Designers & Dragons



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On the Oughts

As the year 2000 dawned, there was a new vigor in the air. The end of the 90's was dampened by a malaise brought on by dwindling RPG sales as former tabletop gamers fled to their computers. All that changed with the release of the third edition of Dungeons and Dragons in the summer of 2000, which brought a surge of optimism into a new century.

The bringer of this optimism was the Open Game License (OGL) that Wizards of the Coast released with their new edition of D&D. The idea behind the OGL was to harness the creativity of the whole roleplaying industry to create products compatible with D&D rather than competing head–to-head with the granddaddy of RPGs. This allowed publishers to hook onto the D&D network, propelling sales of some of the best products to unheard of levels for over a decade. In return, all these companies were pushing more and more players towards the *D&D Player's Handbook* and this aided in making the third edition launch one of the most successful ever.

I enter this decade at the tail end of my Wizards of the Coast career. Fresh off the success of the 3rd edition launch, I was shocked when WotC cut me loose right before Christmas in 2000. I missed a lot of the initial excitement of the d20 revolution and the spate of new companies arising to meet the demand for more d20 products. When I started Paizo Publishing in the summer of 2002, I was shocked to see the landscape of publishers changed so drastically. Green Ronin, Goodman Games, Monte Cook Games. Necromancer Games and a host of others were now some of the most successful RPG publishers around.

That would change with the release of the 3.5 rules for D&D. Most publishers of d20 products were caught unawares and left with warehouses full of now obsolete product. Retailers who ordered heavily on the d20 mana from heaven, found

their mana turned to dust with the 3.5 rules. This definitely took the blush off of the d20 rose for many folks, and quite a few companies closed down in its wake.

But many more thrived, especially with the decreased competition in the marketplace. Many companies decided to try to distance themselves from the d20 brand, since retailers burned by the crash of 2003 were more reticent than ever to pick up publishers that hadn't already established themselves. New game systems were released, but it was hard to find an audience big enough to make publishing print products worthwhile. Websites such as Indie Press Revolution offered small press companies access to roleplayers looking for something a bit off the beaten path. But sales were still rarely enough to support a young company.

Enter RPGNow and later, DriveThruRPG. As the tools for PDF publishing became more robust, these two websites provided avenues for young companies to create PDF-only products and start receiving sales almost immediately. Down the road, the best-selling of these products might even see a print version, or perhaps a print -on-demand version from Lulu or Lightning Press.

Just as the RPG marketplace was getting on its feet again, Wizards of the Coast shocked everybody with the announcement of 4th edition D&D at the 2007 GenCon. Coming as quickly as it did on the heels of 3.5, publishers were thrown into a tailspin, especially when it became clear that WotC wasn't going to use the OGL for 4e, instead opting for a much less attractive GSL.

My company, Paizo Publishing, was thrown a double whammy when Wizards didn't renew the license for Dragon and Dungeon magazines, instead using that content to generate interest in their DDI online subscription service. Like the rest of the publishers in the industry, Paizo had to make a decision about whether to continue supporting 3.5 as the published core books slipped out of print; attempt to make it work with the challenging GSL; publish our own version of the OGL rules; or try to gain traction with an entirely new system altogether. Paizo decided to make our own game based on the 3.5 OGL rules, the Pathfinder RPG, and the rest is history. As 4th edition met a lot of resistance from D&D fans, Pathfinder gathered up many gamers left behind and in 2010, did something that no other company had done before—we took over the leadership position in the RPG industry.

Since then, Paizo has continued to grow, selling more Core Rulebooks each quarter than the one previous (except for the launch quarter), with translated editions now in five languages (German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese) with three more (Chinese, Russian and Hebrew) on the horizon.

Other companies didn't fare as well trying to get gamers to switch to new game systems and it looked grim for the indie RPG scene until a new white knight appeared. Kickstarter provided small companies the means to finance new game

systems, market effectively to fans of new and innovative games, and gain hundreds and hundreds of new cusotmers that they might have otherwise had a hard time finding. Not a week goes by now where a new RPG game or game product isn't launched on Kickstarter and the wheels of game innovation move onward. It hasn't been a totally smooth ride, with some notable flameouts on high-profile Kickstarter campaigns, but there is an air of enthusiasm and hope again in the adventure game industry.

Who knows what the next decades will bring and how the RPG hobby will evolve, but after looking at the past four decades, you know that it will at least be very interesting!

Lisa Stevens
Seattle, Washington
May 2014

Foreword: The '00s

This is a book about the roleplaying industry as it existed during one of its most topsy-turvy decades ever. It's about hobbyist gaming in the '00s. More specifically, it's about 26 different d20 companies, indie companies, and old-guard companies that began publishing roleplaying games in the '00s. If this suggests that the industry was divided in the '00s, it was ... and that's the story of the decade.

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

There are designers aplenty within these covers.

A surprising number of the star designers of the '00s were the newcomers of the '90s, now stepping up to leadership positions in the industry. The design of *Dungeons & Dragons* third edition (2000) was led by Jonathan Tweet and the design of *Dungeons & Dragons* fourth edition (2008) was led by Rob Heinsoo — both of whom had been independent storytelling designers a decade earlier. Similarly, Lisa Stevens formed Paizo in the early '00s and Robin D. Laws wrote a sequence of popular games for Pelgrane Press.

However, the industry has always been a melting pot of talent, and so designers from as far back as the '70s and as recently as the '00s joined together to work

on the industry's top projects — among them Wolfgang Baur, Rob Boyle, Jason Bulmahn, Monte Cook, Dennis Detwiller, Mike Mearls, Erik Mona, Chris Pramas, Greg Stolze, John Wick, and Skip Williams.

The indie community also proved a bountiful new source of designers, thanks to its careful nurturing of independent design. Ron Edwards, Ed Healy, and Clinton R. Nixon were among the leaders who helped to herald in a whole new generation of designers, which included Vincent Baker, Luke Crane, Rob Donoghue, Fred Hicks, Ralph Mazza, Jason Morningstar, Jared Sorensen, Brennan Taylor, and Chad Underkoffler.

Unfortunately, the '00s was also the decade when the roleplaying industry faced its own mortality, as we lost old guard designers like Dave Arneson, Wilf K. Backhaus, Bob Bledsaw, N. Robin Crossby, Gary Gygax, Keith Herber, Edward Simbalist, and Tom Moldvay.

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

Most of them were elemental dragons that swept across the landscape, leaving nothing untouched. You couldn't get out of the way of the d20 bust, the Great Recession, or the market problems caused by the failure of *D&D 4E*, so you had to lie low, and pray to survive. Other than a few bright years at the start of the decade, these elemental dragons ruled the '00s.

They joined the longstanding dragons that circled the industry for years like buzzards: the CCGs and the video games, who were now joined by their newest brethren, deckbuilding games and MMORPGs. Megacorps became dragons too in the '00s — hoping to buy out publishers, strip-mine their assets, and then leave them to die. Everyone had to pitch in to keep the RPG industry moving forward ... but somehow it managed.

Amazingly, one ancient wyrm largely faded away: the lawsuit dragon. Though some legal cases are mentioned within these pages, the lawsuit dragon was no longer used as a weapon for slaying competitors. Perhaps publishers had finally learned that lawsuits were too dangerous, too likely to strike back at their wielder. *Snicker-Snack!*

There were plenty of personal dragons as well: the sort that hide beneath the floorboards of an otherwise healthy looking company, preparing to burst forth and bring everything down about them. Financial problems were rampant in a tough economic time, and too often they arose in in the form of financial impropriety. But difficult licensing terms, off-keel fulfillment houses, and the siren call of other industries loomed as well ... and too often these dragons also won.

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 26 companies profiled within, over 20 of them are theoretically still publishing — though it's a bit hard to say which small press publishers are really still in business. Compared to past decades, that's an astounding ratio, but it doesn't tell the whole story. There may have been as many as two hundred d20 publishers during the height of the d20 boom, and the vast majority of them are now gone. It's quite possible that the '00s saw a worse bloodbath of dying companies than any previous era in the RPG industry — but few of those dead left their mark on history.

Come and read the story of the 26 most notable companies to enter the RPG industry during this bloody, innovative, and exciting time — the story of their designers and their battles against the dragons.



About the Icon: Daniel Solis' icon for the '00s is a d20. It represents d20 (of course), but that's just the largest and most obvious story of the decade.

A Future History of Roleplaying

Though this book focuses on roleplaying companies that began publication in the '00s, most of their stories continued beyond that decade. The trends of later times affected these early publishers. The most important future trends are detailed, in brief, below.

The Kickstarter Boom (2010-Present). Though the story of the RPG industry was looking grim on December 31, 2009, it was about to turn around, thanks to the appearance of Kickstarter — an online crowdsourcing and marketing platform that's helping roleplaying companies to rediscover their audience.

These histories promise that a bust follows every boom, but the Kickstarter bust hasn't occurred ... yet.

A Note to Readers of the First Edition

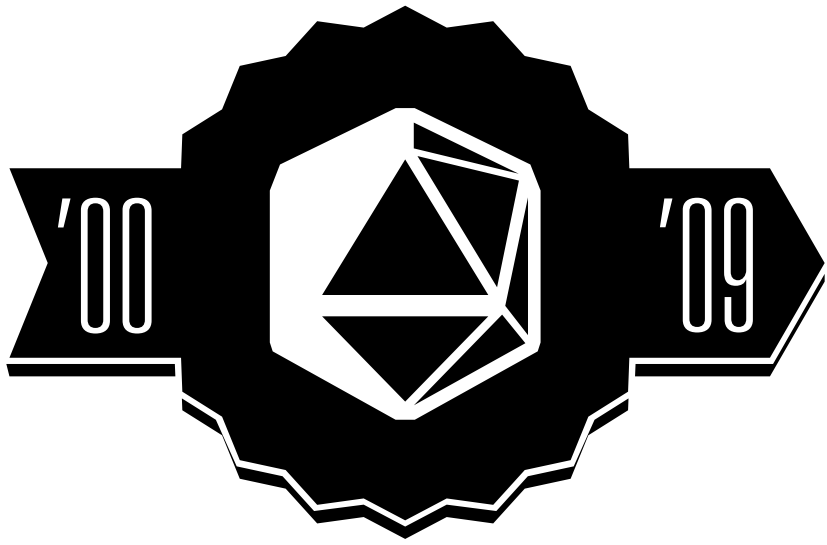
If you read the previous, black monolith edition of *Designers & Dragons*, you'll find that the information on the '00s in this new edition is dramatically increased. The histories for Memento Mori Theatricks, Ramshead Publishing, Lumpley Games, Burning Wheel, Galileo Games, Atomic Sock Monkey, John Wick

Presents, Bully Pulpit Games, Kobold Press, and RedBrick are all new. Arc Dream Publishing, FanPro, and Posthuman Studios were expanded from mini-histories or short sections in other histories; in some cases the expansion was dramatic. Finally, Paizo was notably revised thanks to a series of recollections by Lisa Stevens; while numerous other publishers received expansion and revision due to changes at these very active companies. Appendix I is all-new as well.

In all, over half of this book is new.

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
January 1, 2014



Part One:

The d20 Spark

(2000)

The '00s began with a bang when Wizards of the Coast released *Dungeons & Dragons* third edition (2000) on August 10, 2000. However, they did more than just publish a new edition of the industry's top game: they also released the d20 System Trademark License and the Open Gaming License, which allowed *anyone* to publish supplements for *D&D* using the d20 brand — something entirely unprecedented in the history of the industry.

The result was a new sort of company entering the industry: the ***d20 publisher***. Three different companies kicked things off by releasing their own *D&D* adventures on August 10: Atlas Games' *Three Days to Kill* (2000); Green Ronin's *Death in Freeport* (2000); and Necromancer Games' *The Wizard's Amulet* (2000).

In the earliest days of the d20 boom, a company's success was often measured by how agile it was: how able it was to respond to the quickly developing marketplace. Both Green Ronin and Troll Lord Games actually began publication in 2000 with non-d20 books, but their ability to quickly shift over to d20 was what ensured their place among the top d20 publishers.

Necromancer Games instead planned to publish d20 all along. They were one of the earliest major RPG publishers to appear solely to publish d20 products — alongside smaller publishers like Fiery Dragon and OtherWorld Creations. Sadly, they wouldn't last beyond the end of the d20 license.

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Necromancer Games	2000-2009	*The Wizard's Amulet* (2000)	7
Fiery Dragon Productions	*2000-Present*	*Nemoren's Vault (2000)*	12
Green Ronin Publishing	2000-Present	*Ork! The Roleplaying Game* (2000)	18
Troll Lord Games	2000-Present	*After Winter's Dark (2000)* *The Mortality of Green (2000)* *Vakhund: Into the Unknown (2000)*	42
OtherWorld Creations	*2000-2013*	*Diomin (2000)*	226

Necromancer Games: 2000-2009

Alongside Atlas Games and Green Ronin, Necromancer Games was one of the earliest publishers of d20 material; thanks to White Wolf's Sword & Sorcery imprint, they also became one of the big d20 movers. However, they eventually faded away because they did not plan a post-d20 transition.

Necromancers, Swords & Sorcery: 2000-2001

In Spring 2000, old friends Clark Peterson and Bill Webb could see the potential of the impending d20 license. They joined Ryan Dancey's d20 mailing lists, contributed their own ideas, and got early copies of some of the d20 SRDs. As a result, on August 10 — the same day Wizards of the Coast was to release the *D&D 3E Player's Handbook* (2000) at the 2000 Gen Con Game Fair — Peterson and Webb were ready. Their new company, Necromancer Games, published a free PDF adventure called *The Wizard's Amulet* (2000) just a few minutes after midnight.



2000: The Wizard's Amulet

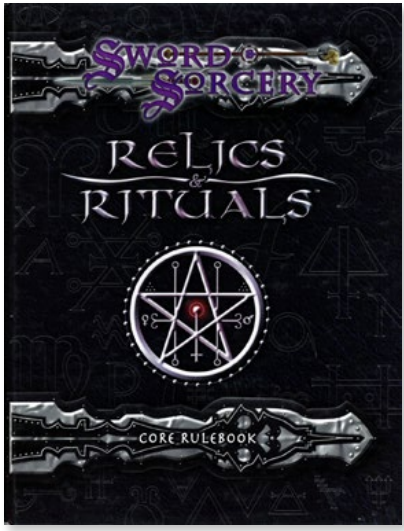
(For those keeping track of such things, *The Wizard's Amulet* was the first widely released d20 supplement and was probably overall the second d20 adventure in existence; Atlas Games' *Three Days to Kill* had been released locally prior to Gen Con, while Green Ronin's *Death in Freeport* came out later the same day.)

The Wizard's Amulet was a teaser for Necromancer's first print adventure, *The Crucible of Freya* (2000). Alone, it likely would have garnered Necromancer the attention they needed; though over a hundred publishers would enter the d20 market by 2001, in 2000 the ground was still virginal. Necromancer Games was about to *assure* their success with a partner more notable than they could have imagined: White Wolf.

The principals at White Wolf also saw that d20 was going to be a big deal for the roleplaying industry, so they were in the process of forming the Sword & Sorcery Studio — a new department to publish d20 products. However, they needed someone with expertise in the legal and mechanical issues related to the d20 trademark license. This led to asking Necromancer Games for help in forming White Wolf's "Sword & Sorcery" imprint, with the understanding that it would publish not only the works of the Sword & Sorcery Studio, but the books of Necromancer Games as well.

(The differentiation between Sword & Sorcery Studio, the White Wolf department, and Sword & Sorcery, the publishing imprint, would soon blur.)

> *"The Open Game and the D20 System Trademark Licenses are a wonderful addition to the health of the roleplaying hobby, and we're pleased to be a part of the roll-out of these new products."*
>
> – Clark Peterson, Press Release (September 2000)



The partnership between White Wolf and Necromancer was announced on September 13, 2000. Thereafter Peterson and Webb were quite involved with the work being done at White Wolf. They were the producers for many of White Wolf's early "core rulebooks" include *Creature Collection* (2000), *Relics & Rituals* (2000), *The Divine and The Defeated* (2001), and *Creature Collection II* (2001). These big books didn't carry the Necromancer Games

logo, and the writing generally came from within White Wolf, but they were at least partially thanks to Necromancer Games.

Meanwhile Necromancer was pushing forward with their own products as well. Rather than the big sourcebooks that were the hallmark of White Wolf's production, Necromancer produced much more standard fare for the early d20 market — adventures. This started off with *The Crucible of Freya* (2000), the *Rappan Athak* mega-dungeon (2000), and *Demons and Devils* (2000).

Necromancer was more consistent in their publication schedule than most of their competitors because of their deal with White Wolf. They were purely a development house, with White Wolf taking care of layout, publishing, marketing, and distribution.

Necromancer also had the advantage of good branding. From the start, they clearly defined their line as being "third edition rules, first edition feel," a general

Retroclones

When Ryan Dancey signed off on the OGL in 2000, he figured some companies would appear producing adventures for *Dungeons & Dragons*, and that they would ultimately add to the success of Wizards itself. He didn't foresee companies like White Wolf putting out core rulebooks or Mongoose Publishing putting out piles of splatbooks. He didn't foresee entirely competitive games arising from the OGL, like *Conan: The Roleplaying Game* (2003), *Castles & Crusades* (2004), and eventually *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game* (2008, 2009). However, the most unlikely result of the OGL might be the rise of the retroclones.

Castles & Crusades (2004) kicked off the idea by trying to recreate the general feel of a very specific game: the original *D&D* (1974). The actual retroclones took the next step by using the OGL's System Reference Documents to minutely mimic the rules for previous editions of the *D&D* game. The most successful retroclones have probably been: *OSRIC* (2006), a recreation of *AD&D* (1977-1979); *Labyrinth Lord* (2007), a retroclone of Tom Moldvay's original *Basic D&D* (1981); and *Swords & Wizardry* (2008), an original *D&D* clone.

Numerous others *D&D* retroclones followed, covering all the major iterations of the game. Retroclones have also appeared for other systems, including: *DoubleZero* (2007), a clone of Victory Games' *James Bond* game (1983); *4C System* (2007) – or FASERIP – a clone of TSR's *Marvel Super Heroes* game (1984); *GORE*, short for Generic Old-School Roleplaying Engine, a retroclone of Chaosium's '80s BRP system as used in *Call of Cthulhu* (1981); *Mutant Future* (2008), a *Labyrinth Lord* variant intended to recreate *Gamma World* (1978) play; and *ZeFRS*, short for Zeb's Fantasy Roleplaying System (2007), a retroclone of Zeb Cook's old *Conan* RPG (1985).

back-to-basics idea they further highlighted with their logo: a picture of Orcus, the demon lord from first edition *AD&D* days when demons and devils were still allowed.

Peterson would later define first edition feel as "all about monster choice, playing style, influence, and setting. ... First Edition is the cover of the old *DMG* with the City of Brass; it is Judges Guild; it is Type IV demons not Tanaari and Baatezu; it is the *Vault of the Drow* not Drizzt Do'urden; the *Tomb of Horrors* not the *Ruins of Myth Drannor*; it is orcs not ogrillons; it is mind flayers not Ilithids ... it is Tolkien, Moorcock, Howard, and Leiber, not Eddings, Hickman, Jordan, and Salvatore ..."

This description would, as we'll see, clearly define the future direction of Necromancer Games.

The power of "first edition feel" can be seen in the fact that many others adopted the same ideals. Kenzer & Company's *HackMaster* (2001), Goodman Games' *Dungeon Crawl Classics* (2003), Troll Lord Games' *Castles & Crusades* (2004), and the OSR movement that followed all came from this wellspring ... but Necromancer was the innovator.

If Necromancer Games had a flaw in those early days, it was biting off more than they could chew. Despite their relationship with White Wolf, they were a very small company. Though they quickly published a number of books in 2000, they also announced books that would be notably delayed — among them *Bard's Gate*, a book detailing a city in Necromancer's gameworld; and *Wrath of Orcus*, an adventure including military combat rules. *Bard's Gate* (2006) took six years to produce, while *Wrath of Orcus* never appeared.

Nonetheless, from 2000-2001 Necromancer Games was doing well as both a d20 forerunner and an advisor to the RPG industry's second largest company.

Kuntz, Gygax, Bledsaw & Grimtooth: 2001-2003

By 2001, Sword & Sorcery was growing. Fiery Dragon Productions and Monte Cook's Malhavoc Press were both added to the imprint, while White Wolf was becoming increasingly competent at producing products on their own. Necromancer was becoming one among many, no longer a leader in the imprint.

Necromancer reacted to this by differentiating and growing in several ways.

First, they began writing core sourcebooks themselves, starting with *The Tome of Horrors* (2002) — a book that continued to support Necromancer's "first edition feel" by reprinting many old *AD&D* monsters for third edition.

Second, Necromancer racked up an impressive list of partnerships with several notables from the dawn of roleplaying.

On May 16, 2001, Necromancer Games announced a partnership with Rob Kuntz, Gary Gygax's co-GM from the original Greyhawk game. Kuntz had published a number of adventures through his own Creations Unlimited in the '80s, and now Necromancer had secured a license to revise them for d20.

On October 9, 2001, Necromancer Games announced that they would be publishing a d20 version of *Necropolis*, an adventure originally planned by Gary Gygax for New Infinities Productions and later printed as a *Mythus* adventure (1992) by GDW.

On October 10, 2001, Necromancer Games announced that they would be publishing *The Wurst of Grimtooth's Traps*, a *Grimtooth's Traps* (1981-1994) collection licensed by Flying Buffalo.

Then on June 26, 2002, Necromancer Games announced that they would be updating and publishing Judges Guild's old Wilderlands and City State books.

It was an impressive set of partnerships, clearly connecting Necromancer Games with many of the individuals and publishers from *AD&D*'s first edition. Unfortunately, Necromancer's plans again outstretched their capability — and more notably, the capability of White Wolf, as the Sword & Sorcery imprint was now spreading its design efforts among many companies.

Some of these agreements produced immediate fruit.

Rob Kuntz's first three *Maze of Zayene* adventures (2001) came out almost immediately, but the fourth and final book was published by Different Worlds, years later (2004). Unfortunately, Kuntz and Necromancer disagreed over another publication: Necromancer decided to publish their own *City of Brass* (2007) adventure, rather than the one licensed from Kuntz — as is more fully described in the history of Creations Unlimited. Kuntz by then had moved on to work with Kenzer & Company and Paizo, and then to form his own company, Pied Piper Publishing, leaving Necromancer without one of their earliest old-school stars.



It took Necromancer a year to produce *Gary Gygax's Necropolis* (2002). He didn't do any more work with them, instead moving on to Hekaforge Productions, and Troll Lord Games.

By the end of 2003, Necromancer's bright hope was notably waning. No doubt the impending d20 crash wasn't helping, but the fact was they lost much of White Wolf's attention and lost their publication

deals with Kuntz and Gygax, while deals with Judges Guild and Flying Buffalo were still largely unfulfilled.

Musical Partners & Continued Publications: 2003-2007

In retrospect, 2002 and 2003 may have been the halcyon days for Necromancer Games; afterward Necromancer Games was entering a more turbulent period in its history.

Since their inception, Necromancer has always acted as a developer not a publisher. Unfortunately by 2003, White Wolf was no longer keeping up with Necromancer's design work. As a result, Necromancer Games announced a new partnership. While continuing their relationship with Sword & Sorcery, Necromancer also took on Troll Lord Games as a new publishing partner.

Mini-History

Fiery Dragon Productions: 2000-Present

Fiery Dragon Productions was founded in Toronto in 2000 by authors James Bell, Jason Kempton, and Todd Secord. They got into the business to publish d20 adventures, and their first, *Nemoren's Vault* (2000), was an early entrant to the field. After publishing just two more adventures – *The Silver Summoning* (2001) and *To Stand on Hallowed Ground/Swords Against Deception* (2001), the latter by prolific d20 author Mike Mearls – Fiery Dragon was invited to become a part of the Sword & Sorcery imprint at White Wolf. They were the fourth "publisher" in the imprint, following Necromancer Games and two White Wolf divisions, Sword & Sorcery Studio and Arthaus.

Fiery Dragon interacted well with the other Sword & Sorcery publishers. One of their early supplements offered some support for Necromancer Games' first *Rappan Athuk* adventure (2001), and even after Fiery Dragon left Sword & Sorcery in 2002, they continued working with Monte Cook's Malhavoc Press.

Though Fiery Dragon got its start in adventures – and published a few more at Sword & Sorcery – they increasingly were moving in a new direction: counters. In that first adventure, *Nemoren's Vault*, Fiery Dragon had included a few illustrated counters to represent characters and monsters. They thought it was important because of the new, more tactical nature of *D&D* third edition. Fiery Dragon continued inserting counters into their adventures through 2002, but by that time they had retained the services of artist Claudio Pozas. He allowed them to create counters in volume. The result was *Counter Collection I: The Usual Suspects* (2001), a Sword & Sorcery publication and the first of many books (and later boxes and tins) that contained counters and nothing else.

In 2005 Necromancer Games moved on again, exchanging Troll Lord Games for Kenzer & Company; amusingly, the press release announcing the new partnership was almost word-for-word identical to the one Necromancer put out two years prior.

Thanks to these deals, Necromancer was able to roughly equal their previous production. They produced 6 to 10 books every year from 2001-2006. They were simultaneously able to fulfill their commitments of 2001-2002 with Sword & Sorcery releases like *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (2004), *Wilderlands of High Fantasy* (2005), *The Wurst of Grimtooth's Traps* (2005), and *Rappan Athuk Reloaded* (2006). White Wolf published these large releases, while Necromancer put out smaller adventures through their secondary partners.

However, the weakness of the d20 market was becoming increasingly obvious as 2006 came to an end. Even White Wolf was feeling it, forcing Necromancer

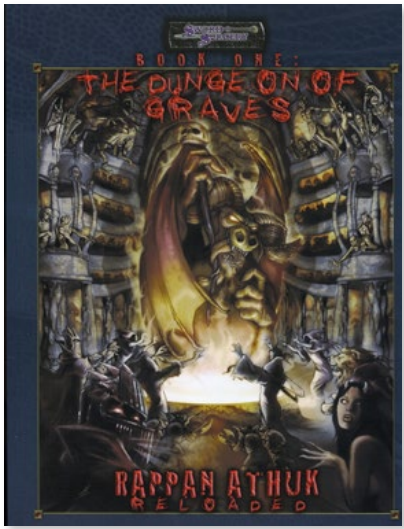
Mini-History

By 2003 and 2004, Fiery Dragon was publishing almost nothing but counters, and they'd clearly become the dominant company in the medium. Two of their most notable publications at the time were *Counter Collection 5: Summoned Creatures* (2004) and *Counter Collection Gold* (2004), which together depicted the entire span of basic 3.5E creatures. Fiery Dragon has continued their extensive counter production to this day, with more recent books carefully collating all the 4E monsters, tier-by-tier. As of late 2008, Fiery Dragon had published over 3000 unique counters, and that number continues to grow.

Prior to 2004, all of Fiery Dragon's adventures – and some of their Counter Collections – were based in their own world of Karathis. In 2005, they returned to publishing things other than counters, but instead of their traditional setting, they began working with licensed backgrounds. The majority of their licenses were taken from Monte Cook's Malhavoc Press. Fiery Dragon put out adventures and counters for both *Arcana Evolved* (2005) and *Ptolus* (2006-2007). They also became the primary publisher for the *Iron Heroes* d20 game (2005-2008).

Further afield, Fiery Dragon published the seventh edition of *Tunnels & Trolls* (2005, 2008) and a *D&D* fourth edition book that updated the best of White Wolf's *Creature Collection* (2009). It's the only *D&D* fourth edition to date that's been printed with a "Sword & Sorcery" logo. Finally, they published a number of "Counter Strike" mini-games.

Following the publication of 4E, Fiery Dragons returned to the serious production of counters from 2008-2010. Most recently, they were responsible for producing *Freeport: The City of Adventure* (2014) for *Pathfinder*, following Green Ronin's successful Kickstarter.

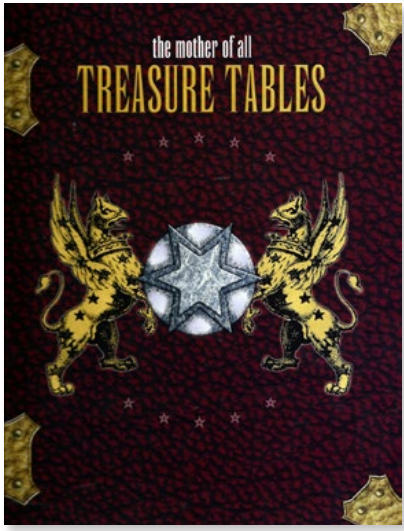


to put out their hardcover *The Mother of All Treasure Tables* (2006) through Kenzer & Company — even though the hefty tome would have been more typical of a Sword & Sorcery release. Unlike the other survivors of the d20 market — who were dwindling by this time — Necromancer didn't have any plan for what to do in a post-d20 world, and this would ultimately prove their downfall.

At the end of 2006, Necromancer's license to the Wilderlands expired. It passed on to a variety of publishers, most notably Adventure Games Publishing, a new company formed by James Mishler and Bob Bledsaw. Necromancer did have some continued plans to publish other Judges Guild products, including a full-color reprint of *Tegel Manor*, but these products were never released, and even that license expired in 2008.

2007 brought Necromancer's proud reign to an end with just three books published in the early part of the year: *Tome of Artifacts* (2007) through White Wolf, *Elemental Moon* (2007) through Kenzer & Company, and finally *City of Brass* (2007).

Afterward, White Wolf brought its seven-year partnership with Necromancer Games to an end. Two announcements followed. First, Necromancer Games announced yet another new partnership, this one with Paizo Publishing —



who at the time was trying to find their feet in a post-*Dragon* marketplace, as is more fully described in their own history. Second, Necromancer said that they were going on hiatus, because of the fear that a new fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* would be announced at Gen Con Indy 2007.

Ending on a Hiatus: 2007-2009

Necromancer Games was entirely correct about the quick approach of the fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, which *was* announced August 2007. They thought that they could ride its success the same way they rode d20, and so they were already planning to design a fourth edition line for Paizo. Initial releases would have included an *Advanced Player's Guide*, a fourth edition *Tome of Horrors*, Judges Guild's *Tegel Manor*, a free adventure called *Winter's Tomb* and — harking back to Paizo's own success in *Dungeon* magazine — *The Iron Tower Adventure Path*.

> *"The bottom line, in my view, is that the GSL is a total unmitigated failure."*
> – Clark Peterson, "What is Up with Necro and 4E" (July 2008)

Unfortunately for Necromancer, Wizards hemmed and hawed about an open-gaming license for their fourth edition. 2007 became 2008, and Paizo began work on a replacement RPG, the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game* (2008, 2009). When Wizards finally dropped hints about their new "GSL" license, existing companies realized that they might not be able to use it at all. Necromancer tried to negotiate with Wizards for changes, but was ultimately unsuccessful.

In later years, Clark Peterson would reveal that though his discontent with 4E began with the GSL license, it also extended to the fourth edition itself — which he felt left behind that first edition feel that Necromancer prided itself on. As a result, Necromancer wasn't enthusiastic about supporting the new *D&D*, and didn't see the viability of supporting the old *D&D*. Stuck between these two bad choices — and without a system of their own — Necromancer Games was effectively dead.

> *"I'm about to start up a new RPG campaign and you want to know what I am playing? What Clark Peterson the President of Necromancer Games is playing? PATHFINDER. Why? Because Pathfinder is D&D – its [sic] the D&D that I love."*
> – Clark Peterson, Paizo Forums (March 2010)

In late 2009 Necromancer released the PDFs of three d20 books prepared for publication, but never printed: *Demonvale* (2009), *The Eamonvale Incursion* (2009), and *Slumbering Tsar* (2009). It was a final gesture to Necromancer's fans.

The Frog God Resurrection: 2010-Present

Almost as soon as Necromancer died, Bill Webb (the other founder of Necromancer Games) created Frog God Games to do his own publication. Necromancer immediately gave Webb all rights to one of their final pseudo-publications, *Slumbering Tsar* — complete with any Necromancer IP that might be mixed in. Frog God also bought the existing Necromancer stock from White Wolf, Kenzer & Company, and Troll Lord Games and started to sell it via eBay in May 2010. Calling back to the earliest years of the hobby, all of these books were being warehoused in Bill Webb's garage.



Frog God Games kicked off their own schedule by releasing a subscription-based three-part, 14-chapter series of *Slumbering Tsar* adventures (2010-2012) as *Pathfinder* supplements. Since then, Frog God publishes adventures of their own with both *Pathfinder* and *Swords & Wizardry* stats, including new editions of several Necromancer classics, including *Tome of Horrors Complete* (2011) and *Rappan Athuk* (2012) — the latter supported by a Kickstarter that raised $246,541 from 1,003 backers. The numbers show the continued interest in these older game books.

In June 2012, Frog God Games quietly bought out what remained of Necromancer Games. Though Webb continued to use the Frog God name, he decided to put the Necromancer Games brand front and foremost once more in July 2014, when he announced a new Kickstarter for a series of three books: "Fifth Edition Foes," "Quests of Doom," and "Book of Lost Spells," all for *D&D* 5*E* (2014). Returning to Necromancer's classic slogan, the Kickstarter promised "fifth edition rules, first edition feel."

What to Read Next ○

- For a competitor in the "first d20 adventure" contest, read ***Green Ronin Publishing.***
- For other "first edition feel" publishers of the third edition era, read ***Goodman Games, Kenzer & Company*** *['90s]*, and ***Troll Lord Games.***
- For Necromancer's publishing partners, read ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*, ***Troll Lord Games,*** and ***Kenzer & Company*** *['90s]*. ***Paizo Publishing*** tells of an almost-partner.
- For other companies who failed at *D&D 4E* products, read ***Goodman Games*** and ***Mongoose Publishing.***

In Other Eras

- For the origins of the d20 System Trademark License, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For another competitor in the "first d20 adventure" contest, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.

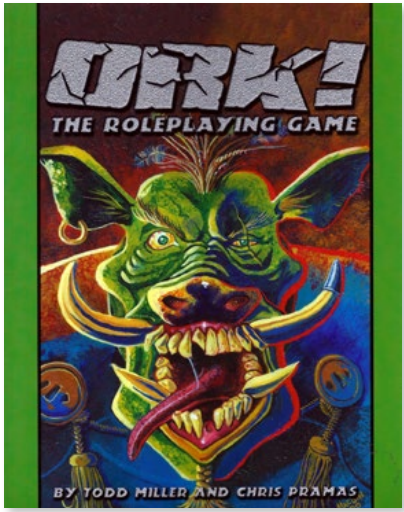
Luminaries and Personalities

- For other works by Rob Kurtz, read ***TSR*** *['70s]* and ***Creations Unlimited*** *['70s]*.
- For other works by Gary Gygax, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*, ***New Infinities Productions*** *['80s]*, ***GDW*** *['70s]*, ***Hekaforge Productions*** *['90s]*, and ***Troll Lord Games*** *['00s]*.
- For Bob Bledsaw, the City State of the Invincible Overlord, and the Wilderlands, read ***Judges Guild*** *['70s]* and to a lesser extent, ***Mayfair Games*** *['80s]*.
- For Grimtooth, read ***Flying Buffalo*** *['70s]*.

For another early d20 publisher, read onward to ***Green Ronin Publishing.***

Green Ronin Publishing: 2000–Present

Green Ronin Publishing was one of the few d20 companies able to use the OGL license to create its own games, separate from the tyranny of Wizards of the Coast revisions. In this way, they've prospered past the days of d20, where so many others fell.



2000: Ork! The Roleplaying Game

Prelude to a Green Ronin: 1993-1999

As is often the case, Green Ronin was the confluence of many streams of creativity wending their way through the industry. The most important of these were two previous companies: Pariah Press (1993-1996) and Ronin Publishing (1996-1998).

That first stream, the story of Pariah Press, begins with Mike Nystul. He was introduced to roleplaying at the young age of nine, when his father brought home a blobby Dragontooth orc miniature from Gen Con. He got his professional start

in the industry writing *Fantasy Hero* books for Hero Games and then worked for FASA and Mayfair in the early '90s. Nystul came into his own at Gen Con '93 when he self-published a limited edition of a new horror RPG called *The Whispering Vault* (1993). By the next year, he was ready to release an expanded and more professional version into distribution, and Pariah Press was born.

> *"The Whispering Vault is the latest entry in the line of 'dark' roleplaying games such as White Wolf's Vampire: The Masquerade and Metropolis' Kult (a stream that shows no sign of ending, with upcoming releases such as Vault and SJ Games' In Nomine). Indeed, 'dark' seems to have replaced 'cyber' as the New Hot Thing in the game publishing industry."*
>
> – Loyd Blankenship, The Whispering Vault Preview, Pyramid #4 (December 1993)

The Whispering Vault was one of many dark horror games published in the early '90s. It was primarily appreciated for its well-themed art and for its evocative background. Players take the roles of immortal "Stalkers" who walk behind the scenes of reality, protecting humanity from the true horrors — whose existence they are entirely oblivious to. Though it wasn't as innovative as the storytelling games of the '90s, *The Whispering Vault* did put story first by making combat brutal and quick and by presenting a simple target-based task resolution system.

Nystul only managed to publish a few supplements for his game, including the *Dangerous Prey* sourcebook (1995) and a three-panel GM screen (1995). By then he'd moved on to a short stint at TSR; when that came to an end in 1996, so did Nystul's presence in the industry — until his 2012 return with Castle Nystul. He leaves our history, though his game, *The Whispering Vault*, does not.

Now we come to the second stream, the story of Ronin Publishing, which itself began with Chris Pramas. He started freelancing in the industry in 1993. After some work for Mayfair's *Underground* RPG (1993), Pramas was one of many contributors to Pariah's *Dangerous Prey* supplement. He also wrote for Hogshead Publishing's *The Dying of the Light* (1995) — a campaign for the *Warhammer* RPG (1986), which is an interest that will re-enter our history down the line.

For the moment, however, it's the interest in *The Whispering Vault* that's noteworthy. Just like Mike Nystul before him, Chris Pramas decided to create a company to publish *The Whispering Vault*. In early 1996, he acquired rights to the game from Mike Nystul and formed Ronin Publishing with his brother, Jason Pramas, and their mutual friend, Neal Darcy. They were the three Ronins, each known by a color-coded name. Chris Pramas was the Green Ronin, another fact that will soon prove important.

The Boston-based Ronin Publishing was a tiny, part-time company that soon got even smaller when Jason left. Its first publication was *The Book of Hunts* (1997), a collection of adventures for *The Whispering Vault*. The Ronins had plans for another *Whispering Vault* book called "Mortal Magic," but they were never able to print it. The rights for *The Whispering Vault* moved on to Pharos Press around 2000, then to Ronin Arts (no relation), who finally published *Mortal Magic* (2003) — which had languished for five years by that point. Ronin Arts continues to keep the game available in PDF to this day.

Meanwhile, Chris Pramas was continuing to freelance. One of the books he worked on was *Blood of the Valiant* (1998), a *Feng Shui* sourcebook for Daedalus Games — who unfortunately was on their way out of business at the time. As a result, Pramas got his adventure back and Ronin got a license to publish it, resulting in Ronin Publishing's second and final book.

By that time, Pramas had moved to Seattle, Washington — a move that had happened in August 1997. There, he upped his freelancing to a full-time occupation. But freelancing full-time is a pretty hard way to make a living in RPGs, so when he got a job offer from Wizards of the Coast in March 1998, he accepted it. He and Darcy tried to keep Ronin Publishing going thereafter, but it was not to be.

Just as both Pariah and Ronin got their start with *The Whispering Vault*, they both came to an end after one of their founders went to work for the publisher of *AD&D*.

From Ronin to Wizards and Back Again: 1998-2000

When Pramas started work for Wizards of the Coast in 1998, he did so as an RPG designer. His most notable work was on *Dragon Fist*, a wuxia-inspired version of *AD&D* that used a brand-new "die + bonus" rolling system that would presage the d20 system the next year. Perhaps because they didn't want competition with 3E, Wizards cancelled *Dragon Fist* in 1999, and cancelled it again in 2000. It was instead released as one of Wizards' first PDFs (1999) and supported with one adventure, *Dragon and Phoenix* (2000); this was far short of the once-a-month releases that Wizards had once envisioned for *Dragon Fist*, but nonetheless the material got out to fans.

While at Wizards, Pramas also contributed to several *AD&D* products and co-authored a *Dark•Matter* adventure called *The Final Church* (2000) — which also ended up as a PDF-only release. Then he was pulled into Wizard's new miniatures division to become the creative designer for the *Chainmail Miniatures Game* (2001). Though Pramas got to design the game's setting, The Sundered Empire, his regular job was no longer satisfying his RPG creativity — which got him thinking about roleplaying work that he could do on the side.

For that, he needed a new company.

Pramas had been known for his work at Ronin Publishing and gained even more attention for *Dragon Fist*. As a result, he wanted to proclaim his identity in his new company's name, but without calling it "Chris Pramas Games." Fortunately, his last company had left him with an obvious answer: "Green Ronin Publishing." Pramas founded the company in 2000 with wife Nicole Lindroos — also a gaming author, whose credentials stretched back to Lion Rampant and White Wolf.

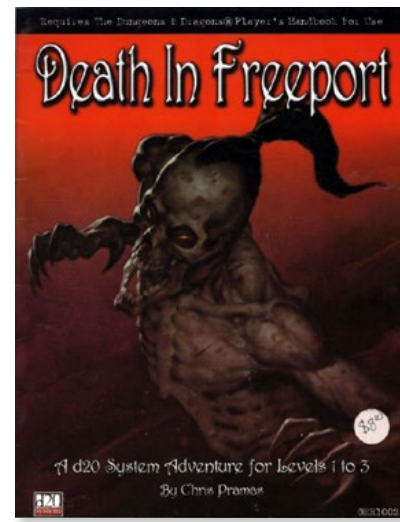
> *"I'm a punk, and not the kind you find in prison. … I keep the Do It Yourself ethic alive with Green Ronin."*
>
> – Chris Pramas, Interview, Asgard #1 (July 2001)

Green Ronin's slogan is "Be Your Own Master," and this philosophy has been with the company from the start. At times, Pramas has explained it as a "punk" philosophy. He wants to make simpler games that empower players rather than constrain them. As we'll see, this philosophy has influenced some of Green Ronin's largest releases, including *True20* and *Dragon Age*.

Green Ronin published its first book in July 2000: *Ork! The Roleplaying Game* (2000), a beer and pretzels RPG about playing orks. However, Pramas already had much bigger plans in mind. Working at Wizards of the Coast, he had the inside scoop on the d20 license; he was determined that Green Ronin was going to be one of the first companies into the breach.

d20 Freeport: 2000-2006

Green Ronin's lead d20 offering, *Death in Freeport* (2000), went on sale on August 10, 2000 — the same day as the new 3E *Player's Handbook* (2000) for *D&D*. It was probably the third d20 adventure in circulation, following Atlas Games' *Three Days to Kill* (2000) and Necromancer's Games' PDF *The Wizard's Amulet* (2000).



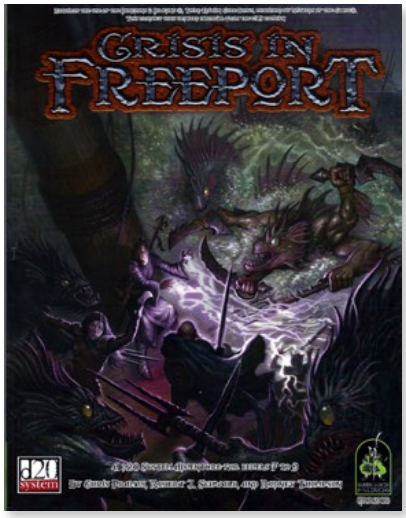
Of the three adventures, *Death in Freeport* may be the most notable. It defined a new campaign setting, the city of Freeport, and was also the first in a connected trilogy of d20 adventures. *Death in Freeport* was also a different sort of *D&D* adventure: it played like d20 crossed with Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), complete with

cultists, ancient gods, and even player handouts. The crossover was quite explicit, with cultists of Yig and the Yellow Sign being among series antagonists.

The original adventure was soon followed by the rest of the trilogy: *Terror in Freeport* (2000) and *Madness in Freeport* (2001). Because Green Ronin was still a tiny part-time company, it took seven months for these three adventures to be produced — but from there things escalated for Green Ronin. By 2001, Pramas and Lindroos had brought on the third member of the Green Ronin team, freelance graphic layout artist Hal Mangold — formerly of Chameleon Eclectic and Pinnacle.

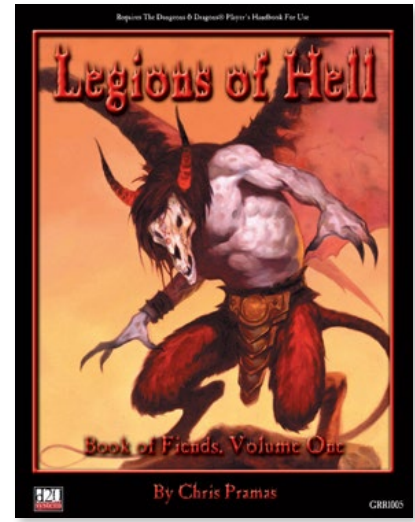
Though Green Ronin cut its teeth on adventures, they've never been more than a minor part of the company's production and for years all of their adventures focused on Freeport. This includes: the devilish crossover *Hell in Freeport* (2001); the mega-adventure *Black Sails over Freeport* (2003); the short adventures of *Tales of Freeport* (2005); and the metaplot-advancing *Crisis in Freeport* (2006). There were also a few Freeport sourcebooks: *Freeport: The City of Adventure* (2002), *Denizens of Freeport* (2002), and *Creatures of Freeport* (2004).

Freeport was the first d20 campaign setting. Due to its importance, it's also appeared in publications by other companies. Paradigm Concepts got into the act first by placing the city of Freeport in their campaign world in the *Codex Arcanis* (2001). Later, Goodman Games published *Shadows in Freeport* (2005) as #20 of their Dungeon Crawl Classics line and PDF publisher Ronin Arts published *Vengeance in Freeport* (2005). Likewise Adamant Entertainment put out a few books beginning with *Gangs of Freeport* (2006), while Expeditious Retreat Press and Fiery Dragon Productions have been responsible for even more recent incarnations of the setting.



Green Ronin's initial surge of Freeport material lasted from 2000-2006, long after the initial crash of the d20 market — which showed off the originality and staying power of the setting. As we'll see, it's returned in a few different forms since, but in the meantime Green Ronin enjoyed *lots* of expansion.

More d20 Growth: 2001-2003



By 2001, Green Ronin was a company poised to grow.

On the one hand, they had small beginnings. The company's staff was all part-time, and so Green Ronin had chosen not to deal with the logistics required by a larger gaming company. Instead, they went with a fulfillment house for their warehousing and sales. They first selected Wizard's Attic, but by 2001, Wizard's Attic had over 80 clients and Green Ronin felt like they weren't getting the attention they wanted. So, they moved to a new fulfillment company called Osseum Entertainment — a local Washington-area company that was just starting up in the wake of Wizard's Attic's success.

On the other hand, they had rapid expansion. In 2001, Green Ronin moved beyond their early Freeport adventures and went into the business that successful d20 publishers like Mongoose and White Wolf were already in: publishing sourcebooks and other gaming material. This began with a well-received monster manual, *Legions of Hell: Book of Fiends, Volume One* (2001). However Green Ronin's biggest d20 seller was actually a gaming aid: the *d20 System Character Record Folio* (2001), a 16-page character sheet that contained everything you'd ever need to know about your character; it sold tens of thousands of copies. In March 2002, Chris Pramas was laid off from Wizards of the Coast — an occupational hazard during the Hasbro era of the company — but he simply took it as an opportunity to go full-time with Green Ronin. The increased attention showed when the company's production suddenly doubled that year.

The path to d20 success wasn't an easy one. At the height of the boom the d20 market was highly competitive. Especially as an increasing number of people got into sourcebook production, competition became fierce because multiple companies were publishing into the exact same gaming space. These problems became obvious to Green Ronin in 2002 when they announced the "Races of Renown" series of books — each of which would cover a fantasy race in detail.

These plans fell afoul of two other companies.

The same day that Green Ronin announced their Races of Renown, d20 publisher Paradigm Concepts announced that they were publishing a "Races of Legend" series. Because of their past relationship, Green Ronin tried to take

advantage of this similarity. They reached an agreement with Paradigm to create "OGL Interlink" books, where the two companies would put out paired racial sourcebooks. This began when Green Ronin published *Hammer and Helm: A Guidebook to Dwarves* (2002) in July and Paradigm put out a sourcebook on their racial enemies, *The Lords of the Peaks: The Essential Guide to Giants* (2002), in August. At the 2002 Gen Con Game Fair, the companies even swapped books to sell and Chris Pramas recounts that the first book sold out of the Green Ronin booth that year was none other than *The Lord of the Peaks*.

The move was typical of Green Ronin, always more concerned with partners than competitors. Another such partnership would emerge the next year when Green Ronin began publishing the d20 Modern offerings of the Game Mechanics.

However, the Races of Renown series *also* ran afoul of Mongoose Publishing, who began publishing books about "Quintessential" classes and races. Mongoose publications like *The Quintessential Dwarf* (2002) and *The Quintessential Elf* (2002) competed directly against Green Ronin's Races books, underlining the tightness of the d20 market in those days when RPGs were (briefly) big bucks.

Green Ronin's Races of Renown series continued through seven books published over the course of just two years (2002-2003). Some of them were paired with Paradigm's four racial books, such as Green Ronin's *Bow & Blade: A Guidebook to Woodland Elves* (2003) and Paradigm Concept's *Eldest Sons: The Essential Guide to Elves* (2003) — the latter of which actually caused the publication of Mongoose's *The Quintessential Elf*, as is described in their own history. Besides the Races of Renown series, Green Ronin also began publication of a few more d20 lines, including the Master Classes books (2002-2004) and some pocket reference books (2002-2003). However by 2003, the d20 market was weakening, with results that we'll soon see.

Spaceships & Superheroes: 2002-2003

Though Green Ronin was largely a d20 supplement shop in the early '00s, they did explore other venues.

Green Ronin's first RPG, *Spaceship Zero* (2002), had its genesis in a CD produced by Cthulhu-rock band The Darkest of the Hillside Thickets called *Spaceship Zero Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* (2000). It was the soundtrack for a movie that didn't exist, full of campy space opera melded with Lovecraftian theme that included songs like "Twenty Minutes of Oxygen" and "Sounds of Tindalos."

The band had a connection to Green Ronin because vocalist Toren Atkinson had contributed artwork to Green Ronin's two premiere products, *Ork!* and *Death in Freeport*. Now, Atkinson asked Chris Pramas if Green Ronin might

publish a *Spaceship Zero* game and Pramas agreed; he was happy to have Green Ronin publishing books by other people. Pramas would later say that because d20 publishing was so *serious* — no doubt referring to the competition — it was nice to do something a little lighter.



"There are games I have great fondness for, like Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay and Call of Cthulhu, but even these old chestnuts are showing their age."

– Chris Pramas, Interview, gamingoutpost.com (September 1999)

Spaceship Zero, by Toren Atkinson and Warren Banks, pushed the setting further toward campy 1950s science-fiction. It used a non-d20 system that felt like a descendent of Chaosium's *Basic Role-Playing* (1980). It was funny and well-themed and generally appreciated for its artistic humor, though it ultimately wasn't a big hit for Green Ronin.

The same wasn't true for Green Ronin's other RPG of the year: *Mutants & Masterminds* (2002). This was a brand-new superhero roleplaying game created by Steve Kenson, who had previously done freelance work on a number of superhero RPGs — including White Wolf's *Aberrant* (1999), Wizard of the Coast's *Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game* (1998), and Guardians of Order's *Silver Age Sentinels* (2002). He'd also written for Green Ronin's d20 *Master Class* books. Those two connections spurred Pramas to ask Kenson if he'd like to design a new d20-based superhero RPG. Kenson had his doubts about the applicability of the d20 system to the genre, but ultimately agreed, partially so that he could publish his Freedom City setting, which he hadn't been able to place with Guardians of Order.



Mutants & Masterminds varied from the d20 supplements Green Ronin published at the time because it didn't carry the d20 system trademark. This was a rarity in 2002,

when the d20 trademark was still seen as a great boon — prior to the bust of 2003. However, the d20 System Trademark License *did* include a notable restriction: you couldn't include character creation in your game. For that, you had to fall back on the Open Gaming License (OGL) — which put the d20 trademark out of bounds.

Up through 2002, few companies were willing to make that trade. Far-flung games like Goodman Games' *Broncosaurus Rex* (2001), Pinnacle's *Deadlands d20* (2001), Fantasy Flight Games' *Dragonstar* (2001), Holistic Design's *Fading Suns d20* (2001), Guardians of Order's *Silver Age Sentinels* (2002), AEG's *Farscape* (2002), and the first edition of *Spycraft* (2002) fudged d20's fantasy-based character creation as much as they could to produce non-fantasy RPGs. White Wolf's *EverQuest RPG* (2002) was one of the few early games that decided to leave the d20 trademark behind. That same year, *Mutants & Masterminds* did the same, because Kenson decided that it *needed* a point-based character creation system (like that found in *Champions*) to accurately balance different heroes with different powers.

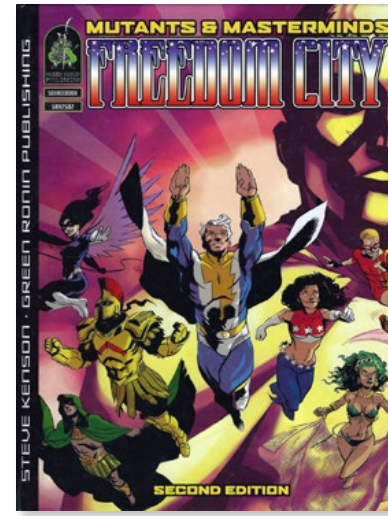
When Kenson was done, *Mutants & Masterminds* clearly showed off its d20 roots, but the mechanics were renovated for use in the superhero genre. Besides adding point-based character creation, Kenson also made a few other notable changes to d20, among them: a saving throw-based damage system that entirely did away with hit points; and a simplified combat system that removed d20's grid-based tactics. The changes to damage, incidentally, allowed *Mutants & Masterminds* to get rid of all dice other than d20s, making it a "true d20 system" — an idea we'll return to.

Mutants & Masterminds was a unique d20 product that appealed outside of the traditional d20 fan base. Where a player might not want to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, they were happy to pick up *Mutants & Masterminds* if they wanted to play a superhero game. This had been another reason to move the game away from its dependence on the *Dungeons & Dragons* books.

With great theming and skillful polishing of the d20 system, *Mutants & Masterminds* was a hit. It would outlast contemporaries like Guardians of Order's *Silver Age Sentinels* (2002) and Marvel's own *Marvel Universe Roleplaying Game* (2003) to become the industry's top superhero RPG system — even outlasting Hero Games' venerable *Champions* (1981).

Kenson soon expanded *Mutants & Masterminds* with his *Freedom City* (2003) setting and after that, supplements began to proliferate. However, Green Ronin wasn't content to have just *their own* products supporting *Mutants & Masterminds*. Instead, they took a page from Wizards' book and made the game available under its own license — the M&M Superlink program. It was the latest instance in a long history of cooperation in the superhero genre — going back to Hero Games' early partnerships. In the following years, a score of companies put out over 100

Superlink products, most of them PDFs; in 2011, the Superlink program was replaced by the "Super-Powered by M&M" program, which was the same idea.



Both *Spaceship Zero* and *Mutants & Masterminds* showed Green Ronin's potential future as a publisher willing to go beyond the narrow bounds of Wizard's d20 license. That was a good thing, because the d20 trademark was about to turn from boon to bane.

d20 or True20?: 2003-2005

Following Wizards of the Coast's release of d20 3.5 (2003), the third-party d20 market went into a steep decline. At Green Ronin, the Master Class books came to an end in 2004, as did the Races of Renown series. Meanwhile, Green Ronin headed into the third major category of d20 production: settings.

The Mythic Vistas series (2003-2006) offered a variety of campaign backgrounds, from the swashbuckling *Skull & Bones* (2003) and the biblical *Testament* (2003) to *Damnation Decade* (2006), a tale of an alternate '70s. Many of these books showed off Green Ronin's continued good relations with the rest of the d20 industry. *Skull & Bones*, for example, was co-authored by Gareth-Michael Skarka and supported by his own Adamant Entertainment. *Sidewinder: Recoiled* (2004) was a new edition of a western previously released by Citizen Games. The *Spirosblaak* (2005) setting was supported by Misfit Studios, while *Testament* (2003) was supported by HighMoon Games.



The Mythic Vistas also showed Green Ronin moving in another direction: toward licensing. *The Black Company* (2004) was based on a novel series by Glen Cook, while *The Red Star* (2005) was based on a comic series by Archangel Studios. It wasn't Green Ronin's only licensing at the time; they also published a series of books based on the classic fantasy anthology, *Thieves' World* (1980-1989, 2002-2004), beginning with the *Thieves' World Player's Manual* (2005).

It was the first roleplaying return to the setting in 20 years — after a boom period in the early '80s when Chaosium, FASA, and Mayfair *all* licensed the setting.

Though moving into setting production was a common third phase for d20 producers, it still left the publishers vulnerable to the whims of Wizards of the Coast, who could cause another bust simply by revising the rule system again. As a result, some publishers were moving past that to a fourth phase, where they used the OGL rules as the basis for their own games. This protected them from the loss of trust in the d20 trademark that cropped up after 2003, as well as the possibility of future changes to the system. Fortunately, Green Ronin already had experience in this type of production.

In 2004, Steve Kenson became the line developer for Green Ronin's existing OGL game, *Mutants & Masterminds*, and so an even more frequent contributor to the company's products. Enter John Snead, an Oregon RPG designer most notable for his work with White Wolf and Last Unicorn Games. He came to Green Ronin with an idea for a romantic fantasy RPG and teamed up with Kenson to produce Green Ronin's second OGL-based game.

Romantic fantasy was to this point a genre that had been pretty much ignored by RPGs. Books in the genre — by authors like Diana Duane, Mercedes Lackey, and Lois McMaster Bujold — tended to do away with some fantasy conventions such as demihuman races, while maintaining ideas of magic and medieval society. These books put their focus on humans, on human relationships, and (of course) on romance.

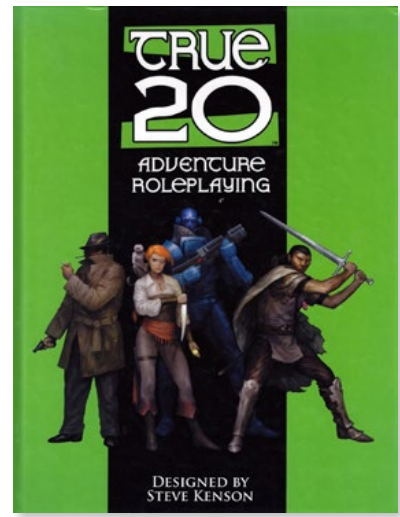
The game that Snead and Kenson produced was *Blue Rose* (2005). It was built on a highly polished d20-variant system that inherited ideas such as wound-based damage from *Mutants & Masterminds*. It also simplified a lot of things: it got rid of characteristic scores and replaced them with bonuses; it got rid of cross-class skills and other such nuisances; it reduced the number of classes to three (adept, expert, and warrior); and it entirely removed experience — replacing it with the idea that characters increased in level every few adventures. Compared to the complex d20 core, you could call *Blue Rose* a "punk" game, centered on the simplified sort of gameplay that Chris Pramas always envisioned.



> *"Punk was a reaction to the state of rock music in the early 70s, when you saw out-of-touch bands writing longer and more complicated songs and doing stuff like recording with symphonies. … I see a parallel in roleplaying. Many games have become bloated and overly complicated, and I don't think that's good for the hobby in the long run."*
>
> – Chris Pramas, Interview, Kobold Quarterly #13 (Spring 2010)

Blue Rose was designed under the OGL — to avoid the increasingly toxic d20 logo and also to sell to an audience that didn't already own the *Dungeons & Dragons* rulebooks. Though *Blue Rose* never got out to that wider audience — as the genre was a pretty hard sell in a traditionally male-dominated hobby — the game mechanics were well-received. As a result Green Ronin put out a 96-page PDF of the game's core rules later that year as *True20 Adventure Roleplaying* (2005) — named after the fact that it also used *only* 20-sided dice. *True20* quickly became Green Ronin's best-selling PDF ever.

Blue Rose and *True20* weren't the only games that Green Ronin produced in 2005. They also published *Mutants & Masterminds Second Edition* (2005), which cleaned up a number of issues that had arisen with the first edition. So 2005 saw a trilogy of post-d20 games from Green Ronin, all built on the OGL — showing a new direction for the company in an increasingly difficult marketplace.



They were out just in time, because Green Ronin was now tottering on the edge of bankruptcy.

Near Death & Rebirth: 2003-2009

Green Ronin's major problems got started in 2003 with the downturn in the d20 market, but it took them a while to see it. In fact, it seemed like things were looking up for Green Ronin as late as 2004, when the company incorporated as an LLC, with Chris Pramas, Nicole Lindroos, and Hal Mangold coming on as the three partners.

Then payments from Green Ronin's fulfillment house, Osseum Entertainment, started to slow down. Late payments in the industry are pretty common, and so Green Ronin soldiered on, putting out several very expensive books such as the *Advanced Bestiary* hardcover (2004), the *Black Company* hardcover (2004), and

the *Egyptian Adventures: Hamunaptra* boxed set (2004). That's when Osseum payments stopped entirely, resulting in Green Ronin never receiving money for these major projects.

> *"The short version of things is that the downturn in the D20 market hit Osseum badly. Real badly. The guy in charge freaked and became something of a paranoid shut-in."*
>
> – Malcolm Craig, "The Osseum Debacle," collective-endeavour.com (2007)

Green Ronin ended their relationship with Osseum in March 2005, and they still hoped to recover their money. Unfortunately, by that summer the owner of Osseum had fled Washington state. Osseum itself was dissolved on September 1, 2005. Green Ronin was on its own and deeply in debt.

A number of factors conspired to save Green Ronin. One of them was that best-selling PDF, *True 20 Adventure Roleplaying* — which not only brought money into the company, but also pointed toward a possible future. *True20* represented both a way to please fans who were begging for the *Blue Rose* game system to be released on its own, and a way to insulate Green Ronin from future sales fluctuations caused by new editions of *D&D*.

To help hype *True20*, Green Ronin kicked off a *True20* setting competition, where they asked other companies to produce new settings for release with the game. Four were published with the hardcover edition of the game (2006): Paradigm Concepts created Caliphate Nights, BlackWyrm Games created Lux Aeternum, Big Finger Games created Mecha vs. Kaiju, and Electric Mulch created Borrowed Time.

From 2006 through 2009, Green Ronin pushed hard on making *True20* a major line. Their last two d20 sourcebooks — *Damnation Decade* (2006) and *True Sorcery* (2006) — included conversion notes for *True20*. Soon, they were also publishing handsome green hardcover supplements for *True20*. *True20 Worlds of Adventure* (2006) included another five settings, while the *True20 Bestiary* (2006) gave stats for *True20* monsters. The *True20 Companion* (2007), the *True20 Narrator's Kit* (2007), and a trio of handbooks that spotlighted the three classes of the game (2007-2008) all followed. A number of PDFs were also published during the period — some in conjunction with Ronin Arts, then becoming a creator of numerous *Mutants & Masterminds* and *True20* eSupplements.

Green Ronin also made a *True20* license available. They allowed publishers to use the game system and the logo for somewhere between $100 and $1000. There was some hope that the setting contest winners would be a strong first wave of

True20 producers, but those books only slowly trickled out, resulting in Paradigm Concepts' *Tales of the Caliphate Nights* (2006), BlackWyrm's *Lux Aeternum: Expanded Setting Guide* (2007), and Big Finger Games' *Mecha vs. Kaiju* (2008). A few other publishers also developed for *True20*, including Expeditious Retreat Press, Reality Blurs, and Reality Deviant, but afterward interest in the system began to die down.

Green Ronin updated the system with *True20 Adventure Roleplaying Revised Edition* (2008), but after that only a final few volumes appeared, including *True20 Warrior's Handbook* (2008), the last of those three class-related splatbooks, and *The Last Island* (2009), a new adventure book for a Freeport resurgence that we'll be encountering shortly.

Though the whole *True20* experiment only lasted for about four years, it gave Green Ronin a boost when they really needed it. It showed the possibilities of a post-d20 landscape and helped to keep Green Ronin in the public idea as both a publisher and a game design leader.



Meanwhile *Mutants & Masterminds* remained Green Ronin's most successful line — and so the subject of a lot of support material. To start with, Green Ronin expanded the setting of Freedom City more than ever before. *Golden Age* (2006), *Iron Age* (2007), and *Silver Age* (2010) developed the city by examining it under the lenses of three different eras of comic publication, while a series of PDF-only *Freedom City Atlases* (2008-2009) detailed Freedom City in the modern era.



Green Ronin also played with some new settings for their superhero game. Steve Kenson's *Paragons* (2007) depicted a new, more realistic world, while *Wild Cards* (2008) adapted George R.R. Martin's superheroic anthologies. Though neither setting was heavily supplemented, they'd serve as a prelude to an even more important setting just a few years in the future.

Mini-History

Ronin Arts: 2003-2008

In 1994, an artist by the name of Christopher Shy – who sometimes used the penname Ronin – created Studio Ronin to highlight his dark and moody photorealistic art.

Jump forward eight years to 2002, when Steve Jackson Games employee Philip J. Reed began blogging at his own site philipjreed.com; the majority of his posts were either reviews or short articles supporting his favorite games.

That September, Reed decided to create a little hobby business, first releasing *Mime Smashing* (2002) – a card game that had been intended for publication by Hobgoblynn Press before the deal fell through. Then he published the PDF that his company would be built on: *101 Spellbooks* (2002).

101 Spellbooks was a collection of books (and the spells, feats, skills, magic items, and poisons they contained) for use with the d20 system. As such, it caught two different rising tides in the RPG industry: the d20 license itself and the idea of electronic publishing. *101 Mundane Treasures* (2002) and many other books followed. Together these short d20 PDF supplements defined both the future of Ronin Arts and the PDF industry itself – which from 2002 forward was increasingly focused on small and cheap supplements. At 36 pages for $3, *101 Spellbooks* was actually relatively big for the market. Soon, publishers would be creating PDFs that were just a few pages long and selling them for a buck or two.

None of this is *quite* the story of Ronin Arts, as Reed sold his first PDFs from philipjreed.com and under the imprint "Spider Bite Games." Ronin Arts didn't appear until 2003, when author Reed and artist Shy joined forces to create a new company to highlight their talents. The first version of the website clearly depicted the different worlds that the two partners were coming from: Reed's *101* books stood right next to beautifully illustrated art books, like Christopher Shy's edition of H.P. Lovecraft's *Herbert West: Reanimator* (2003). Time would prove their partnership a success.

That same year, Ronin Arts tried to expand beyond its d20 collections by purchasing two old RPG properties: Pariah Press' *The Whispering Vault* (1993) and Pacesetter's *Star Ace* (1984). They started producing new *Whispering Vault* material almost immediately, beginning with Ronin Publishing's previously unpublished *Mortal Magic* (2003). Unfortunately, the line sputtered out after just a few more PDFs. Meanwhile, Reed had intended to convert *Star Ace* to d20 Modern, but never completed the task.

Mini-History

The problem wasn't that Ronin Arts was doing poorly. It was actually doing so well that in 2004, Reed left his day job at Steve Jackson Games to work on the company full-time. Around the same time, new freelancers such as Bruce Baugh, Michael Hammes, James Maliszewski, and Patrick Younts began writing for Ronin Arts. However, this success was largely centering on Ronin Arts' work supplementing other lines, rather than publishing their own.

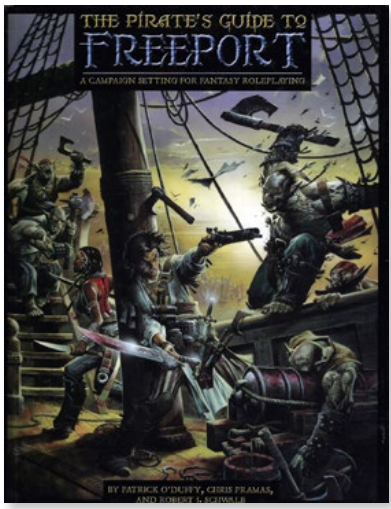
Over the years, Ronin Arts published over 50 d20 PDFs, 35 d20 Modern PDFs, and 20 d20 Future PDFs. They also tested the waters with other licensed systems, publishing the "Runic Fantasy" series for Mongoose's *RuneQuest* (2006-2007), the "First Edition Fantasy" series for *AD&D* retroclone *OSRIC* (2006-2007), and about a dozen supplements for *Mutants & Masterminds* (2003-2008). Hammes and Reed also wrote *4c System* (2007), a retroclone of TSR's *Marvel Super Heroes* (or FASERIP) system – which afterward attracted supplements by Hazard Studio, HighMoon Games, Seraphim Guard, and others.

Ronin Arts maintained more intimate relations with several companies, producing and/or distributing electronic products for Firefly Games, Green Ronin, Lion's Den, and Mystic Eye Games. Their relationship with Green Ronin was the closest – and not just because of their very similar names. Besides those dozen *M&M* Superlink books, Ronin Arts also published *Treasures of Freeport* (2004) and later produced a handful of *True20* supplements (2005-2006) and a long series of M&M Archetype books (2006-2007) that were sold directly by Green Ronin.

Toward the start of the electronic revolution, Ronin Arts was called one of the "giants" in the e-industry. This position slowly eroded due to a withdrawal from top sites, DrivethruRPG and RPGnow, and due to a severe slowing of new products; however, Ronin Arts' historic importance to the industry remains obvious. In 2006, Reed was able to leverage his several years of work in electronic publishing to successfully sell an extended series of PDFs called *ePublishing 101* (2006), which recounted how to make PDF production work.

By 2007, the PDF market had cooled considerably as the d20 license ramped down and Phil Reed decided to return to Steve Jackson Games. In February 2008, he became Chief Operating Officer of the company. It's no surprise that new Ronin Arts production tailed off at the time, though the company's enormous back catalog remains available through various online sites (other than DriveThruRPG and RPGnow) – because PDFs are forever.

As Green Ronin retooled lines, they also tried to return to d20 adventure production. In the post-d20 landscape, third-party d20 adventures had largely dried up. Green Ronin felt like this had created a new need in the market for high-quality adventure production. Because most of the remaining producers, like Goodman Games and Necromancer Games, were publishing old-school adventures, Green Ronin instead imagined a line that was oriented toward the feel of the new third edition of *D&D*. This was their "Bleeding Edge Adventures" series, which began with *Mansion of Shadows* (2006). Green Ronin put out a total of seven adventures before deciding that the market wasn't right. Their last adventure, *Dark Wings over Freeport* (2007) was dual-statted to *True20*, showing the direction they were going at the time.



That final Bleeding Edge book also cross-marketed another of Green Ronin's revamped product lines. It was released simultaneously with *The Pirate's Guide to Freeport* (2007), a new 256-page sourcebook on Green Ronin's best-known locale, written by Patrick O'Duffy, Chris Pramas, and Robert J. Schwalb. This new book was set five years after the events of Green Ronin's previous adventures and was also notable in one other way: it was stat-free.

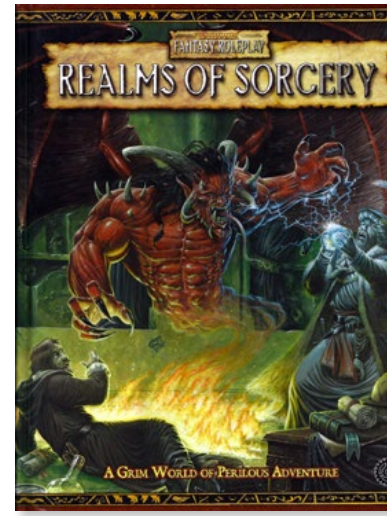
Green Ronin envisioned a new series of Freeport books that could be used with any game system, though they only published two: *Cults of Freeport* (2007) and *Buccaneers of Freeport* (2007). Meanwhile, several "Freeport Companions" translated *Pirates* to a variety of systems. Green Ronin themselves published the conversions to d20 (2008), *Castles & Crusades* (2008), *Pathfinder* (2010), *Savage Worlds* (2008), and *True20* (2007). Expeditious Retreat Press was allowed to produce the *Dungeons & Dragons Fourth Edition Companion* (2010) — probably so that Green Ronin would not fall afoul of the OGL-killing clauses of 4E's GSL, which is discussed more fully in Wizards of the Coast's history.

Fourth edition and the GSL *were* briefly issues for Green Ronin in this time period. Green Ronin was one of the star d20 companies that consulted with Wizards of the Coast on the GSL, but ultimately Wizard's one-sided license and their long delays caused Green Ronin to simply state: "Green Ronin will not be signing the Game System License (GSL) at this time." Ultimately, *d20* and *Dungeons & Dragons* would be Green Ronin's past, not its future — except as it related to their *Mutants & Masterminds* line.

Green Ronin hinted at this through a non-d20 expansion in this time period: James Lowder's "100 Best" series. There have been two entries so far: *Hobby Games: The 100 Best* (2007) and *Family Games: The 100 Best* (2010). Each included a hundred essays from industry notables describing the games that *they* liked best. The books have gotten some nice attention outside of the industry and are even being used as textbooks at the DigiPen Institute of Technology in Redmond, Washington.

There would be more expansions in the near future.

The *Warhammer* Interlude: 2005-2009



It's quite possible that Green Ronin would not have been able to crawl out of the hole dug for them by Osseum's decline on the strength of their own releases alone. So it's fortunate they already had a secondary source of income in hand. Way back in 2003, Green Ronin was hired by Games Workshop to produce a second edition of their classic RPG, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (1986), and to package a line of supplements to be sold by Games Workshop's Black Industries division. Extensive meetings on the topic were held in January 2004, and *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* second edition (2005) was released a year later.

The new edition of the game respected GW's original game, but thoroughly updated and polished it — both to make it a better game and to make it more its own. On the one hand, the dice rolling of the game was notably consolidated, to just use d10s and d100s. On the other hand, alignments — a clear holdover from *D&D* — were eliminated entirely.

> *"Old fans will surely recognize the game. It's still a career-based system that uses percentile dice for task resolution. The focus of my design work was to streamline and modernize the system."*
>
> – Chris Pramas, Interview, geekcentricity.com (May 2005)

The biggest mechanical change was probably to the game's magic system, which had never been well-loved in first edition (and indeed a divine magic system had *never* been created for the first edition). Pramas' new system was quickly accepted

in its original incarnation and then in an expanded form found in his own *Realms of Sorcery* (2005).

There were some changes to the game's setting, revolving around a "Storm of Chaos" introduced through *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* releases. The result was a world even darker than it had been before; Pramas reveled in painting this world with a consistent, if dark, brush.

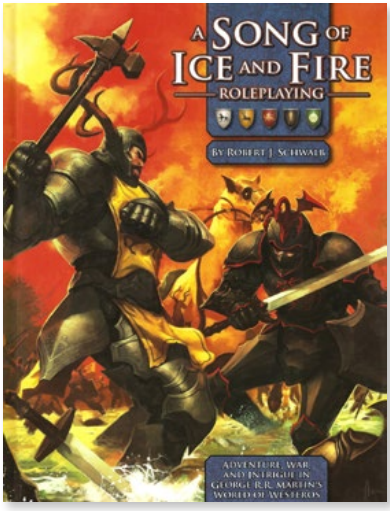
The game was well-received and thereafter Green Ronin was able to support it with eight books each year, using a mixture of Green Ronin staff, Green Ronin freelancers, *WFRP* first edition freelancers, and other industry notables.

However, Games Workshop eventually decided (again) that they didn't want to be in the RPG industry. In 2008, they closed down their RPG division, Black Industries. Green Ronin's few remaining books trickled out. The last product for Green Ronin's version of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* was the *Career Compendium* (2009), produced by GW's new licensee, Fantasy Flight Games; the continuing story of *Warhammer* through a third edition of the game is told in FFG's history.

As with *True20*'s success, Green Ronin's work with Warhammer came exactly when needed most. By the time it was done, Green Ronin had recovered from the troubles of the mid-'00s and was ready to head into new territory.

New Licenses, New Games: 2009-Present

From 2005-2008, Green Ronin spent much of their time quietly supplementing *Mutants & Masterminds* and pushing on initiatives like *Warhammer* and *True20* being developed before the Osseum disaster. Generally, they kept their heads down and tried to weather a bad financial turn.



Only in the last several years has Green Ronin started to expand again and remind us that innovation has been a recurring theme at the company. This began with two entirely new games, neither of which have any ties to the d20 mechanics previously at the heart of the company.

Green Ronin's first new RPG was *A Song of Ice and Fire Roleplaying* (2009), which had been previewed the previous year at Free RPG Day 2008. Long-time Green Ronin developer and staff member Robert J.

Schwalb designed the game — though it would be his last project for Green Ronin before he moved on to Wizards of the Coast.

A Song of Ice and Fire's core mechanics are pretty standard for the industry — including a point-based character-generation system, an additive d6 dice pool, and a Fate Point system. The game really shines in its more unusual game systems: a "house" system that gives deep background for characters and allows ongoing strategic play; and an intrigue system that supports a sort of social combat.

The game has been slowly supplemented over the years, with a *Game of Thrones* edition (2012) taking advantage of those interested in the HBO television series (2011-Present).

> *"My favorite iteration of D&D is the basic version, which culminated in the awesome Rules Cyclopedia. When I was starting the Dragon Age project, it was this version of D&D that was my touchstone. If I was able to capture its spirit, I will consider Dragon Age a rousing success."*
>
> – Chris Pramas, Interview, The Escapist (November 2009)

Green Ronin's second new RPG debuted with *Dragon Age: Set 1* (2009), which was intended as the first of four sets that would bring BioWare's *Dragon Age: Origins* computer game (2009) to the tabletop. This was a project initiated by BioWare, which highlighted Green Ronin's position of importance within the industry. Chris Pramas himself designed the simple class-and-level system he hoped would bring new players to RPGs. He even placed it in a box to improve its accessibility, believing that non-gamers expected to see games in boxes.



Although the second Set for *Dragon Age* was delayed — temporarily capping Dragon Age characters at level 5 — Green Ronin opened it up to internet playtesting in September 2010, hoping to strengthen the game and let players jump right back into their campaigns at 6th level. Green Ronin now plans to follow-up *Dragon Age: Set 2* (2011) with just *one* more box, which will complete the game by running from level 11 to 20.

The Dangers of Licensing

In the '80s, licensed roleplaying games were booming, and for a while, it looked like licensing was a good thing; releases like *Middle-Earth Roleplaying* (1984), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles & Other Strangeness* (1985), *Robotech* (1986), and the original *Star Wars* (1987) helped put their publishers on the map and were successful for years afterward.

Unfortunately, the '90s hinted that there was a dark side to licensing. A few different companies iterated through increasingly less popular licenses – and eventually found that not all licenses made money. West End Games' *The World of Tank Girl* (1995) is usually seen as the poster girl of bad licenses. Meanwhile, ICE was forced out of business in part because its licensor wanted the Middle-earth rights back.

Since the '00s, a new problem has surfaced: licenses have become big business, and roleplaying games can no longer fly unnoticed like they could in the '80s. Instead, they face increased scrutiny.

Though there are still many licensed RPGs on the market today, publishers have to think more carefully than ever about extending the capital, time, and effort for a serious license.

Despite the line's very slow production, it has received some great acclaim for its ease of play and its innovative "stunts" — which allow for alternative tactics when players roll doubles or triples. *Dragon Age* has also been well supported by Kobold Press, particularly in the pages of *Kobold Quarterly* (2007-2012).

After rolling out two new game systems, Green Ronin turned to major renovations of their classic lines, beginning with perennial best-seller, *Mutants & Masterminds*. This revamp came thanks to a major new license to the DC Universe — something that had long been a possibility for Green Ronin. Games Workshop had actually acquired the DC license some years earlier with the idea that Green Ronin would produce a *Mutants & Masterminds* game for them. Now, with GW's RPG Department shut down, Green Ronin was able to acquire the license directly.



The result was a limited series of four books that were based on a new third edition of the *Mutants & Masterminds* rules: *DC Adventures: Hero's Handbook* (2010), two *Heroes & Villains* books (2011-2012), and *DC Adventures Universe* (2013).

Some of the biggest problems surrounding major licenses are:

1. A licensor can suddenly change their world. Green Ronin ran into this problem when they began producing *DC Adventures* (2010) and then had DC quite suddenly reboot their comic book universe with the New 52 (2011). Similarly, Cubicle 7 has been forced to rebrand and rerelease *Doctor Who: Adventures in Time and Space* (2009) twice because of the appearance of new Doctors (2010, 2013).

2. A licensor can severely delay a product line. Though RPG companies were allowed to publish relatively freely in the '80s, nowadays most major licensors require extensive approval cycles – and this can cause extensive delays. Cubicle 7's *Doctor Who*, Green Ronin's *Dragon Age*, and Green Ronin's *DC Adventures* are just three of the recent licensed games that have seen slow publication. Though no one has explicitly pointed a finger at slow approvals, they're a common reason for this sort of delay.

3. A licensor can reject products. Part and parcel of an approval process is the possibility that projects may be rejected. This can derail entire lines, as has been experienced by Mongoose Publishing, who cancelled both *Babylon 5* fiction and *RuneQuest Conan* because the licensor didn't approve.

4. A licensor can decide they want their license back. This often happens when a licensor begins renewed work on a previously abandoned property. For example, the release of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994) resulted in FASA losing their license to the *Star Trek* universe. Similarly, the release of the *Lord of the Rings* movies (2001-2003) was why Tolkien Enterprises wanted the Middle-earth license back from ICE.

Of course a major license's success can usually cover *all* these potential problems … which is why publishers continue to seek them despite the possible dangers.

The books were well-received, though somewhat poorly timed, as they focused on the post-Crisis DC Universe just as DC was rebooting it as the New 52 (2011). Such are the dangers of licensing.

The *DC Adventures* game was quickly followed by *Mutants & Masterminds Hero's Handbook* (2011) and the *Mutants & Masterminds Gamemaster's Guide* (2012) — which offered a non-DC version of the third edition rules. This new edition of the game also brought a new setting to the Freedomverse: Emerald City, which was more extensively detailed in the *Emerald City* box (2014).



Since the release of third edition *Mutants & Masterminds*, Green Ronin has focused most of their *M&M* production on extensive PDF series including: *Threat Reports* (2011), *Emerald City Knights* (2011-2012), *Power Profiles* (2012), *Wild Card SCARE Sheets* (2013), and *Gadget Guides* (2013). The successful *Freedom City Atlases* likely influenced these short 3 to 20-page PDFs. They allow Green Ronin to constantly provide players with new content that they can then compile into print books like *Threat Report* (2012) and *Power Profiles* (2012).

More recently, Green Ronin has also returned to their old d20 stomping grounds thanks to Paizo's *Pathfinder* (2009). A Kickstarter for a *Pathfinder* edition of *Freeport: The City of Adventure* raised $73,471 from 941 backers, while a *Pathfinder* edition of the *Advanced Bestiary* raised $55,391 from 1,136 backers. *Freeport* was produced by Fiery Dragon Productions, but for the *Advanced Bestiary*, Green Ronin brought on a new *Pathfinder* line developer: Owen K.C. Stephens, formerly of Super Genius Games.

Going forward, Green Ronin's new focus on *Pathfinder* could point an interesting new direction for a company that's always been quick to respond to the changing RPG market.

What to Read Next ○

- For how *The Whispering Vault* affected another company, read ***Atomic Sock Monkey Press.***
- For another ork game released in the summer of 2000, read ***John Wick Presents.***
- For a competitor in the "first d20 adventure" contest, read ***Necromancer Games.***
- For more on the competitiveness of the d20 industry, read ***Mongoose Publishing.***
- For modern superhero games with more of an indie twist, read about *Godlike* in ***Arc Dream Publishing*** and about *Truth & Justice* in ***Atomic Sock Monkey Press***. In another era, read about *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying* and *Smallville* in ***Margaret Weis Productions*** *['90s].*

- For more on frequent ally Expeditious Retreat Press, read about the OSR in ***Goodman Games***.
- For a supporter of *Dragon Age*, read ***Kobold Press***.
- For another recent RPG aimed at beginners and produced in a box, like *Dragon Age*, read about the *Pathfinder Beginner Box* produced by ***Paizo Publishing*** – or in another era, read about the *Dungeons & Dragons Starter Set* produced for *D&D 4E Essentials* by ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For more on *Freeport* producer ***Fiery Dragon Productions***, read their mini-history under ***Necromancer Games***.
- For more on *Pathfinder* and Super Genius Games, also read ***Paizo Publishing***.

In Other Eras

- For other dark RPGs of the '90s, like *The Whispering Vault*, read ***White Wolf*** *['90s]* and ***Metropolis*** *['90s]*.
- For what happened to ***Daedalus Games***, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.
- For the new *Chainmail*, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For the d20 and OGL licenses, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*
- For another competitor in the "first d20 adventure" contest, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.
- For ***Green Ronin's*** (doomed) competitor in the world of d20 superheroes, read ***Guardians of Order*** *['90s]*.
- For a previous look at *Thieves' World*, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For the past of *Warhammer*, read ***Games Workshop*** *['70s]* and ***Hogshead Publishing*** *['90s]* and for its future read ***Fantasy Flight Games*** *['90s]*.
- For previous DC comics games, read ***Mayfair Games*** *['80s]* and ***West End Games*** *['80s]*.

Read on for another 2000 Gen Con Game Fair debut … but for the wrong game system, in ***Troll Lord Games.***

Troll Lord Games: 2000-Present

Troll Lord Games is a d20 company that's survived the boom and bust — in large part because they created their own game before the d20 collapse.

The Wrong System: 2000

The story of Troll Lord Games is the story of three guys — Stephen Chenault, Davis Chenault, and Mac Golden — all interested in publishing roleplaying games. Golden wanted to publish a gaming magazine called "The Seeker" while the Chenaults wanted to create a massive 300-page leather-bound campaign setting. However, the story of Troll Lord Games is also that of a company that got into the gaming business at the exact right time in the exact wrong way and somehow managed to find success anyway.



2000: Vakhund: Into the Unknown

Everything started rolling for Troll Lord when Stephen Chenault and Golden learned of their joint interest in publication and decided to publish a set of "universal" adventures, in the style of Judges Guild.

Davis Chenault was soon roped in as well, and the trio prepared their first three "universal" products for the 2000 Gen Con Game Fair: *After Winter's Dark* (2000), a 24-page book describing the campaign setting of Erde; *The Mortality of Green* (2000), an Erde adventure; and *Vakhund: Into the Unknown* (2000), an Inzae adventure and also the first part of a trilogy

Erde and Inzae were two campaign worlds that have remained important throughout Troll Lord's history. Erde was a fairly standard fantasy world, but one set after the downfall of an evil god who had ruled the world through a thousand years of Winter Dark. Inzae was the "Inner World," originally created beneath Erde by a dragon, and later folded inside it. It was a brutal, gritty setting that's also been the less supplemented of the two.

However, there was a problem with Troll Lord's original publications: these "universal" supplements — intended for play with *AD&D* — were released at the same convention that saw the release of the third edition Dungeons & Dragons game and the first two licensed d20 adventures, Atlas Games' *Three Days to Kill* (2000) and Green Ronin's *Death in Freeport* (2000).

> *"When we started back in 1999 and released in 2000 we had little long term plans, and by little, what I really mean to say is we had none."*
>
> – Stephen Chenault, "Alea Iacta Est," The Crusader Journal #20 (June 2009)

Troll Lord Games found out about the d20 System Trademark License just as they were going to print, but they decided to publish their adventures anyway. It was a dangerous decision since they'd become obsolete almost immediately, but it ended up having two benefits: it gave Troll Lord immediate experience in publishing, and it also gave them an important contact — Gary Gygax, who was given copies of the adventures by the Troll Lords when he stopped by their booth.

This small event would be crucial to the future of the company.

Gygax, Kuntz, and other d20 Releases: 2001-2003

In 2001 Troll Lord Games caught up with gaming's newest trend, d20. Much like the rest of the industry, they began publishing d20 adventures, the first of which was *A Lion in the Ropes* (2001) — a d20 mystery by Stephen Chenault. d20 revisions of Troll Lords' original adventures, *The Mortality of Green* (2001) and *Vakhund: Into the Unknown* (2001), followed so quickly that many people didn't realize they ever saw release in a generic form. Some of these adventures were also reprinted as PDFs on CD-ROMs later that year — a trend that didn't last very long as internet-based PDF delivery was quickly approaching. The Chenaults also published the massive campaign setting they dreamed of as *Codex of Erde* (2001).

Although it wasn't *quite* 300 pages long and it wasn't leather-bound, it did provide a grand overview of the Winter Dark world of Erde.

Troll Lord also had some big news: they signed two of the industry's founders to write for them.

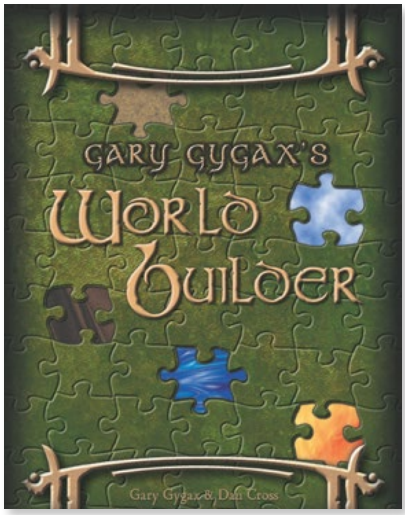
Gygax got things started when he wrote to the Chenaults to thank them for that gift of Troll Lord's first RPG supplements. This conversation eventually led to Gygax offering to write books for Troll Lord. On June 11, 2001, Troll Lord announced this fact, then followed it up with a November 2 announcement that they'd also be publishing books by Rob Kuntz — Gygax's old friend and his co-GM for the original Castle Greyhawk campaign. Where Troll Lord Games could easily have gotten lost amidst the scores of d20 publishers, these partnerships ensured that they'd instead be one of the top contenders.

As 2001 faded into 2002 — and as fans looked forward to the new Gygax and Kuntz books — Mac Golden left the company he helped found. Meanwhile, the Chenaults kept working on their celebrity releases.

Rob Kuntz's first adventure, *Dark Druids* (2002), had originally been designed in 1976 and playtested by TSR luminaries such as James M. Ward and Skip Williams. Sadly, it was also his only book for Troll Lord. Though he planned to continue with "Codex Germania," the first in a Myths & Legends series, Kuntz found himself too busy with other work and withdrew from Troll Lord.

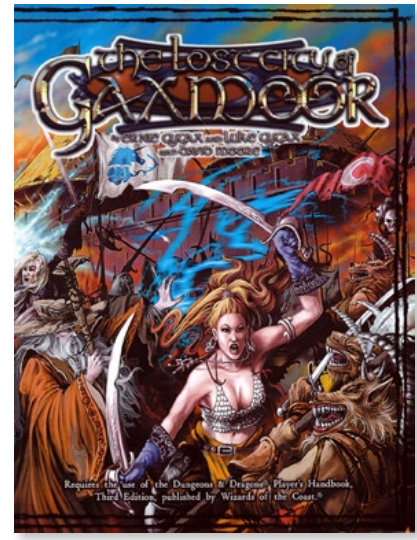
Troll Lord's work with Gygax was much more successful and remained a core part of Troll Lord's line for the rest of Gygax's life.

Gygax's most important early work for Troll Lord was a series of hardcover books that eventually came to be called "Gygaxian Fantasy Worlds." The first of these was *The Canting Crew* (2002), a look at the roguish underworld. Later Fantasy Worlds books — beginning with *World Builder* (2003) and *Living Fantasy* (2003) — were generic game design books usable in many different settings. After the first four books in the series, Gygax dropped back to an advising position, though the books still carried his name as part of the series logo.



Gygax's partnership with Troll Lord also led to the publication of a pair of adventures. The first was *The Hermit* (2002) — an adventure intended with d20 *and* Gygax's own *Lejendary Adventures* RPG, a topic we'll return to. The second

was *The Lost City of Gaxmoor* (2002), an adventure written by Gygax's sons, Ernie and Luke Gygax.



Troll Lord Games formed a third partnership in 2003 when they began publishing books for Necromancer Games; there would be about half-a-dozen.

Though Troll Lord Games was busily publishing the works of Gygax, Kuntz, and Necromancer in the early '00s, they were also working on their own releases. Most were adventures, including new "companion books" like *The Heart of Glass* (2002), which included a detailed setting that could be used after the adventure was over.

Troll Lord Games also tried its hand at a few sourcebooks, beginning with *Path of the Magi* (2003), a magician's sourcebook inherited from defunct Citizen Games — and the sequel to Citizen's own *Way of the Witch*. However, unlike many of the more successful d20 publishers, Troll Lord opted not to focus on sourcebook publications.

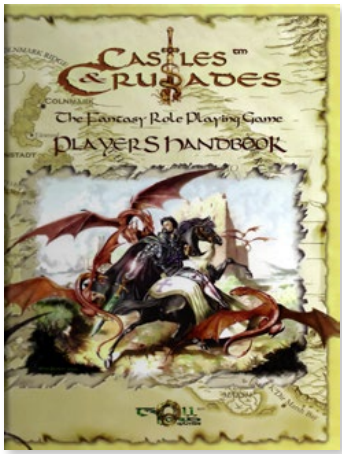
Unfortunately, Troll Lord's publications weren't able to hold up to their ambitions, and planned projects began to get delayed. Davis Chenault's *Bergholt I: By Shadow of Night* (2003), another companion book, kicked off a second trilogy of adventures set in Inzae, but the sequels never saw print. Other unpublished books sounded even more intriguing. One of them, "Vulcan's Cauldron," would have been a d20 Modern look at the future of Erde in an age of gunpowder.

If you looked at Troll Lord Games in late 2003, you'd call them a small d20 publisher. They hadn't gotten out more than a handful of products in any year, and their list of unpublished books probably equaled their list of published books by this time. However, they made up for low quantity with high quality: their adventures, their settings, and their celebrity publications all received good attention. That probably put them in good stead for the rocky times ahead.

By late 2003, Troll Lord Games was facing the same problem as most d20 publishers: the d20 bust and the resulting loss of trust in the d20 trademark. As with the most successful d20 publishers, Troll Lord Games had a solution. They replaced the d20 System Trademark License with the OGL and used it to create their own game.

The result was a brand-new game (sort of) called *Castles & Crusades*.

The Early *Castles & Crusades*: 2004-2007



Castles & Crusades was named after The Castles & Crusades Society formed by Gary Gygax as part of the International Federation of Wargamers in the late '60s. The name reminded people of Troll Lord's connection to Gygax and also indicated a purposeful look back to the origins of the hobby — suggesting the creation of a game that would appeal to older players of *Dungeons & Dragons*. This "old school" spirit had already been embraced by many of the most successful d20 producers, among them: Necromancer Games who promised "first edition feel"; Goodman Games who produced *Dungeon Crawl Classics* (2003); and Kenzer & Company, who actively lampooned *AD&D* and its adventures in their *HackMaster* (2001) game. Now, Troll Lord was joining them.

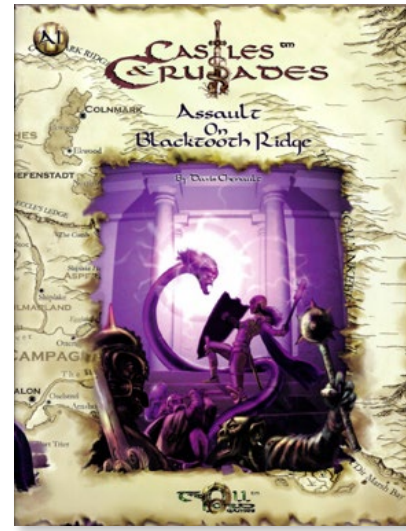
Castles & Crusades was built with d20 mechanics under the OGL, but it used those rules to create a game system much more in tune with older editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The resulting rules-light game featured the original *D&D* classes and the original *D&D* races, and generally felt like the original *D&D*. To underline the similarity Troll Lord initially released the game as the *Castles & Crusades Collector's Edition Box* (2004) — a box with three digest-sized books that was meant to mimic the original *Dungeons & Dragons* boxed set (1974). It was later replaced with a *Players Handbook* (2004) and a *Monsters & Treasures* (2005) book, along with a "Castle Keepers Guide" planned but delayed for several years.

Castles & Crusades mimicked the feel of an early game rather than its rules, so it wasn't what would later be called a retroclone; nonetheless, it engendered interest among long-time enthusiasts of the industry. Troll Lord had already gotten the attention of these old school fans thanks to their publication of works by Gygax and Kuntz, and now they were able to take full advantage of that.

In 2005, *Castles & Crusades* formed a strong third line for Troll Lord, beside its Gygaxian Fantasy Worlds and its d20 adventures — which that year included *Gary Gygax's Hall of Many Panes* (2005) and the first of the limited-edition *Kubla Khan* trilogy of adventures (2005-2006). In 2006, The *C&C* supplements would largely replace Troll Lord's older lines, while simultaneously increasing Troll Lords' output. Prior to 2005 and 2006, the company's best years included eight or so publications. Once things got rolling, Troll Lord published about 20 books each of those two years.

Most of the new *Castles & Crusades* supplements were adventures, staying with Troll Lord's historical interests; and most of these adventures were set in Aihrde, which was the newest iteration of the Erde world that got Troll Lord its start. Though there were completely new adventures, like *A1: Assault on Blacktooth Ridge* (2005), the Chenaults also revamped some of their classics, such as *I1: Vakhund: Into the Unknown* (2006). Counting its generic, d20, and *C&C* releases, that single book had been published in three different forms in just seven years.

A third early adventure is of note: Casey Christofferson's *DB1: The Haunted Highlands* (2006). Christofferson previously authored a d20 adventure for Troll Lord called *Blood Royale* (2002), but this was his chance to shine, as his adventure introduced a new setting for Troll Lord: the eponymous Haunted Highlands. Christofferson has written over a half-dozen total books in the setting, the newest of which is *The Free City of Eskadia* (2013).



The success of *Castles & Crusades* in its early years culminated in 2007, which saw the third printing of the *Castles & Crusades Players Handbook* (2007) and the second printing of *Monsters & Treasures* (2007). The new printings were simultaneously released in limited leatherette editions — demonstrating the popularity and success that Troll Lord's almost-retro game had found in the field.

The Lejend of Gygax: 2004-2008

In 2004, Troll Lord's relationship with Gygax changed. This was in part due to Gygax's stroke that year. Afterward, he was never able to commit the same time or effort to writing as he had previously. We've already seen one of the results of this. Beginning with *Gary Gygax's Extraordinary Book of Names* (2004), the Gygaxian Fantasy Worlds series was only overseen by its namesake. After that, the line only lasted two more years, through the publication of *Gary Gygax's Cosmos Builder* (2006). Along the way, some of the numbered books were actually published out of order, showing Troll Lord's continuing problems with getting things to press.

Though Gygax's original output decreased starting in 2004, his influence on Troll Lords increased — making his books a more important part of their catalog than ever before. This began with the introduction of a new RPG: *Gary Gygax's Lejendary Adventures*.

Lejendary Adventures had originally been published by Hekaforge Productions — who released a 3-book rules set (1999-2000), a few setting books (2002-2006), and several adventures (2000-2004), as is noted in their own history. However, by 2003 the underfunded company was looking for someone bigger to help get the game out to the masses. Meanwhile, back in 2004, Troll Lord Games didn't know that *Castles & Crusades* would be a success. This led them to acquire a license to publish *Lejendary Adventures* supplements. It was a sensible move, given that a few of Gygax's Troll Lord publications had already included conversions for *Lejendary Adventures*.

Troll Lord kicked off their new product line with the *Lejendary Adventures Essentials Rulebook* (2005). Over the next four years, Troll Lord produced about a dozen supplements for the game. They included things like: *The Hermit* (2007), a conversion of Gygax's d20 adventure for the new system; *More Beasts of Lejend* (2007), an increasingly rare Gygax original; and a number of adventures by other authors. Unfortunately for *Lejendary Adventures*, *Castles & Crusades* almost immediately overshadowed it. Even when Troll Lord was publishing both systems, it was obvious which marked the company's future direction.

Even Gygax realized this, so when he created a new setting for Troll, it was for the *Castles & Crusades* game. This setting was Castle Zagyg — the newest iteration of Gary Gygax's original Castle Greyhawk setting. Gygax had failed to get it off the ground two decades earlier while running New Infinities Productions, but this time he would see some limited success. The line kicked off with *CZ1: Castle Zagyg Part I: Yggsburgh* (2005), a hefty 256-page book that depicted the town near the Castle. An adventure by none other than co-Greyhawk DM Rob Kuntz appeared shortly thereafter as *CZA1: Dark Chateau* (2005), but production ground due a halt due in part to Gygax's declining health.



In order to ensure the publication of his original Greyhawk, Gygax put together a team of people to continue with the creation of Zagyg background material. Jeff Talanian helped with the creation of the dungeon, eventually resulting in publication of the limited edition *CZ9: The East Marks Gazetteer* (2007), which held people over until *CZ2: The Upper Works* (2008) appeared. It was to have been the first of three massive boxes entirely detailing the dungeons beneath Castle Zagyg.

Meanwhile, a team of authors led by Jon Creffield worked on describing the nearby town of Yggsburgh in precise detail. In June 2007, Troll Lord announced they had about 1,200 pages of material done, detailing all 24 districts of the town. They were to be released as PDFs starting that summer ... but as with so many Troll Lord projects they were delayed (and would never appear from Troll Lords, as we'll see).

A fourth Gary Gygax product line was announced in 2006 when Troll Lord Games revealed that they had licensed Gygax's Gord the Rogue novels, previously published by TSR and New Infinities Productions. The first, *Tale of Old City* (2008), would unfortunately be one of Troll Lord's final Gygax publications.

On March 4, 2008, Gary Gygax died. It's unlikely that that alone would have affected Troll Lord's plans for publication, but three months later Gygax Games — a new company formed by Gary's widow, Gail — pulled all of the Gygax licenses from Troll Lords. Gygax Games simultaneously announced that Mongoose Publishing would be publishing a new edition of the *Lejendary Adventures* RPG, but soon after Mongoose opted out.

> *"Suddenly TLG found itself with a product line that shrank by three major brands, Gygaxian Fantasy Worlds, Lejendary Adventures, and d20, probably somewhere in the vicinity of 40% of the available titles and more in earning potential."*
>
> – Stephen Chenault, "Alea Iacta Est," The Crusader Journal #20 (June 2009)

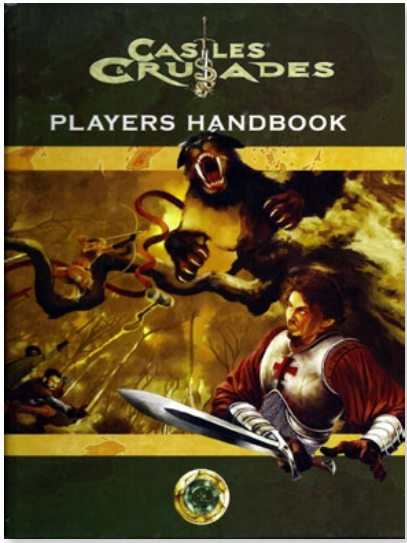
As a result of Gygax Games' actions, you can no longer find any Gygax books in Troll Lord's modern catalog. However, the Chenaults continue to remember his legacy and his part in the success of their company with a memorial on their main web page. Meanwhile, the Gygax Games web page has been non-operational for several years, and Gygax's final works have been gathering dust since his death.

The Continuing Crusades: 2007-Present

Troll Lord Games published their final d20 product in 2007. *Bystle Vale* (2007) was intended to be the start of a d20 adventure path called "Cult of Yex," but instead it marked the end. This was in part due to the increasing weakness of the d20 market and in part due to the fact that *D&D 4E* (2008) was on its way. Meanwhile, the Gygaxian products came to an end in 2008. That left the Troll Lords with just a single product line.

