its covers were mostly unmatched. When they updated the game with a third edition (1992), they adopted a grimoire-framed cover scheme that would be used throughout the rest of their production of the game. Generally, White Wolf's product branding succeeded for two reasons. In part it was simply because they *did it* where many other people didn't. However, it was also because they produced beautiful and evocative branding schemes that caught the reader's attention and kept it.

By the mid-to-late '90s, branding became much more of a requirement for the entire industry, with logos, lines, and consistent design often supplemented with backgrounds or other repetitive elements to help products to stand out. Many publishers used White Wolf's idea of framing the cover image on a textured background, but some went to TSR's older ideas from *WG5*, using complex and baroque elements to delineate the brand.

Today, product branding isn't at all notable; you'll see it on the works of most large publishers. What *is* notable is that it barely existed before the '90s and wasn't considered a necessity until late in the decade.

9. White Wolf Ruled

You may note that a surprising number of the trends of the '90s have one thing in common: White Wolf. Thanks in large part to Mark Rein•Hagen, White Wolf was a creative innovator of the '90s, and thanks in large part to the Wiecks, the company was business innovator of the '90s. You put those factors together and you have the ability to create lots of interesting publications and trends — and White Wolf did.

Beyond their position as a first-mover and a trend-setter, White Wolf was also big business in the '90s. Some sources report White Wolf outselling TSR in the '90s (possibly for as little time as a month). Given TSR's heavy penetration of the book market and the international market, this seems unlikely, except perhaps when TSR stopped shipping product in 1997. However, it's fairly certain that White Wolf was the #2 publisher of roleplaying games throughout much of the '90s — perhaps as early as 1993, when they pushed past FASA and Palladium.

Not surprisingly given their market position, White Wolf also had the most popular horror game(s) of the '90s with *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) and

probably other lines eclipsing Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* (1980), which ruled the genre since creating it.

10. The Old Guard Died

For old time fans of the RPG hobby, the most shocking event of the '90s was the death of many RPG publishers who had been considered icons of the industry. Looking back from the present, many current RPG fans might not even know of these companies, except as myths and legend. The reason for this mass death was at least threefold: the RPG market had been weakening since the early '80s; the CCG boom brought about by *Magic: The Gathering* (1992) further damaged not just the RPG industry, but also the entire system of distribution and retail; and many old-time publishers were tired and ready to call it quits.

Among the dead were: GDW (1996), Task Force Games (1996), Mayfair Games (1997), Avalon Hill (1998), West End Games (1998), ICE (1999), Hero Games (2001, sort of), FASA (2001), and most shockingly TSR (1997). It was a much worse extinction than the one that occurred in 1982–1983, which primarily took out young and weak companies.

Fortunately, the RPG industry also continued to show strength in the fact that many of those publishers were bought by new owners, while in other cases the RPG properties of the company continued on. In some cases, properties from the publishers even hit new heights — such as the editions of GDW's *Traveller* and West End's *Paranoia* published by Mongoose Publishing and the DOJ incarnation of Hero Games' *Champions*, which spawned its own MMORPG.

In other cases — such as the RPGs of Mayfair and Avalon Hill and many licensed or less-popular products — the death of these publishers has (to date) killed off their roleplaying lines too, consigning them to history books.

Such as the one you're reading.

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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Websites

afterglow2.com — a site cataloging many classic RPG products

darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg — an impressive list of game companies and locations

dndlead.com — a look at *D&D* miniatures

dungeonsmaster.com — a comprehensive overview of all the D&D Encounters

escapistmagazine.com — an occasional source of high-quality RPG-related articles

oathsandfates.blogspot.com — a blog including a history of Wizards of the Coast

rpg.net — gaming index, forums discussion, news

rpggeek.com — gaming index

tomeoftreasures.com — a research site for collectible RPGs

web.archive.org — the Way Back Machine, source for dead websites

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 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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