> *"I forcibly removed the d20 material from the lineup. I did not have to, but I made the decision in order to distance ourselves from the cacophony of 4th edition D&D that was coming down the pipe."*
>
> – Stephen Chenault, "Alea Iacta Est," The Crusader Journal #20 (June 2009)

Fortunately, *Castles & Crusades* had waxed strongly for the Troll Lords. From 2007-2011, Troll Lord issued a *Castles & Crusades* "quick start" at each Free RPG Day, to bring new players to the fold. It seemed to work, because by 2009 *Monsters & Treasures* (2009) was in its third printing and *Castles & Crusades Players Handbook* (2009) was in its fourth. New trade dress accompanied these new releases, making the *C&C* books look more colorful and more professional than ever. Afterward, Troll Lord expanded the *C&C* core rulebooks with a pantheon book called *Of Gods & Monsters* (2009, 2010) and the long-awaited *Castles & Crusades Castle Keepers Guide* (2011).



The *Gods & Monsters* book was notable because it was written by Troll Lord's newest old-school talent, James M. Ward — previously a luminary at TSR, where he wrote the original *Deities & Demigods* (1980). Ward also edited Troll Lord's *C&C* magazine *The Crusader Journal* (2005-Present), wrote some adventures, and created the dark-fantasy/horror RPG *Tainted Lands* (2009) while working with Troll Lord; he's since moved on to his own small press, Eldritch Enterprises.

Tainted Lands was one of several new RPGs that Troll Lord produced, turning the "SIEGE" system underlying *Castles & Crusades* into a house system. The others were: *StarSIEGE: Event Horizon* (2008), a science-fiction game also previewed at Free RPG Day 2008; *Harvesters* (2010), a family RPG with anthropomorphic animals; and *Amazing Adventures* (2012), a pulp RPG. Of the three, only *Harvesters* has gotten any particular acclaim and only *Amazing Adventures* has received any supplements, but the creation of a house system nonetheless strengthens Troll Lord's place in the industry.

Beyond that, Troll Lords continues to push on with *many* supplements for *Castles & Crusades*. Most are (as always) adventures, but there are also occasional sourcebooks and hardcover rulebooks. Brian Young, a PhD in Celtic Studies, has produced a stream of Celtic books — the most notable of which is the *Codex Celtarum* (2013) sourcebook. Another notable release is *Bluffside: City on the Edge* (2013), a revision of a d20 city book (2002) previously published by Thunderhead Games.

As with most RPG companies of the '10s, Troll Lord has turned to crowdfunding for several of their newest products. A 2012 Kickstarter helped them to raise $16,106 from 223 backers for a fifth printing of the *Players Handbook* (2012), now in full color; another trade dress update occurred at the same time, resulting in a cleaner, simplified look for the *C&C* books.

Troll Lord Games could have collapsed following the d20 bust; or following the announcement of *D&D 4E*; or following the loss of their Gary Gygax products. Instead, the company continues to produce numerous products that are well-received by their small but loyal cadre of fans. They always seem a full step ahead of the next looming disaster, and that's why they still survive, over a decade after they brought supplements for the wrong RPG to the 2000 Gen Con Game Fair.

What to Read Next ○

- For d20 adventures that were released at the exact same time as Troll Lord's *AD&D* offerings, read ***Necromancer Games***, ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*, and ***Green Ronin Publishing***.
- For other companies focused on "classic" material in the d20 era, read ***Goodman Games***, ***Kenzer & Company*** *['90s]*, and ***Necromancer Games***.
- For how these classic ideas became the OSR, also read ***Goodman Games***.

In Other Eras

- For the origins of the d20 license, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For the origins of *Lejendary Adventures*, read ***Hekaforge Productions*** *['90s]*.
- For more on Castle Greyhawk, read about Greyhawk in ***TSR*** *['70s]*, Dunfalcon in ***New Infinities Productions*** *['80s]*, and El Raja Key in ***Creations Unlimited*** *['80s]*.

Luminaries and Personalities

- For other works by Gary Gygax, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*, ***New Infinities Productions*** *['80s]*, ***GDW*** *['70s]*, and ***Hekaforge Productions*** *['90s]*.
- For other works by Rob Kuntz, read ***TSR*** *['70s]* and ***Creations Unlimited*** *['80s]*.
- For other works by James Ward, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*, and ***Margaret Weis Productions*** *['90s]*.
- For more on Gail, Ernie, and Luke Gygax, read (briefly) about ***Gygax Games*** and ***TSR Games*** in ***TSR*** *['70s]*.

Or read onward for a non-d20 company premiering this same year: ***Issaries.***



Part Two:

Indie Ideas

(2000–2001)

The trend of storytelling publishers — who came into business to produce games that went beyond combat and exploration — dates back to at least the '90s and the appearance of the White Wolf Game Studio. Several more companies of this sort appeared in the early '00s, just as the rest of the industry focused on d20.

Issaries produced *Hero Wars* (2000), a narrative look at the world of Glorantha, while Pelgrane Press published *The Dying Earth RPG* (2001), adapting the literary works of Jack Vance; both of these games were created by Robin D. Laws, one of several storytelling designers coming out of the '90s. EOS Press similarly brought storytelling to the world of superheroes with Dennis Detwiller's *Godlike: Superhero Roleplaying in a World on Fire, 1936-1945* (2001).

These final "storytelling" publishers formed a bridge between older narrative games like *Over the Edge* (1992) and *Prince Valiant* (1989) and the "indie" design trend that was just around the corner. Pelgrane would eventually bring these two sides of the narrative coin together when they published games by authors like Jonathan Tweet, Rob Heinsoo, and Robin Laws such as *Hillfolk* (2013) and *13th Age* (2013), which purposefully merged their older storytelling ideas with the new designs of the indie community.

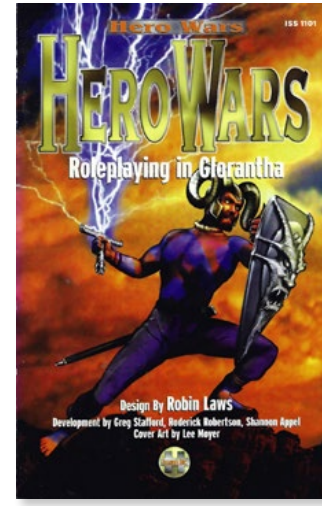
Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Issaries	1997-2004	*Hero Wars* (2000)	55
Moon Design	*1999-Present*	*Pavis & Big Rubble (1999)*	351
Pelgrane Press	2000-Present	*Dying Earth Quick-Start* (2000)	68
EOS Press	*2001-Present*	*Godlike (2001)*	232

Issaries: 1997-2004

Issaries Inc. is one of three new companies that emerged from Chaosium in the late '90s. However, the story of Issaries' creation goes back further than that and has to do with gradual changes to Gloranthan rights over three decades.

The Rise, Fall, and Rise of Glorantha: 1966-1996

Glorantha is a classic fantasy world that originated in Greg Stafford's fictional writing in college in 1966. In the late '70s, the fantasy world moved from the world of fiction to the world of gaming. That's when Stafford created Chaosium to publish the first Glorantha board game, *White Bear & Red Moon* (1975). Just a few years later, he expanded Glorantha into roleplaying with the publication of *RuneQuest* (1978). Much of this early history of Glorantha is described in the history of Chaosium.



2000: Hero Wars

In 1984, things started to change when Chaosium licensed *RuneQuest* to Avalon Hill and simultaneously provided them with limited rights to publish Gloranthan supplements. The partnership was rocky from the get-go, but Chaosium

nonetheless worked for a time to produce new *RuneQuest* supplements for Avalon Hill. Though Chaosium initially set new *RuneQuest* material in "Fantasy Earth," they quickly moved back to Glorantha, publishing classics like *Gods of Glorantha* (1985), *Glorantha* (1988), and *Elder Secrets of Glorantha* (1989). Unfortunately, the relationship between the two companies frayed entirely in 1989. Chaosium ceased working with Avalon Hill and as a result Gloranthan publications ended the next year. Much of this later history is described in the history of Avalon Hill.

For a few years, there were no official *RuneQuest* publications. Perversely, this caused an upsurge in Gloranthan fan activity. In 1989, British fan organization Reaching Moon Megacorp started publishing the *Tales of the Reaching Moon* fanzine (1989-2002). In 1992, they also began holding *RuneQuest* conventions in the UK. The United States followed suit in 1994.

Meanwhile, though Stafford had abandoned Avalon Hill, he couldn't stop creating Glorantha products — now absent the *RuneQuest* rules. The first of these was *King of Sartar* (1992), an in-world collection of primary source material published by Chaosium that was generally given accolades for its deep and realistic look at the fantasy world of Glorantha.

A series of "unfinished works" — each of them a photocopied book of Stafford's original histories and backgrounds — followed. These were semi-professional publications that Chaosium sold directly, not through distribution. The first was *The Glorious ReAscent of Yelm* (1994), published for the first American RQ-Con (1994).

During this same time period, Avalon Hill started publishing new Gloranthan work under the auspices of Ken Rolston, but Chaosium had very little to do with these publications. This soon became obvious when Greg Stafford contradicted Michael O'Brien's well-received *RuneQuest* sourcebook, *Sun County* (1992), with his first unfinished work, *The Glorious ReAscent of Yelm*. This event led to the creation of the term "gregging," which described Stafford making a new discovery in the world of Glorantha that contradicted fan publications.

This period of dual-publications would not last long. Avalon Hill's *RuneQuest* line ended for a second and final time in 1994. The company would be sold to Hasbro a few years later. Meanwhile, Stafford kept putting out an "unfinished work" every year or two, through Chaosium or its retail arm, Wizard's Attic.

However, at the same time Stafford was considering how he could do something more for the world that got him into publishing in the first place.

Back on Target: 1996-1998

Things turned around for Glorantha in 1996. Stafford arranged a deal between Chaosium — then still the owner of the Gloranthan IP — and Italian game publisher Stratelibri to produce a 25mm Gloranthan miniatures game.

Simultaneously, Gloranthan fan Dave Dunham began serious work on a Gloranthan computer game called *King of Dragon Pass* (1999). With two Gloranthan projects requiring support, Chaosium needed a Gloranthan line editor to manage them — and by lucky chance, they were flush with money at the time, thanks to the launch of the *Mythos CCG* (1996). As a result, Chaosium hired Rob Heinsoo to manage their Gloranthan licenses. It was the first time that Glorantha received full-time support from Chaosium since 1989.

> *"In 1997, Chaosium will return to its spiritual homeland by publishing new Glorantha products in a number of lines."*
>
> – Rob Heinsoo, "Putting Glorantha Back on Target," Starry Wisdom #1 (Winter 1997)

In *Starry Wisdom #1* (Winter 1997) — a full-color newsletter also funded by the success of *Mythos* — Heinsoo announced an ambitious Glorantha roll-out. The two properties that he'd been hired to manage had become six: the 25mm Stratelibri skirmish miniatures game; a 15mm mass combat miniatures game; Dave Dunham's computer game; a new line of systemless Gloranthan sourcebooks; a new line of Gloranthan fiction; and eventually a brand-new Gloranthan RPG.

Unfortunately by the time that *Starry Wisdom* was printed, the CCG market was crashing. Chaosium's *Mythos* game simultaneously faltered with the overproduction of the *Mythos Standard Game Se*t (1997). The CCG crash even affected Italy, where Italian sales of *Magic: The Gathering* plummeted — and Wizards of the Coast's Italian licensee for *Magic* was none other than Stratelibri. Not only was Chaosium hurting for cash, but Stratelibri could not fund a Gloranthan expansion either. Rob Heinsoo was laid off (which would ultimately allow him to become the creator of *Dungeons & Dragons 4E*).

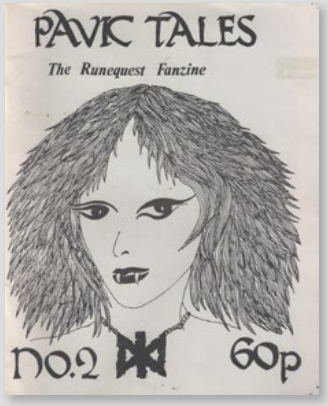
The dream of a new Gloranthan game from Chaosium was dead.

With Chaosium's financial situation growing increasingly bleak, Stafford decided his own interests and Chaosium's were no longer in sync, so he left the company that he founded over 20 years earlier. He took with him the rights to Glorantha.

And that brings us (at last) to Issaries Inc. Greg Stafford founded the company to hold the Gloranthan trademarks and copyrights that he freed from the more volatile highs and lows of Chaosium. Though Issaries now owned that IP, it had funding problems. Stafford, however, had a rather interesting idea for that — one that would foreshadow the patronage projects and ransom methods of the '00s. In August 1997 Chaosium issued a press release offering fans the right to buy shares of Issaries for $100 each, with the plan being to get the company going when $50,000

Magazine History

The Glorantha Fanzines: 1976-Present



The world of Glorantha has inspired the creation of more fanzines than just about any RPG other than *D&D* itself. They've been published across the world, and when the world of Glorantha was at its lowest in the '90s – apparently abandoned by both Avalon Hill and Chaosium – the fanzines were conversely at their best, with almost half-a-dozen fanzines being published.

RuneQuest (and Glorantha) gained a lot of popularity in Britain in the '70s thanks to the influence of Games Workshop. So it's no surprise that *Pavic Tales* (9 issues, 1987-1989), the first notable Glorantha fanzine, got its start there. It was super small press and would be unknown today if not for what came after. Nonetheless, it managed to publish nine issues in its two years of publication, with its anniversary issue #8 (Winter 1988) totaling 100 pages.

When *Pavic Tales* closed up shop after issue #9 (Spring 1989), a new magazine immediately filled the void: *Tales of the Reaching Moon* (20 issues, 1989-2002). Like its predecessor, *Tales* was a British fanzine. Of the 'zine's three founders, David Hall would be the one who stayed on through the magazine's entire run and largely defined it. Over time he was joined by fellow Brit Nick Brooke, by Australian Michael O'Brien, and by American expatriate Rick Meints – showing the international strength of the Glorantha community.

For the majority of the '90s, *Tales of the Reaching Moon* was the heart of Gloranthan publishing, far outpacing the final publications of Avalon Hill and the occasional "unfinished works" by Greg Stafford. If you wanted news of Glorantha, you found it there. Over time *Tales* became increasingly professional, most notably jumping to a full-color cover with issue #12 (1994), the "Bumper Colour Special." By the time the "Reaching Moon Megacorp" closed up shop with the publication of *Tales of the Reaching Moon #20* (2002), they helped to shape the world of Glorantha. Michael O'Brien had been the first author to be published as part of the Avalon Hill "*RuneQuest* Renaissance" of 1992, while Rick Meints (and Colin Phillips) would found Moon Design Publications, which would eventually come to own Glorantha itself.

Other fanzines of the '90s included Stephen Martin's *The Book of Drastic Resolutions* (3 issues, 1996-1998), Mike Dawson's *Codex* (3 issues, 1994-1995), David Dunham's convention fundraiser *Enclosure* (2 issues, 1998-1999), Harald Smith's *New Lolon Gospel* (2 issues, 1995-1996), Michael O'Brien's Glorantha Con

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Down Under fundraiser *Questlines* (2 issues, 1995-1998), and John Castelucci's *RQ Adventures* (6 issues, 1993-1998).

If *Tales of the Reaching Moon* was the Gloranthan magazine of the '90s, then another was the Gloranthan magazine of the '00s: *Tradetalk* (17 issues, 1996-2004, 2007-2009), published out of Germany. Tom Zunder created it as an experiment in publishing English translations of European articles. Ingo Tschinke and the Chaos Society later transformed it into an ongoing publication. In early days, *Tradetalk* gave some very limited coverage to other Chaosium games, but under its second editor, Andre Jarosch it focused on the world of Glorantha in its many forms. The Chaos Society was also the publisher of *Ye Booke of Tentacles* (6 issues, 1998-2006), a convention fundraiser book that was more truly about all of Chaosium's games than *Tradetalk* had ever been, but which also had some Glorantha coverage.

The publication of *Hero Wars* caused two more fanzines to arise. Mark Galeotti and Simon Bray's *The Unspoken Word* (2 issues, 2001-2002) went away almost immediately because they decided they'd rather publish supplements, while the Finnish Glorantha Association only got two issues of *The Zin Letters* (2 issues originally, 2003-2004) out before they hit a major roadblock.

In 2004, Issaries, the owner of Glorantha, announced that they were putting out a "Glorantha Fan Publication Policy." Fanzines were put on hold waiting for it. Unfortunately, because of the problems with Issaries at the time, it took over two years for the policy to be completed. By then, the Gloranthan fan community lost most of its momentum. It took years for the fan community to recover. *The Zin Letters* returned several years after its initial run (2 more issues, 2009-2010), while new magazines like Newt Newport's *Gloranthan Adventures* (1 issue to date, 2010-Present) and *Hearts in Glorantha* (5 issues to date, 2008-Present), and Roderick Robertson's online-only *Rule One* (13 issues to date, 2009-Present) also emerged.

And finally, there's *Gorp #1* (Summer 2000), a fake fanzine created by Michael O'Brien that purported to be a rare collectible from 1982. This 12-page hoax even included a scenario from one-time RuneQuest line editor, Ken Rolston.

Meanwhile, Glorantha's earliest fanzine has become its newest. *Wyrms Footnotes* (1976-1982) was Greg Stafford's original 'zine detailing the world of Glorantha. It ran 14 issues under Stafford at Chaosium. Thirty years later, Gloranthan publisher Moon Design released *Wyrms Footnotes #15* (Summer 2012), full of material by Stafford and others. With its heavy emphasis on system-neutral Gloranthan background, it's very reminiscent of *Tales of the Reaching Moon*, showing how much fan publications can influence "official" releases. Of course that's not a surprise given the origins of Moon Design in the Reaching Moon Megacorp.

had been raised. Stafford promised that a new Gloranthan RPG would be just 18 months off once this funding occurred.

Unfortunately, Issaries' fund-raising plans turned out to be complicated by 50 different legal regulations in 50 different states. The target number of 500 contributors also happened to be the exact number that would have forced Issaries to start reporting its finances officially and publicly — as Wizards of the Coast discovered at around the same time.

As a result, it would take a year and a half to get the legalities for Issaries right, but Stafford didn't wait to begin work on the new Gloranthan game.

The Creation of *Hero Wars*: 1998-2000

Stafford had been trying to produce a non-*RuneQuest* Gloranthan game for years, but the difficulty of creating a fully scalable system that could accommodate both Balazaring barbarians and high-powered heroes had always been a major roadblock. Then Stafford learned that Robin D. Laws — already an up and coming designer who had created *Feng Shui* (1996) and aided in the development of both *Over the Edge* (1992) and *Nexus: The Infinite City* (1994) — was a Gloranthan fan. Stafford approached him to create a new game.

By 1998, an RPG called "Glorantha: The Game" was well underway. Stafford was playtesting it at Chaosium by gamemastering regular sessions for staff and friends. The design of the new game was a considerable step away from *RuneQuest*. Designed 20 years earlier, *RuneQuest* was a fine example of a simulationist system. Conversely, "Glorantha: The Game" was straight from the storytelling branch of games, designed by one of the main proponents of those designs.

By mid-year the game had a real name: *Hero Wars*. Stafford had wanted it to be "HeroQuest," a game that he'd been promising for 20 years, but Milton Bradley grabbed the trademark when Stafford let it lapse some years previous. So, *Hero Wars* it was.

Issaries scheduled the first public demo of Laws' new game for Glorantha-Con VII (1998) — the latest American successor to the RQ-Cons that had begun in 1994. At the last moment, Stafford decided to create some t-shirts for the event. The author of these histories worked at Chaosium at the time, and I ended up making these shirts, which read "Hero Wars: The Initiation." A *Hero Wars* logo of some sort was needed, so I laid out the words in a simple font without paying much attention to it. (For a later iteration of the logo, I knocked bits out of the letters to make them looked aged.) I printed the logo in bright orange, solely to make it very visible against the black shirt. I never imagined I was designing the logo that would be used, down to the bright orange color, on the *Hero Wars* books for years to come.

Several years ago Warner Brothers and CBS learned this same lesson, when they unveiled their new TV network and gave it the "temporary" name "CW." Temporary names and logos often aren't, so I guess we should all do them right the first time, no matter how limited the audience is supposed to be.

In February 1999, the Glorantha Trading Association was finally founded, so that Gloranthan fans could invest in Issaries. Members were now officially "patrons" and "supporters" rather than "share holders," which helped to avoid the need to meet the requirements of 50 different states' securities laws. The target money was soon raised, and an 18-month deadline was set for the release of the new Glorantha game.

Hero Wars Rising: 2000-2002

A year and a half later, Issaries released its first fully professional product, *Hero Wars* (2000), right on time. It was an innovative game system in the storytelling branch of RPGs. Some of its most interesting aspects include:

- A narrative character-creation system that allows players to describe a character, then turn that description into his initial stats.
- An entirely freeform skill system, where *any* descriptive element can be a skill, allowing players to have exactly the appropriate skills for their characters.
- A unified task system that uses the exact same resolution systems for combat, debate, or any other action or interaction.
- A fully scalable skill system that makes it easy to deal with characters at dramatically different power levels.

It was an interesting combination of elements. Some of them, like the unified task system, were natural extensions of design trends running through the '90s, but the freeform skills and the narrative character creation were much more unique — and the exact sort of thing that was about to be picked up by the indie design community, then incubating on Hephaestus' Forge.

However, there were also issues with the new game.

For one, the game had been published in a very odd format: as a digest-sized trade paperback. Chaosium at the time was seeing a lot of success with its *Call of Cthulhu* Fiction line, while game stores were going out of business due to the CCG bust of the late '90s. As a result of these two factors Wizard's Attic — who was then doing sales for Chaosium and Issaries — was pushing hard to get more RPGs into the bookstore market. Wizard's Attic's Eric Rowe believed that the new Hero Wars game would sell better in book stores if the line was published as books, and Issaries decided to give the theory a shot.

Mini-History

Wizard's Attic: 1998-2003

Wizard's Attic appeared in the '90s as the mail order arm of Chaosium, intending to sell mostly Cthulhu-related goodies like t-shirts, buttons, and bumper stickers. They were listed as the publisher of some of Greg Stafford's early "unpublished works," but they weren't a separate entity until 1998. That's when Chaosium marketer Eric Rowe gained rights to Wizard's Attic as a result of unpaid debt owed him by Chaosium. Rowe took on the company as a sole proprietorship; though he continued working out of the Chaosium offices alongside Chaosium successors Green Knight and Issaries, he was working for himself.

Using his knowledge of the book trade – learned while selling Chaosium's fiction line – Rowe turned Wizard's Attic into an RPG industry consolidator that did warehousing, marketing, and sales for dozens of game companies. This helped the small publishers by amortizing costs and also because retailers and distributors might be willing to work with Wizard's Attic where they wouldn't be willing to work with the dozens of companies, each with just a few products. Besides the three other Chaosium companies, Wizard's Attic also took on many clients during the d20 boom, among them Guardians of Order, Mongoose Publishing, and Troll Lord Games. Within a couple of years, Wizard's Attic was selling product for about 80 roleplaying companies.

In order to hold product for its dozens of customers, Wizard's Attic needed more space than was available in Chaosium's West Oakland office, so it rented new office and warehouse space at the Oakland Army Base – which was then being decommissioned for civilian use. Chaosium, Green Knight, and Issaries followed Wizard's Attic to this new location, renting space from the consolidator that had by now become larger than its parent company.

Wizard's Attic's ideas of consolidation started a new trend in the RPG field. In Seattle, Osseum Entertainment followed Wizard's Attic into the consolidation business in 2001, while Fast Forward Entertainment was soon doing the same in the Great Lakes region. Unfortunately, the success of Wizard's Attic, Fast Forward, and Osseum was quite short-lived.

By 2002, the d20 market was starting to show initial weakness due to the glut of products. It would be another year before 3.5E crashed it, but Wizard's Attic was more vulnerable to the fluctuations of the market than most because so many of its clients were small d20 publishers.

Simultaneously, Wizard's Attic was making a big investment by opening up a new warehouse in Kentucky – where products could be shipped more cheaply and quickly to most of the United States – *and* it was also moving from a consolidation

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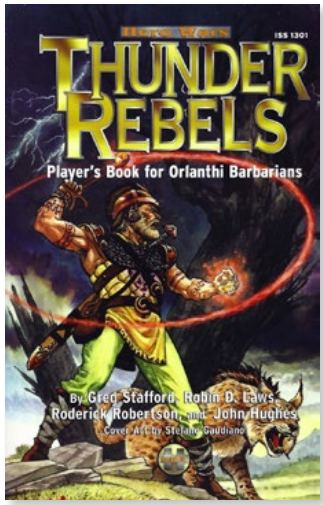
model to a simpler fulfillment model. Rather than providing marketing and billing services for clients, Wizards Attic would simply warehouse and ship products in the future.

This change in business model changed Wizard's Attic's cash flow. Where previously they had a monthly "float" of tens of thousands of dollars between when they billed distributors and when they paid clients, now they had to pay off all their debts without taking in new money. Perhaps because of the d20 weakness, perhaps because of the warehouse expansion, perhaps due to bad accounting, and most likely as a result of at least those three factors, it quickly became obvious that Wizard's Attic no longer had the share of the float that was owed to other publishers.

Payments from Wizard's Attic slowed during 2002, then stopped altogether. The company hung on through 2003 in a very limited form, but things never got better. This caused a terrible domino effect when a number of small publishers suddenly found themselves without product or money and also had to close up shop – possibly with debts owed to authors, artists, or printers. Of Chaosium's successor companies, neither Green Knight nor Issaries *really* survived the fallout, and Chaosium *almost* disappeared during the same time period.

By the end of 2003, both of Wizard's Attic warehouses were closed, the other Chaosium successors were without actual offices, and Wizard's Attic's 80 clients *would* have been scattered to the four winds if not for the intervention of a new player in the RPG field: Impressions Advertising & Marketing.

Digest-sized games were another idea that the indie community would propagate, but 2000 was just a little too early. *Hero Wars* never penetrated the mass market, and the decision to publish as digests might have hurt the game because the smaller format constrained layout and kept the books looking very simplistic. They also didn't fit in well with most game store displays.



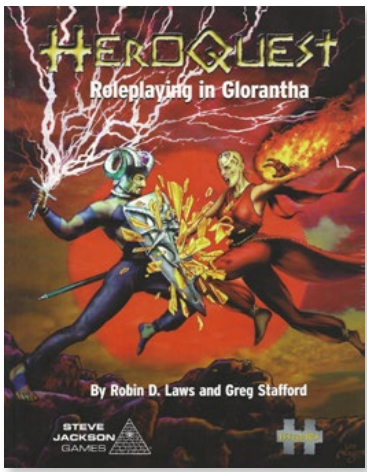
Many fans also felt that *Hero Wars* was rushed to press. Even Stafford agreed with this assessment, but initial funds had run out and the 18-month deadline was up, so the choices were to release the game in its unpolished state, or not at all. Out the game went.

Issaries published about a half-dozen *Hero Wars* books from 2000-2002. Though the original game had been unpolished, these first supplements provided a much more solid foundation for the game line. Most of

the books — including *Thunder Rebels* (2000), *Storm Tribe* (2001), *Barbarian Adventures* (2001), and *Orlanth is Dead!* (2002) — focused on the Sartarites, a topic that Gloranthan fans waited to read about for almost 25 years.

Despite some issues with the game system, it was a good resurrection for Glorantha, six years after the world's death at Avalon Hill.

Hero Wars is Dead!: 2003-2004



In 2003, Issaries sold out on its original *Hero Wars* run and decided to revise the *Hero Wars* rules in a new edition. The rulebook was finally polished and was also reformatted at a more standard size. Even better, the Milton Bradley trademark had lapsed, and so Stafford was able to publish the second edition of his Gloranthan game under the name he had always wanted: *HeroQuest* (2003). If this improved rulebook had been the first one published, the new game might have been more successful from the start.

Issaries published a half-dozen *HeroQuest* supplements over the next year. Though many of these were quite good, the overall line wasn't as cohesive as the *Hero Wars* line had been. Publications included: *Imperial Lunar Handbook Volume I* (2003), which covered some far-flung areas of Glorantha; *Masters of Luck and Death* (2003) which statted up NPCs; and *Men of the Sea* (2004), which offered adventuring opportunities for sailors. One of Issaries' last publications began to move back to familiar lands. *Gathering Thunder* (2004) was the third part of the four-part "Sartar Rising" campaign started in *Hero Wars* days.

Though *HeroQuest* was better received than *Hero Wars*, it was still weighed down by the problems of the previous game. Worse, the RPG market was contracting again thanks to the d20 bust. Issaries had never supported more than a single full-time employee, and it had been run out of the California Bay Area, one of the most expensive places to live in the country. By 2004, that disjunction could no longer be maintained.

Partially due to these financial issues, Greg Stafford moved to Mexico in 2004, bringing Issaries' production to an end.

Mini-History

Impressions Advertising & Marketing: 2002-Present

In 2002, Brentwood, California, resident Aldo Ghiozzi was wearing two different business hats. He was the owner of both Wingnut Games – one of Wizard's Attic's consolidation clients – and of Impressions Advertising & Marketing, a personal consulting firm. That same year, Wizard's Attic's business was starting to wobble, and clients like Ghiozzi were starting to see their payments dry up. Just as Wizard's Attic was trying to get out of the consolidation business, Aldo Ghiozzi – at the suggestion of Rob Stone of Citizen Games – decided to move his tiny advertising and marketing company into the field.

Impressions used Wizard's Attic as its original base of consolidation operations, which meant that Eric Rowe set aside a corner of the Wizard's Attic's warehouse for Aldo and his first three clients – Citizen Games, Troll Lord Games, and Wingnut Games – and shipped their products. At the 2002 GAMA Trade Show, Impressions picked up another eight clients – though he readily admitted that he didn't yet have a business plan. By the end of the year, when Wizard's Attic was shutting down all of its business *except* for fulfillment, Eric Rowe of Wizard's Attic handed 80 consolidation customers to Ghiozzi. Ghiozzi dropped about half of them over the course of the next year, because they were selling just a book a month while simultaneously taking up expensive warehouse space, but he turned the other 40 customers into the basis of a thriving business.

There was one remaining problem: in 2003 Wizard's Attic was about to get locked out of its remaining warehouse in Kentucky, and the product of all of Ghiozzi's clients was there. He had to fly to Kentucky to rescue nine pallets of merchandise, shipping them to Chessex, who became Impression's new shipper.

A decade later, Impressions remains a successful consolidator for RPG, board game, and card game publishers. Clients include notables like BlackWyrm Games, Chronicle City, Goodman Games, Pelgrane Press, and Troll Lord Games. Over the years, Impressions has also tried a few different marketing schemes to improve the profile of its customers, among them the *Gameplay Demo* CD (one of the company's earliest efforts) and the *GameBuyer Magazine* (which was sold to GTS Distribution in January 2009).

Impression's most successful advertising program is one that continues today: Free RPG Day. Beginning in 2007, Impressions has every year coordinated the give-away of original RPG products in game stores across the country, resulting in considerable buzz and interest in those products – which is exactly what Impressions, an advertising and marketing company, was looking for.

Later Licensing: 2005-2013



Issaries' existence as an RPG publisher ended in 2004 when Greg Stafford moved to Mexico. When he returned to the United States a year later, he decided to take a different tack. Rather than publishing Glorantha books itself, Issaries would instead license those rights to companies who could better provide the time and resources. In other words, Issaries became a rights-holding house, much like Marc Miller's Far Future Enterprises or FASA Corp. after it closed up shop in 2001.

In 2006, two licensed publishers began releasing Gloranthan products:

Mongoose Publishing was the larger of the two. After Stafford recovered the *RuneQuest* trademark — thanks to Hasbro abandoning it — he licensed Mongoose to publish a new edition of *RuneQuest* (2006). This new game was set in Second Age Glorantha, several hundred years before earlier *RuneQuest* publications. Following the publication of a few dozen products for the game, Mongoose released a polished *RuneQuest II* (2010) by Lawrence Whitaker and Pete Nash; it was supplemented by several thick hardcover and leatherette supplements. The tale of Mongoose's Gloranthan publications can be found in that company's history.

Moon Design Publications was licensed to continue the publication of the *HeroQuest* game. They kicked things off with *Imperial Lunar Handbook Volume 2* (2006). After publishing a few small sourcebooks, Moon Design revamped their line with *HeroQuest* second edition (2009) — which was the third edition of the *Hero Wars*/*HeroQuest* game.

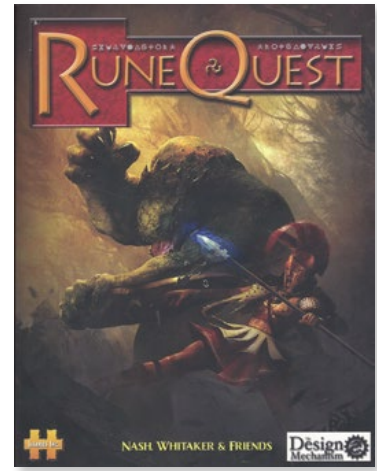
Overall, the late '00s saw some of the most extensive publications for *HeroQuest*, *RuneQuest*, and Glorantha in several years. After that, things got a bit more chaotic.

Mongoose Publishing ended their *RuneQuest II* line in 2011 as part of a general movement out of the roleplaying industry. They immediately replaced it with a revised version of their game system called *Legend* (2011), which is *RuneQuest II* in everything but name. Glorantha, however, is gone from Mongoose's schedule.

The creators of *RuneQuest II*, Pete Nash and Lawrence Whitaker, left Mongoose and formed their own game publisher: The Design Mechanism. They relicensed the rights to *RuneQuest* from Stafford and published another iteration of the game system that they'd developed for Mongoose, calling it *RuneQuest 6* (2012).

Finally, Moon Design continues to publish a massive book or so each year. In August 2013 they made a startling announcement: Greg Stafford had transferred all Gloranthan rights to them. This truly marked the end of an era.

Issaries is now truly a company of the past, while Glorantha is in the hands of the developers who will continue to publish it for the next generation.



What to Read Next ○

- For some of Robin Laws' later work, read ***Pelgrane Press***.
- For the indie community that was developing similar games to *Hero Wars* in the early '00s, read ***Adept Press***, ***Galileo Games***, and many others.
- For a recent licensee of Glorantha and *RuneQuest*, read ***Mongoose Publishing***.
- For a modern-day licensee of *BRP*, *HeroQuest*, and Mongoose's *RuneQuest*, and for Moon Design's publishing partner, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment***.

In Other Eras ✕▣?

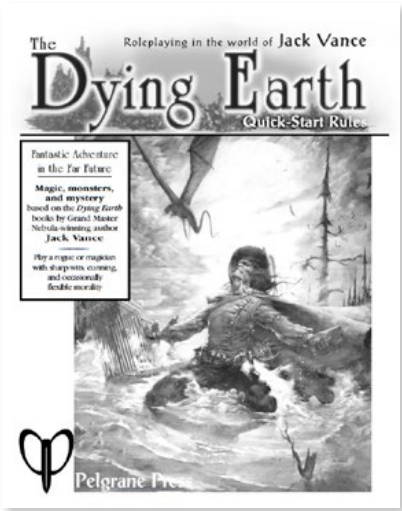
- For what got Greg Stafford, *RuneQuest*, and the world of Glorantha here, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]* and ***Avalon Hill*** *['80s]*.
- For Heinsoo's later work on *D&D*, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For the problem ***Wizards of the Coast*** had with company stock, again read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For the past history of Robin Laws, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.
- For Stafford's recent work on *Pendragon*, read ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*.
- For other early publishers who became licensors in the '00s, read ***FASA*** *['80s]* and ***GDW*** *['70s]*.

Or read on to more Robin Laws productions in ***Pelgrane Press***.

Pelgrane Press: 1999–Present

Though Pelgrane Press *was named for its* Dying Earth *RPG, over the years it has become a haven for a variety of games written by many of the most creative designers in the business.*

ProFantasy & Dragonmeet: 1993-Present



2000: Dying Earth Quick-Start Rules

Pelgrane Press is one of a few interconnected British businesses, and so the story of Pelgrane Press actually begins six years before its creation, with the foundation of the first of those businesses: ProFantasy Software.

Simon Rogers and Mark Fulford formed ProFantasy Software in 1993 to create a professional map-making program for RPGs. The result was *Campaign Cartographer* (1993), a DOS-based drawing program based on a computer-aided-design program called *FastCAD* (1979). *Campaign Cartographer* was quite successful and has since been massively

updated as *Campaign Cartographer 2* (1997), *Campaign Cartographer 2 Pro* (2002), and *Campaign Cartographer 3* (2006) for Windows. A simplified version was even sold as part of the *AD&D Core Rules CD 2.0* (1998).

Over the years amateur gamers and professional publishers alike have used *Campaign Cartographer*. One of the most impressive results was the *Forgotten Realms Interactive Atlas* (1999), a collection of 800 hot-linked maps of the Realms created by ProFantasy Software for Wizards of the Coast.

The principals at ProFantasy were also involved in the rejuvenation of Dragonmeet, a gaming convention originally run by Games Workshop beginning in 1978, and resurrected in 2000 by James Wallis and others. The revamped con was supported by Gameforce Ltd. — an umbrella group that supports hobbyist games in Britain. Members of the group included James Wallis' Hogshead Publishing (who at the time shared offices with ProFantasy), Nightfall Games, Brittania Games, ProFantasy Software, and a newcomer called Pelgrane Press.

Pelgrane Press was another of these interconnected ventures, this one owned by Simon Rogers, ProFantasy Software, and Sasha Bilton — the last, a long-time Jack Vance fan.

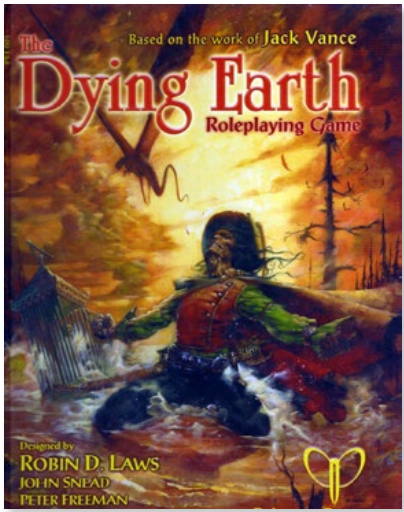
Why Jack Vance? Because Simon Rogers received a license to Vance's world of *The Dying Earth* (1950-1984) for use by his brand-new roleplaying company.

The Appearance of *The Dying Earth:* 1999-2009

Most people are aware of the influence that J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) had on the creation of *Dungeons & Dragons*, so it's not surprising that there have been Middle-earth RPGs from ICE, Decipher, and Cubicle 7. Other major *D&D* influences such as Fritz Leiber and Michael Moorcock have also been well-represented in the roleplaying field, with RPGs by TSR, Chaosium, and Mongoose.

However, Jack Vance had long been the great fantasy writer lost to the roleplaying field. His *Dying Earth* books provided the model for *D&D*'s magic system — with its ideas of magic-users memorizing spells, casting them, and forgetting them. Despite that, no one tried to license a *Dying Earth* roleplaying game for 25 (!) years.

> *"Of the other portions of the A/D&D game system stemming from the writings of Jack Vance, the next most important one is the thief-class character."*
>
> – Gary Gygax, "Jack Vance and the D&D Game," The Excellent Prismatic Spray #2 (2001)



The fledgling Pelgrane Press changed this in 1999 when they began discussions with Jack Vance's agent. They signed a contract on November 1, and then revealed on January 20, 2000, that they'd be publishing a *Dying Earth* RPG with Robin D. Laws as the author. Laws was already well-known for his work at Atlas Games and was just finishing up *Hero Wars* (2000) for Issaries Inc. His participation in the new Pelgrane project promised that Pelgrane's *Dying Earth* would be a storytelling game true to the books themselves.

After several months of design, development, and playtesting, the game was previewed at Dragonmeet 2000 with *Dying Earth Quick-Start Rules* (2000) compiled by Aaron Allston. Laws' complete *The Dying Earth Roleplaying Game* (2001) followed the next year. As was usually the case, Laws produced a game that was innovative and interesting.

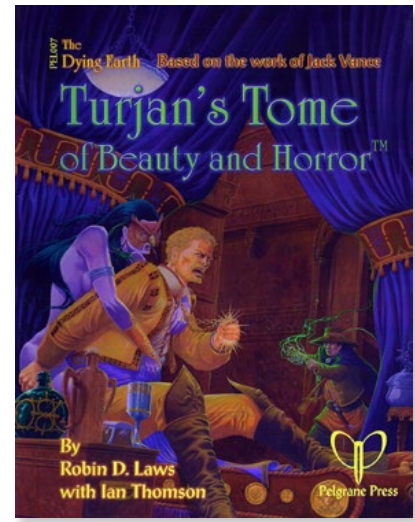
It also contained a number of notable features:

- The game can be run at three different levels of play: the roguish Cugel-level; the sorcerous Turjan-level; and the all-powerful Rhialto-level.
- Just one die is rolled for the game's very simple task-resolution system — with a 1-3 being a success and a 4-6 a failure. Skills are uniquely used as "pools" that allow players to reroll dice. Like older "fame & fortune" mechanisms and newer resource-driven games, this ultimately puts the choice of success or failure into the hands of the players.
- An abstract contest system allows many different types of conflicts (not just combat) to be resolved through an extended sequence — much as in Laws' *Hero Wars*.
- A vice system forces characters to constantly face the dangers of temptation.
- A quirky "taglines" system gives players experience points for quoting droll mottos during the game.

Overall *The Dying Earth* was an innovative storytelling game that also did a great job of emulating the world of *The Dying Earth* — particularly through its temptations and taglines, which are very true to Jack Vance's books. As with Laws' contemporary design, *Hero Wars*, *The Dying Earth* also did a great job of predicting the "narrativist" ideas soon to burst forth in the indie design community.

Despite high regard, *The Dying Earth*'s core rulebook only ever sold a few thousand copies. Rogers later blamed the *Quick-Start*, which gave players a cheap entry point into the game. Nonetheless, the game was well-supported through 2008.

That support began with eight issues of Pelgrane's *Dying Earth* magazine, *The Excellent Prismatic Spray* (2000-2008), which featured articles by RPG luminaries like Keith Baker, Monte Cook, Ed Greenwood, Gary Gygax, and Phil Masters. One or two *Dying Earth* supplements also appeared every year, except 2004 and 2005. This included plenty of setting books and some books intended to support the higher levels of play: *Turjan's Tome of Beauty and Horror* (2003) and *Rhialto's Book of Marvels* (2006). Starting in 2005, Pelgrane also began publishing PDFs for the game, which allowed them to produce more adventures — which previously appeared mostly within *The Excellent Prismatic Spray*.

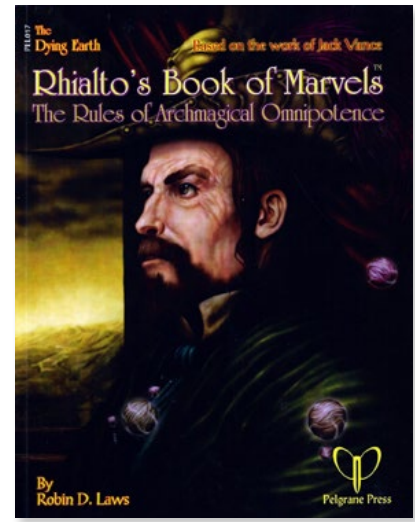


However, by 2009, Pelgrane decided that sales of *The Dying Earth RPG* no longer supported its continuation — especially given the success of *another* line which was by now filling much of Pelgrane's schedule. They let their license with Jack Vance lapse, bringing an end to the game line that gave Pelgrane its start.

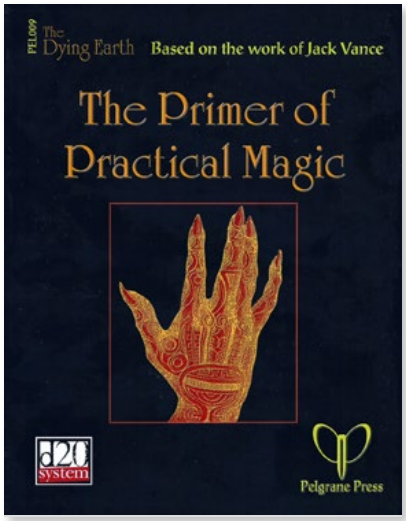
To close out their stock, Pelgrane had a big *Dying Earth* sale, the results of which we'll return to momentarily.

A d20 Interlude: 2003-2005

Dying Earth was probably hurt in part by the d20 boom that began in 2000. From that year onward, d20 was constantly eating away at *everyone's* non-d20 sales. Pelgrane did eventually try to combine their Vancian expertise with the lucrative d20 market by producing *The Primer of Practical Magic* (2003) — a book that introduced d20 players to *true* Vancian magic. However, by the time it was released, the boom was already turning to bust.



A few years later, Pelgrane gave the d20 market one more chance by publishing Dave



Allsop's *The Book of Unremitting Horror* (2005) — a collection of d20 monsters intended to be true nightmares dreamt up by the author of *SLA Industries* (1993).

That was the end of their d20 experimentation, however.

Meanwhile, the rest of Pelgrane's publishing schedule suggests how bad the d20 bust was for the industry. Over two years passed between the publications of *Demons of the Dying Earth* (2003) and *Rhialto's Book of Marvels* (2006) for *The Dying Earth*. During that time, *Dying Earth* production was limited to maps, magazines, and PDFs.

The market wasn't going to get better any time soon — so it's a good thing that Pelgrane had another idea up their sleeve.

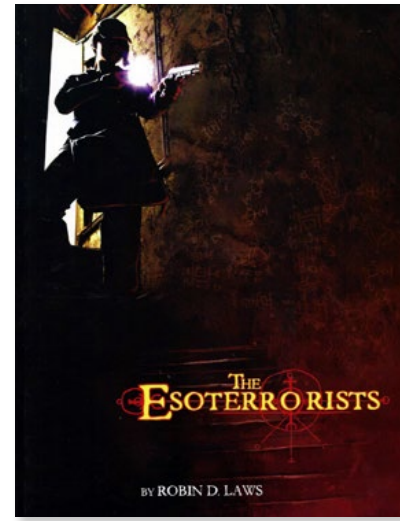
Chewing on GUMSHOE: 2006-Present

Pelgrane started ramping their production back up in 2006. Most of that work went to the *Dying Earth* line, but Pelgrane also went back to Robin Laws for a second gaming system: GUMSHOE. The name wasn't actually an abbreviation; Laws just liked how the capitals looked.

GUMSHOE is an investigative roleplaying system, which means that it was largely a response to Chaosium's classic *Call of Cthulhu* game (1981). Rogers had asked for a game that streamlined mystery play, which led Laws to realize that it was never fun to fail at investigation. In GUMSHOE, characters instead automatically find clues when they use appropriate skills — and it then falls to the players to see if they can make sense of them to actually advance the plot. This new way to look at investigative gaming has generally been well-accepted.

> *"This allows us to shift the focus from finding information to interpreting it, and to make sure that sessions maintain forward momentum."*
>
> – Robin D. Laws, Interview, Futile Position (July 2012)

The Esoterrorists (2006), by Robin Laws, kicked off the GUMSHOE line. It's a game of warring global conspiracies. It got more mixed reviews because the rest of the rules and the background itself were sparse. Since its release, the



Esoterrorists setting has been supplemented with a handful of adventures and a dense sourcebook, *The Esoterror Factbook* (2009).

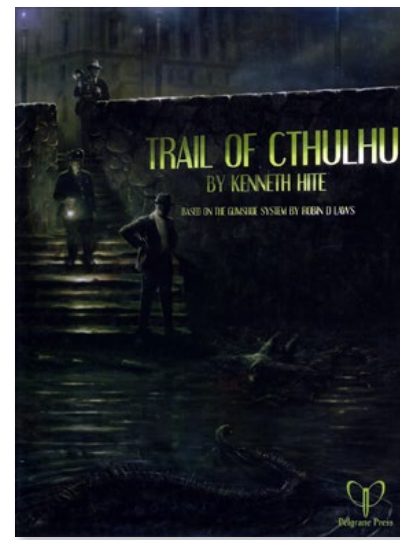
Fear Itself (2007), by Robin Laws, proved that GUMSHOE could support more than just one setting. It focused more directly on horror.

Trail of Cthulhu (2008), by Kenneth Hite, was the game that helped GUMSHOE to come into its own. Its importance to the line was obvious from the start because it was produced much more luxuriously than its predecessors — with a handsome hardcover, two-toned book that featured beautiful grayscale artwork; overall, it was one of the most attractive books Pelgrane ever produced. *Trail of Cthulhu* was also over twice as long as the previous GUMSHOE releases.

Trail of Cthulhu took many of its cues from *Call of Cthulhu* and was even printed "by arrangement with Chaosium." However, it differentiated itself from the primordial Mythos RPG in a few ways.

First, it moved the default setting of the game from the high-flying 1920s of *Call of Cthulhu* to the Depression-stricken 1930s.

Second, it offered three ways to play the game. *Trail*'s standard play methodology combines many different elements from the Cthulhu Mythos. However, there are two alternatives. GMs can instead concentrate on a "purist" game, which focuses on Lovecraft's later philosophical horror, or a "pulp" game, which focuses on the setting of the 1930s and the action-oriented horror of Robert E. Howard — also found in some of Lovecraft's earlier works, such as "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward."

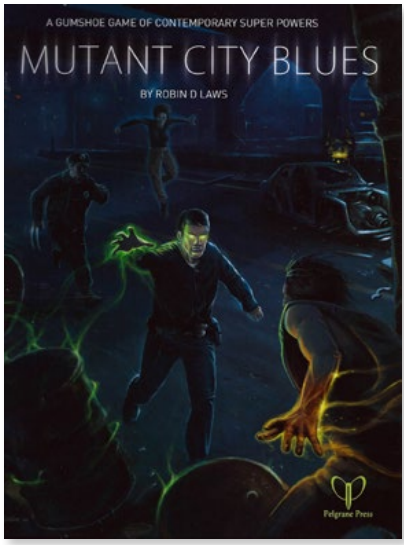


Third, it considerably expands on the idea of mental characteristics. A "drive" defines why a character investigates the Mythos, while mental health is divided between "stability" (which is a sort of

mental hit point) and "sanity" (which is a long-term measure of mental health that kicks in mainly when a character temporarily loses all of their stability points). Sources of stability and pillars of sanity further define the foundations of a character's mental health. All told, these characteristics give substantially more detail to who a character is and how they react to the unknown than the considerably older *Call of Cthulhu* game does.

Of Pelgrane's GUMSHOE games, *Trail of Cthulhu* was the first to get notably good reviews — perhaps because of its return to a familiar setting, perhaps because of the additional depth allowed by the larger rulebook, perhaps because of the more attractive layout and design, or perhaps because of the name recognition of Cthulhoid scribe Kenneth Hite. Whichever the reason, *Trail of Cthulhu* quickly became Pelgrane's star game, just as *The Dying Earth* was petering out. It's since been supplemented by one of two print supplements each year — mainly by Robin Laws and Kenneth Hite. One of its most impressive releases was *Eternal Lies* (2013), a 400-page super campaign by the gameplaywright team of Will Hindmarch and Jeff Tidball.

For five years, from 2008-2013, *Trail of Cthulhu* was Pelgrane's top game, but that didn't stop them from producing yet more variants of the GUMSHOE system.



Mutant City Blues (2009), by Robin Laws, presents a game of investigation in a world of superheroes — taking after Alan Moore's *Top 10* (1999) and Brian Michael Bendis' *Powers* (2000). Like *Trail* it got a lot of critical acclaim, but it was only lightly supported.

Ashen Stars (2011), by Robin Laws, is an investigative space opera. There was one other requirement in Rogers' original request for the game: that each player be able to take a role in space ship combat — a long-running issue among science-fiction RPGs.

"The structure of TV space opera shows like Star Trek or Firefly resemble police procedurals much more than you would think, with most episodes revolving to one degree or another around the solution to a mystery."

– Robin Laws, Interview, Futile Position (July 2012)

Lorefinder (2011), by Gareth Hanrahan, rather uniquely integrated the GUMSHOE investigation system with the *Pathfinder* (2009) roleplaying game, showing GUMSHOE's vast scope. Before its release, *Lorefinder* was temporarily called PATHSHOE; the name change was probably for the better.

Night's Black Agents (2012), by Kenneth Hite, is a post-Cold-War espionage game mashed up with the gothic horror of vampires. It's yet another GUMSHOE game that got rave reviews.

The Esoterrorists Second Edition (2013), by Robin Laws, is the first GUMSHOE revision. It serves as a reminder that *Esoterrorists* has long been the second best-supported GUMSHOE line after *Trail of Cthulhu* — though *Ashen Stars* and *Night's Black Agents* have contended for that spot.

In October 2013, GUMSHOE also became an open gaming system — released under the OGL and a Creative Commons license as a result of a Robin Laws Kickstarter that we're going to meet momentarily.

Since the original release of GUMSHOE, Pelgrane has published a full half-dozen games using the system, making it a clearly successful house system. Pelgrane could have rested their laurels there, they didn't. Instead they decided to keep experimenting and growing.

The Return of *The Dying Earth:* 2010-Present

Though Pelgrane decided to end their *Dying Earth* license in 2009, they didn't want to give up on Laws' innovative game system. This led them to release *Skulduggery* (2010), a more generic variant of the *Dying Earth* mechanics. It was lightly supported by a few PDFs over the next year.

Meanwhile, Pelgrane's going-out-of-Dying-Earth sale in 2009 was so successful Pelgrane decided to relicense the setting! This resulted in new *Dying Earth* books starting in 2011, following a two-year hiatus. There hasn't been much new support for *The Dying Earth*, but Pelgrane has published one notable release: *The Dying Earth Revivification Folio* (2012), which adapts the simpler *Skulduggery* rules for *Dying Earth* play.

> *"The Gaean Reach series offers a galaxy full of exotic cultures, flawed characters and complex machinations. It combines the crafted dialogue of the Dying Earth with Vance's deft way with mysteries – ideal fodder for roleplaying games.*
>
> – Simon Rogers, Press Release (2010)

At the same time that they renewed their *Dying Earth* license, Pelgrane also licensed Jack Vance's evocative science-fiction setting, The Gaean Reach — which was an influence on another primordial RPG, *Traveller* (1977). Like *The Dying*

Earth, the Gaean Reach novels are an important but largely unknown foundation of the RPG industry that might now be revealed to the RPG public.

Robin Laws has been working on a Gaean Reaches RPG for a few years. Current word says that it will use a combination of *Skulduggery* and GUMSHOE, combining Pelgrane's two game systems.

Though Jack Vance is no longer a major part of Pelgrane's production, it's still a minor thread of production that reminds us of the company's roots.

Kickstarting the Future: 2012-Present

Ever since the 2008 release of *Trail of Cthulhu*, Pelgrane has been on a clear upward trend. This allowed them to bring on full-time employee Beth Lewis in 2010. Around the same time, Gareth Hanrahan began regularly writing PDFs for Pelgrane, a role that's only increased in recent years.

However, Pelgrane opted not to settle for the success of *Trail of Cthulhu*. Instead they've continuing to expand, as seen by a trio of 2012 Kickstarters:

Date	Product	P roject By	Goal	Raised	Backers
8/5/12	Stone Skin Press	Simon Rogers	$5,000	$12,531	268
9/21/12	*13 True Ways*	Fire Opal Media	$29,800	$70,101	846
11/2/12	*Hillfolk*	Robin D. Laws	$3,000	$93,845	2,185

It's notable that each Kickstarter was run by a different person — showing how much Pelgrane has become an independent design studio. Each Kickstarter also represented a major new category of publication for Pelgrane.

Stone Skin Press is a new fiction arm for Pelgrane that was initially run by Simon Rogers, Beth Lewis, and Robin Laws. As editor, Laws has so far produced four anthologies of original fiction, the first of which was *Shotguns vs. Cthulhu* (2012).

13 True Ways (2014) was actually a supplement for the then-upcoming *13th Age* (2013) RPG. Pelgrane hadn't initially been comfortable using Kickstarter, due to previous problems. However, by the time work began on this *13th Age* supplement, Pelgrane was willing to try crowdfunding.

13th Age will probably be one of Pelgrane's two biggest lines going forward, so it deserves some additional attention. The story starts with Rob Heinsoo and Jay Schneider, who by 2010 were both former Wizards of the Coast employees. They decided to collaborate on an electronic game, but since they didn't have the money to fund one, they created a game design cooperative: 14WeekHobby. Their game didn't come out in 14 weeks, so friend Lee Moyer helped them to design a better name and logo, making them Fire Opal Media. The co-op later became an actual corporation too, because co-op rules are really intended for agricultural production.

"So instead of taking a turn into dairy-farming, we've restructured ourselves as a game design corporation where nearly everyone is working for sweat equity."

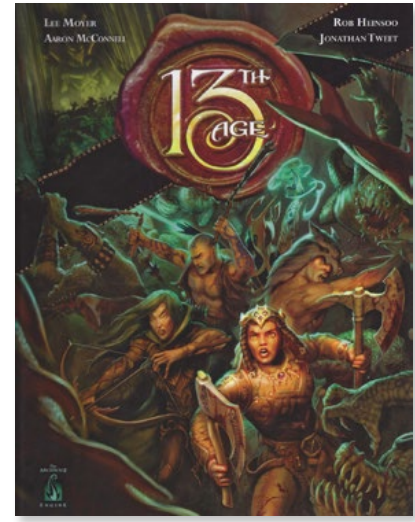
– Rob Heinsoo, "Fire Opal Media & 13th Age," robheinsoo.blogspot.com (June 2012)

With Fire Opal's programmers working on the "14Week" game, Heinsoo decided to move back to tabletop design. For this he turned to friend Jonathan Tweet, with whom he played *D&D* every Wednesday. They decided to design a new RPG together, with the idea that Fire Opal could then exploit the IP on computer platforms. Of course this meant that the game still needed a *print* partner. Fortunately, Simon Rogers had previously approached Heinsoo and said that he'd be happy to produce a game from Heinsoo, with Heinsoo having full creative control.

And that's how *13th Age* (2013) — by Rob Heinsoo and Jonathan Tweet, with art by Lee Moyer and Aaron McConnell, copyrighted by Fire Opal Media — came to be produced by Pelgrane Press. (Whew!)

13th Age calls itself a "d20-roll game." It's in fact a clear descendent of *D&D 3E* (2000) and *D&D 4E* (2008), not surprising since Tweet and Heinsoo were the lead designers for those editions. It's probably the closest in feel to 4E, since it gives special tactical powers to all classes, includes healing surges, and features simple monsters with tactical roles.

However, *13th Age* is vastly simplified over the 4E system. Not only are there no combat grids, but many more game mechanics that *could* be quite complex instead feature simplified abstractions — including abstracted combat rules, simplified gear, the lack of stacking bonuses, very simple combat bonuses, and easy resistances. Monsters are defined by just a few stats, which makes them shockingly simple, but they also possess "triggers" so that they can demonstrate cool effects when certain dice rolls occur.



13th Age was also influenced by the indie design community — which is ironic, because indie designs were originally influenced by early Jonathan Tweet designs like *Over the Edge* (1992). This is the most obvious in the game's discussion of "failing forward," which is a widely referenced indie design philosophy that says that player failure should still advance the plot

of the game. There are many other indie design elements in the game (some of which also appear in previous Tweet designs), among them: freeform skills, unique things about each character, and character relationships with the "icons" that rule the world.

As a *D&D*-like RPG, *13th Age could* be the next big thing for Pelgrane. It was already a third of the company's total sales in 2013, even though the main rulebook was published late in the year and the *13 True Ways* supplement had yet to appear. The next year will surely show the true strength of the line.

That finally brings us to *Hillfolk* (2013), by Robin D. Laws. Like its predecessors, *Dying Earth* and GUMSHOE, it's a game that offers a very different take on roleplaying. This time, Laws concentrates on story and drama — topics previously laid out in *Hamlet's Hit Points* (2010), published by gameplaywright.

The resulting game is very literary, focusing on themes, storybeats, and webs of relationships. It's also the first Laws game that feels like it was directly influenced by the indie community — which Laws also helped to influence, just like Tweet before him. The mechanics of *Hillfolk* are about players distributing authority, framing scenes, and setting the stakes for the conflicts in those scenes. The players then manage resources to determine the results of those scenes. When you put together those elements you have a pretty good overview of indie game mechanics in the '00s.

The most shocking aspect of *Hillfolk* (for traditional roleplayers at least) is the fact that it downplays what it calls "procedural" scenes, which are the type of scenes you'd find in most RPGs, where the players work to overcome some obstacle. Instead *Hillfolk* is all about drama, usually between two participants. These drama scenes ultimately force players to give a concession or refuse a concession — and resources are given or taken as a result.

These last two years have seen considerable growth for Pelgrane. Sales have moved up year-by-year — spiking considerably in 2013, with *13th Age* being only part of that. Meanwhile, Pelgrane's staff has continued to grow. Though Beth Lewis left, she was replaced by Cat Tobin. Meanwhile, Kenneth Hite has been brought on full-time to write "stuff." (*Editor's Note — Seriously, I asked, and he said, "stuff." — JA*)

At the moment, Pelgrane's future seems to largely be about *13th Age*, which quickly sold through its first print run despite it being Pelgrane's largest ever. Currently, it's poised to overtake *Trail of Cthulhu*'s total sales by the end of 2014.

However, if anything, Pelgrane's history has said that they're always ready to try something new, so it's possible that in another five years they'll have something bigger still.

What to Read Next ○

- For other modern RPG companies in the UK, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** and ***Mongoose Publishing***.
- For the beginning of the indie community that was influenced by designers like Jonathan Tweet and Robin Laws, and which has in return influenced them, see ***Adept Press*** and ***Galileo Games***.
- For an indie investigative game, read about *InSpectres* in ***Memento Mori Theatricks***.
- For the other major successor to *D&D* and the game linked to *Lorefinder*, read about *Pathfinder* in ***Paizo Publishing***.
- For a look at indie mechanics like distributed authority, scene framing, and resource management, read ***Ramshead Publishing***; for more on distributed authority, read ***Bully Pulpit Games***; and for stake setting, see much of the indie industry, but especially ***Lumpley Games***.

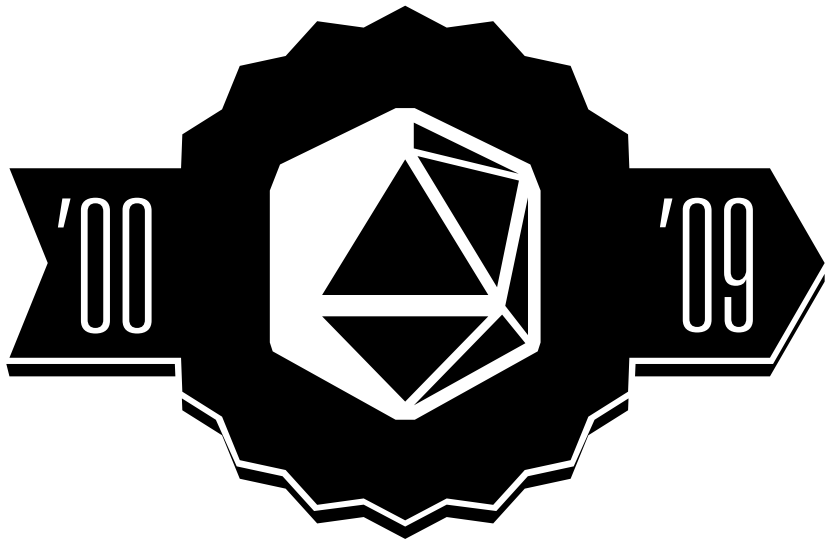
In Other Eras

- For the first game with a Vancian magic system, read about *D&D* in ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For ProFantasy's one-time office mates, read ***Hogshead Publishing*** *['90s]*.
- For the origins of the d20 license, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For another company that published a variety of games by storytelling designers, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.
- For the original investigative game, read about *Call of Cthulhu* in ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For another SF game that focused on the problem of involving all the players in starship combat, read about *Star Trek* in ***FASA*** *['80s]*.

Luminaries and Personalities ○

- For more on Dave Allsop, read the ***Nightfall Games*** mini-history in ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]* and then read ***Cubicle 7 Games*** *['00s]*.
- For more on Rob Heinsoo, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]* and ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For more on Kenneth Hite, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*, ***Last Unicorn Games*** *['90s]*, ***Arc Dream Publishing*** *['00s]*, and ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.
- For more on Robin Laws, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]* and ***Issaries*** *['00s]*.
- For more on Jonathan Tweet, read ***Lion Rampant*** *['80s]* and ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.

For the continuing d20 explosion read onward to ***Goodman Games***.



Part Three:

The d20 Explosion

(2001)

After the spark was struck in 2000, the next year saw a *huge* explosion of ***d20 publishers.*** There were probably a few hundred of them in all — from 0one and 3am to Wicked Press and Wyverns Claw. Some of them took advantage of a new medium to become the industry's first ***PDF publishers,*** but many produced print products as well.

However the d20 explosion wasn't just about new publishers. Many older publishers joined the newest trend as well. The young publishers of the '90s were the most able to make the transition, with some companies like AEG, Atlas, and Fantasy Flight becoming serious publishers of d20 supplements, while others like Holistic Design, Margaret Weis, and Pinnacle instead converted their existing games to the d20 system. The d20 explosion affected distribution too, with fulfillment houses like Wizard's Attic, Fast Forward Entertainment, Osseum Entertainment, and Impressions Advertising & Marketing appearing to service these new, small publishers.

Though there were scores of d20 publishers, most published just a handful of products, and so aren't notable enough to be featured in this book. The ones that follow are those who helped to set the trends for the whole d20 industry.

New d20 companies continued to appear throughout the '00s, but the later a d20 company began publication, the less likely it was to be successful. Open World Press fizzled out after its 2003 debut, while Galileo Games moved to indie games after publishing the d20 *Bulldogs!* (2004). Morrigan similarly moved over to its own small press system following some *d20 Crime* PDFs (2004). Kobold Press was a very rare late success in the d20 field. All of these companies appear in slightly later eras, and so later sections, but are still indexed below.

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Goodman Games	2001-Present	*Broncosaurus Rex* (2001)	83
Privateer Press	2000-Present	*The Longest Night* (2001)	99
Mongoose Publishing	2001-Present	*The Slayer's Guide to Hobgoblins* (2001)	103

Later Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Open World Press	*2003-2007*	*The Hamlet of Thumble (2003)*	250
Galileo Games	1996-Present	*Bulldogs!* (2004)	245
Morrigan Press	*2004-2008*	*d20 Crime: The American Mafia (2004)*	110
Kobold Press	2006-Present	*Steam & Brass* (2006)	327

Fulfillment Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Wizard's Attic	1998-2003	*N/A*	62
Impressions Advertising & Marketing	*2002-Present*	*N/A*	65

Goodman Games: 2001-Present

Goodman Games is one of the few companies that continued to succeed throughout the d20 era by publishing adventures — just like Ryan Dancey had intended. The advent of 4E made Goodman scramble until they were able to find a good game of their own.

d20 Dinosaurs: 2001-2003

In 2000 Wizards of the Coast made the third edition of the *Dungeons & Dragons* (2000) game system available through the Open Gaming License (OGL) and the d20 System Trademark License. A few d20 publishers appeared immediately, but many more followed in the months and years to come. One of them was Joseph Goodman's Goodman Games.

Joseph Goodman got into the professional side of the industry through miniatures. That miniatures interest began in college with Games Workshop's *Warhammer 40k* (1987, 1993), which led Goodman to put out his own fanzine,



2001: Broncosaurus Rex

The Dark Library (1994). While trying to sell ads for his 'zine, Goodman learned that Heartbreaker Hobbies & Games was about a mile from his college; they hired him as editor-in-chief for their own magazine, *Forge: The Magazine of Miniature Gaming* (1995-1997). Later on, Goodman wrote three different miniatures games of his own for Alternative Armies, but they went out of business before the games could be published, so Goodman decided it was time to start publishing on his own.

Thus, Goodman Games was born.

Goodman's first RPG began as a wargame, just like his work in the industry. While thinking about dinosaurs, Goodman came up with a strong contrasting visual, in which he imagined a looming dinosaur together with a Confederate flag. A wargame featuring Civil War soldiers riding dinosaurs soon began to come together.

Then the d20 license offered a new commercial format for gaming and Goodman's wargame became an RPG. Along the way, it transformed. The end result was partially inspired by a trio of comics: Moebius' *Blueberry*, Delgado's *Age of Reptiles*, and Schultz's *Xenozoic Tales*. It moved the story to an alternate world where the Civil War never ended. Instead, the Confederacy had been forced out into space, where it found Cretasus — a world full of dinosaurs. Goodman published this story of dinosaurs and space men as *Broncosaurus Rex* (2001).

> *"For several months I was working on a wargame (for my own enjoyment) that featured Civil War factions riding dinosaurs. Then I needed surgery, and they prescribed Vicodin. Somewhere along the way, it all clicked: the dinosaurs became intelligent and the setting moved to another planet."*
>
> – Joseph Goodman, Echoes from the Wyrd #10 (June 2003)

The result was a complete game — or at least as complete as the d20 System Trademark License allowed. Though there were rare exceptions like Fantasy Flight's *Dragonstar* (2001) game, at the time almost everyone else was publishing fantasy-based d20 supplements for *D&D*. As a western set on an alien world, *Broncosaurus Rex* stood out as a very different sort of d20 release. It was well-lauded for its interesting setting and good design, and to date remains one of the more unusual d20 games. In early days, Goodman sometimes used the slogan "we do d20 different," and *Broncosaurus Rex* was the first proof.

Broncosaurus Rex did quite well for Goodman Games. It's clearly what put them on the map and helped them to rise above the surge of d20 releases. It would remain their best-seller for a few years and was supplemented by two books: the *Cretasus Adventure Guide* (2002), a setting book; and *Dinosaurs that Never Were* (2003), a dinosaurs-only monster manual.

By then, however, Goodman Games was working on lots of exciting new stuff.

Toward d20 Fantasy: 2002-2003

As 2002 dawned, Goodman Games continued putting out "different" books. *The Complete Guide to Velociraptors* (2002) and *The Complete Guide to T-Rex* (2002) were directed toward *Broncosaurus Rex* players, but didn't carry the "Dinosaur Planet" logo so that they could sell to other d20 gamers. A series of three *Aerial Adventure Guides* (2002) were instead written for *D&D*-type fantasy, but again offered a very different setting from most other games, full of cities atop clouds.

Following these initial innovative products, Goodman Games increasingly directed their production toward the dungeon crawling fantasy games that were the d20 norm. A PDF-only *Complete Guide to Drow* (2002) did well, but it was also much less "different." In fact, it was pretty similar to what was being done by the rest of the increasingly competitive d20 market; Green Ronin put out a Drow book (2003) as part of their "Races of Renown" series, while Mongoose Publishing published *The Quintessential Drow* (2003) around the same time. If Goodman Games differentiated itself from these other publishers with its *Complete Guides*, it was mainly through attention to background, history, and story — not just crunchy game mechanics.

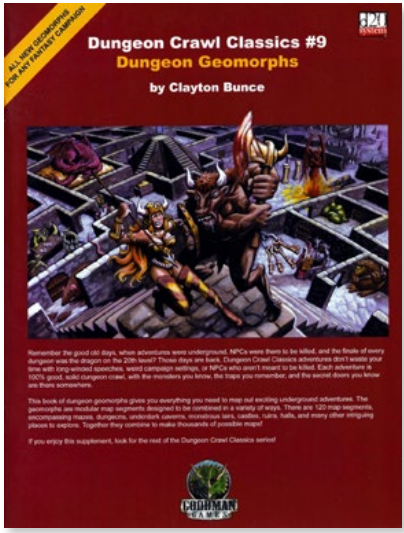
The Goodman *Complete Guides* ran through another 10 books, about half of which highlighted unusual races no one else was covering, such as doppelgangers (2002), rakshasas (2003), treants (2003), and wererats (2003).

> *"We approach the traditional topics with new angles (or at least, we try), so they stay fresh: for example, our latest release, Complete Guide to Liches, focuses on the human side of liches rather than the dank, dark, evil stereotype."*
>
> – Joseph Goodman, Echoes from the Wyrd #10 (June 2003)

Joseph Goodman would later comment that his move from the unusual setting of *Broncosaurus* to the more normative world of dungeon crawls was partially because he couldn't constantly come up with crazy new ideas like western dinosaurs. It was also an economically sound move: the books sold well.

Despite this new success, Goodman opted *not* to bring any game designers in house. Instead, he continued to work with creators on a freelance basis. His basic philosophy was that it was better for his designers to be widely separated, so that they wouldn't end up churning out the same ideas; this was a philosophy that he would hold with, even after his success exploded.

The Classic *Dungeon Crawls Classics*: 2003-2008



Goodman Games' breakout line was *Dungeon Crawl Classics* — a d20 adventure series that began with *Idylls of the Rat King* (2003). Goodman had two goals for his *Classics* adventures. First, he wanted to publish intelligent dungeon crawls that he personally would be interested in playing, because he felt no one else was doing so. Second, he wanted to serve older gamers, as a Wizards of the Coast demographic survey revealed that they were a large part of the modern market.

When creating the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* line, Goodman repeated a trick that Mongoose Publishing used very effectively: they branded their *Quintessential* books to look like TSR's *Complete Handbooks* of the '90s. Goodman similarly designed the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* to look like the saddle-stitched TSR adventure books of even earlier years. Each cover framed a picture with bright primary colors, featured text on the bottom, and sported a diagonal banner to the left. It was a very good reproduction of TSR's *D&D* adventures in their second and perhaps most nostalgic incarnation (1980-1982).

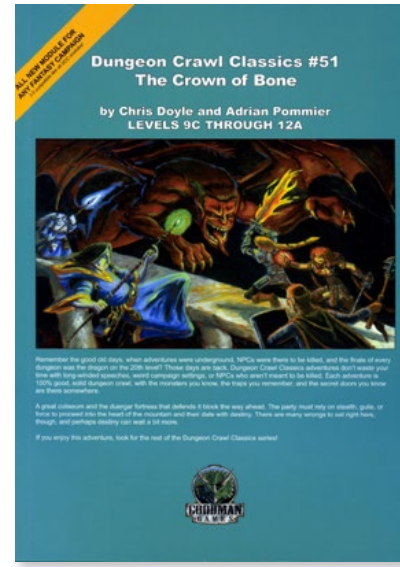
It took a few adventures for the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* to take off, but they did following the third or fourth release. They would soon become the company's biggest line, eclipsing *Broncosaurus Rex*. In all, Goodman published slightly more than 50 *Dungeon Crawl Classics* for third edition; the line included sequels, boxed series, and an adventure set in Green Ronin's Freeport (2005). Goodman even brought all the *Dungeon Crawl* adventures into a single world with *Gazetteer of the Known Realms* (2006) — much as TSR had done with Greyhawk (for *AD&D*) and the Known World (for *D&D*) in the '80s.

From 2003-2008, Goodman Games released one or two *Dungeon Crawl Classics* a month — with publication so regular that they even offered a subscription service. The height of the line was probably *Castle Whiterock* (2007), a 700-page boxed mega-dungeon, which sold for a cool hundred bucks. After that, the company's fortunes would head downhill for several years — but those problems still lie in their future.

It's ironic that Goodman published sourcebooks and world books while everyone else was releasing adventures, and only turned to adventures when

d20 was busting. But they made it work by developing a style no one else really considered.

It's a style that *made* the company in the '00s and saved it in the '10s.



New Partners & Innovative Worlds: 2003-2007

It would be easy to only write about *Dungeon Crawl Classics* in the '00s, but Goodman played with lots of other lines — including both partnered publications and new books of their own.

That began with *En World Player's Journal* (2003-2004), a magazine that tried to bridge the success of the top d20-related online website with the tabletop d20 world. However, magazines are hard, which we'll note for the future. After four issues, low sales led Goodman and En World to part ways; Mongoose Publishing later picked up the magazine and renamed it *En World Gamer* (2004-2005), but they only managed a few issues more.

Meanwhile Goodman's expertise in adventure publication was drawing in d20 publishers interested in partnering with them. The first of these was Dave Arneson's Zeitgeist Games, which resulted in Goodman releasing *Dave Arneson's Blackmoor* (2004). Goodman produced a few more Blackmoor products with Zeitgeist in the next year, before Zeitgest headed off on their own.

By then Goodman was working with several other publishers, this time with Goodman creating licensed adventures for *their* RPGs or settings. This included Goodman Games adventures for Malhavoc Press' *Iron Heroes* (2005-2006) and for Troll Lord Games' *Castles & Crusades* (2006), a complete line for Pandahead Publishing's modern-day dungeon crawl game *Xcrawl* (2006-2008), and licensed Judges Guilds adventures — updated and expanded for d20 (2007).

Joseph Goodman later said that Goodman Games was known for two things: "adventure modules and innovative worlds." So it should be no surprise that Joseph Goodman himself was working on an innovative new setting: *Dragonmech* (2004). This new gameworld combined fantasy with steampunk robot mechs; like *Broncosaurus Rex* it was widely acclaimed. Even better for Goodman, the new game line was released under White Wolf's prestigious Swords & Sorcery label.

The Settings of Yore: Blackmoor

Dave Arneson's world of Blackmoor got its start in 1971. That's when Arneson invented Blackmoor to be used as the basis for his "Braunstein" games. Though the Braunsteins had evolved from Napoleonic wargames, they soon came to use Gary Gygax's *Chainmail* rules (1971), and from there Blackmoor became a foundational setting in the world of RPGs.

The most distinguishing feature of Blackmoor has always been its heavy reliance on technology. Some monsters are clearly aliens and some versions of the setting have even suggested that magic-users are using technological items that they don't understand. More recently, clockwork and steamwork items have helped to expand Blackmoor's strange technology.

Blackmoor is also a remarkably small setting, just a few hundred square miles. Beyond that, however, it's a fairly standard fantasy world. There are certainly nuances here and there, such as warrior halflings, but you also find many standard tropes, such as the division of elves into high elves and wood elves.

Though *Dungeons & Dragons Supplement II: Blackmoor* (1975) bore the setting's name, it was mostly a book of Dave Arneson's house rules, not background material. The only hints at the setting appeared in a short adventure, "The Temple of the Frog." Fans got a little more information in Judges Guild's *The First Fantasy Campaign* (1977). Amidst rules and army listings, readers learned some facts about the Kingdom, received information on some notable personalities, and got a look at Blackmoor Town, Blackmoor Castle, and Blackmoor Dungeon. There were also some maps of more distant lands, which would have to be enough to keep players content for several years.

Amusingly, *The First Fantasy Campaign* positioned Blackmoor as an adjunct to the Wilderlands. Just a few years later when Gary Gygax wrote *The World of Greyhawk* (1980) for TSR, he also connected Blackmoor to *his* world by including a country by that name in Oerth. Of course, Arneson was no longer working with TSR, so there was no connection to the actual world of Blackmoor.

The next iteration of Blackmoor *again* made it an adjunct to an existing world. This time Blackmoor was set in the distant past of TSR's world of Mystara. A series of four adventure books co-authored by Dave Arneson and David Ritchie gave the best detailing ever for the world: *DA1: Adventures in Blackmoor* (1986), *DA2: Temple of the Frog* (1986), *DA3: City of the Gods* (1987), and *DA4: The Duchy of Ten* (1987). A fifth book, "DA5: The City of Blackmoor," was never published and likely never written either.

After that, Blackmoor dropped off the gaming table for almost two decades, until d20 brought all old things back to life. That's when Zeitgeist Games, in conjunction with Goodman Games, was able to publish an even better description of the setting, the 240-page *Dave Arneson's Blackmoor* (2005). They also published several supplements including both new books like *Clock & Steam* (2008) and old favorites like *City of the Gods* (2008), *The Dungeons of Castle Blackmoor* (2008), and the perennial *Temple of the Frog* (2008).

During its d20 era, Blackmoor was briefly the basis of a "Living" campaign, called "Blackmoor: The MMRPG." From 2005-2008 an impressive 60 "episodes" were distributed freely to Blackmoor GMs, resulting in what's likely the most attention (and play) the setting has ever received.

Thanks to Dave Arneson's work with Zeitgeist at the end of his life, it's likely that we have a better vision of the original Blackmoor than we'll ever have of Gary Gygax's original Greyhawk. Sadly, interest in Blackmoor fizzled again following the release of *Dungeons & Dragons Fourth Edition* (2008) and Dave Arneson's death in 2009. Code Monkey Publishing released *Dave Arneson's Blackmoor: The First Campaign* (2009) for 4E, to date, that's been the last look at the setting, despite a plan to supplement the setting book with three additional releases.

Yet another partnership led to Goodman's next innovative world, *Etherscope* (2005). It was created by Nigel McClelland and Ben Redmond and published in association with small press Malladin's Gate Press. *Etherscope* was Goodman's first complete roleplaying game, and also their first step away from the world of d20 and into that of the OGL. Though built upon d20 Modern, *Etherscope* did not use the d20 System Trademark License — which was increasingly toxic following the d20 bust.

Etherscope's basis in d20 Modern came about thanks to its rather unique genre: "cyberpunk Victoriana." Its foundation lay in steampunk, but it pushed those ideas forward 120 years to the 1980s, where miniaturized steam technology was out of control and "Etherscope" was the new frontier. Like the innovative worlds of *Broncosaurus Rex* and *Dragonmech*, *Etherscope* was well-received. However, it appeared too late in the d20 life cycle to become a best-seller; *Etherscope* was supported with new material from 2005-2007.

Sadly, none of these new partnerships or new products could ward off the end of the d20 market. By 2007, only the most successful d20 publishers survived. Though Goodman continued on with their *Dungeon Crawl Classics*, their *Complete Guides* had ended in 2005 and most of the partnerships and licensed products would end in 2006 or 2007.

Goodman Games' last stand against the dying d20 market was Free RPG Day 2007. Where most companies were offering up a single product of variable quality, Goodman contributed three different books to Free RPG Day, each one of them a top-quality production.

Two of the books supported Goodman's two continuing lines: *The Sinister Secret at Whiterock* (2007) was a prelude to *Castle Whiterock*, while *Xcrawl: Dungeonbattle Brooklyn* (2007) was an introduction to Pandahead's quirky setting.



Goodman's third Free RPG Day product kicked off a new line. *Temple of Blood* (2007) was part of Luke Johnson's new *Wicked Fantasy Factory* adventure series, which was a sort of Hong-Kong-action-movie adventure line, offering "extreme playing experience." It was clearly intended to duplicate the success of *Dungeon Crawl Classics* in a new genre.

Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to hold off the next looming d20 disaster, just a few months away.

Fourth Edition Blues: 2007-2012

At Gen Con Indy 2007, Wizards of the Coast announced what much of the industry already suspected: they were working on a fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, for release the next summer. Unfortunately, they weren't ready to talk about how third parties like Goodman Games could release 4E supplements.

Weeks quickly stretched into months. Finally on January 8, 2008, Wizards published a bare outline of their new, more restrictive 4E license for third-party publishers. There weren't a lot of details, but it was enough for Goodman Games to say that they would support the new edition of the game. In many ways, they didn't have much choice. If Goodman wasn't producing supplements for Wizard's game, they probably didn't have a business — at least not based on their product lines in 2008.

Unfortunately, more months went by, and it became obvious that not only was Wizards *still* undecided on their third-party 4E licensing, but that they wouldn't even stand by the outline they'd released in January. Publishers like Green Ronin and Mongoose Publishing, who by now had product lines independent of *D&D*, decided 4E wasn't worth the trouble and announced they were going their own ways. Perhaps more surprisingly, Paizo Publishing did so too. In the end, Goodman

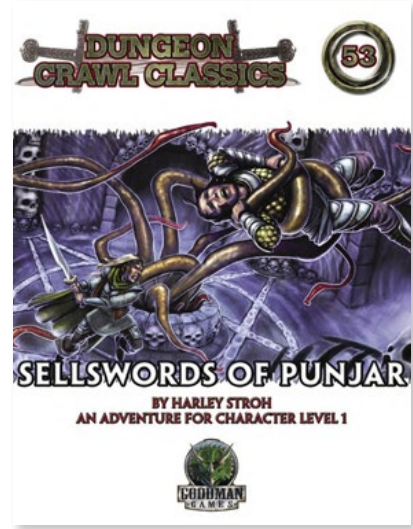
was one of the very few big 3E publishers who continued to plan for (and to hope for) 4E — alongside Necromancer Games and not many others.

By summer 2008, it was obvious that Wizards' GSL license for 4E wasn't nearly as advantageous to publishers as the OGL or even the d20 System Trademark License had been. Many publishers were concerned with a 'poison pill' that forced them to revoke the OGL, but Joseph Goodman found it to be fairly typical for a licensing contract. He was more worried that the GSL didn't allow him to release products until a month and a half after Gen Con Indy 2008. In the end, Goodman decided he couldn't sign on for this reason.

However, this didn't cause Goodman to drop support for 4E (like Paizo Publishing did) nor did it cause them to go out of business (like Necromancer Games did). Instead they decided to support 4E *their* way, depending upon the older OGL to give them sufficient legal protection to print 4E supplements — as long as they were careful with their use of trademarks. The first of these GSL-less products, *Sellswords of Punjar* (2008), was released for Gen Con Indy 2008. It was written by Harley Stroh, long-time Goodman author and by now the *DCC* line editor.

Sellswords was labeled as *Dungeon Crawl Classics #53*, continuing the numbering from the 3E books. However, it featured a clean, white-backed cover design to clearly differentiate it from those earlier releases. It was set in the Known Realms of Aereth, and it placed more emphasis on setting than just about any *Dungeon Crawl Classic* to date — detailing the new city of Punjar. *Sellswords* was also the first in a heroic-tier adventure path that continued with *Scions of Punjar* (2008) and *Thrones of Punjar* (2009) and was further supplemented by a Free RPG Day 2008 release, *Punjar: The Tarnished Jewel* (2008). It seemed like a strong start for Goodman's 4E support.

Goodman Games also published two more *Dungeon Crawl Classics* at Gen Con Indy 2008, and saw their best adventure sales in several years. It was an auspicious start that led to the publication of eleven 4E *Dungeon Crawl Classics* by the end of 2009. The later adventures were even published under the GSL, despite the problem of not being able to show D&D branding on the front cover. To resolve this issue Goodman began printing "This adventure module is 4E compatible" at the top of each publication, beginning with *Scions of Punjar.*



"The Master Dungeon line is all about high adventure, exotic locations, and epic deeds done by great heroes (regardless of level). If the DCCs draw their inspiration from heroes like Gray Mouser and Fafhrd, the Master Dungeons look to Elric and Beowulf."

– Harley Stroh, Interview, daegames.blogspot.com (February 2009)

Due to the success of its initial 4E releases, Goodman Games brought on new writers and editors to rapidly expand its 4E production, beginning with a few new adventure lines. The first was the *Master Dungeons* line — another attempt to create a different sort of adventure series. These new dungeons were intended to tell epic stories that could change the world. However, the line wasn't given a chance to flourish. There were just two releases: *Dragora's Dungeon* (2008) and *Curse of the Kingspire* (2009), both by Harley Stroh. Goodman also converted the *Wicked Fantasy Factory* adventures to 4E, but this only resulted in one release, *A Fistful of Zinjas* (2009). Afterward, both *Master Dungeons* and *Wicked Fantasies* disappeared from Goodman's schedule.

Three different adventure series for 4E wasn't enough to satisfy Goodman Games. They also started work on several non-adventure lines for Wizards' new game. *Points of Light* (2008) and its sequel *Points of Light II: The Sunless Sea* (2009) laid out complete settings for Wizards of the Coast's largely undeveloped "Points of Light" game world. The *Hero's Handbook* line (2008-2009) gave 4E rules for various races, starting with the brand-new *Dragonborn* (2008) and *Eladrin* (2009), while the *Forgotten Heroes* line (2008-2009) introduced 4E rules for classic classes that had been initially omitted by Wizards, such as the bard, barbarian, and druid. *Blackdirge's Dungeon Denizens* (2009) was a monster manual, while *Monstercology: Orcs* (2009) presented a monstrous ecology. *The Character Codex* (2008) was an exhaustive character record sheet. Finally, *Level Up* magazine (2009-2010) tried to fill the void created by Wizards taking *Dragon* magazine online.



This wide variety of releases might seem haphazard at first glance, but it was actually very canny. Goodman had purposefully reinvented many of the best-selling lines from the 3E era. The *Hero's Handbooks* and the *Forgotten Heroes* were similar to Mongoose's 3E *Quintessentials* line (2002-2004), while *Monstercology* was like

Goodman's own *Complete Guides* and Mongoose's *Slayer's Guides* (2001-2004). Finally, *Dungeon Denizens* and *Character Codex* reimagined similar products from Sword & Sorcery Studio and from Green Ronin. It should have been a successful strategy, especially with no competition from 3E's top d20 publishers. Unfortunately, it wasn't. After just six months or so of great sales, Goodman's 4E lines began to falter. Most of them were quickly shut down, while brand-new 4E settings for *Amethyst* (2010) and *Death Dealer* (2010) came and went in a blink.

"Speaking as a 4E licensee, I'm satisfied with the sales of my 4E products, and I wanted to share that fact."

– Joseph Goodman, Interview, koboldquarterly.com (2009)



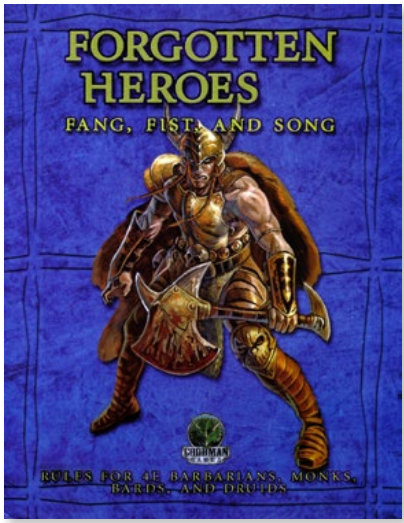
There are likely a number of reasons for Goodman's 4E failure. Most notably, we now know that 4E was a failure for Wizards of the Coast, so it's not surprising that it was also a failure for its licensees. However, there were probably other problems, specific to Goodman's game lines.

First, the entire concept of Goodman converting to 4E was troublesome. The company had always sold to players who liked old-school games, while 4E represented a very notable revamp to the *D&D* system, putting it further from the halcyon days of *AD&D* than ever before. Because of their demographics, Goodman Games might have "left behind" a larger percentage of players than Wizards themselves. Goodman's decision to abandon its *AD&D*-like trade dress probably sent another bad signal to those players.

"When I changed the look of the Dungeon Crawl Classics brand, I was surprised at the intensity of the reaction. A number of the grognards seemed to take it as a personal betrayal."

– Joseph Goodman, Interview, koboldquarterly.com (2009)

Second, Goodman Games didn't do a good job of appealing to new 4E players either. Because they maintained the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* numbering that they'd started with 3E, their first 4E book was #53 — which was probably intimidating to new players.



Third, the *Forgotten Heroes* and *Hero's Handbook* lines failed for a reason that no one could have guessed in 2008: Wizards' downloadable character builder. Character and race splatbooks had been very popular in 3E — making companies like Green Ronin and Mongoose Publishing very successful. However, 4E players were less interested in them because they couldn't load the new options into the Wizards' character builder. As a result, no one but Wizards was able to successfully release mass-market 4E splatbooks. This probably hit Goodman worst, as they were the biggest 3E publisher trying to continue with 4E publishing.

Fourth, *Level Up* was doomed because magazines are hard *and* because someone had already beat Goodman to the punch. Wolfgang Baur and his Open Design publishing house published *Kobold Quarterly #1* (Summer 2007) before the ink dried on the last issue of *Dragon* magazine. Joseph Goodman had talked with Baur about buying his magazine in 2008, to support a dungeon crawling league, but decided the price was too high. Unfortunately, this meant that Goodman Games had tough competition when its produced *Level Up* in 2009, since *Kobold Quarterly* was by then filled with full-color content that didn't focus on 4E. After *Level Up's* first issue, advertising revenue from Wizards disappeared, definitively dooming the magazine.

If Goodman Games had remained focused on 4E, they probably would now be dead. Fortunately, they had already spent years looking for alternatives. It'd take a bit more time, but one of them would eventually click.

Crawling toward the Future: 2007-Present

Goodman Games began dropping hints they were producing their own RPG in 2007, when they talked about a *Dungeoneer RPG* — based on Thomas Denmark's *Dungeoneer* card game (2002) from Atlas Games. Though *Dungeoneer* never appeared, Goodman *did* produce a different roleplaying game the next year with the *Eldritch Role-Playing System Core Rulebook* (2008), by Dan Cross and Randall Petras. This abstract epic FRPG didn't get much attention and was only supported with short PDFs.

Mini-History

The OSR: 2006-Present

The early d20 market it made it obvious that there was considerable room for nostalgic publication. Adventures from Necromancer Games and Troll Lord Games and the *HackMaster* line from Kenzer & Company all appealed to fans of the *D&D* lines of the '70s and '80s. Then Troll Lord Games published *Castles & Crusades* (2004) and took the next step: emulating the games of the '70s and '80s using the d20 game system.

Today most people mark the release of *OSRIC* (2006) as the start of the grassroots OSR movement. This was the first actual retroclone; it tried to specifically recreate a past game system (*AD&D*) rather than just recreating its feel – as *Castles & Crusades* had. In addition, *OSRIC* wasn't a commercial release. It was instead a free download that was mainly intended to give publishers a legal basis for publishing *AD&D* modules.

The OSR in *OSRIC* stands for "Old School Reference." The grassroots movement that it generated also uses the abbreviation OSR, but with a different meaning: usually "Old School Renaissance," but maybe "Old School Revival." Some people also say that OSR can mean "Open Source Rules," since that was the initial intent of *OSRIC* – though this idea has faded in recent years.

The Renaissance (or Revival) caused an explosion of interest in old-school gaming. This quickly resulted in more retroclones, like *Labyrinth Lord* (2007) and *Swords & Wizardry* (2008). Some small press publishers even appeared to publish these new retroclones – or adventures for them.

The OSR was largely spread by word of mouth and by fandom, which means that blogs and fanzines were important parts of the movement. James Maliszewski's blog is probably the best known in the OSR community, but there are dozens more; the most recognized 'zines including *Fight On!* (2008-2011), *Knockspell* (2009-2011), and *Oubliette* (2010-2012).

Though the OSR got its start with *AD&D* retroclone *OSRIC*, it also supports games other than *D&D* – as well as games that evoke an old-school feeling without being retroclones. Goblinoid Games' updating of *Starships & Spacemen* (2013) fits into the OSR movement, as do new games like the weird fantasy *Lamentations of the Flame Princess* (2010) and *Dungeon Crawl Classics* (2012).

In recent years, the OSR has been represented at Gen Con Indy with an OSR booth. Expeditious Retreat Press kicked the idea off in 2011, then Pacesetter Games & Simulations (not to be confused with the Pacesetter of the '80s) continued it in more recent years under the auspices of the "Old School Renaissance Group" which includes: Autarch, Black Blade Publishing, Brave Halfling Publishing, Expeditious Retreat Press, Faster Monkey Games, *Fight On!*, Frog God Games, Goblinoid Games, Henchman Abuse, Lamentations of the Flame Princess, Pacesetter Games & Simulations, and Sine Nomine Publishing.

Mini-History

Beginning in 2012, some fans have suggested that the OSR is dead – not because it's faded out, but because it's succeeded. Fans on blogs have become companies publishing print products, while larger publishers like Goodman Games have proven very successful with their own OSR releases. Even Wizards of the Coast seems to be moving toward the OSR with its *AD&D*-like *D&D Next* and with releases of classic PDFs on dndclassics.com.

In the late '00s, Ron Edwards made a strikingly similar statement about the indie movement, saying that it had broken out and become the mainstream. The next few years should tell us whether this is true of the OSR movement as well.

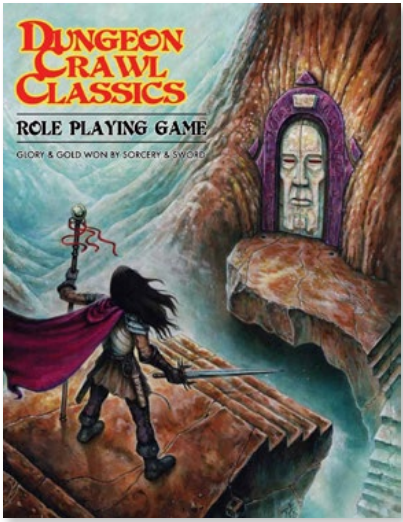
"What if Gygax and Arneson had access to the Open Game License when they created D&D? What if they spent their time adapting thirty years of game design principles to their stated inspirations … ?"

– Joseph Goodman, DCC RPG Designer's Blog #1 (January 2011)

Meanwhile, Goodman Games was also experimenting with a few lines of non-4E supplements.

The first was a generic supplement line that began with those *Points of Light* setting books. *GM Gems* (2008) and *PC Pearls* (2008) received similarly good attention. However, *The Dungeon Alphabet* (2009), a funny look at 26 classic dungeon elements, was the biggest hit: it went to a second printing almost immediately.

The second was the *Age of Cthulhu* line — a set of licensed adventures for Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) that kicked off with *Death in Luxor* (2009). A series of globe-trotting historic adventures followed. In 2010, when 4E support was cratering, *Age of Cthulhu* was actually Goodman's best-supported line.



However Goodman Games hadn't given up on the idea of producing a new roleplaying game — a back-to-the-basics game that would appeal to the fans that enjoyed the old-school feel of the original run of *Dungeon Crawl Classics*. Joseph Goodman and Doug Kovacs started thinking about this design in 2009. They ran a private playtest with Erol Otus at DunDraCon 34 (2010) and then a more public playtest at Gary Con 2 (2010); many visits to mini-cons and game stores

followed. Their new game was finally previewed as a beta (2011) before being released as the *Dungeon Crawl Classics RPG* (2012).

> *"Most of Appendix N was written before 'fantasy' was a recognized literary genre, and very few of our modern conceptions of fantasy … are present in Appendix N. Many Appendix N books cross between what we would now call fantasy, science fiction, horror, and modern adventure."*
>
> – Joseph Goodman, Interview, gaming.suvudu.com (May 2012)

The new game was intended "to create a modern RPG that reflects D&D's origin-point concepts with decades-later rules editions." In particular, Goodman wanted to design a game that could recreate the stories from Appendix N of the original *AD&D Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979). The company had started focusing on Appendix N back in 2008 with their *Master Dungeons* line, whose two adventures had paid homage to Robert E. Howard and Michael Moorcock. Now, Goodman himself read through every book in Appendix N from 2009-2012 and also watched many of its movies. The result was a game much more influenced by sword & sorcery than the average fantasy RPG, which gives it a fairly unique "weird fantasy" spin.

There's a bit of satire in the game, such as the decision to use bizarre "Zocchi" dice, like the d3, the d5, the d7, the d24, and the d30 — and the fact that game starts with a "character creation funnel" where 0-level characters die in mass, before players settle on their actual PCs. Beyond that, *Dungeon Crawl Classics* is a lot like *AD&D* (1977, 1989), but with scarier monsters, more dangerous magic, and more mysterious magic items — just like in those Appendix N stories. It's also been very well-received — selling through two printings in a bit more than a year, and also supporting three limited edition variants: a gold foil edition, a Jeff Easley covered edition, and a slipcase edition.

More notably, the *Dungeon Crawl Classics RPG* has given Goodman Games what it's been seeking since its 4E lines started to fail: a game system that they actually control, which they can use as the basis for continuing DCC adventures. Goodman Games shipped *Dungeon Crawl Classics #66.5: Doom of the Savage Kings* (2012) with pre-orders of the *DCC RPG*, then the series proper continued on with *Sailors on the Starless Sea* (2012).

Goodman Games could have closed up shop due to the failure of 4E, but instead they decided to plunge forward with another of Goodman's trademark innovations. Based on the success of the new *Dungeon Crawl Classics RPG,* it looks like he's struck gold yet again.

Meanwhile, Goodman's time of releasing *D&D* modules may not be done either. A new *Fifth Edition Fantasy* line debuted at Gen Con Indy 2014, offering new adventures for *D&D* 5E (2014).

What to Read Next ○

- For more on the competitiveness of the d20 market, read ***Green Ronin Games*** and ***Mongoose Publishing***.
- For other publishers who created "classic" *D&D* material using the d20 system, read ***Kenzer & Company*** *['90s]*, ***Necromancer Games***, and ***Troll Lord Games.***
- For more on *Quintessentials* and branding, again read ***Mongoose Publishing***.
- For more on adventure subscriptions and early betas, read ***Paizo Publishing***.
- For another steampunk publisher, read ***Privateer Press.***
- For the company that successfully took over for *Dragon* and *Dungeon* (for a time) and yet another steampunk publisher, read ***Kobold Press***.

In Other Eras ⊗ ♀

- For the OGL and d20 System Trademark Licenses, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For a game licensed from *Xenozoic Tales*, read (briefly) about *Cadillacs and Dinosaurs* in ***GDW*** *['70s]*.
- For the Swords & Sorcery label, read ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*.
- For the origins of Blackmoor, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For Goodman's adventure licensors, read Judges Guild *['70s]*, ***Troll Lord Games***, and discussions of Malhavoc Press in ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*.
- For the Points of Light setting and the way 4E third-party publishers were undercut by the GSL and *D&D Insider*, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*
- For the *Dungeoneer* card game, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.
- For *Call of Cthulhu*, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For how the weird dice of *Dungeon Crawl Classics* came to be, read ***Gamescience*** *['70s]*.

On read onward to a d20 publisher who turned to miniatures, ***Privateer Press.***

Privateer Press: 2000-Present

Privateer Press is a company that wouldn't have gotten started without d20. However, they've grown far beyond that common beginning.

Iron Adventures: 2000-2002

Matt Wilson got his start in the industry with AEG around 1995. He art directed first for AEG, then Wizards of the Coast, FASA, and (once more) Wizards of the Coast over the years. The last position was of some note, because it put Wilson at the epicenter of the d20 revolution in 2000, right when it was getting started.

That December, Wilson was sitting on his back porch with friend Brian Snoddy, and they talked about how fun it would be to create their own d20 books. Unlike many dreamers, they decided to make this idea a reality. After bringing in Matt Staroscik to help with the writing, they soon had a publishing house of their own: Privateer Press.



2001: The Longest Night

> *"Little did I know that this was all happening towards the end of my employment with Wizards of the Coast because they had just started downsizing. Soon after they cut all (or at least a great majority) of the artists they had employed at that time. This worked out really well for me because we had Privateer Press ready to go."*
>
> – Matt Wilson, Interview, blog.obsidianportal.com (2010)

Privateer's first publications were a trilogy of adventures: *The Longest Night* (2001), *Shadow of the Exile* (2001), and *The Legion of the Lost* (2001) — which were collectively known as *The Witchfire Trilogy*. They were supplemented by the PDF-only adventure *Fool's Errand* (2001), which could be run between the first two books. Together these adventures helped Privateer Press to establish itself, based on two core strengths.

First, the adventures had great production. With beautiful covers and excellent interior art by Wilson and Snoddy, the books stood out. This was paired with a very low price point for the first two 64-page adventures: just $9.95. Wilson would later admit that this price point came about by mistake: the books had been priced for 48 pages and weren't changed because the price had already been announced.

Second, the adventures had a unique and innovative background called The Iron Kingdoms. It was a "steampunk" setting, mixing dark fantasy with steam-based technology and gunpowder. It was original, innovative, and unlike anything else on the market — though Goodman Games' *Dragonmech* (2004), Wizards of the Coast's *Eberron Campaign Setting* (2004), and Kobold Press' *Midgard Campaign Setting* (2012), have since come to share the market space. The mixture of magic and technology that filled the Iron Kingdoms was first seen in the "warjack," a magical robotic mechanism. It was just barely mentioned in the first Iron Kingdoms adventure, but it was a sign of things to come.

The adventures were much lauded and won Privateer the first of many awards — including ENnies for Best World and Best Art. Though these three books were the entirety of Privateer Press' 2001 print production, they were enough to distinguish Privateer Press among the many d20 publishers.

The next year, Privateer produced two more Iron Kingdoms books: *Lock & Load* (2002), a character primer; and *The Monsternomicon* (2002), an acclaimed monster manual. They also began to promise a complete campaign setting book for the Iron Kingdoms — but in the meantime an even more successful line would appear.

Warmachines & *Hordes:* 2003-Present

Privateer Press only published about a dozen RPG books in the '00s. Though they're original and good quality, that's likely not enough to win them mention amidst these histories. Instead, Privateer Press is notable for how well they've leveraged their RPG success into bigger things.

After those first five RPG books, Privateer's next publication was *Warmachine: Prime* (2003) — a miniatures combat game set in the Iron Kingdoms and centered on warjacks and the warcasters that controlled them. It's been a big hit; in the years since its release *Warmachine* has made Privateer into the industry's #2 non-collectible miniatures company, after Games Workshop. The fact that some retailers are unwilling to deal with Games Workshop because of GW's restrictive business terms is probably what gave Privateer their foothold in the industry.

Warmachine is Privateer's biggest line. It's received major expansions every year, including a second edition of the rules, *Warmachine Mk2* (2010). Privateer has even leveraged the success of *Warmachine* and its setting into a computer game that's being developed with WhiteMoon Dreams; recently, they Kickstarted WhiteMoon's *Warmachine: Tactics* to the tune of $1.6 million dollars.

However, *Warmachine* isn't Privateer's only major miniatures line. They've also released a second major miniatures game called *Hordes* (2006). This more primitive game of giant beast warfare can be played standalone or with hordes and warjacks going head-to-head. There's been a major release for *Hordes* almost every year.

Besides core rules for these two games, Privateer also (of course) produces the miniatures supporting them. Frequent releases make up much of Privateer's modern publications.

Despite their success in miniatures, Privateer continued on with their RPG work through 2007. They kept working on that promised campaign setting book while *Warmachine* was finding its audience; it was finally published in two parts as *Full Metal Fantasy Volume 1* (2004) and *Volume 2* (2005). Highlighting the changes in the industry since Privateer's previous RPG publications, these new books were released under the OGL rather than the d20 license.

With their own setting book in hand, Privateer made a major new push into the roleplaying field: *Liber Mechanika* (2005) provided more information on the "mechanical" entities of the Iron Kingdoms; a new edition of the *Monsternomicon* (2005) updated the book for 3.5E; and *The Witchfire Trilogy* (2005) collected Privateer's original three adventures. However, after that Privateer's RPG publication fizzled out, probably in large part due to the d20 bust. Two final books appeared: *Five Fingers: Port of Death* (2006), a setting book; and *Monsternomicon Volume II* (2007), another monster manual. Privateer's *No Quarter* magazine (2005-Present) continued to support roleplaying for a while, but by the late '00s it was entirely focused on miniatures and Iron Kingdoms fiction.

Though Privateer continued as a very successful miniatures company, it looked for a time like their RPG work was done.

Full Metal Fantasy, Take Two: 2012-Present



In 2012, Privateer Press took a step beyond the setting books that they'd produced in 2004-2005 to publish a long-promised original roleplaying game set in the world of the Iron Kingdom: the *Iron Kingdoms Full Metal Fantasy Roleplaying Game Core Rules* (2012). It was lavishly produced as a hardcover book with full-color illustrations.

The game is based directly on the *Warmachine* rules, which seems to be its biggest strength and weakness. Miniatures fans are thrilled by the conversion, while roleplaying fans seem to have more mixed reactions — as the resulting system is combat-oriented, closely tied to the miniatures rules, and fairly rudimentary in its use of a simple "die + bonus" system.

Since the publication of the rules, Privateer has lightly supplemented *Iron Kingdoms* with a couple of major supplements ever year. Five years after their departure from industry, it now looks like Privateer Press is back — offering up evocative books set in a very well-received world, just like they always have.

What to Read Next ○

- For more steampunk fantasy, read about *Dragonmech* in ***Goodman Games*** and about Zobeck in ***Kobold Press***.

In Other Eras ✕ ☤

- For the origins of the d20 license and yet more steampunk fantasy (in *Eberron*), read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For the first major publisher who moved from RPGs to miniatures, read ***Games Workshop*** *['70s]*.
- For another publisher with closely allied miniatures and RPG lines, read ***Dream Pod 9*** *['90s]*.

For a d20 goliath, read onward to ***Mongoose Publishing.***

Mongoose Publishing: 2001-Present

Though they came to d20 a bit late, Mongoose Publishing carved out a niche for themselves through original d20 sourcebooks. Then, they were able to make the change to non-d20 publishing before the bust.

The Slayer's Guide to Pubs: 2000-2001

In late 2000, Matthew Sprange and Alex Fennell met in a pub in Swindon, England. Fennell was on his way out of the British army — he'd been a Captain — and was considering his next career. Sprange suggested starting a game company, but Fennell was unconvinced and instead joined a 3G (third generation) mobile communication company.



2001: The Slayer's Guide to Hobgoblins

"We knocked about a few ideas, and settled on the idea of a fantasy miniatures game. Quite why we decided upon this, I cannot remember because, looking back, it was faintly ludicrous."

– Matthew Sprange, "Origins of a Mongoose,"
Signs & Portents Wargamer #33 (May 2006)

That, of course, wasn't the end of the story. Over the next few months Sprange put together the rules for a miniatures game, but eventually decided that it was too expensive to produce. Fortunately, he had an alternative that would still allow him to form the gaming company that he was dreaming of: Wizard of the Coast's d20 System Trademark License. Sprange again queried Fennell on the possibility and after six months working in mobile communications, Fennell was interested in taking on a more creative job.

The last thing the two needed was a name. After rejecting "Bitter Tart Games" and "Cosmic Mongoose," Sprange and Fennell finally came up with "Mongoose Publishing."

They also sought out advice from James Wallis — the founder of Hogshead Publishing, one of the few successful UK RPG firms around. Wallis had a standing offer that he'd give anyone advice on setting up a roleplaying company in the UK for the cost of a lunch, promising that he'd keep talking throughout. The newly-christened Mongoose took him up on it. Wallis told Sprange and Fennell plenty of useful things — including the fact that "Any idiot can sell 3,000 copies of something." Mongoose now had a number to swing for.

At first Mongoose was considering publishing d20 adventures. However Sprange had very little experience in penning scenarios, and he'd be writing the company's first books. He also realized that everyone else was already doing adventures — and so there was no way for a new company to stand out.

The alternative was sourcebooks — a path that White Wolf's Sword & Sorcery Studio had taken with its *Creature Collection* (2000), but which was otherwise fairly untouched. The problem here was that sourcebooks were usually big, while Mongoose didn't have the money to produce a large book — nor the time nor expertise to write it. Finally Sprange came up with an alternative: an "ecology" book on a race of monsters — like the articles that ran in *Dragon* magazine, but expanded out to 32 pages. The result was *The Slayer's Guide to Hobgoblins* (2001).

Thanks to these good choices, Mongoose was easily able to beat James Wallis' 3,000-copy challenge. In fact, *The Slayer's Guide to Hobgoblins* quickly sold out. As a result, Fennell gave up his day job, becoming Mongoose's first employee. Sprange joined him a month later.

However Mongoose wasn't successful *just* because they avoided adventures. Sprange and Fennell also approached the company as consummate businessmen:

they'd written an actual business plan. It called for a book published every month; thanks to Fennell's saved army wages, Mongoose was able to afford those additional publications even before they got paid for their first release.

Mongoose was off and running!

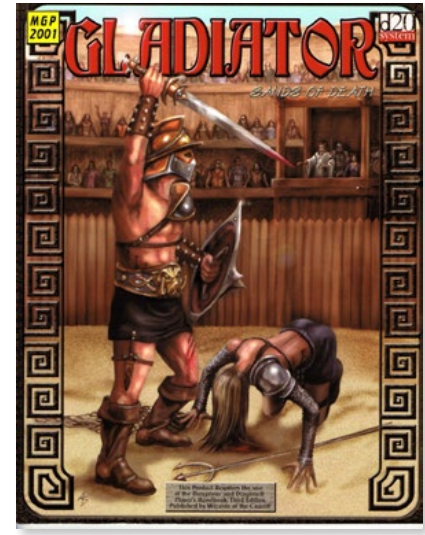
Quintessentials & Other d20 Lines: 2001-2004

Mongoose published four more *Slayer's Guides* in 2001. The series would run to 29 books total (2001-2004). However, the company was also diversifying, with two new series of sourcebooks appearing before year's end.

The *Encyclopaedia Arcane* presented alternative magic systems. The first was *Demonology: The Dark Road* (2001), which was also Mongoose's first perfect-bound 64-page book. Like the *Slayer's Guides*, the *Encyclopaedia Arcane* was a hit — running to 25 volumes (2001-2004).

> *"Everyone else was still working on scenarios, and we had monsters covered. Perhaps something for characters, I mused. After all, there were more players in the world than Games Masters. I hit upon the idea of writing variant magic systems for D20, either simple variations of spells in the Player's Handbook, or completely new rules."*
>
> – Matthew Sprange, "Origins of a Mongoose," Signs & Portents Wargamer #34 (June 2006)

Gladiator: Sands of Death (2001), an 80-page campaign book, wasn't initially part of a series. However, it was soon was included in the *Travellers' Tales* line, which covered distant lands and ocean adventuring. The next book in that series was *Seas of Blood* (2001), which upped Mongoose's page count to 128 pages. The *Tales* line wasn't as well-supported as Mongoose's first two series, but it did come to include four nautical books and a supplement on the Crusades (2001-2002).



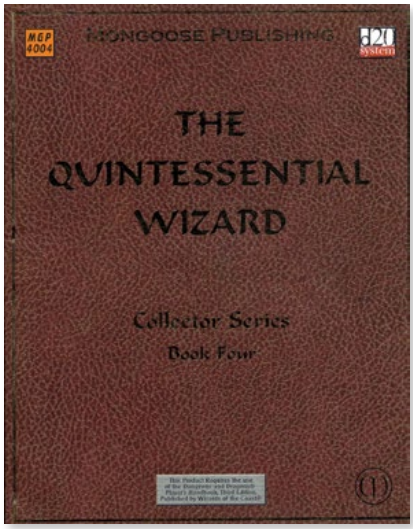
By 2002, the d20 industry grew increasingly competitive and more publishers — including Avalanche Press, Atlas Games, Fantasy Flight Games, Green Ronin, and Paradigm Concepts — were seeing the selling power of sourcebooks. As a result Mongoose Publishing once

more needed to distinguish themselves from their competition. Fortunately they had a new idea.

Back in the days of *AD&D 2e*, TSR published a set of class and race guides called the "PHBR" *Player's Handbook Rules Supplements* (1989-1995). These *Complete Handbooks* were early splatbooks, memorable because of their brown leatherette covers and their gold-leaf cover printing. They'd been a constant presence at gaming tables throughout the '90s, but no one had thought to create anything similar for 3E. Calling the books "quintessential," Mongoose began their own "complete" series with *The Quintessential Fighter* (2002).

These books were broadly similar to the *Complete Handbooks*: each contained specific rules for a single class or race. However, Mongoose decided to take the next step and really throw the similarity in the faces of consumers with some inventive marketing: they printed the *Quintessentials* with brown leatherette covers and gold-leaf cover printing. It was innovative old-school branding of a sort that was only matched by Goodman Games' 3E *Dungeon Crawl Classics* (2005-2008).

Everyone immediately recognized the look of the *Quintessentials*, and they sold like hotcakes. They immediately became Mongoose's best-selling books, and soon became Mongoose's first books to gross more than a million dollars. At one point Mongoose advertised that they were selling a *Quintessential* book every 30 seconds. In the end Mongoose printed 36 different *Quintessential* books through two series (2002-2004).



There were some landmines on the way, because of the competitiveness in the d20 industry. Publishers were constantly stepping on each other's publications — something Mongoose already encountered when their *Seas of Blood* (2001) just barely beat out Fantasy Flight Games' *Seafarer's Handbook* (2001).

Enter Paradigm Concept's announcement of "The Essential Elf," which was eventually published as *Eldest Sons: The Essential Guide to Elves* (2003). When Sprange heard of it, he immediately added *The Quintessential Elf* (2002) to Mongoose's schedule — and actually beat Paradigm Concepts out the door. Sprange would later say that *Quintessential Elf* was the only book he ever publishing in reaction to a competitor — and only to protect the *Quintessential* line, which was by now big bucks for Mongoose.

"Then another publisher announced 'The Essential Elf.' That was way too close for our liking. After all, our gimmick was that our books looked similar to the Complete Handbooks, and there was absolutely nothing to stop another publisher doing the same thing."

– Matthew Sprange, Interview, rpg.net (May 2007)

In fact, the *Quintessential* line was so successful that Mongoose was able to expand. However, they did so in a way unusual for the modern RPG market: by bringing writers in-house. Most '00s RPG publishers instead depended on freelancers, but it (again) made *business* sense for Mongoose to buck this trend. They wanted to assure themselves of more consistently good writing and (more importantly) to make sure they'd get it on deadline.

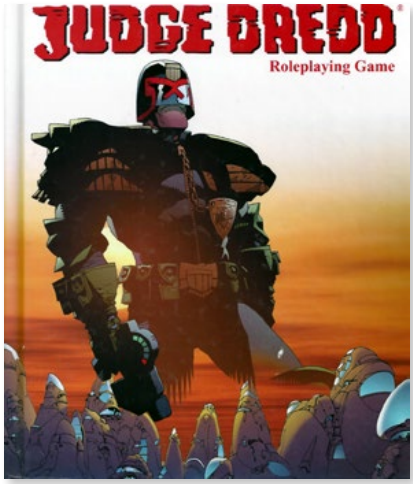
New staff arrived and contributed to Mongoose's existing series: the *Quintessentials*, *Encylopaedias*, and *Slayer's Guides*. Meanwhile, Mongoose premiered a few more fantasy d20 lines that ultimately proved less important to their history. These included: a *Supplementary Rulebook* line (2002-2005), which featured equipment, prestige classes, and other information, and was 100% Open Content; a *Power Classes* line (2002-2003) of new character classes; and a *Classic Play* line (2003-2004) of topical sourcebooks.

From 2001-2004, there's no question that Mongoose was a *major* force in the world of *Dungeons & Dragons* gaming supplements. But that's not all they were doing.

Babylon 5 & Other d20 RPGs: 2002-2005

There was an ecosystem of d20 supplements in the early '00s. Many publishers started out with adventures and from there went to sourcebooks — though companies like White Wolf and Mongoose skipped right to the sourcebook stage. From there publishers began creating their own IP. To do this they either published setting books, or else their own RPGs.

In early 2002, there were just a few original d20 RPGs — among them Goodman Games' *Broncosaurus Rex* (2001), Fantasy Flight's *Dragonstar Starfarer's Handbook* (2001), and Green Ronin's *Mutants & Masterminds* (2002). Of course the line between settings and games was pretty hazy in those days, as most publishers wanted to keep the d20 trademark and so couldn't include complete character creation ... but when a setting went beyond the fantasy genre and when it spawned a whole line of supporting supplements, it was really a brand-new RPG. Since Mongoose was constantly out on the cutting edge of what was new and innovative for d20, it's no surprise that they also got into the d20 RPG business in its earliest days.



Mongoose kicked off their original RPG lines by acquiring a license to *Judge Dredd* (1977-Present) — beginning a long partnership with Rebellion Group, the owner of the *2000AD* comic. Mongoose was then able to publish *The Judge Dredd Roleplaying Game* (2002). It was Mongoose's highest quality book to date, their first hardcover, and their first pseudo-color release: pages were printed with full-color borders, and then the actual book was printed in black & white on those colored sheets. Like all of Mongoose's early RPGs, *Judge Dredd* used the d20 trademark — as the mark was still a boon in those days, prior to the d20 bust.

Mongoose's second RPG, *Sláine, The Roleplaying Game of Celtic Fantasy* (2002), was based on another *2000AD* license. This RPG was much nearer to *D&D* norms, though it differentiated itself with some new concepts, such as "enech" — a sort of reputation and honor.

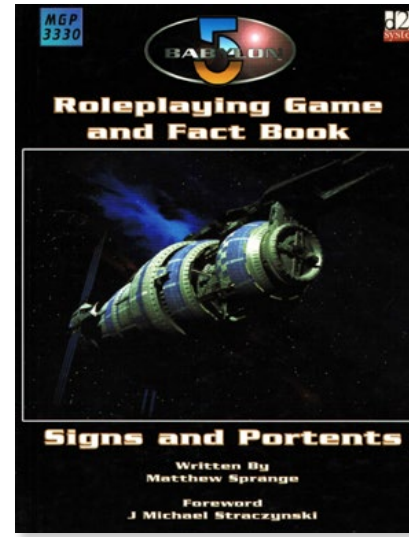
Mongoose's third d20 RPG of the period, *Armageddon: 2089* (2003), was their only entirely original setting. It envisioned a future world with giant mechs.

Mongoose's fourth and final RPG of the d20-boom era was *The Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game and Factbook* (2003). This licensed game was based on J. Michael Straczynski's *Babylon 5* TV show (1993-1998). It was the second RPG for the setting, following Chameleon Eclectic's short-lived *The Babylon Project* (1997), but Mongoose would ultimately be able to support their game better, thanks to their continued success.

> *"The Babylon 5 RPG was completely written and ready to go before we so much as sniffed a contract. That was some risk, as they could have told us to bugger off at any point. What can I say? Inspiration overtook me!"*
>
> – Matthew Sprange, "Origins of a Mongoose," Signs & Portents Wargamer #34 (June 2006)

In fact, Mongoose was able to support all four of their d20 RPGs decently well throughout the d20 boom. They already learned how to support RPGs quickly and constantly through their work on d20 fantasy books; now they applied those rules to their in-house releases. As a result *Armageddon: 2089* received seven

supplements (2003), *Sláine* got 10 (2002-2003), and *Judge Dredd* racked up 15 (2002-2004).



Finally, *Babylon 5* had over twenty supplements for what would turn out to be just the first edition of its line (2003-2005). It received so much support because it was another Mongoose best-seller, surpassed only by the *Quintessential* books. As a result, it would survive the fast-approaching d20 bust while Mongoose's other d20 RPGs would not.

To further support their original RPGs, Mongoose also began publication on their own magazine: *Signs & Portents*. It originally focused on d20, but later became a magazine covering everything that Mongoose published. While *Signs & Portents* only lasted for two years in print (2003-2005), it continued on as a free online publication (2005-2011) for years afterward.

The d20 Bust: 2003-2006

As is described in the history of Wizards of the Coast and elsewhere, the d20 boom turned into a d20 bust starting in 2003. We've already seen some of the effects the bust had on Mongoose. *Armageddon: 2089* and *Sláine* both ended their runs in 2003. Even popular lines like the *Slayer's Guides*, the *Encyclopedia Arcane*, and the *Quintessential* volumes came to an end in 2004. By the end of the year, *Babylon 5* was Mongoose's last line standing from its early days.

Meanwhile, the d20 trademark had grown toxic, so companies began to publish standalone RPGs using the Open Gaming License (OGL) instead. These new games had more freedom, because they didn't need to depend on the *D&D* core books, and the result was ultimately more saleable in the industry's post-d20 reality.

As usual, Mongoose was in the lead on this trend. From 2003 to 2006, they published six d20-based OGL games: *Conan: The Roleplaying Game* (2003-2009); *Lone Wolf: The Roleplaying Game* (2004-2005); *Jeremiah: The Roleplaying Game* (2005); *Starship Troopers: The Roleplaying Game* (2005-2006); *WARS Roleplaying Game* (2005) and *Infernum*, a three-volume series about roleplaying in Hell (2005). As part of this initiative, Mongoose also revamped their *B5* game as *Babylon 5: The Roleplaying Game, Second Edition* (2006-2009) — a seventh OGL release.

Mini-History

Morrigan Press: 2004-2008

Morrigan Press was a Canadian company that got its start with a PDF *d20 Crime* line (2004) and a d20 *Jeremiah* RPG (2005) that was published by Mongoose. Shortly afterward, they licensed the *Talislanta* setting from Stephan Michael Sechi and also bought the rights to two of his *Atlantis* rules books – *The Lexicon* and *The Bestiary*.

Morrigan built on their d20 expertise by publishing *Talislanta d20* (2005). However, they also supported the fourth edition (2001) of the game's original rules system through a series of supplements (2005-2006).

At the same time, Morrigan Press was creating a new generic gaming system using the *Talislanta* fourth edition rules as a basis. *The Omni System* (2005) was rules light, a fact that Morrigan advertised with their slogan: "play great, less filling." It became the foundation for a new edition of *Atlantis* called *Atlantis: The Second Age* (2005). A few other *Omni* games followed: *eco* (2005) was a game of sentient animals; *High Medieval* (2005) was a historical FRPG; and *Trade Authority Roleplaying Game* (2006) was a science-fiction RPG based on a series of classic illustrated science-fiction books (1978-1980).

Talislanta wasn't forgotten. Morrigan announced they'd be releasing a new three-book edition of the rules for 2007. Unfortunately, Morrigan faced a big setback that year when one of their main shareholders pulled out of the company. Simultaneously, Morrigan failed to renew their incorporation and stopped communicating with their fans, suggested there were other problems. Morrigan did eventually get all three fifth edition *Talislanta* books out, ending with *A Gamemaster's Guide to Talislanta* (2007), but that was their final publication.

In 2011, Khepera Publishing purchased the rights to *Atlantis*, resulting in a new *Atlantis: The Second Age Beta* (2013). Meanwhile, rights to *Talislanta* reverted to Sechi. Morrigan today continues to sell their last few games through DriveThruRPG.

A few of these OGL RPGs did well. *Starship Troopers* quickly became Mongoose's #3 line, with about a half-dozen support books, while *Conan* jumped straight to #4. Both *Conan* and *Babylon 5* would be supported until 2009 — well after Mongoose had otherwise left the d20 market behind. The other five games didn't fare as well due to the newfound weakness of d20. Few of the new RPGs got more than a few supplements. Sometimes Mongoose didn't even publish supplements it had in hand. For example, *WARS: Soul and Steel* never saw print; it was instead run in *Signs & Portents* from #39 (December 2006) to #51 (December 2007).

While ramping up their support for OGL games, Mongoose hit upon another idea: creating "toolkits" that could be used to run OGL games in various settings.



They published five of these genre books: *OGL Cybernet* (2003), *OGL Horror* (2003), *OGL Ancients* (2004), *OGL Steampunk* (2004), and *OGL Wild West* (2005). These OGL books could have really opened up the d20 market if other companies bought into them, but in the end they were probably too late.

During the later d20 years, Mongoose didn't abandon the d20 fantasy market entirely; they believed that unique and evocative products could still stand out, even *with* the d20 mark. Ironically, this led them to publish d20 adventures for the first time ever. The three-book *Drow War* (2005) and the *Ruins of the Dragon Lord* (2005) were both intended to be "complete campaigns," much like the adventure paths that Paizo Publishing had run in *Dungeon* magazine. Unfortunately, the d20 market was too badly wounded for them to gain traction.

It's fitting that Mongoose Publishing — a company that got its start publishing d20 sourcebooks — ended its d20 fantasy publication with a trio of sourcebooks: *Epic Monsters* (2006), *Renegade Cleric's Tome* (2006), and *Renegade Wizard's Spellbook* (2006). After that, Mongoose was pretty much out of the d20 business. Though their *Babylon 5* and *Conan* OGL lines continued for three more years, Mongoose was looking toward other sorts of RPGs for their future ... and other sorts of games entirely.

The First Miniatures Era: 2004-2009

The original concept for Mongoose had been to create a wargaming miniatures company. Now, as they stepped back from d20, Mongoose was finally able to fulfill this dream.

By leveraging their general success and their existing licenses, Mongoose produced several miniatures games including: *Babylon 5's A Call to Arms* (2004); a fantasy wargame called *Mighty Armies* (2004); *Judge Dredd's Gangs of Mega-City One* (2005); *Starship Troopers: The Miniatures Game* (2005); the WWII-focused *Victory at Sea* (2006); and the near-future *Battlefield Evolution* (2007).

Mongoose supplemented these games by producing their own miniatures. This new expertise also allowed them to supplement some of their existing lines

— such as when they put out *Lone Wolf* miniatures. Most of the miniatures were unpainted, but the *Battlefield Evolution* line came pre-painted.

For a time in the mid-'00s, miniatures seemed to be half of Mongoose's business, resulting *Signs & Portents* splitting into two magazines: *Signs & Portents Roleplayer* and *Signs & Portents Wargamer* ran side-by-side from #26 (September 2005) to #53 (February 2008).

However, by 2008 the miniatures games were on a downward trend and by the end of 2009 everything but *Victory at Sea* vanished. Though the trend was largely transitory, Mongoose's first wave of miniatures games helped the company through the hard times of the d20 bust, but it weren't the only line to do so.

An Ode to the Eighties: 1975-1986

To understand the history of roleplaying companies in the UK, we need to understand that it's always been a somewhat isolated market — particularly during the origins of the industry in the '70s. RPGs only made it into the UK when someone imported them.

As is described in their own history, Games Workshop was one of the biggest importers of RPGs in the late '70s and early '80s. They had a tremendous impact on the popularity of games in the UK based on what they imported, reprinted, and supported at conventions.

Games Workshop started reprinting GDW's *Traveller* in 1979, Chaosium's *RuneQuest* in 1982, and West End's *Paranoia* in 1986 — and all three became part of the UK's RPG gestalt. Of these three games, *RuneQuest* received special attention in the UK — attendees of the UK Games Day regularly ranked it the #1 RPG in the country. Meanwhile, the UK was also originating some games of their own, including Games Workshop's *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (1986), Corgi Books' *Dragon Warriors* RPG (1985), and Joe Dever's *Lone Wolf* (1984) gamebooks. When you put that all together, an RPG culture emerges in the UK somewhat varied from the RPG culture of the US, where games like *Paranoia*, *Traveller*, *RuneQuest*, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *Dragon Warriors*, and the *Lone Wolf* gamebooks take a special prominence.

Ten to fifteen years later, when the fans of the '80s became the publishers of the '90s and the '00s, this RPG culture came full circle. The history of Hogshead Publishing talks about how that UK RPG publisher revived *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, while we've already noted that Mongoose published a d20 version of *Lone Wolf*.

From 2005 onward, this history of UK roleplaying would play an increasingly large part in the history of Mongoose Publishing. You couldn't have known it

back in 2005, but within five years, Mongoose would bring most of the UK hits of yesteryear back to life.

New Feelings of *Paranoia:* 2004-2012

Paranoia (1984) — by Dan Gelber, Eric Goldberg, and Greg Costikyan — is a satirical game of near-future backstabbing under the oversight of The Computer. It was originally published by West End Games and is largely covered in their history. It made its way into the UK through GW reprints of the first edition (1986) and the second edition (1987), as well as an adventure compilation called *Double Paranoia* (1986).

Its late entry into the UK market kept it from being as big as early games like *RuneQuest* or *Traveller*, but it was supported by *White Dwarf* from #81 (September 1986) to #91 (July 1987). "UFANS NOITAREPO," a *Paranoia* adventure in *White Dwarf #84* (December 1986), was one of James Wallis' earliest professional sales.

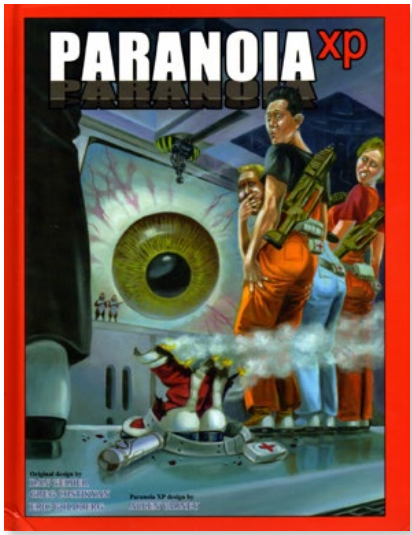
Over at West End, the game suffered several deaths. First, when line editor Ken Rolston left around 1988, then when the Computer was crashed in 1989, then when the game largely died out in 1992, and finally when a short-lived fifth edition appeared in 1995. Following West End's bankruptcy in 1999, the original designers were able to reclaim the game in 2000. By the early '00s, Mongoose found themselves bidding against Chaosium and Z-Man Games to become a new publisher of *Paranoia*. They finally won out, giving them a new RPG to help fill the hole left behind by d20.

Designers Costikyan & Goldberg gave Mongoose several suggestions for a line editor, one of whom was Allen Varney — who had been involved with *Paranoia* since his co-authorship of *Send in the Clones* (1985). Mongoose selected Varney to both write new rules and to package a product line. He managed the latter with the help of his "Traitor Recycling Studio" — an unusual arrangement for Mongoose, who as we've seen did most of their RPG writing in-house.

> *"The first edition (1984) and second edition (1987) of Paranoia were, of course, perfect. The Computer says so. This edition is even more perfect."*
>
> – Paranoia XP (2004)

The line kicked off with *Paranoia XP* (2004), a new edition of the rules mockingly named after the then-current version of *Microsoft Windows*. Certain people in Redmond, Washington, did not have a sense of humor, however, and the book was soon after re-released as *Paranoia* (2005).

The new rules were slick and played quickly — offering the same simplicity that *Paranoia* enjoyed at its height, but completely revamped thanks to another two decades of game design. The setting was obviously familiar, but it had been updated to better accommodate new technology of the late '90s and early '00s such as PDAs and the Internet. The game was well-received, and it was soon supplemented by a series of adventures and sourcebooks that ran from the updated reprints found in *Flashbacks* (2005) to new releases.



Though the *Paranoia* line received critical acclaim, it was less successful financially. As a result, Mongoose put it on hold in 2006 and 2007 when they were trying to pull their printing in-house, a topic we'll return to. After that gap, Mongoose published the Traitor Studio's final two books, *Stuff 2: The Gray Subnets* (2007) and *Flashbacks II* (2007), and then they pulled the *Paranoia* writing in-house where Mongoose regular Gareth Hanrahan oversaw it.

By this time, Mongoose was increasingly seeing a split, where rulebooks sold great and adventures didn't. As a result, they came up with a plan to rerelease *Paranoia* as not one but three rulebooks. *Paranoia: Troubleshooters* (2009) was basically a revision of Varney's previous edition of the game. *Paranoia: Internal Security* (2009) was a new game that gave players the opportunity to play blue-level Internal Security Troopers, taking after Ken Rolston's classic *HIL Sector Blues* (1986). Finally, *Paranoia: High Programmers* (2010) broke new ground, giving players the option to take on the roles of the Computer's right-hand men.

> *"The first edition (1984), second edition (1987) and [redacted due to legal action by a certain megacorporation] of Paranoia were, of course, perfect. The Computer says so. This Anniversary Edition is even more perfect."*
>
> – Paranoia: Troubleshooters (2009)

Mongoose found instant enthusiasm for the new books, which let them also print limited editions of each release: a thousand copies of the limited edition *Paranoia: Troubleshooters Black Missions* (2009) and a hundred each of the

limited edition *Paranoia: Internal Security Blue Line* (2009) and *Paranoia: High Programmers White Washes* (2010).

Unfortunately, the new games still didn't crack the problem of adventure sales. At first, Mongoose tried to solve it with cheaply produced 32-page adventures (2010-2011), but then the company began to hit some serious financial and staffing problems that we'll return to down the line. Two final hardcovers of updated reprints closed out the line's nine-year run at Mongoose: *Flashbacks Redux* (2011) and *Flashbacks Redux Redux* (2012).

Most of Mongoose's hardcopy *Paranoia* books have since gone out of print, while their *Paranoia* PDFs have gone offline. Whether a revival might be in the works for the game's 30th anniversary remains up in the air.

New Quests for Runes: 2006-2011

RuneQuest (1978) — by Steve Perrin and Rudy Kraft, set in the world of Glorantha created by Greg Stafford — is a mythical fantasy roleplaying game. It was at times published by Chaosium and by Avalon Hill and is largely covered in their histories. It made its way into the UK through a Games Workshop reprint of the second edition box (1982) as well as reprints of other notable supplements like *Cults of Prax* and *Griffin Mountain*.

GW's support of *RuneQuest* in the UK market was both long and deep. It started as far back as "Lair of the White Worm" in *White Dwarf #14* (August/September 1979) and became serious after GW licensed the game for UK reprints. That's when the "RuneRites" column began in *White Dwarf #30* (April/May 1982) with "Unarmed Combat in *RuneQuest*." The column continued through "First Then, First That," another set of combat variations that appeared in *White Dwarf #73* (January 1986). RuneRites is best known for its long-time editor, Oliver Dickinson — who is also creator of the fictional Gloranthan heroine Griselda.

Support for *RuneQuest* in the UK began to waver when Chaosium licensed the game to Avalon Hill in 1984 — who then cut Games Workshop out of the licensing loop. Games Workshop *did* manage to get a new license to print UK editions of *RuneQuest* books in 1986, resulting in a series of handsome hardcover books (1987) — but by then GW was on its way out of the RPG business. Meanwhile, US *RuneQuest* floundered through a set of sometimes-conflicting management decisions at Avalon Hill that finally resulted in the game being killed in 1994. Chaosium pulled Avalon Hill's Glorantha license in 1997.

The history of Issaries records what happens next. Greg Stafford left Chaosium, taking with him the rights to Glorantha. Next, he claimed the *RuneQuest* trademark when Hasbro let it lapse. As a result, Stafford was able to put the pieces back together and license a Gloranthan *RuneQuest* game to Mongoose. There

was one catch: Issaries' existing *HeroQuest* (2003) game was based in *RuneQuest*'s traditional "third age" Gloranthan setting. So Stafford set aside a new era for Mongoose to use: the "second age."

> *"We keep an eye on several arenas for possible new licenses, including TV and film, and given the success of Paranoia, we had proved that 'classic' RPGs were still very much in demand. Gamers just wanted them brought up to date, so to speak."*
>
> – Matthew Sprange, Interview, rpg.net (August 2006)



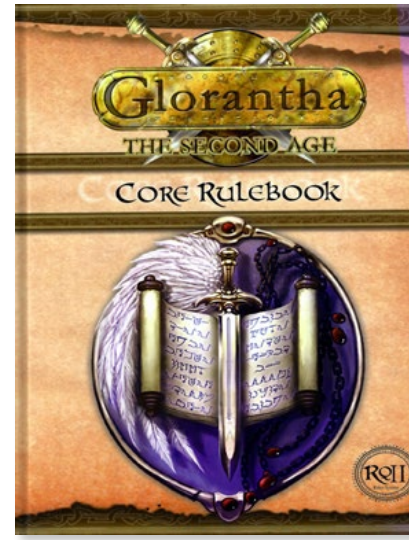
Mongoose's *RuneQuest* (2006), by Matthew Sprange, was released to mixed reviews. Though the game was polished, it didn't necessarily stay true to the original game. There were some quirks in the skill system and the cult system was underused, but most critics focused on the fact that the new rune magic system required characters to quest after literal runes — a far cry from the easy and ubiquitous "battle magic" of previous editions.

Despite any complaints, the game did well; in the post-d20 world, it quickly became Mongoose's top-selling line. To support it, Mongoose produced a series of "universal" supplements and also launched several *RuneQuest* setting lines. The largest led off with Robin Laws' *Glorantha: The Second Age* (2006) — which described the new Gloranthan era, set 600 years before the Hero Wars of previous *RuneQuest* games. Two other settings also appeared — *Fritz Leiber's Lankhmar* (2006) and a *RuneQuest* edition of *Sláine* (2007) — though neither was well-supported.

In 2007, two events helped the *RuneQuest* line to expand. First, Lawrence Whitaker joined Mongoose. The Australian author had long experience with *RuneQuest*'s *BRP* system thanks to his work on Chaosium's Eternal Champion games in the '90s. Second, Mongoose arranged a pair of agreements so that Chaosium dropped their license to Michael Moorcock's Eternal Champion and then Michael Moorcock wrote a new license for Mongoose. Putting these events together, it was no surprise when Lawrence Whitaker became the author of Mongoose's fourth *RuneQuest* setting, *Elric of Melniboné* (2007); Gareth Hanrahan wrote their fifth, *Hawkmoon: The Roleplaying Game* (2007).

From 2006-2009, Mongoose's *RuneQuest* line boomed — particularly after Whitaker took a hand in the authorship of many critical books. In total, Mongoose published about 40 books for their original *RuneQuest* game, mainly spread across their universal, *Glorantha: The Second Age*, and *Elric* lines. Mongoose also developed an OGL-like license to allow other publishers to use their *RuneQuest* system. Unfortunately, they opted to pull it in 2010 because not enough publishers had used it to make it worth Mongoose's while. Though *RuneQuest* was Mongoose's answer to d20, it didn't have the legs to support a secondary small press market.

By 2010, Lawrence Whitaker and Pete Nash decided to revamp Mongoose's *RuneQuest* game, resulting in the *RuneQuest II Core Rulebook* (2010) — the first of a brand-new *RuneQuest II* line. The rules were considerably more polished and also returned *RuneQuest* to its roots by reintroducing traditional battle magic, dropping the idea of physical runes, and restoring cults to their old prominence; the *RuneQuest II* rules also built on modern game design ideas with new mechanics such as a more tactical combat system. Physically, the new *RuneQuest* II releases were Mongoose's most beautiful *RuneQuest* books ever, featuring leatherette covers for the "universal" volumes and beautiful grayscale layouts.



While fan reaction had been mixed for Mongoose's first *RuneQuest*, reaction was much more positive toward *RuneQuest II* — even from old-time fans. Around 20 supplements appeared in 2010, some of which included notable improvements over previous releases: the new *Glorantha: The Second Age Core Rulebook* (2010) included many more crunchy rules for creating characters, while hardcover compilations like *Cults of Glorantha* (2010) and *Races of Glorantha, Volume I* (2010) unified and expanded disparate books from the previous edition. The *Elric* and *Lankhmar* settings also received new support in *RQII*, as did two original settings created by Mongoose: *Deus Vult* (2010), a 12th century setting by Gareth Hanrahan, and *Wraith Recon* (2010), a fantasy warfare setting by Pete Nash — which we'll meet momentarily in an earlier incarnation. Mongoose also hoped to revamp the d20 *Conan* as a *RuneQuest* line, but their licensor refused, so Mongoose let the line lapse.

Unfortunately, *RQII*'s well-received revamp coincided with the financial and staffing problems of 2010-2011 that we've already touched upon. In addition, Whitaker resigned in October 2010. Mongoose's support of the new game sputtered out in 2011 and so in August 2011, Greg Stafford and Mongoose announced that they were dissolving their license. Afterward, Pete Nash left the company too.

For fans of the system, there were two optimistic epilogues.

First, Mongoose decided to release a new system based on the work that Sprange, Whitaker, and Nash had done on *RuneQuest* — a topic that we'll return to.

Second, Whitaker and Nash decided to form a new company and license *RuneQuest* directly from Stafford. The Design Mechanism then produced *RuneQuest 6* (2012), an update of *RuneQuest II*. If the numbering looks funny, it's because The Design Mechanism counted up the two Chaosium editions, the one Avalon Hill edition, and the two Mongoose editions — for five previous *RuneQuest* releases.

New Books of Wolfs: 2007-2013

Lone Wolf (1984-1998) — by Joe Dever — is a series of fantasy gamebooks. This sort of solo adventure game was very popular following the release of *Fighting Fantasy* (1982-1995), as is recounted in the history of Games Workshop. Dever's gamebook line had a deep setting called Magnamund and a continuing storyline that ran across the books — both of which were innovative elements within the gamebook genre. *Lone Wolf* was originally to be produced for GW, but Dever ended up going with Sparrow Books instead.

In all, Dever produced 28 connected books for the UK publishers of Sparrow Books, Beaver Books, and Red Fox. Several related Magnamund gamebooks and a few novels also appeared. They were *highly* influential in the UK hobby. Mongoose founder Matthew Sprange and Cubicle 7 founder Dominic McDowall are just a few of the notable designers in Britain who found their way into the hobby thanks to *Lone Wolf*. The books also appeared in America thanks to publishers Pacer and Berkley.

Unfortunately, none of *Lone Wolf*'s publishers completed the line's run. The 28 books produced in the UK didn't quite finish the story, while only 20 of those books were produced in the US. By 1998, *Lone Wolf* was dead and swiftly dropping out of print.

In 2007, Mongoose licensed *Lone Wolf* and rather ambitiously announced they'd be publishing a complete 32-book series in handsome hardcover volumes that they called "Collectors Editions." Mongoose would also be expanding the



volumes as they went — either with new paths or with short, complementary adventures.

The Mongoose production started off strongly with *Flight from the Dark* (2007), *Fire on the Water* (2007), and *The Caverns of Kalte* (2007) all appearing in the first year. Unfortunately, Mongoose never managed to publish more than several books a year and by the time they published the 14th book, *The Captives of Kaag* (2010), they really slowed down. After that, only one or two books appeared each year through the 17th release, *The Deathlord of Ixia* (2012).

Despite this slowdown, Mongoose was also trying to expand the property with Matthew Sprange's *Lone Wolf Multiplayer Gamebook* (2010) — which allowed group roleplaying in the Magnamund setting. *Lone Wolf Multiplayer* was well-supported with supplements (2010-2012) that detailed the setting of Magnamund for the first time since the brief *Magnamund Companion* (1986). However, these RPG supplements also largely disappeared in 2012.

> *"The margins on these books are wafer thin (a new title costs two to three times more to print than your average 256 page hardback RPG book), making it exceedingly difficult for us to tie up financial resources in a print run."*
>
> – Matthew Sprange, "The State of the Mongoose 2012," mongoosepublishing.com (December 2012)

By the start of 2013, no new *Lone Wolf* or *Lone Wolf Multiplayer* books had been published in about a year. Sprange acknowledged that the line had two major problems: it was very expensive to keep the whole series in print; and the gamebooks had very narrow profit margins. Though Mongoose wanted to continue with the series, Dever reclaimed the rights.

Since then, German licensee Mantikore Verlag has picked up the English rights to the *Lone Wolf* gamebooks, and is using them to continue with the series of Collectors Editions. They quickly published book #18, *Dawn of the Dragons* (2013) and made it look as much like the Mongoose editions as they could. Mantikore plans to print the rest of the 32 books — just as Mongoose intended. Meanwhile, Dever has licensed Cubicle 7 to produce a new multiplayer *Lone Wolf* RPG.

New Printing & New Partners: 2007-2009

Mongoose carried themselves through the d20 bust period with a variety of successful new lines including *Babylon 5 Second Edition*, *Conan*, *Lone Wolf*, *Paranoia*, *RuneQuest*, and several miniatures games. Of them, *RuneQuest* was the most successful.

Approaching 2007, Mongoose was increasingly stable, and this gave them an opportunity to both expand and revamp their business.

> *"[W]e have been able to prove, consistently, that sales runs of 10,000 units and above are still achievable in the roleplaying market."*
>
> – Matthew Sprange, The State of the Mongoose (2007)

Thinking big, Mongoose decided to create their own printing facility. It would be a high-tech printing facility that would simultaneously let Mongoose print as cheaply as China and also offer better quality printing thanks to high-tech integration. Sprange even envisioned a near future where consumers could pick and choose exactly what they wanted in a book that could be printed especially for them.

Hand-in-hand with this, Mongoose launched an initiative that they called "Flaming Cobra." The idea was for Mongoose to use their new printing press to publish books for small press companies. They'd be able to produce beautiful full-color books that were far beyond the means of smaller publishers, and it'd still be quite cheap for them to do so. The first publishers to join Flaming Cobra were: Crafty Games, the owner of *Spycraft* (2002); and two small d20 publishers, 12 to Midnight and Eternity Publishing. WildFire, who had been working for years to publish a game called "CthulhuTech," soon followed, as did Italian d20 publisher Asterion Press.

Unfortunately, Mongoose's printing plans turned into a disaster. The first Flaming Cobra books were scheduled for September 2006, but months dragged by without their appearance. The Flaming Cobra program only kicked off with Silven Publishing's *Secret Societies* (2006) after Mongoose published it by other means. By the time 2007 rolled around, Mongoose was sure that a working printing facility was just around the corner, and so they shut down their book production for four months while they waited.

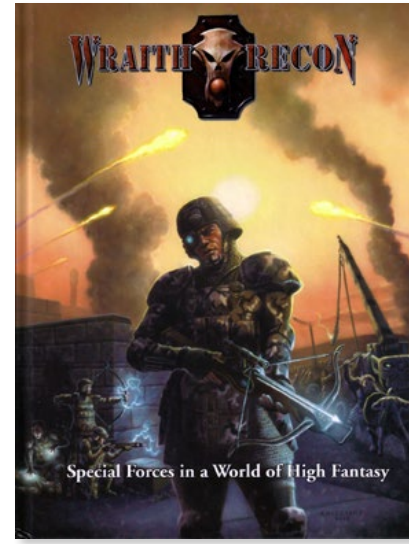
When the printing plant finally came online, Mongoose found that the results weren't up to their standards. The printing was decent enough — if not quite at the resolution of a typical offset press. The binding, however, was quite poor — with many books having rippled spines that didn't correctly fit inside their hardcover

casings. Mongoose fought with their printing press through February 2008, lost some real reputation along the way, and finally junked the whole project.

Despite the problems, Mongoose managed to publish almost a half-dozen Flaming Cobra books, including three complete RPGs: WildFire's Lovecraftian *Cthulhutech* (2007); Asterion's d20 *Nephandum* (2007); and Crafty Game's d20 *Spycraft* (2007). Even after the printing press initiative failed, Mongoose decided to keep the Flaming Cobra program going with their normal offsite printers. However there was one notable departure: WildFire left for Catalyst Game Labs because Mongoose could no longer produce full-color books.

Meanwhile, new Flaming Cobra partners emerged: James Wallis' Magnum Opus Press brought a new edition of *Dragon Warriors* (2008), putting yet another classic UK game under Mongoose's umbrella; Wicked World Games contributed *Noctum* (2009), a rare translation of a Swedish Game for the English market; Brutal Games offer up their *Corporation* (2009) cyberpunk game; and finally RedBrick brought in several classic RPG lines, beginning with a third edition release of the classic *Earthdawn* game (2009). Chimaera Studios, ComStar Games, Exploding Goat Games, Postmortem Studios, and Reality Deviant Publications also briefly joined Flaming Cobra.

Meanwhile, Mongoose was also going to support Wizards of the Coast's fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (2008) with two new game lines. They created *Wraith Recon* (2008), by Bryan Steele, themselves. It was a "special forces" take on a fantasy world where military operatives served king and country while fighting dark forces. Flaming Cobra publisher Asterion Press was simultaneously allowed to publish a fourth edition of the *Quintessential* series, beginning with *The Quintessential Wizard* (2008). Unfortunately, 4E did poorly for Mongoose. The new *Quintessential* books died in early 2009 after just three releases, while *Wraith Recon* was converted to *RQII* in 2010.



Mongoose made one more big change in late 2008: a partnership bigger than their deals with various Flaming Cobra partners and even bigger than their license to *D&D 4E*. In 2008, Mongoose Publishing joined the Rebellion Group — the company that owned the *2000AD* properties.

Mongoose co-founder Alex Fennell left the company in 2009, but nonetheless it

looked like Mongoose was doing great: they had new partners, new resources, and a new setting in *Wraith Recon*. Even better, they revived yet another classic game — and one that would be their most successful to date.

New Travels to the Stars: 2008-Present

Traveller (1977) — by Marc Miller — is the science-fiction RPG that ruled the genre for the first decade of its existence. It was originally published by GDW and is largely covered in their history. It made its way into the UK through Games Workshop imports and then through British reprints that began as early as 1979; Games Workshop even put out a few original accessories for the game: *IISS Ship Files* (1981), *Personal Data Files* (1981), and *Starship Layout Sheets* (1981).

Traveller was also a favorite in *White Dwarf*, starting with "The Experienced *Traveller*," a two-part article on experience in *Traveller* that ran in *White Dwarf #9* (October/November 1978) and #10 (December 1978/January 1979). *White Dwarf* began their *Traveller* support in earnest in #20 (August/September 1980) when Bob McWilliams' "Starbase" column began with "*Traveller* Campaigns." McWilliams' column ran for years, ending in an article called "3-D Space" in *White Dwarf #73* (January 1986). This was the same issue that marked the end of *White Dwarf*'s RuneRites column, showing the general move away from licensed properties in *White Dwarf* — though a few one-off *Traveller* articles appeared as late as "Mercy Mission," an adventure in *White Dwarf #82* (October 1986).

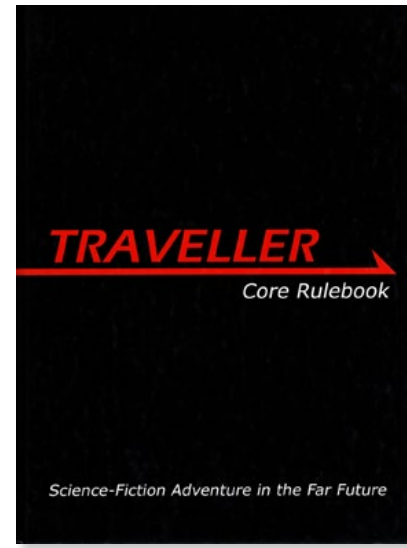
By the time that *Traveller* began to fade in the UK, it'd also gone into a long-term decline in the United States — with later editions *MegaTraveller* (1987) and *Traveller: The New Era* (1993) selling to ever-shrinking player bases. *Traveller* was GDW's last line standing in 1996 when the company shut down. Afterward, the *Traveller* rights returned to Marc W. Miller, which is how he licensed them to Mongoose — though only after some earlier licenses to Imperium Games and Steve Jackson Games, which are described in other histories. By the time Mongoose picked up the *Traveller* license, the game had been out of print in its original form for a decade — or twice that if you count back to the release of *MegaTraveller*.

Mongoose proceeded to publish the *Traveller Core Rulebook* (2008), which was another volume authored by Gareth Hanrahan. The game system owed the most to GDW's original 1977 game — though it polished a lot of mechanics and added a simple universal task system and tactical combat. The graphical layout of the book — from its stark interiors to its black and red cover — was surprisingly utilitarian, but also quite fitting for the line. The new *Traveller* was well-received and managed to outsell *RuneQuest*, becoming Mongoose's new #1 game.

"The open playtest was an astonishing [experience]. Fans did more than just test a few rules and say whether or not they liked them – they wrote whole subsystems, re-edited sections, did statistical analyses and spent thousands of hours discussing the game."

– Gareth Hanrahan, "The Road So Far Travelled," Signs & Portents #55 (April 2008)

After releasing the core rules, Mongoose heavily supported *Traveller* — mostly with two game lines that matched series published by GDW three decades previous. The "Books" each gave more info on *Traveller* professions and their genres of play, starting with *Traveller Book 1: Mercenary* (2008). Meanwhile the "Supplements" each provided gamemaster material, much of it centering on NPCs or vehicles. The first of those was *Traveller Supplement 1: 760 Patrons* (2008). Mongoose also briefly tried out "Adventures," beginning with *Traveller Adventure 1: Beltstrike* (2009); however, they weren't successful enough to continue.





Mongoose supplemented these "universal" books with new setting lines. The first was the *Third Imperium* line, which was set in the "Original Traveller Universe." It kicked off with *The Spinward Marches* (2008), by Martin Dougherty — a major *Traveller* writer who had written for Steve Jackson Games and his own Avenger Enterprises, and who continued to produce independent work through ComStar Games and Flaming Cobra. *The Spinward Marches* was well-received, as were the several *Third Imperium* alien and sector books that followed.

The other new *Traveller* settings were all licensed properties. *Judge Dredd* (2009) and *Strontium Dog* (2009) were both 2000AD RPGs that took advantage of Mongoose's new connection to the

Rebellion Group; while *Hammer's Slammers* (2009) adapted the popular military SF novels by David Drake.

Mongoose's final *Traveller* setting of the '00s was an old one: *Universe of Babylon 5* (2009) converted Mongoose's d20 SF setting to the *Traveller* system. The book was published just as the *Babylon 5* license expired — taking both it and the d20 game out of print shortly thereafter. Though Mongoose stated the license lapsed because it was "old," the later days of the license were plagued with acrimony due to a disagreement between Mongoose and *B5* creator J. Michael Straczynski about *Babylon 5* fiction that Mongoose had hoped to publish.

More recently, Mongoose has published a sixth setting for their *Traveller* game: *2300AD* (2012), which adapts another famous RPG from GDW's Days of Yore.

Many of Mongoose's product lines have faded away in the '10s; not so with *Traveller*. We'll see that print production has declined, but nonetheless Mongoose continues to publish generic books, Original Universe books, *2300AD* books, and even *Judge Dredd* books under the *Traveller* label.

Anarchy in the UK: 2010-Present

At first, Mongoose seemed very pleased with their merger into the Rebellion Group and was taking full advantage of the resources this partnership gave them. We've already seen that this allowed them to publish two *2000AD Traveller* games. They also sold some of *2000AD*'s comic collections and published three volumes of the *Judge Dredd Mega-City One Archives* (2010), a set of *Judge Dredd* encyclopedias.

Unfortunately, by the start of 2010, Mongoose had come to the conclusion that the administrative and fiscal policies of the Rebellion Group didn't fit with those of Mongoose. They'd been shoved into a niche that only allowed them to produce RPGs, while bureaucracy was costing Mongoose time and money. Mongoose therefore left Rebellion in March 2010, though its principals remains owners of the company.

The departure from Rebellion was costly — especially after banks held Mongoose's funds hostage for months; as a result Mongoose was forced to radically cut its staff, from nine to four. Gareth Hanrahan, author of many books and games, was one of those let go during the layoffs. Unsurprisingly, the loss of so much staff forced Mongoose Publishing to use freelancers to write their material in more recent years, changing the company's long-standing policy.

> *"It is possible to still knock the ball out of the park with a good release and hit those nice five figure unit sales in the first month or three but sustaining that across the life of a product line is now exceptionally difficult."*
>
> – Matthew Sprange, "The State of the Mongoose" (2010)

However, it wasn't just the departure from Rebellion affecting Mongoose's finances. After nine years of Mongoose doing very well — even when the industry wasn't — Matthew Sprange admitted in 2010 that the RPG industry was down even for them. In fact that was one of Mongoose's reasons for leaving the Rebellion Group: they wanted to move back into miniatures, but they couldn't while working with Rebellion.

These two problems caused the many slowdowns and shutdowns that we've already seen. *Paranoia* mostly fizzled out in 2011, the same year that *RuneQuest* was cancelled. *Lone Wolf* production dramatically slowed down around the same time, and even the *Multiplayer Gamebook* wasn't enough to save it. Additional stars at the company like Nash and Whitaker left during this chaos. Even the online *Signs & Portents* came to an end with #93 (June 2011).

Unsurprisingly, the Flaming Cobra program began to sputter out as well. Most of Mongoose's partners were gone by 2010, leaving just three standing: Brutal Games, Magnum Opus, and RedBrick. Magnum Opus Press' *Dragon Warriors* line came to an end first, when Magnum Opus couldn't come to an agreement with the *Dragon Warriors* IP owner to renew the license. Brutal Games and RedBrick then left Mongoose in 2011.

Still, not all was doom and gloom.

Mongoose's departure from Rebellion allowed them to get back into miniatures — a category nearer to the company's heart in some ways, and one that was currently stronger for them. Three of Mongoose's new miniatures games show the robust partnerships that the company has developed over the years.

- *A Call to Arms: Noble Armada* (2011) used Mongoose's "Call to Arms" system in the universe of *Fading Suns* — an RPG line licensed by their partner Redbrick.
- *A Call to Arms: Star Fleet* (2011) came out of connections made with Amarillo Design Bureau during the editorial work on Mongoose's first edition of this book — *Designers & Dragons* (2011). In November 2013, Amarillo Design took over the actual production of the line, though Mongoose continues its development.
- *The Judge Dredd Miniatures Game* (2011) returned Mongoose to the fields of *2000AD* — and allowed them to use miniatures they'd created for their previous *Judge Dredd* miniatures game, years previous. It was soon expanded into a complete license for *2000AD*, showing that there were no hard feelings between Mongoose and Rebellion.

Despite their problems with RPG sales, Mongoose has produced one "new" RPG line: *Legend* (2011). It was basically a rebranding of the *RuneQuest II* rules, but now published in cheaper, digest-sized books. Mongoose has used their *Legend* line to publish some of their old *RuneQuest* material, but they've also cleverly revamped old d20 material, including *Skaar: City of Orcs* (2012), which had previously been published as part of Mongoose's "Cities of Fantasy" d20 line (2002-2003), and *Gladiators of Legend* (2012), which was a revamp of *Gladiator: Sands of Death* (2001). More recently, Mongoose has gone further afield for new material: the *Spider God's Bride* (2013) for *Legend* was a revamp of a sword & sorcery adventure previously published by Xoth.net Publishing (2008).

A lot of work is now being done by freelancers such as Colin Dunn — who is producing most of Mongoose's *2300AD* line. However, Mongoose hasn't entirely neglected their own staff; in November 2012 they brought on Andrew McMillan as a new sales manager — a position that's much more important for miniatures lines than for roleplaying games.

Though Mongoose has striven to reinvent itself with new miniatures games and with *Legend*, they're clearly a much smaller company than they once were. In recent years, this has been obvious in their actual production: though they promise to produce hardcopies of all their books for fans who want them, in 2012 and 2013 an increasing number of releases were PDF-only. At the moment, the company's physical catalogue consists mostly of *Traveller* books and miniatures for *Judge Dredd* and *Noble Armada*.

Mongoose did well throughout the late '00s, when other publishers were battling with the Great Recession and the d20 bust. It's ironic that they're now downsizing while Kickstarter seems to be reviving the rest of the industry.

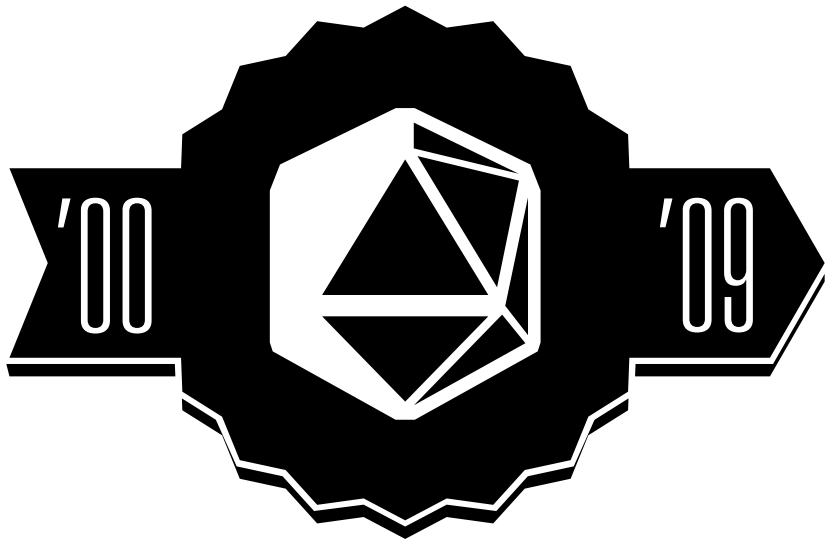
What to Read Next ○

- For more old-school branding, read ***Goodman Games***.
- For adventures paths, read ***Paizo Publishing***.
- For the licensor of *RuneQuest*, read ***Issaries***.
- For the publisher of *Earthdawn* and *Fading Suns*, read ***RedBrick***.
- For the future of *Cthulhutech*, read ***Catalyst Game Labs*** and (to a lesser extent) ***Posthuman Studios***.
- For some of 4E's problems for licensors, again read ***Goodman Games***.
- For a UK publisher that continues the ideas of Flaming Cobra and for the next multiplayer Lone Wolf game, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment***.
- For yet another modern UK publisher, read ***Pelgrane Press***.

In Other Eras

- For the origins of the d20 System Trademark License and OGL, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For James Wallis, read ***Hogshead Publishing*** *['90s]*.
- For the *Complete Handbooks*, and the bad effect they had on *AD&D*, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For some of Mongoose's d20 sourcebook competitors, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*, ***Fantasy Flight Games*** *['90s]*, and ***Green Ronin*** *['00s]*.
- For the original British publisher of Mongoose games like *Paranoia*, *RuneQuest*, and *Traveller*, also read ***Games Workshop*** *['70s]*.
- For more on Morrigan Press and *Talislanta*, read ***Bard Games*** *['80s]*.
- For more on *Paranoia*, read ***West End Games*** *['80s]*.
- For more on *RuneQuest*, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]* and ***Avalon Hill*** *['80s]*.
- For more on *Lone Wolf*, again read ***Games Workshop*** *['70s]*.
- For other Swedish RPGs (like *Noctum*), read ***Metropolis*** *['90s]*.
- For more on *Traveller*, read ***GDW*** *['70s]* and ***DGP*** *['80s]*.
- For the origins of *Noble Armada*, read ***Holistic Design*** *['90s]*.
- For the origins of the *Star Fleet* universe, read ***Task Force Games*** *['80s]*.

Or read onward to the start of the indie revolution in ***Adept Press.***



Part Four:

Indie Apprenticeship

(2001–2002)

The second major trend of the '00s began on online gaming sites like the Gaming Outpost and the Forge. Creators came together and talked about *new* ways to design games, to produce them, and to publish them. Ron Edwards was one of the leaders of this grassroots movement seeking to give independent creators true control of their products. It resulted in the first true ***indie publishers.***

Edwards' ideas about indie games didn't demand any specific sort of design: he simply wanted to free up designers from publishers and distributors demanding their rights and taking their money. However as time went on, the indie scene became increasingly associated with the "narrativist" style of game design that Edwards himself preferred.

Similar narrativist games have been seen throughout these histories as "storytelling games" that put story ahead of many of the other gaming elements seen in traditional RPGs. However, previous storytelling publishers had been scattered without a central focus. Now these designers were parts of communities, and that's what allowed them to kick off the indie revolution.

The story of many of the earliest indie publishers is the story of the innovative games that they produced, which in turn influenced the rest of the indie community. They include: Adept Press' *Sorcerer* (2001); Memento Mori's *InSpectres* (2002); Ramshead Publishing's *Universalis* (2002); Lumpley Games' *Dogs in the Vineyard* (2004); and Luke Crane's *The Burning Wheel* (2002).

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Adept Press	2001-Present	*Elfs* (2001)	131
Memento Mori Theatricks	1997-Present	*Schism* (2001)	152
The Diana Jones Award	*2001-Present*	*Peter Adkison (2001)*	302
Ramshead Publishing	2001-Present	*Universalis* (2002)	168
Lumpley Games	2001-Present	*kill puppies for satan* (2002)	174
Burning Wheel	2002-Present	*The Burning Wheel* (2002)	188
Game Chef	*2002-Present*	*The Court of Nine Chambers (2002)*	292

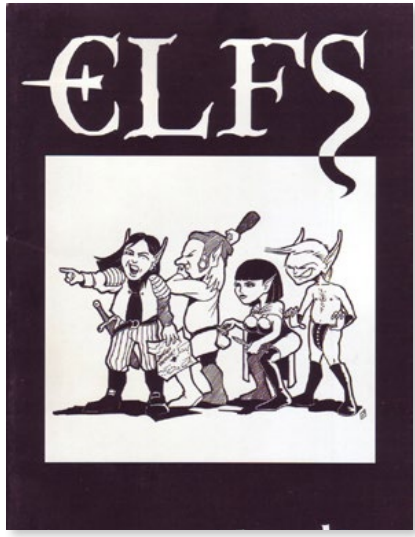
Adept Press: 2001-Present

Ron Edwards' Adept Press was the banner indie company in the early '00s. Its influence probably comes in equal parts from Edwards' games, from his gaming essays, and from his Forge discussion site.

Apprentice Years: 1996-2000

The story of Adept Press sits squarely in the middle of the industry, bringing together threads of development that spanned back to at least 1984 and in turn kicking off a new wave of publication that continues today. Most obviously, this story begins with Ron Edwards. In 1996, he was an instructor of biology at the University of Florida working on his PhD. His dissertation focused on evolutionary theory, but he was also working on a roleplaying game by the name of *Sorcerer*.

At first, Edwards did what almost any aspiring RPG designer would have done in 1996: he sent his game to an existing



2001: Elfs

roleplaying company with the hope that they'd publish it. Unlike many aspiring designers, Edwards got a positive response from the publisher and after that an actual contract, which was where the problems began.

Although Edwards later called the contract "rotten," it was pretty standard for the publishing industry. It gave the publisher the right to control artwork and marketing, to revise the book in the future even if the author didn't want to, and to terminate the contract at their discretion. Standard or not, it was wholly unacceptable to Edwards, who was inspired by Dave Sim — the creator of *Cerebus* (1977-2004) — and by Sim's positions on indie comics. Like Sim, Edwards felt that creators should have control over their own works. So, he decided to self-publish — but in an original way.

> *"The lesson: Beware of being seduced into a rotten contract. These guys were hoping I would sign the version they sent. I was lucky."*
>
> – Ron Edwards, "History of Sorcerer as an Indie Game," sorcerer-rpg.com (2001)

Edwards' self-publication began on the internet. In early days, Edwards would mail a text file of *Sorcerer* (1996) to anyone who asked for it. He said that if they liked it, they should send him $5, and many did. The whole idea of electronic distribution was pretty unusual at the time. Steffan O'Sullivan by then had created *FUDGE* (1993) on the Internet, and Hero Games started selling PDFs of their "Hero Plus" line that same year, but that was it.

Soon afterward, Edwards also produced an "ashcan" of his game — a simply laid-out edition of the rules printed from a computer and spiral-bound (though it wasn't intended primarily for playtesting, like later ashcans). He sold it at cons for $10 as he played and revamped the game over the following years.

Playtesting allowed him to produce a substantially more professional version of his game — one fully rewritten, with examples and artwork. On December 22, 1998, Edwards acquired the sorcerer-rpg.com domain and began using it as a marketplace for a new PDF edition (1998) of his game. Much as with today's Apple iTunes Store, you could test out a "lite" version of the *Sorcerer* game — which Edwards called the "Apprentice" edition — or pay $10 with a credit card to have the complete edition of the game.

With *Sorcerer* having reached a fully complete and professional form in late 1998, it's worth examining the specifics of the game a bit more, as it has ultimately proven a milestone for the industry.

The concept behind the game was striking. It was a modern urban fantasy where players took on the roles of sorcerers whose sole power was to summon and control

demons. As this premise suggests, *Sorcerer* was a game that touched upon black magic — primarily to create a strong and thoughtful moral center for the game. It asked the question "What do you want and what would you do to get it?"

The game system that underlay that premise was rules-light. Four statistics — Stamina, Will, Lore, and Humanity — formed the core of a character. A number of freeform elements filled a character out. First, players got to provide descriptors for their attributes. For example, a character's Stamina could be described as "graceful" or his Will might be described as "loyal." Similarly a player got to create a freeform "cover" for his character, which was his day-job and defined what else he could do well.

Other character elements were plot-related: a "price" was a dark secret or a disability; a "telltale" revealed a character as a sorcerer; and a "kicker" offered a starting plot for a character. The kicker was player-authored and intended to be central to that gamemaster's prep. As such it was the opposite of a more traditional "plot hook"; instead, some of the plot authority within the game was distributed to the players.

Each character got a demon too — similarly described by numerical statistics and by freeform powers. Demons were all played by the gamemaster, which was another thing that startled some players in its uniqueness.

Sorcerer's mechanics were just as rules-light as its character description. They centered on opposed comparative dice pools. For any task, two different players rolled dice, with the winner being the player who rolled the highest single value. The number of dice that the winning player rolled above the opposing player's highest value determined the level of success. Rather uniquely, those successes could then be used to roll extra dice on subsequent rolls. It was simple and elegant but also supported rolling lots of dice — which Edwards said was something that he knew players enjoyed.

As a whole, *Sorcerer* was notable in several ways.

First, *Sorcerer*'s choice of premise was daring. By the late '90s the hysteria over RPGs had faded, but a game about summoning and controlling demons was pretty unlikely to go over well in many parts of the United States. Nonetheless, Edwards would never see any particular outcry due to this element of his game.

Second, *Sorcerer* offered a real fidelity to its chosen genre. This had been seen rarely in the past, in games such as *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985). More recently, a proliferation of universal games such as *GURPS* (1987) and *Hero System* (1989) suggested that systems could be designed to fit any genre. Edwards had instead moved in the opposite direction, producing a game that worked only for the very specific sort of play he intended. In fact, it was impossible to play a character that wasn't a sorcerer in *Sorcerer*.

Third, *Sorcerer* was surprisingly customizable. What "humanity" actually meant, what demons actually represented, and any details of the setting were left up to the individual gamemasters. As a result, some people compared *Sorcerer* to *FUDGE* — not just because they were both independently-developed online games, but also because they were really game *toolkits*.

Fourth, *Sorcerer* had a number of innovative mechanics. The freeform attributes were largely unknown in the industry, with one of the few predecessors being Jonathan Tweet's *Over the Edge* (1992) — which was a clear influence on *Sorcerer*. *Sorcerer* also gave players a lot of authority over the plot, starting with the kicker. A lot of the mechanical innovations of *Sorcerer*, including light rules, freeform attributes, and distributed story authority would frequently reappear in the new indie community that Edwards was about to create.

For now, Edwards was working on two PDF supplements for his new game: *Sorcerer & Sword* (1999), which suggested fantasy settings for the game; and *The Sorcerer's Soul* (2000), which offered options for the humanity statistic. In early 2000, Edwards also licensed Concept Syndicate to sell *Sorcerer* on a CD-ROM.

That *could* have been the extent of Edwards' interaction with the RPG industry, but at the 2000 Gen Con Game Fair — while most of the industry was gawking over the release of the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (2000) — Edwards' eye was caught by something else: *Obsidian: The Age of Justice* (1999), an attractive hardcover RPG independently published by the Apophis Consortium. Edwards decided that if they could publish an RPG while retaining ownership, he could do the same, and so he set to work on doing exactly that.

> *"By the way, a great deal of this is Dav Harnish's fault, because I saw Obsidian at Gen Con 2000 and was immediately irked that a bunch of black-clad hipsters ten years younger than me had managed to publish a high-quality, very slick RPG and to get it into stores without relinquishing ownership."*
>
> – Ron Edwards, Interview, flamesrising.com (July 2004)

Edwards would produce a print edition of *Sorcerer* in mid-2001. However, before we get there let's take a long digression to examine Edwards' other major activity in the late '90s: discussion. Edwards began talking to creators and fans alike about a number of topics that were close to his heart. One of his prime mediums for this roleplaying activism was through essays published on the internet.

Edwards' first two essays of particular note were published in spring 1999. One, "The Nuked Apple Cart," talked about the business of RPGs; while the other, "System Does Matter," talked about their design. We're going to examine each of them in turn.

Forging an Indie Community: 1997-2001

Before we get to the first of those articles, "The Nuked Apple Cart," we should talk about how Edwards created the audience for his essays. That story starts with Ed Healy, a founding member of Eden Studios. He was forced to divest himself of his Eden ownership in 1997 when he joined Deloitte & Touche as a staff accountant. However, he wasn't done with the hobby, so he instead began work on something that was allowed by Deloitte & Touche: game design.

While Healy was working on a *Risk*-like dice mechanic, he stumbled across *Sorcerer*. Its own dice system was almost identical to what Healy had been working on, so he put aside his design and struck up a friendship with Edwards. This in turn led him to the Gaming Outpost, an energetic and experimental online community of designers that included Mike Mearls, Gareth Hanrahan, Clinton Nixon, John Wick, and others.

The owners of Gaming Outpost soon asked Healy for help with business development. He came up with the idea of creating a network of cobranded RPG sites, which would all feed into the Outpost. Bill Walton's RPG advocacy site, The Escapist, soon came aboard, but work stalled after that, and Healy knew that one site did not a network make. So he decided to create a site of his own.

Healy and Edwards talked in passing about the possibility of a creator-owned-game publisher site, and that's what they ended up making. They called it Hephaestus' Forge.

> *"These games are produced by independent game designers and generally published on the internet for free or for a nominal price. Hephaestus Forge's mission is to provide support for these 'indie RPGs' – helping gamers find out more about what other alternatives lie beyond the realm of the established game manufacturers."*
>
> – Description of Hephaestus' Forge (December 1999)

Hephaestus' Forge began life in December 1999. While Edwards had gotten his ideas about RPG independence from indie comics, Healy used "indie music" — where musicians maintained independence from major studios — as his model. Together they created "Internet Home of Indie Roleplaying Games." When the site went live, Edwards was its content editor.

Edwards' first notable article on RPGs, "The Nuked Apple Cart," was written in late 1998 and made available in May 1999. In the article, Edwards stated his belief that the entire model for commercial RPGs was broken. He felt that retailers and

distributors drove RPG production in ways not beneficial to either the creators or the consumers.

Edwards said that indie RPG publishers should ignore everything that retailers and distributors suggested. He said that they should feel free to produce games with lower production values and they shouldn't supplement them if they didn't want to. He also held *Sorcerer* up as a model, saying that it was owned, marketed, and distributed by him and that "no one gets a penny from its sales but [him] and the credit card web-people." This idea formed a strong leg for a new indie design movement that was then gelling on Hephaestus' Forge.

Meanwhile, there were some bumps in the road. Hephaestus' Forge ran in its original form throughout 2000, but the original site then closed due to hosting problems. In early 2001, Ron Edwards and Clinton Nixon resurrected the site at indie-rpgs.com. Though Edwards gets much of the acclaim for the resulting site due to his position as a spokesman and leader, Nixon was the less visible partner who also made the site successful over the next six years.

The new site was more self-contained and more of a community. Hephaestus' Forge had focused on publisher links and reviews, but had used the Gaming Outpost for its forum. The new Forge (which was simply called the Forge) put forums front and center. There, self-publishers and designers increasingly talked about game theory and publication. The Forge also featured another notable innovation: the "Actual Play" forum, which people could use to talk about their RPG sessions; they were encouraged to discuss how their games actually played — rather than just writing fiction about them, as had occurred in years past.

Though it was for the moment confined to online venues, the indie gaming movement had begun.

"GNS" Theory: 1999

Ron Edwards' second major essay of note, "System Does Matter," was posted on the Gaming Outpost website in July 1999. Ron Edwards' central precept in "System" was pretty baldly stated in the title: that system was important, particularly as it fit (or didn't) with the core of a game.

The idea of system being important might already have been controversial to some. However, the essay became even more contentious when it discussed what is now called "GNS Theory." GNS Theory grew out of the Threefold Model, which was widely discussed in the rec.games.frp.advocacy USENET group in the summer of 1997. Mary Kuhner laid out many of the central ideas there, and John H. Kim later codified and expanded the discussion. Now, Ron Edwards was connecting the abstract ideas of GNS to more concrete thoughts about game design. Just as notably, he was also popularizing GNS Theory.

Storytelling Games: 1984-2013

The roleplaying industry grew out of wargaming, a predominantly simulationist hobby. However, many of those wargamers were out to win, and that was the idea that infused the early RPG industry under gamemasters like Gary Gygax and Rob Kuntz. Primordial adventures like *S1: Tomb of Horrors* (1978) and other *D&D* tournament modules offered challenges that players might succeed *or* fail at.

The focus on competition began to change around 1984 when the first of what these books call "storytelling" games appeared. Greg Costikyan produced two of the earliest. West End Games' *Paranoia* (1984) subverted standard ideas about RPGs by making characters both interchangeable and expendable, while simultaneously giving players the ability to influence the game through their personal secret society missions. Steve Jackson Games' *Toon* (1984) moved things in the opposite direction by making player characters unkillable. It was just one of many game design elements that *Toon* used to tell the "story" of a cartoon within an RPG.

TSR was simultaneously offering their own take on storytelling in their original Dragonlance series of adventures (1984-1986). Twelve supplements let players participate in an adventure of grand scope. Ron Edwards would refute these adventures' presence in a history of narrative games because they railroaded players into a set plot. However, they were just as revolutionary as Costikyan's 1984 RPGs when compared to the simulationist and gamist origins of the hobby. The ideas from Dragonlance have evolved over the years, producing the "adventure paths" of the modern day.

Greg Stafford was the next author to notably contribute to the storytelling branch of gaming, beginning with *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985). Like the Dragonlance adventures, it let players participate in an epic story originally outlined in *The Pendragon Campaign* (1985). Like *Paranoia*, it moved the focus of the game past individual characters; in the grand scope of the Arthurian campaign, knights would die and their sons and grandsons would eventually replace them.

In this author's view, the storytelling subgenre of roleplaying really got started when Jonathan Tweet entered the hobby. In *Ars Magica* (1987) he created a game tightly focused on a specific sort of characters – magicians. In later articles and editions of the game, he also introduced a new sort of roleplaying that he called "troupe style," where the entire group came together to tell stories – even switching off gamemasters *and* characters from week to week.

Aaron Allston's Strike Force (1988), a supplement for *Champions*, showed that individual supplements could also support storytelling. It advised gamemasters on how to focus RPG adventures on character plots.

Around the same time, Greg Stafford reentered the storytelling field with *Prince Valiant: The Story Telling Game* (1989). This new RPG was more influential to many indie

designers than *Pendragon* had been, though it was less of a popular hit. The game was extremely rules-light, with just two stats (brawn and presence) – though it still had a relatively large set of skills. Its core resolution system was a comparative *coin* pool where successes carried over from round to round. Many of these elements were revisited years later in the game that kicked off the indie movement, Ron Edwards' *Sorcerer* (1998, 2001). *Prince Valiant* also spent 20 pages describing the art of storytelling and that was probably more notable than its mechanics. The advice highlighted the game's goals to create a "shared experience," not to simulate Arthurian "reality."

Meanwhile, Jonathan Tweet's partner Mark Rein•Hagen was creating another original model for roleplaying in *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991). There was a lot of metaplot in *Vampire* and the games that followed it, like the campaigns of Dragonlance and *The Pendragon Campaign*. However the actual gameplay of the World of Darkness was often gamist, focusing on social challenges.

By this time, Jonathan Tweet had moved on to Atlas Games, who flew the narrativist flag proudly throughout the '90s. Before *Over the Edge* (1992), most "storytelling" games had introduced piecemeal narrativist elements; *Over the Edge* may have been the first game to instead focus entirely on a narrativist gameplay model – because "system matters."

Most notably, *Over the Edge* was one of the first games to allow almost freeform character creation, with players essentially making up skills and other areas of expertise for their characters.

Over the Edge was followed by other games at Atlas that focused on story more than the RPGs of the '70s or '80s, but less than *Over the Edge*. These games included Robin Laws' *Feng Shui* (1996, 1999) and John Tynes and Greg Stolze's *Unknown Armies* (1998).

Meanwhile, over in England, James Wallis was publishing "New Style" games through Hogshead Publishing. Some of them completely ignored individual characters and so became "story games" rather than "storytelling RPGs." The first of those was *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1998).

Around the turn of the century, Robin Laws – who assisted in the preparation of *Over the Edge* – finished up two games that also embraced narrativism: Issaries' *Hero Wars* (2000) and Pelgrane Press' *The Dying Earth Roleplaying Game* (2001). Ironically, Laws may have also produced the most gamist game ever, the competitive *Rune* (2001).

In 2001, narrativist storytelling games suddenly became subsumed in the indie movement, and their history largely continues there, but there's one coda. In 2013, some leaders of the storytelling movement returned with new games published by Pelgrane Press: Robin Laws' *Hillfolk* (2013) and Jonathan Tweet and Rob Heinsoo's *13th Age* (2013). These were the first games by these designers to explicitly include the imprint of indie design – showing that the storytelling ideas of the '80s and '90s had now come full circle.

GNS Theory suggests that there are three main goals for roleplaying: game, narrative, and simulation. Unsurprisingly, one of the best and most concise explanations of these terms appears in Edwards' 1999 essay. He says that: a gamist wants "a contest which he or she has a chance to win"; a narrativist wants "a good story"; and a simulationist wants "a little pocket universe without fudging." He later expanded these short definitions to offer more precision. In particular, he defined narrativism as collaborative storytelling, not the GM-driven storytelling of early RPG epics like TSR's Dragonlance (1985-1987).

John Kim's FAQ on the Threefold Model clearly states, "An important part of the model is recognizing that there are valid different goals for gaming." Ron Edwards' essay on the topic became controversial because many readers felt that he was saying "narrativism" was better than the other two sorts of gameplay. Edwards' essay actually says nothing of the sort — though Edwards does state that he believes a game system that supports a single model of gameplay is stronger than one that tries to support all three, hence the article's claim that "system matters."

Bear in mind, when he was creating his own games, Ron Edwards made most of them narrativist, starting (as we've already seen) with *Sorcerer*. Beyond that, Edwards talked online and elsewhere about why he liked narrativist games best. But none of that undercuts the fairly simple GNS model that appears in Edwards' original essay.

Before Edwards' article and before *Sorcerer*, narrativist games *had* existed. They are called "storytelling" games and "New Style" games in these histories when they appeared before the '00s. However, Edwards sits atop a strong pivot point in the evolution of these games because he took the narrativist ideas that had appeared previously and offered them to a new audience of gamers *and also* — as we'll see momentarily — a new audience of designers.

With the publication of the GNS article, the indie RPG movement now had its three strong foundations:

A stated independence from the demands of retailers and distributors.

The narrativist gaming style.

Sorcerer as an example of an indie production.

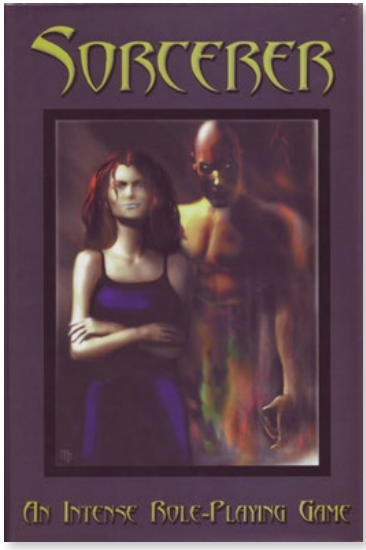
The requirement for narrativism is ironic given the purpose of the GNS essay. Some members of the indie community, including the founders of IPR, tried to stick with a more inclusive definition of "indie." Despite this, narrativism soon became a central precept of indie design, especially as consumers perceived it.

Successful Sorcery: 2001-2003

The creation of the new Forge (which made its online appearance on April 4, 2001) and the creation of Ron Edwards' Adept Press (which made its own online appearance two weeks' previous on March 23, 2001) happened almost simultaneously.

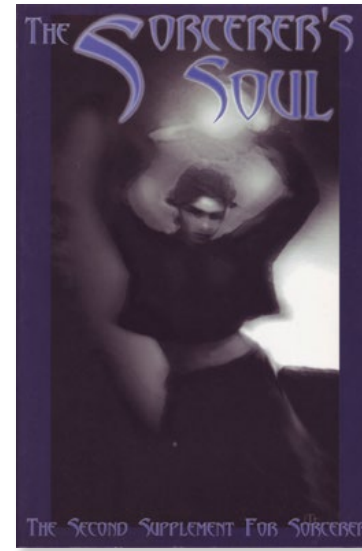
With a new company in hand, Ron wasted no time in getting Adept into the publication business. On April 18, 2001, he made his *second* RPG, *Elfs* (2001), available as PDF through Adept. In *Elfs*, players take on the role of sleazy and dim-witted elves that like to loot and kill. The game system is again rules-light but has one notable twist: "dumb luck." To use dumb luck, a player narrates what his elf wants to happen *and* what he himself wants to happen — with the player's goals usually being hijinks that are a lot of fun for the player and quite possibly annoying for his fellows. Edwards denotes the result as gamist, rather than narrativist — again underlining the fact that he wanted systems to fit games, not for them all to be narrativist.

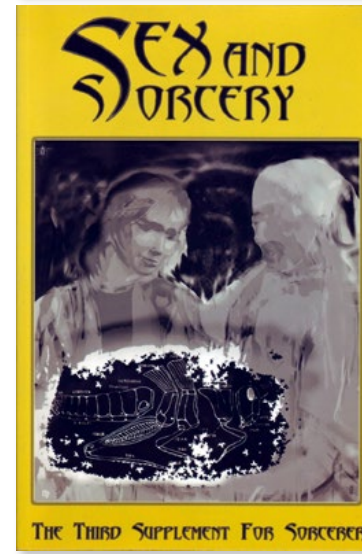
With a scant 55-page length, no supplements, and a pretty simple core idea, *Elfs* was in many ways more standard of an indie than *Sorcerer* had been. It was also Edwards' first flirtation with what's since become known as "old school" roleplaying. Though *Elfs* offered a wacky new gaming system, it was often played with *D&D* adventure modules from the '70s or '80s.



After publishing *Elfs*, Edwards got to the actual reason that he created Adept. He published *Sorcerer* (2001) as a handsome 128-page hardcover volume in early summer 2001. When RPGnet printed one of the earliest reviews of *Sorcerer*, it was ironically by Dav Harnish — one of the authors of *Obsidian*.

Though Edwards spoke out against the RPG industry's distribution system, he still sent half of his 1,200-book print run to standard distributors. At the time, he saw the hardcover printing of the books as a one-off thing, to be sold where it could be sold, after which he thought *Sorcerer* would return to PDF-only publication. When he discovered continued interest in the hardcopy book, Edwards turned to other methods of distribution such as direct sales to retailers and direct sales to customers through then-new services like PayPal.





Around the same time as that hardcover release, Edwards also kicked off a "mini-supplement" program that allowed other authors to write *Sorcerer* supplements that Adept would then sell as PDFs. The authors kept all of the money the supplements made, but Edwards got full editorial control. There were five mini-supplements: *Demon Cops* (2001) by Edwards, which detailed one of his later Sorcerer campaigns; *Electric Ghosts* (2001) by Ravenscrye Daegmorgan; *Hellbound* (2001) by Dav Harnish; *Charnel Gods* (2001) by Scott (now Renee) Knipe; and *Schism* (2001) by Jared Sorensen.

Though those five mini-supplements stayed available through Adept Press for several years, Edwards quickly realized that his editorial mandate differed from the ideas of creative control that he was espousing; future creators would get to publish *Sorcerer* supplements on their own. Meanwhile, Edwards was working on getting his own large-scale *Sorcerer* supplements into print. There would eventually be three: *Sorcerer & Sword* (printed in 2001), *The Sorcerer's Soul* (printed in early 2002), and *Sex & Sorcery* (2003).

The first two books had previously been published as PDFs, but the third was new (and besides that, an innovative look at gender in roleplaying games that would influence the thinking of many). Edwards would later say that the three books together depicted his model for what narrativist content *should* be like. He said that *Sorcerer & Sword* showed that it should be "passionate," *The Sorcerer's Soul* showed that it should be "about values," and *Sex & Sorcery* showed that it should "draw upon the interpersonal dynamics among the real people."

The production of these supplements wasn't all that Edwards was doing during these years. While Adept Press was expanding *Sorcerer*, the community that they had helped forge was turning into a revolution.

Five Gen Cons & a Revolution: 2001-2005

By the middle of 2001, the germ of an indie community created at Gaming Outpost was beginning to grow at the Forge. There was also the barest hint of that electronic interaction turning into real-world design thanks to the creation of those five *Sorcerer* mini-supplements by diverse hands.

The 2001 Gen Con Game Fair offered the next indication of what was to come. That year, Edwards purchased a Gen Con booth for Adept Press so that he could publicize his game. Several members of the Forge ended up helping him. Some, like Scott Knipe and Jared Sorensen, had already contributed to *Sorcerer*. Others would soon become professional indie publishers themselves — including Paul Czege and Clinton Nixon. Finally, existing indie publishers like John Wick, the author of *Orkworld* (2000), joined in as well. Edwards would later describe it as "a party at the booth for four days."

The next year, this casual gathering of indie enthusiasts was made official when Edwards' 10'x10' booth for Adept Press became a 10'x20' booth for the Forge. Adept Press and Jason Blair's Key 20 sponsored the booth. More notably, there was an increasing number of indie publications. Blair's *Little Fears* (2001) had appeared the previous year, but other books had been published within the last several months: including: Clinton Nixon's narrative dungeon crawl, *Donjon* (2002); Matt Snyder's noir-like Western, *Dust Devils* (2002); Jared Sorensen's humorous ghost-busting RPG, *InSpectres* (2002); and Mike Holmes and Ralph Mazza's highly original storytelling game, *Universalis* (2002).

The indie movement also proved that it had gained the attention of the mainstream that year when Ron Edwards and *Sorcerer* won the second Diana Jones Award for "excellence in gaming."

> *"Ron's willingness to put his money where his mouth is by going to hardback, his visible and constant dedication to the craft and art of games design, his tireless encouragement of creator ownership, and his successful nurturing of an online forum dedicated to creator-controlled games have leveraged a mere brilliant game design into the seed crystal of something with the potential to greatly improve adventure gaming."*
>
> – "The Diana Jones Award 2002," dianajonesaward.org (2002)

2002 also brought another publisher into the fold: BTRC. Greg Porter's Blacksburg Tactical Research Center had by then been publishing RPGs for almost fifteen years, starting with *TimeLords* (1987). The company had been independently run and creator controlled long before "indie" was a catch phrase

Fantasy Heartbreakers

After his articles on GNS Theory and the problems with the standard three-tier model of hobbyist sales, Ron Edwards' best-known essay is probably "Fantasy Heartbreakers" (April 2002).

Edwards created the term to talk about fantasy RPGs that were designed by people who seemed to know nothing about the advancement of game design since the original productions of *Dungeons & Dragons*. They inevitably had features like skill systems and tactical combat systems that the designers thought were *very* innovative but really weren't.

The term "Fantasy Heartbreakers" has largely been used in a derogatory manner since Edwards coined it, but Edwards actually saw something good in each heartbreaker game he discussed: a little bit of innovation that would have been great if it weren't chained to an archaic game system. This is why the systems were "heartbreakers" for Edwards: because there was potential unrealized.

Edwards identified a dozen games as fantasy heartbreakers using his own criteria: *Fifth Cycle* (1990), *Hahlmabrea* (1991), *Of Gods and Men* (1991), *Darkurthe: Legends* (1993), *Legendary Lives* (1993), *Neverworld* (1996), *Pelicar* (1996), *Demon's Lair* (1997), *Forge: Out of Chaos* (1998), *Deathstalkers* (1999), *Dawnfire* (2000), and *Undiscovered: The Quest for Adventure* (2001).

None of the publishers of these games appear in this book, which is the other reason they're heartbreakers: they have little chance of success and less chance of influencing the industry – though you can read the history of Lion Rampant to discover how an innovative storytelling publisher *almost* published *Hahlmabrea*.

and had been one of the seminal influences on Edwards' own ideas. After meeting Edwards and other members of the Forge in 2002, Porter would become increasingly involved in the movement — but it was a path he blazed long before.

The next year, indie gaming proved it had arrived as a subgenre when the first "Indie RPG" awards were given out. Though there were indie games before *Sorcerer*, there certainly weren't enough for an awards program. Edwards and the Forge changed that.

Meanwhile, the continuing movement of indie games from the electronic world into the real world was shown by the proliferation of sponsors for the Forge booth. Newcomers arrived, some who hadn't known about the indie community when they'd published their own games — including Luke Crane of *Burning Wheel* (2002). Adept Press, Arc Dream, and The Riddle of Steel sponsored the booth in 2003, and Adept Press, Burning Wheel, Driftwood Publishing, and Ramshead Publishing did so in 2004.

By then, it was increasingly clear that there was a sea change occurring, as evidenced by two events of note in 2004.

The first event occurred at Gen Con, when the fourth Diana Jones Award was given to Paul Czege's *My Life with Master* (2004), another indie RPG — this one a game of evil minions trying to work against their worst nature.

The second event occurred even later in the year when Ed Cha and Brennan Taylor formed the Indie Press Revolution (IPR), a fulfillment house serving "independent" publishers by warehousing, selling, and shipping their books direct to consumers. By the end of the year they were working with seven companies: Adept Press, Anvilwerks, Blue Devil Games, Bob Goat Press, and NerdNYC — as well as Taylor's Galileo Games and Cha's Open World Press. By the end of 2005, they were working with 19. Key 20 Games Distribution also appeared late in 2005 with a mandate to distribute indie games into retail stores. Though they only survived a few years, for a time they were a nice complement to IPR.

You could use the appearance and growth of IPR and then the appearance of Key 20 Games Distribution to mark the end of an era for indie RPGs — as the electronic community of the Forge truly exploded onto the publishing stage. However, you could alternatively use the events of Gen Con Indy 2005 as a benchmark. That year, the Forge booth went beyond its "primary" sponsors and let other publishers buy in for $100 or $200 each. In all, 21 different indie companies contributed to the payment of the booth that year. At the same time, Jared Sorensen was leading several indie publishers in an all-day "Roleplaying Game Design Workshop" as part of the con's regular programming.

What began as essays and discussions online became a new genre of RPG publication.

The Coming of the *Trollbabe:* 2002

It's impossible to write about Adept Press without writing about the changes in the industry heralded and guided by Ron Edwards and the Forge. However, with the indie community now expanding through the middle of the '00s, we can return to the actual production of Adept itself.

While Ron Edwards was working on *Sex & Sorcery*, he ended up writing a new game called *Trollbabe* (2002) — which was originally released as a PDF, though it would appear as a book years later (2009). The central premise of *Trollbabe* is that the players play trolls that are also babes. They wander a world in conflict, and whenever they come to a new town, they find adventure. As should be obvious, *Trollbabe* is even more constrained than *Sorcerer* in the limited sorts of characters that can be played.



The mechanics are very simple. Each player has a single stat, and rolls three types of conflicts based on that stat. To succeed at fighting, the player rolls under the stat, to succeed at magic she rolls over the stat, and to succeed at social conflict, she rolls the stat value or the worse of the two ranges. A reroll system lets a player choose when to reroll; by doing so she increases the consequences of the conflict if she fails.

Though the mechanics of *Trollbabe* are clever, the game really stands out for how it pushes the narrativist envelope and for how it encourages very interactive plotting.

The most unique narrative element of the game is that it distributes storytelling authority. Players get to choose where their Trollbabe will be going for their next adventure and whether they're going to ratchet up the "scale" of the game, which allows characters to move onto larger stages as the game goes on. Then the gamemaster figures out a "stake" (essentially a premise for an adventure) and a consequence (for success or failure).

Once the actual game is underway, players can request individual scenes that they find interesting and they can choose to have their Trollbabe enter a scene at any time, no matter how that fits with the logic of the actual game. During a conflict, a player can create relationships to people in that scene to grant himself rerolls. If a conflict ends with a player character succeeding, then the gamemaster gets to narrate the result, but if a player character fails, then the player explains what happened. These "meta" rules, which state *who* gets to say *what*, were new to the field of roleplaying — which over the years had increasingly focused instead on small-scale tactical rules.

Another notable element in the gameplay of *Trollbabe* is that it doesn't worry about "reality." Everything is about meeting the needs of the story at a particular moment. We've already seen how this could affect a Trollbabe entering a scene. Similarly, a Trollbabe's magical and physical power ramp up as the scale of a campaign increases, with no attempt to explain how.

"Trollbabe is written specifically with an eye toward learning how to establish and utilize that medium."

– Ron Edwards, Interview, The Walking Eye Podcast (February 2010)

As may already be obvious, *Trollbabe* encourages players to be very much "in the moment" — not worrying about where a story has been or how it will develop, but only what it's doing at a precise moment. This was in fact Edwards' main goal when he created the game. He says that it was his only "teaching text" — meant to show that you can create a pretty good story simply by allowing players to spontaneously advance a narrative together.

Trollbabe is reminiscent of "story games" like the New Style games that Hogshead Publishing was releasing in the late '90s and early '00s. However, many of Hogshead's games were so much about "story" that there wasn't much *role*playing; contrariwise, in *Trollbabe*, players very clearly get their own roles to play. The New Style games also tended to be more freeform, and therefore more reliant upon the players cooperating, whereas *Trollbabe*'s meta-rules helped to remove that need. Overall *Trollbabe* was something of a bridge between roleplaying games and story games. As we'll see, it was also a bridge between Adept's own *Sorcerer* and its later "Story Now" games.

It's quite possible that *Trollbabe* was more influential than Edwards' original *Sorcerer*. Today, notable releases like *Fate* (2002), *Dogs in the Vineyard* (2004), and even Margaret Weis Productions Cortex system (2005) all note *Trollbabe* as an influence.

Adept Through the Years: 2004-Present

After Edwards published his trilogy of Sorcerer supplements and *Trollbabe*, the company's production slowed down. It also changed as Edwards stepped away from the pure roleplaying of *Sorcerer* and moved more toward story games. Edwards has labeled some of these more recent releases as "Story Now" — his own name for narrativism.

The first of these games was *It Was a Mutual Decision* (2006). It spun out of the "Ronnies" contest that Edward kicked off in August 2005. For the contest, Edwards gave out four words and challenged designers to create a "24 Hour RPG" using exactly two of them. The words for the contest were "suburb," "hatred," "girlfriend," and "rat."

Edwards decided to write his own game on the topic, choosing the words "girlfriend" and "rat" for his own use. This made him think of were-rats and romantic breakup. He finished a 28-page book after 18 hours of writing, though he'd later polish it and put it together as a nice book. It ended up 100 pages long in its final form.

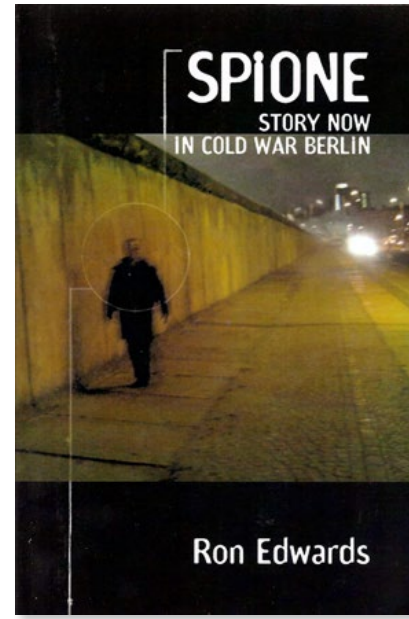
The game is meant to be played in a single evening with the gaming group broken up into two parts, each of which collectively takes on the role of one of the people involved in a breakup. There are three chapters, which cover "before,"

"during," and "after" the breakup. To make things more complex, one or both of the characters *could* be a murderous were-rat.

It Was a Mutual Decision was the first game to include a "Story Now" label. The term highlights the same idea that Edwards was trying to teach back in *Trollbabe*: that you could play a game by staying in the "now" rather than preparing things beforehand or reviewing them afterward.

The growing importance of "Story Now" to Edwards was shown when it appeared as part of the title of Edwards' next game.

Edwards outlined his next project as part of an essay he wrote in 2003 called "Narrativism: Story Now"; he began serious work on it around 2005, and finally published the hefty 244-page *Spione: STORY NOW in Cold War Berlin* (2007) a few years later. As the name suggests, it's a spy game set in World War II Berlin, but it covers a subgenre of spy novels that Edwards calls "Spy vs. Guy fiction." Here, the characters are more endangered by psychological crises than by the enemy.



Edwards' primary goal in producing *Spione* was actually to write a book on what he calls "Cold War Triumphalism" — the idea that the fall of the Soviet Union allowed the United States to retroactively rewrite history to justify their military and economic power. Most of the *Spione* book highlights this real-world focus by providing non-fiction background on spies and the Cold War. This took a vast amount of research; Edwards began to learn German and even set up a Berlin "branch" of Adept Press during his multiple trips to that city while working on the game.

Another goal that Edwards had in creating *Spione* was to expand upon the idea of "Actual Play" that he'd introduced at the Forge. He planned to do so by letting gamers from across the world see each other's actual plays through videos available on a website. Sadly, this goal wasn't realized at the time, as real-life got in the way for Edwards, when he had children in 2007.

Edwards, of course, wanted to create a good game design too. *Spione* focused on a deck of cards as its prime mechanic. By using it, a group jointly narrated the story of two flawed spies in Berlin.

With its heavy focus on the real history of espionage and the Cold War, Edwards hoped to sell *Spione* throughout Europe in places that don't usually carry RPGs. It's currently available in English and Italian with a German edition forthcoming. A companion book called *Shahida*, which focuses on the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990, has since been published in Italian (2013) by Narrattiva and should be Adept's next release (2014).

Edwards' most recent original release is the slim, 30-page *S/lay w/Me* (2009). It's a two-player fantasy game that Edwards has acknowledged as "old school" despite its narrativist focus. *S/lay w/Me* also returns to RPG norms, as "characters" are individually controlled. However, most would still call it a story game. One participant takes on the role of a stalwart hero while the other takes on the role of both the hero's lover and his monstrous opponent. They narrate back and forth and there's eventually a "match" where dice are rolled.

"It is an attempt to recover excitement about two things … monsters and nudity."
– Ron Edwards, Interview, The Walking Eye Podcast (February 2010)

Much of the basis of *S/lay w/Me* is explained in Edwards' essay, "Naked Went the Gamer," which he originally wrote for old-school magazine *Fight On! #6* (Summer 2009). As described there, *S/lay w/Me* is openly opposed to the censorship that Edwards feels entered the industry following the more open publications of the mid-'70s; it's meant to also recall the "underground" fantasy movement of the '70s. As a result of these goals, Edwards' frankness of content is very much on display in *S/lay w/Me* — which is a common thread through his games, going back to the original release of *Sorcerer*.

Though some reviewers have been uncomfortable with *S/lay w/Me*'s artwork, its name, or its focus on monsters and sex, the game has received good reviews for its game system.

Most recently, Edwards took advantage of Kickstarter to reprint his original game, *Sorcerer*, in an upgraded form. In January 2013 he raised $26,792 from 708 backers to reprint *Sorcerer* in two volumes: an annotated hardcover of the original rules (2013) and a compilation of the three supplements called *Sorcerer: Sword, Soul, and Sex* (2013).

Though Edwards has only published infrequently since 2003, in that time he's also been a fairly iconic indie RPG publisher: putting out games as they strike him, and only when he's entirely sure they're right. It seems likely this trend will continue into the future.

Indie Through the Years: 2005-Present

Meanwhile, the indie RPG community that Ron Edwards helped create has continued to grow. Before 2005, there were already dozens of indie publishers publishing their own games. However, it was that year that the indie community really moved beyond those initial bounds that Edwards set.

We've already seen how the creation of IPR and Key 20 Games Distribution and the appearance of over 20 sponsors for the 2005 Forge booth at Gen Con displayed the maturation of the indie industry. Edwards was also seeing that same sort of growth at the Forge.

That February, Edwards felt that the community there had gotten so large that it had damaged the intellectual integrity of game design discussions. As a result, he shut down the Forge's "GNS" and Game Design forums (though those discussions continued as part of actual plays and other concrete examples). Some marked this as the beginning of the Forge's slide down into irrelevance, but Edwards was unconcerned; after all, the problems he'd seen arose due to community size. Toward the end of the year, a new website appeared to take up some of the slack: story-games.com.

Though 2005 offered lots of signs that indie RPGs had come of their own, some instead say that 2007 was the pivotal year, noting a great "diaspora" at Gen Con — which was in part due to Edwards limiting companies to two years under the Forge banner. Where there had once been a single Forge booth, now there were also booths for the Playcollective, the Ashcan Front, Burning Wheel, and others.

By 2008, the indie community had grown sufficiently that Ron Edwards felt that parts of it weren't actually "independent" any more. Toward the end of that year, IPR had somewhere between 50 and 100 clients. Brennan Taylor had also by then hired on a part-time staff member: Fred Hicks of Evil Hat Productions. Due to these factors, Edwards felt that IPR had become less friendly to the small press that it was created to serve. He left IPR and began using a new non-profit fulfillment house. Today, there are about 125 publishers working with IPR. It's a shock that Adept Press is not among them.

In 2009 and 2010, a number of events occurred that showed that indie RPGs had not just gotten big, but had in fact moved into the mainstream.

- Jay Little, designer of the third edition of the gamist fantasy stalwart *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (2009), listed a huge swath of narrativist games among his influences for the new release — including *Ars Magica* (1987), *Don't Rest Your Head* (2006), *InSpectres* (2002), *Little Fears* (2001), *My Life with Master* (2003), and *Primetime Adventures* (2004).

- Cubicle 7 Entertainment, who was already using Evil Hat's indie *Fate* system, began printing and distributing books for indie publishers, among them Arc Dream Publishing, Box Ninja, and John Wick Presents.
- Margaret Weis Productions turned their Cortex system into "Cortex Plus" with the release of *Leverage the Roleplaying Game* (2010) and *Smallville Roleplaying Game Corebook* (2010). These games openly embraced indie ideas — especially *Smallville*, which builds its characters around relationships and moral values.
- Evil Hat Productions put out *The Dresden Files* in two books, *Your Story* (2010) and *Our World* (2010). By the end of the year, the books had sold 17,000 copies between them (combining print *and* PDF) — great numbers for *anyone* selling RPGs in the late '00s and unthinkable numbers for an indie publisher.
- Mainstream RPG producer Hero Games purchased IPR. They continue to run it as a venue for the sales of indie RPGs.

Ron Edwards acknowledged the mainstreaming of indie RPGs when he began to cut back the existing institutions he created 10 years earlier to help germinate the indie community.

In 2010, he replaced the Forge Gen Con booth with a small booth for just himself and Lumpley Games. The Ashcan Front, a display for creators working on their small press games, supplemented it. He described the Front as "an attempt to keep the spirit of the 2002-2003 Forge booths alive." Edwards was still interested in assisting newcomers — in seeking out the unknown publishers still on the "edge" of the indie community — but he felt that the indie publishers he'd supported beginning eight years previous had spread their wings and flown.

> *"I aim to move the Forge into its winter stage by the end of the year. For those of you who don't know this, I announced quite a while ago that the Forge was never intended to be a permanent site. Especially since, well, bluntly, I (and Clinton, and Ed Healy, and a lot of other people active at the founding) have unequivocally won the battle we wanted to win."*
>
> – Ron Edwards, "The Winter of the Forge Looms Near," indie-rpgs.com (November 2010)

Then, in November 2010, Edwards announced that he was downsizing the Forge, with the intention of eventually closing it. The reason for cutting back the Forge was simple: Edwards felt the previous incarnation of the Forge served its purpose. With indie publishers very successfully publishing their own games and

influencing the rest of the industry, it certainly seems that he's right. And that's a pretty impressive change when you look back at a single text file being sold on the internet in 1996.

What to Read Next ○

- For narrativist games contemporary with *Sorcerer* but not necessarily related to the indie community, read about *Hero Wars* in ***Issaries*** and *The Dying Earth* in ***Pelgrane Press***.
- For a company that got its start with a *Sorcerer* supplement, read ***Memento Mori Theatricks***, and for a company that later ghost published one, read ***Burning Wheel***.
- For the next two pivotal indie games after *Sorcerer*, read about *Universalis* from ***Ramshead Publishing*** and *Dogs in the Vineyard* from ***Lumpley Games***.
- For more on IPR, read ***Galileo Games***.
- For the indie seminars held at cons in 2005 and 2006, read ***Memento Mori Theatricks*** and ***John Wick Presents.***
- For modern companies that are carrying indie publishing into the mainstream, read ***Bully Pulpit Games***, ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment***, and ***Evil Hat Productions***.
- For one more indie publisher, read ***Atomic Sock Monkey Press***.

In Other Eras

- For other pioneers of electronic distribution, read ***Grey Ghost Press*** *['90s]* and to a lesser extent ***Hero Games*** *['80s]*.
- For Ed Healy's past, read ***Eden Studios*** *['90s]*.
- For early narrativist games, read about *Paranoia* in ***West End Games*** *['80s]*, *Toon* in ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*, *Pendragon* and *Prince Valiant* in ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*, *Ars Magica* in ***Lion Rampant*** *['80s]*, *Over the Edge* and others in ***Atlas Games*** *['80s]*, and the "New Style" games in ***Hogshead Publishing*** *['90s]*.
- For Tracy Hickman's 1979 manifesto about story, read ***DayStar West Media*** *['70s]*.
- For Dragonlance, one of the first epic RPG stories, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For mainstream games influenced by the indie movement, read about Cortex Plus in ***Margaret Weis Productions*** *['90s]* and *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay Third Edition* in ***Fantasy Flight Games*** *['90s]*.

Or read onward to another indie publisher who got its start in electronic publishing: ***Memento Mori Theatricks.***

Memento Mori Theatricks: 1997-Present



2001: Schism

Memento Mori is one of the earliest indie publishers; today designer Jared Sorensen continues to be one of the most collaborative creators working in the field.

Remember That You Will Die: 1990-1996

What makes an indie designer?

Early creativity certainly doesn't hurt, and Jared Sorensen was designing his own board games way back in grade school. An early introduction to a variety of roleplaying games is, of course, a requirement as well. Sorensen was given a copy of *Basic Dungeons & Dragons* (1980, 1983) when he was 12; though he

didn't play it for years, he read and reread the rules again and again. Other games followed, including *Ghostbusters* (1986) and *Shadowrun* (1989).

Future indie designers should (of course) design as well. In his late teens, Sorensen created his first RPG, a "hack" of the *Marvel Super Heroes Advanced Set* (1986), a post-apocalyptic desert planet where giant mutated bears and four-armed robots rode crocodiles. It was a preview of the hallucinatory dreamscapes that would follow.

By 1990, Sorensen was studying English at the University of Southern Maine. Here he discovered *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991), the game that caused him to take the next step — beyond the tabletop gaming experiences he grew up with in the '80s and toward more public game design.

This began when Sorensen founded one of the first *Vampire* LARP groups in New England alongside friend Todd Estabrook — all before the official *Masquerade* (1994) LARP rules were released. Sorensen and his friends played the game by wandering the city late at night, dressed as vampires and goofing around. Eventually Sorensen expanded the ideas of his LARP into his first public rule set, the *Memento Mori Theatricks* (1996) Vampire LARP. It was a freeform game whose core rule was that everyone should have fun.

"If it's not keeping you alive or helping you procreate, it's art. It's basically stuff you do while you're waiting to die, hence the name of my company, Memento Mori."
– Jared Sorensen, See Page XX Interview Series #3 (September 2008)

The next year, Sorensen moved from Maine to San Francisco. He would soon re-establish his *Memento Mori* LARP on the new coast, but he also was ready to begin a new endeavor: producing RPGs for the masses. Before we get there, however, we should take a moment to get to know Jared Sorensen, the designer. As is the case with most indie publishers, his story and that of his company are entirely intertwined.

First and foremost, Jared Sorensen believes in game design as art. It comes across in the bizarre, innovative, and beautiful ideas embedded in his designs, but it also comes across in the surprising fact that he not only didn't playtest many of his earliest designs — but he didn't even play them. As of 2008, he never played his first professional design, *Schism*; he similarly didn't play his popular *Lacuna Part I* for years.

Probably because he sees his designs as art, Sorensen is often very critical of his past work. His books often seem to be in flux before he settles on a final form. Many of these updates have been superficial, as individual books have climbed from amateur publication toward professionalism, but in other cases — such

as with the aforementioned *Lacuna* — Sorensen made big changes to games following their publication.

Finally, it's worth noting that Sorensen has real highs and lows in his production output — as is common for indie designers. For Sorensen, productivity has been closely related to his employment status. When he was busy at a great job in the late '00s, almost nothing appeared, but then during a period of unemployment from 2009-2010 there was a huge burst of productivity.

Prelude to *Schism:* 1997-2001

Jared Sorensen started working on roleplaying design almost as soon as he arrived in the San Francisco Bay Area. One of his first designs was "eight: the game of dark imagination," which he began in January 1997 and never finished.

Once he began designing RPGs, Sorensen also began to make them freely available to the Internet. On March 26, 1998, he registered memento-mori.com as the home of *Pulp Era* (1998), a game co-designed with James Carpio and Jon Richardson; the site would take off as a repository of most of Sorensen's games and game ideas about two years later.

As noted, Sorensen gave his early games away for free. It was very much in the spirit of the Internet of the '90s, which was full of .net books, FTP sites, gopher sites, USENET groups, and mailing lists — all of which offered free RPG material for popular game systems. It was only in May 1995 that commercial use of the Internet became viable thanks to changes in the ownership of the Internet backbone, and it would be several more years before commercial RPGs outnumbered free material on the Internet.

By 2001, Sorensen had about 20 games and game ideas available on his Memento Mori site — though many were unplayable as Sorensen wasn't fond of finishing things at the time. The online game files were largely web-based, meaning that readers had to click through web pages to view the rules. A few of these early web giveaways were of special note: "Squeam" (2000), "octaNe" (2000?), and "InSpectres" (2001) were among the first RPGs Sorensen finished; they'd soon rise to prominence as some of Sorensen's first print products.

Sorensen's complete "Circuspunk RPG" was available as a PDF thanks to the fact that it was part of *RPGevolution #1* (July/August 2000), an "independent RPG magazine for the people." This e-zine was a preview of the future in more way than one; not only was it encoded as a PDF — the format that would help indie RPGs to grow in the early '00s — but it also collected together multiple designers from the Gaming Outpost, among them Clinton R. Nixon and Mike Mearls.

If you looked at Sorensen's site in early 2001, one other RPG might have caught your eye. "Schism: A virulent setting for *Sorcerer*" was labeled as "coming soon."

Schism (2001) was originally intended to be an RPG that tied together all of David Cronenberg's movies into a single (bizarre) timeline. It would have included car crash magic, video voyeur magic, and more ... but then Sorensen discovered Ron Edwards' *Sorcerer* (2001) and decided that it was the perfect game for *Schism*.

When adapted to *Sorcerer*, *Schism* became a modern-day game of psychic powers. The catch was that it interpreted *Sorcerer*'s "humanity" attribute as "mortality" — meaning that those psychic powers killed their users. *Schism* was one of the earlier RPGs with its own "endgame" — though the idea of character obsolescence in an ongoing campaign had been touched upon in a few earlier RPGs, including Chaosium's *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985). In *Schism*, a character gets just one more session before they die when their mortality reaches zero.

Schism was produced as the first of five "mini-supplements" that appeared for *Sorcerer* in July 2001. Sorensen initially sold the 36-page black & white PDF as a book through his Memento Mori website — his first such commercial book. That summer, he printed about 50 copies of the book and took them to sell at the 2001 Gen Con Game Fair.

> *"I don't know what I was thinking, but it was really, really depressing. It was my worst Gen Con ever."*
>
> – Jared Sorensen, See Page XX Interview Series #3 (September 2008)

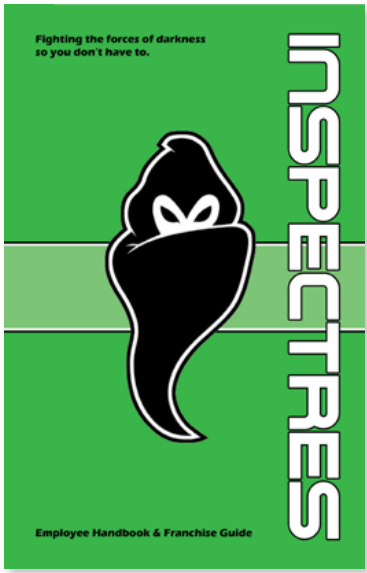
At Gen Con, Sorensen helped staff Ron Edwards' Adept Press booth — the first iteration of what would become the Forge booth in future years. Though Edwards described the experience as "a party at the booth for four days," Sorensen didn't have the same experience. He hated being a salesman. He became depressed over the fact that he was selling art and ended up giving away *Schism* to people that were buying *Sorcerer*. Sorensen would soon conquer this problem, and move on to produce and sell many other books, but it was nonetheless an inauspicious beginning.

Sorensen's work on *Schism* highlighted two elements that would recur throughout his game design career.

First, it demonstrated his willingness to work with other designers, here Ron Edwards. As we'll see, Sorensen would go on to form even tighter bonds with two other indie designers.

Second, it revealed his self-critical attitude toward his work. Sorensen quickly revamped *Schism* with a second edition, where it became easier to use psychic powers — instead focusing the game's uncertainty on the *control* of those powers.

Sorensen has also worked on a third edition of *Schism*, though he's never finished it.





Indie Independence: 2002-2004

Most of Jared Sorensen's early freebie games were incomplete, short, or based on licensed properties. So in late 2001, as he pushed Memento Mori toward being a professional publisher, Sorensen also moved some of his earliest games over into what he called "jared's game graveyard."

Meanwhile, Sorensen concentrated Memento Mori's more official focus on three games that he'd completed by releasing the *Ghostbusters*-influenced *InSpectres* (2002), the *Mad Max*-influenced *octaNe* (2002), and the b-horror movie *Squeam* (2002) as commercial PDFs. They ran the gamut, from *Squeam*'s 10 pages of play to the massive 120 pages of *octaNe*. Together with *Schism*, they built the foundation for Memento Mori's commercial enterprise. They also continued Sorensen's interaction with the then-innovative PDF form. At the time, he was told that no one would actually *pay* for PDFs. History has declared the victor of that particular argument.

Of the three games, *InSpectres* was the most important for the attention that it would earn Sorensen and Memento Mori. The idea of the game had come from its name. Sorensen had liked the fact that "InSpectres" sounded like inspectors but also suggested ghostly wraiths. He registered inspectres.com on September 27, 2000, but it took him another year to come up with the game.

At first Sorensen thought that *InSpectres* was going to be about vampires living out in the open, fighting for equal rights, like on *True Blood* (2008-Present), but then he saw a TV show about a forensic cleaning service that clears up after murders and suicides, and asked himself, 'What if *Ghostbusters* were like that?' *InSpectres* was born shortly afterward. The game started out as 8 or so pages of

HTML, grew to 16 pages, and eventually hit 39 pages when Sorensen began selling it in 2002 as a PDF.

One of the most interesting elements of *InSpectres* was that it highlighted what Sorensen calls the "player/character divide." Though players took on the roles of characters, they also "played" the game by engaging in their own metagame activities. This primarily came about through "starting interviews" and "confessionals."

The starting interviews lead off each game, and take the form of an employee screening, an investor meeting, or a media interview. Through these interviews, the players and GM are effectively engaging in improv theater. The players even have the freeform ability to introduce subplots for the game and generally set its tone.

InSpectres' confessionals are even more innovative. They take the form of the confessionals seen on reality TV shows like *Survivor* (2000-Present) and *Big Brother* (2000-Present) — with a player character talking directly to the "camera." However, the players don't just report what's happened in the game *so far*; they can once more introduce new plot elements and foreshadow the future.

The core mechanic of *InSpectres* continues with the trend of distributing authority between GM and players. It's based on a comparative dice pool where a 4+ is a success; the player gets to narrate the success for a roll of 4 or more, while the GM gets to narrate the failure for a 3 or less. It's the inverse of the system that Ron Edwards introduced in *Trollbabe* (2002), around the same time.

The fourth-wall breaking and distributed authority of *InSpectres* together made it very innovative, but it still remained clearly within the roleplaying field — rather than becoming a story game, like many RPGs that used similar innovations.

InSpectres was a finalist for the first Indie Game of the Year award, alongside Clinton R. Nixon's *Donjon* (2002) and Misguided Games' dieselpunk game, *Children of the Sun* (2002). They all lost, however, to the very well-received *Dust Devils* (2002) by Matt Snyder. More recently *InSpectres* has generated a spin-off small press movie, *InSpectres* (2013).

octaNe and *Squeam* haven't been as successful as *InSpectres*, but were still interesting releases. Where *octaNe* focused on Grindhouse and Psychotronic film, *Squeam* more simply built upon the teen horror genre. *octaNe* deserves some additional notice because it uses the same "iSystem" mechanics as *InSpectres* — which is also credited by John Wick as a major influence on his own indie release, *Houses of the Blooded* (2008).

Over the next couple of years, Memento Mori sold its first PDFs using the Forge Bookshelf — another innovator in the quickly growing indie field. He also

produced semi-professional print editions of the books using coil-bound binding or three-ring binders.

Memento Mori also published a few PDFs by other authors — a first for the company. *Against the Reich!* (2003) by Paul Elliott was an expansion for *octaNe*, while *Le Mon Mouri* (2003) by Sean Demory was a surreal game of personal horror. Sorensen supplemented these books with a fourth major game of his own: the short and simple *Tooth & Claw* RPG (2003), where players took on the role of dinosaurs.

Early in 2004 Sorensen published a brand-new RPG called "Lacuna" in the pages of the *Daedalus* e-zine. However its history falls more fully into the *next* major era of Memento Mori's development, which began a few months later.

A Wicked Crew: 2004-2006

Jared Sorensen made deep connections within the indie community from the start. As we've seen, his first commercial publication was for Ron Edwards' *Sorcerer*, while he also staffed Edwards' Adept Press booth in 2001. Meanwhile, he was making friends on both the Gaming Outpost and the Forge and contributing to related indie magazines like Clinton R. Nixon's *RPGevolution* (2000) and Matt Snyder's *Daedalus* (2003-2005). So it was no surprise when John Wick announced in 2004 that he and Jared Sorensen were forming an RPG publishing house called The Wicked Dead Brewing Company.

Sorensen and Wick had first decided to work together around August 2003. They had a full business plan in place by March 30, 2004. It called for the production of "quality small roleplaying games"; the goal was to produce RPGs that were about 48 pages long and to have five of them ready for Gen Con Indy 2004. Most of the games would be Wick's, and so are covered in his history, but Sorensen did continue on with his own publications in this period.

> *"The roleplaying game industry is not an industry at all. It looks more like an environment of co-conspirators than competitors."*
>
> – John Wick, "Wicked Dead Brewing Company Business Plan" (March 2004)

Wicked Dead *did* end up bringing five books with them to Gen Con: John Wick's *Enemy Gods* (2004), Annie Rush's *Run Robot Red!* (2004), and three books by Jared Sorensen: *InSpectres*, *octaNe*, and *Lacuna Part I*.

These new editions of *InSpectres and octaNe* were the first ones professionally bound and professionally produced. Sorensen tried to print bound editions of *InSpectres* once before, for Gen Con Indy 2003, but they ended up misprinted, resulting in 60 unsellable copies. Now, the new association with John Wick had

encouraged Sorensen to take the next step with his old Memento Mori games.



Lacuna was a new game from Sorensen — and his most popular release since *InSpectres*. To give its full name, it was *Lacuna Part I. The Creation of the Mystery and the Girl from Blue City* (2004). Sorensen claims it was the RPG book with the longest name prior to the release of *in this shimmering Spring day, ah with ever anxious heart, the blossoms are falling* (2007) from Burning Wheel.

Lacuna Part I originated (as we've already seen) in Matt Snyder's *Daedalus* magazine. Snyder was a friend, so Sorensen had agreed to contribute to the magazine, but two weeks before the deadline he found himself without any content. Fortunately he had a weird nightmare around the same time and turned that into the game. Sorensen later said the he wrote *Lacuna Part I* in just two hours. It was published on February 2, 2004, as part of the PDF *Daedalus #2* (Winter 2004). Sorensen then fixed up the typos and published it on his own for Gen Con Indy 2004.

Like *Schism*, *Lacuna Part I* was influenced by David Cronenberg, and like *Schism* it featured characters who possessed super powers that could kill them. Here they were "mystery agents" whose ever-rising "heart rate" could eventually prove fatal. The goal of the mystery agents was to hunt down "rogue personalities" in a very surreal world: the collective subconsciousness of Blue City.

The main mechanic of *Lacuna* is an additive die pool where players are trying to achieve an 11+ for success. The catch is that each roll adds to the mystery agent's heart rate. Players can *keep* rolling if they feel that a success is particularly important, but doing so raises their heart rate faster and faster — which is good while a character is heading toward a target heart rate, but increasingly dangerous when he goes even higher.

The heart rate was the design feature of *Lacuna Part I* that was particularly loved by players and designers alike. Though it didn't feature the extensive distributed authority of *InSpectres*, *Lacuna* nonetheless gave players a lot of choice over whether they failed or succeeded.

As was common, Sorensen hadn't played or run *Lacuna Part I* when he released it. However, he later heard about a GM on RPGnet who was really enjoying the game, so he decided to run it himself; one of his test runs included indie designers

Luke Crane and Thor Olavsrud, who were happy to point out the "dangly bits" of the game. This led Sorensen to produce a "second attempt" at *Lacuna* (2006).

The second attempt included graphic work by Daniel Solis, who helped to make the design of the book match the surreal and weird design of the game. However, the way that Sorensen marketed the new edition is at least as notable.

In March 2006, Sorensen started posting crazy journal entries about Memento Mori coming under threat of lawsuit and buyout. Then on April 1, he shut down the memento-mori.com website entirely and began forwarding browsers to a new (made-up) company. Fans were distressed, even panicked; some of them tried to start a legal defense fund for Sorensen. When Sorensen revealed it was all an elaborate lead-up to the rerelease of *Lacuna*, many were less than pleased. Sorensen and accomplice Wick were both temporarily banned from RPGnet, where they'd perpetrated much of the hoax. This probably increased the publicity they got from the incident.

> *"Some cunning LJ posts on my part and plotting on RPG.net … have whipped up a small maelstrom of outrage, anger, sadness and … ah, support? Didn't see that coming."*
>
> – Jared Sorensen, "An Apology on April Fool's Day," nasrudin-institute.org (April 2006)

Though *Lacuna* was labeled as "Part I," Sorensen originally said he didn't intend to write a "Part II." However, he's since admitted to working on a location book detailing puzzle tiles which could be used to form a Blue City that changes in every game. If this supplement is ever released, it'll be called "Lacuna Part II."

After *Lacuna*, Sorensen would design just one more game with Wicked Dead, *the farm* (2005) — a creepy game about balancing cooperation and personal interests. Sorensen describes it as "experimental."

During this time period, Sorensen also produced his only material for another RPG publisher. Sorensen and Wick had originally planned to produce a book called, "Man, Fuckin' Vampires" after seeing *Vampire: The Requiem* (2004) at Gen Con Indy 2004 and talking about how they should produce their own vampire game. However, White Wolf subsequently contacted Sorensen to write some material for them, and so his "Monster Garage" ended up being a subversive variant game published in the *Requiem Chronicler's Guide* (2006). Sorensen was ultimately disappointed by his freelancing experience, since it took him a year of working and reworking his article and resulted in a pretty small payout.

"I made $300 … If I self-published MFV as a 30-page stand-alone and charged $5 a copy, I'd earn the same amount in the same timespan after selling just 60 copies (that's roughly one sale a week). I'd also own the rights. Let that be a lesson to you!"

– Jared Sorensen, "Other Games," memento-mori.com (2006)

By mid-2005, it looked like Sorensen was on his way up in the gaming world. That was most obvious at Gen Con Indy 2005, when Sorensen talked Peter Adkison into giving him a block of four seminar spaces at the convention to run the "Gen Con 2005 Indie Game Design Seminar" (or more simply, the "Roleplaying Game Design Workshop," as it finally appeared in the program). Sorensen's basic idea was: "Show up with an idea, go home with a game." Unlike the talky seminars that filled Gen Con (and most gaming conventions), Sorensen wanted this one to be a real workshop.

Sorensen got the stars of indie publishing to help out. Vincent Baker of Lumpley Games kicked off the workshop with a "Theory of Roleplaying" seminar; Luke Crane of Burning Wheel joined Sorensen for a "Game Design" session; John Wick followed up with "Worldbuilding and Mythic Storytelling"; then Luke Crane finished things up alongside Clinton R. Nixon of Anvilwerks by talking about "Print & Electronic Publication."

The seminar was a highlight of the early indie publishing movement. It was also successful enough that Sorensen and Luke Crane organized the workshop again for Gen Con Indy 2006 — with the exact same cast, plus Ron Edwards himself.

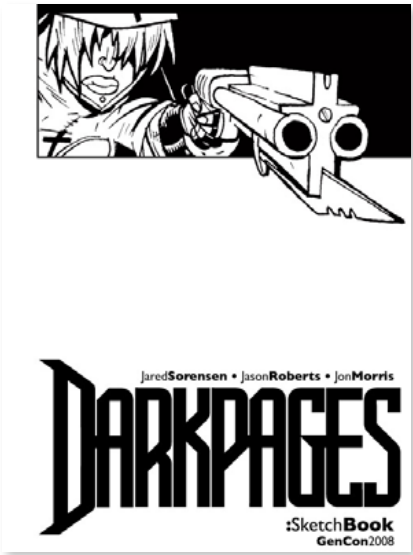
Sorensen's next game was supposed to be "Dark Pages," a superhero game based on the horror superhero genre of the '70s. It would have been a game for comics like *Doom Patrol*, *Ghost Rider*, *Sandman*, and *Swamp Thing*. It would also have featured some unique, comic-based mechanics — including visually-described "panels" that could be used to detail both characters and the game. Sorensen wrote fiction about the game and also imagined many "imprints" (settings) — running the gamut from 19th century adventures to "The Final Days of Man," which Sorensen described as "heavy metal sci-fi." *Schism* was even going to be resurrected as a Dark Pages setting.

Sorensen previewed the mechanics of the game in *Daedalus #3* (Spring 2005). From there, he developed Dark Pages for a full five years. He even produced an ashcan of the game that he called *Darkpages Sketch Book* (2008) for Gen Con Indy 2008, but he eventually gave up. He later said that he just couldn't get the game to work.

Unfortunately, Sorensen was spinning his wheels on Dark Pages just as both of Wicked Dead's principals were beset by troublesome times in their personal lives. Sorensen later acknowledged it as a "rough time" while Wick said that 2006 was "a rough year on both a financial and health level."

As is more completely described in the history of John Wick Presents, Wick's issues resulted in Wicked Dead having problems with fulfilling orders. Though Sorensen stepped in to help get paid-for products out the door, he also cut off his personal connections to Wicked Dead around August 2006.

During the years of Wicked Dead, Sorensen never abandoned his Memento Mori brand or its website. He'd continued to sell his own products there, while also selling them through Wicked Dead. Now he was able to fully return to Memento Mori. However, Sorensen's company would not produce any more new RPGs other than that ashcan *Darkpages*.



The end of Memento Mori's RPG production was in large part due to new jobs that were taking up Sorensen's creative energy. At first Sorensen was working with Turbine, where he did development for *Dungeons & Dragons Online* (2006) and *The Lord of the Rings Online* (2007). But then in early 2007 he started work with a company with even closer ties to the roleplaying industry.

Hidden City, Free Market: 2007-2010

In November 2006, shortly after ending his official connections with Wicked Dead, Sorensen was attending Gen Con SoCal 2006. He'd been there before and knew show owner Peter Adkison, who was always interested in the newest indie happenings. They'd vaguely talked about playing a game together in the past, but this year it actually happened when Luke Crane decided to run Sorensen's *Lacuna* for Adkison.

By this time, Peter Adkison had been recruited as the CEO of a hobbyist company called Hidden City Games. They'd gotten their start with *Clout Fantasy* (2005), a collectible chip throwing game, but were now looking for new games. As a result, Adkison pitched Sorensen and Crane to develop an electronic science-fiction game. They agreed and were both hired at Hidden City in January 2007. The game they designed would be Sorensen's next (and to date last) major roleplaying game.

At first Sorensen and Crane played around with a game about Korean gangsters on a space station. It would include a Japanese-like reputation economy. However, they eventually decided it wasn't quite what they were looking for — though the space station would remain as the heart of their evolving SF game.

Sorensen and Crane then decided to develop a game of "real" science-fiction. They didn't want it to be a game of "pirate romance" nor about cargo hauling. They also didn't want it to include any traveling, which is why they stuck with their space station. They definitely didn't want it to be about killing things and taking their stuff. Aliens and laser gun battles were both straight out.

Instead Sorensen and Crane wanted to design a game about stronger SF themes — including time, space, and identity. They wanted it to be about the future of today, about peoples' hopes and fears for tomorrow. By focusing on the writings of authors like Iain Banks, Vernor Vinge, Cory Doctorow, and William Gibson, Sorensen and Crane ended up writing about the newly evolving transhuman genre. When they eventually produced *Freemarket* (2010), it wasn't the first SF RPG to focus on transhuman themes, because *Transhuman Space* (2002) and *Eclipse Phase* (2009) both beat it to market, but it's still in pretty rarified company.

> *"Everything I think [that] Luke and I write is autobiographical. … I think, artists, that's what we do."*
>
> – Jared Sorensen, Interview, The Walking Eye Podcast (July 2010)

Unfortunately, there were some major trials along the way. This was partially due to cash flow problems at Hidden City, caused by the Great Recession. However, Hidden City had also signed an agreement in mid-2006 to produce *Bella Sara* (2006), a horse-themed girl's collectible card game. Hidden City began selling *Bella Sara* in quantity in March 2007 and never looked back. It quickly took over the whole company, and so about six months after they started work on *Freemarket*, Sorensen and Crane were pulled off that task to work on *Bella Sara* — where they designed achievements, mini-games, board games, and social media games related to the horse-trading brand. Sorensen and Crane barely managed to keep the *Freemarket* flame alive, teasing the public with a Flash website called projectdonut.com — which pretended to be a real look at the fictional space station at the heart of *Freemarket*.

In 2009, Sorensen and Crane were let go from Hidden City. Crane remembers recommending the decision after seeing the budget versus income spreadsheets for the team; Sorensen remembers receiving a mysterious letter saying that he was no longer a full-time employee of Hidden City and having to ask Peter Adkison



about it at Gen Con Indy 2009. In any case, the two's time with Hidden City was over. Fortunately, Sorensen and Crane had already negotiated to keep the tabletop rights to their SF game — as Hidden City had no interest in that medium. As a result, they now had a *better* opportunity to finish *Freemarket* than when they were with the larger company.

Jared Sorensen was unemployed for about two years following his layoff from Hidden City. Though this caused him real financial hardships, it gave him an opportunity for a huge burst of creative production. That began with *Freemarket*, which was released to the public as a free PDF in November 2009; and then published under the "Sorencrane" brand as an attractive boxed game in a limited edition of 1,000 at Gen Con Indy 2010. As was the case with Sorensen's previous indie team-up, he keeps *Freemarket* available through Memento Mori as well.

Having reached the publication of *Freemarket*, we should probably explore it in a bit more detail. Its boxed release was full of cool stuff like chips, tokens, and card decks. It's the sort of release that hasn't been seen much since the '90s — especially not among indie designs, which tend to be more minimalistic than mainstream RPG publishing. Ironically it's also the sort of thing that can keep games from being effectively pirated in the '10s — which was one of the goals.

The game fully plays up its transhuman influences. Anything is possible on the Donut, and death is just a temporary nuisance. As a result, though characters certainly *can* go on wild killing sprees, it's unlikely to be the major conflict of the game. The most interesting transhuman element of *Freemarket* is probably its focus on memories as a currency that can be gained or lost. The way that memories are managed is even linked into the game's experience mechanism.

> *"In order to get ahead on the station, players must make friends, cooperate and give gifts to one another. Doing so enhances a player's reputation. Players can then spend this reputation to accomplish personal goals."*
>
> – Luke Crane, Interview, technoccult.net (August 2010)

Meanwhile, the heart of the game is all about "Flow" — which isn't quite the reputation economy of those Korean gangsters, but is sort of close. Flow is risked in conflicts, with card draws ultimately determining who wins and who loses. Overall, however, the mechanics are probably less important than *Freemarket*'s new take on science-fiction and its focus on transhumanism.

Though they're no longer working at Hidden City, Sorensen and Crane continue to work together as "Sorensen/Crane," a "game design and consulting firm." Recent projects include a *Dark Crystal* brand bible and a *Vampire Diaries* Facebook game. Ironically, their partnership has lasted longer than Hidden City Games itself, which closed up shop in 2011 after losing its *Bella Sara* license.

Parsely Days: 2009-Present

To date, the second attempt of *Lacuna Part I* was Memento Mori's last complete roleplaying product, and *Freemarket* was Jared Sorensen's final roleplaying release — so depending on how you count it, Memento Mori has mostly been out of the roleplaying industry since either 2006 or 2010. However, Jared Sorensen has been publishing books of a different sort: his Parsely games.

The history of the games goes back to the early '80s, when Sorensen got to tour the offices of computer game publisher Infocom during a class trip to Cambridge, Massachusetts. While there, he even got to playtest *Seastalker* (1984), an upcoming release from the company. After returning to the classroom, Sorensen played some of Infocom's most famous games, including *Zork* (1980-1982), *Deadline* (1982), and *Planetfall* (1983). Sorensen fell in love with the games and even had a *Zork* poster on his wall in his teenage days.

Infocom's games were what are now called "interactive fiction" games. Using a text interface, players worked their way through various locales, collecting equipment, solving puzzles, and finally (perhaps) reaching a game's conclusion. Since the games were entirely text based, players had to communicate with the game via a text "parser," which interpreted their commands. However, the commands were pretty basic, usually running just two or four words. Players could do things like "take lamp" or (if they wanted to be fancy) "take rusty lamp." At the extreme, the parser could figure out stuff like "put babelfish in ear," but that was the extent of its intelligence.

Fast forward almost two decades. In 2002, Sorensen wrote up the rules for "Parsley," which he called a "text-based roleplaying game." It was a free game, and the rules were less than 500 words long. The game's premise was simple: it adapted Infocom's gaming style to a multiplayer tabletop game. Players issued commands in simple Infocom parser form, and the gamemaster (called the Parser) interpreted them.



"I was amazed at how much fun it was for everyone involved. The goal was 'get off the spaceship before it blows up' and involved a lot of [humorous] frustration as the players attempted to get the shuttlecraft out the hanger bay. Nice."

– Jared Sorensen, Forum Posting, indie-rpgs.com (July 2002)

Sorensen actually ran a Parsely game a short time later at BisbeeCon III (2002). It was a science-fiction scenario that would become known as "Action Castle." He discovered that the players loved the game, and the next year he followed it up with "Action Castle #2: Jungle Adventure" at BisbeeCon IV (2003). So it continued over the years.

One of the advantages of Parsely is that it can be run with any groups of any size, since different players take turns issuing commands. Sorensen ran it for 17 people at Dreamation in 2006 or 2007; then, at the PAX 2008 convention, Sorensen was able to run a particularly successful game of "Action Castle" with 30 players. The next year, at PAX 2009, over 100 players played! It has since become a "Legend of PAX."

As far back as that Dreamation run, Luke Crane was telling Sorensen to publish his Parsely games. *Action Castle* (2009) finally appeared at Gen Con Indy 2009, the same con where Crane and Sorensen got their walking papers from Hidden City.

The initial production of *Action Castle* was an amateur release that only appeared in a more professional form at Gen Con Indy 2010. Since Sorensen temporarily had lots of time on his hands, he also had three more Parsely games ready by that time: *Jungle Adventure* (2010), *Spooky Manor* (2010), and *Space Station* (2010). *Action Castle II* (2010) and *Pumpkin Town* (2010) followed, making 2010 the most productive year ever for Memento Mori.

Unfortunately, by 2011, Sorensen was running short on money, and this impacted his ability to produce games. The seventh major Parsely adventure, *Z-Ward* (2011) required a Kickstarter: Sorensen raised $7,694 from 281 backers.

He said that after paying for the game, he had enough money left for a month of rent and utilities — which is probably more money than it sounds like, as Sorensen had by now moved to New York. Meanwhile, fans that Kickstarted *Z-Ward* also got to see the first copies of the *next* Parsely game, *Six-Gun Showdown* (2012, 2013).

Though the Parsely games are clearly hobbyist games, and though they're all genre games, they fall outside of both the roleplaying and story game categories. They're all about solving puzzles, with no actual role to play. Sorensen himself claims that they're performance art.

Though different than his previous games, Sorensen has done okay with the Parsely releases. He usually is able to print and sell 500 copies of a new Parsely game. He's even got at least one imitator: Andrew Looney of Looney Labs has occasionally run a convention Parsely game of his own, called "Muffins."

Sorensen's game production at Memento Mori has largely stalled out (once more) since 2011. That's probably in part because he's once more gainfully employed. He worked first at Guerillapps, then at Plyfe as a senior game developer and more recently has become Plyfe's VP of Game Design.

The current word is that the next Sorensen design may be an old one: "Darkpages: Miniseries" — though the release originally planned for Gen Con Indy 2013 has not appeared as of this writing.

What to Read Next ○

- For Ron Edwards, *Sorcerer*, and the Forge Gen Con booths, read ***Adept Press***.
- For the full history of Wicked Dead Brewing and more on John Wick, read ***John Wick Presents***.
- For the stars of the Indie Game Seminars at Gen Con Indy 2005 and 2006, read ***Adept Press***, ***Burning Wheel***, ***John Wick Presents,*** and ***Lumpley Games***.
- For more on Sorensen's current partner, Luke Crane, read ***Burning Wheel***.
- For the other modern transhuman game, read ***Posthuman Studios***.

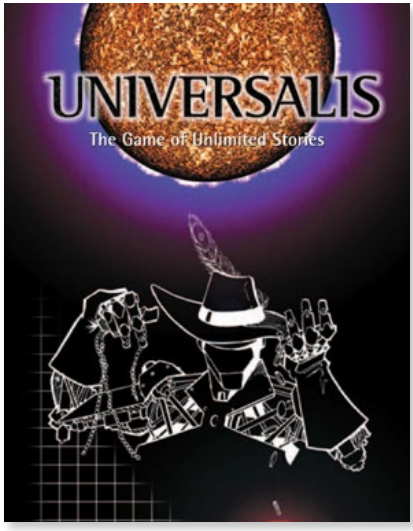
In Other Eras

- For *Vampire* and the official *Vampire* LARP, read ***White Wolf*** *['90s].*
- For the original Ghostbusting game, read ***West End Games*** *['80s].*
- For Peter Adkison's origins in the field, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s].*
- For an older look at transhuman ideas, read ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s].*

For one of the most influential indie companies, read onward to ***Ramshead Publishing.***

Ramshead Publishing: 2001-Present

As an early indie publisher, Ramshead helped to popularize many of the ideas prominent in the indie community throughout the '00s.



2002: Universalis

The *Universalis* Years: 2002-Present

Indie publishers are independent, and that means that they can publish at their own speed. For many indie publishers, that's meant releasing a book every year or two. Ramshead Publishing goes even further: they've published just a single finalized book in a decade. Mind you, it was a pretty important book: the second pivotal book of the indie revolution.

That story begins with Mike Holmes and Ralph Mazza. They were members of the Gaming Outpost and later, founding

members of the Forge. They didn't have any particular plan to publish, but they enjoyed talking about design: in fact, Holmes and Mazza would be two of the Forge's most prolific posters over its lifetime.

That brings us to a Forge thread started by Seth Ben-Ezra — who was working on the RPG design that would eventually be released as *Legends of Alyria* (2006) through his own Dark Omen Games. Ben-Ezra wanted to give his game's players more control over the creation of the setting, and he was looking for ideas. Holmes and Mazza both offered suggestions, but Ben-Ezra eventually told them that they weren't quite what he was looking for. That's when the accidental partnership of Holmes and Mazza went offline and they began developing their ideas into a game.

The result was *Universalis: The Game of Unlimited Stories* (2002), which was released at the 2002 Gen Con Game Fair. It was published by Ramshead Publishing — a company name based on Mazza's initials, which he'd been using since he was a kid. The game has been called "whacked" and "paradigm shifting." It certainly changed the way that a lot of indie designers thought about games.

> *"I'm proud to say that Universalis represents a real Forge game."*
> – Ron Edwards, Universalis Review, The Forge (November 2002)

As the name suggests, *Universalis* is about telling stories. In other words, it's a prototypical story game — the sort of thing that Hogshead Publishing released under their "New Style" label, but which was otherwise largely unknown in the industry. In *Universalis*, players agree to tenets and then collectively tell a story over a single session of play. The game includes plenty of rules to help the story along — molding it into a truly collaborative creation. It's here that *Universalis* really innovated the roleplaying form:

- *Universalis* has ***no GM***. Instead players take turns telling the story.
- As a result, the game requires ***no prep***.
- In order to decide who does what, *Universalis* utilizes a ***resource management*** system. Players have to spend coins to create facts.
- These facts usually take the form of "traits," which are ***freeform attributes***.
- A ***bidding*** system uses the same coins to choose who gets to define scenes.
- The resource management and bidding are part of a larger ***economy***: players can win coins back through conflicts, while they can improve their position in a conflict by using the facts that they created through the use of coins.
- When a player actually wins the right to run the next scene, he leads things off by ***framing the scene***. This means that he must define the scene's location

and time and then introduce its first components (people and things). Afterward, other players join in.

- This scene framing is part of a general attention to ***literary mechanics***; for example, people and places are defined by their "importance" to the story.

Universalis didn't originate most of these ideas. Hogshead's *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1998) had GM-less play, while *Nobilis* (1999) featured resource management. Issaries' *Hero Wars* (2000) included freeform attributes. Bidding had appeared in limited capacities: *James Bond 007* (1983) used bidding in chases and *Amber Diceless Role-Playing* (1991) used it during character creation. Collaborative storytelling had appeared in *Once Upon a Time* (1993) and scene-based storytelling was found in *Maelstrom Storytelling* (1997)/*Story Engine* (2001).

However, none of these ideas were used widely at the time, nor were they used frequently; instead, most of these mechanics were just coming to the attention of roleplaying designers. *Universalis* took these relatively fresh ideas and molded them into a coherent whole. More importantly, Ramshead then offered these ideas to the indie Forge community.

In turn, the Forge community used these ideas for many new designs. In an RPGnet review just a year later, Jonathan Walton listed several in-process Forge games that had been influenced by *Universalis*, including his own "Ever-After." Most of them were never completed; nonetheless, it was clear that *Universalis* was being discussed and considered at the heart of indie design. Almost a decade later, story games such as Lame Mage's *Microscope* (2011) still clearly show the imprint of *Universalis*' ideas.

> *"Many aspects of Universalis are so different that it has led some to question whether it is even a role-playing game at all. … More than anything, Universalis is a tool kit for the creation of stories."*
>
> – Ralph Mazza, "Intent and Departure from Tradition," Universalis website (2002)

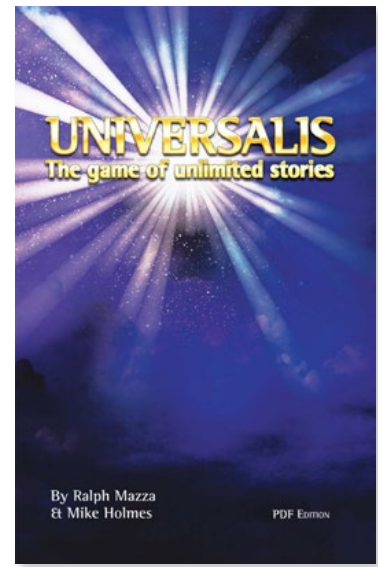
Several of *Universalis*' individual mechanics proliferated. Scene framing practically became a requirement for indie games over the next several years. Freeform attributes similarly became quite popular. GM-less play became a more general question about distributing authority that was touched upon by most indie games — and which has been deeply developed by Bully Pulpit Games. Resource management created its own stream of game design that included games like Clinton Nixon's *The Shadow of Yesterday* (2004) and much of Galileo Games' production.

Which is why *Universalis* was the second pivotal game of the indie scene, following Ron Edwards' *Sorcerer* (2001) itself.

When Holmes and Mazza designed *Universalis*, it was a truly collaborative effort — though Mazza would later say that Holmes often solved design issues *months* before he did. However it was Mazza who wrote all the words for the final book. He was obviously the one who really wanted to *publish* a game.

In January 2003, Mazza bought out Holmes' share of *Universalis*. Afterward the game and Ramshead Publishing would both be his alone — a more typical situation for an indie publisher. Holmes remained a member of the indie design community, where he ran the first Game Chef contest in 2002 — an event that has in some ways been just as important to the indie community as *Universalis* itself.

Meanwhile, all 100 copies of the (small) first printing of *Universalis* sold out. Mazza financed a larger second print run (2003) solely from the profits of the first printing. Those 750 or so copies sold out by the end of 2005. Mazza then produced a *Revised Edition* (2006) of *Universalis* as its third printing. It was largely rewritten based on years of experience and included "gimmicks" and advice from players.



By 2010, *Universalis* had sold almost 2,000 copies — a strong number for a small press indie RPG. Most of these copies were sold through Key 20 Direct or Indie Press Revolution, who distributed indie games to retailers and sold them directly. The game has since entered a fourth printing.

The footprint of indie games influenced by *Universalis* and *their* total print runs is probably much, much larger.

Unpublished Games: 2003-Present

As soon as Mazza was done with *Universalis*, he began work on his next game, "Robots & Rapiers" — which is a typical pattern for indie designers. The game had its origins in *Universalis* itself. There, Mazza had given his artist a lot of leeway to draw whatever he wanted, because *Universalis* could be used to tell any sort of story. Some of the pictures that he got were of robot pirates; that intrigued Mazza — and became the inspiration for the new game.

Robots & Rapiers turned out to be a game about an abandoned entertainment complex somewhere in the far future. This allowed the robot entertainers to participate in swashbuckling adventures, but there were some complexities. First, the robots were slowly overcoming their programming and achieving sentience.

Second, there were political machinations underway between the various factions of the entertainment center. Mazza announced the game as early as June 2003, with the intent to publish in 2004.

In 2004 Ramshead released what Mazza called the *Robots & Rapiers Quick Start Rules* (2004) — first as a PDF file, then as a printed book at Gen Con Indy 2004. The game was roughly laid out, and it was mostly free of art. The intent was to offer a beta version of the rules that people could playtest and comment on. The mere publication of this booklet was of some note, because Mazza produced what would later be called an "ashcan" — a preliminary, playtest version of an upcoming RPG. Ashcans would become quite important to the indie community a few years later when Paul Czege and Matt Snyder created The Ashcan Front (2007-2010), which allowed indie publishers to come together and jointly sell their ashcans at Gen Con. For now, though, Mazza was going it alone.

Unfortunately, the *Robots & Rapiers Quick Start* playtesting didn't go well. Mazza would later say that he'd hit all of his design goals for the game, but that it wasn't any fun to play. If he'd been a non-indie publisher, Mazza might have been forced to release his game anyway. Instead, he was able to put it aside. Mazza has gone back to *Robots & Rapiers* from time to time, and in recent years has even said that it's nearly ready to go.

In the meantime, Mazza became distracted by a new design that he called "Blood Red Sands." It was a sword & sorcery RPG that was set in a godless fantasy setting that Mazza used for his personal *AD&D* campaign way back in first edition days. Blood Red Sands' big innovation was that it was not only a competitive game, but one that allowed head-to-head competition; to support this, Mazza took some inspiration from tabletop board games, which are all about creating player conflict without the need for an impartial referee.

Mazza also took inspiration from *many* RPGs as part of a rather unusual game design goal: he wanted to prove that a game could be innovative without actually having any new mechanics. To support this idea, Mazza created the first draft of Blood Red Sands by cutting and pasting rules from other games, creating the precise combinations that he wanted. Character creation came from *Universalis* using random tables similar to those in *In a Wicked Age* (2007). Players made lots of characters as in *Legends of Alyria*, but decided which to play in each session, because there could only be a single hero, like in *Beast Hunters* (2007). Dice mechanics were borrowed from *Dogs in the Vineyard*, player authority was distributed like in *Polaris* (2005), and the end-game conditions drew on *My Life with Master* (2003) and *InSpectres* (2002).

It was an intriguing methodology for creating a game — and equally intriguing to see indie game rules being used for competitive play.

"Quite literally – and it's kind of interesting, being the sword & sorcery game that it is – the game was assembled from the bleeding corpses of other games that I hacked apart to make this game."

– Ralph Mazza, Jennisodes Podcast #114 (July 2012)

As with *Robots & Rapiers*, Blood Red Sands has taken years to complete. Playtest rules went online in 2009, and Mazza has more than once said he's nearly done, but the work continues.

Recently, Mazza has decided that he's more interested in creating games than in the actual publication. As a result, he's decided to produce Blood Red Sands with Galileo Games; Brennan Taylor himself has taken on the editorial work for the game. A successful Kickstarter in 2012 raised $7,001 from 223 backers.



Layout problems and other setbacks have plagued the project, but a PDF of *Blood Red Sands* (2013) finally went out to backers in May 2013 with a print book appearing in wider distribution in early 2014. Though it's taken 11 years, Ramshead's second complete game is finally available.

What to Read Next ○

- For the origins of Gaming Outpost and the Forge, read ***Adept Press***.
- For the other two pivotal games in the early indie industry, read about *Sorcerer* from ***Adept Press*** and about *Dogs in the Vineyard* from ***Lumpley Games***.
- For other games with GM-less play, read ***Bully Pulpit Games***.
- For other games with resource management, read ***Galileo Games***.
- For another indie publisher who decided he didn't want to deal with actual publication, read ***Atomic Sock Monkey Press***.
- For the publisher of *Blood Red Sands*, also read ***Galileo Games***.

In Other Eras ⚲

- For earlier story games and for *Nobilis*, read about the New Style games from ***Hogshead Publishing*** *['90s]*.
- For an earlier competitive game, read about *Rune* from ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.

For another very influential indie publisher, read on to ***Lumpley Games.***

Lumpley Games: 2001-Present

Indie publisher Vincent Baker has produced not one, but two RPG hits: Dogs in the Vineyard *and* Apocalypse World *— each of which has had notable repercussions on indie design.*

Puppy Years: 2001-2003



2002: kill puppies for satan

As with most indie publishers, Lumpley Games is the story of just one designer: D. Vincent Baker. Baker's origins in roleplaying came from a rather unusual source: *Zork* (1980), the interactive fiction computer game published by Infocom. Baker and friends played it on a computer belonging to Baker's uncle. When that computer was unavailable, Baker tried something different: he took the role of the computer and let his friends issue computer commands for moving around a dungeon. Soon, Baker began letting his friends interact with him in a more

freeform way; though he called it "adventuring," Baker invented fantasy roleplay all on his own.

Baker stumbled upon three issues of *Dragon* magazine at a yard sale, but he didn't see a published roleplaying game until high school. He thought that the games he was running on his own were better, but he began playing "legit games" too. *Shadowrun* (1989) and *Talislanta* (1987, 1989) came first; *Cyberpunk* (1988) and *Ars Magica* (1987, 1989) followed. There was even a bit of *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) once Baker got to college.

> *"If you want, you can look at everything I've done in RPG design and theory as my attempt to solve the problems that Ars Magica poses."*
>
> – Vincent Baker, "Designer Interview," Primeval Games Press (January 2005)

However, it was *Ars Magica* that Baker constantly played from 1990 onward. He acknowledges it as one of the major influences on his game design, but even back in the '90s he wasn't entirely happy with the game. This was especially true after the game's third edition (1992) was released and bloated the game. It was now full of many gaming subsystems, none of which particularly fit together; this wasn't entirely unusual for a game of the '90s, but Baker didn't like it.

By the late '90s, Baker found the internet. There he discovered the "BerkList" — the *Ars Magica* mailing list at Berkeley. Upon joining the list, Baker began telling the participants how rotten the *Ars Magica* rules were, and how he'd fixed them with various freeform mechanics. He even talked about some theory — like the idea that a fireball only exists in a roleplaying game because everyone agrees that it does.

It all went over about as well as you'd expect.

Meanwhile, Baker had recently left an awful job so that his wife Meguey Baker — who we'll meet again — could keep working. Add all that up and you have an angry and disenchanted young gamer. One day he got it all out on paper in a roleplaying game called *kill puppies for satan* (2001).

It wasn't Baker's first game design. Way back in college he mashed together R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk* and ICE's *Cyberspace* (1989) to create his own cybergame, and (as we've seen) he extensively house ruled *Ars Magica*. He'd also written much of a fantasy heartbreaker — his handwritten pages filling a giant notebook. Baker even worked on a time travel game where players had to kill innocent people to save the future. However, *kill puppies for satan* was the first game that Baker made available to the public.

As the name suggests, *kill puppies for satan* encourages characters to kill puppies (and other pets and even wild animals). Characters then earn evil points, used for

casting spells, engaging in rituals, and doing other evil stuff. Baker has said that it was a "scream of rage" against the state of roleplaying development at the time.

Baker acknowledges the game as a parody of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, where players drink blood to help pay for their special powers; however it's even more clearly a satire of *Ars Magica*. There, godless magicians kill puppies and other cute magical beasts to extract *vis* — the essence of magic, required to power their greatest spells. *kill puppies for satan* sort of updates that idea for the modern day.

Baker didn't playtest *kill puppies for satan* — and wouldn't play it for years. His object wasn't to create a playable game, but instead to make a political statement. In any case, the game mechanics aren't particularly innovative: *kill puppies for satan* uses a simple "die + bonus" skill system, just like *Ars Magica* does.

> *"The game mechanics are so derivative – what the [expletive] do you need to playtest?"*
>
> – Vincent Baker, Interview, Independent Insurgency Podcast #10 (May 2008)

The mechanics were derivative because Baker hadn't yet discovered the indie design community. That would come a short time later, thanks to Ron Edwards' Forge website. Baker logged on to the Forge for the first time several months after creating *kill puppies for satan* — probably around summer 2001. There, he would discover a whole new way to design games.

For now, though, Baker was more interested in hearing about how to sell games.

As a result of the Forge's encouragement, Baker turned *kill puppies for satan* into a PDF and began selling it around December 2002. Though he didn't call it a "lumpley game," Baker listed "lumpley" email addresses and URLs in the game. It was a name that Baker had used on various online systems, and it would quickly become the name of Baker's indie publishing company too.

So, *kill puppies for satan* was the first Lumpley Game, more or less.

kill puppies for satan generated tons of hate mail, much of which Baker reprinted and mocked on his website. This publicity helped the game, encouraging Baker to take things a step further. At the time his gaming budget was just $60 a year; in 2003 he decided to spend his gaming money to print up copies of *kill puppies for satan* to sell at Gen Con Indy 2003. He produced 40 or 50 and sold them all, which would give them the money for his *next* project. Baker says that he hasn't put a dime into Lumpley since that initial investment.

There are two footnotes to Baker's "*puppies* years."

First, Baker wrote a supplement to *kill puppies for satan* called *cockroach souffle* (2002). Ten years later, he continues to sell both books through his website, right

alongside his more indie creations. According to Baker's records, he had sold more than 1,000 copies of *kill puppies* by Lumpley's 10th anniversary — about half of them through a collection of his games and half standalone. That's not bad for a game that looks like it was typeset on a typewriter — and one without capital letters at that.

Second, *kill puppies for satan* wasn't the only game that Baker wrote in the early '00s. He also wrote lots of short, often incomplete games. Many of them were the direct results of arguments at the Forge; in order to support a point that he was making in a theory discussion, Baker would create a small game. By 2002, Baker had made many of these games freely available as pages on his website, much as Jared Sorensen was doing at the same time.

A few of these games deserve some additional comment because of their historical importance.

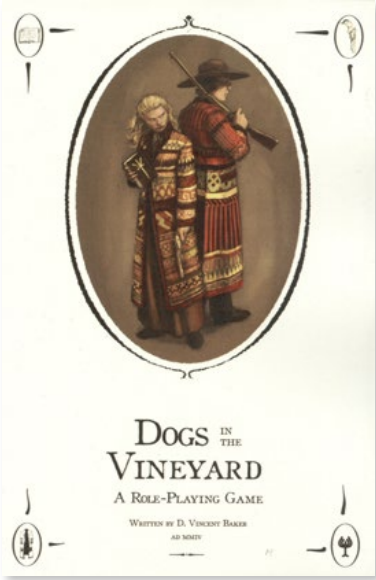
The Cheap and Cheesy Fantasy Game (2001) was the first game by Baker that called itself "a lumpley game." Baker also calls it his "first whole game," and took the time to produce it as a PDF — though he never sold it commercially.

Otherkind (2002) is important in part because Baker saw it as one of his "real" games — unlike the many "practice" and demo games that he produced. It was a lightweight fantasy RPG that had one mechanism of particular note: the Otherkind dice. Here players would roll four (or more) dice, then assign them to four elements: narration, motion, life, and safety. The narration die decided who narrated events, while the other three dice determined specific consequences; all told they gave a player considerable power to decide *what* happened, but within the constraints of a random die roll. Though *Otherkind* long ago disappeared from the Lumpley Games catalog, other games have since used the *Otherkind* dice mechanism.

Finally, *Mechaton* (2002) was a wargame that Baker wrote based on Lego-figure combat. It's important because it got revamped a few years later — but even more recently it was the heart of a very successful Kickstarter, a topic that we'll return to.

Though a few of the other games that Baker wrote in his *puppies* years have some historical resonance, they didn't have much impact on players because Baker still wasn't writing games to be played. Instead, it was all about theory (or, in the case of *kill puppies*, about rage). That changed when Clinton R. Nixon played *kill puppies* — something that Baker had still never done. Baker was surprised and excited by Nixon's reports on the game. He never previously thought about people actually *playing* his games, and now he discovered it was something that interested him.

This would lead Baker to design a *different* sort of game when he took the money that he had earned from *kill puppies* sales at Gen Con Indy 2003 and put it into his *next* production.



Dog Years: 2004-2008

Baker's second notable game was *Dogs in the Vineyard* (2004), a massive 156-page book that took three years of indie learning and discussions and turned them into a game that was utterly unlike *kill puppies for satan*. (Mostly.)

Dogs is set in the Old West, but an Old West centered on religion. Players take on the roles of God's Watchdogs, who travel through communities to help protect the Faith. The moral codes of the Faith are presented so authentically that you can just feel the world that they create shimmering into existence around you. This is clearly the game's first strength.

There was a good reason for this authenticity: the Faith is based on Mormonism — a religion that Baker was born into. Baker had left the religion in the early '90s, but it wasn't until he wrote *Dogs* that he was able to come to terms with his Mormon upbringing.

> *"When I left the Church, swearing became my favorite vice."*
> – Vincent Baker, Penny Red Podcast #26 (August 2012)

The gameplay of *Dogs* centers on morality. Each session, players are introduced to a community falling apart due to failures of morality or corruptions of scripture, and they must decide how to correct things. Mind you, the Dogs' corrections might be horrible; as Baker says in the rules, a character might be "a remorseless monster or a destroying angel." The dissonance that develops between the harsh (and very conservative) reality of the Dogs and the real-life morality of the players is another of the game's strengths.

This all says little about the game's mechanics. Unlike many indie games, the rules-light mechanics are not the heart of *Dogs*.

Dogs' most important mechanic is a clever conflict mechanism that can be used for any sort of conflict, not just fighting; it gives players the opportunity to narrate their battles as they roll dice and then choose how to use them. "Stake setting" is an important part of the system: players explicitly say what's at risk when they enter a conflict, covering both positive and negative repercussions. This was an important

idea that had appeared previously in *Dust Devils* (2002) and which was just now entering many indie designs, as also demonstrated by the contemporary *Primetime Adventures* (2004).

Beyond that, Baker was liberal in adapting other ideas from the indie games that he'd discovered at the Forge. He gives his highest accolades to Ron Edward's *Sorcerer* (2001). For his conflict resolution model, he notes *The Riddle of Steel* (2002) as general inspiration and *Dust Devils* for the idea of using poker terms within the resolution. He thanks *Universalis* (2002) for the idea of freeform traits, and notes a whole list of games that helped to inspire his skill-like relationships, including: *HeroQuest* (2000, 2003), *Trollbabe* (2002), and *My Life with Master* (2003). As these histories have shown, the roleplaying industry has always been full of designs that build on the innovations of the predecessors; this was particularly true in the early days of the indie movement, and it moved at a particularly rapid speed.

Baker's advice to GMs in *Dogs* was probably more innovative (and indie) than his actual mechanics. Most importantly, it suggested that a GM should create a situation for players, but *not* come up with any resolution. The GM's job was then to react to what the players did — to create an organic story based on player actions. Hand-in-hand with this, Baker offered what's now called Baker's Admonition, which is "Say Yes or Roll the Dice": if a player suggested something, the GM should agree to it — unless it was in conflict with something, in which case dice should be rolled.

> *"Your job as the GM is to present an interesting social situation and provoke the players into judging it."*
>
> – Vincent Baker, Dogs in the Vineyard (2004)

From a historical point of view, *Dogs* is intriguing because it highlights themes that have remained consistent in many of Baker's designs. Ron Edwards noted the most interesting one, which is that Baker tends to write games about characters that have a morality that Baker doesn't agree with. This was clearly true in both *kill puppies for satan* and *Dogs in the Vineyard*. *Dogs* also displayed a continued interest in God, which also followed straight on from *kill puppies for satan*.

Beyond that, Baker has remained steadfast through several games in the belief that GMs should create situations, not stories. He's also continued to write rules-light mechanics that don't get in the way of story. Finally, the light, breezy, and approachable writing style that Baker uses in *Dogs* was also present in his most recent success — though as we'll see, he purposefully avoided it in the games that came between those major successes.

That leads us to the fact that *Dogs in the Vineyard* was a major success in the indie design community. Its sales of perhaps 40 copies a month over its first several years weren't big compared to the mainstream RPG community at the time, but they showed an ongoing interest that was beyond most indie releases. By Lumpley's 10-year anniversary, total sales of over 2,000 copies showed that continued upside.

Dogs also dominated the imagination of indie designers for the next few years. It popularized stake setting to the point where it became a *de facto* indie standard for a few years, while "Say Yes" became a mantra of the community. If *Sorcerer* created the indie community, and if *Universalis* revolutionized it with new ideas of authority, then *Dogs in the Vineyard* was the third pivotal RPG of the indie revolution.

Unsurprisingly, *Dogs* won the Indie RPG of the Year award at the Indies. It also made the short list of the Diana Jones Award, but lost out to Days of Wonder's bestselling railroad board game, *Ticket to Ride* (2004).

If anything is a measure of Baker's increasing influence in the indie RPG community from 2004 onward, it may be his relationship with the Forge. In 2008 he became the technical administrator of the site, taking over from Clinton Nixon. He would keep that role until Ron Edwards shut the Forge down in 2012.

Between the Best-sellers: 2005-2009



After the very successful release of *Dogs in the Vineyard*, Baker found it difficult to design and complete his next game. So there was a long dry spell afterward. A new version of Baker's *Mechaton* (2006) Lego game appeared in 2006, but it was 2007 before Baker published a new RPG. And when new RPGs *did* appear from Baker, they purposefully went against the type he set with *Dogs in the Vineyard*: they were considerably shorter games that didn't make the same effort as *Dogs* to draw in new players; instead, they were aimed for a more experienced audience.

Baker's first new RPG was *Poison'd* (2007) — a game that was as authentic to piracy as *Dogs* had been to the early Mormon religion. The result isn't a very pleasant game, and though Baker tried to warn about that by saying "for adults, please" on the cover, *Poison'd* still generated some irate attention from readers (and lookie-loos) who didn't like rape and sodomy in their gaming.

Poison'd is another rules-light game; it uses simple stats and special keywords to define characters and objects. Players roll six-sided dice to generate successes. It's perhaps most interesting for the ties to Baker's other games. Much as in *Dogs*, players can choose to escalate fights up through increasingly dangerous sorts of conflict; and much as in *puppies*, characters can grow closer to the devil by committing sins.

The form factor of *Poison'd* was also quite odd — even for indie games. It was a tall and very skinny book.



Baker's next RPG, *In a Wicked Age* (2008), had been in development before *Poison'd*, but it appeared afterward. Though Baker has generally derided story games, *In a Wicked Age* very clearly fits into the category. Players consult an "oracle" each session to determine the elements of the day's gaming. They might not even get to play the same character from session to session — though they can increase the likelihood by purposefully putting themselves at disadvantages in conflicts.

Conflicts in *In a Wicked Age* begin when two characters come into disagreement; at this point, dice *must* be rolled. The conflict system uses a dice-picking mechanic that clearly shares ancestry with *Dogs*. It also can be used for many sorts of conflict (not just combat) and it always ends in three rounds or less. Though there isn't any stake setting, players can choose to negotiate consequences when a conflict ends — which is sort of the same thing in reverse.

Poison'd and *In a Wicked Age* are both relatively typical indie games: small, clever, and heavily focused on a specific time, place, and theme. Though there are clear similarities in style to Baker's two major games, these two short games are quite different from them in both size and depth. Unsurprisingly, they also sold very differently: where Baker's two major games had sold thousands of copies, by Lumpley's tenth anniversary in late 2012, *Poison'd* sold 175 standalone copies and *In a Wicked Age* sold 250. That's probably the difference between an indie game that's broken into the mass RPG market and one that hasn't.

Baker was working on one other RPG in this period: an indie fantasy game that *would* have been a major release like *Dogs*. He released the first part of it in December 2008 as a playtest PDF that he called *Storming the Wizard's Tower Level 1: Fighting Monsters* (2008). It was an FRP that clearly showed Baker's fingerprints. For example, the GMing centered on Baker's idea of laying out a situation: the

GM created a monster in a specific circumstance and by doing so asked a practical question (rather than a moral one, like in *Dogs*): Can the players beat this monster?

The first iteration of *Storming the Wizard's Tower* used cards. After that Baker moved on to a multicolored dice pool. However by August 2009 Baker decided the game had serious mechanical problems. He would later note that it was quite painful for a game to get to late-stage external playtesting before you decided that it was broken — but unfortunately that was exactly what happened. To date, Baker has neither produced Level 2 of the game ("Storming the Wizard's Tower") nor Level 3 ("Fighting Dragons").

Fortunately, Baker's *next* attempt at a game would be much more successful, and would quickly bounce him back to the success that he'd enjoyed in 2004.

Apocalyptic Years: 2010-Present

It's perhaps unsurprising that Baker repeated the success of *Dogs in the Vineyard* by returning to some of its strengths. His next game was big and it was written in the same approachable style. However, its theming went in a wholly different direction. Where *Dogs in the Vineyard* was set in the past and was about conservative morality, Baker's newest offering, *Apocalypse World* (2010), was set in the future and was steeped in sex and violence.

> *"Apocalypse World is like super-Poison'd"*
>
> – Vincent Baker, Independent Insurgency Podcast #25 (May 2009)



The theming of the game just drips off the pages. From the start, you feel like you're deeply immersed in a post-apocalyptic '70s B-movie. Character classes from battlebabes and brainers to choppers and drivers help to accentuate genre, but it's really there in every word. It's like the great theming of *Dogs*, but so very different too. Just like in *Dogs*, players also get great advice about running games where the GM empowers the players by asking questions and creating an evocative world.

However, *Apocalypse World* really excels through its (light) mechanics — some of which focus on elements that are unusual in roleplaying games. For example, each character has a relationship stat for every

other character; and each character has their own rules for what happens when they have sex with another character (!). Together, these result in connections among characters being front and forward in the game.

The most important rules in *Apocalypse World* are "moves." These are formalized (yet simple) rules for players taking actions. Just as players must roll dice when they get into conflicts in *Dogs*, in *Apocalypse World* players must roll dice when they make a move — and when they make a move, they must roll dice. The actual roll is a simple "die + bonus" where a player tries to get a 7+ for partial success, or 10+ for complete success.

However, moves are more than that. One reviewer called them "macros," while Baker explains that a move in *Apocalypse World* might have been explained in 5-6 pages of rules in a game like *Ars Magica*. Moves are instead short and succinct; they make die rolling quick and ensure that it doesn't interrupt the flow of the game. This is a pretty big change from the conflict resolution in *Dogs in the Vineyard*, which could pull players out of the game's narrative for an extended amount of time.

> *"My whole objective with them was to make the die rolling take a second … a fraction of a second."*
>
> – Vincent Baker, Interview, The Walking Eye Podcast #18 (April 2010)

Baker also designed moves to create compelling fiction. While there are many "basic" moves that are available to everyone, individual characters also get special moves that reflect who they are and *the sorts of things they do*. These moves put the characters into arenas of conflict that are appropriate for them and also ensure that the things that are at risk and the actions that result are all appropriate for the character. So the operator can "moonlight" while the chopper has "[expletive] thieves."

The GM even gets moves that are appropriate for him — stuff like "announce future badness," "inflict harm (as appropriate)," and "take away their stuff." They can explicitly respond to a player's move with a move of their own ... or else they can use moves for inspiration if their own ideas are failing.

Apocalypse World is clearly filled with original innovation — all of which grew out of Baker reading Gregor Hutton's *3:16 Carnage Amongst the Stars* (2008), and saying, "Ah, is this what we're doing now!?"

However, Baker also notes many inspirational sources; he says that character moves were based on the secrets in Clinton Nixon's *The Shadow of Yesterday* (2004), while other mechanics or design were inspired by *The Mountain Witch* (2005), *Over the Edge* (1992), *Primetime Adventures*, *Sex and Sorcery* (2003),

Sorcerer, *Trollbabe*, *XXXXtreme Street Luge* (2008), and Ron Edwards' "Narrativism: Story Now" essay (2003).

The sales numbers alone show how successful *Apocalypse World* has been. Though it was released in early 2010, by the end of 2012, it was already Lumpley's most successful game, with over 2,000 standalone sales.

Like *Dogs in the Vineyard*, *Apocalypse World* has been even more successful in how it grabbed the attention of the indie design world. However, where *Dogs in the Vineyard* generated a lot of discussion and theory, *Apocalypse World* has instead generated games that "hack" the *Apocalypse World* rules to new settings by designing new "character playbooks" with custom moves for a variety of genre-appropriate character classes.

Baker is flattered by this hacking and has even created a "Powered by the Apocalypse" logo for use by these games. Major releases that have been built on the *Apocalypse World* engine include: the fantasy game *Dungeon World* (2012), the modern-day monster-hunting *Monster of the Week* (2012), the monstrous teenage angst game *Monsterhearts* (2012), and the historical *Saga of the Icelanders* (2013). *Dungeon World* has itself received a few supplements, while many more fan-based hacks can be found at Baker's *Apocalypse World* website.

Some of these hacks have been supported by Kickstarters, whose numbers show just how popular the *Apocalypse World* system is:

Date	Product	Publisher	Goal	Raised	Backers
6/30/12	*Dungeonworld*	Sage Kobold	$4,000	$82,879	2,455
5/28/13	*Inverse World* for *DW*	Jacob Randolph	$2,000	$18,606	763
6/16/13	*Monsterhearts* playbooks	Jackson Tegu	$4,000	$12,395	603
9/19/13	*Grim World* for *DW*	Boldly Games	$5,000	$22,500	666
12/3/13	*Pirate World* for *DW*	Iain Chantler	£1,300	£8,129	467

A few Kickstarters for *Dungeon World* adventures have been less successful than the sourcebooks (and playbooks) listed here, but they still managed to raise a few thousand dollars each.

Since the release of *Apocalypse World*, Baker has also written several new playbooks, which have been given away at conventions or to help various causes. He also hacked his own *Apocalypse World* game: *Trauma Games Presents: Murderous Ghosts* (2011), which he released through his wife's publishing imprint, Night Sky Games. This two-player game is meant to be *highly* accessible — the sort of thing that could get new players into the roleplaying hobby.

Mini-History

Night Sky Games: 2006-Present

If anything, it's surprising that there aren't *more* couples in the modern roleplaying industry where both members design. A few have appeared in the pages of these histories, but Lumpley Games and Night Sky Games may be the only example of two members of a couple each having their own (small press) game label. Where Lumpley Games is the creation of Vincent Baker, Night Sky Games is that of his wife, Meguey Baker.

Granted, the division between the two companies might be artificial. Vincent said that his *Apocalypse World* (2010) was for Meguey, and she's also listed as a developer of the game. It's not the only game where both of their names appear. One of Vincent's games, *Trauma Games Presents: Murderous Ghosts* (2011), was even published as a Night Sky Game. However, we'll pretend that some line exists between the two companies, so that we can briefly detail the history of Night Sky Games itself.

Meguey Baker got a much more traditional start in gaming than her husband.

She began playing *D&D* in spring 1978. For there, she played RPGs pretty constantly – in time moving on to *Robotech* (1986), *Cyberpunk* (1988), *Shadowrun* (1989), *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985), and *Ars Magica* (1987).

The first design from Meguey Baker (and Night Sky Games) was *A Thousand and One Nights: A Game of Enticing Stories* (2006). Meguey says that *Universalis* (2002) was her biggest inspiration, but where *Universalis* rewarded good GMing, Meguey wanted to reward good playing.

This story game is about characters telling stories; players take the roles not only of their tale-telling courtiers, but also the characters within those tales. The result was an innovative game that was a runner up at the Indies for both the Game of the Year and the Most Innovative Game awards – losing out to *Spirit of the Century* (2006) and *Lacuna Part I. The Creation of the Mystery and the Girl from Blue City*, Second Attempt (2006), respectively. Meguey has much more recently revised *Thousand and One Nights* (2012), following a Kickstarter that raised $4,847 from 148 backers.

After the initial publication of *Thousand and One Nights*, Night Sky Games wasn't heard from for several years. In 2011, Meguey started revising her web page, and shortly afterward the company returned to life. The most immediate result was the publication of Vincent Baker's *Murderous Ghosts* – an *Apocalypse World* game.

*Psi*Run* (2012) was Meguey's second game (and the third publication from Night Sky). This game of psychic powers and amnesia had originated with the "Otherkind dice" mechanism that Vincent had created way back in 2002. Christopher Moore had liked the mechanic and with the help of Michael Ligner produced the first iteration of the game, which he published at Gen Con Indy 2007 as an ashcan (2007) – a publishing methodology that was popular in the indie community at the time. However,

Mini-History

Moore decided that the game needed work that he wasn't willing to provide – which was why Meguey took over the project around 2010. She rewrote it from scratch and published in January 2012.

After releasing that revised edition of *A Thousand and One Nights*, Night Sky Games began distributing *Bacchanalia* (2012) by Paul Czege & Michele Gelli. Narrattiva, "the major indie game publisher in Italy," published it in Europe. This game had begun as the dice-based *Bacchanal* (2005), which Paul Czege wrote for Game Chef several years previous; Gelli had evolved it into a card game for the Narrattiva release. *Bacchanalia* was another game about stories, and so was a good fit for Night Sky.

Night Sky Games has more recently returned to the publications of Meguey herself with *Valiant Girls* (2013), a nanogame and Night Sky's sixth release.

In just a few years, the *Apocalypse World* system has clearly become one of the two great "generic" RPG systems that's risen out of the indie movement — the other being Evil Hat's *Fate* (2003). The wide success of both systems points to the success of the indie movement itself, and how much it is now a part of the roleplaying mass market.

Many Publishers: 2011-Present

Besides working on new playbooks for *Apocalypse World*, Baker has also been writing a variety of other material — much of it for other publishers. That started (sort of) in 2011 with *Murderous Ghosts*.

In 2012, Vincent worked on a new iteration of the *Mechaton* rules with Joshua A.C. Newman called *Mobile Frame Zero: Rapid Attack* (2012); this was then used by Newman as the basis of a very successful Kickstarter. It wasn't the only crowdfunding to touch Baker's life in 2012, as his wife shortly thereafter ran an Indiegogo campaign to revamp her own premiere RPG, *A Thousand and One Nights: A Game of Enticing Stories* (2006, 2012).

Date	Product	Publisher	Goal	Raised	Backers
4/11/12	*Mobile Frame Zero*	Joshua A.C. Newman	$9,000	$82,499	2,639
8/6/12	*A Thousand and One Nights*	Meguey Baker	$1,001	$4,847	158

Baker says that he'll doubtless crowdsource his *next* game, but for the moment it's notable that over half-a-dozen different Kickstarters have already gone off surrounding him; it says a lot for his position in the industry.

Meanwhile, Vincent Baker was also writing *The Seclusium of Orphone of the Three Visions* (2013) for the old-school RPG, *Lamentations of the Flame Princess* (2010). This sourcebook provides rules for creating "seclusia" for wizards. It's clearly a callback to Baker's interest in the rules for creating wizardly covenants in *Ars Magica* — something that he also referenced as an influence on the "holding" rules in *Apocalypse World*.

More recently, Baker had gotten back to Lumpley work with indie's newest fad, the "nanogame" — which is typically a game that fits on a single card or on a single piece of paper. His *Sundered Land* (2013) is a series of five single-page games and two supplements.

However, he's also preparing to playtest something bigger. It might be too much to hope for another *Dogs in a Vineyard* or *Apocalypse World*, but when someone's already changed indie RPGs twice, anything's possible.

What to Read Next ○

- For a designer who published his own face-to-face version of interactive fiction games, read ***Memento Mori Theatricks***.
- For the creation of the Forge and a strong influence on Baker, read ***Adept Press***.
- For another publisher who offered small, free, and often incomplete games on his website, also read ***Memento Mori Theatricks***.
- For the first two pivotal games of the indie industry, read about *Sorcerer* in ***Adept Press*** and about *Universalis* in ***Ramshead Publishing***.
- For indie's other major genre-spanning gaming system, read about *Fate* in ***Evil Hat.***
- For a smaller scale universal indie system, read ***Atomic Sock Monkey Press***.

In Other Eras

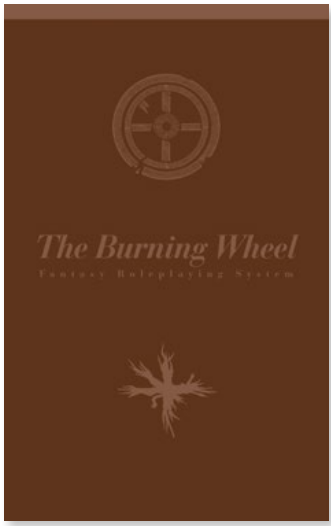
- For the origins and history of *Ars Magica*, read ***Lion Rampant*** *['80s]*, to a lesser extent ***White Wolf*** *['90s]* and ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*, and most recently ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.
- For other games that (like *Dogs in the Vineyard*) have a strong focus on religion, read about *In Nomine* in ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]* and *Kult* in ***Metropolis*** *['90s]*.

Or take a look at an indie FRP with ***Burning Wheel***.

Burning Wheel: 2002-Present

Luke Crane, the producer of The Burning Wheel *and other games, began his work long before the indie movement appeared, but has since become an integral part of that design community.*

The Rim of the Wheel: 1992-2004



2002: The Burning Wheel

What's in a name? This has sometimes been an important question in the indie design community where "publisher" names are often just *nom de plumes* for the individual designers operating them. But it's more of a question for Luke Crane and for his *Burning Wheel*-related RPGs than for anyone else. That's because there's no company name on the various *Burning Wheel* books that Luke Crane has published; instead they're copyrighted to Crane directly. Many other indie publishers work in this way, but Crane is one of the few who doesn't put up *any* corporate façade.

With that said, this history lists under the name "Burning Wheel," because that's come to be accepted as the company name by fans. It's what

Crane's products are listed under at Indie Press Revolution and DriveThruRPG, and it's an obvious name for a company that doesn't actually have a name. Be aware that it's a convenience, though, a fiction — an alternate name for Luke Crane himself.

As for Luke Crane, his RPG beginnings came in sixth grade, when he was introduced to *Paranoia* (1984). As he later admitted to designer Greg Costikyan, his friends "played *Paranoia* straight" — without the dark comedy that was intended to be a part of the game. From there, Crane's earliest influences were a parade of notable games of the '80s, including *AD&D* (1977-1979), *Marvel Super Heroes Advanced Set* (1986), *Shadowrun* (1989), *TimeLords* (1987), *Top Secret/S.I.* (1987), *Twilight: 2000* (1984), and *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (1986).

The game that would become *Burning Wheel* has its origins in the next decade. It began in 1992 after an unsatisfactory roleplaying session. He and friend Dan Abram went out to dinner in the West Village of Manhattan, to talk about the game's problems — and ended up kicking around ideas for their own RPG. The game that would become *Burning Wheel* was actually a science-fiction RPG at first, but it would change back and forth between fantasy and science-fiction over the years. These changes were made easier by the fact that Crane kept throwing out old drafts of the game and rewriting his rule system from scratch; he felt that by doing so, he could drop the cruft from the system and ensure that what remained was important.

> *"I started where everybody else started, in my basement with my perfect roleplaying game that was going to destroy the world."*
>
> – Luke Crane, Theory from the Closet Podcast #6 (2007)

The eponymous Burning Wheel first appeared in one of the game's fantasy incarnations. It originated in Joseph Campbell's *Primitive Mythology* (1969), which includes a sketch depicting a wheel as a set of lines pointing inward. Luke Crane's Burning Wheel is a stylized variant inspired by a Christopher Moeller drawing. Campbell says that the symbol (and related spirals and stars) was used to represent gateways to the other worlds and was often placed on gravesites. Adopting this mythology, Crane used the Burning Wheel as a symbol of gateways in his fantasy world. It later became an artifact, and eventually the name of the game as well.

The first "printing" of the *Burning Wheel* RPG probably occurred in late 1997. Crane worked on the rules all summer for a two-book set — with one book of rules and one book for character creation. With a weekend of gaming planned with his friends, Crane then spent all night producing his rules — photocopying his two rulebooks at work, then tape-binding them at Kinko's. He produced just 12 copies

of that first edition, which he gave to his friends. In the years that followed, Crane printed a few more "ashcan" editions of his game.

In these early years, Crane didn't intend to publish *Burning Wheel*, though he was quite serious about perfecting his game. In 1998, Crane converted his long-running *AD&D* first edition campaign to *Burning Wheel*. Then around 1999 or 2000, he cut himself off from all new roleplaying games. He felt that if he didn't do so, *Burning Wheel* might grow forever, as he continued to incorporate innovative ideas he saw.

In late 2001 and early 2002, Crane asked his friends if he should publish *Burning Wheel* and they enthusiastically pushed him forward — though just a few months later Crane was the only one working on the project. Nonetheless, on October 31, 2002, Crane published 1,036 signed, stamped, and numbered copies each of two digest-sized books that made up what's now called *Burning Wheel Classic*. Just like that original ashcan, *The Burning Wheel* (2002) contained the core rules, while *Character Burner* (2002) included the character creation rules.

As published, *Burning Wheel Classic* was a home-brewed fantasy game in development for 10 years. Crane now says that he cringes when he hears similar statements from would-be designers. That's for good reason, because such design processes, occurring in isolation from the industry, usually produce fantasy heartbreakers.

However, unlike most heartbreaking designers, Crane played and studied games that came *after D&D*. As a result, Crane drew inspiration from games of the '80s and other sources; *Burning Wheel*'s scripted combat system was actually inspired by *Diplomacy* (1959) — and later wargames with similar systems. Most importantly, *Burning Wheel Classic* was a game that produced intense and emotional roleplaying, thanks in large part to its "BITs": beliefs, instincts, and traits.

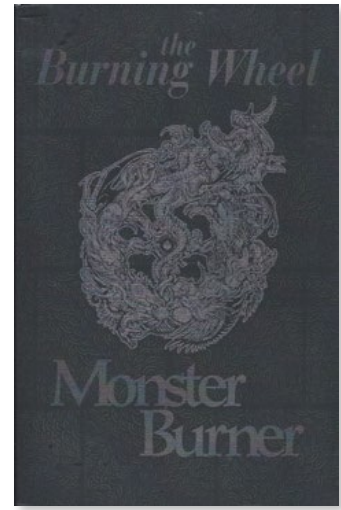
We'll talk more about all of *Burning Wheel*'s mechanics shortly, when it reaches its mature form in 2005. For now, though, we want to comment on a few innovative aspects of the game's presentation. When Crane published *Burning Wheel Classic*, he was determined to make it stand out as something different. Part of this is obvious from the language of the game; it's full of terms like "Artha" and "FoRKs," "Steel" and "Circles" — words that won't be familiar to gamers coming to *Burning Wheel* from other games.

However, there's one other thing of note in Crane's early *Burning Wheel* publications: their format. They were all published as digest-sized books, a format that was purposefully chosen (just like those terms) to shock readers out of any preconceptions that they might have about the game. At the time Issaries was producing *Hero Wars* (2000) in a digest size, but that was a rare anomaly on the

market. It was only in the years that followed that the format would really bloom, mostly within the indie community — a community that Crane didn't even know about when *Burning Wheel* was released.

The Wheel's Indie Revolution: 2003-2006

Following the publication of *Burning Wheel Classic*, Luke Crane emerged from his self-imposed exile and almost immediately heard about the newly born indie community. Numerous people told him to talk to Ron Edwards or to read Jared Sorensen's *InSpectres* (2002). Some even told him that *Burning Wheel Classic* had arrived too late, due to the publication of Driftwood Publishing's *The Riddle of Steel* (2002). However it was Jason E. Roberts and Michael S. Miller — the authors of *FVLMINATA* (2001) — who actually brought Crane into the indie community by introducing him to the Forge.



In March 2003, Crane read about the Forge's Gen Con booth. Five months later, he showed up at that booth to sell *The Burning Wheel* alongside *Sorcerer* (2001), *Godlike* (2001), *The Riddle of Steel*, and others. Crane says he was "nervous and timid" that first year — that he had no idea how to sell his game. Fortunately Scott Knipe — the author of a *Sorcerer* mini-supplement called *Charnel Gods* (2002) — helped out.

Crane's presence at the 2003 Forge booth led directly to *Burning Wheel*'s earliest success, because it's where Crane met the influential Kenneth Hite. Mike Miller — one of Crane's fellows in the booth — insisted that Crane should give Hite a free copy of his game. Crane was reluctant, but eventually agreed. Thanks to that promo copy, Hite was soon touting *Burning Wheel* as the best new RPG of 2003. Crane would later note the importance of this acknowledgement when he said, "If you like this game, and you see Ken at a con, say a polite, 'Thank you.'"

> *"I was surrounded by other small press, self-published authors. There was energy, camaraderie. It was exciting."*
>
> – Luke Crane, "My First Gen Con," Kobold Press (2010)

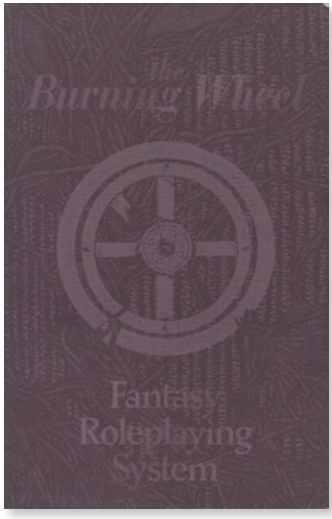
As *Burning Wheel* became more successful, Crane opted to supplement it. *Monster Burner* (2004) added new monsters and new character races to the game. Its print run came in at almost 1,600 — showing the post-Hite growth of the

game. Crane also experimented with PDF-only publication for *Under a Serpent Sun* (2004). It was a game of future apocalypse that showed both *Burning Wheel*'s applicability to science-fiction roleplaying and Luke's interest in death metal, as it's an RPG adaptation of the Death Metal album *Slaughter of the Soul* (2005).

Meanwhile, Crane's interactions with the indie RPG community were also growing. In 2004, he was one of the *sponsors* of the Forge booth — alongside Adept Press, Driftwood Publishing, and Ramshead Publishing. By 2005, Crane was joining indie luminaries like Jared Sorensen, John Wick, Vincent Baker, and Ron Edwards to run all-day "indie game design" seminars at Gen Con. Though Crane hadn't known about indie design when he published *Burning Wheel*, and though his game was distant from standard indie fare, Crane has become one of the voices of the revolution.

Crane was simultaneously building up a coterie of his own — a group of *Burning Wheel* enthusiasts who would help him to continue the expansion of his game. Crane would dub them the "Burning Wheel HQ." Two names stand out among Crane's earliest friends: Thor Olavsrud, who would become Burning Wheel's long-serving editor; and Radek Drozdalski, who would help kick off multiple Burning Wheel projects.

During the early '00s, Crane also finished up his 12-year-long *AD&D/Burning Wheel* campaign; afterward, he began to play many of the early indie masterpieces. He also played hundreds of games of *Burning Wheel* with hundreds of players — many of them as demos at convention. With new RPG influences and new Actual Play in hand, Crane decided to update his fantasy RPG. *Burning Wheel Classic* sold out in 2004, and was unavailable as a print book for about a year, though Crane maintained its availability through a new PDF edition. Then on May 5, 2005, about two and a half years after the first edition, *Burning Wheel Revised* (2005) appeared with a new print run of 1,500 copies.



With *Burning Wheel* now available in its *Revised* form, we should address its mechanics in more depth. As has already been noted, *Burning Wheel* isn't a typical indie RPG. It's instead a complex fantasy RPG whose characters are built on lifepaths and skills; the influence of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* is quite clear. It also uses a comparative dice pool mechanic, showing the influence of *Shadowrun* (1989).

Though the *Revised* edition of *Burning Wheel* drew new inspiration from early indie RPGs, Crane says that the game still remained "pretty traditional"; indie RPGs gave Crane ideas for new ways to approach his game without dramatically changing it. The most explicit influence came from *Sorcerer*, which provided *Burning Wheel* with its "linked tests." However, *InSpectres* and *Dogs in the Vineyard* (2005) suggested some clarifications for *Burning Wheel*'s conflicts, while *The Riddle of Steel* gave Crane ideas about combat positioning. Ralph Mazza of *Unviersalis* (2002) helped Crane to rethink the consequences of failure, pushing the game toward "full blown conflict resolution." Finally, Crane designed the Duel of Wits — a scripted social combat system — for a game by Jason Roberts, and then reclaimed it for himself with Roberts didn't need it.

> *"What I found as I played all these excellent games was that we were estranged sisters and brothers. We were all designing from a similar standpoint, striving for similar goals using different tools and materials."*
>
> – Luke Crane, Interview, Soul Kerfuffle (April 2007)

Despite any changes, the "BITs" remained the core of *Burning Wheel Revised* — and also one of the game's most "indie" elements, thanks to their focus on player interaction and on emotional depth.

- The "B" stands for "beliefs," the core ideas that drive a character and what he does.
- The "I" stands for "instincts," automatic reactions that the character has to certain situations.
- The "T" stands for "traits," some of which are relatively freeform.

Crane introduced these game elements to make *Burning Wheel* a game where players actually talk to each other. By tying these "BITs" into the skill and experience systems, Crane ensured they were an important focus of the game. He highlighted this all in *Burning Wheel*'s long-standing slogan: "Fight for what you believe!" It's what's truly differentiates the game from the rest of the FRP market.

At Gen Con Indy 2005, shortly after the release of *Burning Wheel Revised*, Crane also produced two shorter books in very small print runs: *The Path of Spite* (2005), which got a print run of 50; and *Burning Sands: Jihad*, which had a print run of around 88. They're both short books that are minor parts of the *Burning Wheel* canon, nonetheless they would prove quite important to the future of *Burning Wheel*.

The Path of Spite was the shorter of the two at 20 pages, and also the most applicable to the standard fantasy setting of *Burning Wheel*. It offered new life paths for "dark elves."

Burning Sands: Jihad (2005) was, like *Under a Serpent Sun*, a science-fiction book —essentially an adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965). Once more it showed *Burning Wheel*'s applicability to the science-fiction genre. It also showed fans' interest in the topic, as Crane would sell about 1,000 print copies of the book before he withdrew it in recent years. More importantly, it would lead to Luke Crane's biggest game design project ever.

Burning Jihad, Iron Empire: 2005-2006

Jihad had been the first truly collaborative project from "Burning Wheel HQ." Though Crane was the main author, Olavsrud wrote a "world burner," Drozdalski put together black market rules, and everyone contributed lifepaths and traits. It proved that the team could work together, which would be a necessity if they took on a larger project. Beyond that, *Jihad* showed Crane that the team could produce a work that was both focused on science-fiction and (sort of) a license.

Which brings us to *Iron Empires* (1994, 1998), a science-fiction comic book series by Christopher Moeller, rereleased by Dark Horse Comics as a pair of graphic novels (2004). Crane was a long-time fan of the comic — and even found inspiration for *The Burning Wheel* in the comic. Now, Drozdalski had acquired the new Dark Horse graphic novels, and so they were being passed around the group. Shortly after Gen Con Indy 2005, Burning Wheel HQ started talking about producing an *Iron Empires* game, using their experience with *Jihad* as a basis.

There was one major problem: Avalanche Press had the license to the comics. They'd been talking about releasing a d20 setting book called "Iron Empires Lost Histories" for a while, but it was due in 2004, which by now had come and gone. Crane contacted Moeller directly, offering to help with the Avalanche project, only to learn that it was dead and Moeller was now looking for a new RPG publisher.

A deal was struck.

Of course that makes the license negotiation sound easier than it really was. There are lots of decisions required for this sort of agreement, and they can make or break the deal. Fortunately, Luke Crane was able to avoid many of the pitfalls of licensing deals that have been seen elsewhere in the RPG industry.

First, Crane and Moeller clearly bifurcated ownership, saying that Crane would continue to own all the mechanics, even things added for the new game, while Moeller would continue to own the setting, even things added for the new game. Compare this to the situation at West End, where the company was unsure whether they actually owned the "d6" system that they'd used for *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* (1987).

Second, though Crane gave Moeller approval rights, he made sure the turnaround would be a lightning quick three days. This is again a contrast to many other agreements in the industry, where slow approvals wreck product lines.

Third, Crane and Moeller agreed to a very friendly fiscal arrangement: they would split profits evenly after the costs for the project were paid out.

With a contract in hand, the Burning Wheel crew was able to start working on *Burning Empires* (2006) — a massive science-fiction expansion of the company's house system that Crane called "Burning Wheel 3.0."

Rather remarkably, the first draft of the game was done just months later, on January 9, 2006. The game was playtested throughout the winter and was in editorial and layout by spring. By May 2006, it was ready to go to press. *Burning Empires* saw print in August 2006 as a beautiful full-color, digest-sized hardcover book. It was Burning Wheel's biggest production to date, coming in at 656 pages.



Though *Burning Empires* was clearly descended from *Burning Wheel*, it also introduced many unique elements in what Crane called an "experimental" game design. Most interestingly, the game is strategic and competitive — unlike almost anything in the roleplaying field other than Robin Laws' *Rune* (2001). *Burning Wheel* had always been a very intense game, where the GM was meant to push the players hard, but *Burning Empires* moved that to the next level by having the GM take the side of the invading Vaylen and the players the side of the defending humans.

> *"Luke and I pledged that we would do our best to hard code the way we played into Burning Empires by critically evaluating every nuance of how we played our games, and making sure it made its way into the text."*
>
> – Thor Olavsrud,
> "Burning Empires: From Inception to Finished Product (Part III),"
> Well of Urd (July 2006)

The conflict between the GM and the players hints at the indie influence on the game. Players bid for control of the story using the "Infection" rules and also set stakes in individual conflicts — which was a very popular indie idea in the early '00s.

However it's *Burning Empires*' "scene" mechanic that stands out as its most innovative indie idea. Color scenes, building scenes, interstitial scenes, and conflict

scenes define the different ways that players can interact with the world — and also enforce a narrative story structure. Different players get to introduce different scenes, cleverly dividing up the "authority" — another indie catchphrase. In addition, each scene has a "figure of note": a spotlight character. To use Crane's terminology, players can't "turtle" in *Burning Empires*.

The result was apparently successful, because Kenneth Hite gave *Burning Empires* an Outie Award for Best Licensed Thing, while it was the runner-up for the Best Indie Game of the Year and winner of the Origins Award for Game of the Year. Ironically, Crane wasn't available to pick up his Origins Award because he was demoing.

Though *Burning Wheel* has sold two or three times as many core books as *Burning Empires*, the handsome new game has surely brought many new players to Crane's gaming system.

Amid this success, Crane's part-time enterprise continued to grow, forcing him to take on assistant Katie Bode — who made sure that the bills got paid on time. At the time she was Burning Wheel's only regularly paid employee (with Thor Olavsrud being paid more occasionally for his editorial work).

Other Burning Publishers: 2006-Present

For the first several years that he was publishing, Luke Crane exclusively released books under his own brand. However, since 2006 that's changed. In more recent years, Crane has been working with a number of publishers — advising, designing, writing, and otherwise aiding in a variety of publications.

That began with Judd Karlman's *Dictionary of Mu* (2006), a supplement for *Sorcerer*. Karlman brought Crane the manuscript, and he liked it, so he laid out the book and acted as a creative editor — alongside Ron Edwards himself. Crane would later say that Burning Wheel had been a "ghost publisher" for the book. *Dictionary of Mu* was printed in a run of just 50 books for Gen Con Indy 2006; though Karlman instantly made back the $1000 or so that he invested in the editing and printing of the book by selling his book at $20 a copy, the smallest of small press.

Crane's next opportunity would be much bigger: he was asked to join an up-and-coming game company by Peter Adkison, the by-then former owner of *Dungeons & Dragons*. This new opportunity began at Gen Con SoCal 2006, when Crane ran a game of Jared Sorensen's *Lacuna Part I. The Creation of the Mystery and the Girl from Blue City* (2004) for Adkison. Shortly afterward, Crane and Sorensen found themselves pitching a science-fiction RPG to Adkison for publication by the company that he was now working for, Hidden City Games.

As is more fully recorded in the history of Memento Mori Theatricks, Crane worked for Hidden City from January 2007 to August 2009; it was the only time

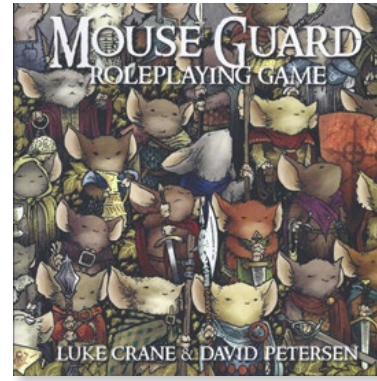
that his secondary job of game design overlapped with the primary job that paid his bills. Though Hidden City eventually opted out of Sorensen and Crane's RPG due to the company's success with the *Bella Sara* collectible horse game (2006-2011), and due to any number of financial troubles, the two were able to publish it on their own, as *Freemarket* (2010) — a transhuman RPG that would be the first publication of a new partnership called (fittingly) Sorensen/Crane.

Amazingly, that wasn't the only game that Crane was working on in the late '00s. In 2006, Crane had introduced designer Clinton Nixon to comic book author and artist David Petersen. As a result of this meeting, Nixon began work on an RPG based on Petersen's *Mouse Guard* comic (2006-Present). He produced a partial manuscript called "Tiny Triangles" but then abandoned the effort.

However Petersen and his publisher, Archaia Studios, were still excited about the possibility of a roleplaying game because they were roleplaying fans as well. Archaia's founder, Mark Smylie, already produced a well-received RPG called *Artesia: Adventures in the Known World* (2005) while *Mouse Guard* author David Petersen played a variety of RPGs back in the '80s. So in 2007 they approached Crane himself about writing that *Mouse Guard* game.

Crane later acknowledged that he agreed to write the *Mouse Guard* RPG for Archaia for primarily "mercenary" reasons: Smylie and Petersen showed him how well the comic series was selling. However, Crane also saw it as a test of his game design skills because it would require an extreme simplification of the *Burning Wheel* rules.

Archaia's *Mouse Guard Roleplaying Game* (2008) was published right in the middle of Crane's time at Hidden City. It was well-received and would go on to win Crane another Origins Award for Best Game — as well as the Indie award for Indie Game of the Year.



Mouse Guard was another beautiful full-color hardcover. As promised, it dramatically simplified *Burning Wheel*'s play, while still keeping the most notable gaming elements, such as the "BITs." There were also some notable differences in its mechanics — particularly in areas of goals, advancement, and rewards.

"David and Mark came to me and asked if I would be interested. We talked about ideas back and forth – what would be important for the game and what wouldn't? We saw relatively eye to eye on mice with swords and cloaks and we went from there."

– Luke Crane, Interview, Wizard Universe (August 2008)

Mini-History

Archaia Studios Press: 2002-2013

Archaia began as the story of one man and one comic. In 2002, Mark Smylie had published two volumes of *Artesia*, his beautiful, hand-painted fantasy and war comic: *Artesia* (1999) and *Artesia Afield* (2000-2001). Then publisher Sirius Entertainment told Smylie that they planned to publish the third volume in black & white. Smylie was unwilling to agree to this, and so he formed Archaia Studios Press (ASP) to publish the third volume of his book, *Artesia Afire* (2003-2004).

ASP enters our gaming histories because Smylie is also a fan of RPGs. The Known World of *Artesia* in fact started out as a roleplaying campaign world, inspired by the worlds of Arduin, Glorantha, and the Wilderlands – as well as other literary sources. Since he now owned his own publishing company, Smylie decided to take the world of *Artesia* full-circle, by turning it into an original RPG.

Artesia: Adventures in the Known World (2005) was produced as a hefty and beautiful hardcover roleplaying book. Though it had many unique systems, it was ultimately built on the Fuzion engine – making it one of the last Fuzion games of note, alongside R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk v3* (2005). The *Artesia* RPG was well-received; it was nominated for numerous awards and won the Origins Award for Best Role-Playing Game.

Unfortunately for fans of *Artesia*, Smylie decided to grow ASP in 2005 by bringing on other comics. Running the larger company took up most of his time, and support for both the *Artesia* RPG and the comic ground to a halt. Meanwhile, the most notable of ASP's new comics was David Petersen's *Mouse Guard* (2006-Present), a medieval-themed comic starring mice. *Mouse Guard* also got made into a roleplaying game (2008), thanks to an adaptation by Luke Crane – who used a simplified version of his *Burning Wheel* (2002, 2005) game system. It also went on to win the Origins Award for Best Role-Playing Game.

Over the years, ASP became a notable comic publisher, though one that was often plagued by problems meeting deadlines. Meanwhile, ASP did *not* become a notable RPG publisher. Despite the critical success of its two RPG releases, ASP focused on the comic industry – which was probably much more profitable for them. They only published one other roleplaying release: a boxed edition of the *Mouse Guard Roleplaying Game* (2011).

In 2013, Archaia was purchased by Boom! Studios. By this time, Archaia had dozens of different properties; Boom! may provide them with the infrastructure necessary to regularly publish this rich catalog of material. For the moment, Archaia continues as an imprint of their new parent company.

Prior to the sale of Archaia, Mark Smylie said that he was working on both the long-delayed fourth volume of his *Artesia* comic, *Artesia Besieged* (2006, 2009+), and a second edition of the *Artesia RPG*. Whether they will now appear from Smylie or Boom! is unknown.

The growing indie influences on Crane's game design generated some of these differences. Like *Burning Empires*, *Mouse Guard* distributes authority. There are literally player turns and GM turns — and during player turns, the players can bring up "Unfinished Business," which are plot elements that a player feels has been left out of play.

The *Mouse Guard RPG* was sufficiently successful that Archaia later rereleased it as a $70 box set (2011), complete with a small book of new rules and adventures. That deluxe edition rapidly sold out, demonstrating the game's popularity.

Though nothing else has been quite as notable as *Mouse Guard* and *Freemarket*, Crane continues to work with other companies. He and Sorensen wrote a *Dark Crystal* (1982) brand bible for Jim Henson Company, and for a while it looked like Crane was also going to produce a *Dark Crystal* RPG for Archaia — but that seems to have fallen through with the 2013 sale of Archaia to Boom! Most recently Crane helped with the production of another RPG, *Tenra Bansho* Zero (2013), by providing layout work.

Crane's gaming designs for Archaia, for Hidden City, and for various small presses would be impressive on their own but at the same time, he's continued turning the Burning Wheel as well!

Dungeons & Gold: 2007-Present

Though Luke Crane has worked on projects for several other publishers since 2006, he's also continued to focus on his own publishing imprint and it existing lines.

For the most part, that focus has been on *Burning Wheel Revised*. Over the years, it's sold quite well: great for the indie community and good for *any* game in the turbulent '00s. By the time the *Burning Wheel Revised* run came to an end in 2011, there were about 8,000 copies on the market.

Meanwhile, Crane continued to supplement the game. His next release was another setting book: *in this shimmering Spring day, ah with ever anxious heart, the blossoms are falling* (2007). It was essentially *Burning Wheel* Japan, set in the Heian era (794-1189). Crane also claims it to be the roleplaying book with the longest title.

Blossoms was a relatively long book, coming in at over 200+ pages, and so Crane hoped to give it more attention than his earlier setting books, *Under a Serpent Sun* or *Burning Sands: Jihad*. That meant that he wanted to do an offset printing rather than local photocopying or print-on-demand (POD). Unfortunately, the company was then having cash flow problems as a result of taxes owed on the very successful *Burning Empires*, so *blossoms* went POD instead. Crane was still able to produce an initial run of 380 copies; in all over 1,000 copies of the setting book have been published over the years.

Burning BITs

In the spirit of *Burning Wheel*, the beliefs and instincts of the Burning Wheel HQ are available from the Burning Wheel website. Among these beliefs are:

- We are not a company.
- We make games when we are moved to do so.
- We make games we want to play and we play them as much as we can before releasing them.
- Each of our games is an attempt to say something new about the art of role-playing games and game design in general.
- We believe that a creator should be solely responsible for the publication and distribution of his or her work.
- We are unconcerned with popularity or convention and will sacrifice a great deal in service of a compelling idea.
- We do not make a living making games.

After that, Crane finished a five-book series that formed the complete rules for *Burning Wheel Revised*. *Monster Burner* had already been updated for the *Revised* rules sometime previous. Now Crane also wrote *Magic Burner* (2008) and *Adventure Burner* (2010). Around the same time, he also supplemented *Burning Empires* with Sydney Freedberg's *Bloodstained Stars* (2009) — an in-character setting book.

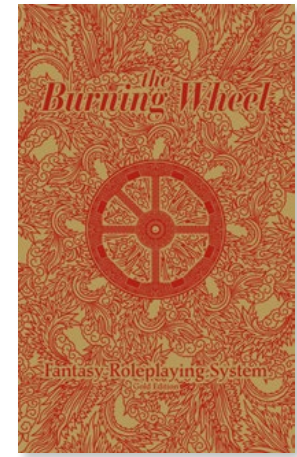
Though Burning Wheel still wasn't paying Crane's bills, these four major releases show that it had become a mature and successful company that could sell a few thousand copies of its biggest releases and that could produce about a book a year — even while Crane was busy with other creative tasks.

Meanwhile, Crane also kicked off his own yearly con: Burning Con (2010). It has run every year since, though in 2011 it was called Burning Apocalypse Con. This convention has focused on *Burning Wheel* as well as other indie games. Vincent Baker, John Harper, Jason Morningstar, and Jared Sorensen have all co-hosted it.

In more recent years, Crane has (if anything) increased the scope of what he's producing.

That started with *Burning Wheel Gold* (2011). This third edition of *Burning Wheel* was a handsome hardcover that ran 600 pages and combined the two previous core books. Though *Gold* has been well-received, the other three rulebooks have not been similarly updated — and have started to go out of print. The reason is simple: Crane doesn't have the time to update them for the *Gold* system, which is the danger of a truly independent publisher. This time crunch

became even more serious in 2012 when Kickstarter hired Crane as a "Community Manager for Games."



Appropriately, Burning Wheel ran its own Kickstarter in 2013. It was for *Torchbearer* (2013), a game by Thor Olavsrud, built on the foundation of the *Mouse Guard* system. It focuses on exploration, resource management, and turn-based play to make dungeon crawling really tough. Crane has called it "a love letter to *Basic D&D*" and *"Basic D&D* on hard mode." The Kickstarter went well, in part due to some good attention on forbes.com. It raised $65,154 from 1,745 backers.

> *"We're using Kickstarter this time because we really and truly are out of money for this project. We've spent it all on art and editing. To go forward, we need you to tell us if you want to see this game in print."*
>
> – Luke Crane, Torchbearer Kickstarter (May 2013)

Eleven years after printing a game that *could* have been a heartbreaker, Burning Wheel continues to produce RPGs that are innovative and critically acclaimed — *and* that sell well. As a result, they distinguish themselves as one of the more notable successes rising up out of the indie revolution.

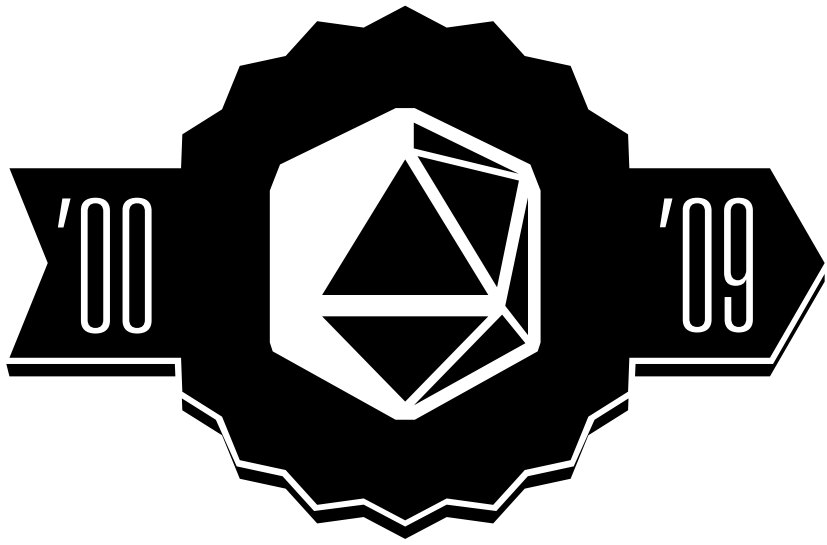
What to Read Next ○

- For Ron Edwards, Forge booths, *Sorcerer*, and fantasy heartbreakers, read ***Adept Press***.
- For another competitive indie game (like *Burning Empires*), read about Blood Red Sands in ***Ramshead Publishing*** and in ***Galileo Games***.
- For more on Jared Sorensen, and the work that he and Luke Crane did together on *Freemarket*, read ***Memento Mori Theatricks***.
- For another love letter to *D&D* (like *Torchbearer*) and a lot more on distributing authority in a game, read ***Bully Pulpit Games***.
- For some of the co-hosts of Burning Con, read ***Lumpley Games***, ***Bully Pulpit Games***, and ***Memento Mori Theatricks***.

In Other Eras

- For *Rune*, yet another competitive game, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.

Or read on to one of the biggest companies in the RPG industry, ***Paizo Publishing.***



Part Five:

Carrying the Flame

(2002–2003)

A third trend crossed through the '00s — one that reappeared throughout the industry's history. The old guard keeps returning to create new RPG companies, many of which are second-generation roleplaying publishers continuing gaming lines from previous publishers.

Paizo Publishing is obviously the most important of these torchbearers in the '00s. Founded by old guards Lisa Stevens (of Lion Rampant, White Wolf, and Wizards of the Coast) and Johnny Wilson (of Wizards of the Coast), it initially continued the publication of *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. In the years since, Paizo has become a powerful force on their own as the creator of *Pathfinder* (2009) — the roleplaying game that is currently the successor to *D&D* itself. As such, Paizo's story continues the story of *D&D* told in the histories of TSR and Wizards of the Coast.

Arc Dream Publishing is a more typical ***second-generation roleplaying publisher***, continuing lines from smaller press publishers Pagan Publishing and EOS Press.

Ronin Arts is more uniquely a ***d20 publisher***, a ***PDF publisher***, *and* a ***second-generation roleplaying publisher***; it qualifies for the last category because it inherited *The Whispering Vault* (1993, 2003) from past publishers Pariah Press and Ronin Publishing.

Several companies who carried the flames for past publishers are omitted from this section because they form a continuous sequence that originated with a single past RPG publisher: FASA. They appear in their own section at the end of this book.

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Paizo Publishing	2002-Present	*Dragon #299* (2002)	205
Ronin Arts	2003-2008	*101 Spellbooks (2002)*	32
Arc Dream Publishing	2002-Present	*Talent Operations Command Intelligence Bulletin No. 2: Talent Operations Groups* (2003)	230

Paizo Publishing: 2002-Present

Though Paizo came into business as a magazine publisher, they've since become the de facto *inheritor to the* Dungeons & Dragons 3E *rules and Wizard of the Coast's top competition in the fantasy RPG field.*

The Golem Cometh: 2000-2002

The story of Paizo begins with Lisa Stevens, formerly of Lion Rampant and White Wolf, who in 2000 also became former employee #1 of Wizards of the Coast. She was one of the many victims of the 2000 Christmas layoffs at Wizards, but when she left she wasn't *entirely* done with *D&D*. In particular, she wasn't done with *D&D*'s magazines, *Dungeon* and *Dragon*; she let it be known that if Hasbro ever wanted to get rid of them, they should give her a call.

Following those layoffs, Hasbro continued cutting costs at Wizards by getting rid of its less successful departments. *Legend of the Five Rings* went



2002: Dragon #299

to AEG, while Gen Con went to former president, Peter Adkison. Then there were those magazines — *Dungeon* and *Dragon* — and they weren't as profitable to publish as the core *D&D* books. By chance, someone remembered that Stevens had expressed interest in the magazines, so Periodicals Group Publisher Johnny Wilson gave her a call. Very soon afterward, Wizards offered Stevens a license to publish its magazines.

> *"Frankly, neither Hasbro nor Wizards of the Coast wants to be a magazine publisher. Both companies were built on publishing quality games and toys."*
>
> – Johnny L. Wilson, Editorial, Dragon #298 (August 2002)

By July 2002, Stevens formed Paizo Publishing to take advantage of these licenses. It was an LLC owned by herself, her partner Vic Wertz, and Johnny Wilson. The name "Paizo" came from Wilson; it was biblical Greek for "I play." Paizo transitioned the entire Wizards magazine staff to the new company — and even worked out of the Wizards offices for a while.

In all, Paizo now controlled three magazines. Jesse Decker and Matt Sernett oversaw *Dragon*, while Chris Thomasson (later Chris Youngs) and Erik Mona edited *Dungeon*. Paizo's third magazine was *Star Wars Insider* — the Star Wars Fan Club magazine that Wizards began publishing with issue #51 (October/November 2000). Dave Gross, Michael Mikaelian, and Vic Wertz oversaw that.

Because Paizo was a magazine-only publisher, they didn't have to contend with Wizard's problems of comparative profits. In fact, Wizard's magazines were a real boon to a brand-new RPG publisher: sales that weren't good enough for Wizards were wildly successful for newborn Paizo.

Dragon #299 (September 2002) was the first issue of the world's premiere RPG magazine published under the Paizo brand. That same month, Paizo also brought out *Dungeon #94*/*Polyhedron #153* (September/October 2002).

As is probably obvious from the name, *Dungeon* was an odd duck when Paizo took it over. Back in *Dungeon #90* (January/February 2002), Wizards combined their adventure magazine with the RPGA's *Polyhedron* — which was numbered #149 in its first outing as a split personality. *Dungeon* continued to publish *D&D* adventures while *Polyhedron* became an outlet for the d20 system — often featuring an entirely new d20 game, such as Jonathan Tweet's d20 "Omega World," which showed up in #153. Although this might have been a useful bit of branding for Wizards, the split magazine would eventually prove too schizophrenic for Paizo — but that change still lay a few years ahead.

Paizo published a total of four issues of their magazines at the tail end of 2002. During these formative months, the company was also puzzling out the

The Rise & Fall of RPG Magazines

Any professional business is ultimately about comparatives. Unless a company is very small – and unless it has someone to argue for a less-profitable line – less-profitable lines are ultimately let go.

Unfortunately, that's the typical story of magazines in gaming. White Wolf, Steve Jackson Games, and AEG are just three companies that got their start in generalist RPG magazines, while Chaosium also ran a top generalist magazine for many years. But today you can no longer find *White Wolf*, *Space Gamer*, *Shadis*, or *Different Worlds* on gaming store shelves – even though each company survives.

As soon as a generalist magazine publisher starts to expand beyond that magazine, one of two things tends to happen. Either: the magazine is ultimately let go, or else it's turned into a house organ – which accountants can at least write it off as marketing expense for a company's more profitable lines. (Other things happen less frequently, such as White Wolf's short-lived attempt to turn their magazine into a mass-market vehicle for pop coolness and Steve Jackson's decision to turn *Pyramid* magazine into an online-only 'zine.)

Even after a magazine has become a house organ, that's sometimes not enough for a company looking at their comparative economics. By this point, a magazine is filling a similar niche to adventures, and as Wizards proclaimed when they created the d20 System Trademark License: even if adventures are necessary for the success of a RPG line, they're not very profitable on their own. As a result, house organs like *Adventurer's Club*, *Wyrm's Footnotes*, and *Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society* have also fallen by the wayside. Ironically, these publishers sometimes replaced their house organs with generalist magazines: Chaosium's *Different Worlds* replaced *Wyrm's Footnotes*, while GDW's *Challenge* replaced *Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society*.

Which highlights the cycle of futility in RPG magazine publication.

There's one other solution to the problem of a magazine that's no longer profitable enough: you can license it out. That's exactly what Wizards of the Coast did in the '00s with the industry's premiere magazines – *Dragon* and *Dungeon*.

tricky magazine publishing business. For example, Wilson learned that newsstand payments for magazines were very confusing to follow and very slow to arrive. Meanwhile, the whole Paizo crew decided that Wizards' methodology of paying someone *else* to fulfill their subscriptions wasn't going to work for them.

This last decision would soon have major effects on Paizo as a whole.

Paths to Adventure: 2003-2007

One of the most important events in Paizo's early history is its creation of adventure paths in *Dungeon* magazine. These paths sprang from two different developments in RPG adventures: linked adventures and complete campaigns.

The idea of linked adventures dates back almost to the start of the industry. They originated in gaming conventions, where different but related adventures were often run as the opening, semi-final, and final rounds of a tournament. For example, Gary Gygax's original giants adventures — *G1: Steading of the Hill Giant Chief* (1978), *G2: Glacier of the Frost Giant Jarl* (1978), and *G3: Hall of the Fire Giant King* (1978) — appeared as the Origins '78 tournament (1978). Shortly thereafter they became TSR's first published adventures and their first *linked* adventures. Other linked *D&D* scenarios quickly followed, beginning with the "D" Descent adventures (1978) and the "A" Slave Lords series (1980) — both of which also originated in tournaments.

These linked adventures took a developmental leap in the '80s, thanks to TSR's Dragonlance series (1984-1986). Where tenuous plots had linked earlier adventures, Dragonlance put story first. DGP's 21-part "Grand Tour of the Imperium" (1985-1990) for *Traveller* was another linked adventure with an epic storytelling scope.

By 2000, linked adventures were a well-understood part of the industry. Many of the longer ones — such as Dragonlance and the Grand Tour — could be used to form complete campaigns, but publishers hadn't made that an explicit part of the adventures' designs. Wizards of the Coast changed that with their eight-part "Adventure Path." Beginning with *The Sunless Citadel* (2000) and ending with *Bastion of Broken Souls* (2002), player characters moved through all 20 levels of the core *D&D* games. However Wizard's Adventure Path was a big step backward in other ways, because the connections between the adventures were (again) tenuous — like those early linked adventures of the '70s.

Now we return to *Dungeon* magazine. It had usually been filled with short adventures. Linked adventures, however, were rare — and rarely more than a few parts long. Depending on how you count it, the first of *Dungeon*'s linked adventures were either Jackie and Merle Rasmussen's two-part "Tortles of the Purple Sage" which ran in issues #6 (July/August 1987) and #7 (September/October 1987) or John Nephew's "Grakhirt's Lair," which ran in issue #1 (September/October 1986) and inspired a very loose sequel in #8 (November/December 1987) called "Mountain Sanctuary."

"What began as a trepidatious experiment turned into something extraordinary and unprecedented, thanks largely to the writers and artists who contributed to the series."

– Chris Perkins, Editorial, Dungeon #73 (March/April 1999)

Dungeon's staff first indicated that they wanted to push the envelope of adventure design a decade later, when they published "Slave Vats of the Yuan-Ti" in *Dungeon #69* (July/August 1998). It was the first of an expansive five-part adventure by five different authors. The Forgotten Realms adventure series concluded with "End of Myrkul" in *Dungeon #73* (March/April 1999). As the series came to a finish, it was already obvious to the staff that they'd stumbled upon something great. As editor Chris Perkins said at the time, "The overwhelmingly positive response we've received to our 'experiment' has prompted us to consider publishing another series of adventures in the not-too-distant future."

Fast-forward four more years; the staff at Paizo was ready to combine these three ingredients: linked adventures, a complete campaign, and a variety of hands producing that campaign within the pages of *Dungeon* magazine itself. Using Wizard's recent terminology, Paizo called the result an "adventure path."

The first of Paizo's first adventure paths, "The Shackled City," set itself in the world of Greyhawk. Paizo's *Dungeon* editor, Chris Thomasson, got to announce it saying, "after years of protestation by many vocal readers, we've succumbed to the hue and cry." The Shackled City ran (irregularly at first) from *Dungeon #97* (March/April 2003) to *Dungeon* #116 (November 2004) and provided a 12-part adventure that took characters from 1st to 20th level. It was followed by two more adventure paths in *Dungeon*: "Age of Worms" (2005-2006) and "Savage Tide" (2006-2007).



The popularity of the adventure paths was apparent early in The Shackled City's run and led to the quick publication of the two follow-ups. By the end of the third adventure path, people were talking about the three campaigns in the same breath as classic adventures like TSR's *T1-4*, *A1-4*, and *GDQ* modules.

The adventure paths highlighted what a dedicated magazine publisher could do. Paizo was able to create epic adventures — more detailed and better connected than most other publishers had time for — and they were also able to support otherwise quiescent game worlds like Greyhawk. In other words, if you can make the economics of magazine publishing work, you can also crack some of the other tough nuts in the world of RPG publication.

They didn't know it, but Paizo was laying out the precise publication pattern that they'd *need* for future success. They were also presenting a useful new tool to the RPG industry. Though most of the big publishers haven't been willing to expend the energy required for a huge adventure path of the sort that Paizo pioneered, some have. Mongoose Publishing's *Drow War* (2005) was a three-book 30-level extravaganza, while Sovereign Press' "Age of Mortals" Dragonlance campaign (2004-2006) spanned the full range of standard levels, from 1st to 20th. Even Wizards themselves would eventually release a tightly connected adventure path for *D&D*: "Scales of War" (2008-2010).

Of course, the adventure paths weren't the only the only things that Paizo was doing with their magazines in the first few years of their existence.

An Oil Tanker in the Dark: 2003-2005

Paizo received considerable acclaim for their adventure paths. However, they were just one element of Paizo's overall magazine output — the rest of which also received considerable attention during the first five years of Paizo's life.



Dragon magazine was Paizo's flagship through 2007. One of their most notable early issues was #310 (August 2003), which closed out their first year of *Dragon* publication. It included the first ever *D&D 3.5* DM screen, which proved to be a big hit for Paizo. In their second year of *Dragon* publication, Paizo started venturing further afield from Wizards' model for the magazine, publishing special issues like #315 (January 2004), whose "Classic Campaigns" returned to old TSR settings like Al-Qadim, Birthright, and (of course) Greyhawk, and issue #319 (May 2004), which included an entire 3.5 player's handbook for Dark Sun.

"If we came up with an idea for a particular issue, it would take a couple of months for that idea to reach the newsstand, and by the time we had final sales figures on that issue, a full year had passed. We liked to imagine that making running changes to a magazine must be a lot like trying to turn an oil tanker in the dark with no instruments."

– Lisa Stevens,
"Paizo Publishing's 10th Anniversary Retrospective – Year 1 (2003),"
paizo.com (March 2012)

Dungeon magazine had always been the more troublesome *D&D* magazine, because its focus on adventures had traditionally resulted in a lower circulation. This caused Paizo to revamp the magazine a few times in 2003.

That began with Paizo's introduction of adventure paths in *Dungeon #97/Polyhedron #156* (March/April 2003) — which probably did more for *Dungeon* than anything else in its first hundred issues. Unfortunately, *Dungeon* was proving too expensive to produce; one calculation suggested that it should cost $12.99 to generate the same profit as *Dragon*, while Paizo was charging just $7.99 for each issue. This required a second revamp in *Dungeon #98/Polyhedron #157* (May 2003), when Paizo moved the magazine over to a monthly schedule and simultaneously reduced its page count.

Meanwhile, *Dungeon* was helping Paizo to move into the world of electronic publishing. "Life's Bazaar," the first part of *The Shackled City*, led to the creation of a web enhancement that contained material that hadn't fit in the magazine. Following *Dungeon #100/Polyhedron #159* (July 2003), Paizo similarly used material originally intended for *Dungeon* to create their first commercial PDF: Chris Perkins' *Tu'narath City Guide* (2003).

That same year saw another success for both magazines: Paizo licensed translations of *Dungeon* and *Dragon* to Italian game company Nexus Editrice — who published a combined magazine called *Dragon & Dungeon* starting in April 2003.

This history hasn't given much attention to *Star Wars Insider* and the Star Wars Fan Club because they lie largely outside the roleplaying industry. Nonetheless, they were *very* important to Paizo in its first years — representing approximately half of the company's revenue. Unfortunately, *Star Wars Insider* also came with a notable limitation: Paizo was only allowed to publish eight issues a year under its contract with LucasFilm.

This left the *Star Wars Insider* staff with some free time, which Paizo decided to use to launch a new magazine: *Undefeated* (2003), which was meant to cover any game a player could win at — from *Magic: The Gathering* and *HeroClix* to

Settlers of the Stone Age. It also gave Paizo their first opportunity to try subscription fulfillment on their own. They did so using a new website created by Rob Head, a former Amazon employee. Though we'll see that *Undefeated* didn't last for long, its subscription system would soon be expanded to all of Paizo's magazines.

Unfortunately, Paizo's magazines were also a source of conflict between two of the company's founders, Wilson and Stevens, who had different ideas about how the magazine business should work. Wilson decided to leave Paizo on December 8, 2003. He was replaced as Publisher at Paizo by Keith Strohm. Shortly thereafter LucasFilm canceled their contract with Paizo — something they were allowed to do if Wilson left the company. This brought Paizo's work on *Star Wars Insider* to an end following issue #76 (June/July 2004), after which LucasFilm took over the Star Wars Fan Club.

As we've noted, the *Star Wars* properties represented a *lot* of Paizo's income. This meant that LucasFilm's decision to reclaim the magazine (and the club) was a horrendous calamity for the company. The only upside was very slow newsstand payments, which meant Paizo would have about a year to come up with a new source of revenue.

Paizo hoped *Undefeated* would help to fill the gap, but they didn't depend on it: they also kicked off a new series of magazine revamps and expansions.

That began with a fifth magazine, *Amazing Stories* (September 2004). Paizo had licensed the fiction magazine from Wizards in 2002, alongside *Dungeon* and *Dragon*, but hadn't previously used the license. Now, Paizo tried to recreate the fiction magazine as a mass media vehicle — pushing *Amazing Stories* not just as an anthology for short stories, but also as an overview of all genre media — including comics, movies, and TV.

At the same time, Paizo revamped *Dragon* for the first time with issue #323 (September 2004). This temporarily resulted in the magazine being filled with very short articles aimed at players. Lisa Stevens said they were trying "to provide something for everyone with every issue." Though the "Class Act" character class columns continued on through issue #359 (September 2007), most of the other short pieces quickly disappeared — to be replaced by new features that we'll talk about momentarily.

Dungeon simultaneously received its third (!) revamp at Paizo with issue #114 (September 2004), near the end of "The Shackled City" adventure path. These changes were even bigger than the ones that had appeared in *Dragon*. First, Paizo dropped the *Polyhedron* section. The bipartite nature of the magazine had always been awkward, and now with the d20 bust in full effect, the advantages

of a d20 platform were gone. Second, *Dungeon* began to better balance its adventures, promising a low, mid, and high-level adventure in each issue. Third, *Dungeon* began to include content for classic campaign worlds in every issue — starting with a return to the beloved Isle of Dread. Fourth, *Dungeon* expanded (somewhat) beyond adventures by introducing columns of more general interest to gamemasters — the most notable of which was "Dungeoncraft," a GM design column borrowed from *Dragon* that was written by luminaries such as Monte Cook and Wolfgang Baur.

The addition of two magazines and the revamp of two more were some remarkably big changes for a little company. Unfortunately, they weren't enough to recover the money that Paizo had lost from LucasFilm's departure. In fact, *Undefeated* and *Amazing Stories* underperformed; on December 16, 2004, Lisa Stevens was forced to cancel both of them and lay off six staff members. The final issues were *Undefeated #10* (February 2005) and *Amazing Stories #609* (March 2005).

> *"We worked hard to find alternative means to keep these titles viable, including moving them to other companies. However, our efforts ultimately met with no success. We felt that it was time to fold our hand and let our customers know the final outcome."*
>
> – Lisa Stevens, Press Release (March 2006)

Vic Wertz was very candid about why *Undefeated* and *Amazing Stories* failed, offering insights that revealed a lot about how the magazine business works. He outlined three revenue streams that most magazines have — what Johnny Wilson had called the "three-legged stool":

- Newsstand sales, which are usually break even because newsstands are allowed returnability, and so constantly over order.
- Subscription sales, which lose money for most magazines, but which Paizo managed to make a little money on, thanks to the special interest level of their magazines.
- Advertising, which is what actually pays the bills for most magazines, but which Paizo had some issues with because they were getting money from unreliable hobbyist companies.

One of Paizo's advantages in the magazine business was that they had two additional sources of revenue:

- Game store sales, which aren't returnable, and so did make money for Paizo.
- Back issue sales, which aren't a factor for most magazines, but were for Paizo, thanks again to the special interest of the hobbyist industry.

Dragon and *Dungeon* were able to hit all five revenue streams, explaining their continued success. *Undefeated* and *Amazing Stories* didn't have the same game store sales as the RPG magazines, nor did they generate many back-issue sales. That left the two new Paizo periodicals with the same dilemma faced by most magazines: they had to get loss-leading newsstand and subscription sales up high enough that they could generate acceptable revenues from ad sales.

With cash flow problems looming thanks to the loss of the LucasFilms properties, Paizo couldn't wait: they needed new money a *lot* faster. In order to get it, they'd have to move beyond the magazines that had been their bread and butter for the company's first few years.

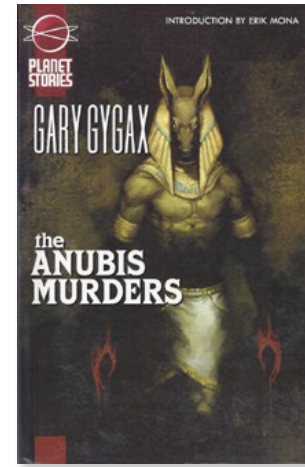
A Farewell to Mags: 2005-2007

Paizo decided upon a strategy that would take them beyond their magazine origins in January 2005, at a manager's meeting at Lisa Stevens' house. There, the management team agreed to six general goals for the coming years:

1. To increase the subscriber base of *Dungeon* and *Dragon*.
2. To expand their licenses with Wizards so that they could publish non-magazine products — especially ones based on out-of-print magazines.
3. To create generic gaming accessories.
4. To help other publishers to get their products to retail stores.
5. To increase paizo.com sales through business partnerships.
6. To expand beyond RPGs.

Over the course of 2005, Paizo pushed hard on these goals, resulting in a variety of new product lines.

The expansions outside of the RPG business were probably the least successful. The first of these occurred with the 2005 creation of board game publisher Titanic Games with James Ernest and Mike Selinker. However, it resulted in just a few releases over the years. Planet Stories — a fiction-publishing division intended to reprint "classic fantasy" — got its start in 2007 and lasted much longer. Over the years, it reprinted classic pulp and science-fantasy stories by Michael Moorcock,

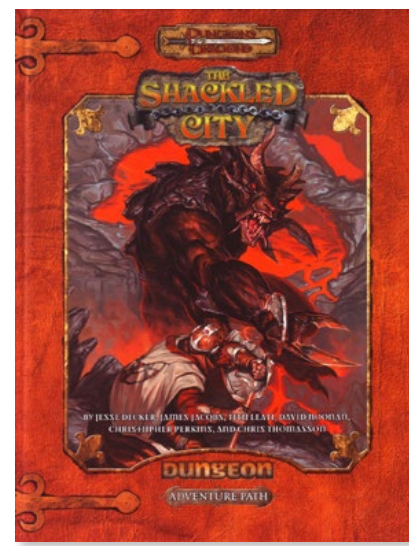


C.L. Moore, Robert E. Howard, and many others, as well as a few more recent novels, including the Mythus novels of Gary Gygax. However, it was eventually closed down following publication of Robert Silverberg's *The Chalice of Death* (2012).

The expansion of paizo.com more clearly improved the prospects of the company. The site's online web store had launched just a few months earlier, on November 24, 2004. It was the result of Rob Head's continued work, following the launch of Paizo's subscription service the previous year. By selling the products of other publishers, Paizo was able to increase their presence on the internet and become a go-to place for gaming supplies. It also helped them to form strong connections with RPG designers, distributors, and manufacturers — further benefitting the company as a whole.

However, it was Paizo's RPG expansions that were the most interesting and would have the most long-lived effects on the company.

Paizo's first four book publications, all based on licenses from Wizards of the Coast, were quite notable. They included: a hardcover compilation of *The Shackled City* (2005), *The Dragon Compendium* (2005), *Dragon: Monster Ecologies* (2007), and *The Art of Dragon Magazine* (2007). As promised, each of these books reprinted material from old magazines. *Shackled City* in particular made a pretty big impact, and made it obvious that Paizo was a contender in the RPG scene.

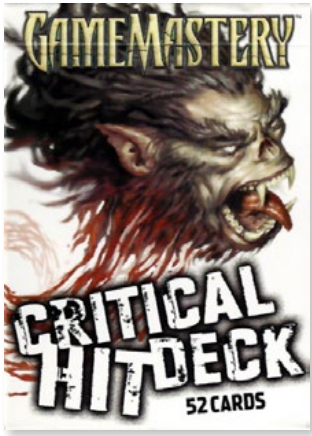


However Paizo really previewed its future in March 2005 when they announced a *GameMastery* line of gaming accessories. The line kicked off with *Compleat Encounter: Dark Elf Sanctum* (2005), the first of several *Compleat Encounters* that married miniatures with d20 encounters. A number of other gamemaster-oriented products followed. *Map Pack: Village* (2005) was the first in a line of tiled cardstock maps that could be fitted together in various ways. *Item Pack One* (2006) was the first of many magic item card decks. They were intended to help GMs easily track secret magic powers,

but the line was later extended into mundane item cards and eventually decks of other sorts.

Some of Paizo's *GameMastery* products were inherited from other companies. Steel Sqwire had previously produced plastic-coated flip-mats that showed different tactical maps on either side. Their initial line had included releases like *Flip-Mat: Forest Path* (2006) and *Flip-Mat: City Square* (2006). In 2007, Paizo licensed the system and began a long series of their own flip-mats with *Flip-Mat: Tavern* (2007) and *Flip-Mat: Ship* (2007). Open Mind Games was the source of another popular *GameMastery* product, a "combat pad" (2006) released through Paizo.

The *Compleat Encounter* line debuted villains such as the Gorilla King and the Whispering Tyrant, which offered the first hints of the campaign setting Paizo would soon be producing. However, the line proved too much work for its value and so it was cancelled in April 2006; three final products, "Fane of the Black Adept," "Stand & Deliver," and "War Golem Factory," were never finished. The rest of the *GameMastery* lines were much more successful: *Map Packs*, *Item Packs*, and *Flip-Mats* all continue to this day. They've also expanded. For example, the *Critical Hit Deck* (2007) was a new sort of card deck — and ended up being the *GameMastery* release of the year for 2007.



Throughout all of these expansions beyond the world of magazines, Paizo also continued to publish their last two magazines standing — *Dragon* and *Dungeon*.

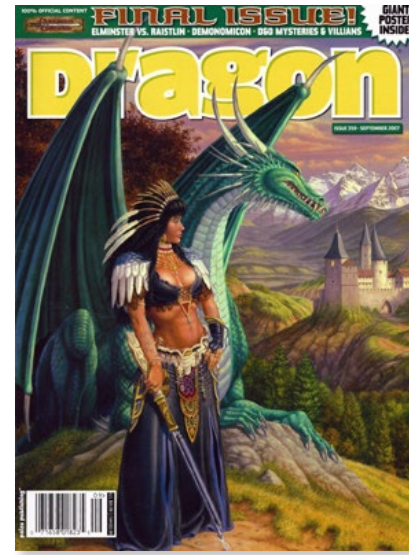


Dragon evolved past its 2004 revamp and now began publishing heftier articles featuring deep and evocative backgrounds. Two columns were particularly memorable: the "Demonomicon of Iggwilv" (2005-2007), which provided extensive information on the demons of the *D&D* cosmology; and "Core Beliefs" (2005-2007), which similarly detailed the deities of Greyhawk, expanding on ideas first presented over two decades before by

Gary Gygax and Len Lakofka. This sort of in-depth world creation would point strongly to the company's future.

Meanwhile, Paizo's storytelling also continued in high gear at *Dungeon*. As we've already seen, these years brought about the publication of "Age of Worms" (2005-2006) and "Savage Tide" (2006-2007).

Paizo's magazine staff saw a few final changes in these years. Keith Strohm left Paizo, but was replaced by Erik Mona as Paizo's new Publisher. Mona was running both *Dragon* and *Dungeon* by this time, but James Jacobs succeeded him as the editor-in-chief of *Dungeon* in June 2006.





Together Mona and Jacobs *might* have led *D&D*'s premiere magazines far into the future, except Lisa Stevens learned that wouldn't be the case in a May 30, 2006, conference call with Wizards of the Coast. She called to begin negotiations over a renewal of Paizo's licenses, which ended in March 2007. Wizards instead told Paizo that they'd be reclaiming the licenses themselves and end the print runs of the two magazines forever.

Wizards was unerringly polite, professional, and understanding. They told Paizo about their decision in May, though they could have waited until the end of the year. They also extended Paizo's license until August 2007, though it was originally intended to end that March. This gave Paizo another year to deal with the newest disaster. They used the time wisely, and waited almost a year — until April 19, 2007 — to tell the rest of the world that the magazines were ending. The final print issues ever for the industry's flagship magazines were *Dragon #359* (September 2007) and *Dungeon #150* (September 2007).

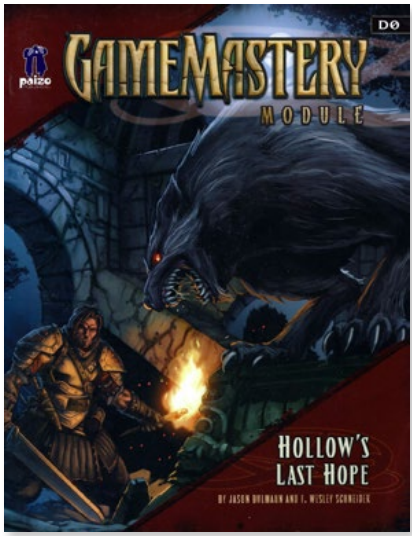
"The legacy of Dragon magazine has shone brightly for 31 years, and I felt the best way to go out was to take a page from my old DM [Monte Cook]: put all the miniatures on the table, close up dangling loose ends, and make the last installment the best and most exciting we absolutely could."

– Erik Mona, Editorial, Dragon #359 (September 2007)

Following the loss of *Star Wars Insider* and the Star Wars Fan Club, *Dragon* and *Dungeon* had become Paizo's strong remaining core. Paizo had been slowly trending up the magazine's subscription numbers over the last five years, with *Dungeon* up to about 40,000 subscribers and *Dragon* up to about 50,000 — great numbers for anyone other than Wizards of the Coast, and especially strong numbers for the previously lagging *Dungeon*. Now, all that work was gone.

It was a thunderbolt that few companies survive — and by now the *second* thunderbolt Paizo had received in just a few short years. Fortunately, the loss of their *Star Wars* business taught Paizo a lesson: they'd already been working since 2005 on expanding their business into products that *they* owned. Another year of work would help Paizo to get where they needed to be.

Creating a World: 2007-2009



Though Paizo's *GameMastery* line provided a strong foundation of products that could be used to help support the company, it was unlikely to sustain the company in the imaginations of players; for that, Paizo needed to harness the creative force behind its adventure paths and popular *Dragon* columns like "Demonomicon of Iggwilv" and "Core Beliefs" and apply it to the creation of something all their own.

This work began in February 2007 when Paizo announced the *GameMastery Modules* — which were original adventures not tied to *Dungeon* magazine. Paizo previewed the new series with *D0: Hollow's Last Hope* (2007), which showed up on June 23, 2007, at the first Free RPG Day. This 16-page full-color book was a beautifully illustrated and well-written d20 adventure that introduced the village of Falcon's Hope in the country of Andoran. A few weeks later, at the Origins Game Fair, Paizo followed *Hollow's Last Hope* up with their first commercial adventure

module, *D1: Crown of the Kobold King* (2007). Like its predecessor, it showed off the professionalism and creativity that Paizo previously brought to their magazines and encouraged the readers of those magazines to join Paizo in their new venture.

By the time those first adventures were published, Paizo had made another important announcement. Beginning in August — in time for Gen Con Indy 2007, and just as *Dungeon* and *Dragon* were ending — Paizo would be publishing *Pathfinder Adventure Path*. This would be a new "monthly volume" that would feature adventure paths in six-volume arcs, all set in the world of Golarion that Paizo was also exploring through their *GameMastery Modules*.

In many ways, *Pathfinder Adventure Path* was a clear continuation of Paizo's success with *Dungeon* and with *Dragon*. However there were two elements of particular note in the new periodical's design.

> *"We knew that the key to our survival beyond Dragon and Dungeon hinged upon our mastery of creating adventures, particularly Adventure Paths."*
>
> – Lisa Stevens, "Paizo Publishing's 10th Anniversary Retrospective – Year 4 (2006)," paizo.com (June 2012)

First, Paizo was careful not to call *Pathfinder Adventure Path* a magazine, despite its appearance as a monthly, numbered volume. It certainly was more coherent than a magazine — with everything directed toward that singular story. It was also printed on higher-quality paper than most magazines and was square-bound. Finally, it was a lot more expensive than most magazines; where *Dungeon* had been $7.99 before its last issue, *Pathfinder Adventure Path* was $19.99 for each issue. The semantic change was likely a major factor in making this price increase acceptable.

Second, *Pathfinder Adventure Path* — like Paizo's *Compleat Encounters* and *GameMastery Modules* — was based on the OGL, not the d20 System Trademark License. This was probably the right thing to do after the loss of trust that came with the d20 bust. However, in 2007 it was still pretty rare for a publisher to publish actual *D&D* supplements without marking them as d20. Of course, this proved to be another canny move for Paizo, as it made sure that their new line wouldn't be affected by Wizard's inevitable revocation of the d20 license.

Before continuing on, it's worth commenting on the name "Pathfinder" itself. The creative staff at Paizo came up with the name by brainstorming words that made them think of adventures, then combining them in various ways. The periodical could have been called "Wyrmpath," "Renaissance Realms," "GodDoom" or "AdventureWorld." Paizo even thought about "Kobold" for a while because of their premiere adventures but finally settled on "Pathfinder."

Thanks to their web store's subscription system, Paizo was able to sell their new non-magazine to fans through monthly subscriptions, as they had *Dungeon* and *Dragon*. However, Paizo decided to expand beyond that by also offering the *GameMastery Modules* as a monthly subscription. In the years since, Paizo has offered subscriptions to most of their product lines — even the maps and card packs.

Neither Paizo's web store nor its subscriptions has particularly endeared Paizo with brick-and-mortar retailers, who are cut out of the loop by these initiatives. However — unlike other direct sellers such as Columbia Games — Paizo's success speaks for itself, and so retailers keep supporting Paizo whether they like these business practices or not.



From 2007-2009 Paizo expanded their new *GameMastery* model of business. *GameMastery* accessories and adventures proliferated, while *Pathfinder Adventure Path* happily marched through its first four Golarion stories: "Rise of the Runelords" (2007-2008), "Curse of the Crimson Throne" (2008), "Second Darkness" (2008-2009), and "Legacy of Fire" (2009). The first three arcs all detailed the country of Varisia; while the fourth was more farflung, as it had been intended as the fourth adventure path in *Dungeon*, before things got crazy for Paizo.

Along the way, Paizo decided that "Pathfinder" was the best trademark to use for their burgeoning FRP line. When they kicked off an organized play league with the adventures *Silent Tide* (2008) and *The Hydra's Fang Incident* (2008), they called it the "Pathfinder Society." The Society had proven very successful, thanks to Paizo's support in providing two PDF adventures each and every month. The *GameMastery Modules* also became *Pathfinder Modules* in 2008. This marked the start of a gradual change, though Paizo would only retire the *GameMastery* brand entirely in 2013.

As they continued to expand, Paizo debuted two lines of Golarion supplements. The *Pathfinder Chronicles* (2008-Present) provided deep details on the setting of Golarion. It kicked off with the *Pathfinder Chronicles Campaign Setting* (2008), released at Gen Con Indy 2008, which was Paizo's first hardcover focused on *their own* gameworld. Meanwhile, the *Pathfinder Companions* (2008-Present) offered background that was more appropriate for players. The two series have since

been renamed the *Pathfinder Campaign Setting* line and the *Pathfinder Player Companions* to better highlight their purposes.

Overall, Paizo was able to successfully leverage their expertise in *Dragon* and *Dungeon* to create a well-supported and well-loved series of adventures and supplements. This was helped by the same evocative creativity previously on display at Paizo since its earliest days. Whether it was the draconic kobolds of *D1: Crown of the Kobold King* (2007), the long-dead Egypt-like country of *J1: Entombed with the Pharaohs* (2007), or the epic storytelling on display month after month in the *Pathfinder Adventure Path*, Paizo continually proved itself a top d20 publisher.

Paizo also began tapping the creativity of a new group of people: its fans. Following their loss of *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines, Paizo could no longer easily (and safely) bring in new talent. To address this problem, they created a yearly "RPG Superstar" contest. Christine Schneider was the first winner, leading to her authorship of *S1: Clash of the Kingslayers* (2009).

Everything was looking great for Paizo (again!), but there was one fly in their ointment: when Wizards of the Coast reclaimed *Dungeon* and *Dragon*, it had been because they were planning for a new fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*. This meant that Paizo was soon going to be producing supplements for a game that no longer existed.

Fortunately, they had an answer for that too.

Creating a Game: 2007-2009

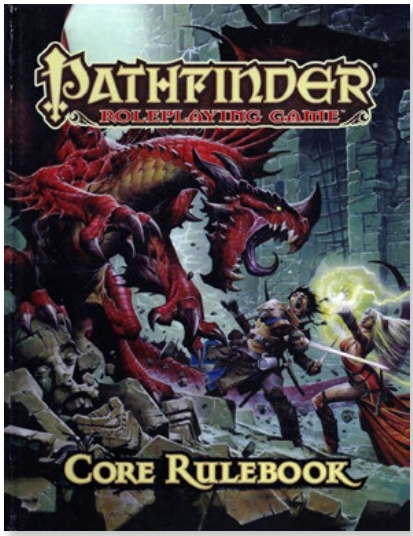
Wizards of the Coast announced *Dungeons & Dragons* Fourth Edition at Gen Con Indy 2007. At that same convention, they promised Paizo a playtest of the 4E rules once everyone got back to Seattle — but that never happened.

Enter Paizo designer Jason Bulmahn, an architect who joined Paizo in 2004. While working for Paizo, he'd also been freelancing books for Wizards, but (unsurprisingly) found that work coming to an end in 2007 after Wizards' 4E announcement, meaning he had some free time. In October 2007, he decided to use the OGL to create "an easy PDF document with some rules revisions." He called it his "3.75 Rules Set."

> *"What started out as a simple side project soon turned into an obsession as the rules document got longer every day."*
>
> – Jason Bulmahn,
> Introduction to Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Beta Release (2008)

Over the next few months, Wizards of the Coast hemmed and hawed about how third-party publishers would be able to support their new game. Early in 2008, Paizo

decided that they couldn't wait any longer. Stevens called a meeting at her house (as usual) to discuss the problem and Bulmahn convinced everyone to turn his side project into a complete RPG — giving Paizo their own set of core rules for the d20 game system. He left the meeting as the lead designer of a new project codenamed "Mon Mothma." A few frantic weeks of work followed, then on March 18, 2008, Paizo announced their new project as the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game*. For a while afterward they toyed with the idea of also supporting fourth edition through a partnership with Necromancer Games, but eventually that possibility faded away.



Simultaneous with their March 18 announcement, Paizo released *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Alpha Playtest 1* (2008) to the internet as a free download. It was the start of what Paizo touted as the "largest open playtest in RPG history." That first playtest release included Paizo's new versions of just a few of the classic d20 classics, but it was quickly supplemented by two more downloadable Alphas over the next two months. Over 50,000 people downloaded those playtests. A print Beta (2008) appeared in time for Gen Con Indy 2008, and then the final edition of the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game* was released in a hardcover (2009) at Gen Con Indy 2009.

Paizo's overall strategy for the *Pathfinder RPG* release was quite clever — as was typical for the company. To start with, the playtest was a great marketing tool that gave players across the world the opportunity to try out the game well before its release. Paizo also learned genuinely useful information from the playtest — solving what could have been future problems for the *Pathfinder* RPG. Because of their first playtest's success, Paizo has since publically playtested all of their core *Pathfinder* books.

Paizo's decision to release a print copy of their Beta at Gen Con Indy 2008 was another marketing coup. On the one hand, it let them go straight up against the release of *Dungeons & Dragons Fourth Edition* — co-opting players who might have otherwise gone over to the new game. On the other hand, it gave Paizo an extra year to complete work on the game, so that they could be sure that the final product actually *was* something that they could stake the future of the company upon.

When Bulmahn started work on the *Pathfinder RPG*, he said he had three goals: compatibility, rule improvement, and better base classes. The compatibility

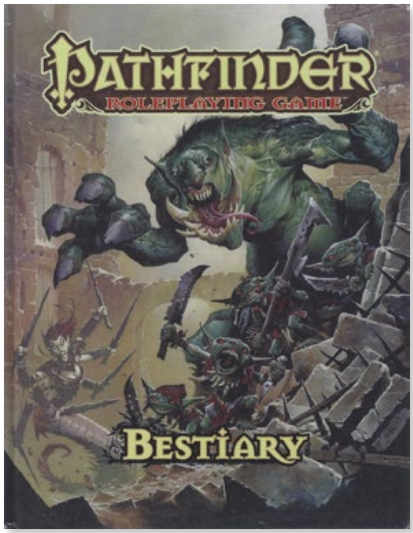
with *Dungeons & Dragons 3.5* was largely maintained — though Paizo played with moving further from the base game in its Alpha playtest. In the end, the biggest difference was that player characters tended to be more powerful in *Pathfinder*, but GMs could easily use monsters with slightly higher CRs and NPCs with slightly higher levels if they were converting adventures from older sources. The rules changes and base class improvements, meanwhile, largely defined the new game.

In approaching the rules, Paizo renovated a few of d20's more troublesome systems — prime among them the grappling system and the polymorph rules. They also make a concerted effort to step through all the game systems and answer obvious questions that hadn't been addressed in the rules before. The result was not only more exhaustive, but also more colorful in many places.

> *"Far too many of the basic classes lose their luster after just a few levels, leading most players to take a host of other classes or a number of prestige classes. While this option is still available, I wanted to give every class a reason to be followed up through 20th level."*
>
> – Jason Bulmahn,
> Introduction to Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Beta Release (2008)

However, it was the changes to the base classes — such as the cleric, fighter, monk, and wizard — that really jumped out in the new rulebook. In order to address the problems of players abandoning classes rather than sticking with them, Bulmahn (and a horde of co-authors) did two things. First, he made sure that there were no "dead levels"; now, each class earned real benefits at every single level — not just bonuses to a few abilities. Second, he gave each class a level 20 "cap" ability, which was a fancy and exciting special ability that epitomized the class and gave players something to strive for. Like many of the other rule changes, the base class changes added evocative color to the game.

In the end, the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game* showed off the possibilities of what a new and polished game edition could be. Many fans called the result 3.6E or 3.75E — matching Bulmahn's earliest name for the project. The rules tweaks obviously created a slightly different game, but it was still recognizable as *Dungeons & Dragons* third edition. There were some fans who complained that it was too different (primarily because of the differences in power level) and others who complained that it was too similar (primarily because some more far-reaching changes that had appeared in the playtest were dropped in the final release), but the game's ultimate success suggests that Paizo did a good job of finding a middle ground.



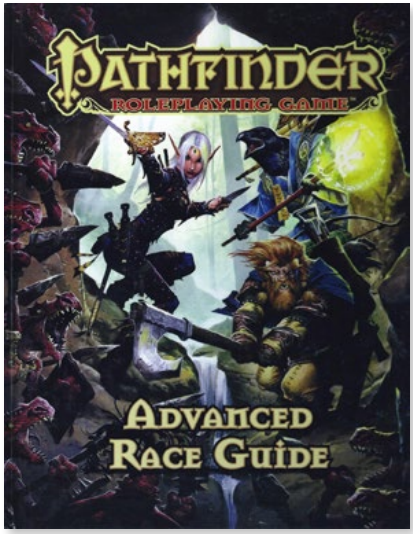
That success was already apparent by August 2009. Though Paizo's print run of *Pathfinder* was three times that of any previous release, they sold out before the game came back from the printers, then sold out of the book at Gen Con.

Paizo quickly followed up *Pathfinder* with its first hardcover supplement, the first *Bestiary* (2009), which was released in October. They also shifted their existing *Pathfinder* lines over to the new game — including *Pathfinder Adventure Path*, which launched the "Council of Thieves" (2009-2010) for *Pathfinder* at Gen Con Indy 2009.

It was clearly the start of something new, for a company still less than 10 years old.

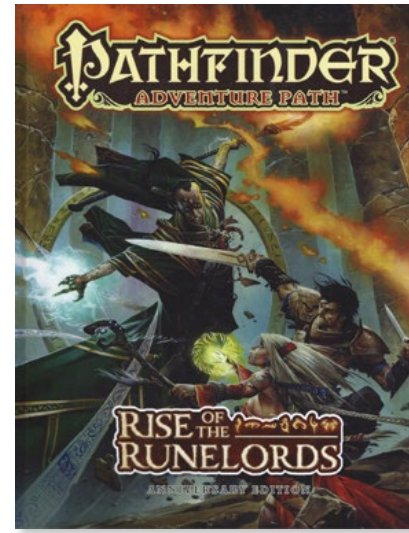
The *Pathfinder* Renaissance: 2010-Present

Since the publication of *Pathfinder*, Paizo has cleverly managed their supplement production, starting with their hardcover rule supplements. Stevens felt that TSR had over-published their hardcover rulebooks in their dying days, but she didn't want to starve her fans either, so she set a schedule of three hardcover books each year: a *Bestiary* for the holiday season; a rules-heavy book for Gen Con; and something else for the spring. This plan kicked off in the *GameMastery Guide* (2010) in May 2010, the *Advanced Player's Guide* (2010) that August, and the *Bestiary 2* (2010) at the end of the year. Of these the *Advanced Player's Guide* was the best received because it allowed Paizo to (finally) cover ground beyond the d20 core, by creating several new base classes and a huge number of variants for the existing ones.



In the years since, Paizo has mostly kept to this pattern while experimenting with many sorts of hardcovers, with the most notable including the *Advanced Race Guide* (2012), which gave players the opportunity to take on the roles of many different races, some of them monstrous,

and *Ultimate Campaign* (2013), which included rules for character downtime, building kingdoms, and more.



The kingdom building rules were adapted from "Kingmaker" (2010), the sixth *Pathfinder Adventure Path*. It was focused on sandbox adventures and gave players the opportunity to create a kingdom of their own — showing that Paizo was continuing to take chances and explore new ground with its not-a-magazine. In the years since, *Pathfinder Adventure Path* has included horror adventure paths, piratical adventure paths, Asian-influenced adventure paths, and even a return to Varisia. Meanwhile, Paizo's first *Pathfinder Adventure Path* returned in the *Rise of the Runelords Anniversary Edition* (2012), which converted the 3.5E adventure to *Pathfinder*.

Paizo's *Pathfinder Chronicles*, *Pathfinder Player Companions*, and all the rest have continued forward throughout the *Pathfinder* era. The *Chronicles* had a clear remit of detailing Golarion one book up a time, but the *Companions* have proven more challenging, as they need to constantly offer new material that will interest players. In recent years the line has grown to include books on the religions of Golarion (2011-Present), setting *Primers* (2010-Present), and more nebulous *Handbooks* (2013-Present).

Paizo's lines of cards have probably morphed more than anything else. They now include *Face Cards* (2010-Present) and any number of crunchier cards related to gameplay. The most interesting were Paizo's *Plot Twist Cards* (2010). Over two decades previous, Lisa Stevens' first job in the gaming industry was at Lion Rampant, where she helped to work on their first product, *Whimsy Cards* (1987). Those cards distributed storytelling authority by allowing players to offer plot input, constrained by the cards that they were dealt. *Whimsy Cards* were truly ahead of their time, foreshadowing much of the work in storytelling and indie games that was to follow. Paizo's *Plot Twist Cards* were a similar product, tied to the *Pathfinder* RPG.

We've already seen that Paizo's Planet Stories line lasted until 2012, but it was wobbly by 2010. Though Erik Mona had a passion for the line's pulp content, the line had never been as successful as the company had hoped. As a result, Paizo decided to create a line that could more directly benefit them and Golarion. The

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OtherWorld Creations: 2000-2013

OtherWorld Creations, a Californian RPG publisher founded by R. Hyrum Savage and David Webb, was one of many RPG publishers that got into business thanks to the d20 boom. They kicked off publication with *Diomin* (2000), a d20 fantasy setting. This myth-heavy RPG setting – inspired in part by *RuneQuest* and Glorantha – was originally designed for use with *GURPS*. The d20 license convinced Savage and friends Chad Cunningham and Chris Miller to convert it over to d20 – and release it. As with many small companies at the time, OtherWorld was distributed through Wizard's Attic.

OtherWorld supported Diomin with a handful of publications through 2003 and then began looking into moving away from the increasingly glutted fantasy market. They purchased the rights to the old Mayfair and Pacesetter game, *Chill* (1984, 1990), and were looking into more modern uses of d20. Unfortunately the collapse of Wizard's Attic and the collapse of the d20 market hit them hard.

Production came to a halt, and the company shut down for all intents and purposes. Savage went to work for Upper Deck Entertainment in 2004. *Chill: Into the Unknown*, the third edition of the classic game, started appearing in playtest drafts through 2007, but publication of the complete book kept being put off. Other planned OtherWorld games went elsewhere. *Solid!* (2005), a blaxpoitation book based on d20 Modern, was published by Wingnut Games, while Paragon Games ended up releasing *The Secret of Zir'An* (2004) on their own.

However, Savage wasn't done with the RPG industry yet. He resurrected OtherWorld in 2006 by taking advantage of another OGL-like licensing opportunity: Mongoose's *RuneQuest* (2006). OtherWorld's new *RQ* books were largely PDFs, but they still represented new publication for a company that had previously disappeared. In 2007 OtherWorld took another step forward when Savage formed a subsidiary with Stan! Brown called Super Genius Games. The new line was tasked with publishing Chaosium-licensed *Call of Cthulhu* adventures, beginning with *Murder of Crows* (2008).

2009 saw a renaissance of the company, as Savage was able to focus much more attention on it after leaving Upper Deck. To start with, he took another stab at *Chill: Into the Unknown* by beginning a fundraising drive to publish the new rulebook – harking back to the "patron" and "ransom" methods used by other publishers at the time. The drive failed, which may result in the ultimate death of the game, but OtherWorld was already onto bigger and better things.

That September, OtherWorld also tested the *Pathfinder* waters by publishing *The Genius Guide to the Shaman* (2009), a PDF that updated one of their d20 books to

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Paizo's new rule system. The experiment worked, so OtherWorld brought on Owen K.C. Stephens as a *Pathfinder* line manager; starting in November 2009, and they published a new *Pathfinder* PDF every week, most of them grouped under the "Genius Guide" line name.

Paizo heavily promoted OtherWorld in those early days, as they were Paizo's most prolific *Pathfinder* licensee at the time. As a result of that initial support and interest, OtherWorld even compiled some of their first *Pathfinder* PDFs for print, starting with *Adventurer's Handbook: Genius Guide Volume 1* (2010). This success brought one other change: OtherWorld officially changed its name to Super Genius Game to better highlight their *Pathfinder Genius Guides*.

Super Genius faded a bit from the limelight as other notable *Pathfinder* publishers appeared, among them: former d20 publishers Dreamscarred Press and Frog God Games; Wolfgang Baur's Kobold Press; and Jason Nelson's Legendary Games. Still, Super Genius Games' weekly new releases often jumped to the top of Paizo's listings of PDF sales.

There was a bit of a resurgence starting in 2012. Super Genius successfully Kickstarted a storybook called *The Littlest Shoggoth* (2013) and acquired the rights to the *Warlords of the Apocalypse* setting for *Pathfinder* from Adamant Entertainment. They also brought in Christina Stiles to create her own line of books.

However, the story of Super Genius Games may have come to an end on November 1, 2013. On that day, both Stan! And Stephens announced they were leaving the company. They soon joined with Stiles to form a new publisher called Rogue Genius Games, which has taken over Super Genius' enormous *Pathfinder* catalogue.

resulting *Pathfinder Tales* kicked off with Dave Gross' *Prince of Wolves* (2010). Wizards of the Coast has certainly proven that novels can be every bit as successful as the games that spawned them — or perhaps more so. Sure enough, the *Pathfinder Tales* immediately did better than the Planet Stories line.

Though Paizo was putting out a *lot* of *Pathfinder* content, they also licensed third parties to create their own material. Beginning in 2009, companies that previously published d20-compatible supplements started producing *Pathfinder*-compatible supplements under Paizo's open licensing. At first these supplements were restricted to PDF books — as remaining d20 supplements tended to be — but soon publishers like 4 Winds Fantasy Gaming, Adamant Entertainment, Expeditious Retreat Press, Open Design, and OtherWorld Creations were publishing print books as well. By the end of 2009, there were probably more books being published for *Pathfinder* than for d20. By the end of 2010, *Pathfinder* third-party publications eclipsed *Dungeons & Dragons 4E* third-party publications as well.

Paizo says that by the end of 2010 they were also seeing signs that *Pathfinder* was outselling *Dungeons & Dragons*. For those of us without access to Paizo's own sales numbers, it became obvious that *Pathfinder* was locked in a back-and-forth war with *Dungeons & Dragons* by 2011, and that *Pathfinder* won by 2012. This was in part due to the collapse of Wizards of the Coast's *Dungeons & Dragons* publication in 2011 — and the announcement in 2012 that they abandoned the fourth edition line. However, that should not diminish Paizo's unprecedented accomplishment. Some unverified sources suggest that White Wolf might have bettered TSR's sales for a brief month or two in the '90s, but depending on which source you believe it's clear that *Pathfinder*'s reign as the top roleplaying game will last a *minimum* of two to four years.

In October 2011, Paizo used their new position as top dog to produce the *Pathfinder Beginner Box* (2011) a simplified version of the *Pathfinder* rules intended to be an entry to the hobby. It included a set of high-quality cardboard "pawns" that depicted monsters and characters. These pawns were quite successful, leading Paizo to create yet another product line — pawns related to their *Bestiaries* and their adventure paths. Two of their earliest releases were the *Bestiary Box* pawns (2012) and the *Rise of the Runelords Pawn Collection* (2012).

Meanwhile, a partnership with WizKids resulted in the production of pre-painted plastic miniatures. The *Pathfinder Beginner Box Heroes Miniatures Set* (2011) kicked things off. *Pathfinder Battles* (2012-Present), a series of randomized pre-painted miniatures that WizKids sells by the case, soon followed.

"We've decided to stay the course. Pathfinder is doing amazingly well, with our products selling better and better each year, and our licensing partners are helping us make it the top RPG worldwide."

– Lisa Stevens,
"Paizo Publishing's 10th Anniversary Retrospective – Year 10 (2012)," paizo.com (December 2012)



In recent years, a proliferation of *Pathfinder*-branded material that sells beyond the roleplaying hobby proves that *Pathfinder* has moved beyond being just a d20 game. Ryan Dancey's Goblinworks, a sister company to Paizo, has raised $1.3 million dollars through two Kickstarters to create a *Pathfinder Online* MMORPG; Dynamite Entertainment is publishing *Pathfinder* comics (2012-Present); and



Paizo themselves has produced the *Pathfinder Adventure Card Game* (2013-Present), which merges cooperative deckbuilding play with the *Pathfinder* mechanics.

The future of Paizo is somewhat unsettled, because no one knows how the release of *D&D Next* (2014) will affect *Pathfinder* — but when hasn't it been? For the moment, Paizo's position in the industry looks strong. By the time the '10s come to an end, it seems likely that Paizo will still be one of the top two producers of tabletop RPGs.

What to Read Next ○

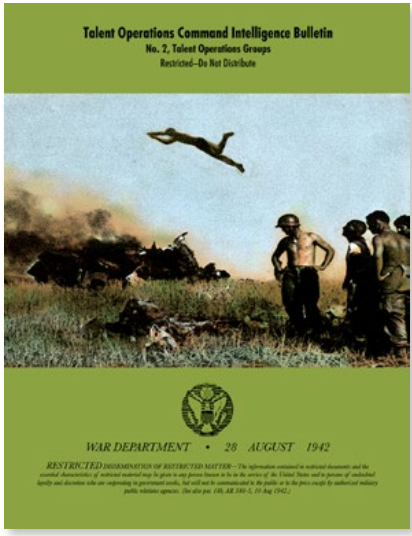
- For a different sort of narrative gameplay than adventure paths, read ***Adept Press***.
- For a company that got some *Pathfinder* publishers mainstream attention, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment***.
- For the company who carried the RPG magazine flame after the fall of *Dragon* and who is now also a *Pathfinder* publisher, read ***Kobold Press***.

In Other Eras ✕▣?

- For Lisa Steven's earliest work, including *Whimsy Cards*, read ***Lion Rampant*** *['80s]*. Then read ***White Wolf*** *['90s]* and ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]* as well.
- For the rest of the histories of *Dragon* and *Dungeon*, read ***TSR*** *['70s]* and ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For the origins of the d20 and OGL licenses, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For other adventure path-like campaigns, read about the Dragonlance and the *AD&D* "super modules" in ***TSR*** *['70s]*, about *The Travellers' Digest* in ***DGP*** *['80s]*, and about the original "adventure path" in ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For an alternative to adventure paths, read about plot point campaigns in ***Pinnacle Entertainment Group*** *['90s]*.
- For a company who less successfully pushed direct sales, read ***Columbia Games*** *['80s]*.

Or continue onward to a smaller second-generation publisher, ***Arc Dream Publishing.***

Arc Dream Publishing: 2002-Present



2003: Talent Operations Command Intelligence Bulletin No. 2: Talent Operations Groups (2003)

Though not exactly a member of the indie revolution, Arc Dream Publishing has offered up similarly innovative gaming systems in the '00s, while simultaneously supporting one of the oldest games in the industry.

Horrors and Heroes: 1991-2002

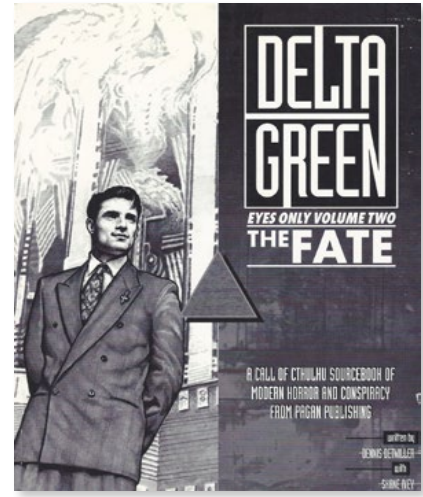
Two RPG professionals — Dennis Detwiller and Shane Ivey — formed Arc Dream Publishing in 2002. However, the tendrils of the company actually extend back 20 years earlier, and connect two past publishing companies to Arc Dream's present.

The first of those companies was Pagan Publishing — John Tynes' *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) publishing company, which dominated the game's publication in the '90s. Though neither Detwiller nor Ivey was involved with the company at its conception, they would both come to Pagan through one of its earliest releases: *The Unspeakable Oath #3* (Summer 1991). Detwiller found a copy in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and thought it a "revelation"; while Ivey found a copy in Birmingham, Alabama, and found it an "eye-catcher." This publication would eventually lead these *Call of Cthulhu* fans to Pagan's door.

Detwiller arrived first. He was a staff artist starting with *The Unspeakable Oath #7* (Fall 1992) and would eventually become the company's artistic director. He was one of four Pagan Publishing creators who moved to Seattle in 1994 to set up Pagan as a fully professional publisher — a topic covered more fully in Pagan's own history. This gave Detwiller the opportunity to contribute to Pagan's iconic *Call of Cthulhu* RPG of modern conspiratorial and alien horror, *Delta Green* (1996); he was the one that added the game's alien elements, including the Mi-Go and the Fate. He later expanded on these topics in Pagan's "Eyes Only" (1998-2000) sourcebooks for *Delta Green*.

Ivey arrived later. He started administering Pagan's *Delta Green* website in 1998 and also began playtesting and proofing for the company. He even used his background in criminal justice to write a short section called "Policing New York City" for Detwiller's *Delta Green Eyes Only Volume Two: The Fate* (1998). However, Ivey wouldn't have much more opportunity to contribute to Pagan because by that time the company was winding down: on January 1, 2001, John Tynes announced he'd be leaving the RPG industry by the end of the next year.

This left a particularly large project in limbo: Dennis Detwiller had been working with industry freelancer Greg Stolze on a new game for Pagan Publishing called "Godlike," which would have been Pagan's first original RPG. Now it needed a new home, and fortunately Detwiller had friends in Seattle willing to provide one. Enter Hawthorn Hobgoblynn Press, which was formed in early 2001 for the sole purpose of publishing Detwiller and Stolze's new game.



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EOS Press: 2001-Present

EOS Press was founded as Hawthorn Hobgoblynn Press on January 12, 2001, by financier and businessman Hsin Chen and game designer Aron Anderson – also the owner of The Dreaming, a top comic and game store located in Seattle, Washington's university district. The company was created to publish *Godlike: Superhero Roleplaying in a World on Fire, 1936-1945* (2001), a game created by Greg Stolze and Dennis Detwiller – the latter a friend of the Hobgoblynn founders. Pagan Publishing had prepared it for publication, but Pagan was winding down at the time, so Detwiller took it elsewhere. *Godlike* did well despite the unfriendliness of the d20 landscape to new RPGs, and so Hobgoblynn also published a supplement, *Will to Power* (2002).

In 2003 the principals of Hobgoblynn Press took a big step forward when they recreated the company as EOS Press. By this time Chen and Anderson had a third partner, Brad Eliott – the company's business manager, who would be its face for the next several years. They also had new investment and a new license, to *Weapons of the Gods* (1996-2005), a popular Hong Kong wuxia comic. EOS' initial press release – distributed on March 16, 2003 – stated that the new game would make use of ORE, Greg Stolze's game engine from *Godlike*. EOS licensed it as their in-house gaming engine, so *Godlike* would soon be one of many ORE games from EOS. Unfortunately, these plans were short-lived; Detwiller and Stolze soon decided to withdraw their licenses from EOS, making Detwiller's own Arc Dream Publishing company the main publisher for both *Godlike* and ORE.

This didn't set EOS back for long. Just a few months later, in September 2003, they announced a new game: Matthew Grau's *CthulhuTech*; its gaming system, Framewerk, was to be the EOS Press house system. *CthulhuTech* was literally dreamt up in Anderson's store, The Dreaming, when Grau exclaimed that no one had ever combined anime-style mechs with Cthulhu. Unfortunately, EOS decided to prioritize their licensed game, *Weapons of the Gods*, over newcomer *CthulhuTech* – leading Grau to take his game to a parade of different publishers over the next few years: Osseum Entertainment, Mongoose Publishing, Catalyst Game Labs, and Sandstorm Productions.

Meanwhile, Rebecca Sean Borgstrom (aka Jenna Moran) continued work on *Weapons of the Gods* (2005), which was eventually released as EOS' first in-house RPG, years after it was announced. The mechanics of the game had undergone an unfortunate series of changes over its years of design and development. It

Mini-History

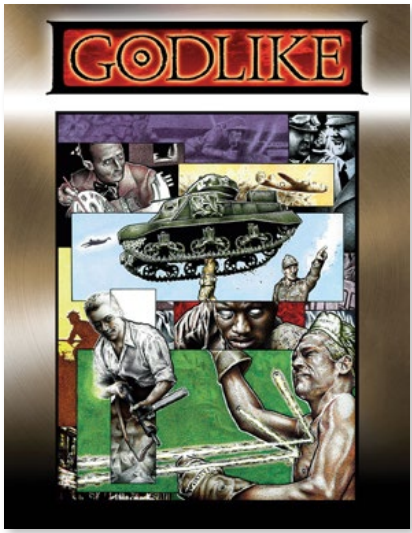
had at various times been an ORE game and a Framewerk game; the final game shows hints of the Framewerk influence, but is its own beast. *Weapons* would generally set the style for EOS' games: a well-themed game with indie stylings that was delayed for years before it finally went to press.

Over the next couple of years, EOS had several books in progress, including Pierre Kakos' *Lesser Shades of Evil* (2007), Jason Soles and Nicole Vega's *Unhallowed Metropolis* (2007), the *Weapons of the Gods Companion* (2008), and two books that they were printing for other publishers: *Delta Green* for Pagan Publishing (2007) and *Jadeclaw* for Sanguine Productions (2007). EOS several times announced that these books were just months or even weeks away, but they never appeared. Finally, in 2007 Brad Eliott admitted that "a formerly-trusted employee [was] slowing down and sabotaging our print schedule deliberately." No explanation for this sabotage was ever publically offered, but apparently the employee had been lying about the status of the books that EOS was having printed in China. When this was discovered and corrected, a deluge of books appeared in 2007 and 2008.

Toward the end of this period of serious publication, EOS announced a deal with Borgstrom to produce a new edition of her cult indie RPG, *Nobilis* – previously published by Pharos Press (1999) and Hogshead Publishing (2002). PDFs were quickly released, but after that EOS seemed back to its old tricks, as the book stalled and stalled. Brad Eliott left the company, and Chen was left as the only founder. Some wrote EOS off as dead.

In 2010, EOS reincorporated (again!), this time as EOS SAMA, with Hsin Chen and Jesse Covner now the partners behind the company. *Nobilis: The Essentials, Volume 1: Field Guide to Powers* (2011) finally appeared; it was the first book for the new third edition of Jenna Moran's indie RPG. However, as has been the case throughout EOS' multiple histories, things stalled afterward.

A new game using the wuxia rules called *Legends of the Wulin* was scheduled for 2011, but has only ever appeared in a "pre-sales" edition (2012). "Trail of the Brotherhood," a board game by *Arkham Horror* creator Richard Launius, was eventually withdrawn by the author because of EOS' failure to meet their deadlines. EOS has more recently used Kickstarter to raise $90,081 from 1,082 backers in order to publish a new diceless RPG from Jenna Moran called "Chuubo's Marvelous Wish-Granting Engine." Here they were more successful, with a PDF released on August 20, 2014. However the status of their other plans remains in question.



Hobgoblynn published *Godlike: Superhero Roleplaying in a World on Fire, 1936-1945* (2001) within the year, and followed it up with a supplement, *Will to Power* (2002), a year later. At this point, we should probably take a moment to explore the game that will (shortly) become the foundation of Arc Dream Publishing.

Godlike is a superhero game set in an alternate-history World War II. It was born of Detwiller's twin interests in superheroes and alternate histories — and also the fact that superhero RPGs were doing very badly at the time. The three classic superhero RPGs — *Champions* (1981), *Marvel Super Heroes* (1984), and *DC Heroes* (1985) — all died in the mid-to-late '90s. Even though all three RPG universes returned in different forms — as *Champions: New Millennium* (1997), *Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game* (1998), and *DC Universe* (1999) — only the DC revamp survived into the 21st century.

It seemed like a great time to launch a new superhero RPG — though Detwiller had no idea that the d20 games *Mutants & Masterminds* (2002) and *Silver Age Sentinels* (2002) were just around the corner, let alone a resurgence of the classic *Hero System* (2002).

> *"I wanted to illustrate what I believe to be a human truth: given time, man gets used to anything, whether it is a man walking on the moon or a man who can fly. … I felt Talents and their powers would be the same: amazing, but integrated over time – and at a rapid speed due to the war."*
>
> – Dennis Detwiller, Interview, examiner.com (2009)

Nonetheless, *Godlike* had a pretty open field in 2001; it got additional attention due to its good theming, its historical accuracy, its colorful setting, and surprising realism (or "grit," if you prefer). That realism came about because of the game's mixture of superheroes and warfare. It resulted in the RPG being about heroism — not about power fantasies. The "Talents" of the game could get shot and killed; their "Will" was required not just to activate their powers, but also to maintain their mental stability — a requirement for surviving the horrors of warfare. The connections to Detwiller's work on *Delta Green* and Stolze's work on *Unknown*

Armies (1999) are obvious — since they're similarly about heroic characters fighting against horrible odds, with mental stability under constant threat.

Greg Stolze contributed the mechanics to *Godlike*, though it took him three tries to get them right. The first try instead became a board game called *Meatbot Massacre* (2005), which Stolze self-published in a way that would prove surprisingly important to Arc Dream's own history. The second try was thrown out before it even got to the playtest phase. As Stolze said, the third time was the charm. This third rule system was influenced by Stolze's freelancing for White Wolf's *Storyteller* games; he called the result the One Roll Engine (ORE).

ORE is a comparative dice pool system, like the *Storyteller* system. However, it has some unique and clever crunch that helps set it apart from other dice pool games. Each roll encodes three bits of information: success (whether any of the dice matched); "height," or how well the task succeeded (the value on the matching dice); and "width," which is typically how fast it succeeded (the number of dice in the match). Hence a *one* roll engine. Beyond that, ORE was a fairly typical game design for the late '90s: mechanically clever, potentially evocative, and complex.

> *"Just as John Tynes approached me and said 'I've got this game idea that needs mechanics' and we made Unknown Armies, so too did Dennis Detwiller approach me and say the same thing for Godlike. Only his concept was 'gritty, really gritty, low powered superheroes in World War II. With extra grit.'"*
>
> – Greg Stolze, "One-Time Things," gregstolze.com (2006)

Returning now to Shane Ivey, we find that he quickly became a fan of Hobgoblynn's *Godlike*. As a result, he signed on as the web designer for Hobgoblynn, just as he had been for Pagan in years before.

Unfortunately, there were problems at Hobgoblynn that kept the company from supporting *Godlike* very well, and Detwiller quickly became frustrated with this. In 2002 he left Seattle for Vancouver, to take a job with a computer game company called Radical Entertainment. Around the same time, he said that he was giving up on tabletop RPGs.

Fortunately for fans of *Call of Cthulhu*, *Delta Green*, and *Godlike*, this decision didn't stick. In late 2002, Detwiller and Ivey started talking about alternatives, and by November they decided to create a new company that could support *Godlike* better than Hobgoblynn could. It would be called Arc Dream Publishing, named after a corporation from *Delta Green*.

Up, Up & Away: 2003-2006

When Arc Dream got started, its main intent was to support Hobgoblynn's *Godlike* — but spin-off games were planned too, with names like "Wild Talents," "Ghosts," "Teenagers+," and "Blood and Lightning." We'll return to one of those spin-offs shortly; in the meantime, the first *Godlike* supplement arrived early in the year. *Talent Operations Command Intelligence Bulletin No. 2: Talent Operations Groups* (2003) was a short sourcebook on the heroic Talents and on warfare, disguised as a training manual.

By this time, Hobgoblynn announced that they'd be working on a new game, based on the *Weapons of the Gods* (1996-2005) comic. This may have been the last straw for Detwiller; he had already created Arc Dream out of frustration over the support for *Godlike* — and now it seemed like that support would drop even more. So, he decided to have Arc Dream take over *Godlike* entirely.

The decision wasn't made lightly, but Detwiller had several years of experience as an art director, while Ivey had some experience running a company and managing freelancers. Friends at Atlas Games also offered some help early on. Arc Dream was therefore able to confidently make a deal with Hobgoblynn to buy out their stock of *Godlike* and *Will to Power* — and so Arc Dream was suddenly the sole publisher of not just *Godlike* supplements, but also *Godlike* itself.

Detwiller wasn't the only one unhappy with Hobgoblynn. Greg Stolze was too, and this was of relevance because he licensed his ORE game system to Hobgoblynn to use as a house system for several games, beginning with *Weapons of the Gods*. Because of his own problems with the company, Stolze rescinded the ORE license from Hobgoblynn. This left Stolze holding an ORE-based fantasy game he'd been working on called "Reign." It also left him with the ORE game system itself, which he decided to offer to Arc Dream. As we'll see, nothing came of either "Reign" or Arc Dream's ORE license for a few years, but they'll re-enter our narrative soon enough.

Meanwhile, Arc Dream supported *Godlike* over the next few years with an adventure called *Donar's Hammer* (2003), another *Talents Operation Command* sourcebook (2004), and eventually a full campaign, *Saipan* (2006). Greg Stolze contributed to some of the writing in 2003, but after that it was mostly Detwiller & Ivey. A number of free PDFs complemented these commercial productions, and helped to support the game.

In these early years, production was slow, as is often the case for small RPG companies. Limited capital was one of the factors impacting production, and so a *Godlike* GM Screen that had been promised in 2003 didn't appear. As Detwiller said, they were "a niche of a niche of a niche" — a fact that was made even more difficult by the financial turmoil caused by the d20 boom and bust.

If Arc Dream was to grow, a new answer was needed for financing.

Ransoms and ORE: 2005-Present



Financial issues came to a head due to work on a spin-off game called "Wild Talents." It was something that the fans had long demanded: a game that extended the *Godlike* supers game beyond the constraints of World War II. Between 2003 and 2005, Detwiller and Ivey developed it on Arc Dream's mailing lists and a Yahoo! group — in full view of their fans and with full input from them.

Pretty soon Arc Dream's work on Wild Talents generated a spin-off fan project: *Star ORE* (2005), a free "microgame" by Shane Ivey that was based on the concepts of *Star Wars* (1977-Present) and used the Wild Talents gaming system.

Unfortunately, as they approached publication of Wild Talents, Ivey and Detwiller realized that they didn't have the money to produce it. To that point, all of Arc Dream's products had been small, saddle-stitched books; the more expensive *Godlike* and *Will to Power* rules instead were published by Hobgoblynn. Arc Dream just didn't have the cash flow to publish a 300+ page full-color hardcover book, and they didn't appear to have a way to bootstrap themselves up.

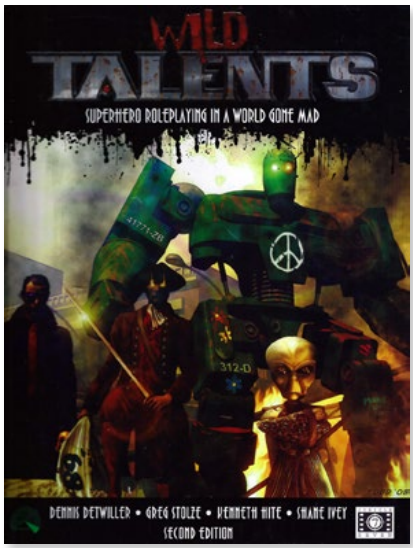
It was Greg Stolze who offered a solution and it was thanks to *Meatbot Massacre* — the tactical board game by Greg Stolze and Daniel Solis that had grown out of *Godlike*; ironically, it would now trailblaze the path for *Godlike*'s next iteration. Stolze had released *Meatbot Massacre* using what he called the "ransom method": he asked fans for money and when enough cash was committed, he released the game as a free download. Not only did this resolve issues of payment for the creators, but it also made 21st century digital piracy utterly irrelevant. Stolze would use the same model a few years later to self-publish his ORE-based fantasy RPG, *Reign* (2007), along with many supplements.

The idea was clearly in the air — and perhaps a necessity due to the weakening of the RPG industry caused by CCGs and MMORPGs from the '90s onward. Issaries Inc. may have been the first major publisher to offer fans the opportunity to invest directly in creators, through their original plans for incorporation in the late '90s. Meanwhile, Wolfgang Baur started playing with the idea of "patronage" in March 2006 — and even won a Diana Jones award for the concept.

Arc Dream got a taste of Greg Stolze's ransom model in February 2006 when Detwiller and Stolze successfully ransomed *NEMESIS* (2006). This "Dark ORE" game combined the One Roll Engine from *Wild Talents* with Stolze's "Madness Meter" from *Unknown Armies*. It was intended to recreate the atmosphere of stories by Ambrose Bierce, William Peter Blatty, Stephen King, Brian Lumley, and (of course) H.P. Lovecraft. It could even be used to run *Delta Green* adventures — proving that Detwiller hadn't traveled far from his *Call of Cthulhu* roots. Following the successful ransom, *NEMESIS* was released as a PDF. Like *Meatbot Massacre* and *Reign*, it remains freely available online to this day.

However, Stolze's model wasn't a perfect fit for Arc Dream proper, because they weren't publishing PDFs, but instead print books, so they needed to adjust how ransoms worked. Instead of asking for contributions, Arc Dream would request preorders when they "ransomed" a book. If they got enough, they'd process the preorders and actually print the book. Arc Dream successfully ransomed their long-delayed *Godlike Game Moderator's Screen* starting in January 2006, clearing their preorder demands in just four weeks. The question was: could they be as successful with the larger, more expensive *Wild Talents* book?

As it happens, *Wild Talents* (2006) was rather uniquely suited for ransoming because it was already a fan favorite, even before publication. That was because fans requested the book in the first place, and Detwiller and Stolze then worked on the game publically — giving the fans lots of opportunity for real input. When Arc Dream made their ransom for *Wild Talents* in June 2006, they figured that they needed a few hundred pre-orders to print 1,000 copies of the book. It took just 36 hours to get them. A few months after the December 2006 release of *Wild Talents*, fans were crying out for a new printing, because that first run of 1,000 was gone.



"Well, it began with 'We love GODLIKE, but we want more…' and it ended with a 300+ page hardcover full color book."

– Dennis Detwiller, Interview, examiner.com (2009)

Wild Talents was a polished version of the *Godlike* rules that made the mechanics more flexible and applicable to more settings. Though the book updated the *Godlike* timeline to bring it from World War II into the present, it

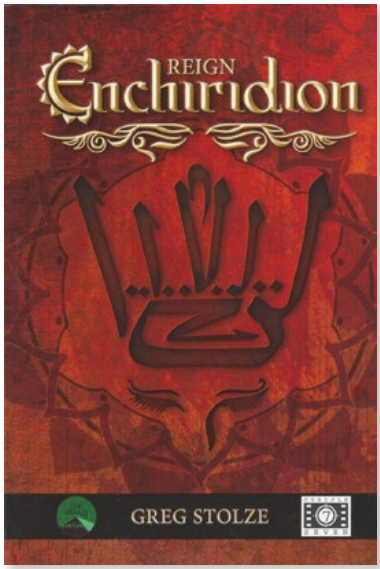
also gave GMs the opportunity to create new worlds. This was thanks to a chapter by Kenneth Hite, which distilled superhero settings into a set of four "axes," which could be modified to create completely different worlds of adventures: the red axis measured historical inertia, or how much the Talents could change the world; the gold axis detailed Talent inertia, or how much the heroes changed; the blue axis represented how wacky the game's cosmic and weird elements were; and the black axis revealed how "black & white" the setting was. The idea was one of the best-received elements of the book, and also one that suggested the future of Arc Dream as a creator of *many* superhero settings.

For several years, beginning in 2007, *Godlike* production died out at Arc Dream. That was in part because they were publishing new settings for *Wild Talents*. *Monsters and other Childish Things* (2007, 2008) was the first. It first appeared when Shane Ivey saw Benjamin Baugh talking about a sort of Cthulhoid *Calvin & Hobbes* on RPGnet, and suggested that he write up his idea as a 16-page PDF supplement for *Wild Talents*. Ivey liked the results, so he then asked for a 64-page treatment, and he liked that too, so *Monsters and other Childish Things* became Arc Dream's third game. It was well-received and well-supported (2007-2010).



Most of the other *Wild Talents* spin-offs were published as supplements rather than full games. This included Hite & Stolze's modern-day *Grim War* (2009), Baugh's Victorian *Kerberos Club* (2009), and Allan Goodall's Civil War-focused *This Favored Land* (2009). Arc Dream also translated *The Kerberos Club* to the *Savage Worlds* (2010) and *Fate* (2011) game systems, making it the most accessible product they've ever produced — though the company hasn't chosen to repeat this experiment for any other releases.

> *"Everything Arc Dream did was informed at some level by The Unspeakable Oath. Godlike and Wild Talents are about the nature and risks of heroism, not just the glory of superpowers. Monsters and Other Childish Things features ordinary kids with ferocious, often downright Lovecraftian monsters as their friends and protectors …"*
>
> – Shane Ivey, "The Dread Page of Azathoth,"
> The Unspeakable Oath #18 (December 2010)



In 2010, Arc Dream saw two big changes.

First, Greg Stolze became more involved in the company. As a result, Arc Dream began publishing new ORE games by Stolze, like the noir RPG *A Dirty World* (2010) and the fantasy-based *Reign Enchiridion* (2010) — a distillation of some of Stolze's online *Reign* material. Stolze also helped to revamp *Wild Talents* for its second edition (2010) and contributed his own *Progenitor* setting (2010) to the game; it detailed an alternate 20th century where a single hero was spreading super powers.

Second, Arc Dream linked up with Cubicle 7, who for a short time printed and distributed products for them. This resulted in books like *A Dirty World*, *Reign Enchiridion*, and the updated *Wild Talents* being distributed to a larger audience. However, the alliance didn't last long.

Throughout this period, Arc Dream continued to ransom products when they needed to. Then, beginning with *Reign Enchiridion*, they became one of the first RPG companies to use Kickstarter — which was pretty much a mass-market version of the ideas Arc Dream had been using for almost four years. Since 2009, Arc Dream has ransomed one or two of their biggest products through Kickstarter each year.

In recent years, ORE production at Arc Dream has dropped from its height of 2008-2010 — in part due to their work on yet *another* line that we're fast approaching. Though they haven't been publishing anything new for *Wild Talents* or *Monsters*, Arc Dream did return to their premiere game, *Godlike*, publishing the *Black Devils Brigade* (2011) campaign and a new revised edition of the rules (2012); the latter product was the result of a Kickstarter to produce a PDF of *Godlike*, which hadn't previously been possible due to the game's origin at Hobgoblynn.

Arc Dream's focus lies in a more horrific direction nowadays, but they certainly haven't left ORE behind — as proven most recently by their successful Kickstarter for Greg Stolze's *Better Angels* (2013), a new superhero RPG that focuses on characters of a more villainous nature.

Horrific Expansions: 2007-Present

Though Arc Dream has been successful with *Godlike* and *Wild Talents* over the years, Dennis Detwiller never entirely abandoned his earlier interest in the Cthulhu Mythos. For a while, that interest was segregated: while Detwiller was

writing heroic material for Arc Dream, he was also writing horror fiction for Armitage House, the fiction publishing arm of Pagan Publishing.

Detwiller's professional fiction writing has always been focused on *Delta Green*. It started when he wrote "Drowning in Sand" for Armitage's *Alien Intelligence* (1997) anthology. In his *Godlike* days he also contributed "Night and Water" to Armitage's *Dark Theatres* (2001) anthology and (more notably) penned his first novel, *Denied to the Enemy* (2004).

After that, a transition period came when Arc Dream prepared two *Delta Green* roleplaying supplements for publication by Pagan Publishing. The first was *Delta Green: Eyes Only* (2007), a compilation of Detwiller's three "Eyes Only" chapbooks. They'd previously been sold direct-only, to avoid Chaosium's high licensing fees, so this was the mass market's first chance to see them.

"We suffered under the yoke of a very difficult licensing agreement from Chaosium – it cost in the order of $1000 in licensing fees to release a single book."

– Dennis Detwiller, Interview, fullmoon-mag.gr (2003)

Arc Dream's publication of the new *Eyes Only* was contemporary with a new edition of *Delta Green* (2007) produced by EOS Press and Pagan, and so represented a large-scale revival of the property. Arc Dream followed up a few years later with *Delta Green: Targets of Opportunity* (2010), by Dennis Detwiller, Shane Ivey, Adam Scott Glancy, and a few others. Like its predecessor it was prepared by Arc Dream for publication by Pagan. It was also the first new roleplaying material for *Delta Green* in over a decade.

Following the successful creation of those two *Delta Green* sourcebooks, Arc Dream decided to leap more directly into Cthulhu publication. To do so, they acquired a license from Pagan to publish their Cthulhu magazine, *The Unspeakable Oath*. Arc Dream began publication with issue #18 (December 2010). They've since averaged a couple of issues of the *Oath* every year.

Arc Dream has also found the time to publish a few other Cthulhoid publications, including: *Through a Glass, Darkly* (2011), the second *Delta Green* novel by Detwiller; *Strange Authorities* (2012), a *Delta Green* anthology with some reprinted stories; and *The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man* (2013), a new *Call of Cthulhu* campaign by Detwiller that's set in the Dreamlands.

As usual, "ransoms" through Kickstarter have supported many of these publications. As of this writing, Arc Dream has seven Kickstarters under their belt. Although their backer numbers aren't as large as seen by some in the industry, Arc Dream always raises as much as they need. Their last four Kickstarter campaigns have shown a notable growth beyond their goals, which bodes well for the future.

Date	Product	Line	Goal	Raised	Backers
12/18/09	*Reign Enchiridion*	ORE	$5,400	$6,893	246
1/15/10	*Bigger Bads*	Monsters	$7,500	$8,395	152
6/19/11	*Through a Glass, Darkly*	Delta Green	$26,000	$27,032	346
7/20/11	*Godlike PDF*	Godlike	$3,000	$3,502	156
4/30/12	*The Sense of the Sleight of Hand Man*	Cthulhu	$5,500	$14,494	403
8/26/12	*Better Angels*	ORE	$5,000	$21,593	639
3/11/14	*Tales from Failed Anatomies*	Delta Green	$3,000	$30,776	1,085
8/22/14	*Better Angels: No Soul Left Behind*	ORE	$6,666	$13,283	376

It's quite possible that Arc Dream's upcoming 2015 Kickstarter may be their best ever, as they're planning to take *Delta Green* away from its roots as a *Call of Cthulhu* supplement by producing "Delta Green: The Roleplaying Game." The design team of Detwiller, Glancy, Hite, Ivey, and Stolze includes many of Pagan's and Arc Dream's all-stars and suggests that the future is bright both for Arc Dream and for *Delta Green* — a line that many had thought dead a decade previous when Pagan Publishing closed down.

As the old gentleman of Providence said: "That Is Not Dead Which Can Eternal Lie ..."

What to Read Next ○

- For *Mutants & Masterminds*, a superhero RPG that appeared around the same time as *Godlike*, and succeeded, read ***Green Ronin.***
- For an early attempt to get fans to invest in creators, read ***Issaries***.
- For the "patronage" model, read ***Kobold Press***.
- For another RPG that gained a fan following through its creation in the public eye, read about *Orkworld* from ***John Wick Presents.***
- For Arc Dream's temporary partner in publishing, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment***.

In Other Eras ✕ ?

- For more on the first RPG company that Detwiller and Ivey worked for, read ***Pagan Publishing*** *['90s]*.
- For the creators of *Call of Cthulhu*, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For *Silver Age Sentinels*, a superhero RPG that appeared around the same time as *Godlike*, but failed, read ***Guardians of Order*** *['90s]*.
- For *Unknown Armies*, a previous RPG by Greg Stolze and the progenitor of *NEMESIS*, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.

Or return to the world of indie games with the creator of IPR, ***Galileo Games***.



Part Six:

The Indie Revolution

(2003–2006)

The indie community grew from that seed that was planted in 2001 at the Forge and within the pages of the earliest indie games like *Sorcerer* (2001) and *Universalis* (2002). By the mid-'00s it was ready to burst forth.

Much of this growth is seen in the appearance of new ***indie publishers*** like Atomic Sock Monkey, Bully Pulpit Games, Evil Hat Productions, and Wicked Dead Brewing Company (later: John Wick Presents). Some of these new indie publishers would see success far beyond the first generation of indie companies: Bully Pulpit's *Fiasco* (2009) and Evil Hat's *Dresden Files* (2010) and *Fate Core* (2013) would all end up selling into the roleplaying mainstream — though only as the '00s came to an end.

Meanwhile, the d20 boom turned into a d20 bust following the release of *D&D 3.5* (2003) and the general oversaturation of the d20 market. This resulted in some ***d20 publishers*** being subsumed into the indie community. Open World Press and Galileo Games both started off the '00s publishing d20 books, yet soon moved over to the indie world. Similarly, Lame Mage Productions went from *Mutants & Masterminds* (2002) to innovative story games.

Other sorts of independent publishers also appeared in the mid-'00s amid the general cooling of the d20 market. Archaia Studios and Morrigan Press are both small publishers that were able to publish non-d20 games — though they didn't publish the narrativist games now normally associated with the indie community.

The growth of the indie community in the mid-'00s can also be seen in the appearance of an ***indie infrastructure*** to support it — including online indie retailer IPR and indie distributor Key 20. These companies happily supported independent publishers of *all* sorts.

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Open World Press	*2003-2007*	*The Hamlet of Thumble (2003)*	250
Galileo Games	1996-Present	*The Legend of Yore* (1996) *Bulldogs!* (2004)	245
Morrigan Press	*2004-2008*	*d20 Crime: The American Mafia (2004)*	110
Atomic Sock Monkey	2003-Present	*Dead Inside* (2004)	260
John Wick Presents	2003-Present	*Enemy Gods* (2004)	267
Indie Press Revolution	*2004-Present*	*N/A*	249
Archaia Studios Press	*2002-2013*	*Artesia:* *Adventures in the Known World (2005)*	198
Lame Mage Productions	*2005-Present*	*Zodiac Ring (2005)*	307
Bully Pulpit Games	2005-Present	*The Shab-al-Hiri Roach* (2006)	288
Evil Hat Productions	2001-Present	*Don't Rest Your Head* (2006)	309

Galileo Games: 1996–Present

Galileo Games is a small press publisher who has already had a big effect on the industry thanks to the indie revolution that it helped to kick off.

Days of Yore: 1996-2005

The story of Galileo Games is primarily that of its founder, Brennan Taylor. His roleplaying experience began in the fifth grade with Tom Moldvay's *Basic Dungeons & Dragons* (1981). Then in high school he discovered other games — among them ICE's *MERP* (1984), Chaosium's *RuneQuest* (1978), and GW's *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (1986).



1996: The Legend of Yore

Meanwhile, Taylor was also becoming interested in the design side of gaming. At the age of 16, while bored on a long car trip, he began working on his own FRP; he originally called it "Archers & Alchemists," but it later became "The Legend of Yore." It was a career-based FRP with life paths and one-roll combat. His friends enjoyed it, so he ran it for them for years.

By 1992, Taylor was studying at Colorado State University; his friends here said that he should publish "The Legend of Yore," and he decided to give it a shot. Taylor created a company and sold shares to friends and family. He was then able to produce his RPG on a budget — with assistance from cheap artwork, free editing, and free desktop publishing. Much of this was thanks to support from his friends, including: art director Krista White; editor C. Austin Hogan; and webmaster A.J. Hernandez.

Taylor printed 1,000 copies of *The Legend of Yore* (1996); the back cover of each book proudly announced it was a "Visionary Game Design." The name Galileo Games, however, was used on Taylor's website, and that was the name that would stick.

Taylor was able to get *The Legend of Yore* into distribution. He even planned to sell it at Gen Con '96. An unfortunate flood damaged much of his stock, but he didn't let that get in the way: he sold lightly damaged copies on the cheap at Gen Con for just $5 each, and they sold well.

Unfortunately, that was the limit of *The Legend of Yore*'s success — and Taylor largely attributes it to the low price of those flood-damaged books. When Taylor returned to the 1997 Gen Con Game Fair, his sales were much worse. Meanwhile, the sales of the game through distribution and local hobby stores dropped year by year; one of Taylor's distributors even began to report that Galileo was out of business. Taylor produced 900 copies of a supplement, the *Screen of the Gods* (1997), but it wasn't enough to shore up the game.

> *"One thing I absolutely do not regret … was ignoring the advice not to publish it at all and just play it with my friends."*
>
> – Brennan Taylor, "The Legend of Yore: A Fantasy Heartbreaker Story," When is a Raven Like a Writing Desk? (December 2005)

By 2005, sales were entirely dead, and Taylor pulped the remaining 300 copies of *The Legend of Yore*, which were "dried out and falling apart" anyway.

The Legend of Yore failed in part because it was a "fantasy heartbreaker" — or if you prefer to use Taylor's definition, it was an "answer to *D&D*." Though he had experience with more games than most heartbreaker authors, Taylor was still treading much of the same ground. He was trying to publish a FRP with systems that innovated it beyond *D&D*, but not necessarily beyond the rest of the industry, and doing so on a shoestring budget. This methodology worked in the '70s and even the early '80s — as games like *The Arduin Trilogy* (1977-1978) and *Thieves' Guild* (1980-1984) attest. However by the late '80s and the '90s, it wasn't enough to get a new FRP off the ground.

Despite the commercial failure of *The Legend of Yore*, Taylor doesn't today consider it a waste. He says that he learned a lot about game design while simultaneously creating a fun fantasy setting — one that he's considered revising and rereleasing as recently as 2007. Beyond that, he learned a lot about the hobbyist industry: that he should set lower expectations for game sales and that the distribution system was flawed for the small press.

All of these lessons would prove vitally important when Taylor began digging into game design again, several years after the initial failure of *The Legend of Yore*.

Dogged Determination: 2001-2008

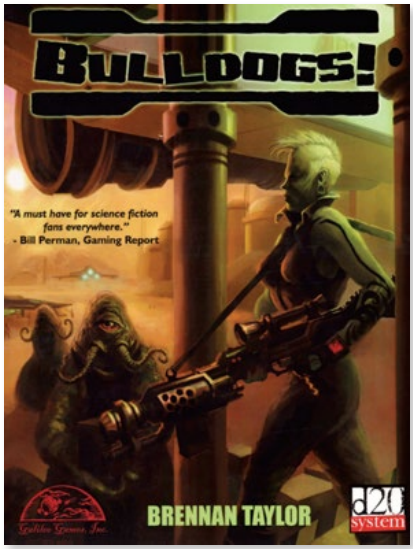
The early story of Galileo Games could be that of many heartbreaker publishers of the '90s who have not been detailed in these histories. Shield Games (1990-1992), Non Sequitur Productions (1991), and the publishers of *The World of Synnibarr* (1991, 1993) came and went without making much of an impression.

Galileo Games themselves *did* largely go on hiatus from 1997-2002, following the publication of *The Legend of Yore*. Their website stayed live and Taylor sold *The Legend of Yore* as he could, but there was no new production. Then, starting in 2002, Galileo Games completely reinvented itself. In many ways, Galileo became an entirely *new* company, publishing new material — not just another heartbreaker. It's this new company that this history is really about (which is why Galileo is placed here, instead of in a previous volume with the publishers of the '90s).

This revolution began in 2001 when Taylor met Vincent Baker at a convention and learned about the Forge. At the time, the Forge was focused as much on independent production as on narrativist games, and that was probably what encouraged Taylor to give publication another try: he saw a way that he could publish a very small quantity of books and *not* lose money.

By mid-2002, the result showed up on the Galileo website: Taylor started to advertise two new games: "Bulldogs!," a d20 space opera RPG; and "The Darklands," a modern fantasy RPG where players could play anything, "from fallen angels to faerie kings to mortal magicians." The latter was to be built with Galileo's "house system" — drawn from *The Legend of Yore*. By 2004, The Darklands was still in development, but it was now a diceless RPG called "Mortal Coil" that we'll return to down the road. For now we're going to focus on Taylor's first new product in almost a decade: *Bulldogs!* (2004).

Bulldogs! was released in April 2004 as a 216-page d20 RPG. Very few games used the OGL at the time, so it's unsurprising that Taylor stayed with the d20 trademark license. This decision meant that his science-fiction game included *D&D* classes like fighters and rogues — but there were also a lot of new ones too,



such as the bounty hunter, the engineer, the gunner, the medic, the space pilot, and the space pirate.

2004 wasn't a great time to release a d20-based science-fiction roleplaying game. The d20 market was already crashing following the release of D&D 3.5 (2003). In addition, the d20 science-fiction market was saturated with games like *Babylon 5* (2003), *Farscape* (2002), *Star Wars* (2000, 2002), *Traveller20* (2002), and many more. Despite this, *Bulldogs!* got some attention and kudos. This was in part because it featured a fun, Cold War-like setting that reminded many people of classic space opera; more than one reviewer compared it favorably to *Star Frontiers* (1982). It was also because Taylor spent good attention on his game systems. There were extensive starship rules, and players could even create their own alien races. It had what players wanted in a SFRPG, all in a relatively small package.

> *"I published Bulldogs! … and although I didn't lose money on that, it wasn't a great success either."*
>
> – Brennan Taylor, Interview, See Page XX (October 2008)

Given his lower expectations for sales, Taylor printed just 200 copies of *Bulldogs!*. He sold out in three years and then produced 200 copies of a revised edition (2007). Meanwhile, he also did away with distributors thanks to lessons learned from *The Legend of Yore*. Instead he sold direct to customers — an idea from the Forge that Taylor would soon expand upon.

Over the next few years, Galileo produced three supplements for *Bulldogs!*: *Bulldogs! Races* (2005), *Bulldogs! Robots* (2006), and *Bulldogs! Psionics* (2008). They were all PDF-only, showing the game's relatively small footprint.

Though Taylor wrote and produced *Races* himself, the same wasn't true for the other two *Bulldogs!* books. *Robots* was co-published with Silven Publishing. They also planned to publish *Bulldogs! Psionics* and a never-seen book called *Bulldogs! Unleashed* but never did because they were going out business. As a result, *Psionics* was published by Galileo, but it wasn't written by Brennan Taylor. Instead it was authored by Brian Engard — who we'll meet again in a few more years.

One might wonder why Galileo decided to have Silven publish *Robots* rather than doing it themselves. There was a good reason: by 2006, Taylor was extremely busy with a second company — one that would have a profound effect on almost every indie publisher of roleplaying games.

The Indie Revolution: 2004-Present

Taylor was far from the first small publisher to have problems with distribution. Unfortunately, many distributors don't want to work with small companies because it costs them too much time (and money) to do so. This problem reached a fever pitch in the early '00s because of the advent of the d20 trademark license; suddenly there were hundreds of very small publishers producing d20 material.

To serve this need, several new companies appeared, calling themselves "consolidators" or "fulfillment houses," as is detailed in the mini-history of Wizard's Attic. The most notable consolidators of the d20 boom were Fast Forward Entertainment, Osseum Entertainment, and Wizard's Attic. Unfortunately, things didn't work out very well for any of these companies, in large part due to the d20 bust. Wizard's Attic was gone by the end of 2003, Osseum crashed in 2005, and Fast Forward disappeared around the same time. As early as 2004, there was new opportunity in this field, if someone could make a fulfillment model work.

Meanwhile, the indie field that grew out of the Forge wasn't (for the most part) using these fulfillment houses. Instead, these indie companies used a different model: they sold directly to customers at cons and through their websites. Sometimes they advertised for each other in the backs of their publications, in order to try and raise awareness, but it was a minimal attempt at cross-sell. Clearly, there was an opportunity here as well.

Which brings us back to Brennan Taylor. In March 2004, just before he started selling *Bulldogs!*, he chanced to meet another publisher named Ed Cha at the I-Con convention in Long Island. Cha ran Open World Press, the producer of two well-received old-school d20 adventures, *1A: The Hamlet of Thumble* (2003) and *1B: The Village of Oester* (2004). Unfortunately, the d20 bust was making it hard for Cha to sell these well-received, award-winning adventures through distribution, and he wasn't a member of the Forge, so he didn't know about independent alternatives. He was intrigued by Taylor's ideas of direct-selling short print runs.

Though Cha's initial goal was to sell his own products more profitably, he soon began thinking larger: he imagined several small companies getting together and jointly selling their products direct to consumers. Cha and Taylor brainstormed the idea further; the result was a new company called Indie Press Revolution (IPR), which Cha and Taylor formed in 2004 with Taylor as the majority stockholder.

Mini-History

Open World Press: 2003-2007

Open World Press was a small New York-based d20 publishing house founded by Ed Cha. Though Cha got into the d20 publishing field quite late, he was able to partner with Mystic Eye Games – a veteran of the d20 field years whose work dated back to their publication of *The Pits of Loch-Durnan* (2001).

Open World was one of Mystic Eye's several "imprint partners" – a group that also included Ambient, Natural 20 Press, Thunderhead Games, and Vigilance Press. Using the model premiered by White Wolf's Sword & Sorcery imprint, Mystic Eye helped these smaller publishers to get their books to print. Now, Open World could take advantage of that expertise.

Open World's first publication with Mystic Eye, Ed Cha's *1A: The Hamlet of Thumble* (2003), appeared just in time for Gen Con Indy 2003. It was followed in January 2004 by *1B: The Village of Oester* (2004), also by Ed Cha. Though most would have classified these books as adventures, Open World instead called them "adventure settings," which it defined as "a mini-campaign setting which includes an adventure and several side encounters."

The adventure settings were quite well-received – for their setting details, for the hints they gave of the "World of Whitethorn," for their intricately defined NPCs, and for their morally complex adventures. The World of Whitethorn trade dress probably helped, as it mimicked old-school *AD&D* trade dress – just when Goodman Games was experimenting with the same old-school nostalgia.

The purpose of IPR was to offer an alternative to the consolidators that were then on their way out of business and to make it easier for small publishers to get their games to the public. IPR would warehouse games from small publishers on consignment and then would offer them for "direct sales first" through an online store; at the time, there was no plan to involve retailers at all.

Unlike many of the consolidators then in the market, IPR intended to be very picky. Though "disintermediation" had connected up customers and publishers on the internet, those customers had to dig through piles of "slush" in order to find the good games. IPR wanted to help customers with this problem, so membership was invite-only — ensuring that IPR was only selling the best of the best. The first four publishers selected for IPR were: Blue Devil Games, Bob Goat Press, Galileo Games, and Open World Press. By the site's "official" opening in December, three more companies had been added: Adept Press, Anvilwerks, and NerdNYC (also known as SloeBrownWolf).

Mini-History

Following the production of *The Village of Oester*, Cha immediately began talking about Open World's next product: "1C: The City of Calas." It would have continued Open World's climb upward, as Cha provided intricate details of increasingly large urban areas. Cha said it would be "the most complete city book ever published." But a full year went by with nothing appearing.

By the end of the 2004, Cha moved and began work at a new job. He also started a new venture with Brennan Taylor of Galileo Games: Indie Press Revolution, a direct-to-consumers seller of independently produced games. All of this took a toll on Cha's free time.

With IPR now available as a seller of Open World's games, Cha ended his partnership with Mystic Eye and announced that The City of Calas would be Open World's first truly independent book. He was expecting to publish it as a handsome hardcover.

Unfortunately, The City of Calas never appeared. One source suggests that Cha had it mostly completed, but became discouraged by the publication of *World's Largest City* (2006) by AEG and *Ptolus: City by the Spire* (2006) by Malhavoc Press. The d20 market was, of course, plummeting as well.

Whatever the reason, Cha decided to exit the RPG industry. He stepped down as chairman of IPR in September 2006. Several months later, the Open World Press website disappeared. Cha has since moved to South Korea, well away from the tabletop roleplaying industry he briefly contributed to.

The initial composition of IPR's member companies is interesting because it doesn't match most peoples' conception of what IPR is. Three of the publishers were d20 companies. That's all Open World ever published, while Galileo Games was at the time known for *Bulldogs!*; similarly Blue Devil Games just kicked off their d20 production with *Poisoncraft* (2004). Another three were what were called "Forge" publishers: Adept Press, the publisher of *Sorcerer* (2001); Anvilwerks, the publisher of *The Shadow of Yesterday* (2004); and Bob Goat Press, the publisher of *Conspiracy of Shadows* (2004). NerdNYC was a t-shirt producer, which meant that IPR was evenly split between d20 and the Forge.

Today, we think of IPR as being the heart of the "indie" movement that grew out of the Forge. We think of it as being a seller of rules-light narrativist games that are outside of the RPG mainstream. However, that wasn't IPR's purpose. It was simply trying to give independent publishers of *any* sort a place to sell their games. In the years since IPR's foundation, d20 games have faded away and the narrativist games of the Forge have hit the mainstream; within a few years IPR was *de facto* the seller of narrativist "indie" games, but it wasn't a purposeful choice.

"Once everyone takes their share, there is virtually nothing left for the creator. You can even find yourself losing money on each book you sell through traditional distribution. By banding together as indie publishers, we can cut a lot of overhead costs."

– Brennan Taylor, Interview,
The Silven Trumpeter #17 (December 2004/January 2005)

IPR quickly grew from its small beginning. Timfire Publishing, the creator of the groundbreaking *The Mountain Witch* (2005), joined next; then Muse of Fire Games and d20 publishers Bad Axe Games and The Inner Circle signed on. Goldleaf Games, Twisted Confessions, Contested Ground Studios, Cold Blooded Games, Spartans Unleashed, TAO Games, Burning Wheel, and Incarnadine Press followed. By the end of 2005, IPR had almost 20 publishers aboard, and they'd be nearing 40 a year later.

The cross-selling of products from multiple publishers helped sales to rise quickly as well, so in March 2005 Taylor and Cha took on some small external investors to help grow the company. Part of that growth involved a retailer outreach program: IPR was soon selling not just to customers, but to retail stores as well. This was all *great* news for the indie publishers that IPR was representing. Between 2005 and 2010 indie publishers and their narrativist ideas became an important element of the larger roleplaying industry and in large part thanks to IPR.

You could also measure IPR's growth through its con presence. At Origins '05 they were borrowing booth space from Key 20, and at Gen Con Indy 2005 they were hosted by Blue Devil. However just a year later, IPR was in the thick of things. They had their own booth at Origins '06, and then at Gen Con Indy 2006 they were one of the primary sponsors of the Forge booth — alongside Adept Press, Burning Wheel, Lumpley Games, and Timfire Publishing.

IPR brought something new to the Forge booth in 2006: credit card processing. It hadn't previously been available to the small publishers at the Forge, but IPR was an entirely different sort of business. IPR got a 10% fee on these transactions, and Taylor figured this would help him break even on his booth costs if the publishers sold well. Instead, the Forge sold *great* thanks to part to its new credit card capability; the booth had grossed $20,000 in sales in 2005, increasing to $33,000 in 2006.

In 2006, IPR also experienced what could have been a setback. On September 21, Ed Cha resigned as chairman of the company. However, it was Taylor who had been doing the day-to-day warehousing and the twice-weekly shipping for the company, so Cha's departure was a minor bump in the company's upward swing.

A month later, on October 24, Taylor proved that he was keeping up with the latest trends and advances available to independent publishers. At the suggestion of Paul Tevis — the host of the *Have Games, Will Travel* podcast (2005-2010) — Taylor started a new podcast called *The Voice of the Revolution* (2006-2012) with Tevis as his cohost. Over the next five years, it highlighted the products sold by IPR through interviews, news, and reviews. If the Forge was the crucible of the indie revolution, and if IPR was its marketplace, then *The Voice of the Revolution* was exactly what its name suggested — a clarion call, resounding across the electronic airways in 62 episodes from October 2006 to February 2012. Brennan Taylor was the constant throughout the podcast's run; after Paul Tevis stepped down, he was replaced first by Ryan Macklin, then by Rich Rogers.

By 2007, IPR had more than 70 member publishers, and it had become more than Taylor could handle on his own. In addition, IPR was increasingly impacting Taylor's time to do the creative work he really wanted to do — as we've already seen through Galileo's decision to license *Bulldogs!* out to Silven Publishing.

To assist with the workload, Taylor brought on Fred Hicks in 2007 to do customer service. Hicks also helped to streamline the business, which would allow Taylor to put a little more work into Galileo beginning in 2008. DOJ, Inc. — the modern-day incarnation of Hero Games — took over IPR's warehousing and shipping that August. A year later, in September 2009, Taylor brought on Ryan Macklin as the general manager of IPR.

> *"I am super happy to be getting back into more game design, which is what I wanted to be doing in the first place."*
>
> – Brennan Taylor, "IPR and My Game Design," bar-sinister.livejournal.com (October 2009)

Taylor described the new staff at IPR as "a massive relief." So it was no surprise when Taylor and Hero Games announced on June 17, 2010, that DOJ, Inc. had purchased a majority share in IPR. It was an entirely amicable takeover; Taylor was still a minority stockholder and a client of the company he created, but now he passed the torch, so that his burnout didn't impact the 100+ clients who were benefiting from IPR's services.

For a while afterward, IPR was run by Darren Watts and Jason Walters of Hero Games, but since November 2011, Walters alone has been the driving force behind IPR. The company continues to sell independent RPGs to consumers and to retailers.

Taylor's last major work with IPR was at Gen Con Indy 2010. He described the IPR booth that year as "a great success." This was in large part thanks to *The Dresden*

Files Roleplaying Game (2010) published by Evil Hat — and IPR's former customer service guy, Fred Hicks. IPR sold over 200 copies of the core book, which probably means it grossed about $10,000 on its own. The indie publishers that Taylor had been working with for six years had now moved into the RPG mainstream.

And that's how the indie revolution was won.

Indie Production: 2006-2010

We're now ready to return to Galileo Games' RPG production, already in progress. When we left, toward the start of 2004, Galileo published *Bulldogs!* and *Bulldogs! Races*, but then their production tailed off. In fact, Galileo would publish only one more game (in two forms) between 2006 and 2009 — plus a few minor releases including *Bulldogs! Psionics*. Only in 2010, when Taylor was on his way out at IPR, did his game production start to recover.

We've already seen hints of Galileo's one game of the late '00s: Taylor was calling it "The Darklands" on the Galileo Games website in 2002. It was a game with a *very* long history. Its design had begun in the '90s, when one of the players in Taylor's gaming group refused to play any more *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991). In response Taylor converted over his "Legend Of Yore" system, the players converted over their *Vampire* characters, and they were off to the races. Taylor's group played The Darklands for the next decade or so; along the way Taylor created *many* more playable races, including angels, fairies, sorcerers, and werewolves. That was the state of The Darklands around 2003, before the game began to evolve.

First, Taylor changed the name, to avoid confusion with *Darklands* (1992) — an older DOS game that remained popular. His new name, "Mortal Coil," borrowed from the Bard himself.



Second, Taylor dramatically revamped the game system — throwing out over a decade's worth of design. This was the result of Taylor's purchase of a copy of *Dust Devils* (2002), based on reviews at the Forge. After reading it, Taylor became a fan of Forge games — and Mortal Coil became an indie design, influenced by Forge releases like *Dogs in the Vineyard* (2004), *Dust Devils*, and *Primetime Adventures* (2004). Taylor had a fairly complete version of his game done by the end of 2004, but it took him a while longer to finalize it. *Mortal Coil* (2006) was finally launched at Origins '06 — just when things were really heating up at IPR.

"For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life."

– William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of Hamlet,
Prince of Denmark (1603, 1604, 1623)

The freewheeling nature of the original Darklands game, which let players play just about any strange race that they could imagine, became even *more* freewheeling in *Mortal Coil*. Now, players could invent any *world* that they imagined — and that world creation was an integral part of the gameplay. *Mortal Coil* did focus on the modern era, because Taylor wanted to create a game that could mimic the magic realism of Neil Gaiman books like *Neverwhere* (1996) and *American Gods* (2001). However, the potential scope of the game was much larger.

The players of *Mortal Coil* don't just collaboratively create a world; they also collaboratively create a magic system. This arose from Taylor asking the question: "Why does magic never feel like magic in a roleplaying game?" In response he created game mechanics that made magic "emergent." At the start of the game, magic didn't actually do *anything*. Players have to expend resources during to play to make up new rules for magic, causing it to feel "spontaneous" ... and *magical*.

The world-building and magic-building mechanics of *Mortal Coil* are clearly its most innovative aspects. Beyond that, it contains a lot of the elements that you'd expect to find in an indie game. To start with, *Mortal Coil* is diceless; conflict begins with setting stakes and is then focused on resource management, where players decide what to spend through a blind bid. The players also get quite a bit of creative authority in the game's magic-building — though this authority is (of course) distributed: the GM sets the "price" for the magic that the players introduce.

Taylor would later call *Mortal Coil* his "first real success." He lost thousands of dollars on *The Legend of Yore*, and he just managed not to lose money on *Bulldogs!* In contrast, *Mortal Coil* earned him a profit — and also put him on the indie map. Mind you, indie games in the mid-'00s were still relatively niche. Taylor sold about 60 copies of *Mortal Coil* at Gen Con Indy 2006, which was enough to make him a top-ten seller at the Forge booth that year. Over the course of *Mortal Coil*'s first edition, Taylor sold about 650 copies total, which made it an indie success.

Unfortunately, Taylor ran into one major problem with *Mortal Coil*: many players had troubles learning the game from the rules. This caused Taylor to produce a revised edition (2009), though it took him a few years to do so, due

to his IPR responsibilities; the revised edition kept the core of the game the same, removed extraneous rules, and added many more examples.

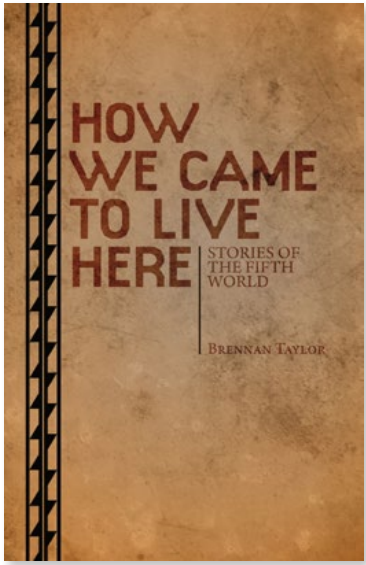
In 2010, Taylor was still working with IPR, but his creative time was increasing due to the company's new staff. This became obvious early in the year with new publications from Galileo.

Hard-Boiled Empires: Solara (2010) appeared first. It was a setting for *Dungeons & Dragons 4E* (2008) that Taylor had originally created for publication by One Bad Egg; after One Bad Egg's demise, Taylor released it himself.

Taylor's other product of early 2010 was much more notable: it was a complete RPG based on the legends of the Anasazi Pueblo People. He began work on it as early as 2005, but had then set it aside to instead finish *Mortal Coil*. He began work *again* in fall 2006. It was a long time coming.

The game had started life as "The Fifth World" but once again the name had changed — this time because of the impending publication of a post-apocalyptic RPG called *The Fifth World* (2006). Taylor publically asked for comments on a number of alternative names including "Twin Souls," "Up from the Fourth World," "So That This World Will Not Be Destroyed," "Into the Light," and "How We Came to Live Here." Taylor would eventually settle on the last, because it evoked the mythic feeling of the game.

The game that would become *How We Came to Live Here* originally used the mechanics of Clinton Nixon's *The Shadow of Yesterday* game. However, Taylor found this confining, and it soon progressed from being a clone of *The Shadow of Yesterday* to being a game influenced by *The Shadow of Yesterday*; this change was a major breakthrough that let Taylor really make the game his own.



How We Came to Live Here was previewed as an online ashcan (2008) in July 2008, then released in a final edition (2010) in March 2010 — just three months before Taylor really freed up his creative schedule through the sale of IPR.

Like *The Shadow of Yesterday* — and like *Mortal Coil* — *How We Came to Live Here* focuses on resource management. Player take turns framing scenes; then, when a conflict arises, they roll dice. The actual conflict is played out through players choosing dice from their rolls and then narrating the results — a system that was clearly inspired by *Dogs in the Vineyard*. Resources come into play when

players choose to refresh traits and otherwise improve their chances at winning a contest — but in doing so give the GMs dice to use in the future.

Two elements of *How We Came to Live Here* are particularly notable. First, its conflict system has an innovative result system, where players get to choose to spend their "victory dice" for specific sorts of consequences. Second, it uses two GMs, something that many indie designers have played with, but few have brought to publication. In this case, the two GMs are responsible for different sorts of threats, from the "Inside" or the "Outside."

"There are few things that can't be improved by adding monster hunting to them."
– Paul Tevis, Voice of the Revolution Podcast #1 (October 2006)

These mechanics were mixed in with an evocative southwestern setting — something that was near to Taylor's heart due to his youth spent growing up in Tucson, Arizona. There's lots of background on the culture and life of the Pueblo People; Taylor builds on that by including myths in the rules text itself.

How We Came to Live Here was another well-received indie RPG, and in some ways a tipping point for Galileo. By that time, the company had published four RPGs in 15 years: one fantasy heartbreaker, one d20 game, and two Forge-influenced indie RPGs. The appearance of *How We Came to Live Here* following *Mortal Coil* suggested that it was the last that would determine the company's future, not all that came before.

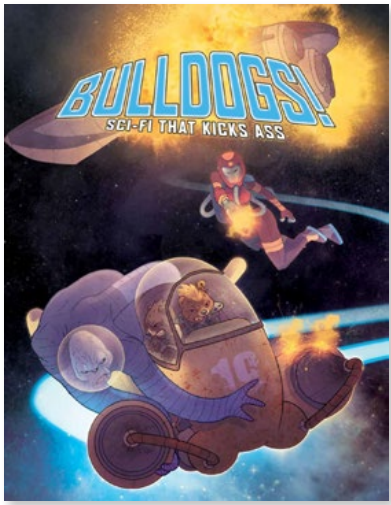
However the more important tipping point was Taylor's departure from IPR, and the new creative time and energy this permitted.

A Larger Business: 2010-Present

Up until 2010, Galileo Games was a fairly typical indie publisher, with the emphasis on "independent." With the exception of *Bulldogs! Psionics* and the co-produced *Bulldogs! Robots*, all of Galileo's products had been written by Taylor himself.

However, as Taylor emerged from IPR, he decided that he wanted something more. He wanted Galileo to become more than just a hobby. In order to pursue this possibility, Taylor laid out three goals:

- To write and publish a game a year himself.
- To help other designers to publish games that had "fallen by the wayside."
- To produce additional material for his games that would keep them fresh in players' minds.





To date Taylor hasn't been that successful at producing new games himself — though he did rerelease *Bulldogs!* in a new edition for d20 and for Evil Hat's *Fate* system, with the latter book being co-authored by Brian Engard.

Galileo has been much more successful in helping *other* designers to get their RPGs to market. The first of these was *Kingdom of Nothing* (2010), a dark urban fantasy about people whose memories have been stripped away. It was a great complement to Taylor's own work because it included a coin-based conflict system that was partially resource-based and because it included a lot of collaborative creativity, with players creating the (unknown) backstories for each other. More recently, Galileo produced a zombie LARP called *Shelter in Place* (2011) by J.R. Blackwell, David A. Hill, Jr., and Filamena Young. They're also working on a competitive FRP called *Blood Red Sands* (2013) by Ralph Mazza and a new steampunk game called *The Ministry Initiative* (2014?).

Galileo has also created considerable additional material for its own games. Though Taylor had previously said that he'd never supplement *Mortal Coil*, because too much of the game was focused on the world creation, he did so starting in May 2010. These supplements took the form of PDF-only "campaign frames," which were setups for *Mortal Coil* play. The first was *Old Gods* (2010), by Taylor himself. Other frames have been written by a variety of authors, such as *Divinity* (2010), by Fred Hicks. The frames have shown off the breadth of *Mortal Coil*, since they've detailed swords & sorcery worlds of fantasy, the Industrial Revolution, the 1950s, and even the afterlife. Many of these frames were later collected in the print book, *More Things in Heaven and Earth* (2012).

More recently, Galileo has provided support for its new *Fate Bulldogs!* game with free online adventures (2011-Present) and a print supplement, *Ports of Call: The Frontier Zone* (2012). They've also produced two books of fiction, *Gimme Shelter* (2012), and *Have Blaster, Will Travel* (2013) — which support

Shelter in Place and *Bulldogs!*, respectively. If Galileo and Evil Hat are representative of a trend, turning gaming settings into fiction settings is the next step for indie publishers as they evolve into full publishing houses.

Unsurprisingly, Galileo has supported much of its recent production with Kickstarters:

Date	Product	Goal	Raised	Backers
6/16/11	*Bulldogs!*	$3,000	$13,430	295
10/13/11	*Shelter in Place*	$2,500	$5,551	139
4/29/12	*Have Blaster, Will Travel*	$1,500	$4,381	207
8/21/12	*Blood Red Sands*	$5,000	$7,001	223
6/15/13	*The Ministry Initiative*	$20,000	$30,480	674

When he left IPR, Taylor hoped to push harder on Galileo. He's since produced a number of games by a number of designers and supplemented many of his product lines. Though the company's production is still relatively low, at the moment it looks like Galileo is on its way to becoming a larger publishing venue.

What to Read Next

- For more on fantasy heartbreakers, problems with distribution, and the Forge, read ***Adept Press***.
- For more on Vincent Baker, read ***Lumpley Games***.
- For more on consolidators, read the mini-history of ***Wizard's Attic*** in ***Issaries***.
- For Fred Hicks, *The Dresden Files*, *Fate*, One Bad Egg, and indie fiction, read ***Evil Hat Productions***.
- For another indie urban fantasy game about lost things, read about *Dead Inside* from ***Atomic Sock Monkey Press***.
- For Ralph Mazza's indie history, read ***Ramshead Publishing***.

In Other Eras

- For another publisher that got its start when friends suggested the publication of a home-brewed FRP, read ***Palladium Books*** *['80s]*.
- For another fantasy heartbreaker, read ***Lion Rampant*** *['80s]*.
- For the best-known diceless game, read ***Phage Press*** *['90s]*.
- For more on the current owner of IPR, read the latter part of ***Hero Games*** *['80s]*.
- For the game that inspired *Mortal Coil*, read ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*.

Or continue with superhero, fantasy, and horror publisher ***Atomic Sock Monkey Press.***

Atomic Sock Monkey Press: 2003-Present



2004: Dead Inside

Chad Underkoffler's Atomic Sock Monkey Press is best known for its creation of PDQ — a rules-light indie system that's been used by a few different publishers.

Becoming *Dead Inside:* 1998-2004

In college, Chad Underkoffler wanted to be a writer. Unfortunately, his love of writing was beaten out of him by college writing courses at Penn State where "vicious" classmates "put the sci-fi fan in his place." Fast-forward a few years, during which Underkoffler started to recover some confidence in his writing — and also sold vacuum cleaners door-to-door. He was now ready to give professional RPG writing a shot, which would lead him to the indie community by a different route than most designers.

It all began with *GURPS* (1986). Though Underkoffler got his start in gaming with *Basic D&D* (1981) and the *Hero System* (1981, 1990), by the late '90s he was playing Steve Jackson's *GURPS*. He was also designing his own material for the game and even publishing some of it on the online *GURPS* Mailing List.

A friend told Underkoffler he should submit his material to Steve Jackson Games' *Pyramid* magazine (1993), which was just then beginning publication of an electronic second volume (1998-2008). Underkoffler did and quickly found acceptance. "The Power Within: Chi Magic" was published by *Pyramid Online* on September 25, 1998.

It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Underkoffler continued to occasionally write for the magazine over the next couple of years, and was eventually given a column, "Campaign in a Box" (2001-2006). He also contributed to a few *GURPS* books and some *Gamma World* releases and even wrote a short-lived RPGnet column. The majority of Underkoffler's freelance time, however, went to work on a half-dozen books in the *Unknown Armies* (1998) line from Atlas.

Underkoffler would later say: "The joy [of writing] is back."

However, Underkoffler wasn't content to only write material that wound up owned by other publishers. So he created Atomic Sock Monkey Press as his own publishing house.

"Why Atomic Sock Monkey? Well:

- *Monkeys are funny.*
- *Sock Monkeys are weird.*
- *Atomic energy gives you superpowers (unless comic books have lied to me)."*

– "Mission," atomicsockmonkey.com (2004)

Atomic Sock Monkey's first publication was a little dice game called *Monkey, Ninja, Pirate, Robot* (2003), which he released online in December 2003. It was a simple and chaotic game in the "beer & pretzels" genre that had some depth thanks to the special powers used by the four eponymous characters. It was fun and funny, but a minor release.

Meanwhile, Underkoffler was also working on his first independent RPG for Atomic Sock Monkey: a game about sky pirates that he'd eventually call "Swashbucklers of the 7 Skies." Surprisingly, Underkoffler wouldn't publish Swashbucklers for half-a-decade.

That's because something else came up, putting Swashbucklers on the back burner.

The something that took Swashbuckler's place as Atomic Sock Monkey's first RPG was called *Dead Inside* (2004). This project had begun around 2001 when Phil Reed of Ronin Arts approached Underkoffler about creating a new RPG. Reed wanted it to be about a phrase that haunted him: "dead inside."

Reed was thinking about "soulless monsters," but the phrase reminded Underkoffler of those college writing courses: the way they made him feel and the fact that it had taken him five years to recover. So he came up with a mystical urban fantasy about characters that had lost their souls and were trying to recover them. Underkoffler then spent the next few years playtesting and revising his game.

As late as 2003, *Dead Inside* was still bandied around as an upcoming publication for Ronin Arts. However, Phil Reed also became the newest publisher of *The Whispering Vault* (1994, 2003), another urban fantasy game. The similarities between the games — as well as some thematic disagreements between Reed and Underkoffler regarding *Dead Inside* — led the two to amicably part ways. This left Underkoffler with a new game for Atomic Sock Monkey to publish. As is often the case in the history of small companies, this singular event would set Atomic Sock Monkey on a trajectory that would define its publications for the next few years.

Dead Inside was released in 50 small press copies. It got some nice acclaim primarily because of its evocative setting; characters danced back and forth between the Real World and the Spirit World, with the only limitation being the imagination of the participants. It also got noticed because it directly subverted the conventions of the fantasy roleplaying genre. Rather than killing people and taking their stuff, Underkoffler wrote a game about healing people and giving them stuff; his design focused on introspection and acts of kindness, on moral choices rather than mindless mayhem.

Dead Inside's game system got the least attention when the game was released — and that's probably because it was a rules-light system that faded into the background. The PDQ system (short for Prose Descriptive Qualities) builds characters upon a small set of freeform qualities. Characters use them in situations that seem appropriate; success is automatic if a quality's ranking exceeds the difficulty's ranking, else a simple "die + bonus" roll is made. Of all of PDQ's mechanics, it's probably the damage system that's gotten the most attention over the years: characters reduce their qualities as they're wounded. As Rob Donoghue of Evil Hat Productions often jokes, it's the game where "you can punch Spider-man in the girlfriend."

Underkoffler says that the biggest influences on PDQ were *Castle Falkenstein* (1994), *Marvel Super Heroes* (1984), and *Risus* (2001). However, the simple, ranked, freeform qualities remind many people of Evil Hat's *Fate* (2003) — and Underkoffler agrees that he must have picked up ideas from *Fate*'s predecessor, *FUDGE* (1992), through osmosis.

"Dead Inside remains a fantastic game, enough so that I tend to think of Don't Rest Your Head as my Dead Inside heart-breaker."

– Fred Hicks, "Sources of Inspiration," Don't Rest Your Head (2006)

In turn *Dead Inside* was a source of inspiration for Evil Hat's *Don't Rest Your Head* (2006) and probably for other games of the indie community. However it was that little-mentioned PDQ game system that would have the biggest effect — both on Atomic Sock Monkey itself and on a few other indie publishers.

More Games, Pretty Darned Quick: 2004-2009

2004 was a busy year for the brand-new Atomic Sock Monkey, during which they put out a wide variety of publications, including: a generic RPG supplement called the *Imago Deck* (2004); a supplement for *Dead Inside* named *Cold, Hard World* (2004); and a PDF of the *PDQ Core Rules* (2004). However, big supplements and generic RPG aids wouldn't end up being the focus of Atomic Sock Monkey. Instead, Underkoffler would focus on a series of RPGs that all used the PDQ system. Three of these appeared in the next few years.


PDQ

PROSE DESCRIPTIVE QUALITIES SYSTEM
CORE RULES

PDQ MASTER CHART

Level	As Quality Rank	Modifier to 2D6 roll	As Difficulty Rank	Target Number
Poor	Notably inept.	-2	A trivial task.	5
Average	Typical human capability.	0	Straightforward task.	7
Good	Better than usual; most professionals or talented amateurs.	+2	Complex task, requiring attention to detail.	9
Expert	Noted/famed professional; talent with skill to back it up.	+4	Intricate task, difficult and requiring sharp concentration; hard or expert-untrained person (Average).	11
Master	Acclaimed genius; talent with substantial skill behind it.	+6	Extremely difficult task, hard for most professionals in the field (Good).	13

ABOUT THE PDQ SYSTEM

CREATING CHARACTERS

QUALITIES



Monkey, Pirate, Ninja, Robot: The Roleplaying Game (2004) — or *Monnipir* according to some — was a wacky and silly RPG, where characters stole uranium and collected mojo to do cool stuff. It showed that PDQ could be used for more than just one game.

Truth & Justice (2005) was Atomic Sock Monkey's first real hit. It was a PDQ superhero game based on the "mad, beautiful ideas" from the Silver Age of comics. The book also included an analysis of many different sorts of comic book stories to allow for other types of play — something that would become a regular feature of Underkoffler's RPGs.

Truth & Justice was successful in part because PDQ's freeform qualities allowed

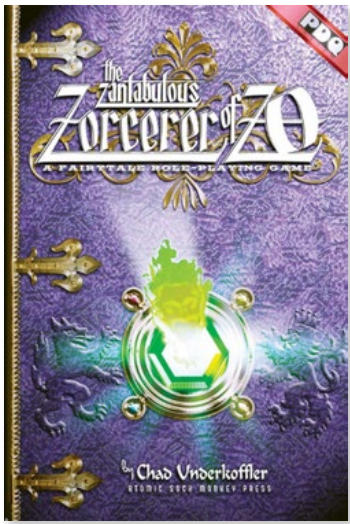
for a very simple superpower system, where any power could do anything — if it was appropriate. It was a game where Doctor Nemesis really could win a battle using Science!

In order to support the "story-based aspects of the [superhero] genre," *Truth & Justice* made some changes to the core PDQ gameplay. A "Stunts" mechanic allowed freeform powers to be used even more widely — but only in certain predetermined ways. In addition "plot hooks" were added to the damage system: the first time a character took damage in each battle, the damaged quality would be marked for a future plot. This integrated a little bit of storytelling into the core conflict system, and it also let players signal what they'd like the game to be about in the future.

> *"Keep it Simple and Focused. Playtest and Peer Review. Seek out people who hate what you're attempting as well as people who love it. Seek out newbies to test your game as well as experienced gamers. Get over yourself, but know when to put your foot down."*
>
> – Chad Underkoffler, "The Designers Speak," hinterwelt.com (2004)

The Zorcerer of Zo (2006) was a PDQ game based on fairy tales. Like *Truth & Justice*, it got a lot of acclaim because of its in-depth look at the genre. As a very rare fairy tale RPG, *Zorcerer of Zo* also got attention because of its unique focus.

The game actually grew directly from a campaign Underkoffler ran in late 2005. One of Underkoffler's players then actively encouraged him to publish the campaign; Underkoffler got enthusiastic about the idea when he remembered *Aaron Allston's Strike Force* (1988) for *Champions* — an RPG supplement that had thoroughly detailed Allston's *Champions* campaign. As a result, *The Zorcerer of Zo* contained not only the rules for a PDQ fairy tale game, but also a complete Actual Play (AP) description of Underkoffler's campaign.



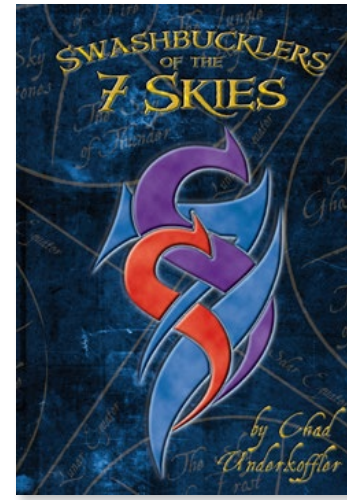
By the end of 2006, Atomic Sock Monkey impressively produced four different games using the PDQ house system. However, they weren't the only PDQ games around. That's because Underkoffler was also licensing the game to other publishers. Though the license wasn't "open," he wasn't charging for it; he just wanted approval over PDQ's usage.

The first PDQ game from another publisher was aethereal FORGE's *Ninja Burger 2nd Edition* (2005). Silver Branch Games' *Questers of the Middle Realms* (2006) soon followed. More recently, Silver Branch published *Jaws of the Six Serpents* (2009), while aethereal FORGE developed a simplified PDQ2 system for their *Vox* (2009) RPG.

PDQ hasn't been a viral success like *Fate* and *Apocalypse World* (2010), but it's nonetheless notable as a third "universal" system that grew out of the indie community.

Wearing an Evil Hat: 2007-Present

The indie movement is all about publishers owning their own work from start to finish, but not all publishers are interested in doing all of the jobs required in the creation of a game. This was the case with Underkoffler, who determined late in 2007 that he wasn't actually having fun with the business end of Atomic Sock Monkey (and that he wasn't necessarily good at it either). As a result, he got together with Evil Hat Productions, making Atomic Sock Monkey into a sort of imprint of Evil Hat: Underkoffler would pitch them an idea, and if they liked it, he'd create a game for them to publish.



As a result of the new arrangement, Underkoffler was (finally!) able to publish that game he'd been playing with five years previous: *Swashbucklers of the 7 Skies* (2009). The joint arrangement to produce the game went smoothly, with the biggest disagreement being over size; Evil Hat's Fred Hicks was ultimately able to convince Underkoffler to go with a 7"x10" format — a little smaller than a traditional RPG.

Swashbucklers was a homage to the pulp swashbuckling genre — with a full chapter (of course) spent on the tropes of the genre. However, it was more than that: *Swashbucklers* included a fully original setting, of sky pirates in flying ships battling across a world where islands float in the sky.

Though *Swashbucklers* used PDQ, it was a new variant of the system that Underkoffler called PDQ#. For the first time ever, Underkoffler dramatically revamped his house mechanics: PDQ# gave characters foibles and techniques and changed conflict into a more tactical system. Because of the specific needs of the setting, *Swashbucklers* also had a ship combat system that was well-received.

After its publication, *Swashbucklers* went on to pick up a Silver ENnie and was the runner-up for the Indie Game of the Year.

Underkoffler has done more than just publish his own books with Evil Hat; Hicks also wanted to get him involved with Evil Hat's own games, so he approached Underkoffler about working on *The Dresden Files RPG* (2010). Underkoffler was unfamiliar with Jim Butcher's urban fantasy novels, so Hicks gave him a copy of the first one, *Storm Front* (2000). Underkoffler devoured the book and was soon buying the rest. After that, he couldn't resist helping with the RPG, so he signed on as the lead setting developer.

After *Swashbucklers* and *Dresden*, Underkoffler took a year off of design. He's since worked mostly for Evil Hat on *Dresden* supplements and for Margaret Weis Productions on their *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying Game* (2012). Though no further PDQ designs have appeared, Atomic Sock Monkey remains an active concern; Underkoffler recently reprinted *The Zorcerer of Zo* through POD (2013) and has been thinking about a new edition of *Dead Inside*.

A new PDQ game will likely appear under the Atomic Sock Monkey label when inspiration strikes once more.

What to Read Next ◯

- For another indie publisher who wrote for *Pyramid*, read ***John Wick Presents.***
- For more on Ronin Arts, see the mini-history in ***Green Ronin Publishing***.
- For another urban fantasy where players seek that which is lost, read (briefly) about *Kingdom of Nothing* in ***Galileo Games***.
- For other indie games that have become (sort of) universal game systems, read about *Fate* in ***Evil Hat Productions*** and *Apocalypse World* in ***Lumpley Games***.
- For the publisher of *Swashbucklers of the 7 Skies*, again read ***Evil Hat Productions***.
- For another indie publisher who has moved away from publication, read ***Ramshead Publishing***.

In Other Eras

- For more on *Unknown Armies*, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.
- For another game that purposefully subverts fantasy roleplaying conventions, like *Dead Inside* does, read about *Violence* in ***Hogshead Publishing*** *['90s]*.
- For *Aaron Allston's Strike Force* and other *Champions* campaigns, read ***Hero Games*** *['80s]*.

Or read onward to a serial publisher, who was most recently called ***John Wick Presents.***

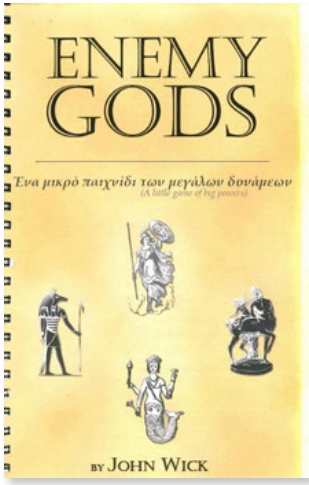
John Wick Presents: 2009–Present

John Wick has formed two indie RPG publishers — Wicked Dead Brewing Company and John Wick Presents — which together form a continuum of roleplaying publication. However, his roleplaying history goes back to the '90s and his days with AEG and continues with his first company, Wicked Press.

Before Wickedness: 1968-1999

This is the story of the two indie RPG companies that John Wick founded in the '00s, which together have a fairly cohesive (and overlapping) history. However, every history has stories that lead into it, and that is certainly the case for John Wick Presents.

Those stories began when Wick came into the world of roleplaying games at the age of 12 or 13 through the discovery of *Call of Cthulhu* (1981). There were no gaming stores in Albany, Georgia, so Chaosium's classic horror RPG instead turned up in a shop called Spencer's Gifts — shelved between a board



2004: Enemy Gods

game about beer and another that was "just for couples." Wick thought that the box would contain more stories by H.P. Lovecraft; since he'd already enjoyed some of Lovecraft's stories thanks to the library, he was interested in this new collection.

"Having Call of Cthulhu as your first RPG changes you in ways that human language really has no words to convey."

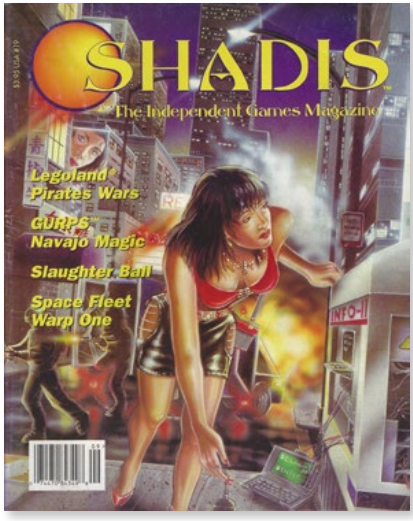
– John Wick, Interview, Geeks On Podcast #111 (June 2009)

Though *Call of Cthulhu* wasn't what Wick had been looking for, he found it intriguing and began roleplaying. The RPGs that followed are an encyclopedia of some of the top games of the '80s and early '90s, including *D&D* (1974), *Champions* (1981), *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles & Other Strangeness* (1985), *Ars Magica* (1989), *Rifts* (1990), *Amber Diceless Role-Playing* (1991), and *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991).

Many of these games would influence Wick's later works. For example, *Call of Cthulhu* led Wick to ask questions in his games about how much time we have left, and what we should do with that time. However Wick has cited the influence of Erick Wujcik — designer of *TMNT* and *Amber* — more than the most, saying that Wujcik's designs taught him that it was okay to break rules, a maxim which led to many of the innovations of Wick's games.

Wick got involved on the business side of gaming in the late '80s while attending college at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. While there, he worked for The Source — a gaming store that would be even more critical to the history of Atlas Games. However it'd be a few more years before Wick dove into game design.

In 1995, Wick was published in a pair of magazines. A "Mysterious Manuscript" in Pagan Publishing's *The Unspeakable Oath #13* (1995) demonstrated Wick's continued interest in *Call of Cthulhu*. However, it was Wick's articles in AEG's *Shadis* that better presaged his future in the gaming industry.



The articles came about because Wick had been hired by AEG as an "office grog." He doubtless had a variety of jobs under that title, but it's his articles for *Shadis* that concern us now. The first of them, in *Shadis #19* (May 1995), was called "Shakespeare Didn't Need Dice: A Polemic on Diceless Role-Playing." In this article,

Wick clearly and baldly stated that diceless roleplaying better enabled "cooperative storytelling" and that this was a "superior form of roleplaying."

The article offered a preview of Wick's place in the industry: controversial and willing to say what he believed, even if he knew it'd be unpopular. This sort of attitude isn't unusual in roleplaying — and especially not in the indie community, where the personalities of the creators are often as important as the games they produce. However, John Wick seems more controversial than most — possibly because of his bluntness, possibly because of a perceived arrogance, and possibly because he can be unorthodox both in his interests and in his GMing style. This controversy forms a constant undercurrent to John Wick's stream of gaming companies.

Wick continued to write articles for *Shadis* for the next couple of years. Some of them supported games like *Battlelords of the Twenty-Third Century* (1990), *Call of Cthulhu*, and *Over the Edge* (1992). Others offered more editorial (and often more controversial) views. Two articles were of particular note. "To Do What We Must" in *Shadis #22* (December 1995) talked about how unheroic *D&D* was because of its focus on murder and theft — a topic that Wick would revisit when he created his own *anti-D&D* game a decade down the road. Shortly afterward Wick's "Ork: A New Look at an Old Enemy" in *Shadis #24* (February 1996) offered a detailed look at the culture of the ork race; this would foreshadow *another* Wick RPG, one which lay even nearer in his future. This sort of reuse and expansion of ideas, sometimes years after the fact, is another common element in Wick's work. We'll see that he often starts something, sets it aside, and then finishes work on it years later.

While Wick was writing his articles for *Shadis*, he was also rising up in the ranks at AEG, a story that is better detailed in that company's history. His knowledge of Japanese history led him to design the *Legend of the Five Rings* RPG (1997). Within a few years, he became the go-to guy for roleplaying at AEG, and so also designed their next RPG, *7th Sea* (1999) — this one in conjunction with his first wife, Jennifer.

> *"We were the new kids, upstarts, all of us under 30, all of us working 80 hour weeks with no sleep, little food, and nothing to sustain us but our comraderie."*
>
> – John Wick, "Gen Con: The Long(er) Version," johnwickpresents.com (August 2006)

Wick's roleplaying games were well-received thanks to their good mechanics and their strong concentration on setting. The focus on setting may have come from Wick's experience with *Amber* and *Pendragon* — both of which offered great lessons on creating rules that really *fit* with a game's genre and background; whatever the source, Wick was writing genre-appropriate mechanics before

Ron Edwards published "System Does Matter" (July 1999). Wick also included strong roleplaying tips in these early games. Both of these elements would foreshadow Wick's indie future.

And that future was fast approaching, as Wick was having troubles at AEG as early as 1999, when he was working on *7th Sea*. He intended it to be the game of Errol Flynn and Alex DuMas, but he felt that was changed by AEG's development — with the end result not being what he'd wanted. Wick would later write that the staff at AEG "didn't quite understand the property."

Wick felt that the problems with the development of *7th Sea* reflected a general change in the corporate culture of AEG. It also highlighted the fact that Wick was creating and developing ideas that didn't actually belong to him. It was a sobering realization.

Wick announced that he was leaving AEG in September 1999, but continued working with them on some projects through April 2000. He later described leaving AEG as a divorce that was unhappy but not angry. As it happens, Wick got out just in time; he later said that he would have been upset by AEG's decision to move *Legend of the Five Rings* and *7th Sea* over to the d20 rule system.

Wick's departure from AEG didn't mean that he was leaving game design behind. Quite the contrary.

Damn Dirty Orks: 1999-2000

Just as he was preparing to leave AEG, John Wick was also striking out on his own by two different paths.

The first of these was a gaming column. It started out as a series of articles about GMing that Wick posted to Gaming Outpost, a pre-indie RPG site. Meanwhile, Scott Haring — the editor of Steve Jackson Games' *Pyramid* — was looking for a way to stir up the online magazine and give it new attention. So he asked Wick to write new articles of GM advice for *Pyramid*.

The result was "Playing Dirty," which ran in *Pyramid* from October 1999 to July 2000. The name came from the fact that Wick wasn't always nice in his GMing style (or in his GMing advice). He instead "played dirty" — using tricks and deceit to draw out the strongest emotions in his players.

> *"Some use RPGs as comfort food or power fantasy fulfilment. I don't. I use them as powerful tools for personal catharsis."*
>
> – John Wick, RPGnet Forums (November 2006)

By now, it's almost redundant to point out that the articles were controversial. Some readers thought that Wick was an "abusive GM" and said as much. As a

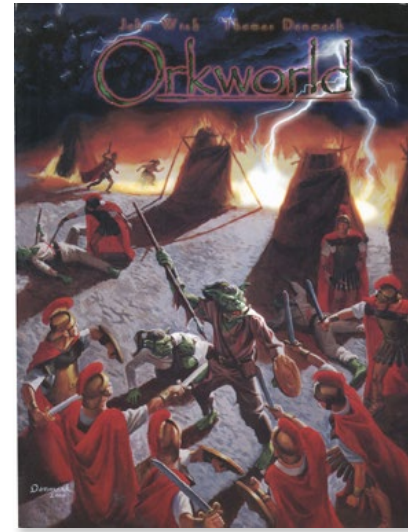
result, Wick's first article received more low ratings than any other article in *Pyramid*'s history. However, it also received more *high* ratings than any other article in *Pyramid*'s history. Haring's desire to stir the pot had paid off in spades; he would defend Wick and his controversial GMing style for as long as "Playing Dirty" was running.

A popular and controversial article series was exactly what Wick needed following his departure from AEG, because it kept his name in the limelight — and may even have spread his popularity. That was important because Wick's second project post-AEG was a brand-new RPG: *Orkworld* (2000).

Orkworld was another reason that Wick had left AEG. He wanted to own his games, and this was to be the first salvo. Without AEG's backing, Wick knew that *Orkworld* would be a small release — that it wasn't going to have the distribution of his previous games. Wick foreshadowed the scale of the onrushing indie movement when he said that he hoped to sell just 500 copies or so, to pay back his investors. It was a big come-down from *L5R*, which probably sold tens of thousands of units ... but it'd be *his*.

Ironically, *Orkworld* had grown out an office *D&D* game at AEG that was to be run by John Zinser. Wick told Zinser that he wanted to run an ork bard and Zinser refused, saying there was no such thing. So Wick wrote a 4,000 word essay proving that there could be ork bards ... which was then published as "Ork: A New Look at an Old Enemy." The *D&D* game never got run, but the idea of Wick's ork bard would pay out in spades.

Though *Orkworld* isn't really an indie game, Wick announced it at the home of the proto-indie movement, the Gaming Outpost. For the next year he regularly updated the community by writing about the design and production of the game — making it perhaps the first RPG ever whose creation was laid bare to the world in such an intimate way.



Orkworld almost failed to appear, first because Wick was reportedly mailed a computer virus that destroyed any files with the word "ork" in them, and second due to multiple printer holdups. However, the book was released just in time at the 2000 Gen Con Game Fair as the first publication of Wicked Press, Wick's new RPG publisher. Unfortunately, the game would face an uphill battle from there

— not only because of the release of *Dungeons & Dragons* third edition (2000), but also because of *Ork! The Roleplaying Game* (2000) by Green Ronin. The FRP market was suddenly very crowded, and so was the ork roleplaying market.

Problems with editing and printing made *Orkworld* a slightly hard sell. Reviews were also mixed. Ron Edwards called it "a triumph of creator-owned-and-operating RPG design" and *Games Unplugged* magazine speculated that it might win an Origins award, but others had issues with the game's mechanics, the game's background, or the ratio of the two.

The amount of ork setting material was certainly extensive, totaling about 250 pages out of the 304-page book. It portrayed orks as "noble savages" whose true culture was nothing like the foul lies spread by other races. Everything from religion to cannibalism was covered — both in background material and in fiction. This was all beautifully illustrated by Thomas Denmark, one of his earlier works in the field.

The mechanics, in comparison, were short and simple. They used a comparative dice pool at their base, where only the highest result was considered; it differed from the norm in the fact that doubles or triples of the same number increased its value (so that 3 "5"s would actually result in a "7").

Despite the rules-light mechanics, there were a few innovations in the gaming system. A character creation system focused on a collaborative process where players created a tribe and a household before they got to their characters. The players even got to pick good stuff that lay near their tribe — though their GM got to pick just as much bad stuff. Within the game, players could voluntarily take on "trouble" — which would give disadvantages in play, but more experience at the end of the session. There was also a wintering system, for playing out what happened between sessions, though this was one of the mechanics that players had particular problems with, due to some holes in the rules.

All told, *Orkworld* was an interesting bridge between Wick's earlier work at AEG and his later work at his two indie companies. Though *Orkworld* was produced as a big book, it was still a pretty little game, with the rules running just 50 pages. Further, its tribes, its households, and its voluntary trouble mechanics all foreshadowed indie ideas of distributing creative authority among the players and GM.

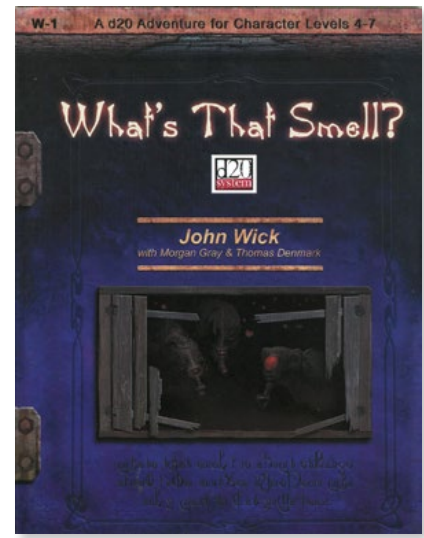
Despite the mixed reviews and the saturation of the FRP market, *Orkworld* sold pretty well — which is probably a testament both to Wick's name recognition and to the hard work he'd done previewing the game at Gaming Outpost. Wicked Press sold about $40,000 worth of *Orkworld* in its first year. With a retail of $25, this means Wick sold perhaps half of his 3,000-book print run. Despite that, Wick

reported no actual profit, because production costs had been about $40,000. It would take Wick another five years to sell out the run.

Though *Orkworld* was almost entirely about orks, it lightly touched upon the other fantasy races, offering them up with wicked twists. For example, elves were portrayed as evil, immortal anti-heroes. There was supposed to be an "Elfworld" game, which Wick talked about as early as 2001, but it didn't appear due to the problems that Wicked Press was just about to run into. *Orkworld*'s elves are reputed to appear in *Houses of the Blooded* as the "Sorcerer Kings," but that's almost a decade down the road. For the moment, the story of *Orkworld* and Elfworld (and even the once-mentioned Dwarfworld) ends in 2000 with that premiere Gen Con publication — though Wick has talked about revisiting the games from time to time.

Wicked d20s: 2001-2003

John Wick has always had an on-again, off-again relationship with the d20 system. In its early days, he rather famously published a rant on the Gaming Outpost where he said "YOU BOUGHT AN 800 PAGE RULEBOOK YOU SUCKERS!!!" He also said that the system had "fundamental design philosophies" that he didn't like. Need we say these statements were controversial?



Given these complaints, it's surprising that Wicked Press' second (and final) release was a d20 adventure called *What's That Smell?* (2001), co-authored by Morgan Gray and again featuring art by Thomas Denmark. Wick's reasoning behind the publication was simple: he wanted to attract the d20 crowd, with the hope that they'd look at his other projects; it was the same philosophy being used by many other publishers at the time.

Wicked Press had lots of plans beyond that. There was going to be a second d20 adventure called "Who Killed Lord Davenport?" and maybe even a John Wick version of d20 — to be designed with Jess Heineg of White Wolf and throwing out levels, classes, alignments, and even hit points. Wick was also working on his own increasingly indie designs. He finished the character creation and the magic system for "Elfworld" and was also working on two other designs, called "Cat" and "Neverland."

Then things started to fall apart.

To start with, Thomas Denmark and John Wick both moved and both got new jobs. This killed their collaboration, which was the main reason that "Who Killed Lord Davenport?" never showed up. Wick was also now working full-time in the gaming industry, which gave him another outlet for his creativity.

Then, Wizard's Attic died. Eric Rowe's fulfillment company had been warehousing and distributing Wicked Press' two books — as was the case with many of the new companies of the '00s — but John Wick's connection to the company was probably closer than most. He several times mentioned advice from Rowe in his Gaming Outpost columns; the head of Wizard's Attic was even given a production credit in *What's That Smell?*

> *"I took a look at Elfworld … and put it back. It reminded me too much of Orkworld and that reminded me too much of the Wizard's Attic period and the horrible time I had in the subsequent years."*
>
> – John Wick, "Whatever Happened to Elfworld?," johnwickpresents.com (December 2008)

Though Wick's geographical and professional changes in 2001 certainly slowed Wicked Press' production for the next year or two, it's the death of Wizard's Attic that killed it around 2003. That downfall cost Wicked Press a lot of money and disillusioned John Wick about the tabletop industry; he no longer saw the purpose of writing products for a few hundred people when his video game job gave him the opportunity to connect with millions.

And so we also end this prelude to the history of the Wicked Dead Brewing Company and John Wick Presents — John Wick's two indie RPG companies. Wicked Press stands separate from them for several reasons: it didn't overlap them in time; it didn't overlap them in catalog; and John Wick's design philosophy at the time was different. When we begin this history proper, in just a moment, we'll see all of these changes.

But before that could happen, John Wick had to die; he was killed in a car crash on July 24, 2002, at the young age of 33.

The Birth of the Wicked Dead Brewing Company: 2003-2004

John Wick was not actually dead. Instead he was the victim of an internet rumor that appears to have been maliciously spread. As he'd already been attacked with what appeared to be a custom-built virus while working on *Orkworld*, we can see a pattern — and one that was doubtless the result of Wick's controversial stances on d20, on GMing, and more.

Despite Wick's continued survival, that purported death in July 2002 is an excellent dividing mark for his professional career. Before then he was largely a big game, commercial game designer; after that he became the indie designer whose two interlinked companies are at the heart of this history.

Wick's move toward indie design began in 2001 when he met Jared Sorensen at the first KublaCon, in Burlingame, California. They talked about game design and became friends, but it wasn't until Wick got copies of two of Sorensen's earliest games, *octaNe* (2002) and *InSpectres* (2002), that he truly caught the indie spirit.

> *"See, if truth be told, first edition L5R looked absolutely nothing like the way I ran it. My style of Game Mastering has always been very loose. I encouraged player feedback. I seldom, if ever, used dice. In fact, I only ever used dice if I didn't know what should happen next."*
>
> – John Wick, "D&D 4e," johnwickpresents.com (May 2009)

Sorenson taught Wick that his games could actually reflect his style of GMing — something that his previous games hadn't done, except in the form of GMing advice. Sorensen also brought Wick over to indie ideas of narrative control and player empowerment. Finally, Sorensen showed Wick the indie way to sell things — which focused on small, simple books rather than the goliaths that Wick was known for.

Before Wicked Press collapsed under Wizard's Attic's weight, Wick had already started work on his first indie game, "Cat." Burnout and disillusionment kept him from completing that project for a couple of years, but then in 2003, Wick and Sorensen decided to try something new: they got into business together.

By late 2003, Sorensen had already published six books through his own company, Memento Mori Theatricks — covered in its own history. Despite that, he agreed to join Wick in a new indie publishing house, the Wicked Dead Brewing Company — named because Sorensen was wicked and (as we've already seen) Wick was dead. It's this event that truly marks the beginning of this gaming history, for the foundation of the Wicked Dead Brewing Company marked the start of John Wick's indie publication that continues directly into the present-day John Wick Presents.

On March 30, 2004, Wick and Sorensen finished work on a business plan for Wicked Dead. It revealed that the company's goal was to produce "high quality, low-cost roleplaying games" of just 48 pages or less. Wick and Sorensen also hoped that the company could embrace other indie designers: they planned to publish works from other authors under the banner of "WDBC Presents" while still allowing those authors to keep their own rights to the material. If they had

followed through on this, Wicked Dead could have been something entirely unique: a major publisher for indie designs. In the end, however, Wick and Sorensen only embraced one additional designer.

That additional designer was Annie Rush, who John Wick met at his full-time job. He'd run a *D&D* game for his officemates, and they'd enjoyed it, but Rush was particularly intrigued; she ended up imagining games of her own and so became Wicked Dead's third author.

Overall, the story of Wicked Dead is *largely* the story of the games produced by Wick and by Rush, and that's what's documented here. Sorensen published just two games during Wicked Dead's years: *Lacuna Part I. The Creation of the Mystery and the Girl from Blue City* (2004) and *the farm* (2005); both described within the story of Memento Mori — a company that Sorensen continued to run throughout his Wicked Dead time and continues to this day.

That's not to say that Sorensen wasn't vital to Wicked Dead: he was a critical member of the company from 2004 through the end of 2006. His existing games were a large part of the company's catalog during its first year. He also contributed his web expertise to Wicked Dead's site, and helped to keep the company afloat when Wick ran into problems in late 2006 and early 2007. But most of the *new* creativity at Wicked Dead came from Wick and Rush.

That began in July 2004 when John Wick published his first RPG in four years, *Enemy Gods: A Little Game of Big Powers* (2004) — a small book of just 58 pages. Like *Orkworld* (and the future *Houses of the Blooded*), it was ultimately a reaction to *D&D* — specifically to Wick's *D&D* game, where the goal was to become a god by reaching 36th level, killing a god, or even sleeping with a god. Wick's new RPG gave players the opportunity to instead roleplay gods from the start.

Enemy Gods was also Wick's first indie game. In it, players take on the roles of not one but two characters: a hero and a god. While the heroes engage in standard FRP adventures, the gods get to kibitz about the adventures and introduce complications for the PCs. Therefore, the god-players end up actively aiding the GM in telling the story.

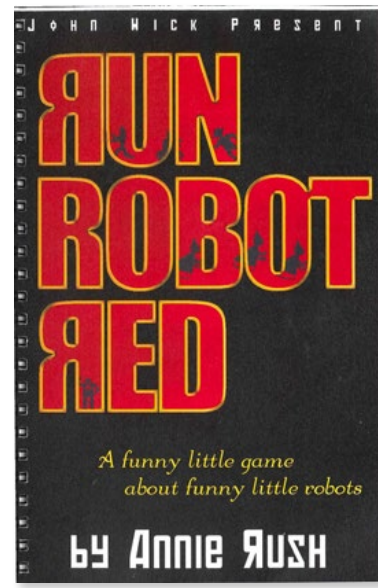
Enemy Gods also marked the first use of the Advantage System that would be appear in several of Wicked Dead's earliest games. It was a simple dice pool system that awarded dice for "advantages." These dice mainly resulted from the use of skills, but players could also explain how the current situation or circumstances could give them an "advantage."

Wick came up with the idea from *Dungeons & Dragons* third edition (2000), which "preloaded" all of its advantages on the character sheet. Wick felt that this discouraged players from thinking about the situation and telling stories

about it. His new Advantage System pushed things in the opposition direction — empowering *and* rewarding the players for taking on some storytelling authority.

"I'm not a crunchy gamer. I like the fun. I like the roleplaying."
– Annie Rush, OgreCave Audio Report (August 2005)

Annie Rush quickly completed her first game too, *Run Robot Red!* (2004); in it, players take on the roles of rebellious robots in a communistic society. Though people enjoyed the unique robots that they could create in the game, its most innovative aspect was probably the fact that the game's story had a planned ending.



When Wicked Dead attended Gen Con Indy 2004, the company was proud to have five print games available for sale: *Lacuna*, *octaNe*, and *InSpectres* by Sorensen; *Run Robot Red!* by Rush; and *Enemy Gods* by Wick. Of the newer games, *Run Robot Red!* was the biggest hit.

It was a fine start for a young company with ambition.

The Wicked Dead Rise: 2004-2005

Wicked Dead sold out on everything at their first Gen Con. Wick was quite pleased that the company was doing better than he expected, and for the first time started talking about the "Next *Big* Thing."

For now, though, the plan was to release "little games." There were several more in 2004, including: two of Wick's Advantage games, *Dragon: A Little Game for Little Dragons* (2004) and *Cat: A Little Game about Little Heroes* (2004); Annie Rush's *Alien Summit: A Little Game of Big Problems* (2004) and *The Secret Lives of Gingerbread Men* (2004), the latter also an Advantage game; and a board game that was coauthored by the two called *Necronomopoly* (2004).

Necronomopoly offered an interesting new direction for the company and also underlined Wick's continued interest in Cthulhu gaming. However, the company would ultimately decide not to go in that direction. Annie Rush's *Witches and Liches: Wicked vs. Dead* (2005) would be the company's only other strategy game.

Dragon and *Alien Summit* also broke some new ground; they were categorized as "shots," games for new gamers. They were also available for just $0.99 as PDFs — cheaper even than the $5 that Wick charged for most of the company's PDF games.

However, of all of Wicked Dead's 2004 games, *Cat* was the breakout. In it, the players take on the roles of cats — protecting their humans from dangers that they don't even know about. The game had a fun premise, a simple setup, and used the proven (and evocative) Advantage System. The result was a book that Wick has sold year after year in both of his indie companies — while most of his other early games have fallen to the wayside.

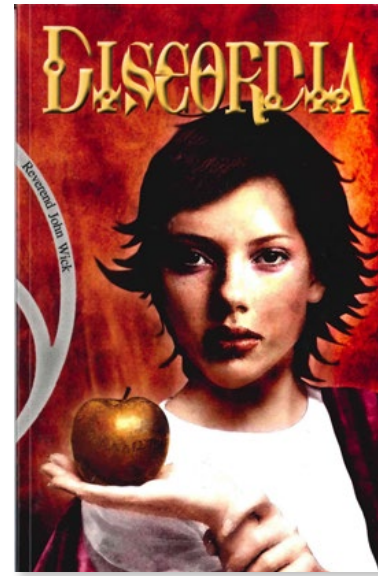
Cat, it should be noted, was aimed at both grown-ups and kids, while Rush's *The Secret Lives of Gingerbreadmen* ("Little Cookies ... Big Secrets") was advertised as a family game. Meanwhile, *Dragon* was intended for children. All told these three games comprised a rather impressive push toward a demographic that's ignored by most RPGs — even by most indie releases.

By the end of 2004, Wicked Dead had its complete PDF catalog available through RPGnow. Between the games by Rush, Sorensen, and Wick, this catalog totaled an impressive 15 books. The company was also seeing considerable success — so much that Wick's production manager couldn't keep up with hand-making the books. Though Wicked Dead was still a small and somewhat amateur press, it continued to exceed expectations.

2005 saw more of the same. John Wick produced: the horror game *Schauermärchen: A Very Scary Little Game* (2005); the historical *Thirty: A Big Game about a Big Mystery* (2005); and a final Advantage game called *Discordia: A Little Game about Lots of Chaos* (2005). Meanwhile, Rush produced *inTERRORgation: A Little Game of Big Questions* (2005) and *Witches and Liches*, while Sorensen produced his one other release, *the farm*.



Both *Discordia* (produced for Eris' benefit on 5/5/5) and *Thirty* (which focused on the Knights Templar) showed off Wick's interest in esoterica; it hadn't been obvious in his previous release, but was front and center here. *Thirty* — which had once been called "a little game about a big treasure" — ended up being surprisingly big, as it'd gotten away from Wick during the writing; it came in at 144 pages, much



larger than the 48-page books that Wick and Sorensen had originally written. Meanwhile, Rush's *inTERRORgation* deserves some additional comment, solely for its innovation. This game of interrogations supports a non-linear plot told solely through flashback.

The releases of 2005 also made it obvious that Wicked Dead was gaining a fanbase. RPGnow started regularly listing their products on various "top ten" lists. Then, when Wick announced a special limited edition version of *Thirty* that came in a wooden box with unique artifacts, he sold out of all 30 copies within a day.

Wicked Dead may have peaked at Gen Con Indy 2005. They had 14 or 15 printed products available for sale — including Wick's last box of *Orkworld*. The print quality of many of these products was also improving. Where most of Wicked Dead's books had previously been sold in spiral bindings, now *Cat*, *Discordia*, *InSpectres*, and *octaNe* all appeared in perfect-bound editions. The company doubled their sales from the previous Gen Con.

That year the Wicked Dead crew also hosted the indie game workshop at Gen Con — a lengthy day-long event intended to help designers to turn their ideas into games. Jared Sorensen was the lead on the project, so more information on it appears in the history of Memento Mori, but Wick participated by running a panel on "World Design." The workshop undoubtedly brought more attention to Wick and Sorensen's company, which Sorensen was now calling the "Sundance of indie."

However, the first hints of the company's downfall were also surfacing. Most notably, there were an increasing number of products that were seriously discussed by Wicked Dead but did not appear, among them: Wick's "Wicked Fantasy" setting for OGL; something mysteriously called "The Mars Journal"; and a joint book by Wick and Sorensen on vampires. Wick also continued to talk about a "Great Work" that would focus on esoterica, but he wouldn't actually begin it until late in 2006.

As it was, Wick's last RPG work for 2005 ended up being the April 27 release of *Thirty*. It would be his last original RPG work for over a year, as Wick was entering a very turbulent time in his life, during which the Wicked Dead Brewing Company as it then existed would die.

The Wicked Dead Fall: 2005-2007

In September 2005, Wick was laid off by Upper Deck. Some designers, like Wick's then-partner Sorensen, are able to take such a setback and use the free time to produce numerous publications. Wick instead found his game creation grind to a halt as chaos consumed his life for the next year.

That began with a move from San Diego to Santa Monica, where Wick took a job as an apartment manager. However, he found that it called upon him to do things that he wasn't willing to do, so he quit — ending up temporarily without a home as a result. Meanwhile, Wick was also starting to suffer from severe back problems. Eventually, he decided that Los Angeles was part of the problem; just a year after moving to Santa Monica, he moved again, this time to Phoenix, Arizona.

> *"As I prepare to leave Los Angeles, people keep asking me why I'm leaving. I keep giving the same answer. 'My love affair with LA is over,' I tell them. 'It's turned into an abusive relationship. I keep getting beat up and we never have sex anymore.'"*
>
> – John Wick, "Break Up Songs," johnwickpresents.com (January 2007)

Meanwhile, the business side of Wicked Dead was suffering, and Wick's compatriots decided to head out on their own.

Annie Rush did so first, when she began selling her books through her own imprint, Itesser Ink, around July 2006. Though Rush is today focused on graphic design, *Run Robot Red(ux)* (2006) and *The Secret Lives of Gingerbread Men* remain available from her at lulu.com.

Jared Sorensen cut his own ties to Wicked Dead in August 2006. However, even afterward, Sorensen continued to help with order fulfillment that was getting behind while Wick's life was in upheaval.

Meanwhile, Wick was already starting to turn things around. That began in June 2006, when he published his old *Pyramid* columns as *Play Dirty* (2006); in July, he then released his first novel, *No Loyal Knight* (2006). Wick had been unsuccessfully trying to sell it for years and finally decided that he might as well publish it himself.

However, it wasn't until Gen Con Indy 2006, some 16 months after his previous RPG, that Wick published a new game: *Wilderness of Mirrors* (2006). It was an interesting release for several reasons. To start with, it was a game written primarily for two friends. They'd been looking for a spy game and weren't happy with *Spycraft* (2002, 2005) or *Top Secret/S.I.* (1987). Wick told them the problem was that existing spy RPGs didn't do a good job of capturing the feel of a spy novel.



To correct this problem, Wick had to first figure out what the existing spy games were missing; he picked through espionage tropes and decided that spy novels were generally about "suspicion and trust." He then developed a game for his friends based on this.

We'll see this pattern with Wick again, as he turned to zombies and retro SF in the years to come, but it also reflects back on his earliest works, *L5R* and *7th Sea*. When Wick designed those early games, he was intent on adapting the samurai and swashbuckling genres to roleplaying. Now he was doing the same for espionage, with a few years of indie publishing under his belt.

To a large extent, that is the end of the story of the Wicked Dead Brewing Company. Two of its three principals were gone. The website largely died out that summer, prior to the publication of *Wilderness of Mirrors*. A variety of personal problems had kept the company from publishing in late 2005 and early 2006; now a big new project was (finally) about to emerge, and it would similarly keep the company's printing presses halted for another year. By the time that new project emerged the company would be so changed that the only choice would be to reinvent it.

With that prelude, we can turn finally to the Next Big Thing; it would be to the bridge to Wick's second (and closely linked) indie company: John Wick Presents.

Houses of the Blooded: 2006-Present

By Gen Con Indy 2006, Wick had been talking about working on his next "Big Thing" for a couple of years; he increasingly wanted to create a major game, like the ones he'd written for AEG. *Thirty* trended in that direction, with its 144 pages, but it still didn't have the scope of Wick's classic releases.

That Gen Con, Wick saw *Burning Empires* (2006), the newest release from Luke Crane and Burning Wheel. It struck him in part because it was *big*: 656 pages or four pounds, depending on which count you prefer. *Burning Empires* finally pushed Wick into buckling down and starting work on *his* Next Big Thing. In December he admitted that it was going to be a "fantasy heartbreaker" in the style of Luke Crane's *Burning Wheel* (2002) and Clinton Nixon's *The Shadow of Yesterday* (2004).

"I could write this book forever. And every time I think those words, I'm reminded of That Guy at the game design seminar who begins his question with, 'I've been designing a game for fifteen years.'"

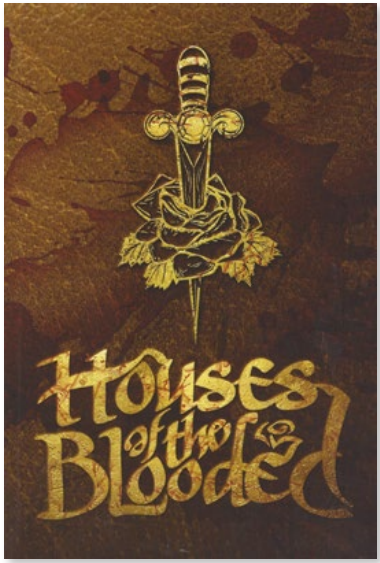
– John Wick, "Houses of the Blooded: Deadline," johnwickpresents.com (November 2007)

Wick would spend almost two years writing and extensively playtesting his "heartbreaker." He posted much of his early writing for the book to his online journal — generating a preexisting audience for the book much as he had with *Orkworld* almost a decade previous. Still, it was a long process, highlighting just how "Big" the book was going to be.

In May 2008 Wick finally opened the book up to preorders. Using his experience from *Thirty* he again offered a limited edition — this time 100 copies, which he sold for $75 each. The book went to the printer at the end of June, and Wick finally got the first 100 copies of *Houses of the Blooded* (2008) back just in time for Gen Con Indy 2008. He sold all of them, this time for the regular edition price of $45. After returning home, Wick began to fulfill preorders, and *Houses of the Blooded* slowly went forth into the world.

Both *Orkworld* and *Enemy Gods* had grown out of *D&D*, and this was also the case with *Houses of the Blooded* (2008). The difference was that *Houses of the Blooded* was intended to be the anti-*D&D* game. Much as he had while working on *Wilderness of Mirrors*, Wick walked through *D&D* to figure out what was missing.

Because Wick felt that *D&D* was all about lawless psychopaths with no past, *Houses of the Blooded* was instead *all* about the past — and about law and family and all those other things that *D&D* didn't care about. The PCs of *Houses of the Blooded* didn't even care about loot because they were nobles! All told, *Houses of the Blooded* had an operatic scope, focusing on tragedy, romance, and revenge. There was 'nary a dungeon to be found. Ever.



Houses of the Blooded was set in the "pre-Atlantean" civilization of the Ven. Wick presented their society with such veracity and in such an archaeological style that he's regularly gotten queries about whether the Ven were "real." Though they're not, Wick created the "Shanri Research Institute" and released everything under an open license,

so that others could add to the mythos of the Ven — just as has been done with Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos.

Mechanically, *Houses of the Blooded* was heavily influenced by a number of different indie game systems; Wick hasn't been shy in crediting them. The biggest influence was *Spirit of the Century* (2006), the earliest iteration of the *Fate 3.0* game system. *Houses of the Blooded* essentially started out as a *Fate* game, with its biggest difference being a codification of *Fate*'s aspects — regularizing them in a way that *Fate* games usually don't. From there, Wick built out numerous additional systems to supplement those aspects.

> *"I thought [aspects] were three-dimensional skills … [they] actually had three different elements which was: the invoke, which was how you get dice; the tag, which is some kind of disadvantage; and then the compel, which forces your character to act in a certain way."*
>
> – John Wick, Interview, Master Plan Podcast #29 (May 2008)

A "wager" system was inspired by *L5R* and *7th Sea*: when players roll dice, they can set some aside to allow them to narrate additional results of the outcome. This is part of an overall system of player empowerment: players generally get to describe results as long as they are successful; while the GM narrates only when the players fail. This idea was inspired by *octaNe*.

The game also includes "seasons," revisiting the idea of winter from *Orkworld* — and *King Arthur Pendragon* before it. The game was going to have Advantage Dice too, revisiting one of Wick's own innovations, but aspects eventually replaced them.

In all, *Houses of the Blooded* was almost a capstone to Wick's 14 years of game design — both at AEG and at his own companies. It was a return to big games that at the same time encompassed everything he'd been working on in the indie world. It was also the last major release from Wicked Dead — though in many ways Wick's first indie-focused company was already dead, as its website continued to languish while Wick created a brand-new site solely for his new game.

After its release, *Houses of the Blooded* became a critical success. Wick sold through his initial printing in less than a year, and he arranged a deal with Cubicle 7 to print a second edition (2009). However, Wick's original plans to extensively supplement the game have gone slowly, which suggests that its more general success is still limited.

Wick himself has produced two related releases: the novel *A Game of Tears* (2009); and the LARP *Blood & Tears* (2010). Meanwhile, he's turned to star designers to supplement the actual game. Indie designer Josh Roby wrote the "family and politics" supplement, *Coronets but Never Crowns* (2011), after

successfully Kickstarting it with $3,201 in pledges. The second *Houses of the Blooded* supplement was instead Kickstarted under Wick's own name — which might explain why it did much better, gaining $11,157 in pledges. Jesse Heineg's *Wilderness* (2013) then appeared in early 2013.

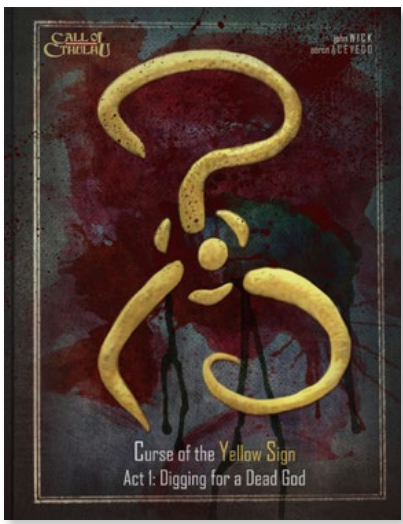
Perhaps more importantly, *Houses of the Blooded* also inspired one RPG variant, *Blood & Honor* (2010), a Samurai game that uses the *Houses of the Blooded* system; this returned John Wick to the genre that originally brought him recognition in the roleplaying field.

All told, the *Houses of the Blooded* books make up a good portion of John Wick's catalog in the modern-day, while his "little games" of the mid-'00s have (for the moment) largely disappeared. However, that catalog is no longer found on the pages of the Wicked Dead Brewing Company, but instead under a new name: John Wicks Presents.

John Wick, The Present: 2009-Present

The Wicked Dead Brewing Company and John Wick Presents both have focused on many of the same games created by John Wick. That's in part why they're presented as the same company in this history. It's also because the changeover from one to the other was gradual over the course of 2009.

Wick announced the new company name toward the end of January 2009, but he didn't establish a website (or store) for the new company until May. Of two major products released in July, Wick produced one using the Wicked Dead label, while the second printing of *Houses of the Blooded* was instead labeled as coming from John Wick Presents. Since then, all of Wick's older products — *Cat* and *Houses of the Blooded* chief among them — have changed over to the John Wick Presents label. For the purposes of this history, the start of 2009 is arbitrarily used as the end of Wicked Dead and the start of John Wick Presents because it reflects the announcement of the name and also mirrors a brand-new endeavor for Wick.



That was *Curse of the Yellow Sign* (2009-2010), a three-part adventure for *Call of Cthulhu* that John Wick released over the next year and a half. He began playtesting it the previous Halloween, which means that it was his first major product following *Houses of the Blooded*. The book contained not just an adventure, but also extensive

GMing advice — reflecting one of Wick's oldest interests. It was well-received and for a time a top-seller at DriveThruRPG.

We've already seen that work continued on various *Houses of the Blooded* spin-offs over the next couple of years. During that same time, John Wick Presents also rolled out three new little games: *My Monster* (2009), a story game for kids; *The Shotgun Diaries* (2009), a zombie horror game; and *Yesterday's Tomorrows* (2010), a retro science-fiction game.

The Shotgun Diaries and *Yesterday's Tomorrows* are likely the more notable of these games; each was written in the same manner as *Wilderness of Mirrors*: a friend was interested in a particular genre, and John explored the genre, figured out its tropes, and incorporated them into a game. The two games were also connected by blood, as they were written for a brother and sister. Wick wrote *Yesterday's Tomorrows*, for the sister, second. It seemed only fair, since he'd already given her brother a zombie game. By the time the game was finished and published, she'd become Ro Wick, John's second wife.

The Shotgun Diaries did particularly well for John Wick Presents. It pushed past the first two *Curse of the Yellow Sign* adventures and for a time gave Wick a 1-2-3 lineup of top-selling indie RPGs at DriveThruRPG. At Gen Con Indy 2009, when Wick was sharing space with Cubicle 7, it was again a hot seller — all a year before *The Walking Dead* (2010-Present) came to TV. However nine months after that may have been John Wick Presents' first creative peak, when *Yesterday's Tomorrows*, *Blood & Tears*, and *Blood & Honor* all went on sale in May 2010.

Wick opted not to go to Gen Con Indy 2010 due to problems of time and money, but that didn't mean that John Wick Presents was winding down in any way. Instead the company has worked on three major projects in the last few years.

John Wick first announced *The Big Book of Little Games* in May 2010, but he did the most extensive work on in it in the first half of 2011. The idea was to fill a single book with the little games that had been Wicked Dead's bread and butter. Revised versions of several old games appeared, including: *Cat*, *Enemy Gods*, *Wilderness of Mirrors*, and *Yesterday's Tomorrows*. Wick also produced several new games for the book in early 2011, including: *The Flux*, *Byron Falls*, *Sexcraft*, *Wicked Heroes*, and (much later) *All the Days of My Children Hospital*. Some of the games had a surprisingly old pedigree. Wick had first talked about *The Flux* as a game to follow *Orkworld*, while he'd released an early copy of *Wicked Heroes* in his blog back in 2007.

Despite all the work done in early 2011, it took another year for *The Big Book of Little Games* (2012) to go out to fans that had preordered it from Wick. Plans to distribute the book through Cubicle 7 fell through when that partnership ended, keeping the book from going into wider distribution at the time; the mass-market

printing (2014?) finally may appear almost three years after Wick wrote or updated the majority of the games contained within. Such are the travails of the small press.

Toward the end of 2011, Wick's attention instead turned to something totally new. *The Aegis Project* (2011) was a brand-new "big" game for Wick — this one an epic science-fiction game in the spirit of mech games of the '80s. It was notable not only as Wick's first major game after *Houses of the Blooded*, but also because it was a patronage project. Patrons were allowed to buy in while Wick was still working on the RPG, and he kept them informed of its design through an extensive series of vlogs. Wick worked steadily on *The Aegis Project* through the end of 2011 and released it toward the end of the year.

John Wick's final major project of recent years is Wicked Fantasy, something that Wick first talked about back in the d20 era. He finally started work on the topic shortly after finishing *Houses of the Blooded* by writing a series of articles for *Kobold Quarterly* (2007-2012). In the articles, John Wick wrote background while Jesse Heineg wrote rules for a series of unusual and "wicked" takes on standard fantasy races. It was similar ground to what Wick had covered a decade before while writing *Orkworld*.

The first article, "Haffuns: Seeming Servants" appeared in *Kobold Quarterly #10* (Summer 2009) with complete rules for *D&D* third edition. There were eventually five more, covering humans, orks, dwarves, elves, and gnolls.

> *"Kender … they don't make sense. It doesn't make sense for a race of sociopathic kleptomaniacs to exist in a culture. So how do you put that in a culture to make it make sense?"*
>
> – John Wick, Bear Swarm! Podcast #71 (August 2009)]

Following his work on *The Aegis Project*, Wick expanded the Wicked Fantasy articles, updated them for *Pathfinder* (2012-2013), and released them as PDFs through John Wick Presents. Along the way he added on new races like rat men, gnomes, goblins, and kobolds. Most recently, Wick held a Kickstarter to create a *Wicked Fantasy* book (2013) for *Pathfinder*, which provides a complete setting for the *Wicked* races. Wick raised $46,679 for the project, making it considerably more popular than the two *Houses of the Blooded* Kickstarters.

Most indie publishers are lucky to publish an indie game every year or two. Wick has often worked faster than that, publishing a few games in a year due in large part to his frequent focus on "little games." However, his companies have also occasionally flirted with even higher levels of production — such as in 2005 when Wicked Dead released 9 or 10 new products over the course of a year.

It looked like that might be the case again in 2012 when John Wick Presents released an impressive schedule for the year including the *Big Book*, *Houses of the Blooded: Wilderness*, *Wicked Fantasy*, the *No Quarter* thieves campaign novel, and a second *Pathfinder* sourcebook called *Santa Vaca*.

As it turns out, the company was still working on some of those projects in 2013 — and perhaps beyond. Nonetheless, the ambition to produce so many books suggests that John Wick Presents is more than just an indie hobby.

What to Read Next ○

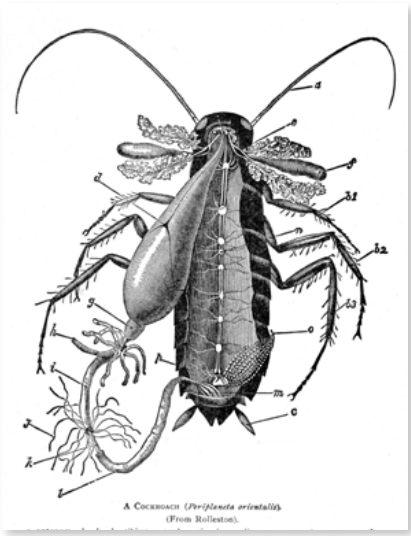
- For someone who *didn't* say that storytelling games were better than other RPGs and for a little on the Gaming Outpost, read ***Adept Press***.
- For another indie publisher who wrote for *Pyramid*, read ***Atomic Sock Monkey Press***.
- For that other ork game released at the 2000 Gen Con Game Fair, read ***Green Ronin Publishing***.
- For more on ***Wizard's Attic,*** read the mini-history in ***Issaries***.
- For Jared Sorensen, Wick's partner in the Wicked Dead Brewing Company, read ***Memento Mori Theatricks***.
- For more family-friendly indie games and for the origins of the *Fate 3.0* game system used in *Houses of the Blooded*, read ***Evil Hat Productions***.
- For John Wick's short-lived publishing partner, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment***.
- For *Kobold Quarterly*, the original publisher of "Wicked Fantasy," read ***Kobold Press***.

In Other Eras

- For more on *Call of Cthulhu*, the game that got Wick into the hobby and the inspiration for some of his publications, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.
- For more on The Source, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.
- For John Wick's earliest games, read ***AEG*** *['90s]*.
- For *Pyramid* magazine, the original publisher of "Play Dirty," read ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*.
- For the origins of d20, something that Wick has had an uneven relationship with, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For some later work by Thomas Denmark, read ***Atlas Games*** *['90s]*.

Or read onward to ***Bully Pulpit Games,*** where no GMs are required.

Bully Pulpit Games: 2005-Present



2006: The Shab-al-Hiri Roach

Though Bully Pulpit has only published a half-dozen games, they've twice won RPG's most coveted trophy: The Diana Jones Award — and are the only publisher to have done so.

Ancient Origins: 1976-2005

In most indie companies, like Luke Crane's Burning Wheel and John Wick Presents, there's no dividing line between the publisher and his business. Bully Pulpit Games is different. It was created in 2005 as a partnership of three gaming friends: Jason Morningstar, who had the initial ideas for the games; Steve Segedy, who would do

editing (and later the *whole* business side of the business); and Patrick M. Murphy, the "Mad Irishman," who would do graphic layout. Where most indie designers have to be polymaths — taking care of all parts of the business — Bully Pulpit instead offered a meeting of minds, where three different creators could share their expertise.

The initial idea was that any of the three might contribute game designs to the company. However, it turned out to be Morningstar who created all of Bully Pulpit's games, so it's his gaming history that we're going to explore before continuing on to the publishing history of Bully Pulpit itself.

Most indie designers got their gaming start in the '80s or '90s, but Morningstar instead became involved in roleplaying games back at the dawn of the industry. That's because Morningstar's father and his Uncle Bill were wargamers, playing games like *Tactics II* (1958), *PanzerBlitz* (1970), and *MechWar '77* (1975). It was Morningstar's Uncle Bill who bought the original boxed *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) game around 1976. Since he didn't know what to do with it, Morningstar and his older brother, Scott, appropriated it. Scott then began to run adventures for Jason, beginning a lifetime of roleplaying. Many more classic RPGs of the '70s followed.

> *"I went to my first convention, using a name badge my Mom quite capably forged because she couldn't afford to pay for two. We came home with Ogre, Melee, and Wizard …"*
>
> – Jason Morningstar, "My Life as a Gamer," bullypulpitgames.com (2006)

Meanwhile, Morningstar's own game designs started way back in the first grade when he created "Jesus Tic-Tac Toe," a tic-tac-toe game played on a 10x10 grid. It didn't work, but it was a first effort. In the fourth grade, Morningstar converted the *Hunt the Wumpus* computer game (1973+) into a tabletop game that befuddled his grandparents. However it was only in the fifth grade that he started designing for the roleplaying field: first with "Baby Wars," a rip-off of *Melee*; then with "Kitties and Catnip," Morningstar's own version of *Bunnies & Burrows*. Morningstar has long said that B. Dennis Sustare is his favorite RPG designer, so the choice of *Bunnies & Burrows* as the basis for his second game was an appropriate one. Continued designs appeared throughout high school.

After college, Morningstar became more interested in the realistic approach of *GURPS* (1987). This led to his first professional game design, when he contributed material to *GURPS Low Tech* (2001) and *GURPS Steam Tech* (2001). However, even as those books were being published, Morningstar was making his own

GURPS games lighter and easier to play. That trend caused him to defect to Steffan O'Sullivan's *FUDGE* (1992) — one of the precursors of the indie revolution.

A few years later, Matt Snyder's *Dust Devils* (2002) really showed Morningstar the possibilities of indie design. Afterward he began lurking on the Forge, reading Ron Edwards' essays, and fiddling with game design once more. Lumpley Games' *Dogs in the Vineyard* (2005) continued Morningstar's indoctrination; many more pivotal games followed — among them *The Mountain Witch* (2005), *Primetime Adventures* (2004), and *The Shadow of Yesterday* (2004).

Meanwhile, Morningstar had found a new outlet for his roleplaying creativity: game design contests, which had begun to flourish thanks to the Gaming Outpost and the Forge. Most of the contests supplied contestants with themes, words, and/or pictures and instructed them to create a game in a short amount of time. Morningstar says that the constraints give him challenges that he enjoys working through, and that they can also drive his creativity.

Morningstar entered no less than four games into contests for 2005. He wrote "Dungeon Squad" as a 24-hour RPG after trying to run *D&D 3.5* for a group of teens; and he wrote "Xochitlcozamalatl" for Ron Edwards' Ronnies contest. However it was Game Chef 2005 that set Morningstar on his route to the Bully Pulpit.

Game Chef 2005 instructed its contestants to create a "historical" themed game using the ingredients of "wine," "accuser," "companion," and "entomology." Morningstar actually wrote *two* entries for the contest. "The Doomed Assault on the Fire Moon" was a game that put the players before a board of inquiry where they had to defend the actions of a failed expedition. One of the game's most interesting aspects was that each player took on two roles: a board member and a witness to the failed expedition. We'll return to that idea of two characters a few years down the road.

However it was Morningstar's *other* Game Chef 2005 game that was critical to Bully Pulpit's history. In thinking about his own fear of cockroaches and about Lovecraftian horror, Morningstar came up with the core ideas for a *second* game — the game that he and his friends would found their company upon. It was called "The Shab-al-Hiri Roach."

En-Roaching on the Industry: 2005-2006

Participants submitted entries to Game Chef 2005 in late May 2005. On July 30, the judges announced the winner: "1984Prime" by Mischa D. Krilov. Though neither of Morningstar's games won, The Shab-al-Hiri Roach was chosen as one of the "Inner Circle" — the group of the nine best games from that year's 38 entrants.

Game Chef gave Morningstar lots of feedback on his game, but two more things were required before Morningstar would decide to publish his first game. The first was Ron Edwards, who not only played the game and praised it, but also encouraged Morningstar to refine his original design, and then *publish* it. Meanwhile, over on the Forge, Morningstar was seeing how easy it was for small press indie designers to publish their games. So, alongside friends Steve Segedy and Patrick M. Murphy, Jason Morningstar decided to give it a go.

The Bully Pulpit Games website was live by November 2005. Very soon, the crew was working on not one, but three games — though we're going to wait a bit to meet the other two. Meanwhile, The Shab-al-Hiri Roach was being revised again and *again*. By the time Murphy started testing out layouts for the game, around Thanksgiving 2005, the Roach was in its 45th revision — or at least the 45th since they started counting. This sort of heavy revision and comprehensive polishing would soon become a trademark of Morningstar's games.

> *"Taking something to a point where I wanted to share it with an audience, where I felt excited and proud of it, [where] I felt like it was worth distributing and ultimately charging people $20 for … that's a big deal, and I feel like that's a big responsibility."*
>
> – Jason Morningstar, Interview, See Page XX (June 2008)

Bully Pulpit's first game, *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach* (2006), went on sale on March 10, 2006. The company printed just 100 copies — a typical size for a small press indie game.

Bully Pulpit's cost to print the book was $475, but the cards that accompanied the game and the envelopes for mailing it added about $200 to the total. The company also had to sort and hand-collate 5,280 cards — the sort of extensive labor cost that typically doesn't get recorded at a small company. There aren't any economies of scale for such a small print run, so *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach*'s unit cost of $6.66 was pretty high for a book retailing at $20 — but again that's not unusual for an indie game that's intended to be sold direct.

Bully Pulpit managed to make back its book printing costs in about three days. All hundred copies of *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach* had sold out by May 12, just two months later — by which time Bully Pulpit had ordered a second printing. Most of those 200 reprints went to Bully Pulpit's new partner, IPR, who put *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach* into wider circulation. IPR did just as well as Bully Pulpit, selling their 180 copies by September 26.

Mini-History

Game Chef: 2002-Present

Game Chef was inspired by contests running on the Gaming Outpost in its primordial days. The exact details have been lost, but various sources suggest that they were a variety of Gaming Outpost contests – with lengths of 24 hours, 28 hours, and a week – and that one of the first was run by Clinton R. Nixon and Jared Sorensen.

Mike Holmes invented Game Chef in its modern form on the Forge in 2002. It was taken over by Andy Kitkowski in 2005 and then by Jonathan Walton in 2009. It's moved about over the years too, going to 1K1MT, then to its own site, then back to the Forge and 1K1MT. The importance of Game Chef to the industry (and especially to the indie segment of the industry) was noted in 2006 when it was nominated for the Diana Jones Award – though it lost out to Irish game convention charity auctions.

Each year, Game Chef offers a theme and a set of ingredients; the theme is intended to shape the contest entries, which also must use some of the ingredients. Designers have a short time to produce their games, which are then judged. Game Chef has produced a surprising number of designs that have gone on to be professionally published indie games – though that's rarely been true for the actual winners of the contest.

After being in business for just about a year, Bully Pulpit had proven not only that they could bring a game to publication, but also that there was an audience for their creativity. With that said, we're now ready to examine Bully Pulpit's first game in some depth, because the trends that Morningstar, Murphy, and Segedy revealed in those first published pages would continue to permeate Bully Pulpit's games through the next several years.

The Shab-al-Hiri Roach is a one-session game of black comedy that's played over six events — each of which contains several scenes. The players take on the roles of professors and assistant professors at a New England University, and then they engage in a battle for reputation. There's a catch: an alien roach has invaded the university and is taking over the brains of the staff, faculty, and students. At any time, some or all of the characters might be taken over by the roach.

There are two important mechanics that drive the game.

The first is a system of cards that determines who's taken over by the roach, who's freed from it, and what those players must do within an event: normal characters get Opportunities while roach-controlled character get Commands, but both of them tend to drive action within the scenes.

Mini-History

Here's a list of Game Chef contests over the years:

2002: Iron Game Chef, with ingredients of Africa, art, court, and numerology. Vincent Baker and Jonathan Walton were among the six entrants of this first Game Chef.

2003: Simulationist theme, with ingredients of blood, song, sphere, and volcano. *Tooth & Claw* (2003), by Jared Sorensen, was one of the first Game Chef entries professionally published by its author.

2004: Fantasy theme, with ingredients of assault, dawn, ice, and island. This was a high point for the contest, as several notable games have since been published, including: *The Dance and the Dawn* (2009), *Ganakagok* (2009), *The Mountain Witch* (2005), and *Polaris* (2005).

2005: Historical theme, with ingredients accuser, companion, entomology, invincible, and wine. This was the contest that got Bully Pulpit Games its start, with *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach* (2006). *Bacchanal* (2005) by Paul Czege was another entry.

2006: Time theme, with two sets of ingredients: ancient, committee, emotion, and glass; and actor, law, steel, and team. One of the finalists was *Decade* (2006) by Jessica Hammer. *The Holmes and Watson Committee* (2007), an entrant by Troy Costisick, rather uniquely describes itself as "a mystery solving roleplaying game."

2007: FunGameCorp theme with two sets of ingredients: currency, drug, memory, and palace; and inconsistency, rose, sacred, and thread. Fred Hicks was one of the winners this year for his "Schizonauts." *A Penny for My Thoughts* (2009), by Paul Tevis, was another entry that year – and was ironically published by Hicks' Evil Hat.

2008: The unique "Artists First!" Game Chef was made up of 29 artistic ingredients.

2009: Icon Intrigue theme with ingredients of fleur-de-lis, dividers, seabird, and star.

2010: Journey theme with ingredients of city, desert, edge, and skin.

2011: William Shakespeare theme with ingredients of daughter, exile, forsworn, and nature. One of the entrants was *Durance* (2012) by Jason Morningstar. Mark Truman's *Fate*-based *The Play's The Thing* (2012) went more directly to the Shakespearian core of the contest.

2012: A "Last Chance" theme, where the game could only be played once. Ingredients included coyote, doctor, lantern, and mimic, plus four game design threads from the Forge. To date this was the largest Game Chef, with 82 games in English and 15 in Italian – 97 in total.

2013: Five bizarre icons represented the theme and ingredients of this year's contest.

2014: A "There is No Book" theme, meaning that entries shouldn't be in a standard book format, with ingredients of absorb, wild, glitter, and sickle.

The second is a system of conflicts. Players each get the opportunity to define an individual scene within each event. When describing a scene, a player also gets to set the stakes of the conflict within that scene (e.g., what good thing happens if they win and what bad thing happens if they lose) and create a bid of reputation. When a scene is played out, players and NPCs alike choose sides in the conflict, then a bunch of dice are rolled — some for the scene-setter and some against. The result determines what happens, based on the predetermined stakes.

> *"It's a game that was definitely au currant for the 2004-2005 Forge crowd – stake-setting is front and center, it is GM-less, and it has a tight thematic focus."*
> – Jason Morningstar, Interview, Flames Rising (August 2008)

There are numerous aspects of *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach* that are notable and that foreshadow the future development of Bully Pulpit — so we're going to look into this game at some length.

First, *Roach* is very constrained. It's not a horror game in the style of *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) that could be used to tell an infinite number of stories in settings as disparate as the Dreamlands and Future Earth. Instead, it tells a very specific story in a tightly constrained setting, using a single type of character and pre-defined scenes. That's one major path for indie design in a nutshell. Because they're small press, they don't *have* to offer up big, multi-use game systems. Instead they can tell small, personal stories.

Second, *Roach* is very structured. Its play is split among six specific Events, each of which tends to feature one scene per player. We'll see this level of structure again in later Bully Pulpit games like *Grey Ranks* and (to a lesser extent) *Fiasco*.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, *Roach* is GM-less — following in the footsteps of *Universalis* (2002). Individual players set the scenes and the stakes for the scenes, and then the dice determine the results.

Story Game or Roleplaying Game?

A lot of indie games walk the border between story game and roleplaying game, and Bully Pulpit's publications may do so more than most.

They're sort of roleplaying games, because (to look at the term literally) players take on roles in all of Bully Pulpit's games, and tend to play those roles in most of the scenes. However, they're sort of story games, because most of them are single-session games where players can take on multiple roles, where their characters can die before the session's end, and where story is really front and center.

Morningstar doesn't actually like the term "GM-less," because it encompasses too many possibilities. Instead he prefers to say that *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach* distributes authority differently than a traditional RPG. Each player has near total authority in creating an individual scene, but in the end, dice determine the actual outcome.

To date, GM-less play has been the trademark of the Bully Pulpit Games, as all of Morningstar's major releases have focused on it in different ways. Most of them use the same authority-distribution model as *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach* — rotating scene-setting authority throughout the game, but determining the results via different methods (from the die rolling of *Roach* to the more clear-cut division of authority found in *Fiasco*).

Before we leave GM-less play behind, we should note that it's part of a spectrum. Games like *Universalis*, *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach*, *Breaking the Ice* (2005), and *Polaris* (2005) are entirely GM-less. However Jonathan Walton places these on a continuum that includes "homogeneous player roles," "heterogeneous player roles," and "multiple different roles." The vast majority of indie games lie *somewhere* on this spectrum — even GM-ed games like Jared Sorensen's *InSpectres* (2002) or John Wick's *Houses of the Blooded* (2008) that just cede *some* GM authority to players, based on the results of a die roll.

> *"Is authority evenly or unevenly divided? Is authority isolated, binary or universal when invoked? Is authority sequenced or is it a constant? You need to make some decisions about this that, were you designing a GM-centric game, would not be an issue at all."*
>
> – Jason Morningstar, Interview, The Hopeless Gamer (February 2010)

Fourth, *Roach* was influenced by the Vi Åker Jeep Group — a Nordic school of freeform design. These games tend to be very intense and are often related to real-world concerns. They offer a very different vision of what roleplaying could be, and it's interesting to see their influence in a (somewhat) more traditional roleplaying design. The influence of the Jeep group continues throughout Morningstar's various games, with *Grey Ranks* perhaps being the most notable.

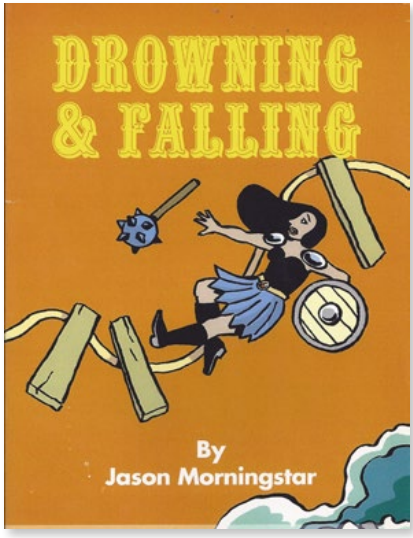
Beyond its mechanical aspects, *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach* was a well-produced book thanks to The Mad Irishman. The actual layout of the book is mainly functional, but it also includes "artifact" pages, which meld together period-style images related to the college and the roach; the result creates a strong feeling of verisimilitude. Beautifully produced books will continue to be a theme in Bully Pulpit's production — even after Murphy's departure — and are something that sets the company apart from some other small press indie publishers.

As we've already seen, the *Roach* sold well for a small press indie game. It also received some critical attention: Kenneth Hite gave it an Outie Award in January 2007, naming it the "best sui generis RPG of 2006."

A bit more than a year after the *Roach*'s release, Bully Pulpit published a supplement, *The Roach Returns* (2007), which went on sale at Gen Con Indy 2007. It presented two new settings for *The Roach*: a WWII England locale written by Jason Morningstar, and an Oxford locale written by Graham Walmsley, who was best known as the author of *Play Unsafe* (2007).

By that time, however, Bully Pulpit had no less than three RPGs out, as 2006-2007 was the one of the busiest periods of creativity ever for the young company.

Two Small Games, One Big Award: 2005-2009



Remarkably, before Bully Pulpit had even published *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach*, two other games were in process: one was in playtesting, while art was being commissioned for the other.

Of the two games, *Drowning & Falling* (2006) appeared first and had the shorter production period. Morningstar started thinking about the game in January 2006 when a wit at the Story Games site suggested that the definition of story games should say that they "may or may not contain specific rules for drowning and/or falling." It was a commentary on the extensive simulation systems found in most traditional RPG games — which usually included rules for drowning and falling.

Morningstar decided to design a game *entirely* about drowning and falling. Bully Pulpit had the game ready to go by August 2006, and so was able to sell it (alongside *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach*) at Gen Con Indy 2006. They did so from the Forge booth — as was typical for small indie publishers. Profits from the sales of *Drowning & Falling* were donated to a charity: ORBIS International.

Drowning & Falling was described by Morningstar as a "love letter to the oldest of skools." It's a largely satirical game that makes fun of *D&D*, and of drowning and falling. The game's most interesting element is (unsurprisingly) its GM-less play, where players use playing cards to create challenges for the group.



After creating two games with comedic elements, Morningstar was interested in stretching his wings, so that he didn't get known as the funny-RPG guy. That's definitely what happened when he wrote his third RPG, *Grey Ranks* (2007); instead of a comedy, it was a tragedy.

Grey Ranks got its start as yet another contest entry. This one was for "Iron MACE," a Game Chef-like contest that was being held for the first time in November 2005 at the MACE gaming convention in North Carolina. It required the designers to create a game that included the ingredients "ruined city" and "romance." Morningstar not only took the challenge, but he was also deemed the winner — thanks in part to judge and indie publisher Luke Crane.

After the game's contest success, Morningstar started thinking about publishing *Grey Ranks* through Bully Pulpit. However, he felt like the MACE edition of *Grey Ranks* was totally unplayable; it took 40 drafts before Morningstar felt like he was getting it right. In all, the game underwent 18 months of historical research and mechanical revision. Bully Pulpit finally shipped it off to the printer in July 2007 and had it back by August. They had it ready for sale (alongside *The Roach Returns*) for Gen Con Indy 2007. They once again sold it from the Forge booth, though this time Bully Pulpit was a primary sponsor.

If *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach* had a small scope of the sort that you could only find in an indie game, then the focus in *Grey Ranks* was as precise as a laser. It covered the "sixty days of armed rebellion" that made up the Warsaw Uprising of 1944; players took on the roles of members of the Grey Ranks — child soldiers and resistance fighters.

Grey Ranks shared many of the successful characteristics of *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach*. It was tightly structured, with play occurring over 10 specific dates; it was GM-less; and players took turns laying out scenes. Unlike *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach* (which had a competitive element), *Grey Ranks* was entirely cooperative: players have to pool their dice to beat ever more difficult target numbers as the game goes on.

However, *Grey Ranks* contained a number of stunningly innovative and evocative features as well.

"I've spent a lot of time thinking about what it must have been like to be sixteen in Warsaw in 1944. What does it mean to serve a doomed ideal?"

– Jason Morningstar, Designer's Notes, Grey Ranks (2007)

First, as promised by the keywords, *Grey Ranks* contrasted the warfare of 1944 Poland with romance, in the form of the first loves of these young freedom fighters. This created a tense and emotional basis for play — but the emotional core of the game went beyond that. Players could literally sacrifice their character's beliefs in order to try and achieve success on their missions. Meanwhile, they inexorably spiraled outward on an emotional "grid" that ultimately pushed the characters toward martyrdom, suicide, derangement, or nervous breakdown.

The characters ultimately have to choose between their missions and their emotional well-being — between their young love and the good of Poland. And, in the end, they're doomed, for the Nazis are fated to defeat the uprising on October 3, 1944.

The resulting game — played out over three sessions — is emotionally taxing and generally exhausting. It's not for everyone. However, it's also one of the most "serious" and emotional roleplaying games on the American market, standing alongside Ron Edwards' *Spione* (2007), a game of Cold War Espionage set in Berlin, and a few others.

Grey Ranks won Indie Awards for innovation and for overall design. Much more notably, it won the 2008 Diana Jones Award for excellence in gaming. It was a notable achievement for a young indie company that had produced just four products total.

Unsurprisingly, Morningstar was already onto the next thing or the next *things*. Between 2006 and 2008, Morningstar discussed any number of roleplaying games that he was working on. Most of them were mentioned once and then disappeared, including: "DwarfQuest," a choose-your-own-adventure supplement for *Drowning & Falling*; "The Sin-Eaters," a game set in a Nordic world focused on "the currency of disgrace"; "Bear Lake," which was described as "*Polaris* for shaky vets meets *Wisconsin Death Trip*"; "Open Boat," a game of "cannibalism ... on the high seas"; "War Dogs," a political commentary disguised as a game; and "Night Witches," a game about Soviet airwomen during World War II. Some never got written, some were submitted for contests, and some got a fair amount of work before being set aside. However two games took up most of Morningstar's attention in this time period.

One was "Business Solutions," which Morningstar began work on in November 2006, while he was playtesting *Grey Ranks*. He described it as "the roleplaying game of life and love among photocopy repair." By February 2008, it had gone through 60 drafts, Morningstar was saying the game was 95% done, and Murphy was looking at the layout, but the game never appeared.

The other game was "Medical Hospital," which Morningstar began work on in 2007. This hospital RPG would have mimicked the stories of soap operas, full of "A" plots, "B" plots, and character subplots. It was also going to include real-time tactile elements, as players rearranged index cards to simulate operations. Unfortunately, it too fell to the wayside — though Morningstar has continued to work on it off and on up to the present day.

> *"I had a playtest-fest yesterday; Clinton did a splenic bypass. I'd been at a creative impasse with Business Solutions in particular and that's over now. The thing I'm doing with Medical Hospital – the tactile, player-skill-equals-character-success thing – turns out to be just the ticket for Business Solutions as well."*
>
> – Jason Morningstar, "Playtesting, Moving Forward," bullypulpitgames.com (June 2008)

Just as Morningstar is willing to revise his games extensively, he's also not afraid to set them aside if they aren't "completely awesome" — or if their production isn't possible with current technology. It seems entirely possible that "Medical Hospital" (and probably even "Business Solutions") will return some day in some form, but they didn't appear in 2007 and 2008 when Morningstar was giving then extensive attention. As a result, Bully Pulpit didn't see any publications for two years following their well-acclaimed *Grey Ranks*. Compared to the two new books available at each of their first two Gen Cons, it was a big change.

Though Bully Pulpit didn't see any releases in these years, Morningstar had a new publication from an unlikely source: his old "Dungeon Squad" game was printed in a Spanish newspaper (2009) in Mexicali, Baja California — where it went out to 10,000 readers. A few years later, Dungeon Squad it would also be published in Czech (2011) — not bad for a contest entry that Morningstar had released into the Creative Commons.

Meanwhile, new Bully Pulpit publications would have to wait until December 2009. Perhaps this was in part due to the question of how Morningstar could possibly top the award-winning *Grey Ranks*. If so, Morningstar came up with the answer: a game that would out-circulate even that massive newspaper publication.



A Roleplaying *Fiasco:* 2008-Present

Bully Pulpit's next game, *Fiasco* (2009), would be as well-received as *Grey Ranks*, but in the end it would be a much more popular and commercially successful game.

Fiasco got its start as "Hat Creek," a game focused on collaboratively creating an Old West town and playing out its history over multiple generations. There were tons of people in the game (a town's worth), and those people had relationships — which was what ultimately struck Morningstar as the strength of the game. However, Morningstar decided that these webs of relationships were timeless, and so shouldn't be constrained to just the Old West.

Morningstar opted to move Hat Creek to a new, larger genre: the darkly comedic genre of heists gone wrong, seen in movies like *A Simple Plan* (1998), *Fargo* (1996), and *Blood Simple* (1984). Morningstar felt this new genre would fit well for groups of 3-5 people. It also provided new opportunities for the game — as a crime gone wrong can be played out in many different places and times.

Fiasco was in a pretty solid form by the end of 2008 and was undergoing comments and editorial work by Segedy at the start of 2009. John Harper was doing the artwork by June, but it took until December for Bully Pulpit to release the final PDF of the game to fans who preordered it. Print copies of the book appeared in January 2010.

In the end, *Fiasco* was Bully Pulpit's most approachable game to date. *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach* had clearly been intended for the Forge crowd, and so was probably unapproachable by gamers who were less knowledgeable about indie games; while *Grey Ranks* provided a much clearer foundation for its gameplay, but was still a pretty intimidating game because of its setting and highly emotional content.

By contrast, *Fiasco* feels light as air. The rules are simple and introductory. The gameplay is full of plot hooks that help players to develop their scenes. Because the genre is so wide — at least compared to the constrained settings of *The Shab-al-Hiri Roach* and *Grey Ranks* — players can more easily make it their own. This is all complemented by the layout of the book, which included Murphy's last work for the company he co-founded. It's full of white space, big tables, and iconic

two-color pictures that together make the game feel *easy*. All told, *Fiasco* was the first Bully Pulpit game that had the potential to make it to the RPG mass market.

But before it gets there, we should comment briefly on *Fiasco*'s mechanics.

Most of *Fiasco*'s notable elements stem from the game's setup, which begins each session of play. It creates a very clever collection of gaming elements that drive the game. True to Morningstar's original vision, each pair of players around the table creates a relationship between their characters. Then, each relationship gets a detail, which can be a need, a location, or an object. Players will exploit these relationships and their details over the course of the game.

All of the game's setup elements come from a "playset," which defines the sort of game that's being played. The original *Fiasco* game contains four: Main Street, Boom Town, Suburbia, and The Ice. From our viewpoint, Boom Town is the most notable because it's a western that surely inherited elements from "Hat Creek." Meanwhile Main Street and Suburbia offered more traditional settings for heist stories while The Ice, set in Antarctica, showed how far the game system could stretch.

In its actual gameplay, *Fiasco* is GM-less (naturally). It lets the players take turns wielding authority — much as in Morningstar's three previous Bully Pulpit Games. Players alternate having "spotlight scenes," but this doesn't mean the player necessarily gets to frame the scene. Instead, he must decide between controlling the creation of the scene and controlling its resolution. If he chooses to establish the scene, then the other players decide whether it should be resolved positively or negatively; if he chooses to resolve the scene, then the other players get to establish what exactly is going on. It's an amazingly simple mechanic that spreads out the authority so that no one player can decide *everything* about *anything*.

> *"As far as I'm concerned the guy in charge has all the fun, so in Fiasco the authority is evenly divided, and everyone is making stuff up and putting pressure on their friend's characters all the time."*
>
> – Jason Morningstar, "Designer's Notes," Fiasco (2009)

Fiasco could have gone mainstream just based on its approachability, its simple mechanics, and its wide-open genre and setting. However, Bully Pulpit also pushed it hard from the start. Beginning in January 2010, they offered new playsets as free downloads on a monthly basis. Some of these playsets — like "Reconstruction" (June 2010), "Dallas 1963" (October 2010), "London 1593" (November 2010), and "Dragon Slayers" (December 2010) — showed how expansive the game system could be. The free-playset-a-month project continued for three full years, until the end of 2012.

Mini-History

The Diana Jones Award: 2001-Present

The Diana Jones Award "for excellence in gaming" was first awarded on August 4, 2001. It's since been given on a yearly basis to the person, place, or thing deemed most worthy. The Diana Jones Award has focused partially on indie games that are particularly innovative. However, it has also been granted to a few board games and other more far flung honorees.

Unlike most awards, the Diana Jones Award is selected by an anonymous committee of gaming professionals; and unlike most awards it's a singular accolade. For these reasons, some consider the Diana Jones Award to be the most prestigious in gaming. Each winner receives the Diana Jones Award trophy for a year's time; it's a Perspex pyramid containing the remnants of TSR's last copy of *The Adventures of Indiana Jones* (1984); the name of the award comes from the burnt ruins of that game's title.

To date, the winners have been:

2001: Peter Adkison
2002: Ron Edwards and *Sorcerer*
2003: (tie) *Nobilis*, Second Edition; Jordan Weisman
2004: *My Life with Master*
2005: *Ticket to Ride*
2006: Irish Game Convention Charity Auctions
2007: *The Great Pendragon Campaign*
2008: (tie) *Grey Ranks*; Wolfgang Baur and Open Design
2009: *Dominion*
2010: Boardgamegeek.com
2011: *Fiasco*
2012: *Nordic Larp*
2013: *TableTop*
2014: *Hillfolk*

The free online playsets won *Fiasco* one of its many prizes: an Indie award for Best Support. *Fiasco* was also a runner-up for the Golden Geek and Indie Game of the Year Awards and won a Judges Award at the ENnies. However, *Fiasco* picked up its most notable award almost two years after its publication: the 2011 Diana Jones Award. Bully Pulpit & Jason Morningstar's win of the award was unprecedented, as no other designer or publisher had won it twice (to date).

Meanwhile, *Fiasco* has been supported by three additional publications. *The Fiasco Companion* (2011) appeared in mid-2011 — co-authored by Bully Pulpit

principals, Jason Morningstar *and* Steve Segedy. It was mainly full of advice on how to "hack" the game, but there were a few new playsets as well.



Bully Pulpit next published the PDF-only *American Disasters* (2012), a set of original playsets focused on the game's new "trainwreck" rules. Rather shockingly, *American Disasters* was Bully Pulpit's first commercial PDF-only release. Selling PDFs has long been a central focus of the indie industry; the fact that Bully Pulpit never previously created PDF-exclusive commercial content shows another way in which they've differed from the rest of the indie industry. A second PDF-only release, *Run, Fools, Run* (2013), offered more of the same.

Meanwhile, *Fiasco* got one more major boon thanks to former *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994) actor and gaming nerd, Wil Wheaton. At Gen Con Indy 2010, Chris Bennett's "Los Angeles 1936" playset for *Fiasco* was played by Paul Tevis, Will Hindmarch, Ryan Macklin, and Wil Wheaton. Wheaton afterward remained interested in the game. He wrote a foreword for *The Fiasco Companion* in 2011 and even offered his six personal rules of play. Then, almost two years after that Gen Con Indy game, Wheaton featured *Fiasco* on *TableTop* (2012-Present), Wheaton's popular web show highlighting various tabletop games — which itself won the 2013 Diana Jones Award. *Fiasco* appeared on the July 13, 2012 and July 27, 2012 shows. This was the first time that Wheaton had featured an RPG, and the first time that he'd spent two whole episodes on one game. It brought *Fiasco* to the attention of a whole new audience.

> *"If someone says 'Here's a suitcase," you say 'Yes, and inside the suitcase is the gun I'm going to jam into my mouth.'"*
>
> – Wil Wheaton, "Wheaton's Big Six," The Fiasco Companion (2011)

Prior to *TableTop*, *Fiasco* had already sold over 4,000 copies — a pretty notable number for an indie game, and likely Bully Pulpit's best game by far. Thanks to the "Wheaton Bump," Bully Pulpit sold another 4,000 copies of *Fiasco* just in their third quarter 2012 and brought the game's total sales up to 10,000 copies

by the end of the year. The *Companion* similarly jumped from 2,000 copies sold pre-Wheaton to 4,000 total by the end of the year.

Meanwhile, *Fiasco* was doing well in the wider world. A FiascoCon held at EndGame in Oakland in January 2012 showed off the local community support for the game. Internationally, translations have already appeared in French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Russian.

Just as with *Grey Ranks*, Bully Pulpit has to ask, how can we possibly top that!?

All the Worlds, A Stage: 2010-Present

Since 2009, *Fiasco* has been a major focus at Bully Pulpit. As we've seen, this resulted in the production of 36 online playsets, a full-length *Companion*, and two small commercial PDFs. However both Morningstar and Bully Pulpit have been doing other work in that time as well.

To start with, Morningstar published his first game outside of Bully Pulpit: *Love in the Time of Seið* (2010). It was an expansion of Matthijs Holter's *Archipelago II* (2009), an Earthsea-influenced story game also influenced by Morningstar's own *Archipelago II* spin-off, *Last Train out of Warsaw* (2009) — one of Morningstar's free releases. Both Morningstar *and* Jeepform-enthusisast Holter contributed to *Seið*, which took the game system from *Archipelago II* (and *Warsaw*) and used it to depict a Norse-themed fantasy kingdom on the brink of ruin. As with *Drowning & Falling*, the profits from *Love* went to a charity, this time the Mines Advisory Group.

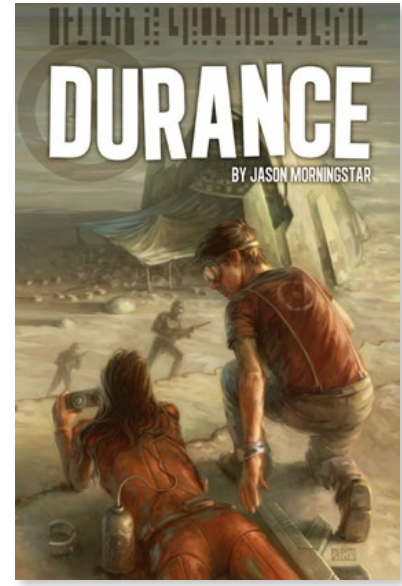
During the same time period, Morningstar also did freelance design for Pelgrane Press, writing *The Black Drop* (2010) and *Many Fires* (2011) for the *Trail of Cthulhu* (2008) RPG and contributing to *Out of Time* (2011) and *Out of Space* (2013).

As always, Morningstar continued writing for contests. One of those entries was of particular note: "Durance," which Morningstar wrote for Game Chef 2011. This new game focused on the contest's theme of William Shakespeare and its ingredients of "daughter," "exile," "forsworn," and "nature." Those elements got Morningstar thinking about the colonization of Australia in the 1780s and the 1790s. He ended up writing about a penal colony on a distant planet.

Morningstar was pleased with the Game Chef iteration of Durance, so in July 2011 he started iterating it for possible publication by Bully Pulpit. About a year later, he had a polished game ready to go. Bully Pulpit then decided to take advantage of the newest advances on the internet, and pushed Durance out as their first Kickstarter, raising $27,458 from 639 backers. Several months later, *Durance* (2012) was released in both a softcover and a limited-edition hardcover that was Bully Pulpit's first foray into hard-bound publication.

"Honestly, things in Durance have the possibility to go bad at a completely different scale than Fiasco, but it's still about the unraveling of the people."

–"Michael," "Six Things I Learned about Durance," Futile Position (August 2012)



The game combines many successful elements from past Bully Pulpit games while still maintaining a lot of originality. It's a GM-less game where individual players establish individual scenes (like everything Bully Pulpit has done), it's playable in as little as one session (like most of Bully Pulpit's games) and the players create the setting and their characters as part of play (like in *Fiasco*). It also has a really tight focus (like everything but *Fiasco*): a prison planet. However the setting is only somewhat limited by that minimalist description, as the players get to detail what the planet actually is.

One of the most interesting elements of *Durance* is that each player gets *two* characters: one of them a convict, and the other someone on the side of authority. Each character also swears an oath — describing something that he'll never do; this is a core idea for the game, as the game ends only when enough people have broken their oaths.

Morningstar divides up the authority for creating and resolving scenes in *Durance* in another unique way. This time, a "guide" gets a scene going by asking a question that the scene will answer — a technique that Morningstar borrowed from Ben Robbins' *Microscope* (2011). The *rest* of the players then establish the actual scene in order to address the scene's question.

Once a scene has been played out, the players learn how it resolves. The guide rolls dice that tell him (somewhat abstractly) whether the resolution focuses on servility, savagery, or a third attribute specifically related to the planet that the players created. The guide can even manipulate these results a bit — and *might* get to choose between some of those options. Overall, *Durance* combines a two-part scene establishment with a resolution that combines randomness and determinism — creating yet another way to distribute authority.

Since the publication of *Durance*, Bully Pulpit has produced two smaller games.

Jason Morningstar's *Carolina Death Crawl* (2013) actually entered playtesting way back in April 2009 — meaning it predates *Fiasco*. Morningstar almost finished it at that time, but found that producing the game was limited by the then-current state of card printing. It was only when DriveThruCards came online as a spin-off of DriveThruRPG in 2013 that Bully Pulpit was able to publish.

This Gothic RPG fits right in with Bully Pulpit's themes. It's card-driven and competitive (like *Roach*) and it covers a very specific setting: the Tar River Valley in July 1863, during Potter's Raid in the American Civil War. A character dies at the end of each of the three acts, and the players each try to not be that person.

Finally, Jason Morningstar's *The Climb* (2013) is a new direction for Bully Pulpit, as it's a six-person LARP. It comes with a 91-minute MP3 that's a countdown for the game. Though it's GM-less (as usual), it requires a facilitator.

Thus far, neither *Durance*, *Carolina Death Crawl*, nor *The Climb* looks like Bully Pulpit's next *big* thing, but they highlight the company's continued innovation within the small category of indie GM-less games.

As with some other indie publishers, Bully Pulpit has been quite open about their sales, so we can take a more analytical look at their products over the last few years. The following chart shows unit sales per year:

Game	2011 Sales	2012 Sales
Durance		1,240
Fiasco	2,340	7,794
Fiasco Companion	1,126	3,095
Fiasco: American Disasters		220
Grey Ranks	58	50
The Shab-al-Hiri Roach	131	140
The Roach Returns	33	45

The sales for *Fiasco* are good for the modern roleplaying market. Almost any publisher would be happy to have them, indie or not. *The Fiasco Companion* has similarly done well, but it's too early to say anything about *American Disasters*, which went on sale at the very end of December 2012.

The majority of Bully Pulpit's catalog — consisting of older, indie games — performs at a lower level. This isn't surprising as they're games for a small audience. However the sales of the company's latest game, *Durance*, suggest that the company *may* have made it outside that indie audience and could now be selling to the RPG mass market.

Mini-History

Lame Mage Productions: 2005-Present

Ben Robbins entered roleplaying through the J. Eric Holmes' *Basic D&D* Set (1977). Though he wrote a Senior Psych Thesis on roleplaying and though he played around with co-designing a fantasy heartbreaker called "The Gygax Project," Robbins didn't try his hand at publication until the mid-'00s.

It all started with Robbins' *Zodiac Ring* (2005), the first third-party adventure published for *Mutants & Masterminds* second edition (2005). Although originally released as a PDF, it later appeared as a print-on-demand product too, thanks to lulu.com. *Zodiac Ring* was followed by the freebie *Dr. Null: Battle on the Bay Bridge* (2006), a *Dr. Null* trilogy of adventures (2006-2007), and a few others. By 2007, Robbins probably had more *M&M* adventures under his belt than any other author.

Robbins was also proving a notable publisher in other ways. For one thing, he was really thinking about how to make his adventures evocative and memorable. "Action Shticks" involved players in genre-appropriate action scenes like bomb defusings and car chases; while Revelations revealed new things about character or backstory. Robbins was also working on improving the experience for the GM – to allow him to run better adventures. To this end, he created GM cheat sheets, friendlier stat boxes, and annotated maps.

However, Robbins wasn't content to stick with Green Ronin's Superlink program. In 2008, he started releasing free supplements for games with a decidedly indie slant, including *InSpectres* (2002) and *AGON* (2006). Around this time he hit 1,000 total sales, and then Lame Mage's production stopped for a few years. That's because Robbins was completely reinventing the company. What had started out as a supporter of the post-d20 market was instead going to become an indie publisher.

Robbins' premiere RPG was a GM-less story game called *Microscope* (2011). It allows a small group of players to collaboratively build a history. Much of the game is played by adding eras and events to a master timeline, but the group can also roleplay individual scenes to answer questions within the history – an innovation that was later used by Jason Morningstar for *Durance* (2012). Unlike most story games, *Microscope* can also be played through many sessions, iteratively defining the same setting. Rather uniquely, it can also be used to create the setting for another roleplaying game.

More recently Robbins Kickstarted a second story game, *Kingdom* (2013), raising $30,303 from 1,113 backers. *Kingdom* similarly details the secrets of a setting – this time by examining what a specific organization does as it reaches important crossroads. Like *Microscope*, *Kingdom* can also be integrated into an existing RPG campaign by revealing insights into the campaign's organizations (be they countries, guilds, kingdoms, or something else).

"I'm working on an Apocalypse World hack where you play secret police in a totalitarian society, and a children's RPG about corpse-snatching in the 1880s, and of course my white whale, Medical Hospital. … There's always something."

– Jason Morningstar,
"A Conversation about Durance,"
Go Forth and Game (July 2012)

Whether that continues to be the case going forward is a question for the future. As usual, Jason Morningstar has several games in process, including an *Apocalypse World* (2010) variant and (once more) both Medical Hospital and Night Witches, so there will be ample opportunities to see how the *next* game sells.

What to Read Next ○

- For more on the Forge, Ron Edwards, and *Spione*, read ***Adept Press***.
- For Luke Crane, a judge at the first Iron MACE competition, read ***Burning Wheel***.
- For one of the games that popularized stake-setting, read ***Lumpley Games***.
- For one of the games that popularized GM-less play, read ***Ramshead Publishing***.
- For Open Design, which Bully Pulpit shared the 2008 Diana Jones Award with, read ***Kobold Press***.
- For another "love letter" to *D&D*, read about *Torchbearer* in ***Burning Wheel***.
- For *Trail of Cthulhu*, which Morningstar has written for, read ***Pelgrane Press***.
- For *Apocalypse World*, again read ***Lumpley Games***.

In Other Eras

- For *Melee*, the game that got Morningstar his start in amateur design, read ***Metagaming Concepts*** *['70s]*.
- For *GURPS*, the game that got Morningstar his start in professional publishing, read ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*.
- For *FUDGE*, the game that got Morningstar into lighter-weight designs, read ***Grey Ghost Press*** *['90s]*.

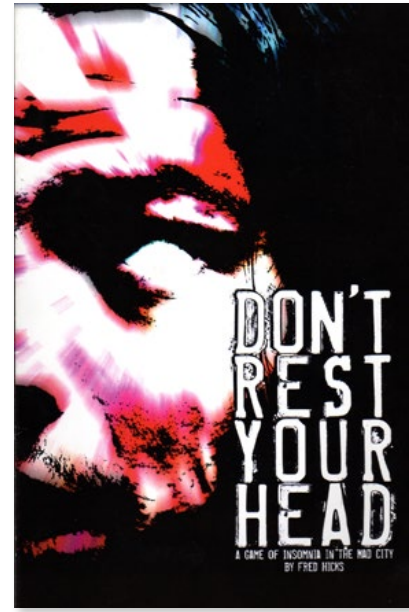
For another indie publisher that's found mass-market RPG success, read ***Evil Hat Productions.***

Evil Hat Productions: 2001–Present

Evil Hat is the story of a publisher born of two literary settings. Though the principals began designing for Roger Zelazny's Amber, they would end up working for half a decade to get things just right for Jim Butcher's "Dresdenverse."

Amber Origins: 1991-2001

The story of Evil Hat has roots in 1992 when Steffan O'Sullivan decided to create a "net.rpg." After previewing the system as *SLUG* (1992), he released it in a more complete form as *FUDGE* (1993), and then polished it up a few years later for publication by Grey Ghost Press (1995). O'Sullivan's game design toolkit was light and simple (for the most part). It centered on a ladder of traits with ranked stats, skills, *and* results — using the same scale for all three elements; a simple die-rolling system that supported this idea. All of this is described more fully in the history of Grey Ghost Press.



2006: Don't Rest Your Head

Enter Fred Hicks.

In the '90s, while in college, he was one of many gamers that discovered the *FUDGE* system while online. In 1999, he ran "Crown of Amber" using *FUDGE* — a campaign set in the universe of Roger Zelazny's Amber novels. FUDGE's ladder of traits offered a good basis for an Amber campaign. Like Erick Wujcik's *Amber Diceless Role-Playing* (1991), it could absolutely determine how a group of people ranked in the use of a specific skill or attribute.

However, *FUDGE* also had its issues. There had been long years of internet arguments about how to integrate attributes and skills — which were entirely unrelated in the *FUDGE* rules. *FUDGE* was also a toolkit: something that you could use to create game systems, but not an actual usable game. Hicks was thinking about some of these issues following the end of his Crown of Amber game, and how he might correct them.

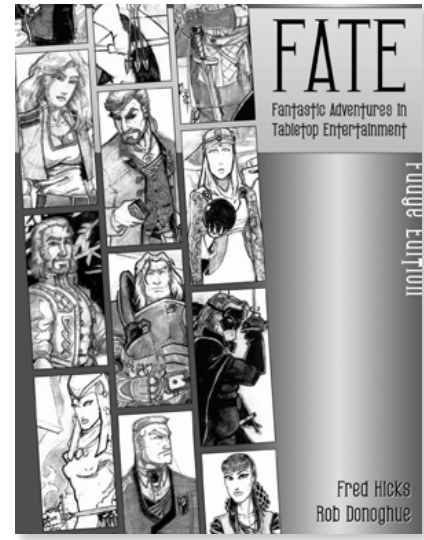
Fred Hicks was simultaneously working with Lydia Leong, Rob Donoghue, and others to run LARPs at AmberCon NorthWest. The first game they ran together was "Amber: Apocalypse" (1999). When the group returned two years later to run "Last Jack Down" (2001) and "Blood Ties" (2001), they even had a quirky name for themselves: Evil Hat. It was based on something that Leong — who Hicks calls "the Original Evil Hat" — had said offhandedly while online. Hicks, ever the marketer, immediately recognized it as an evocative group name.

Evil Hat, Amber, and the idea of a revamped *FUDGE* coalesced on a memorable trip to Lake Tahoe. During it, friends Hicks and Donoghue talked about Hicks' desire to run another Amber game — but only after fixing some of *FUDGE*'s problems. The result of that conversation was a new game built on *FUDGE*'s skeleton that would be called *FATE*. The "publisher" that Hicks and Donoghue listed for their system when they released it to the internet would (of course) be Evil Hat.

FATE Origins: 2001-2005

Hicks beta-tested his proto-*FATE* game system in a second Amber campaign, this one called "Born to Be Kings"; it ran from May 2001 to September 2002. One of *Fate*'s core ideas — which we'll return to momentarily — made its public debut in during the campaign in an article written by Hicks called "The Case for Aspects." It was published in the online magazine *FUDGE Factor #1* (October 2001).

It only took a few months after the campaign ended for Rob Donoghue and Fred Hicks to finish a complete first edition of their FUDGE-derived game system. They released it through Yahoo! Groups (January 2003) then cleaned up the technical writing and slightly polished the system for a second edition (August 2003) — which was the first comprehensive and complete version of *FATE*.



FATE, we should note, was originally an abbreviation that stood for "*FUDGE* Adventures in Tabletop Entertainment." It later became "Fantastic Adventures in Tabletop Entertainment," but today it's usually written as the uncapitalized "Fate."

Fate inherited two main elements from *FUDGE*: a hierarchical listing of traits which *Fate* called the "adjective ladder" (abysmal, terrible, poor, mediocre, average, fair, good, great, superb, epic, legendary); and the dice-rolling methods from *FUDGE* that produced an average result of +0. Those dice-rolling methods were sometimes a sore spot on the internet, because they required special *FUDGE* dice, so in the early days the Evil Hat crew labeled their *Fate* releases as being a "*FUDGE* edition," with a stated goal of producing variants of the game for other dice-rolling mechanics. These concerns have largely faded as *Fate* has grown in popularity.

Fate made huge expansions on *FUDGE*, turning a largely abstract and unspecific system into something more concrete — though it still remained a toolkit. A wide variety of examples helped in this process. Donoghue and Hicks also replaced some systems that they didn't like — such as the *FUDGE* combat system, which they found overly complex; they also expanded others — such as the skill system, which they constrained to a "skill pyramid," limiting skill advancement.

When considering the evolution of the roleplaying field as a whole, there are two particularly notable new mechanics in *Fate*, both of which came straight from the indie design movement of the '00s. These are aspects and phase-based character creation.

Aspects were originally born of dissatisfaction with attributes in *FUDGE*. From there, Donoghue and Hicks gradually reinvented the idea of personal attributes, producing a new sort of characteristic that provided deep and meaningful information about characters. This was done through a number of interesting advances:

First, *Fate*'s aspects were freeform. Rather than having all characters defined by the exact same characteristics, now each character was defined only by the characteristics that were particularly notable for them. To demonstrate the freeform nature of aspects, the *Fate* rules suggested that they could include: attributes (like "Strong"), descriptors (like "Charming"), careers (like "Musketeer"), or ties to

settings (like "Merry Man of Sherwood"). More advanced rules suggested that items, people, and even catch phrases could be aspects as well.

The idea of freeform attributes was quite innovative for RPGs — though they'd been seen a few times previously, in games like Jonathan Tweet's *Over the Edge* (1991), Ron Edwards' *Sorcerer* (1996, 2001), and Robin Laws' *Hero Wars* (2000). They've since become a *lot* more common, especially in indie games.

Second, aspects were resource-oriented. Rather than being constantly available, characters could only use each aspect a few times over the course of a game session, meaning that their usage had to be managed. Tactical resource management is another meme that's slowly bubbled throughout the indie movement. It's perhaps best known for its appearance outside the indie movement in *The Marvel Universe Roleplaying Game* (2003).

Third, aspects were complementary to skills. They could be used either to allow a reroll of a skill roll or to give a bonus to a skill roll. Having skills and attributes that work together is pretty normative for the industry, but this fixed a long-running issue with *FUDGE*.

Fourth, aspects were potentially negative. Rob Donoghue had liked the fact that John Wick's *7th Sea* (1999) required you to pay for "backgrounds" — which were what most games would call "flaws" or "disabilities." As a result, Donoghue considered negative aspects like "drunk" to be possibilities in the *Fate* system from the start. Though these negative aspects could have some drawbacks, players could still use them for beneficial effect in appropriate situations. For example, if a character with the "frequent drunkard" aspect hit the ground hard, he might ask to use his aspect to reroll his dice because he was limp from all the liquor.

> *"Aspects are designed to model a more literary convention, whereby things like strength only matter when the character is doing something interesting and has the focus of the scene."*
>
> – "Why Aspects," Fate 2.0 (August 2003)

Fifth, *Fate*'s aspects were generally designed to mirror literary conventions. This idea ran through most of the other underpinnings of the aspect system: once or twice in a game a character could step into the spotlight and do what he was renowned for doing, then step aside to let others take the fore. The result wasn't necessarily "realistic," but it was authentic to those literary narrations that Donoghue and Hicks were emulating.

Phase-based character creation built upon the foundation laid by aspects. It split a character's creation into six to eight "phases." During each phase, a player chose an aspect that described what his character was doing during that phase of their

Fred Hicks: Marketeer

In a 2005 interview at the RPG Blog, Fred Hicks and Rob Donoghue were asked why they were giving *Fate 2.0* away for free. Donoghue self-effacingly said, "Low self-esteem." Hicks, on the other hand, stated, "When it comes right down to it, I think most game companies should be offering their systems up for free – it lowers the resistance to people getting started on it, and that means more people playing it. More people means more word-of-mouth advertising, which is priced at a pretty affordable rate. If you want to charge for something, charge it for add-ons – settings, 'advanced rules', whatever."

The two designers' differing answers help to highlight one of Fred Hicks' strengths in the gaming industry: he's a consummate marketer, always figuring out new ways to get word out about his games. He's used websites, Facebook, Twitter, and forums. He's hosted the "That's How We Roll" podcast with retailer Chris Hanrahan. The author of these histories first learned of Fred Hicks' works when he started encouraging his fans to rate his games at the RPGnet Gaming Index.

Some of Hicks' marketing initiatives are the sort of thing that could change the industry, such as Evil Hat's "Brick & Mortar PDF Guarantee," which promises to send PDFs to hardcopy Evil Hat purchasers upon proof of purchase. The "Instant PDF Preorder" program offered an expansion of this idea by allowing retailers to take pre-orders of Evil Hat products and simultaneously give out PDFs. Interest in the *Dresden Files* release let Evil Hat involve dozens of retailers – some located internationally – in Instant PDF Preorders for that game.

Some of Hicks' groundbreaking marketing ideas have *already* snuck out into the rest of the industry. When Hero Games – who Hicks worked with as a layout artist – didn't have their sixth edition ready for Gen Con Indy 2009, they instead sold over 200 Instant PDF Preorders. More recently, in August 2010, Evil Hat was one of the founders of the Bits and Mortar initiative – alongside Arc Dream Publishing, Cellar Games, Cubicle 7, Pelgrane Press, and Rogue Games. The initiative pushed on all of the PDF ideas that Hicks advocated: giving PDFs to print customers and working actively with retailers to allow them to give away PDFs directly from their point of sale.

More recently, Hicks has also proved quite adroit in his crowdfunding, producing entire lines of books from singular Kickstarters and even creating new cheaper entry points like *Fate Accelerated* (2013).

All of this goes to show that good game designers sometimes have ideas for more than just games.

life, and took four skills appropriate to the aspect. The *Fate 2.0* rules suggested career-based aspects such as gypsy, herbalist, and knight — harkening all the way back to the career-based character generation of *Traveller* (1977) and the much-later *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (1986) — but more recent incarnations of *Fate* have opened up aspects in character creation considerably, highlighting the variety possible when using the freeform aspect system.

Fate was well-received following its release online. It quickly won recognition in the 2003 Indie RPG awards, where it was named the Best Free Game of the Year. An active internet community formed around the game that soon matched — and perhaps exceeded — that enjoyed by its parent, *FUDGE*. In 2005, Evil Hat was able to turn *Fate* into an OGL game, thanks to Grey Ghost Press changing the licensing of *FUDGE* itself, opening it up to easy use by other designers.

As interest in Evil Hat's free game system increased, Evil Hat itself was working on commercial games that would cement their position in the industry not just as internet philosophers, but also as real-life gamesmiths. Unfortunately, it would take seven years to get their *first* game to press.

Dresden Origins: 2003-2006

Our story now moves to a gentleman by the name of Jim Butcher. In days of yore he'd been a friend of some of the founders of Evil Hat. Where they had moved on to game design, Butcher entered another creative field: fiction writing. Inspired in part by the urban fantasy novels of Laurell K. Hamilton, he wrote a book called "Semiautomagic" about urban magician and detective Harry Dresden. It was eventually published by Roc Books as *Storm Front* (2000), becoming the first book in a series called the "Dresden Files."

Books in the urban fantasy genre tend to blend fantasy, horror, noir, and romance in varying amounts. Butcher's books focused largely on the first three — leaving out most of the romance. This might be one of the reasons that it appealed to existing fans of the fantasy genre — and to roleplayers as well. Whatever the reason, the books have done well in RPG crowds, and it was no surprise when Butcher's agent, Jennifer Jackson, started getting queries about roleplaying rights.

Jackson was a gamer too. She knew Butcher had friends in the field *and* that they'd recently won some roleplaying awards. So, upon receiving those queries, she asked if maybe Butcher's friends were the correct people to make an RPG for the *Dresden Files*. Butcher agreed and so he contacted the Evil Hat crew and asked if they'd like to create and publish a *Dresden Files* RPG.

That was the precipitating event that moved Evil Hat away from being a producer of LARPs and free online game systems and toward becoming a print RPG publisher.

"So there we were, with – quite honestly – zero publishing experience, and with the means for gaining that experience not yet clear (the print-on-demand movement was still slow to pick up speed) – getting asked by our good friend Jim to take his books and turn them into an RPG. To be honest, we just about lost our minds …"

– Fred Hicks, "The Dresden Files RPG: Schedule," dresdenfilesrpg.com (October 2009)

However, the road was not an easy one. Though the crew was able to quickly turn Evil Hat into a real company, from there things slowed down. Two problems became apparent right away.

First, Hicks and Donoghue weren't interested in building a game dependent on splatbooks and other supplements, and that meant that they had to create a really comprehensive rulebook for Dresden. They brought in Genevieve Cogman to do the research on Butcher's novels and its setting, but there was an enormous amount of work just in this one part of the game's creation — as there were already 6 *Dresden Files* books in 2004 and there would be 10 by the time that Evil Hat decided to cap what the game would cover.

Second, it turned out that *Fate 2.0* didn't have everything that was needed to create a *Dresden Files* game. Evil Hat started work on *Fate 3.0*, but after a year of tinkering decided that the changes to the system weren't working — so they threw everything out to start from scratch.

Along the way, late in 2004, Evil Hat made the mistake of announcing the *Dresden Files* license — a problem that would haunt them for the next six years, as they were constantly asked were the game was. Within a few years, The *Dresden Files* RPG had become one of the great "vaporware" games of the industry.

After the failure of the original *Fate 3.0*, Hicks decided that one of the problems he was facing was a lack of public feedback. He and Donoghue had been very in-touch with player communities when working on his first iteration of *Fate*, but because Dresden was a licensed game, Hicks felt that it couldn't be molded in quite the same way.

He came up with a unique solution: Evil Hat would backburner *Dresden Files* and instead publish *another* game that would introduce the *Fate 3.0* system. This would give Evil Hat some badly needed publishing experience and it would also give *Fate* fans an opportunity to look at and critique the new system. The new game would be set in the pulp genre — both because of Hicks and Donoghue's interest in the genre and because of its similarity to the noir genre of Dresden. It would be called "Spirit of the Century."

Hicks originally thought that Spirit of the Century "wasn't going to require too much effort," but it of course did. As a result, he ended up burned out on *Fate*

before he got Spirit of the Century to press — and so he decided to work on a side-project of his side-project. The result of *that* was yet another indie RPG called "Don't Rest Your Head," which would actually be Evil Hat's first published game.

The next four years would then see a slow unspooling of Evil Hat's stack, as they tried to get back to the game that had gotten them started.

Four Years of Publications: 2006-2010

Don't Rest Your Head (2006), by Fred Hicks, appeared about a year and a half after Evil Hat had first announced the *Dresden Files* to the world. Like most indie RPGs of the '00s it was a small, one-off game featuring an original setting and an original game system that was printed in a run of just a few hundred copies.

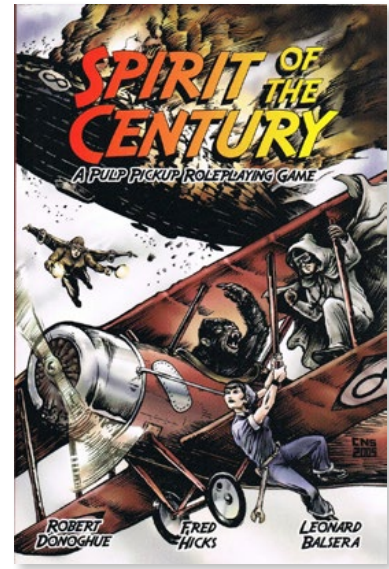
Don't Rest Your Head included some clever dice mechanics and some resources, all bound up in an evocative setting. People who can't sleep draw upon that insomnia for power. As they take actions, players can choose to use madness and exhaustion dice alongside their discipline dice — but if they do so, they might go around the bend, with either insanity or nightmares catching up. Hope and despair enter the game system as coins, which players and the GM exchange with either other to bend the story to their needs. When a GM uses despair he gives hope to the players and vice-versa; all participants in the game get to balance their authority for plot creation.

Don't Rest Your Head got good acclaim and quickly sold through Evil Hat's short POD print run. It also got attention at the Indie RPG awards, and was named the runner up for both the Indie Game of the Year and Most Innovative Game awards — with the Most Innovative Game award going to Jared Sorenson's *Lacuna* (2006) and the Indie Game of the Year award going to Evil Hat's other release of 2006.

That was *Spirit of the Century* (2006). The primary author of the game was Rob Donoghue, with key support from Leonard Balsera — formerly an internet *Fate* fan, now brought into Evil Hat to help finish this book. Fred Hicks was involved in the project too — until he burned out and decided to write *Don't Rest Your Head*.

As Evil Hat had intended, *Spirit of the Century* previewed the *Fate 3.0* system. It revamped some existing *Fate* systems and polished others, resulting in a more coherent and comprehensive whole. For example, Fate Points and aspects had been two different resources previously, but were now integrated. Other changes included the creation of a feat-like "stunts" system and a revamp of the combat system to use "stress tracks."

Most notably, *Spirit of the Century* used aspects much more extensively than the previous edition of the system, really expanding on the innovative mechanic. Aspects could now be found in locations. PCs could now "tag" aspects onto people



or places and then make use of them. When stress started to run out during combat, it could result in "consequences" such as broken bones and bruised ribs — which were aspects too.

Negative aspects were also better integrated into the system. Not only could a player use a negative aspect to his advantage, but a GM could also request ("compel") a player to roleplay a negative aspect in a way that made life harder for him. A Fate Point was exchanged during the compel, with the direction of payment depending on whether the player agreed to the hardship or not.

This was a fairly elegant answer to a problem with mental characteristics that dated back to at least Chaosium's *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985). Then, naysayers had complained that they couldn't entirely control their characters if a GM chose to make them act upon one of their personality traits. Now, the decision lay entirely in the hands of the player, as part of the resource-management of the game.

> *"I personally like to believe that Fate is fairly non-intrusive: it gets out of the way of your fun. It gives you some structure for building your stories, but it doesn't club you over the head with that structure."*
>
> – Fred Hicks, "The FATE Inteview," rpgblog.typepad.com (May 2005)

Spirit of the Century got great acclaim too. As already noted, it beat out *Don't Rest Your Head* at the Indies as the Indie Game of the Year. It also did well in the ENnies, winning a Silver for Best Rules and an Honorable Mention for Best Game. These ENnie awards really put Evil Hat on the map, though they'd still remain a fairly small press until 2010.

Perhaps more importantly, *Spirit of the Century*'s *Fate 3.0* system and its central idea of aspects proliferated in the years that followed. Fred Hicks has been peripherally involved in a few of these efforts. He did layout for Cubicle 7's *Starblazer Adventures* (2008) and in the process offered lots of editorial work. After VSCA Publishing in Canada put out their own science-fiction game, *Diaspora* (2009), Hicks noted that it was one of his favorites, and got it into wider distribution by reprinting it through Evil Hat (2010). Other *Fate* or *Fate*-inspired games have included Cubicle 7's *Legends of Anglerre* (2010), the superhero game

ICONS (2010), Galileo Games' newest version of *Bulldogs!* (2011) and a pair of "generic" *Fate* games: *Awesome Adventures* (2009) and *Strands of Fate* (2010).

After *Spirit*, Evil Hat got to work in earnest on Dresden, bringing another game designer — Chad Underkoffler — on board to help in 2007. Underkoffler had done some work for Atlas Games and Steve Jackson Games in the early '00s, but was best known for his PDQ indie games published through his own Atomic Sock Monkey Press.

In the end, project developer Ryan Macklin and managing editor Amanda Valentine oversaw work on the *Dresden Files*. Leonard Balsera took on the role of lead system developer while Chad Underkoffler became the lead setting developer, taking over the work that Genevieve Cogman had previously done. Fred Hicks and Rob Donoghue stayed on as two of the nine authors now writing for the game.

Though *Spirit* had been successful, there were rough spots in its *Fate 3.0* mechanics that appeared when it was tested out by hundreds of players — which was exactly why Hicks had wanted an open testing of the new system. Some of the work on *The Dresden Files* involved resolving those problems. This would result in changes to the way that stress tracks were used in combat, the introduction of a new "social" stress track, and the improvement of the advancement rules. Of course, there was also plenty of work required to get *Fate* working just right for the "Dresdenverse" and there would also be some expansion to make character creation into a cooperative effort that designed not just PCs, but also their city and its other denizens.

Evil Hat finally released a "bleeding alpha" to playtesters in January 2008 and a "burning alpha" that summer. They returned to design work in 2009 as the authors considered their feedback. A "bursting beta" would follow.

Meanwhile, Evil Hat continued on as an occasional publisher of indie RPGs. *Spirit of the Season* (2007) and *Don't Lose Your Mind* (2008) supplemented the company's early games, then Evil Hat put out two new RPGs during the next year.



A Penny for My Thoughts (2009), by Paul Tevis, was the sort of story game that Hogshead Publishing had been producing in its "New Style" line a decade before. Players of amnesiac characters ask leading questions of each other to find out their histories.

Swashbucklers of the 7 Skies (2009), by Chad Underkoffler, was a more traditional RPG. Set in a fantasy world of islands floating in the sky, it offers players the chance to heroically adventure

Mini-History

One Bad Egg: 2008-2009





Although he's best known for his work in the indie RPG community, Fred Hicks of Evil Hat Productions has several times acknowledged his love for the fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (2008) – primarily due to the visionary reinvention of the game by its designers. As such, when the GSL rolled out, Evil Hat was eager to support 4E. Unfortunately a ham-handed requirement of the original GSL forced 4E publishers to revoke the OGL. It was presumably intended to end support of the 3E game, but because Evil Hat's *Fate* system was released under the OGL, it caused a big problem.

As a result, Fred Hicks and Rob Donoghue of Evil Hat joined with Chris Hanrahan of EndGame, a gaming store in Oakland, and attorney Justin D. Jacobson to form a new company: One Bad Egg. Their goal was to publish high-quality 4E PDFs that supported storytelling. One Bad Egg kicked off their production with *Shrouded Paths: The Unbroken* (2008), a new paragon path for the paladin class by Donoghue and Hicks. It was followed by ten more PDFs through 2009. Some of them received ENnie nominations, including *Hard Boiled Ideas: Armies* (2009), a 35-page PDF that expanded the scope of 4E games to include large-scale army conflicts.

Unfortunately, One Bad Egg soon discovered the same lesson as most 4E publishers: sales were bad. In September 2009, Fred Hicks announced that the small imprint was closing down. One of the reasons was indeed those terrible sales: One Bag Egg had sold less than 300 copies of each of their products, and most had actually sold 100 copies or less. Another reason was Wizard's DDI – which has been an issue for all 4E licensees.

Because of DDI's Character Builder and Monster Builder, there really wasn't much space for anyone but Wizards to publish.

After closing down, One Bad Egg handed their PDFs off to HighMoon Games, Daniel Perez's PDF press.

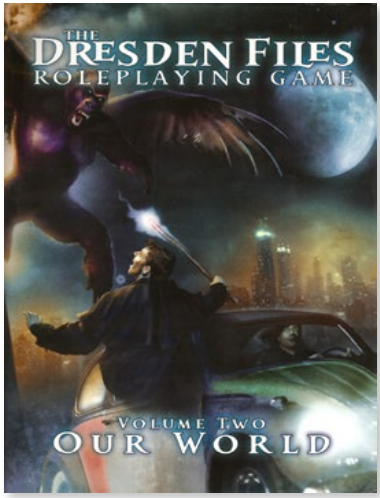
across the heavens. It uses Underkoffler's PDQ system, which shares some characteristics with *Fate* — such as its use of Fortes (or qualities), which could be freeform occupations, motivations, histories, or organizations. *Swashbucklers of the 7 Skies* was a well-polished game that showed the benefits of indie designers working together in a larger design house.

Both games received good attention, but as 2009 faded into 2010, fans of Evil Hat were becoming increasingly interested in something else. Rumors said that *The Dresden Files* RPG would appear (finally) that year.

Dresden Futures: 2010-Present

After years of work and planning, The *Dresden Files* was released at the Origins Game Fair on June 23, 2010, as two books: *The Dresden Files Roleplaying Game Volume One: Your Story* (2010) and *The Dresden Files Roleplaying Game Volume Two: Our World* (2010). Together they totaled 670 pages. Players beyond the convention got to see the game for the first time on July 10 at the West Coast Release party hosted by the EndGame game store in Oakland, California. The books became available through distribution shortly thereafter.





"We spent nearly five years on it, didn't compromise, and put out something that our friend Jim is excited about. We did right by him and right by what we believed we should do with the Dresden Files license."

– Fred Hicks, Interview, ennie-awards.com (October 2010)

Six years of hopes and expectations touted on the internet could have caused the game to fail if it'd shown the slightest flaw, but instead it maintained the same high standards that Evil Hat has shown throughout their publishing career. As a result it won the Origins Award for Best Roleplaying Game,

the Golden Geek Award for Game of the Year, and Golden ENnies for Best Writing, Best Rules, Best New Game, *and* Best Game.

The production of the game also got accolades, including a Silver ENnie for Best Production and a Golden Geek for Best Artwork/Presentation award. This was thanks to: plentiful full-color pictures, including chapter heads that portrayed notable events from the *Dresden Files* books; playful commentary "from" series characters Harry Dresden, Billy the Werewolf, and Bob the Skull running alongside the rules; and Fred Hicks' always attentive layouts.

Evil Hat's great white whale has been harpooned, but that isn't the end of the line for the line at Evil Hat. A third core rulebook, *The Paranet Papers* (2014?), will detail Harry's world. Evil Hat has also released a few free "casefile" adventures and even Peter Woodworth's *Hocus Focus* (2011), a Dresden playset for *Fiasco* (2010).

Kickstarting Futures: 2010-Present

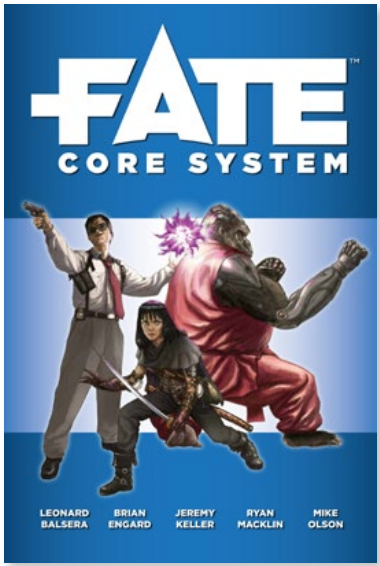
By the '10s, RPG publishers were starting to work with Kickstarters, and this was the source of funding for Evil Hat's next two original games, both created (and Kickstarted) by graphic and game designer Daniel Solis.

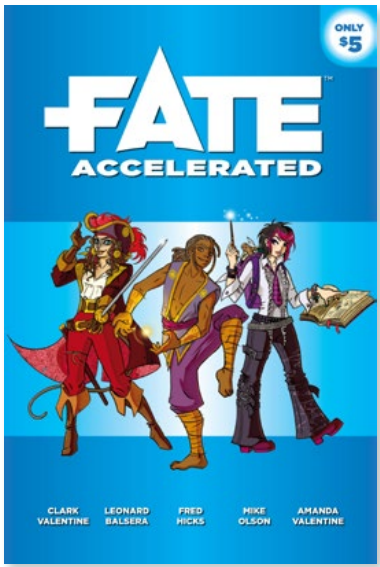
Daniel Solis' *Happy Birthday, Robot!* (2010) was a short story game. It's one of the few RPGs specifically aimed at kids, joining Firefly Games' *Faery's Tale* (2006) and a few games by John Wick Presents in a small subcategory.

Daniel Solis' *Do: Pilgrims of the Flying Temple* (2011) was a "slapstick fantasy storytelling game." Inspired in part by *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008), *Do* lets players collaboratively solve problems to tell a story. Although not as kid-oriented as *Happy Birthday, Robot!*, it's another light game that could be kid friendly.

By 2012, Evil Hat was ready to try Kickstarting on their own. This has resulted in several crowdfunding drives that have both been phenomenally successful and that have cannily allowed Evil Hat to increase their catalog by leaps and bounds.

Date	Product	Type	Goal	Raised	Backers
4/22/12	*The Dinocalypse Trilogy*	Fiction	$5,000	$42,769	1,516
7/24/12	*Race to Adventure!*	Board	$40,000	$52,117	884
1/29/13	*Fate Core*	RPG	$3,000	$433,365	10,103
5/21/13	*Fate Dice*	Dice	$10,000	$78,367	1,750
3/1/14	*Zeppelin Attack!*	Board	$21,700	$35,524	1,200
9/9/14	*Designers & Dragons*	Non-fiction	$7,500	$115,348	3,046





The first interesting aspect of Evil Hat's Kickstarters is that they've been used to expand the company into new categories of publication — including fiction, board games, dice, and (now) non-fiction. Evil Hat has also been using the Kickstarters to turn their RPG settings into more general IP, with both *The Dinocalypse Trilogy* (2012+) and *Race to Adventure!* (2013) based on the world of *Spirit of the Century*.

However Evil Hat's Kickstarters have been the most impressive for the way that they've leveraged the production of multiple products from each Kickstarters. Most obviously the *Dinocalypse* Kickstarter funded the production of three novels, while the *Designers & Dragons* Kickstarter will pay for four *Designers & Dragons* books.

Evil Hat has also cleverly used stretch goals to fund additional products. For example, the *Dinocalypse* Kickstarter funded four additional *Spirit of the Century* novels, including *Khan of Mars* (2013) by Stephen Blackmoore and *King Khan* (2013) by Harry Connolly. The Fate Dice Kickstarter resulted in eight different sets of dice (2013). Most impressively, the highly successful *Fate Core* Kickstarter resulted in the publication of seven different books: *Fate Core* (2013), *Fate Accelerated* (2013), *Fate System Toolkit* (2013), two volumes of *Fate Worlds* (2013), *Strange Tales of the Century* (2013), and the YA novel *Sally Slick & The Steel Syndicate* (2013). All told, Evil Hat has used just six Kickstarters to add over 25 items to its catalog.

> *"To get to the point where we could shrug at $2000-5000 in printing expenses for a semi-experimental, but proven-by-KS add-on product [Fate Accelerated] took us a good 7-10 years of invested effort."*
>
> – Fred Hicks, RPGnet Thread (December 2013)

Evil Hat West

Like many modern RPG publishers, Evil Hat has a distributed work force, with designers and editors spread across the US (and other countries). However, a nexus of Evil Hat activity has popped up in the San Francisco Bay Area in recent years, creating a sort of West Coast Evil Hat branch.

It started with Chris Hanrahan, who has long been an ally of Evil Hat (and Fred Hicks) and has since become the company's brand manager. Hanrahan is also the owner of a community-focused gaming store in Oakland, California, called EndGame – and that community has been fairly central in the expansion of Evil Hat in recent years.

Race to Adventure! (2013) was created by three EndGame regulars, including co-owner Chris Ruggiero. The *Zeppelin Armada* (2014) deckbuilding game is the work of another EndGame regular, Eric Vogel. Project manager Sean Nittner ran the Good Omens con at EndGame for years before launching Big Bad Con in Oakland, while freelance proofreader and editor Karen Twelves also hails from the Bay Area. For that matter, the author of this book is an EndGame regular, and it's through Chris Hanrahan and EndGame that *Designers & Dragons* came to rest at Evil Hat.

Fred Hicks officially recognized the existence of an "Evil Hat West" crew when talking about work on an upcoming "War of Ashes" RPG. It was licensed from Zombiesmith, a miniatures producer run by EndGame regulars; when Evil Hat put together a team to create the RPG, they did so by drawing together Bay Area designers that can meet and talk at EndGame.

Though it's now the virtual age, a little face-time can help too!

Fate Core deserves some additional comment, as it will be very important to the future of Evil Hat. To start with, it's one of the most successful Kickstarters to date for a roleplaying game. To date, the few tabletop RPG game Kickstarters that have done better include: White Wolf's *Deluxe Exalted* at $684,756; Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu 7e* at $561,836; and Monte Cook's *Numenéra* at $517,526. That puts *Fate Core* into some pretty rarified company — amazing for a company that originated in the indie community and printed just a few hundred copies of its first book.

Mechanically, *Fate Core* is the fourth iteration of the *Fate* roleplaying system; it started out as a generalization of the *Fate 3.0* rules from *Spirit of the Century* and *The Dresden Files*, but the rules evolved before hitting their final published form. Along the way authors Leonard Balsera, Brian Engard, Ryan Macklin, and Mike Olson rewrote the entire system from scratch, so that Evil Hat could entirely own

the results rather than continuing to depend on *FUDGE*. They then released the results under the OGL and Creative Commons for use by others.

The *Fate Core* rules were divided among three major books. *Fate Accelerated* offers a quickstart; *Fate Core* provides the main rules; and *Fate System Toolkit* discusses how to hack the rules. The rules were streamlined from previous iterations of the system. They also provided the first look at *Fate* as a generic gaming system since the 2003 release of *Fate 2.0* — and the first ever print version of the generic rules. In other words, *Fate Core* is exactly what is needed if *Fate* is ever to become a heavily supported generic system like *GURPS* or *Hero*.

Amid all of this work before and after *Fate Core*, Evil Hat has also been adding staff like crazy. Long-time ally Chris Hanrahan joined the Evil Hat team of Hicks and Donoghue in 2012 as brand manager. Carrie Harris became marketing manager in 2013 and Sean Nittner became project manager.

Now that Evil Hat has spent a full year digging out from the massive backlog of products promised through their nearly half-a-million-dollar Kickstarter, the question is, "What will they do next?"

What to Read Next ○

- For another company that Fred Hicks was involved with, read about IPR in ***Galileo Games***.
- For other companies that are developing *Fate*, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** and to a lesser extent ***Arc Dream Publishing***, ***Galileo Games***, and ***John Wick Presents.***
- For more on Chad Underkoffler and PDQ, read ***Atomic Sock Monkey Press***.
- For indie's third genre-spanning generic systems, read about *Apocalypse World* in ***Lumpley Games***.
- For other family-friendly indie games, also read ***John Wick Presents.***
- For the original publisher of *Designers & Dragons*, read ***Mongoose Publishing***.

In Other Eras

- For the backstory of *FUDGE*, read ***Grey Ghost Press*** *['90s]*.
- For *Amber Diceless Role-Playing*, read ***Phage Press*** *['90s]*.
- For the "New Style" of RPGs, read ***Hogshead Publishing*** *['90s]*.
- For the GSL and problems experienced by 4E licensees, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.

Read on for the little magazine that could in ***Kobold Press.***



Part Seven:

The Newest Generation

(2006-2009)

What does the future hold for RPGs? That's a question that can't be answered, though future history started to be written in the late '00s when the death of d20 offered the opportunity for new sorts of publishers to appear.

Kobold Press got into business as a ***d20 publisher*** with an interesting financing model and has since become a ***Pathfinder publisher*** — which may be an important new sort of open licensee in the future.

Cubicle 7 Entertainment is a ***licensee*** and an ***original RPG producer*** — something scarcely seen since the '90s. Several years later, they're focused mostly on their own games — which could mean it's time to innovate again.

A variety of ***OSR publishers*** are focusing their production on nostalgic products that call back to the games of the '70s and '80s — though most of them are still small press.

Finally, One Bad Egg offers an example of a failed path: the ***4E publishers***, who found themselves facing license problems, online support problems, and ultimately the death of 4E itself.

Original RPG producers, *Pathfinder* publishers, or OSR publishers could all point toward paths for the future. Or it could be something else entirely.

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
Kobold Press	2006-Present	*Steam & Brass* (2006)	327
Cubicle 7 Entertainment	2006-Present	*CS1: Cannibal Sector One* (2006)	341
The OSR	*2006-Present*	*OSRIC (2006)*	95
One Bad Egg	*2008-2009*	*Shrouded Paths: The Unbroken (2008)*	319

Kobold Press: 2006–Present

Kobold Press is the current incarnation of the company previously known as Open Design, which managed to make a splash in the roleplaying industry despite the d20 bust — in large part thanks to owner Wolfgang Baur's unique business model.

Periodical Employment: 1989-2006

It should be no surprise that King Kobold Wolfgang Baur got his start in gaming with *Dungeon!* (1975) and with the Holmes *Basic D&D Set* (1977). His first *D&D* character would eventually be a "human cleric with hammer."

Similarly, it should be no surprise that he got his start in design at *Dungeon* magazine. While in high school, a young Baur submitted "The Glass House," a Forgotten Realms adventure; it was published in *Dungeon #15* (January/February 1989). Baur was in good company, as *Dungeon* at the time was a proving ground for the next generation of



2006: Steam & Brass

game designers. That same issue featured contributions from: Carl Sargent, future architect of Greyhawk; Thomas M. Kane, a frequent Atlas Games contributor of the '90s; and many others.

Over the next few years, as Baur moved on to Cornell University, he would contribute to both *Dungeon* and *Dragon*. He also took the next step into the RPG field by producing an original supplement, *Treasures of Middle Earth* (1989) for ICE's *MERP*.

By May 1991, Baur was studying biochemistry as a grad student. Everything changed for him when freelancer Steve Kurtz alerted him to a new opportunity: TSR Periodicals was hiring. Baur decided to apply — figuring that if he were hired, he would just play around in the hobby for a year or two. He was quickly snapped up because of his experience with the TSR magazines. The result would be not a year or two, but instead a decade of full-time employment for Baur in the gaming industry.

Baur started out as a "junior flunky" working for the TSR Periodicals division, but in time he'd come to edit both *Dungeon* and *Dragon* — following in the footsteps of those magazines' most illustrious editors, Barbara Young and Roger E. Moore. He also began to write supplements for TSR. Baur's first TSR box was *Assassin Mountain* (1993) for Jeff Grubb's *Al-Qadim* setting; it remains one of his favorites. However, he's probably better known for his *Planescape* supplements: *Planes of Chaos* (1994), *Planes of Law* (1995), and *In the Cage: A Guide to Sigil* (1995) — the last being particularly notable because it's the book where *AD&D* second edition's "tanar'ri" became demons once more, reversing James Ward's 1990 decision to appease allegedly "angry" mothers.

> *"It was an honor to learn from Roger Moore and Barbara Young: the two people who defined the magazines in that era. Kim Mohan, the founding editor of [Dungeon], was just down the hall. It was an amazing time to work at TSR, as the company was full of creative people isolated in a small Wisconsin tourist town."*
>
> – Wolfgang Baur, Interview, treasuretables.org (December 2006)

After four years working on TSR's periodicals, Baur decided to try something new. He left TSR and moved to Seattle to join newcomer Wizards of the Coast's RPG division, where he worked under Jonathan Tweet. Though Wizards' roleplaying division was shut down at the end of 1995, Baur stayed at the company. Much to his surprise, just a year and a half later he was acting as an advance scout for TSR employees — moving out to Seattle themselves to join Wizards of the Coast. Baur showed off the town to old friends, helped them find apartments, and explained the mysteries of Wizards of the Coast R&D.

Soon Baur was creating RPGs again — most notably the *Dark•Matter Campaign Setting* (1999) for *Alternity*. Unfortunately, he found the constant layoffs that were occurring at Wizards uncomfortable, and as a result ended his four-year tenure at the company in 1999. Since then, he has worked gigs at Microsoft (2000-2010) and Pokémon USA (2010-Present) that have taken him outside the RPG industry — at least for his full-time work.

However, Baur wasn't entirely done with roleplaying games. He freelanced throughout the d20 era, writing supplements for new publishers such as Green Ronin Publishing, Malhavoc Press, Paradigm Concepts, Paizo Publishing, and Privateer Press. He authored *Frostburn* (2004), an environmental book for *Dungeons & Dragons 3.5*, and would later co-author a pair of late 3.5 supplements: *Expedition to the Demonweb Pits* (2007) and *The Forge of War* (2007).

By the time the last two books were published, Baur was onto a new roleplaying project: a company named Open Design.

Sleepless Beginnings: 2006

In March 2006, Wolfgang Baur was sleep-deprived due to the recent birth of his daughter. He was also vaguely thinking about setting up a college fund. It was some combination of these two elements that led him to make a March 20 posting to his new "Open Design" Live Journal blog. Therein he stated, "Designing an adventure with input from fans and fellow gamers is a great chance to experiment with open design. Will it work? That depends on the game-buying public."

Over the following days, Baur expanded on the idea, stating that he was looking for "patrons" to contribute to the creation of new gaming material. It was an idea that was in the air. Earlier that year, Arc Dream Publishing started using a "ransom" model for publications like *NEMESIS* (2006) and the *Godlike GM's Screen* (2006).

However, Baur offered a unique take on the idea. His concept of patronage came from the Renaissance, where individuals would commission authors and artists to create work. As a result his model he would offer "exclusive access" to an adventure that would be "written to order" for his patrons. The patrons would get to learn about game design and to see the project slowly come together — all the while contributing ideas and comments of their own to the project.

Baur also felt Open Design could produce adventures of a different type than those published by larger companies. He later outlined three differences between his adventures and others: length, quality, and subject matter. Most of these comparisons were in relation to what Baur had known at *Dungeon* magazine. His adventures could be longer than the relatively short pieces in *Dungeon*; without the grind to produce a magazine full of adventures, he could also pay more careful attention to the individual piece that he was working on, improving its quality.

However, it was the question of subject matter that came closest to the heart of the patronage model. Baur didn't need many people to make it worth his while to produce an adventure. As a result, he could create adventures that appealed to much smaller groups. This could also allow for more adult material, if desired.

In his first cut of the patronage model, Baur aimed low. People could join for as little as $5 (as subscribers) or as much as $50 (as patrons, who would get the opportunity to add content to the adventure). History would eventually show that gamers were willing to contribute much more to projects of this type; in particular, on Kickstarter tiers valued at hundreds or even thousands of dollars are common. So Baur was starting small, but it ensured that he'd be able to attract backers to his new system for adventure design.

As part of the patronage process, Baur allowed his supporters to select what his first adventure would be. He offered up a list of seven possible d20 adventures: "The Black Forest," "Empire of Ghouls," "The Flying Fortress," "Steam & Brass," "The Lost City," "The Tenth Hell," and "Tomb of the Dragon." Patrons voted and eventually decided on "Steam & Brass," which Baur had described as "A city-based adventure involving a clockwork mage, the Mouse King, and a contract with a devil. Sort of an *Iron Kingdoms* or *Warhammer Fantasy* tone." On July 4, 2006, Baur officially announced that the project was funded, thanks to 49 patrons.

What's impressive about Baur's initial listing of adventures is that many were later published. Two of the ideas became Open Design products that we'll meet down the road. *Empire of the Ghouls* (2008) retained its name, while "The Black Forest" became (in a fashion) *Tales of the Old Margreve* (2010). Baur would meanwhile turn "The Lost City" into *Crucible of Chaos* (2008) for Paizo Publishing.

For now, though, Baur was working on *Steam & Brass*. Over the next months, he would see it double then triple in size — not even including the game design articles he wrote to describe the process. By September 2006, the project was drawing to a close, and so Baur made his last call for patrons. He then officially closed the project to new participants, on September 30. The final list of patrons included a who's who of the gaming industry, with names such as Matt Forbeck, Jeff Grubb, Chris Pramas, Phil Reed, and Steven Schend.

Steam & Brass (2006) was published on October 5 as a 115-page PDF. It was also available as a print-on-demand (POD) book to patrons for a limited time only.

> *"I still write adventures in the 2e style: story and characters first, stats later. I think it's a successful approach, because editors and DMs will only run adventures that have a great villain or plot. If you don't have that, the greatest mechanics and stats in the world won't save you. No one buys an adventure just for the crunch."*
>
> – Wolfgang Baur, Interview, treasuretables.org (December 2006)

Though *Steam & Brass* is a d20 book, Baur wrote it in what he calls a "2e style"; this was well-received and would soon lead Open Design to increasing success. However, Baur was still learning about the patronage process and how it interrelated with the mass market, and this brought Open Design its first controversy.

When Baur conceived of patronage, he decided to produce limited editions, just as "patron projects of long ago were kept in private hands and never shown to the public." However, as soon as *Steam & Brass* was created, there was wider interest in the book. Seeing this, Baur asked his patrons if they'd be willing to open up Open Design's premiere adventure to a wider audience. Seventy patrons gave the OK, but four patrons — led by Steven Schend and Troy Luginbill — refused permission. As a result, *Steam & Brass* is now the most limited of limited editions, only (legally) available to those who signed up by September 30, 2006.

Steam & Brass was notable for one other reason: it was set in the Free City of Zobeck, an original steampunk setting mixing fantasy and clockwork. It quickly became the world of Baur's own house campaign and would soon become the basis of most of Open Design's products as well. This shows how much the history of a small company can depend on a decision made in its earliest days. If patrons instead decided to have Baur produce "The Lost City" or "The Black Forest" — both projects that were preferred over *Steam & Brass* at points in the voting — then Open Design's modern product lines would be entirely different. Or, perhaps, they might not have succeeded at all.

As it happens, the first Open Design patrons were quite canny in their decision, as *Steam & Brass* ended up being only the beginning.

The Later Limited Editions: 2006-2009

The success of Open Design was proven by the very rapid development of its next project. Wolfgang Baur posted the first poll about a new design on September 1, 2006, while still working on *Steam & Brass*. He offered up a set of three possibilities on October 14 and patrons picked "Castle Shadowcrag" as the winner on October 31. Baur described the new adventure as taking place in "a Gothic castle entangled with the plane of Shadow." It was set in the same world as *Steam & Brass*, though it was distantly located. The adventure was quickly funded and released near the start of the next year.



Castle Shadowcrag (2007) continued in the footsteps of *Steam & Brass* with one exception: though the book was still a limited edition, it wasn't limited to just its patrons. Instead, patrons of future projects would also be able to purchase *Castle Shadowcrag*, until the printing ran out. Though certainly more open than Baur's first take on patronage, this exclusivity has also caused controversy. That's because Open Design projects published under this new paradigm have still dropped out of print — presumably forever. It's just been a slightly slower process.

Over the next three years, Baur used his patronage model to produce six more projects: *Empire of the Ghouls* (2007), *Six Arabian Nights* (2008), *Blood of the Gorgon* (2008), *Wrath of the River King* (2008), *Tales of Zobeck* (2009), and *Halls of the Mountain King* (2009).

These later limited-edition products brought a few new firsts for Open Design. Though Wolfgang Baur was still the heart of the company, he began bringing in other luminaries from TSR and Wizards of the Coast to help him produce the books. Prime among them was Nicolas Logue, who got his start co-authoring *Blood of the Gorgon*. Simultaneously, Baur decided to move his company beyond the shrinking d20 market. As a result, *Wrath of the River King* appeared as a *Dungeons & Dragons 4E* (2008) adventure, based on the requests of patrons.

Surprisingly, this did not result in an abandonment of d20. By 2008, Open Design was perhaps the only RPG company around supporting both 4E and d20 — though their support for d20 would soon evolve into support for Paizo's *Pathfinder* (2009).

In the end, Open Design's production of limited edition and exclusive adventures marked one phase in the company's development. Starting in 2007, Open Design was also working on projects that received mass-market attention — and this would soon change the way they produced adventures as well.

The Quartered Kobold: 2007-2012

On April 19, 2007, Paizo Publishing announced that they lost the license to publish the two biggest roleplaying magazines: *Dragon* and *Dungeon*. More surprisingly, Wizards of the Coasts decided to discontinue the print magazines entirely, moving them online. Suddenly, there was a magazine-sized hole in the roleplaying industry.

This offered a great opportunity for *someone* to step to the plate. Open Design took on the challenge. On May 21, well before Paizo's publication of their final magazine — *Dragon #359* (September 2007) — Wolfgang Baur announced that he was working on a new magazine for gamers. A short time later, Open Design published the first issue of a 3.5E/d20 magazine called *Kobold Quarterly* (Summer 2007).

As Baur wrote in his first editorial, *Kobold Quarterly #1* wasn't the lavish full-color production that *Dragon* had been. Much later, Baur quipped that *Kobold Quarterly* didn't have *any* of *Dragon*'s three main weapons: "its prodigious art budget, its early access to WotC releases, and its fanatical devotion to the Pope." However, it had attitude. Baur was too humble to say it, but it also had terrific experience, since he himself had been the head honcho at *Dragon* just over a decade previous.



"My guiding principle is that Kobold Quarterly should not only offer something valuable to the D&D gaming world, it should do it with attitude. That's the meaning behind the 'small but fierce' credo: kobolds may not have the big marketing dollars or the massive staff of a multinational corporation, but we're also free to do as we please."

– Wolfgang Baur, "Editorial: Small but Fierce,"
Kobold Quarterly #1 (Summer 2007)

Beyond that, *Kobold Quarterly* had the support of the vibrant community of designers that arose within the d20 market. Though Baur wrote much of the first issue of *Kobold Quarterly* himself, he included an interview with Erik Mona of Paizo Publishing. It was the beginning of a continuing relationship with designers and publishers from the rest of the post-d20 industry.

The second issue highlighted this with articles by: Ed Greenwood, designer of the Forgotten Realms; Jeff Grubb, one of Baur's inspirations at TSR and the creator of many notable products including *Marvel Super Heroes* (1984) and *Manual of the Planes* (1987); Nicolas Logue, who we've already met as an Open Design contributor, and then getting his start with books for Paizo and Wizards; Robert J. Schwalb, a d20 author for Goodman Games, Green Ronin, Mongoose, and others; and Skip Williams, one of the co-designers of *Dungeons & Dragons 3E* (2000). And that was just the beginning.

Open Design didn't publish *Kobold Quarterly #1* as a patronage project, but they did distribute it using the same limited means as their earlier releases: the magazine was sold primarily as a PDF, but a limited number of POD books were also produced.

This small print run of *Kobold Quarterly #1* sold out in September. Thanks to its success, *Kobold Quarterly #2* (Fall 2007) *was* printed in full-color. It was also produced in larger quantities and made available in game stores — unlike any other Open Design product to that date. It was a new era for the small (but fierce!) publisher.

Meanwhile, Wizards of the Coast was stumbling with their new online magazines, extending the opportunity for someone else to get noticed. *Dragon #360* (October 2007) was only available as web pages. Wizards didn't produce an actual PDF magazine until #364 (June 2008) — and in between it published approximately bimonthly. *Dungeon* similarly published four HTML issues over eight months. Wizards' magazines were also content-light and hype-heavy. They really wouldn't recover until mid-2008, by which time there was a little kobold foot in the door.

You could see that in *Kobold Quarterly*'s subscription numbers, which hit 1,000 in January 2008. Later that year Baur received a Diana Jones Award for excellence in gaming — in part for his innovative patronage system and in part for his creation of a new print RPG magazine in a market that seemed hostile to such an endeavor. For more than four years afterward, the story of *Kobold Quarterly* was one of confident success. It averaged four issues every year and pretty soon its full-color interior looked lavish too — much like *Dragon* in its waning days.

A bit of controversy arose for the magazine with issue #7 (Fall 2008), when *Kobold Quarterly* supplemented its d20 coverage with a single *Dungeons & Dragons 4E* article, "Ecology of the Centaur," written by Baur. Some readers were afraid that *Kobold Quarterly* was going to abandon d20, as Wizards of the Coast had. Instead, Open Design opted to walk a fine line between the two systems. They called themselves "the Switzerland of the Edition Wars."



d20 support soon became *Pathfinder* support, while Green Ronin's *Dragon Age* showed up in *Kobold Quarterly* as well — mainly because Baur liked the game. Though *D&D 4E* support was fading (along with the game) by 2012, Baur was determined to remain Switzerland. In *Kobold Quarterly #22* (Summer 2012) Baur explained his philosophy, saying, "There's always something you can learn from seeing how someone else runs their

game." Simultaneously, he made a call for *13th Age* (2013) articles and "5e" articles.



Though Open Design's patronage projects had been well-respected and well-received, *Kobold Quarterly* gave the company much more attention. There were many reasons for this, including: *Kobold Quarterly*'s coverage of multiple games systems, its appearance in game stores, and the nostalgic feelings it created as a "replacement" for the print *Dragon*.

Kobold Quarterly #23 (Fall 2012) was produced in October 2012, and it looked like any other issue of the magazine. It included articles for *Pathfinder*, d20, *Dragon Age*, and *13th Age* — and even had a "Coming Next Issue!" box that previewed exciting articles like "Super-Science in Fantasy." Unfortunately, that next issue would never appear. On November 16, 2012, Baur announced that he was closing down the magazine — though the company would continue on.

> *"It's been glorious fun, but at some point in the last year or two it became a burden and even a bit of a grind to devote every night and weekend to KQ, four months a year, while working a full-time job and being a husband and a father to two kids."*
>
> – Wolfgang Baur, "Kobold Quarterly Folds, A New Adventure Begins," koboldpress.com (November 2012)

Baur said that he hoped *Kobold Quarterly* would become a full-time job, but it had not. As a result, the effort required to produce *Kobold Quarterly* proved too much, especially when stacked on top of a full-time job and the other products that Open Design was producing. To a certain extent, it's the oldest story in the RPG industry: boy meets magazine, boy and magazine make beautiful music, magazine proves too demanding, and boy rides off into sunset with other publications his company is now producing. It's probably a story that's been made even more likely by the increased challenges created for print magazines in the 21st century.

There are two codas to the story of *Kobold Quarterly*, both of them good.

First, history repeated itself. As soon as Baur revealed that he was ending *Kobold Quarterly*'s five-and-a-half-year run, the newly founded TSR Games — created by Ernie Gygax, Luke Gygax, Tim Kask, and others — announced they'd be publishing a new magazine for the industry. *Gygax Magazine #1* (February 2013)

appeared several months later. While *Kobold Quarterly* was clearly a post-d20 magazine, *Gygax* has more of an old-school feel. With issue #2 (Autumn 2013) Baur even contributed a section to the magazine called "The Kobold's Cavern"; it included that lost "Super-Science" article.

Second, *Kobold Quarterly* changed how Open Design worked. It encouraged companies to produce products other than its patronage projects; it got its product into game stores; and it got the company lots of attention. As we'll see, Open Design would even change their name down the road, to reflect their post-*Kobold* reality.

And we're now ready to dive back into the history of Open Design proper, to see those changes in action.

Moving Away from Exclusivity: 2008-2012

The success of *Kobold Quarterly* was soon followed by a second move toward the mass-market. That started with those game design articles that Baur wrote to keep his first patrons entertained while waiting to see if he could garner enough support to make Open Design viable. Now, Baur collected many of these articles as *The Kobold Guide to Game Design Volume 1: Adventures* (2008). It was published as a PDF in early 2008, but Open Design released it as a print book just a few weeks later thanks to its success. The PDF and the book would soon become Open Design's first "unlimited" release.

Meanwhile, discontent continued to bubble among fans over the exclusivity of the rest of Open Design's adventures. Online piracy was one of the results — something that nearly drove Baur to quit, since it went against the core of trust Baur expected in the patronage relationship.

> *"The piracy of some Open Design work was a hugely depressing blow at a time I really didn't need more bad news. The ongoing piracy is an argument in favor of quitting as a designer of patron projects, because the whole point of a patron system was some form of mutual trust."*
>
> – Wolfgang Baur, Forum Post, koboldquarterly.com (December 2008)

Baur was also polling supporters toward the end of 2008 to ask what they thought of the issue of exclusivity. Most of them said that they wanted projects to remain private — only available to Open Design patrons, not to the general public. So Open Design continued on with *Tales of Zobeck* and *Halls of the Mountain King* — but those would be Open Design's final exclusive releases.

However *Tales of Zobeck* also continued Open Design's trend of slowly opening up its publications. This book of six adventures was a limited edition — as all the patronage projects were to that point — but the 48-page *Zobeck Gazetteer* (2008) that was produced as part of the project was created non-exclusively. When it was released in December 2008, Baur declared it "the first public Open Design."

After *Halls of the Mountain King* shipped to patrons on June 30, 2009, Open Design quickly moved away from exclusivity in a few simple steps. It began in July with *Dwarves of the Ironcrags* (2009), which was advertised as the second *Zobeck Gazetteer*. Having already set a precedent with the first volume, Open Design made the second volume into a public release as well — though patrons still received private editions with some unique material. The *Imperial Gazetteer* (2009) and *Iron Gazetteer* (2010) would follow.

In October 2009, Open Design announced an even more mass-market product: "From Shore to Sea" (2010), a patronage product that was produced for Paizo as part of their *Pathfinder* adventure line. It was eventually released in May 2010 in two parts: *From Shore to Sea* (2010) was Paizo's adventure, while *Sunken Empires* (2010) was Open Design's linked sourcebook detailing the "Underdeep." These products went out to the public as unlimited books too — but it made sense due to the Paizo connection.

The two undersea books set another notable precedent. Brandon Hodge — originally an Open Design patron and contributor to *Halls of the Mountain King* — was the sole author of both, where Baur had always been at least a co-author of products before. Open Design was no longer *just* Wolfgang Baur's design house.

The release of 4E adventure *Courts of the Shadow Fey* (2010) in July 2010 made it obvious that exclusivity was dead. For three years, Open Design had been moving toward more open content — from *Kobold Quarterly* through the *Kobold Guides to Game Design* and on through these more recent publications. Starting with *Courts of the Shadow Fey* (2010), all patronage projects were made widely available on the mass market following their creation — bringing the patronage products into better sync with the modern kobold-filled reality of Open Design.

In the years afterward — from 2010 to 2012 — Open Design expanded considerably. Patronage projects continued, now imagined by a variety of creators. Eileen Connors, Tim Connors, and Richard Pett authored *Tales of the Old Margreve* (2010); Siegfried Trent created a PDF patronage project called *Advanced Feats* (2010); and Dan Voyce wrote a project originally known as "Frozen Empires" but eventually published as *Northlands* (2011). Open Design even tried out a non-FRP project with *Red Eye of Azathoth* (2011) for *Call of Cthulhu* — through the print version was only available to patrons.



Meanwhile, Open Design was also pushing its non-patronage releases. This included *The Kobold Guide to Board Game Design* (2011) and *The Complete Kobold Guide to Game Design* (2012). Like the newer patronage projects, these books were available to game stores.

However, Open Design's biggest expansion at the time was into "Midgard." This was the world of Zobeck that Baur had been detailing in Open Design products since *Steam & Brass* and in every issue of *Kobold Quarterly*. In early 2011, Open Design offered a new patronage project, the "Midgard Campaign Setting" — which would be the company's biggest product to date. Wolfgang Baur, Jeff Grubb, and Brandon Hodge were the project's architects.

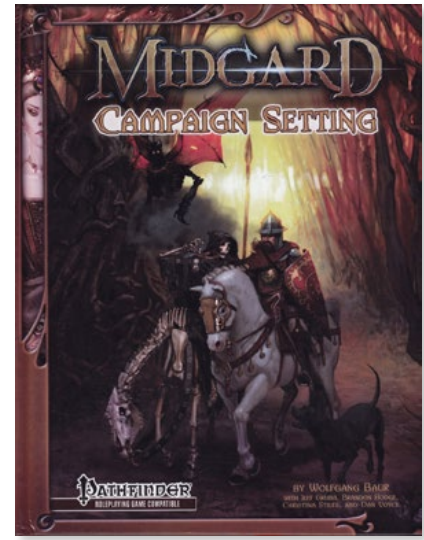
> *"The project was never meant to happen: I tried very hard to keep the Open Design default setting for our adventures – the Free City of Zobeck – totally self-contained. … That worked for a while, but each adventure by Open Design added a bit more about the world, and fans kept asking about what was over the next hill."*
>
> – Wolfgang Baur, Interview, dragonageoracle.com (January 2011)

Though the book would take almost two full years to produce, from 2011 onward the world of Midgard was an increasingly important part of Open Design's production. New products like *The Lost City* (2011), *Northlands*, *Soldiers of Fortune* (2011), and *Streets of Zobeck* (2011) proudly carried a "Midgard" logo. Meanwhile, fans and developers talked about the world in patronage forums, making it the only large-scale setting of its sort to be created by the interaction between designers and patrons. Yet more products spun off of those discussions, starting with the *Midgard Bestiary* (2011, 2012).

As he worked on Midgard, Baur outlined three design priorities for this new world:

1. It would be a traditional setting that had new interpretations of fantasy tropes.
2. The setting would be built for utility and playability, not as a supplement mill.
3. Its mythology wouldn't rehash the British and Celtic stories at the heart of most FRPs, but would instead build on German, Norse, Russian, and Polish traditions.

Meanwhile, Open Design was in for a few major changes while the Midgard project was underway.



The first of those changes occurred in November 2011 when Wolfgang Baur put a new project called "Journeys to the West" on Kickstarter. It was still a traditional patronage project where "backers [could] participate in brainstorming sessions, and ... add feats, spells, traits, and gear to the book as patron designers." However, it now used the new technology of Kickstarter to market the project. 286 backers pledged $15,425 to its creation, eventually resulting in the publication of *Journeys to the West* (2012).

The second of these changes occurred in 2012, and had been a long time coming.

Kobold Press: 2012-Present

Ever since the release of *Kobold Quarterly* back in 2007, the word "kobold" has increasingly become Open Design's core brand. Koboldquarterly.com was the company's main website, and when they started producing an email newsletter in April 2010 it was called "Kobold Courier."

Wolfgang Baur registered another kobold domain on the web in February 2012: koboldpress.com. It was no surprise when the company started producing books under the "Kobold Press" imprint later in the year. The actual company name hasn't changed, but the logo that appears on all of Open Design's books did. The term "Open Design" is now used only for those books that have an actual open design process — where the designers work with patrons. Somewhat appropriately, *Kobold Quarterly #23* was the last book that was published under the old Open Design brand name, in October 2012. By then, everything *else* was being released under the Kobold Press imprint.

That brings us back to the *Midgard Campaign Setting* (2012), produced under the Kobold Press imprint as the company's first full-color hardcover — and a thick one, at 296 pages. It was just one (big!) part of a continued expansion into Midgard, including two new PDF series: *Midgard Adventures* (2012-Present) and Midgard *Player's Guides* (2012-Presents).

Meanwhile, new patronage products continue under the new Kobold Press imprint, with some of them using Kickstarter, like *Journeys to the West* did. The company's Kickstarter efforts have mostly focused on new *Pathfinder* material, but they also supported the revision of the *Midgard Bestiary* for 4E.

Kobold Press' latest Kickstarter, *Deep Magic*, did spectacularly well — probably in part because of an aggressive "add-on" structure that let backers buy older PDFs and in part because it was a supplement of use to all *Pathfinder* players, not just those who enjoyed Midgard.

Date	Product	Type	Goal	Raised	Backers
12/19/11	*Journeys to the West*	*Pathfinder*	$4,200	$15,425	286
5/21/12	*Midgard Tales*	*Pathfinder*	$7,500	$28,028	367
7/16/12	*Midgard Bestiary*	*D&D 4E*	$3,500	$10,251	220
7/11/13	*Deep Magic*	*Pathfinder*	$10,000	$126,031	1,927

Despite the loss of *Kobold Quarterly*, the company now known as Kobold Press seems well-situated to continue on as a successful small press publisher. Their current production of sourcebooks and adventures for their own campaign setting looks a lot like Paizo's publishing schedule — with the main difference being that Kobold Press' smaller economies require more PDF-only production.

Meanwhile, Kobold Press' patronage products and their Kickstarters alike seem able to generate interest among fans. And that was the whole point of the company formerly known as Open Design.

What to Read Next ○

- For the ransom model, read ***Arc Dream Publishing***.
- For more steampunk, read Privateer Press and (briefly) ***Goodman Games***.
- For another attempt to take advantage of the magazine-sized hole in the RPG industry, read about *Level Up* in ***Goodman Games***. Sadly for them, ***Open Design*** got there two years earlier.
- For two companies that received good support through *Kobold Quarterly*, read ***Green Ronin Publishing*** and ***Paizo Publishing***.

In Other Eras

- For the company that got Wolfgang Baur his start in gaming, read ***TSR*** *['70s]*.
- For Baur's second RPG employer, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For other companies that left their well-loved magazines behind, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*, ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*, Pagan Publishing *['80s]*, ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*, and ***AEG*** *['90s]*. Or anyone else who ever published a magazine whose name wasn't *Dragon* or *Dungeon*.
- For Open Design's *Call of Cthulhu* licensor, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*.

For a different sort of publisher, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment.***

Cubicle 7 Entertainment: 2003-Present

For a year or two, Cubicle 7 was one of the most prolific publishers around; now, they're concentrating on several star RPG lines, including the current Middle-earth license.

Publishing Prelude: 2003-2006

Angus Abranson started playing *AD&D* back in 1984, but it wasn't too long before he ended up on the business side of the industry. By the age of 14 he was working for Leisure Games — one of the top game retailers in London. In the late '80s and the early '90s, he was also writing for *Adventurer* (1986-1987) and other British RPG magazines, and before long he was



2006: CS1: Cannibal Sector One

one of the forces behind the foundation of another: *Valkyrie* (1994-2004). He regularly reported news for *Valkyrie* afterward — an easy task since his position at Leisure kept him in the middle of the industry.

Abranson was thinking about getting into publishing as early as 1996, and he even had a name for his company: Cubicle 7. However, it'd take several more years for that possibility to become a reality. For that, we jump forward to 2003, where we find Angus Abranson sharing a flat with Dave Allsop, the creator of a dystopic future British RPG called *SLA Industries* (1993). Allsop's game had a long and circuitous history: Wizards of the Coast bought it and then returned it to Nightfall, who licensed it to Hogshead Publishing. In 2002, Hogshead decided to close down, and so *SLA Industries* came back to Allsop once more.

By now, Abranson had been peripherally working in the industry for over a decade, and he was ready to become more involved. So he and Allsop decided to form a new roleplaying company together: Cubicle 7. Their first priority was *SLA Industries*; Abranson soon announced an ambitious publishing schedule of five *SLA Industry* books for 2004. By the start of the year, he had the first two — *CS1: Cannibal Sector One* and *Hunter Sheets Issue One* — in layout. Meanwhile, Allsop started work on the next release, and Abranson began talking to editors — a topic that we'll return to.

Cubicle 7's next announcement made it obvious that they were truly looking to follow in Hogshead's footsteps. It told of an upcoming product called "Frankenstein Factory." It was reminiscent of Hogshead "New Style" RPGs and for good reason: the original Polish publisher of *Frankenstein Faktoria* (2000) was Portal, the same company that published the original edition (2001) of Hogshead's *De Profundis* (2001). To underline the connection, Abranson even used Hogshead's terminology in his announcement, calling Frankenstein Factory a "new style RPG."

Unfortunately, this first incarnation of Cubicle 7 ground to a halt over the course of 2004. The layout of both *SLA Industries* books got delayed several times. Then, that Fall, Allsop decided to pull out of Cubicle 7 to pursue other opportunities. Cubicle 7 work suddenly stumbled to a halt and for two years remained in a state of stasis.

SLA Industries and *Victoriana*: 2006-2011

Dominic McDowall — a leadership and communication consultant — began his relationship with Cubicle 7 on January 1, 2004. He and Abranson were friends who regularly gamed and clubbed together. On that fateful first of January — in the wee early hours — Abranson waited until McDowall was drunk, and then asked him to

help edit the *SLA Industries* books. McDowall agreed and ended up editing *Hunter Sheets Issue One*. But for a long time afterward there was nothing else to edit.

In late 2006, Abranson and McDowall decided that they were *really* going to give Cubicle 7 a shot. This time they properly formed Cubicle 7 Entertainment Limited, with the two of them as partners. It only took two months to get their first book out — the much-delayed *CS1: Cannibal Sector One* (2006). *Hunter Sheets Issue One* (2007) soon followed, but after that the *SLA Industries* queue was dry due to Dave Allsop's departure four years earlier.

Though Dave Allsop *did* return to Cubicle 7 in 2007 as the *SLA Industries* line editor, the stars did not quite align. Instead Allsop and Cubicle 7 amicably parted ways in 2011 so that Allsop could reform Nightfall Games (alongside Merci Reed and Jared Earle) as the holder of the *SLA Industries* rights — all in preparation for a movie deal.

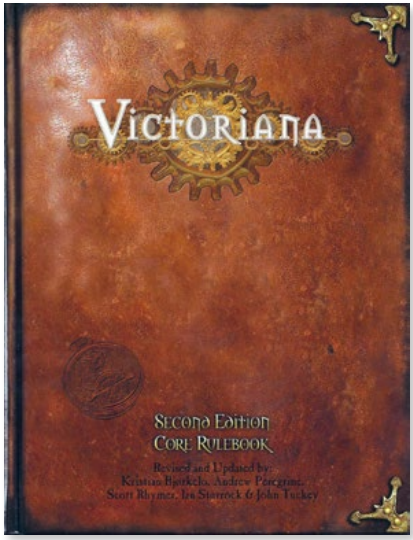
Fortunately, back in 2006 Abranson had an answer to the disappearance of new *SLA Industries* materials: Cubicle 7 bought British small press publisher Heresy Games — and with it, their RPG *Victoriana* (2003).

Victoriana was a game by John Tuckey, Scott Rhymer, and Richard Nunn, built using the Fuzion gaming system. It was set in 1867, but an alternate-reality fantasy steampunk 1867. In fact, *Victoriana*'s setting was so "punk" that some people called it "Victorian Shadowrun." When first released by Heresy Games, *Victoriana* had gotten average reviews, with most people saying that its strength lay in its setting. Meanwhile, there'd been criticism over poor proofreading and poor attention to historical dates.

With the *SLA Industries* line now on hiatus, Cubicle 7 could give *Victoriana* the benefit of their complete attention. That's exactly what they did, bringing in designer Ian Sturrock and new *Victoriana* line editor Andrew Peregrine to create a new edition of the game. Sturrock and Peregrine tossed out Fuzion and replaced it with their own "Heresy Gaming System." This was a dice pool system that uniquely included both positive and negative dice. However, its main purpose was to be simple and so to fade into the background. The new simplified game system combined well with strong editorial work from Peregrine and McDowall to put the focus of the game on its strength: the setting.

> *"I think that the 'product late for Gen Con' experience is a rite of passage for publishers. Mine resulted in me, Andrew Peregrine (Victoriana lead writer) and the Hilton Bell-hop pushing ten boxes of Victoriana 2nd Edition through the streets of Indianapolis from the hotel to the hall on a gilded luggage trolley. "*
>
> – Dominic McDowall, "From Small Cubes …,"
> A Cubicle with a View, rpg.net (November 2009)

After previewing the system in 2007, Cubicle 7 got advance copies of the *Victoriana Second Edition* just in time for Gen Con Indy 2008. Those copies turned out to be *way* in advance, as the rest of the run wasn't available until mid-2009.



Victoriana Second Edition (2008, 2009) was an attractive book spotlighting a unique setting. Though it didn't knock the ball out of the park, it got good reviews and showed that Cubicle 7 was emerging on the RPG scene as a professional and notable company. It was also strong enough to receive continued support. More than a half-dozen supplements appeared through 2011. We'll see that year was a time of transition for the company.

Two Very British Licenses and a French One Too: 2006-2009

Though Abranson and McDowall handed the creation of *Victoriana Second Edition* off to Sturrock and Peregrine, they hadn't slacked off themselves. Instead, they remained focused on the business side of things — as has increasingly been the case as the company has matured. While *Victoriana Second Edition* wended its way through its design, development, and production, they were busy acquiring licenses for two quintessentially British properties that together would put Cubicle 7 solidly on the map.

A fan named Chris Birch suggested the first license. It was to *Starblazer*, or more completely, *Starblazer: Science Adventure in Picture* (1979-1991) — a British anthology of science-fiction comics that ran 281 issues, most of them published in the '80s. *Starblazer* was well-loved for its complete-in-one-issue stories and for its gorgeous science-fiction artwork. Grant Morrison, Cam Kennedy, and John Ridgway were just a few of the notable British creators who had worked on the comic. Though it was now 15 years gone, it still held an important place in the psyche of youngsters who grew up in the '80s, among them Chris Birch, who discovered in August 2006 that an RPG license for the series was available.

Birch knew Abranson slightly through a board game design discussed some years previous, and so approached him about the opportunity. Abranson was excited by the possibility and recruited Birch to write the new *Starblazer* game — to Birch's surprise.

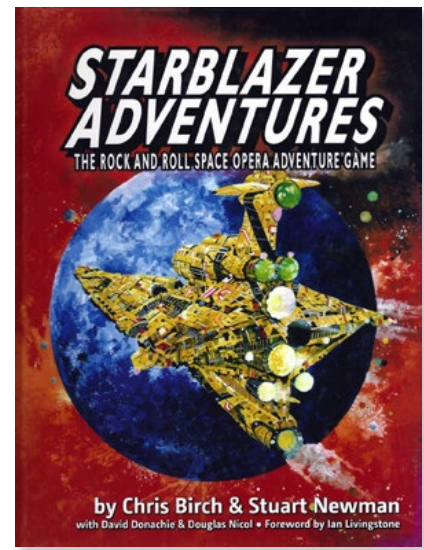
"Starblazer was one of the milestones of the British comic scene in the 70's and 80's. It inspired many of the artists who worked for Games Workshop and most artists I work with at Eidos today will point to Starblazer as one of their early introductions to science-fiction art."

– Ian Livingstone, Foreword, Starblazer (2008)

Though he'd never designed a game before, Birch was eager to give it a shot and soon he and friend Stuart Newman were on board. They intelligently decided that they didn't want to create their own game system the first time out, so instead opted to use an existing one.

After researching a number of available systems, Birch decided that Evil Hat's *Fate* was a perfect fit. It was relatively simple, had a burgeoning internet fandom, and was just revamped in Evil Hat's *Spirit of the Century* (2006). Not only had *Spirit* polished and integrated the *Fate* rules (as is better described in Evil Hat's history), but it was also a pulp game — just like the *Starblazer* comics were, when you really got down to it. Birch decided it was a perfect fit.

Originally, Birch expected to produce a 200-page book by Winter 2007, but he soon discovered that a *Starblazer* game needed a *lot* more rules than that. Then it needed a fair amount of editing, as it *was* a first-time game. Though Cubicle 7's usual editor, McDowall, was busy with a consultancy contract at the time (highlighting the problems of running a *part-time* game company), Gareth-Michael Skarka of Adamant Entertainment was able to step in. After that, the book went to layout, and by chance the layout artist for *Starblazer Adventures* was Fred Hicks — the public face of Evil Hat Productions and co-designer of *Fate*. Hicks was able to make *more* comments on the text and even ended up editing some himself. When everyone was done, *Starblazer Adventures* (2008) was published as a 600-page book appearing at the very end of 2008.



Starblazer Adventures successfully pushed *Spirit*'s *Fate 3.0* system into the space age.

First, it took *Fate*'s core ideas of freeform "aspects" and applied them to everything. Alien races, starships, organizations, and planets were all defined with these narrative-focused game mechanics.

Second, it expanded on *Fate*'s idea of "stress" by introducing stress tracks for organizations, plots, and campaigns alike. These represented ways that a gamemaster could measure the larger-scale consequences for failures — something not usually quantified in roleplaying games and so fairly unique at the time.

(However, it was an idea that was in the air, as Jay Little would create similar progress tracks for Fantasy Flight Games' *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay Third Edition* (2009) a year later.)

Third, it supported the creative experience. *Starblazer Adventures* contained not only an extensive random-plot generator but also the flip idea: a method to collaboratively create a campaign with the players. This was an idea that would be expanded upon by the *Fate* community in the near future: VSCA's *Diaspora* (2009) gave much more extensive rules for collaborative creation of worlds in space, while Evil Hat's *The Dresden Files* (2010) let the players jointly generate a complex city as part of character creation.

If *Victoriana* earned Cubicle 7 a bit of attention, *Starblazer Adventures* blew the company right into the mainstream. The game was nominated for three ENnies and three Indies, and though it didn't win any of them, it's understandable as the competition included games like *Dungeons & Dragons Fourth Edition* (2008), *Dark Heresy* (2008), *A Song of Ice & Fire* (2009), and *Mouse Guard* (2008). Overall, the generally great reviews and the handful of nominations, combined with the awesome heft of the hardcover *Starblazer Adventures* and its pages and pages of beautiful *Starblazer* art, created Cubicle 7's first bestselling RPG.

Starblazer Adventures has been lightly supported since its release, most notably with Sarah Newton's *Mindjammer* (2009) setting book.

Cubicle 7's next license — and their fourth line — was a French one. Toward the end of 2007, they announced that they'd be publishing English translations of the "Qin" RPG line, a deeply thematic and beautifully produced wuxia game by French publisher 7ème Cercle. The core rulebook, *Qin: The Warring States* (2006), had already been published in English by 7ème — and already won the 2007 ENnie Silver Award for Best Game.

Cubicle 7 began to sell 7ème's core *Qin* book immediately. From there, they planned to translate and publish the follow-up supplements themselves. Unfortunately, they ran into problems getting the rest of *Qin* to print — something that would take a few years to solve.

Though *Qin* was temporarily sidelined, Cubicle 7 kept pushing forwarding, announcing yet another new license in December 2007. It was one of the biggest licenses in modern Britain.

Doctor Who.

The classic time travelling show had originally run through the '60s, '70s, and '80s until it was put on "hiatus" after 26 seasons. Before 2005, the show had been off the air for over 15 years and though there were books by Virgin and the BBC and audio plays by Big Finish during the downtime, none of that would have amounted to a particularly great licensing opportunity.

That changed in 2005 when Russell T. Davies brought the old show back to the small screen, but regenerated into a new form that was faster-paced, trendier, and just flat out *cooler* than the original. Old fans and new fans flocked to it, and it was soon achieving viewerships double that of the show just before its 1989 demise. By the broadcast of "The Day of the Doctor" (2013), the show was popular enough for the 50th Anniversary Special to be simulcast in 75 countries on six continents.

Even by 2007 *Doctor Who* was a big license. So big, in fact, that it would turn Cubicle 7 on its head.

Many Partners: 2008-2011

The acquisition of the *Doctor Who* license was part of a clever plan whereby Angus Abranson and Dominic McDowall would take Cubicle 7's existing success and multiply it many times over. However, they needed investment to fulfill their newly-won potential. To help with that, they went to Matthew Sprange of Mongoose Publishing.

> *"But we had a plan. We were going to get a license and use it to fast track ourselves a few rungs up the ladder. We thought it would take a while … six months later we had the Doctor Who license."*
>
> – Dominic McDowall, "From Small Cubes …,"
> A Cubicle with a View, rpg.net (November 2009)

By the end of 2008, Mongoose Publishing was a part of the Rebellion Group, a British megacorp best known for their ownership of *2000AD* and for their creation of video games such as *Aliens vs. Predator* (1999) — so Sprange naturally introduced the Cubicle 7 folks to Rebellion. Very soon afterward a deal was made. Not only did Rebellion invest in Cubicle 7, but Cubicle 7 also got the opportunity to pair up with Mongoose. They moved from London to Mongoose's Swindon offices, where they also linked up with Mongoose's sales team, who would help them sell their product.

As a result, Abranson and McDowall were able to go full-time at Cubicle 7 for the first time in March 2009. To do so, Abranson left behind Leisure Games, where he worked and made contacts in the industry for 24 years.

Less ambitious entrepreneurs might have just used the Rebellion investment to get their own lagging projects — like *Qin* and *Doctor Who* — to press. Coupled with the new distributor connections that Mongoose offered, Cubicle 7 could have made a real go of it and emerged as a notable publisher.

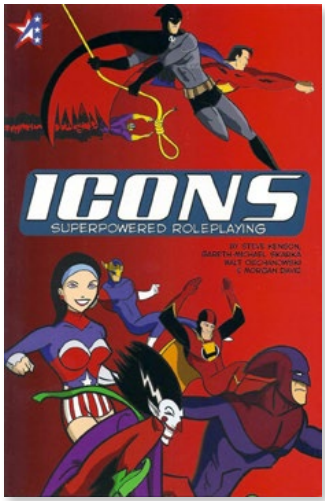
However, Cubicle 7 had bigger plans. They started reaching out to small press publishers who had interesting products Cubicle 7 thought could do better if they had mainstream distribution. Mirroring Mongoose Publishing's original plans for their "Flaming Cobra" line, Cubicle 7 then offered to do the publishing and distribution for these companies — releasing many of their products into game stores (and some into print) for the first time ever.

The whole system kicked off in July 2009 when Cubicle 7 offered distributors not only their own *Victoriana* (finally!) and *Starblazer Adventures* books, but also Adamant Entertainment's *MARS: Savage Worlds Edition* (2009) and Box Ninja's *3:16 — Carnage Amongst the Stars* (2005, 2008, 2009). In the next couple of years, Cubicle 7 partnered up with over twenty companies — many of them thanks to Angus Abranson's long-time connections within the industry.

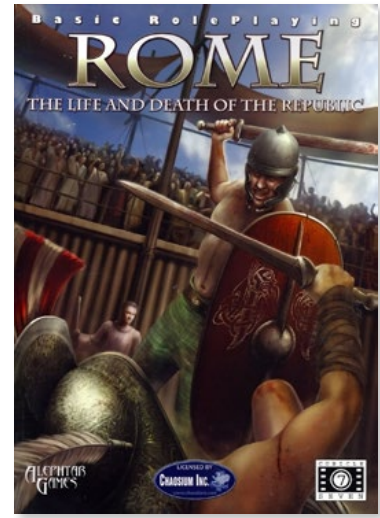
Among Cubicle 7's partners in this time period, several were particularly notable or prolific.

Adamant Entertainment (2009-Present) was the first partner that Cubicle 7 revealed, on June 12, 2009 — just 10 days after they announced joining the Rebellion Group. That's no surprise, since owner Gareth-Michael Skarka was already involved with Cubicle 7.

In many ways, Adamant was a perfect partner for Cubicle 7, since they'd been publishing high-quality material since 2003, but almost entirely for the electronic market. At the time of their partnership with *Cubicle* 7, Adamant was best known for their d20 Modern lines — including the pulpish *Thrilling Tales* (2004-Present), the planetary romance *Mars* (2006-2012), and the Victorian *Imperial Age* (2007-2009). Adamant's publications through Cubicle 7 included core books for some of these lines as well as supplements for more recent game systems — including a series of *Pathfinder* supplements and *ICONS* (2010), a *Fate*-influenced superhero game.



Alephtar Games (2010-2013), owned by Paolo Guccione, is clearly a company of Chaosium fans. Before partnering with Cubicle 7, they published historical settings for Mongoose's *RuneQuest*, including *Stupor Mundi* (2007) and *Merrie England: The Age of Eleanor* (2009). Around the



time they teamed up with Cubicle 7, they shifted over to Chaosium's new BRP system — starting with *Rome: The Life and Death of the Republic* (2009, 2010), an impressive 220-page setting book. They also published *Nameless Streets* (2010), a paranormal mystery game that used the *HeroQuest* system created by Robin Laws for Chaosium spin-off Issaries.

Some of the Alephtar credits pages look like a who's who of Chaosium fandom from the '90s and '00s, including authors like Lawrence Whitaker, Simon Phipp, and Pete Nash, and artists like Dario Corallo — all of whom previously worked on Chaosium fanzines like *Tales of the Reaching Moon* (1989-2002), *Tradetalk* (1996-Present), and *Ye Booke of Tentacles* (1998-2006). Whitaker and Nash may be better known nowadays as the creators of Mongoose's *RuneQuest II* (2010) and their own *RuneQuest 6* (2012).

Arc Dream Publishing (2009-2013) was a well-known publisher even before they joined with Cubicle 7. As is more fully described in its own history, Arc Dream was founded to produce supplements for Detwiller's superhero game, *Godlike* (2001). *Wild Talents* (2006), a sequel to *Godlike*, later joined the Arc Dream catalog. Prior to their work with Cubicle 7, Arc Dream was small press and primarily worked on the "ransom" model. Cubicle 7 let them sell their biggest games into wider distribution, starting with *Wild Talents Second Edition* (2010).

Arion Games (2010-Present) got their start in paper miniatures, but brought a classic British RPG back into print through their partnership with Cubicle 7. *Advanced Fighting Fantasy* was originally published as three books by Puffin (1989-1994). Arion combined them into a single book: *Advanced Fighting Fantasy: The Roleplaying Game* (2011). They've also reprinted some classic *Fighting Fantasy* supplements including *Out of the Pit* (2011) and *Titan* (2011) and returned to the setting of Steve Jackson's *Sorcery!* (1983-1985) with *Crown of Kings* (2012).

Cakebread & Walton (2010-2013) was named for its principals, Peter Cakebread and Ken Walton. They started out as licensors of Mongoose's *RuneQuest II* system, which they used to create the very well-received "Clockwork & Chivalry" alternate history, set during the English Civil War, in 1645. Their first book was the *Clockwork & Chivalry Core Rulebook* (2010). More recently the second edition of *Clockwork & Chivalry Core Rulebook* (2012) developed its own "Renaissance" game system, while *Clockwork & Cthulhu* (2012) offered new horrors for the Civil War era.

John Wick Presents (2009-2012) was founded by the creator of *Legend of the Five Rings* (1997) and *7th Sea* (1997), but in the '00s published more indie offerings. Wick ended up publishing just one book with Cubicle 7: a reissuing (2009) of his *Houses of the Blooded* RPG (2008), a *Fate*-influenced fantasy RPG. Though the partnership between Wick and Cubicle 7 was short, it marked the exact sort of publication that had been imagined: a reissuing of a high-quality independent book to a larger audience.

Khepera Publishing (2010-2011) got started to publish *GODSEND Agenda* (2001) — a realistic look at superheroes in the modern world, written by Michael Fiegel and Jerry Grayson. They really got rolling when they partnered up with the third-incarnation of West End. This resulted in their publishing a d6 edition of *GODSEND Agenda* (2005), a *d6 Powers* genre book (2006), and several supplements. Though West End is now gone, Khepera continued with their d6 *GODSEND Agenda* through Cubicle 7 (2010), as well as a new edition of their well-received indie game of spacefaring Greeks, *Hellas: Worlds of Sun and Stone* (2008, 2010).

Monkey House Games (2011-2013) was one of Cubicle 7's later partners. Jeff Dee and Jack Herman founded the company to recover their *Villains & Vigilantes* (1982) game, which they'd published through FGU some decades earlier. Monkey House printed about a half-dozen books with Cubicle 7, including new editions of the superhero RPGs *Living Legends* (2011) and *Villains & Vigilantes 2.1* (2011).

Moon Design Publications (2011-Present) is the successor to Issaries Inc. as the publisher of the Gloranthan-based *HeroQuest* (2000, 2003, 2009) game. Though they'd been publishing excellent, well-received products for a few years, getting books into retail stores had been a continuing problem — and one that Cubicle 7 could uniquely solve. Under Cubicle 7, massive Moon Design tomes like *Sartar: Kingdom of Heroes* (2012), *Sartar Companion* (2012), and *Pavis: Gateway to Adventure* (2012) have seen larger audiences.

Postmortem Studios (2009-2013) was another early partnership, again due to the connections of the owner, James Desborough, with Cubicle 7. He was the co-author of *CS1: Cannibal Sector One* and for a short time the *SLA Industries* line editor. Postmortem has published a set of generic plot seed books with Cubicle 7, the first of which was *100 Sci-Fi Adventure Seeds* (2009). Many of these volumes had been published as PDFs before Cubicle 7 gave them a wider audience.

Savage Mojo (2010-2013) was the newest incarnation of Talisman Studios, who was once Pinnacle Entertainment Group's art studio. They changed their name in late 2009 to demonstrate their dual focus on the *Savage Worlds* rules system and their own "Mojo Rules!" system. Their first product with Cubicle 7 was *Savage Suzerein* (2010), a new iteration of their classic setting that allows *Savage Worlds* players to attain demigodhood and adventure through the planes.

Mini-History

Moon Design Publications: 1999-Present

In the '90s, American expatriate Rick Meints was a member of the Reaching Moon Megacorp – the British fan publisher that was the center of Glorantha culture at the time. There he published his book on collecting Gloranthan publications: *The Meints Index to Glorantha* (1996, 1999). By the time of the book's second edition, the Megacorp was on its way out: a decade of constant publication and convention organizing burned out *most* of its members. Rick Meints wasn't done with publishing Gloranthan material, though, so he and Colin Phillips created Moon Design Publications. Its name was clearly beholden to its predecessor, but the new company's purpose was something different: to reprint long out-of-print *RuneQuest* supplements.

Over a six-year period, Moon Design published four beautiful compilations of old *RuneQuest* material as the *Gloranthan Classics* series, which included: *Pavis & Big Rubble* (1999), *Griffin Mountain* (2001), *Cult Compendium* (2002), and *Borderlands & Beyond* (2005). Meanwhile, Greg Stafford returned from a one-year stay in Mexico and was looking for a new company to carry on the publications of Issaries. Moon Design, by now done with the major Gloranthan books published by Chaosium, became that company.

For its first few years, Moon Design's aspirations exceeded its resources. It published its first book, *Imperial Lunar Handbook Volume* 2 (2006), fairly quickly, but only two more *HeroQuest* books would appear by 2008 – plus a few of Greg Stafford's "unfinished works," which Moon Design rebranded as the *Stafford Library*.

Fortunately, Moon Design picked up some new resources in 2008 when Jeff Richard came on board as both co-owner and principal Gloranthan author. Soon afterward the company published the second edition of *HeroQuest* (2009), revised by author Robin Laws. The new edition updated the game with a lot of the "indie" memes of the 2000s: it focused more than ever on storytelling and introduced the idea of "dramatic rhythm" – suggesting that roleplaying is about creating great narratives, not adversarial simulations. Laws would continue developing some of these same ideas for other publishers, as seen in *Hamlet's Hit Points* (2010) and *Hillfolk* (2013).

Since then, Moon Design hasn't sped up their production, but they have increased the size of their books, resulting in a few mammoth releases: *Sartar: Kingdom of Heroes* (2009), *Sartar Companion* (2010), and *Pavis: Gateway to Adventure* (2012). Next up is a two-book *Guide to Glorantha*, funded by a Kickstarter that raised $260,962 from 1,276 backers – showing the high level of interest still engendered by the world of Glorantha. Meanwhile, a partnership with Cubicle 7 has helped to get Moon Design's products out to fans, while Moon Design is closely allying with *RuneQuest* publisher The Design Mechanism. They've also recently taken on a new business manager, Neil Robinson – another long-time Glorantha fan.

Moon Design's biggest news of recent years was announced on August 12, 2013, when they became the owners of Glorantha. Their efforts in recent years suggest that they're masters of the world, who will be able to carry it on into the future.

Triple Ace Games (2009-2012) was a fairly new company, founded in 2008 by Paul "Wiggy" Wade-Williams and Robin Elliott to publish supplements to Pinnacle's *Savage Worlds* system. They've created several original properties using *Savage Worlds*, including the *Daring Tales of Adventure* pulp genre books and the worlds of Hellfrost and Sundered Skies. Print copies of the *Hellfrost Bestiary* (2009) and the *Hellfrost Gazetteer* (2009) kicked off their work with Cubicle 7.

Many of Cubicle 7's partners were indie publishers, and so one of Cubicle 7's important contributions to the industry was the mainstreaming of indie ideas — both through these partnerships and through their own indie games like *Starblazer Adventures*. Many of Cubicle 7's partners were also British, giving more opportunity for UK publishers to influence the wider RPG marketplace.

While Cubicle 7 added partners by the score in 2009 and 2010, they also lost their first and biggest partner: Mongoose Publishing. As is described in their own history, Mongoose left Rebellion in early 2010. This resulted in Cubicle 7 moving for the second time in two years, to Rebellion's own headquarters in Oxford. Cubicle 7 also needed a replacement for Mongoose's distribution infrastructure, which resulted in them linking up with PSI, a publisher service company in the US created by White Wolf.

Games across Time & Space: 2009-2011



Though Cubicle 7 began publishing numerous partnered books in mid-2009, they were also pushing forward on their own games. This began with the two lines that Cubicle 7 licensed back in 2007 but hadn't yet produced.

Qin got a new Cubicle 7 edition (2009) and would be lightly supported with new books in the year that followed.

Meanwhile, David Chapman's *Doctor Who: Adventures in Time and Space* (2009) was a completely new line for Cubicle 7. The simple, rules-light RPG was built on the "Vortex" gaming system, which used a "die + bonus" skill resolution mechanic and also allowed for physical, mental, or social conflict.

The entire package was clearly intended to be inviting to new players. To start with, the game actually contained dice — which is extremely rare in the modern day. Inside, the game was printed full-color and featured numerous pictures

of David Tennant — then the current Doctor — and his friends and foes. Pre-generated characters kept the game simple, allowing players to immediately take on the roles of the tenth Doctor or his companions — all with no character creation.

Unfortunately, Cubicle 7 quickly discovered the problems that a major license can bring; their follow-up to *Doctor Who*, *Aliens and Creatures* (2010), was delayed into late 2010, apparently due to the timeframes required for approval. Meanwhile, Cubicle 7 also had to quickly produce an *Eleventh Doctor Edition* of the game rules (2012).

Despite these issues, *Doctor Who* has consistently been Cubicle 7's best-selling game by a wide margin, and production has sped up in recent years. The highlight has been an ambitious series of sourcebooks announced for the 50th Anniversary of the show that will detail every incarnation of the Doctor; it began with *The First Doctor Sourcebook* (2013).

Following the launch of *Doctor Who*, Cubicle 7 continued onward with yet more new lines; it was now able to realize them much more quickly thanks to the support of Rebellion. The next two were based on a pair of licenses from Chaosium for *Call of Cthulhu* and *Basic Roleplaying*. The *Call of Cthulhu* license resulted in *Cthulhu Britannica* (2009), a book of UK *Call of Cthulhu* adventures that later spawned a line of UK Cthulhu sourcebooks. The *BRP* license was ironically used to create a Cthulhoid game as well. *The Laundry* (2010) is based on the *Delta-Green*-esque Cthulhu writings of Charles Stross (2004-Present), where agents have to deal with the outer gods and British bureaucracy at the same time.



"Licensed games can also provide a base for the publisher to grow on – in both terms of cash revenue to inject into the company and other products as well as the spotlight that falls on them boosting their profile and that of the rest of the games in their portfolio."

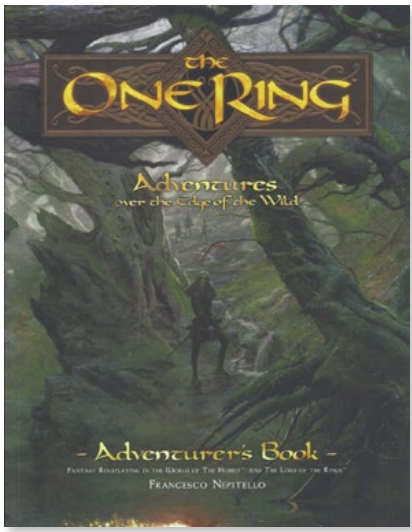
– Angus Abranson, Interview, cubicle-7.com (September 2009)

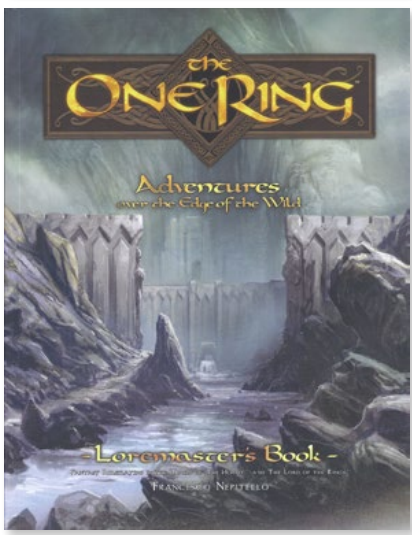
Cubicle 7's eighth major line was a spin-off of *Starblazer Adventures*: a fantasy game called *Legends of Anglerre* (2010), by Sarah Newton and Chris Birch. This new RPG was based on fantasy stories from *Starblazer*, but just as *Starblazer*

Adventures was really a generic science-fiction *Fate* system, *Anglerre* was a generic fantasy *Fate* system. Like *Starblazer*, it was also a gigantic toolkit, with rules for empires, guilds, and more.

However, it was Cubicle 7's ninth game line that would get them real attention. In January 2010 they announced that they'd secured the license to one of the few British properties bigger than *Doctor Who*: J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955). Dominic McDowall led this new project alongside Robert Hyde of Sophisticated Games, while design was managed by Francesco Nepitello — the creator of the *War of the Ring* (2004) board game for Italian publisher Nexus.

The One Ring: Adventures over the Edge of the Wild (2011) was released in August 2011. It was a handsome slipcased pair of full-color books that (again) contained its own dice. It was beautifully produced with a heavy emphasis on artwork and graphic design.





The most surprising aspect of the game was its tight focus. It was set in the Wilderlands east of the Misty Mountains, shortly after the events of *The Hobbit* (1937). The books contained very little information about the wider world, but this gave the game the opportunity to detail and evocatively present its limited locale; this is one of the places where the game has received particular praise, especially in contrast to ICE's classic *Middle-earth Roleplaying* (1984), which was frequently criticized for not evoking the feeling of Middle-earth.

The mechanics for the game are light, but otherwise not notable. Various attributes and skills are well-integrated into the game's setting. Conflict resolution is based on a simple additive dice pool whose main quirk is the "feat dice," which can produce instant success (if the Gandalf rune is rolled) or increase the likelihood of failure (if the eye of Sauron zeroes out the die). Combat is abstract, while the most

interesting aspect of the game is probably a Fellowship (wintering) phase that allows players to do a bit of storytelling.

The original plan was for *The One Ring: Adventures over the Edge of the Wild* to be the first in a trilogy of games, each of which would cover a different physical area and each of which would push the setting toward the War of the Ring. However, Cubicle 7 decided that they weren't happy with reselling the rules through multiple books and instead focused on expanding the game's playable area and gaming options. As a result, early supplements such as *Tales from the Wilderland* (2012), *The Heart of the Wild* (2013), and *The Darkening of Mirkwood* (2014) all focused on the game's original setting. Given the release of *The Hobbit* movies (2012-2014) set in this area, this was probably a canny decision. New supplements expanding the setting into Rivendell and Rohan have since been announced.

Finally, *Airship Pirates* (2011) was another Gen Con Indy 2011 release: this coproduction with Cakebread & Walton used *Victoriana*'s Heresy system as the basis of a future steampunk game.

Throughout the '00s, Cubicle 7 had problems with its production meeting its plans, leading to all of their early product lines being delayed, sometimes by years. The deal with Rebellion opened the floodgates, resulting in 2010 being the company's best year ever — with over 50 books being published for Cubicle 7 and its partners. The company followed that up in 2011 by expanding their staff with industry notables like Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan, Walt Ciechanowski, Charles Ryan, Neil Ford, and Jon Hodgson.

However, 2011 also saw a rather surprising departure: in November, Angus Abranson announced that he was leaving the company that he founded.

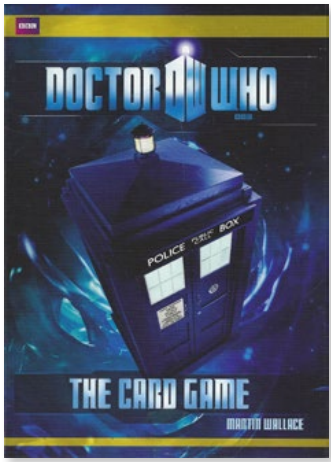
The End of an Era, The Beginning of Another: 2012-Present

Cubicle 7's publishing partnerships were the ultimate source of this abrupt change. They had tied up a lot of the company's resources and had not been as successful as hoped. While some partners performed well, others did not, and these losses had a disastrous effect on Cubicle 7's cash flow. The financial impact was the cause of Abranson's departure.

Abranson landed on his feet. In 2012, he announced that he was forming a new roleplaying company called Chronicle City. Ironically, he's largely basing his new company on the publishing partnership model: he's working with over 25 small publishers to produce their books. Some of the names are quite familiar, such as Alephtar (who was a Cubicle 7 partner), Brutal Games (who was a Flaming Cobra partner), and Postmortem Studios (who worked with both).

Meanwhile, back at Cubicle 7, McDowall concentrated his attention on the company's own product lines in a bid to turn around its finances. As a result, most

of Cubicle 7's publishing partnerships were brought to an end in 2012-2013. Although the company's publication rate decreased from its height of 50 books in 2010 to about 20-30 books a year, the books were more successful, in part because they were focused on in-house lines.



Some of Cubicle 7's recent books have supplemented their existing lines; *The Laundry*, *The One Ring*, and *Qin* all continue to be supported. *Victoriana* received a third edition (2013), while *Doctor Who* received not only RPG support, but also a *Card Game* (2012) designed by Martin Wallace — marking Cubicle 7's first exploration of the strategic arena. Finally, Cubicle 7 has supported *Cthulhu Britannica* and also released a new *Call of Cthulhu* line: *World War Cthulhu*, overseen by McDowall himself. The first book in the line, *World War Cthulhu: The Darkest Hour* (2013), is set in WWII, but the line will eventually cover other eras of warfare. To date, it's been Cubicle 7's best-selling Cthulhu product.

This juggling of existing lines would be impressive on its own, but Cubicle 7 has also been pushing on yet more new games. The technological horror game *Kuro* (2013) and the Nordic *Yggdrasill* (2012) were both translations of French games, while *Primeval* (2012) and Ken Spencer's *Rocket Age* (2013) both use the Vortex system originally created for Doctor Who.

Late in 2013, three more events demonstrated how things were changing.



First, Cubicle 7 ran its first Kickstarter, for the boxed *Cthulhu Britannica: London*. They raised £90,412 (approx. $150,000) from 753 backers — which is a level of success that will likely send Cubicle 7 back to Kickstarter in the future.

Second, Cubicle 7 brought on Andrew Kenrick, formerly of Games Workshop and *White Dwarf* magazine, as Managing Editor. This should give McDowall more time (once more) for business growth and high-level product development.

Third, Art Director Jon Hodgson was promoted to Deputy CEO, again bolstering McDowall's support.

By the end of 2013, Cubicle 7 had clearly turned around. Its revenues were up 34%, exceeding $1,000,000 even without the Kickstarter. The company had also won its first two Origins awards (adding to a collection of ENnies and a Golden Geek).

Going into the future, it appears that Cubicle 7 will continue its expansion. Planned RPG lines include: a new multiplayer *Lone Wolf* RPG; and a "new RPG based on a prestigious 2000AD property," which is being developed by Nick Robinson. The company is also continuing its expansion into the card medium, starting with *Hobbit Tales* (2014), a storytelling card game designed by *One Ring* designers Francesco Nepitello and Marco Maggi.

Cubicle 7 has certainly seen slowdowns and setbacks in its history, but at the same time they've constantly pushed forward with proactive plans, and in doing so they've managed to be successful during one of the most challenging times for the roleplaying industry.

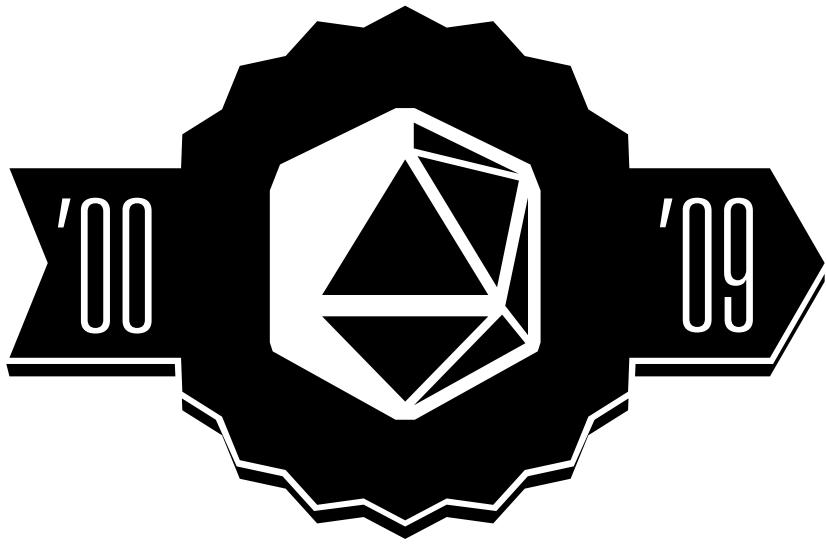
What to Read Next ◯

- For *Fate* and Fred Hicks, read ***Evil Hat Productions***.
- For Flaming Cobra, read ***Mongoose Publishing***.
- For another modern UK company, read ***Pelgrane Press***.
- For more on former partner ***Arc Dream Publishing***, read their own history.
- For more on former partner ***John Wick Presents***, read their own history.

In Other Eras

- For the origins of *SLA Industries*, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*, including the mini-history of ***Nightfall Games***.
- For the previous publisher of *SLA Industries* and the creator of New Style games, read ***Hogshead Publishing*** *['90s]*.
- For *Victoriana*'s original Fuzion gaming system, read ***R. Talsorian*** *['80s]*.
- For the origins of former partner Monkey House Games, read ***FGU*** *['70s]*.
- Many of Cubicle 7's licensed gaming systems come from previous eras. For the d6 system, read ***West End Games*** *['80s]*. For *BRP* and *Call of Cthulhu*, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*. For *Fighting Fantasy*, read ***Games Workshop*** *['70s]*. For *Savage Worlds*, read ***Pinnacle Entertainment Group*** *['90s]*.
- For another *Doctor Who* RPG, read ***FASA*** *['80s]*.
- For other *Lord of the Rings* RPGs, read ***ICE*** *['80s]* and the mini-history of ***Decipher*** in ***Last Unicorn Games*** *['90s]*.

For the beginnings of the FASA legacy, continue onward to ***FanPro.***



Part Eight:

The FASA Legacy

(An '00s Trend)

Over the years, a number of notable ***second-generation roleplaying publishers*** have carried on with product lines originally produced by now defunct companies. Of these, the long line of companies that has followed in the footsteps of FASA is the most impressive, because it includes almost a dozen publishers: WizKids, Living Room Games, FanPro LLC, RedBrick Limited (and RedBrick Germany and RedBrick LLC), InMediaRes, Catalyst Game Labs, Sandstorm Productions, Posthuman Studios, and FASA Games. The trend spans the '00s — though it originated in the '90s and continues into the early '10s.

Some of these companies cleaved close to FASA's old game lines, but WizKids went into miniatures, InMediaRes focused on fiction, and Posthuman produced the totally new *Eclipse Phase* (2009) RPG after its principals worked on other FASA games for a decade.

For one company to have inspired so many follow-ups suggests the strength of their original games in the '80s and '90s — and also suggests that the future of the RPG industry lies not only in the next big thing but in its past as well.

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
FanPro	2001-2007	*Year of the Comet* (2001)	361
InMediaRes	*2003-Present*	*Battlecorps.com (2004)*	384
RedBrick	2003-2012	*Earthdawn Player's Compendium* (2005)	369
Catalyst Game Labs	2007-Present	*Emergence* (2007)	382
Posthuman Studios	2009-Present	*Eclipse Phase* (2009)	393
Sandstorm Productions	*2010-2011*	*Sunward (2011)*	397
FASA Games	*2012-Present*	*Creatures of Barsaive Pathfinder Edition (2012)*	379

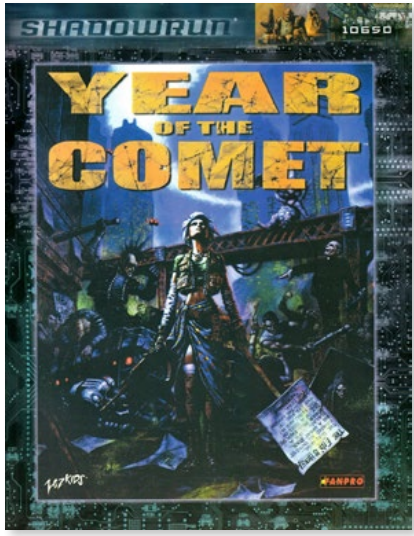
FanPro: 2001-2007

FanPro LLC, the company that carried the FASA torch through the early '00s, is all but forgotten today. Nonetheless, they were a vital link that bridged FASA's past with Catalyst Game's future.

The FASA Rebirth: 2001-2003

On January 25, 2001, Mort Weisman & Ross Babcock decided to shut down FASA, a classic RPG publisher from the '80s and '90s. At the time, they were still publishing *Battletech* (1985) and *Shadowrun* (1989) — though over their history they'd also been known as a licensee of *Traveller* (1977) and the publisher of *Star Trek: The Roleplaying Game* (1983) and the *Earthdawn* (1993) fantasy RPG.

When FASA shut down, many of its employees moved on to Jordan Weisman's newest venture, WizKids, who already published the *Mage Knight* (2000) fantasy miniatures games. WizKids also



2001: Year of the Comet

acquired the rights to *Battletech* and *Shadowrun* and used those rights to publish a pair of "clix" miniatures games: *Mechwarrior: Dark Age* (2002) and *Shadowrun Duels* (2003).

However, WizKids had no interest in publishing FASA's RPGs or their classic *Battletech* game of non-collectible miniatures. This would soon kick off FASA's legacy, which would continue in the stories of companies like FanPro, RedBrick, and Catalyst Game Labs.

One of those stories began with Rob Boyle, a FASA alumnus who wasn't interested in joining WizKids. He instead wanted to continue with the roleplaying work that he'd done at FASA; as a result, he was considering making a bid for the license to *Shadowrun* (1989). Before he could, FASA's German licensee, Fantasy Productions, expressed interest in *Shadowrun* themselves.

Fortunately, this wasn't an obstacle for Boyle, but instead an opportunity. Because he was an ex-FASA guy still living in Chicago *and still interested in RPGs*, Boyle got invited by Fantasy Productions founder Werner Fuchs to visit him in Germany. The next thing Boyle knew, *he* was the one setting up and running FanPro LLC, a new corporation created by two of the principals of the German Fantasy Productions corporation, and Boyle himself.

> *"Werner and I hit it off pretty well, I think. They flew me over to Germany and [we] had a talk and decided to run with it, and so yeah, ever since I've been in way over my head."*
>
> – Rob Boyle, Interview, Pulp Gamer Inside Track Podcast #3 (October 2006)

In many ways, FanPro LLC was a direct continuation of FASA from its last days. The company licensed *Shadowrun* in early 2001, and Rob Boyle took over as line editor. Six months later, FanPro licensed *Battletech* as well and hired ex-FASA employee Randall Bills to continue with his job as *Battletech* line editor. Bills had been one of the FASA employees to move over to WizKids, and he continued with that job through 2004. Simultaneously, he was also FanPro LLC's second (and only other) employee.

FanPro was able to get *Shadowrun* going again almost immediately. Work had begun on Boyle's first book before FASA shut down: *Year of the Comet* (2001) continued Shadowrun's metaplot by introduced a new storyline involving the return of Haley's comet. The storyline introduced a new dragon, another holdover from *Earthdawn* (1994). It continued in *Wake of the Comet* (2002) and was resolved in *Survival of the Fittest* (2002) — though its repercussions would continue to affect the *Shadowrun* universe afterward.



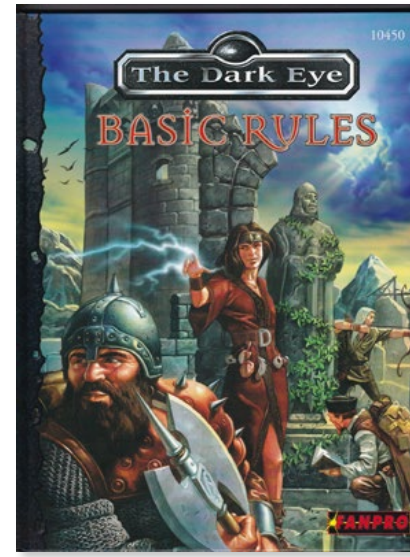
FanPro's new *Battletech* line under Randall Bills trailed the new *Shadowrun* line by a year because of the initial delay in licensing, but once it got going it followed a remarkably similar trajectory. The only notable change was in the name; FanPro was asked to rechristen the game as *Classic Battletech* (2002) to differentiate it from the era then being developed by WizKids for *Mechwarrior: Dark Age* (2002).

As with *Shadowrun*, FanPro got right into the metaplot of *Battletech*. Following the end of the Federated Commonwealth Civil War, depicted in Loren Coleman's *Endgame* (2002) novel from Roc, FanPro quickly moved the timeline up into a new "Jihad" era. They published the *Technical Readout: 3067* (2002), *Field Manual: Updates* (2003), and *Field Manual: Mercenaries Revised* (2003) as the basis for the new time period.

Just a few years after the death of FASA, FanPro revived the company's two final lines and continued on with them under their own strong editorial direction. In the next few years, it would look like they were going from strength to strength.

In with the New: 2003-2007

FanPro's middle years are notable for how much they managed to innovate despite a small staff.



That began with a unique new direction for the company, which grew out of their new German roots. In 2002, the German Fantasy Productions produced a new fourth edition (2002) of *Das Schwarze Auge* (1984), Germany's top fantasy RPG. FanPro LLC was then licensed to produce an American translation, which was released the next year as *The Dark Eye* (2003).

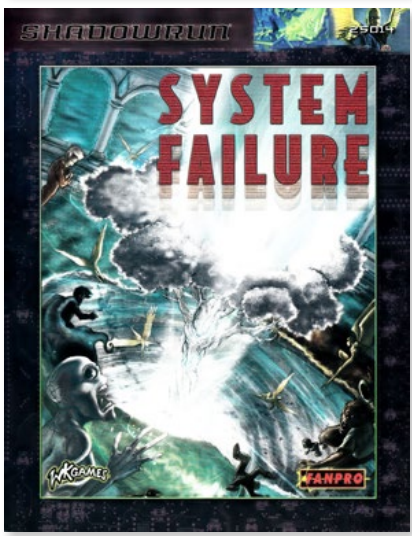
The Dark Eye was the first German RPG translated to English in its original form. Through French and even Swedish RPGs had been well-represented in the

US RPG market in the '90s, the same wasn't true of German releases. White Wolf's *Engel Corebook* (2000) had been the first real look at a German RPG in the US — except that White Wolf converted it to d20, which probably removed much of its novelty. Unfortunately, FanPro's *The Dark Eye* didn't make any waves either, perhaps because it was a fairly traditional FRPG. As a result, FanPro only supported the game with two supplements.

Nonetheless, the young FanPro continued to innovate — and they did so more successfully when concentrating on their existing games.

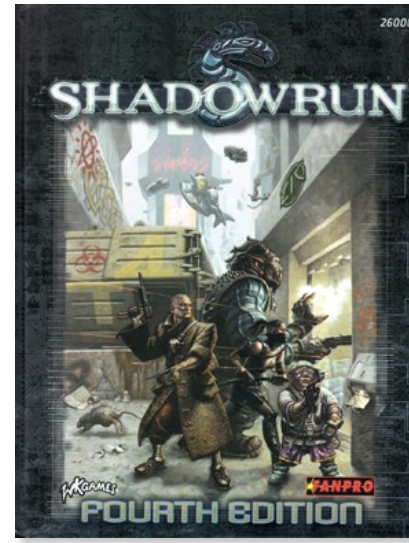
This began with Rob Boyle's *Shadowrun Missions*, overseen by Rich Osterhout in their "first season." These downloadable single-night adventures were part of a *Shadowrun* "Living Campaign" — much like the Living Campaigns initiated by the RPGA in the '80s. Every month, GMs could download a new adventure to run as part of organized play. The first was *Death of a Fixer* (2004).





Though these *Missions* offered a new way to distribute *Shadowrun* supplements, they didn't replace FanPro's traditional distribution. Over the next few years, they published *Shadowrun* location books and organization books and even reprinted out-of-print FASA releases. Meanwhile the ongoing story of *Shadowrun* continued in *State of the Art: 2063* (2003) and *State of the Art: 2064* (2004). Then in 2005, Boyle's methods infiltrated the *Shadowrun* metaplot too; in the *System Failure* (2005) event book, *Shadowrun*'s Matrix crashed, resulting in a big change for the status quo of the game.

This was part of Boyle's master plan. While working with *Shadowrun* freelancers, he learned that even *Shadowrun*'s top designers didn't understand its complex rules — which like most RPGs of the '90s was full of different rule sets for different parts of the game. Boyle figured that if the game designers



had problems with the rules, then the fans probably had *bigger* problems. He decided the game needed simplification and started working on a new edition of *Shadowrun* around 2003. When it finally materialized two and a half years later, *Shadowrun Fourth Edition* (2005) was the biggest revamp the game had ever seen; the Matrix crash was just part of that.

Boyle's main goal in creating the fourth edition was to make the game more approachable by new players. To accomplish this he made changes in three main areas:

First, Boyle updated the game system. Though he kept *Shadowrun*'s dice pools, he got rid of individual target numbers and instead set 5+ as the standard success value. It was the exact same simplification that White Wolf made with the release of *Trinity* (1997) — underlining the commonality of the games, even years after their creation. Many variant rule systems were then simplified down to this simple mechanic.

Second, Boyle updated continuity. This was done in large part by jumping the time frame ahead five years. It allowed old plots — some of which had 10-15 years of real-world history behind them — to be shut down. New players could instead jump into new stories.

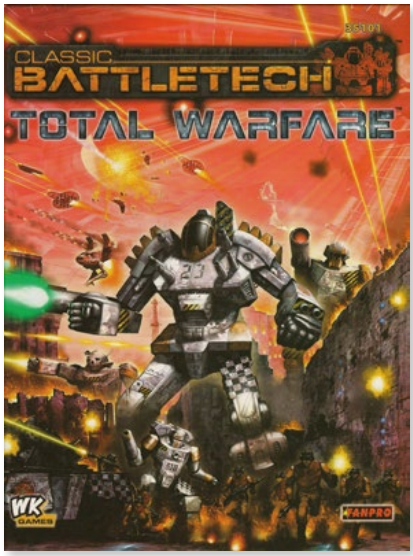
Third, Boyle updated *Shadowrun*'s technology. As is true of most science-fiction, *Shadowrun* found itself outpaced by real-world advances. This was the purpose of the Matrix crash; it allowed Boyle to create a new wireless Matrix that better meshed with the technology of today. He also introduced augmented reality as a middle ground between the real world and virtual reality.

These changes were sufficiently notable that the fourth edition of *Shadowrun* wasn't entirely compatible with what came before. The new core mechanic meant that older characters were weaker and less likely to succeed under the new system, while elements from other gaming systems would need to be converted. Because of these incompatibilities and some stylistic changes, there was (of course) some backlash from existing fans — particularly regarding modifications to the magic systems and the new edition's use of real profanity rather than something made up.

Fortunately, Boyle's work on the new book was sufficiently strong that many more fans were happy with the changes. The awards community even recognized the new edition with a pair of golden ENnies in 2006 for best rules and best product. Perhaps

more importantly, sales proved the changes out. The first printing of fourth edition sold out within a month, and two more printings sold out in the next year — even though those three printings were the largest print runs that FanPro had ever done.

Meanwhile, Randall Bills continued working on *Battletech* over this same period, and his work continued to mirror what Boyle was doing on *Shadowrun*. That meant the releases were pretty traditional over the first few years. There were reprints of classic FASA books, technical readouts, maps, and rulebooks. FanPro's most original release in this time was probably the *Classic Battletech Miniatures Rules* (2003), which moved the game beyond its traditional hex maps for the first time ever. Ultimately, however, it was a direction that FanPro didn't pursue.



A year after the *Shadowrun* revamp, FanPro decided to similarly revamp *Battletech*. The result was *Total Warfare* (2006). This full-color hardback offered the biggest update to *Battletech* ever by combining *all* of the *Battletech* games. *Total Warfare* included all the combat rules for infantry, support vehicles, aerospace fighters, dropships, and more, as well as details of the *Battletech* universe — traditionally omitted from the rules.

The strong new editions of *Battletech* and *Shadowrun* should have formed the cores of even stronger lines for FanPro and allowed them to continue into the '10s and beyond. Unfortunately, they were about to be beset by multiple problems that were no fault of their own. Still, they got to enjoy *some* of the fruits of their labors.



FanPro produced a handful of books to support the fourth edition of *Shadowrun* in 2006, including: *On the Run* (2006), an introductory adventure for new players; *Runner Havens* (2006), which reintroduced the *Shadowrun* settings of Hong Kong and Seattle; and *Street Magic* (2006), which expanded the magic system. But that was it.

Meanwhile, *Battletech* didn't even get to finish its revamp. *Total Warfare* was supposed to be followed by an introductory box, a book of construction rules, and more — none of which would ever appear from FanPro. Instead, they managed to publish only one more book for the *Battletech* relaunch: *Classic Battletech RPG* (2007), a reprint of Bryan Nystul and Randall Bills' *Mechwarrior* third edition rules (1999).

It would be one of the company's final publications.

Out with the Old: 2006-2007

FanPro's downfall was unfortunately encoded in its DNA: it was nearly predestined from the day it was founded.

This was in part due to the company's small staff. A lack of employees meant that they couldn't do their own warehousing and shipping, and so they instead went to a fulfillment company: Fast Forward Entertainment — who was also a d20 company and the final publisher of *Games Unplugged* magazine. Sadly, fulfillment houses haven't had a very good record in the 21st century; just like Wizard's Attic and Osseum Entertainment, Fast Forward went under. When they did, they took a lot of money with them that they collected for FanPro's books and hadn't paid out. This was probably the first nail in FanPro's coffin.

The other problem was FanPro's interconnection with its (sort of) parent company, Fantasy Productions in Germany. By 2007, FanPro's German progenitor was having problems of its own. As a result, in April 2007, they started divesting themselves of their gaming properties by selling the once best-selling *Das Schwarze Auge*. The rest of Fantasy Productions' games would soon follow. In the meantime, Fantasy Productions were helping to support themselves using gaming stock taken from the American FanPro warehouses. So, FanPro LLC wasn't getting support from its German parent in hard times — and worse, was actually supporting *them*!

The first sign of FanPro's problem may have been the disappearance of a fourth RPG called *Degenesis*, scheduled for publication in late 2006. It would have been FanPro's second translated German RPG. Though *The Dark Eye* hadn't been that successful for FanPro, *Degenesis* might have done better. It was a post-apocalyptic transhuman game that included a unique genre and setting, but sadly, it was not to be.

> *"[T]he game industry does have a problem with good-intentioned people who care a lot about games but know nothing about running a business. Or worse, it has ruthless business people transplanted from other areas who care nothing about the creative folks behind the games. So, freelancers beware."*
>
> – Rob Boyle, "Re: FASA Curse," forum.rpg.net (March 2010)

In its last days, Boyle and Bills tried to buy FanPro LLC from Fantasy Productions. When that didn't work, they threatened to leave and implied that they'd be bidding for the WizKids licenses coming up for renewal. Eventually WizKids stepped in to mediate. Though they weren't willing to let Boyle and Bills create a new company, they did offer another possibility.

This opportunity came about through InMediaRes, a company publishing licensed *Battletech* and *Shadowrun* fiction that Bills was also involved with. Through an agreement with WizKids, InMediaRes was able to pick up the license for the *Classic Battletech* and *Shadowrun* games and (as part of the agreement) to take on Boyle and Bills as regular staff. InMediaRes created a new subsidiary to hold their new gaming rights: Catalyst Game Labs.

Despite the death of FanPro, its two product lines — and the work that Boyle and Bills had done on the older FASA games — was able to continue directly on. And so the story of FanPro continues in the history of Catalyst Game Labs.

What to Read Next ◯

- For more German RPGs, read about the Pro-Indie releases from ***RedBrick*** and their spin-off, Vagrant Workshop.
- For the continuing story of Randal Bills, Rob Boyle, *Battletech*, and *Shadowrun*, read ***Catalyst Game Labs***.
- For the actual publication of *Degenesis* and Boyle's continuing story, read ***Posthuman Studios***.

In Other Eras

- For a Swedish-influenced RPG company, and one of the few other American RPG publishers with strong foreign ties, read ***Metropolis*** *['90s]*.
- For the French-US RPG connection, read ***Chaosium*** *['70s]*, ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*, and ***West End Games*** *['80s]*.
- For what's essentially the previous part of this history, covering *Battletech*, *Shadowrun*, and WizKids, read ***FASA*** *['80s]*.
- For changes to the Storyteller System that mirror the fourth edition *Shadowrun* updates, read ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*.

For another foreign look at FASA, read onward to ***RedBrick.***

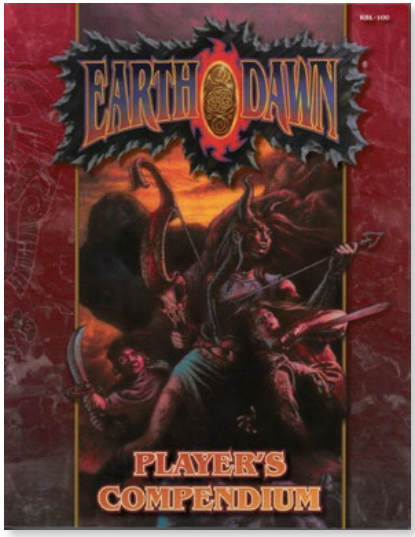
RedBrick: 2003–2012

Though RedBrick came into existence to publish Earthdawn *products, they picked up several other classic lines before they transformed into something else.*

New Zealand Dawn: 2002-2006

Following the January 2001 closure of FASA Corp, the rights to the fantasy RPG *Earthdawn* (1993) were sold off to Jordan Weisman's WizKids. Meanwhile, FASA had already licensed Living Room Games to continue the line; they soon produced a second edition (2001) of the game and began pushing its metaplot, moving the game away from its FASA origins.

Enter James Flowers of Auckland, New Zealand. He'd been a fan of *Earthdawn* (and a GM) since the game's earliest days — and had even produced some amateur releases, such as "Herbs and Plants of Barsaive" (1994) and the "Earthdawn Downtime System" (1995). In 2002, Richard Vowles convinced Flowers to



2005: Earthdawn Player's Compendium

approach WizKids about an *Earthdawn* license of their own, concentrating more on the game as FASA had imagined it — including the original first edition rules.

WizKids agreed to the proposal, but things wouldn't be that easy; WizKids was sold to Topps in 2003, and the master *Earthdawn* license reverted to FASA Corp. Fortunately, FASA was also impressed by Flowers' professional proposal — especially his ideas about leveraging the *Earthdawn* back catalog and using print-on-demand technology. On October 16, 2003, they agreed to a license for Flowers and Vowles to produce an *Earthdawn Classic* line.

These rights were licensed to a new publisher called RedBrick Limited. Oddly, RedBrick appeared in 2002 as a company that promised to bring "software development excellence" to New Zealand, but the name had been repurposed in 2003 to instead offer "roleplaying excellence." Web programmer Richard Vowles and *Earthdawn* line developer James Flowers were the directors of the new company.

> *"From our perspective, we're focusing on getting 'generic' First Edition original material out sooner, rather than later. This means you can use it with your First AND Second Edition games. So use our material AND Living Room Games' material AND FASA's as well!"*
>
> – Richard Vowles, Interview, *Circle of Four* (January 2004)

Before continuing with the history of RedBrick, we should take a moment to comment on their unusual location in New Zealand. They were not the first RPG publisher in the country. At the very least FSpace Publications (originally Future Systems) of Lower Hutt predated them. FSpace started out as an amateur publisher producing their own *Federation Science Fiction Roleplaying Game Rulebook* (1991) and a *Traveller* fanzine called *The Meshan Saga* (1995-1999); when they ended their *Traveller*'zine, it was to focus on the commercial launch of the *FSpace* RPG — the newest incarnation of their house roleplaying game. They continue its publication to this day.

However, RedBrick was something different: they were a publisher that intended to get out into the international market — and they potentially had the capability to do so, thanks to the improving technology of the '00s. The internet allowed them to coordinate creators across the world and advertise their products beyond the shores of New Zealand.

Early on, RedBrick talked about the possibility of producing a d20 *Earthdawn*. That could have crashed the company immediately, as the d20 bust was then looming in the near future. Fortunately, RedBrick opted to work exclusively with first edition *Earthdawn* material. They still needed to be cautious, as *Earthdawn*'s

fan base was a small one. As planned, new technologies came to the rescue here: PDF and POD production.

Despite the strong proposal they gave FASA, it took a couple of years for RedBrick to get going. This was in part due to the problems faced by any new company trying to create a viable and repeatable business model and in part due to the lack of electronic files for the previous *Earthdawn* line — which meant considerable OCR work was needed. It was also due to RedBrick's insistence on perfection in their products.

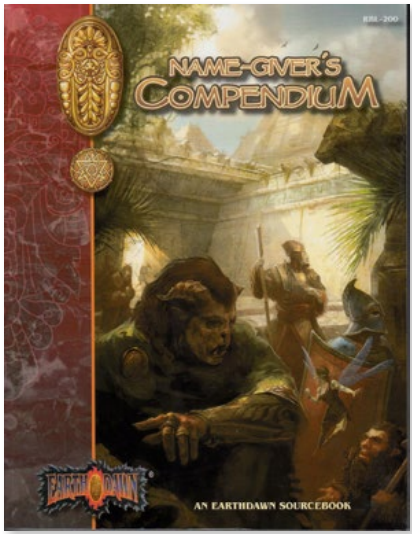
RedBrick began releasing FASA's first edition *Earthdawn* books as PDFs in April 2005. Their own products appeared later in the year. The *Earthdawn Classic Player's Compendium* (2005) was released as a PDF in August 2005 and the *Earthdawn Classic Gamemaster's Compendium* (2005) PDF followed at Christmas time. Print-on-demand softcovers finally appeared in July 2006; while hardcovers stalled even longer, due to technological issues with their POD production.

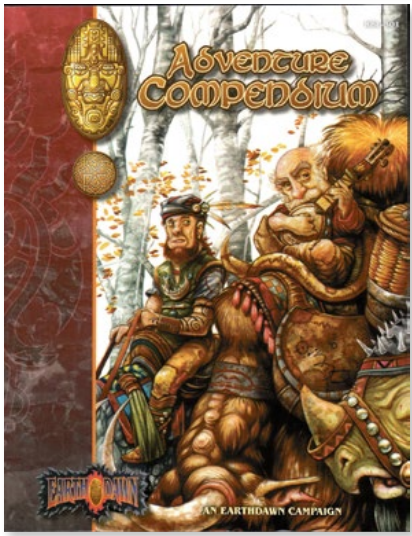
The massive new *Earthdawn* core books were notable because they were quite complete: the *Player's Compendium* gave players the ability to play through all 15 "Circles" of experience, while the *Gamemaster's Compendium* collected together almost all of FASA's first edition creatures, Horrors, and magical treasures. These *Classic* releases also included some minor changes to the rules — removing inconsistencies, tweaking skills, expanding goods and services, and providing rules variants. However, they were mostly first edition *Earthdawn*.

When a small publishing house like RedBrick comes into existence, the first few years of production typically determine which of the company's volunteers are serious. Some step up while others fade away. At RedBrick, one of the most notable creators to step up was Carsten Damm. He was a German fan of *Earthdawn* who became involved with the online *Earthdawn* community after attending the SPIEL '96 convention — a major German gaming convention held in Essen. Damm afterward wrote for the fanzines *The Earthdawn Journal* (1994-1999) and *B'jados* (1999); much like Flowers, he also released some fan publications online — including *Ardanyans Rache* (1999, 2003) and *Woodland Whispers* (1999, 2005).

By 2003, Damm had grown frustrated with the way the *Earthdawn* IP was being treated, and was considering writing for other games. Then Flowers contacted him online and invited him to work on *Earthdawn Classic*; Damm agreed. Over the next few years he also brought in a few more fans — the most notable of which was Kathy Schad, a German graphic designer and layout artist.

Around the time that *Earthdawn Classic* was released, Flowers offered Damm the role of *Earthdawn* line developer, while Flowers took on the broader role of product director. Damm accepted the position and would hold it for the next several years. Schad meanwhile became the company's art director.





RedBrick published a few other major books in its second year of publication, including: a complete rewrite of Damm's fan adventure, *Ardanyan's Revenge* (2006); a new races book called *Name-Giver's Compendium* (2006); and the *Adventure Compendium* (2006), which updated almost all of FASA's *Earthdawn* adventures. By this time, RedBrick had ironed out their POD problems, so these (and later) books were promptly released online as PDFs and through Lulu as both soft and hardcovers. Meanwhile, the company was also testing an alternate publishing model: "Shards" were shorter PDF-only adventures, giving RedBrick the opportunity to "try out" new authors. This series kicked off with *Journey to Lang* (2006); in the next few years it would be RedBrick's most frequently supported product line.

In 2005, RedBrick sold about 350 *Earthdawn* PDFs, divided fairly evenly between FASA and RedBrick products. In 2006, that increased to about 1,200 PDFs, with two-thirds of those being RedBrick releases. Meanwhile, the new RedBrick print books sold about 450 copies. They were relatively small numbers for the industry, but strong for the new PDF + POD field.

Though RedBrick was finding its initial success during these years, fans found the time a bit confusing; *Earthdawn* was simultaneously being published by Living Room Games (who published a second edition game with an advancing timeline) and RedBrick (who published a revised first edition game with a classic timeline). It was a relatively unprecedented situation for the industry.

The point became moot in 2005 when Living Room Games' production fizzled out; their license lapsed entirely in 2007, which would leave RedBrick as the sole producer of *Earthdawn*. Meanwhile, FASA Corp. already decided they were happy with RedBrick's production and sales. In 2006 they gave the company a boost by offering a six-year extension to their license.

RedBrick was still a small company at the end of 2006, with relatively small sales, but large opportunities lay ahead of them. With Living Room Games on its way out, RedBrick now had the possibility both to grow and to unite the *Earthdawn* audience.

For a few years at least, they'd fulfill that opportunity many times over.

Fade to Blue: 2007-2008

RedBrick consistently published new *Earthdawn* material for the next two years. One or two major books appeared each year in POD and PDF, including the *Burning Desires* (2007) adventure and RedBrick's first two setting books: *Nations of Barsaive: Volume One* (2007) and *Kratas: City of Thieves* (2008). More Shards appeared and were eventually compiled into a print book: *Shards Collection Volume One* (2007). RedBrick even began publishing fiction with *Anarya's Secret* (2007).

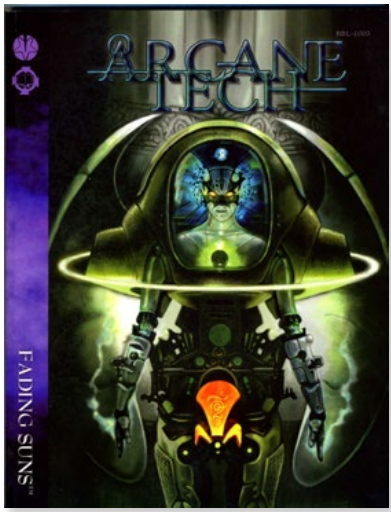
At the same time, Damm was actively working with the wider *Earthdawn* community. He made a few open calls for material and also publicly tested and discussed various upcoming mechanics. This resulted in some free PDFs, including rules for *Spell Design* (2006) and *Alternative Discipline Mechanics* (2007).

Meanwhile, RedBrick's ambition was also increasing. During these two years, they picked up two more stalled-out RPG lines from the '90s while also thinking about original lines of their own. If RedBrick had succeeded at all of their plans, they could have become a major RPG publisher — and one of the few success stories of the Great Recession. Unfortunately RedBrick's success would never reflect their plans of the late '00s.

This ramp-up started in February 2007 when RedBrick licensed *Fading Suns* (1996) from Holistic Design. This dark science-fiction RPG had been very successful in the '90s, but it hadn't been able to stay afloat in the d20 market of the '00s. Now, RedBrick was willing to give it a new lease on life; Carsten Damm, Alex Wichert, Angus McNicholl, and Kathy Schad began developing a third edition of the game, but kept the second edition alive during the development process. This resulted in the release of the *Fading Suns Second Edition Revised* (2007).

> *"Our business model is based around managing the Intellectual Property interests of our licensors, and publishing the highest quality products we can produce using the newer on demand technologies available."*
>
> – James Flowers, "Anyone Heard of This Company?," story-games.com (March 2008)

Just as RedBrick premiered their second game line, the company also attended their first major gaming convention: the SPIEL '07 convention in Essen, Germany.



This choice of venue showed both RedBrick's continued international focus *and* their continued ties to Germany — thanks to Damm, Schad, Wichert, and others. RedBrick released their first print supplement for *Fading Suns* at Essen: *Imperial Survey Vol. 7: Church Fiefs* (2007). It would be followed by *Arcane Tech* (2008). In the meantime, RedBrick was repeating their *Earthdawn* model by publishing short Shards adventures for *Fading Suns*, starting with *Kraken's Loom* (2007).

By the end of the year, RedBrick was also working on a new game line that would be all theirs. *Equinox* originated with Carsten Damm, who was increasingly becoming the creative heart of the company. It was a dark science-fiction game unofficially set in the "Eighth World" of the FASA cosmology — long after the "Fourth World" of *Earthdawn* and the "Sixth World" of *Shadowrun* (1989).

At the same time, Damm and Schad started Pro-Indie, a new publishing imprint for independent game designs. They began German publication immediately with Joerg Duenne's indie *Western City* (2007), Dominic Wäsch's gamemastering book *Spielleiten* (2008), and Frank Tarcikowski's indie *BARBAREN!* (2009). RedBrick Limited was planning to publish the games in English, as part of yet another game line.

Pro-Indie was more than just an imprint, though; it was part of a separate company called RedBrick Germany. Founded by Damm and Schad in 2007, it was described as a "branch" of RedBrick Limited. RedBrick Germany was formed in part for tax reasons and in part to take better advantage of the German market, but it also suggested a fracture within the company. For the moment Flowers and Vowles of Limited were working hand-in-hand with Damm and Schad of Germany, but this wouldn't always be in the case.

Back in New Zealand, Flowers picked up two more licenses. *Blue Planet* (1997) was first; it was an aquatic science-fiction game formerly published by Biohazard Games and by Fantasy Flight Games. RedBrick promptly supported the line by reprinting *Ancient Echoes* (2008) as a POD; this sourcebook had previously been released by Fantasy Flight, but only in very limited quantities.

RedBrick's sixth game line combined the old and the new. Though RedBrick decided not to produce a d20 version of *Earthdawn*, they were now interested in working with *Dungeons & Dragons 4E* (2008). Unlike most existing publishers, they decided to sign Wizards' GSL — hoping to produce "Age of Legend," a fourth

edition of *Earthdawn*. They thought that it might bring new fans to the existing *Earthdawn* game.

That was the state of RedBrick near the end of the 2008: six game lines, but only *Earthdawn* was viable. *Fading Suns* had received some support, but was selling at just 25%-50% of *Earthdawn*'s sales levels, while *Blue Planet* was just getting off the ground; Age of Legend and *Equinox* were still vaporware, while Pro-Indie games were only appearing in German.

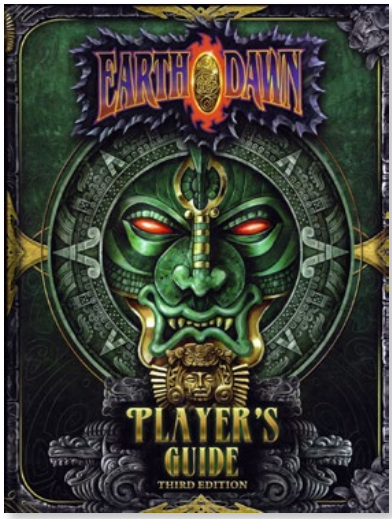
The company's plans were certainly ambitious, and perhaps they were on their way up, but they were also about to hit a major problem. To date RedBrick's production and distribution entirely depended on lulu.com, and Lulu had a notable problem: their shipping had always been expensive, especially for international customers. Then in late 2008, Lulu increased their hardcover shipping costs, international shipping costs, *and* printing costs, effectively pricing RedBrick out of business.

Unless they could come up with a new printing method quickly, RedBrick was done for.

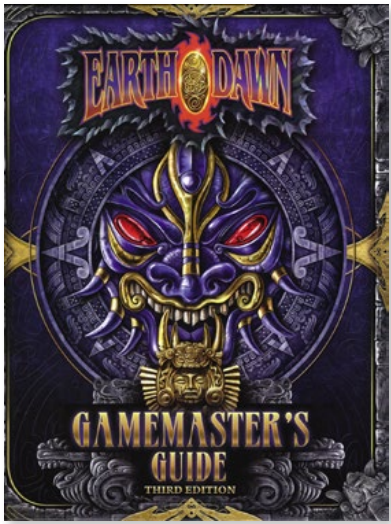
Flaming Cobra Twilight: 2009-2012

Fortunately for RedBrick, another publisher was looking for books to print; as is described in their own history, Mongoose Publishing began a program called Flaming Cobra where they printed and distributed books for other companies. Most of the publishers associated with Flaming Cobra were small press, new publishers, or both — so getting RedBrick was something of a coup.

In March 2009, RedBrick and Mongoose came to an agreement where Mongoose would publish all six of RedBrick's lines. However, Mongoose's main interest was with *Earthdawn*, only they had a few requirements for that line. Mongoose wanted to kick off their production with a new edition of the game, and they also wanted the books to be thinner than the mammoth (but comprehensive) rulebooks RedBrick produced previously.



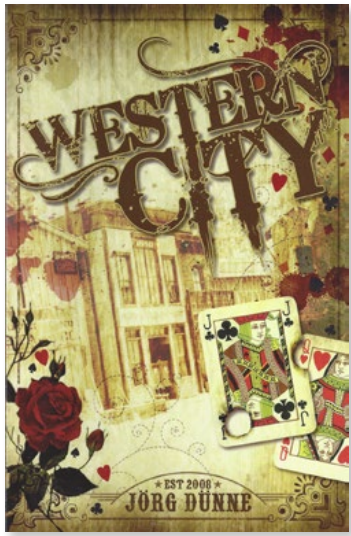
Earthdawn Third Edition was released in summer 2009 — produced by Damm and his team with support from Sutton. It appeared as four new books: *Gamemaster's Guide* (2009), *Gamemaster's Companion* (2009), *Player's Guide* (2009), and *Player's Companion* (2009). This third edition line



had the advantage of officially anointing RedBrick as the heir to the *Earthdawn* crown — after the confusing years when both *Classic* and *Second Edition* had been published. Beyond that, *Third Edition* continued on from *Classic* with numerous tweaks and minor updates.

At the time that Mongoose published RedBrick's *Earthdawn Third Edition*, the company was getting a lot of attention for its revitalization of older games like *Paranoia* (2004), *RuneQuest* (2006), *Lone Wolf* (2007), *Dragon Warriors* (2008), and *Traveller* (2008). *Earthdawn* fit right in with those classic RPGs; this helped the *Earthdawn* line get more attention than it had during the years when RedBrick distributed the game solely through PDF and POD releases.

Earthdawn as published by Mongoose and RedBrick looked very healthy through 2010. Where RedBrick had only been able to produce a few print books each year, now they were able to publish over half-a-dozen books on a yearly basis. About half of these books were updates of previous FASA and RedBrick books, with new artwork and additional writing, but Damm also kept a few new books coming as well — including *Kratas: City of Thieves* (2009) and two volumes on *Cathay: The Five Kingdoms* (2010). The *Cathay* books also marked the return of illustrator and former art director Jeff Laubenstein to the line.



Unfortunately, Mongoose's success with *Earthdawn* wasn't repeated with *Fading Suns* — due to private setbacks and a shortage of dedicated writers at RedBrick. The line sputtered out almost as soon as it'd begun, with *Shards Collection Volume One* (2010) being the final book for the game under RedBrick. *Blue Planet* didn't get even that much support, and both lines lost any momentum they might have had before the move to Mongoose.

Pro-Indie got some attention thanks to Mongoose's English-language editions of *Western City* (2009) and *Gamemastering* (2010),

but Mongoose opted out of *BARBAREN!* The rest of RedBrick's pending lines suffered worse. Age of Legend was shut down due to a lack of resources, while *Equinox* went out for playtesting in late 2008, but increased focus on *Earthdawn* meant there was no time to finish it up.

Sadly, RedBrick was also hit by problems closer to home. Throughout 2008, Flowers' wife struggled with depression. This reached a critical point when in July 2009, she killed their son, then herself.

Flowers eventually relocated to the US in 2010, where he remarried and changed his surname to Sutton. This move required the creation of a new (US) company called RedBrick LLC. The business decisions involved with the transfer of properties from RedBrick Limited to RedBrick LLC caused another fracture in the company.

Meanwhile, there were problems at Mongoose too. The Flaming Cobra program hadn't worked out as they'd hoped, so they cut it down to just three companies: Brutal Games, Magnum Opus Press, and RedBrick. Then in 2010 Mongoose started having severe financial problems, which forced them to lay off over half of their staff.

Due to some combination of Mongoose's problems and RedBrick's problems, the companies decided to part ways in mid-2011. With no publishing partner, RedBrick's publication abruptly came to an end.

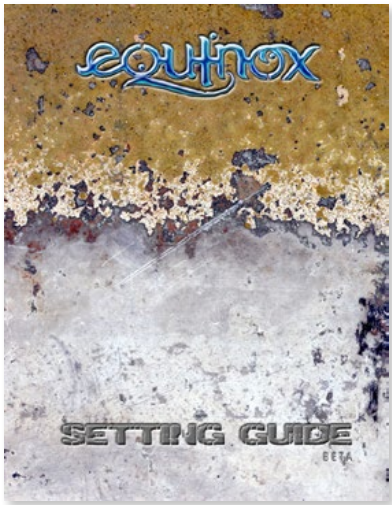
RedBrick still had *plans* for future publications, and they were still talking about yet more new lines. Damm was working on "Vampire City," which would be a vampiric variant of the *Western City* game, while Sutton was considering a retroclone of SPI's *DragonQuest* (1980).

More concretely, Sutton licensed a new game called *Demonworld* (1994). This game and miniatures line had originally been produced by Hobby Products in the '90s, but was purchased by Ral Partha Europe in 2011; this put it into the hands of FASA Corp, who in turn licensed it to their existing licensor, RedBrick; it was their seventh and final game line.

However, things were going to get worse before any of these lines had a chance of appearing.

"All I can give you is this in a nutshell: RedBrick is changing, but I am not."
– Carsten Damm, Interview, Earthdawn Blog (December 2011)

To start, Damm was growing increasingly uncomfortable with the Suttons' desired direction for the company and for the *Earthdawn Third Edition* line. He resigned as *Earthdawn* line developer in September 2011 — with the intention of staying involved with the development team and finishing several projects that



he'd begun. Then in November 2011, Damm found himself abruptly "shut out" — with no particular notice or opportunity to figure out what was going on.

Schad already left RedBrick, so she and Damm were now able to refocus. They changed the name of RedBrick Germany to Vagrant Workshop and finally released *Vampire City* (2012) and a systemless beta of the *Equinox Setting Guide* (2012). They've since continued with a variety of unusual games, including English translations of two Scandinavian RPGs: the penguin-focused *Valley of Eternity* (2012), and the surreal *Itras By* (2012). Pro-Indie also continues on, but now it's an imprint for Vagrant Workshop's German-language releases — including a German edition of *Fiasco* (2013).

Meanwhile designer Angus McNicholl had been working on a third edition of the *Fading Suns* rules since 2008. He delivered a draft of the first player's book to RedBrick, previewed at Dragon*Con in September 2011, but didn't hear much back from Sutton afterward. Then on April 30, 2012, McNicholl received his own letter suddenly cutting him off from all work at RedBrick. Like Damm, he was shocked by the decision, but unlike Damm he was very public in telling the Internet what was going on. A major kerfuffle resulted, leading to some other long-term contributors leaving the company.

> *"After serious consideration, I regret to inform you that your services are no longer required with regards to Fading Suns Third Edition and Noble Armada Third Edition development. … The reason for this decision has not been taken lightly; we respect your skills and dedication to the Fading Suns property over the last few years."*
>
> – James Sutton, Letter to Angus McNicholl (April 2012)

By early May 2012, RedBrick's fortunes seemed at their lowest ebb ever. Though they'd announced seven product lines over the years, some had never appeared and only *Earthdawn* (and to a lesser extent *Fading Suns*) received much support. Worse, *Earthdawn* was now fading into the rear-view mirror, with Mongoose's publication almost a year gone. Due to years of delays, RedBrick was already starting to bleed goodwill among its fans; the loss of the multiple designers who maintained close relations with the user community only worsened the problem.

Something *had* to change — and surprisingly, it did!

FASA Games: 2012-Present

RedBrick had been thinking about converting the *Earthdawn* universe to other game systems since its earliest days. They wisely decided to pass on d20 in 2003 and ultimately cancelled their 4E conversion due to a lack of resources.

However, in 2011, RedBrick was talking about a new possibility: creating *Earthdawn* conversions for *Pathfinder* (2008) and for *Savage Worlds* (2003), two of the hottest open systems then on the market. As usual, the goal was to interest a new group of players in the world of *Earthdawn* and hopefully to draw them over to the actual *Earthdawn* game.

Unlike the previous attempts, the *Pathfinder* and *Savage Worlds* conversions quickly came to fruition thanks to Hank Woon — who previously wrote for Paizo and RedBrick alike. Between May 2012 and July 2012, RedBrick released a series of ten books from Woon; each system got a *Game Master's Guide* (2012), a *Player's Guide* (2012), two *Denizens of Barsaive* volumes (2012), and a *Creatures of Barsaive* supplement (2012). These books were all presented in a new digest-size format, another new direction for RedBrick. All told, Woon's 10 books represented the most production for RedBrick in two years. Unfortunately, they also had some problems, including limited editing on what Woon considered a first draft.

Woon's last book, *Creatures of Barsaive Pathfinder Edition* (2012), also bore an odd logo; it read "FASA Games."

As it turned out, FASA Games was *not* FASA Corp. — which had long licensed *Earthdawn* (and now *Demonworld*) to RedBrick. Instead it was a completely new company formed by L. Ross Babcock III of FASA Corp, Martyn Tetlow and Paul Reid of Ral Partha Europe, and James and Dawn Sutton of RedBrick. The group had been talking about creating a new game called "1879" that would support both roleplaying and miniatures play. Ultimately, they decided to form a new company to do so: FASA Games.

As FASA Games came together, more staff joined the company, including former FASA Corp. art director Jeff Laubenstein, *1879* and *Blue Planet* line developer Mark Stout, RedBrick's then-current *Fading Suns* line developer Todd Bogenrief, one of RedBrick's original *Earthdawn* developers Steven Black, and marketing and promotional guy Sean Patrick Fannon.

Despite new faces, FASA Games was very much a continuation of RedBrick. Sutton's original company released all of its gaming rights to their licensors, but licensed those rights straight back to FASA Games. As a result FASA Games was now the producer of a familiar looking catalog containing *Blue Planet*, *Demonworld*, *Earthdawn*, and *Fading Suns* — as well as the newly announced *1879*.

We can speculate a few reasons that the company restructuring was useful. First, it helped the new partners at FASA Corp. and Ral Partha Europe get in on the ground floor.

Second, it helped Sutton to move past the tragedy associated with his old company.

Third, it helped RedBrick to get out of the rut that it had been in for the last few years.

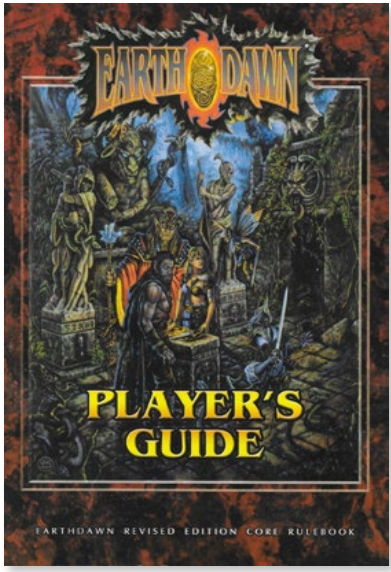
Fourth, it moved the various game lines away from the damage done to RedBrick's brand during that time.

In other words, the creation of FASA Games offered a new beginning.

"RedBrick is no longer publishing games, this is our first and last Gen Con."
– James Sutton, Interview, Roleplayers Chronicle (August 2012)

FASA Games premiered at a joint FASA Games/RedBrick booth at Gen Con Indy 2012, overseen by James Sutton. The booth sold print copies of all of the recent *Earthdawn* conversions as well as new editions of two games that had long eluded RedBrick: *Blue Planet* and *Fading Suns*. Rather than trying for the larger-scale revamps that had been considered for both games, FASA Games instead published "Revised Editions" which included smaller scale updates and corrections — but more importantly, got the game lines rolling again.

After that initial roll-out, production slowed down. New developers had to be brought up to speed, and Sutton suffered some major health problems. Meanwhile, there was a bit of upheaval as well in late 2013. First, Biohazard chose not to renew FASA's *Blue Planet* license. Second, James Sutton stepped down as CEO of FASA Games, saying that his "judgment/decisions/call-it-what-you-will had been not great for some time."



This may ultimately give the new FASA an opportunity to grow beyond its RedBrick roots.

For now, FASA Games continues on, with some rearrangements of the staff. Josh Harrison took over the *Earthdawn* line in August 2013, and has since announced a fourth edition of the game for 2014 — though support is ending for the *Savage Worlds* and *Pathfinder* conversions.

Meanwhile the brand-new *1879* game line is waiting in the wings under new developer Andrew Ragland. Sutton had been planning to massively expand *Earthdawn* by releasing new games for the second, sixth, and eighth worlds; and though Sutton is stepping away, the first of these games, *Earthfell*, is in development from Mark Stout. If FASA Games is able to push on some or all of these game lines, they may generate some badly needed momentum.

The company has other challenges as well. In particular, they've returned to RedBrick's old PDF + POD business plan, and to date this has kept them from penetrating much of the brick-and-mortar hobbyist market. Especially with the recent resignation of Sutton, the new FASA Games stands at a delicate point; whether they'll be able to fulfill the old promise of RedBrick is still unknown.

What to Read Next ○

- For Flaming Cobra, and more on how *Earthdawn* fit into it, read ***Mongoose Publishing***.
- For more GM-less games like *Western City*, read ***Ramshead Publishing*** and ***Bully Pulpit Games***.
- For another game that was briefly conceived of as the future of *Earthdawn* and *Shadowrun*, read ***Posthuman Studios***.
- For the *Pathfinder* game system that *Earthdawn* was converted to, read ***Paizo Publishing***.

In Other Eras

- For the original publisher of *Earthdawn* and more on Ral Partha, read ***FASA*** *['80s]*.
- For the original publisher of *Fading Suns*, read ***Holistic Design*** *['90s]*.
- For some notes on the original publisher of *Blue Planet*, read ***Pagan Publishing*** *['90s]*.
- For the second publisher of *Blue Planet*, read ***Fantasy Flight Games*** *['90s]*.
- For the problems with the *D&D 4E* GSL, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For the *Savage Worlds* game system that *Earthdawn* was converted to, read ***Pinnacle Entertainment Group*** *['90s]*.

For the continuation of FanPro, read onward to ***Catalyst Game Labs.***

Catalyst Game Labs: 2007-Present

Though its principals got their start in fiction, today Catalyst Game Labs is the publisher of two of FASA's top games.

Fictional Beginnings: 2001-2007



2007: Emergence

In 2001, FASA's principals decided that they wanted out of the roleplaying business and closed up shop. Their most popular lines, *Battletech* and *Shadowrun*, were passed on to their immediate successor, WizKids — run by FASA's founder, Jordan Weisman. However, WizKids was only interested in miniatures, so they were happy to license out the rights to those games in other forms.

Lots of folks were interested in the tabletop gaming rights. *Earthdawn* was licensed to both Living Room Games and RedBrick. Meanwhile, the rights to *Shadowrun* and to the original,

non-miniatures version of *Battletech* went to a new(ish) company called FanPro LLC. Both RedBrick and FanPro are detailed in their own histories — though we'll also encounter FanPro here shortly.

That still didn't account for *all* of the old FASA rights, because none of those (four!) legacy companies were interested in continuing the fiction lines for "Classic" era *Battletech* or for *Shadowrun*. That meant that there was an opportunity for yet another publisher to get involved.

Here we encounter the first person who would be instrumental in the creation of Catalyst Game Labs: Loren L. Coleman, an ex-Navy man and a prolific *Battletech* author. His first novel was *Binding Force* (1997). Afterward he published several other *Battletech* books and eventually got to write the finale to FASA's Classic era novels: *Endgame* (2002).

When *Endgame* came out, it marked the conclusion of one of the longest-running series of hobbyist-related fiction books — totaling 56 volumes written over the course of 16 years. Though *Battletech* fiction continued in a new era as the *MechWarrior: Dark Age* series (2002-2008), Coleman wasn't ready to let the *Classic Battletech* era go. So he came up with an idea: he'd acquire a license to publish original, canon *Battletech* fiction set in the Classic era and sell it via a subscription-based online website.

And he talked about this idea with his friends.

Here we encounter the second person that would be instrumental to the creation of Catalyst Game Labs: Randall N. Bills. He'd been a fan of *Battletech* back in the early '90s when he met then-line developer Bryan Nystul at Gen Con '94 over an all-night game of *The Succession Wars* (1987). During the next year and a half, Bills got to know some of the FASA staff better — even touring their Chicago headquarters — while simultaneously writing for the fan club's *Mechwarrior Quarterly*. When FASA had an assistant developer job open up in late 1995, they made sure Bills got the invite and eventually hired him.

By 2000, Bills became the *Battletech* line developer. In the meantime, he'd also begun writing *Battletech* fiction. He produced two novels for the original era of the game: *Path of Glory* (2000) and *Imminent Crisis* (2002). After FASA closed up shop, Bills went to work for WizKids, but that didn't stop him from considering other gaming opportunities.

> *"Though FanPro LLC has done a fantastic job continuing the legacy of Classic Battletech sourcebooks, it simply is no substitute for the fiction we all thought gone for good."*
>
> – Randall N. Bills,
> "Classic Battletech: A New Dawn," battlecorps.com (July 2003).

So he got to hear about Coleman's idea for a new business.

That first conversation occurred in September 2002. It went well, and the two decided to give the idea a go. In 2003, Loren Coleman created a company to build his vision: InMediaRes Productions, which he founded with Heather Coleman, Randall Bills, Tara Bills, and Philip DeLuca.

After that, everything fell into place. InMediaRes received their license for the electronic publication of *Classic Battletech* fiction from WizKids in fall 2003. They announced their license at Gen Con Indy 2003 and had their full website, battlecorps.com, ready a year later, in August 2004.

As a company supporting gaming fiction, InMediaRes (in its original form) largely lies outside of our gaming history. Suffice to say, they kicked things off with their strongest assets: the fiction of founders Bills and Coleman. From there, month by month they proved the viability of both hobbyist fiction and their electronic delivery model — which was a rarity in 2004, three years before the release of the Amazon Kindle (2007). They even added electronic *Shadowrun* fiction to their license, though they wouldn't actually produce any until 2010.

If InMediaRes had continued on with just their fiction, they would have been a notable company affiliated with the roleplaying community, but in 2007 an even bigger opportunity appeared.

Shadowrun & *Battletech* In Media Res: 2007-2009

That opportunity came thanks to FanPro, who (as we saw) picked up licenses to *Shadowrun* and *Battletech* tabletop gaming back in the early '00s. They'd been successful as well, thanks to the hard work of their two employees: Rob Boyle ... and Randall Bills. After a few years of continuing with FASA's old lines, the two produced new editions of *Shadowrun* (2005) and *Battletech* (2006), which should have kept them successfully publishing into the '10s and beyond.

Unfortunately, FanPro was beset by a number of problems that are better detailed in their own history — the worst of which were the downfall of their fulfillment house *and* their corporate parent. This might have been the end for the tabletop *Battletech* and *Shadowrun* lines — except InMediaRes was publishing fiction based on those *exact same properties* and Bills was involved with both companies. This created a new opportunity, allowing InMediaRes to pick up the gaming licenses to *Battletech* and *Shadowrun* from licensor WizKids.

In order to hold these new rights, InMediaRes created a new subsidiary: Catalyst Game Labs, who is the actual subject of this history. As part of their agreement with WizKids, Catalyst also took on FanPro editors Rob Boyle and Randall Bills as regular staff — making Catalyst feel like it was a merger of InMediaRes and FanPro. Boyle remained *Shadowrun* line editor for the next few years; Bills, who had been



the *Battletech* line editor, instead became a managing director of InMediaRes, with Herb Beas taking over as *Battletech* line editor for Catalyst.

In some ways, the early history of Catalyst Game Labs is anticlimactic because FanPro had already majorly revamped both *Battletech* and *Shadowrun* in its final days.

Shadowrun moved forward in support of FanPro's fourth edition (2005). Its releases included: introductory books, such as *Corporate Enclaves* (2007), which detailed Los Angeles and Neo-Tokyo; meta-plot books such as *Emergence* (2007), which started the game clock going again in 2070; and advanced rule books like *Augmentation* (2007). Catalyst also continued with a line of electronic *Shadowrun Missions* that Boyle had initiated a few years earlier, but where FanPro had given them away, Catalyst began charging for the *Missions* — reflecting InMediaRes' experience with the commercial possibilities of electronic publishing.

By 2009, Catalyst was turning out well-received *Shadowrun* books such as *Seattle 2072* (2009) and the beautiful, full-color *Shadowrun Fourth Edition Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (2009). However, when a "limited edition" of the Anniversary Edition didn't appear by the end of the 2009 anniversary year, it was clear that something was wrong — which is a topic that we'll return to.



Catalyst got to experience a bit more of the excitement of a new line with *Classic Battletech*, as FanPro had released the *Total Warfare* edition (2006) of the rules when they went out of business. As a result, it was Catalyst who published the majority of the line's introductory material, starting with the *Classic Battletech Introductory Box Set* (2007). This was an eye-catching and nostalgic product that reminded many of the first *Battletech* (1985) box. It put the two-decade old game back into the public consciousness and was the release that really put Catalyst on the map.

Afterward, Catalyst published additional rulebooks for the *Total Warfare* edition, including: *TechManual* (2007), the new construction rule set; and two advanced rule books, *Tactical Operations* (2008) and *Strategic Operations* (2008). Catalyst also supplemented the line with *Starterbooks*, *Technical Readouts*, and sourcebooks for the new "Jihad" era that had been initiated by FanPro.

During all this work on the gaming side of things, parent company InMediaRes was continuing with its fiction as well. In 2008, they received *yet more* licenses, showing WizKids' continued faith in the company. Because WizKids ended their print publication of *Shadowrun* fiction in 2006 and *MechWarrior: Dark Age* fiction in 2008, they were now willing to turn InMediaRes' electronic fiction license into an electronic *and* print publication license. Catalyst even got the rights to publish in the *Dark Age* era.

Battletech Corps Vol. 1: The Corps (2008), an anthology of *Battletech* fiction, was InMediaRes' first print publication of fiction; it would take a few more years for another book to appear in the form of *Battletech Corps Vol. 2: First Strike* (2010), as print books just weren't an important part of InMediaRes' business plan. It also took a few years for InMediaRes to get going with the *Dark Age* fiction, but *A Bonfire of Worlds* (2010) finally kicked off that line. These strange gaps in publication in 2009 again suggest problems at InMediaRes — but we'll have to continue waiting for that explanation.

In the meantime, *Battletech* also had an anniversary in 2009. Catalyst celebrated that with *Battletech: 25 Years of Art & Fiction* (2009). They were able to include stories in this print anniversary book thanks to their new license. For the moment it looked like these old FASA properties had a bright future ahead of them.

CthulhuTech & *Eclipse Phase*: 2008-2009

We've already seen that InMediaRes started having scheduling problems in 2009 for its fiction and RPG lines alike. Fans might have guessed that this resulted from Catalyst having a lot of irons in the fire: after picking up the two ex-FASA games in 2007, Catalyst picked up two more lines in the next two years.

The first of these was Matthew Grau's *CthulhuTech*, which was brought to them by the game's owner, WildFire. *CthulhuTech* had been underway since 2003, when EOS Press announced they were going to publish it. From there it went to Osseum Entertainment, then on to Mongoose Publishing, who finally put *CthulhuTech* (2007) into print. Unfortunately, *CthulhuTech* got caught up in the middle of Mongoose's printing problems of 2007-2008. Though the first printing of *CthulhuTech* was released in full-color, just as WildFire envisioned, a second printing (2008) and follow-up book *Dark Passions* (2008) both appeared in black & white. This caused WildFire to end their relationship with Mongoose.



Catalyst now gave the *CthulhuTech* line a solid home for the first time ever. They were able to rapidly publish a series of five full-color hardcover books: *CthulhuTech* (2008); *Dark Passions* (2008); *Vade Mecum: The CthulhuTech Companion* (2008); *Damnation View* (2009); and *Mortal Remains* (2009).

Though *CthulhuTech* has wended its way through several histories in this book, it's worth (finally) describing the game in some detail here, as Catalyst is where the game received the most attention to date. The concept of *CthulhuTech* is obvious from its name: it combines magic, mecha, and the Mythos. In other words, mankind is fighting a science-fiction war against the Mi-Go and other alien races. To support this fantastical combination, WildFire filled its books with high-quality art that helped to demonstrate the unlikely juxtaposition. The result was well-lauded, and the setting remains the most-loved thing about the game line.

The idea of science-fiction mythos RPGs is an old one, but one that other publishers had only touched upon. Pagan Publishing announced *End Time* as a late 21st century mythos RPG way back in 1993; though Pagan never published that game, their *Delta Green* (1996) had definite SF overtones. Chaosium featured a science-fiction adventure in *Strange Aeons* (1995), but has always focused most on the past. A version of *End Time* (2003) finally came out as a Chaosium monograph by Michael C. LaBossiere many years later. Despite clear enthusiasm for the science-fiction/mythos genre, only *Delta Green* got any sort of support. So, it wasn't a stretch to think that WildFire had a great foundation for their game.

The mechanics of *CthulhuTech* are simple and look more like a game from the '90s than the '00s. Players use points to buy attributes and skills. A standard dice pool of d10s usually results in the highest value rolled — but it can result in the sum of several dice if they form either a set or a sequence. (Yahtzee!) Combat is based on opposed rolls. It's all relatively standard stuff — but folks were interested in *CthulhuTech* for the setting, not the system.

The other unique element of *CthulhuTech* was that it was envisioned as a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Six "story books," starting with *Damnation View*, were intended to reveal the full story arc of the *CthulhuTech* universe, with the PCs taking leading roles. Dream Pod 9 envisioned a limited metaplot back

in the '90s, while White Wolf has also introduced a few limited-run games over the years, but it was still a fertile ground to explore. Unfortunately, the move away from Mongoose put a kink in WildFire's plans for their six-book metaplot, as would those Catalyst problems that we're fast approaching.

> *"The story books are written in such a way that Storyguides can adapt these epic plotlines to involve your individual characters, so that they can take part in the greatest conflict Humanity has ever faced."*
>
> – "Story Books," cthulhutech.com

First, though, we should touch upon Catalyst's fourth roleplaying line, which appeared in 2009. *Eclipse Phase* (2009) was a transhuman SF game that was the product of Posthuman Studios, a new game design studio created by none other than Catalyst's own Rob Boyle — alongside *Shadowrun* writer Brian Cross, and Catalyst graphic designer Adam Jury.

Boyle had been thinking about the idea of a transhuman science-fiction game since he came over from FanPro, and now it had finally reached completion. This would mark the beginning of the end of Boyle's time with Catalyst — and of his decade of work with *Shadowrun*. For now, Boyle stepped away from his long-time role as *Shadowrun* developer so that he could concentrate on Posthuman and *Eclipse Phase*. He'd be replaced first by Peter Taylor, then by Jason Hardy.

Money Mingling & Soul Searching: 2009-2010

Now that we've met all four of Catalyst's game lines, we can at last return to those publication problems of 2009. Beyond those slowing product lines, there was also a second problem of note that's always bad news for an RPG publisher: freelancers were getting paid late. The cause, as it turns out, was cash flow problems that didn't have anything to do with the four game lines that Catalyst had added in the last three years.

At the end of 2009, Catalyst did a financial audit to figure out what was going on and discovered that a substantial amount of money had gone missing. Randall Bills would later explain the losses by saying that the audit had discovered that a "co-mingling of funds between the personal and business had occurred involving the company's primary shareholders."

By 2010, the problems started to become more public. It began in January 2010 when WildFire terminated their agreement with Catalyst. Then a few Catalyst staff members began to resign starting in early March. On March 15, 2010, the results of the financial audit were finally reported to Catalyst, and shortly thereafter everything blew up in one of the ugliest game company meltdowns played out in the Internet age.

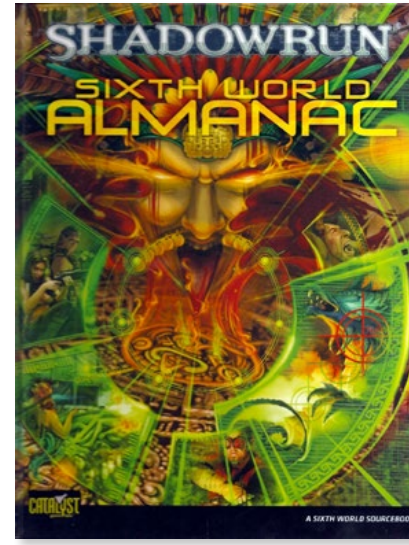
Over the next months, freelancers began talking more openly about Catalyst's problems and even forwarded on a message from Randall Bills explaining the situation and why the partners had decided to stay in business despite it. Meanwhile a few *Shadowrun* freelancers pulled the rights from Catalyst for books they hadn't been paid for.

> *"[A]fter reviewing everything and doing some massive soul searching, I've made a personal decision that this was a terrible, terrible series of mistakes; I bear my own weight of guilt in this in that I didn't pay better attention to the various red flags raised over the years that something wasn't right."*
>
> – Randall Bills, Letter to Catalyst Game Labs Freelancers (2010)

In April, Posthuman Studios severed their relationship with Catalyst too. They terminated their contract for *Eclipse Phase* and then bought up Catalyst's remaining stock — including a recently received second printing of the game, one that unfortunately hadn't corrected the errors from the first printing.

A few weeks later, on April 19, 2010, three of Catalyst's creditors — including WildFire, who hadn't been paid for many of their *CthulhuTech* books — sued Catalyst in court, trying to force them into involuntary bankruptcy. Filings on May 21, 2010, revealed that while only three parties were involved in the court case, Catalyst had approximately 250 creditors. With Catalyst's licenses to *Battletech* and *Shadowrun* coming up for renewal at the end of May, the company looked doomed.

Somehow, despite the deep financial problems and the departure of half of Catalyst's game labs, the company survived. They immediately started paying off freelancers and were able to get the rights to start selling their books again. While the court case was still ongoing, Catalyst was also able to get a temporary extension of their FASA licenses from Topps — who had bought out WizKids by this time. Afterward, they settled with the three creditors involved in the court case.



Following the court case, publication began again rather promptly with the *Corporate Guide* (2010) for *Shadowrun* in July and *Hexpack: Lake and Rivers* (2010) for *Battletech* in August. Catalyst was



announcing new hires in September and by the time *Sixth World Almanac* (2010) for *Shadowrun* and *Technical Readout: 3085* (2010) for *Battletech* came out later that month, Catalyst was probably distributing games that hadn't even been sent to the printers when the problems hit their peak. Some freelancers never returned to Catalyst after the problems, but many more have continued to produce content for the company.

Toward the end of 2010, Catalyst published what may have been their most notable new publication since they picked up FanPro's lines: Herb Beas' *A Time of War* (2010), the fourth iteration of a *Mechwarrior*-like roleplaying game set in the *Battletech* universe. It was published as a beautiful full-color hardcover like the other core rulebooks of the new *Battletech* line.

One of the biggest problems with the previous *Mechwarrior* RPGs was a disconnect between the PCs of the game and actual mech fights. This newest game resolved that problem better than most by largely basing its mechanics upon those of the parent board game. It also has some 21st century RPG innovations including a phased character-generation system.

Despite its innovations, *A Time of War* hasn't broken out as a major RPG — but then *Mechwarrior* never has. However, its mere existence was a powerful sign that Catalyst was coming back from its problems of 2009-2010. At the start of 2010, the entire industry had written them off for dead. Now, it was looking like their best years might still be ahead of them.

Brewing Up New Games: 2011-Present

In the years since their flirtation with death, Catalyst Game Labs has continued to support their remaining lines, *Battletech* and *Shadowrun*. *Battletech* received a *Time of War Companion* (2012), keeping the idea of *Battletech* roleplaying alive. However, Catalyst has innovated more on their other two gaming lines — one of which is brand-new.

The new line is *Cosmic Patrol* (2011), a pulp science-fiction roleplaying game authored by Matt Heerdt — who's been doing design and production at Catalyst since 2009. Rather surprisingly, it's an "indie" game, where players share the

authority of GMing — trading off for each new scene. To distribute the authority even further, players can expend resources at any time to adjust the plot. The actual mechanics beyond this are light and simple, as they should be for an indie-influenced pulp game.



Support for *Cosmic Patrol* has been low-key, but Catalyst Game Labs highlighted the game during some recent Free RPG Days and has also produced about a book a year. That sort of thing is probably easier to do when a project is a labor of love for its creators — and Catalyst has long seemed happy to support innovations from within the company, as they did with *Eclipse Phase* just a few years earlier.

Catalyst's other major innovation of recent years has focused on their classic *Shadowrun* game. Though both FanPro and Catalyst ably supported the game throughout the '00s, its star rose in 2012 when two different computer game publishers Kickstarted *Shadowrun* computer games. Jordan Weisman, the founder of FASA and WizKids, Kickstarted *Shadowrun Returns* through a new company called Harebrained Schemes, raising $1,836,447 from 36,276 backers; and then Cliffhanger Productions Kickstarted *Shadowrun Online* by raising $558,863 from 6,003 backers.

Catalyst Game Labs started pushing hard on *Shadowrun* themselves when they announced the Year of *Shadowrun* on December 21, 2012 — the same date that marked the launch of *Shadowrun*'s own Sixth World. The Year of Shadowrun was originally planned to include many new initiatives, including a deckbuilding game, a miniatures game, and more. Most of these plans lagged, but Catalyst was able to finally launch their *Shadowrun* ebooks with *Spells & Chrome* (2013), and more importantly they released a new fifth edition of *Shadowrun* (2013) at Origins.



The new edition of the rules contains numerous tweaks — especially to character creation, combat, and hacking. Catalyst

also described it as "grittier & deadlier." Overall, though, Jason Hardy's fifth edition is mostly an update of the solid rules created by Rob Boyle at FanPro.

Overall, Catalyst Game Labs seems to be in a strong position now that they're a few years past their near-death experience. *Battletech* and *Shadowrun* are both strong lines, and Catalyst is comfortable enough to experiment with very different designs like *Cosmic Patrol*. As a robust supporter of print RPGs, Catalyst has been a strong second-tier RPG producer in the '10s — obviously trailing only the big three: Wizards of the Coast, Paizo Publishing, and Fantasy Flight Games.

Meanwhile, WildFire and Posthuman — the two companies who left Catalyst during its problems — have each continued to publish. At first this was thanks to Sandstorm Productions, an "angel" investment company. Unfortunately, Sandstorm only lasted until 2011.

Posthuman Studios immediately went it alone, and has since put out more games than they did through Catalyst and Sandstorm combined. The rest of their story is told in their own history. It took WildFire a little longer to get going again, but by 2012, *CthulhuTech* was again in production; they've also gone it alone, which is probably a good choice given their long history of troublesome partners.

What to Read Next ◯

- For what's essentially the first part of this history, covering *Battletech* and *Shadowrun*, read ***FanPro.***
- For more on *CthulhuTech*, read the ***EOS Press*** mini-history in ***Arc Dream Publishing***, then the history of ***Mongoose Publishing***.
- For more on *Eclipse Phase* and Sandstorm Productions, read ***Posthuman Studios***.
- For more on distributed authority, like in *Cosmic Patrol*, read ***Ramshead Publishing*** and ***Bully Pulpit Games***.
- For *Rocket Age*, another game like *Cosmic Patrol* that is pulp science-fiction, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment***.

In Other Eras

- For what's essentially the zeroth part of this history, covering *Battletech*, *Shadowrun*, and WizKids, read ***FASA*** *['80s]*.
- For *Heavy Gear*, another game like *CthulhuTech* that was intended to have a beginning, middle, and end, read ***Dream Pod 9*** *['90s]*. Or read about the limited-run games from ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*.

For the newest member of the FASA Legacy, read ***Posthuman Studios.***

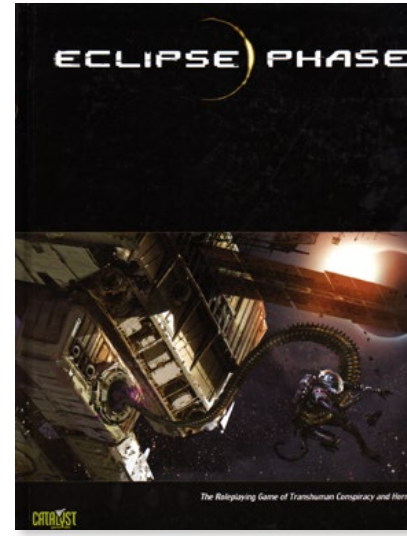
Posthuman Studios: 2008–Present

By focusing on transhumanism, Posthuman Studios introduced a new sort of science-fiction game to the RPG field.

The Catalyst: 2005-2010

The story of Posthuman Studios goes back to the mid-'00s when Rob Boyle was working at FanPro as the line developer for *Shadowrun* (1989). While there, he started playing with a game idea set in the future of *Earthdawn* (1994) and *Shadowrun*: in a science-fiction universe, at the height of the Sixth World, the Horrors of *Earthdawn* had once more returned.

By that time, however, the legalities of the once-shared *Earthdawn*/*Shadowrun* universe were a Gordian knot: *Earthdawn* was owned by FASA Corp. and licensed to



2009: Eclipse Phase

RedBrick and Living Room Games; while *Shadowrun* was owned by WizKids and licensed to FanPro. As a result, Boyle decided to go his own way; he largely set aside his ideas about a third *Shadowrun* universe game, but the formula of "science-fiction + horror" remained. Following the publication of *Shadowrun Fourth Edition* (2005), Boyle started to consider the creation of his new science-fiction game more seriously; he was joined by one of his *Shadowrun* writers, Brian Cross. Together they decided to create one of the first transhuman roleplaying games — following in the footsteps of the *GURPS*-driven *Transhuman Space* (2002) and to a lesser extent Biohazard's *Blue Planet* (197). It was a natural direction for the two writers, as Boyle and Cross were already interested in the transhuman movement: Boyle organized a local Chicago chapter of transhumanists, while Cross was researching the ways that technology changed social norms, for his PhD.

Before we go on, we should briefly define transhumanism. As the name suggests, it focuses on transforming humanity. It suggests that the human body can be changed or even abandoned — that humanity can live on in new bodies, in machines, and in other unrecognizable forms. Sentient machines, nanotechnology, backed-up brains, and rebuilt bodies are all common transhuman tropes. Transhumanism also often talks about a Singularity, where technological development continues to speed up until it all happens *simultaneously*.

"Your mind is software. Program it.
Your body is a shell. Change it.
Death is a disease. Cure it.
Extinction is approaching. Fight it."

– Eclipse Phase (2009)

Some transhuman ideas appeared throughout the 20th century. However the ideas only began to come together in the '80s, and they only gelled as a literary movement in the '90s and '00s — starting with books like *A Fire Upon the Deep* (1993) by Vernor Vinge, who had also predicted the cyberpunk movement with his "Real Names" (1981) novella. Boyle and Cross took as their inspirations authors like Iain Banks, Warren Ellis, Ken MacLeod, Richard K. Morgan, Alistair Reynolds, and Charles Stross.

The two worked on mechanics and settings for a few years in the mid-'00s. FanPro went out of business, and Boyle moved on to Catalyst Game Labs, where he continued as the *Shadowrun* line developer. Meanwhile, a graphic designer by the name of Adam Jury joined Catalyst in 2007. He previously worked with Boyle at FanPro as a graphic designer, layout artist, and website guru and had even lived in Boyle's loft for a summer — so it was natural that he fell in with the two

transhuman designers. In 2008, Rob Boyle, Brian Cross, and Adam Jury came together as co-owners and "comrades" in a new publishing house, Posthuman Studios, which they created to hold the IP of their game.

By now the game was coming close to completion. Posthuman licensed Catalyst Game Labs to publish it and finally revealed *Eclipse Phase* to the world on a new website in May 2008. They demoed it at Gen Con Indy 2008, but it would take another year for the game to see print — in part because Catalyst gave the OK to upgrade the game from black & white to full color, which required some last-minute scrambling for new art. *Eclipse Phase* (2009) finally went to press on July 7, 2009, written by Boyle and Cross, with beautiful full-color layout by Jury. The transhuman science-fiction and horror game was then released to the public at Gen Con Indy 2009.

Eclipse Phase may ultimately be what *Cyberpunk* was to the industry two decades earlier: a foundational look at the newest science-fiction trends seen through an RPG lens. Not only is *Eclipse Phase* transhuman, but it's also set after a Singularity: the Earth has been destroyed, but humanity has escaped into the solar system — and beyond, through gates leading to other worlds. Hypercorps still exist, and they're willing to use and abuse humanity — just like the old megacorps of all the *Cyberpunk* games — but individuals have sufficient technology to go it on their own. Even death may not be an obstacle, as characters can constantly back themselves up through "cortical stacks" and then "resleeve."

The actual game system of *Eclipse Phase* is pretty basic. It includes point-based character generation and a percentile-based skill system. "Moxie points" gave players the ability to slightly influence outcomes. Its main purpose is to provide some resolution, and then to get out of the way.

Eclipse Phase is forward-looking not just in its setting, but also in the method of the creators' attitude toward electronic distribution. First, they wanted to make sure their PDFs were cheap: where Catalyst typically charged $30 for the PDF of a $50 game, Posthuman Studios only wanted to charge $15 for the core game. Second, they wanted to make it freely available through a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-ShareAlike license — which would allow fans to give away the PDF and to remix it, provided that they didn't sell it and that they continued to attribute the authors.

Catalyst was resistant to these ideas, and so Posthuman had to cut a deal. They said that if their $15 PDF didn't double the sales of an equivalent $30 PDF, then Catalyst could take the difference out of their royalties. To meet this goal, Posthuman would have to sell 800 $15 PDFs within 18 months.

With this agreement in hand, Posthuman made *Eclipse Phase* into the first major RPG released under a Creative Commons license. The Posthuman crew

even seeded BitTorrents with their PDF themselves. Then, they had to sit back and see how well their theories of PDF sales meshed with reality.

Posthuman sold their 800 PDFs in just six weeks; within the 18-month timeframe, they'd double that. Meanwhile, one BitTorrent tracker suggests that *Eclipse Phase* was downloaded for free somewhere over 14,000 times in that same time period — exposing many potential players to the game. Not only was *Eclipse Phase* selling well, but it was well-received too; it would go on to win the Origins Games of the Year Award in 2010 as well as a few ENnies.

Meanwhile, Posthuman was preparing supplements for their new game. By February 2010, Catalyst had sent both a *GM Screen* and what was supposed to be a revised and corrected edition of the *Eclipse Phase* rules to the printers. The products were immediately released to PDF along with something new: a "Hack Pack" for the *GM Screen*.

The *Hack Pack* fulfilled the other half of the promise of the Creative Commons license — that fans could "remix" the *Eclipse Phase* products on their own. It did so by providing fans with the original computer files for the *GM Screen*, so that they could rearrange it as they saw fit. In the future, Posthuman would release *Hack*

The Problem with PDFs

PDFs have generally been great for the RPG industry. They've lowered barriers of entry and made it possible for small publishers to publish professional products without having to raise much (if any) money to do so. PDFs were an important tool for the d20 boom and for the indie revolution – and so they've influenced the entire industry.

Unfortunately, there's also a major problem with PDFs – and with PDF-only publications in particular. They can go away. If a publisher loses a license or if they decide that they don't want a product to be available any more, then it just disappears. Forever.

This isn't a purely theoretical issue. Martin J. Dougherty and Avenger Enterprises released numerous *Traveller* PDFs from 2005-2008. They even created a major new era for the Original Traveller Universe: *Traveller 1248: Out of the Darkness* (2006). But then Mongoose acquired a license to *Traveller* and Marc Miller's Far Future Enterprises pulled the licenses from smaller *Traveller* publishers. As a result, there is no longer any legal way to access the vast majority of Avenger's production. It's been lost, perhaps forever.

Posthuman Studios offered one solution to this problem when they released *Eclipse Phase* (2009) under a Creative Commons license: they ensured that their game can *never* be lost, because it can always be freely distributed by its fans.

Packs for all their major releases — and would eventually put out a *Hack Pack* for the core rulebook (2011) as well.

Unfortunately, none of this would happen at Catalyst. As is more fully described in Catalyst's own history, a financial audit turned up missing money; Catalyst dissolved into recriminations — and nearly into bankruptcy.

Rob Boyle and Adam Jury both decided to leave Catalyst as a result of these problems. In April 2010, they also revealed that they were negotiating with Catalyst to end Posthuman's relationship with the company. Fortunately, they were quickly able to find a new production partner: on June 12, 2010, Posthuman Studios announced that they were now working with a brand-new company called Sandstorm Productions to ensure the continued production and distribution of *Eclipse Phase*.

Posthuman brought the newly printed *GM Screen* (2010) and the second printing of *Eclipse Phase* (2010) with them — though they were very disappointed to discover that the errata and corrections *hadn't* actually gone into the core rulebook.

But surely that was one last problem following a hectic year at Catalyst Game Labs; now, things would get better.

The Storm: 2010-2011

Sandstorm Productions LLC was a group of "investors and game industry experts" who came together on April 23, 2010, to offer "business services" to game design studios — including capitalization, production, advertising, and sales. President and general manager David Stansel-Garner, another refugee from Catalyst Game Labs, headed the company. Other staff members included Jessica Blair, Stephen McQuillan, and Jennifer Harding.

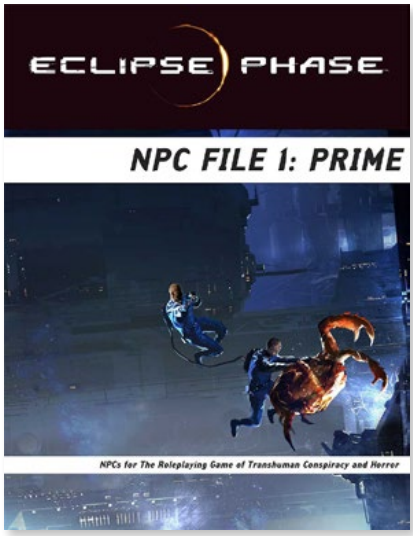
Sandstorm immediately signed up two ex-Catalyst companies: WildFire LLC, the makers of *CthulhuTech* (2007, 2008), and (as we've already seen) Posthuman. They also brought in two brand-new board game companies: the family-oriented GlowFly Games and Closet Nerd Games — a studio for the Knudson brothers, who had published *Ergo* (2009) through Catalyst Game Labs. In an impressively short time, Sandstorm had a large library of materials — helped by the product brought over from Catalyst and by the roll-up of additional board games, such as Eric Vogel's *Cambria* (2008) and *Hibernia* (2009).

There haven't been a lot of roll-ups of this sort in the hobbyist gaming industry, and unfortunately the few that have occurred haven't been that successful. Cybergames tried to roll-up several RPG companies around 2000 and almost immediately crashed and burned. Hasbro purchased Avalon Hill, Last Unicorn Games, and Wizards of the Coast around the same time; they almost immediately

lost all of Last Unicorn's value, and haven't done much with Avalon Hill's catalog or trademarks. Sadly, Sandstorm wasn't going to see much better success.

That isn't to say that Posthuman didn't have a good year under Sandstorm. Jury later said that he, Cross, and Boyle used 2010 "to lay the foundation for an independent creative studio." Though the three creators were separated geographically and working virtually, they were still able to continue forward with the momentum created by the release of *Eclipse Phase* in 2009.

Even before signing up with Sandstorm, Posthuman had been experimenting with new digital products, leading to the release of two pieces of fiction — *Lack* (2010) and *Melt* (2010) — for ePub and *Kindle* release. These were existing pieces of fiction, from the main rulebook and the upcoming "Sunward" supplement, respectively. However, Posthuman was now aiming them at a new audience, as a new vector to bring players into the game. Non-gamer sales on the Kindle were unfortunately poor, but sales at game-related sites like DriveThruRPG were better.



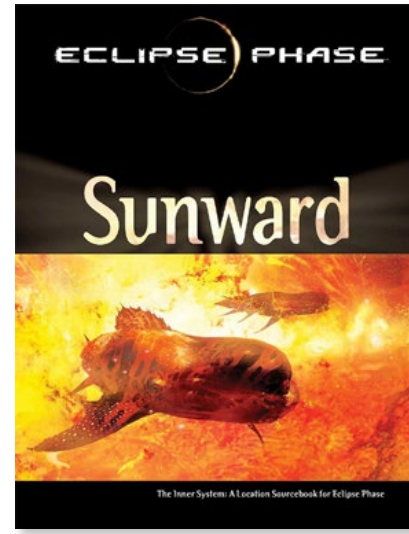
As a result, Posthuman has continued to release the fiction from their core sourcebooks as separate downloads.

Posthuman also released their first PDF-only release in July, shortly after they joined Sandstorm. *NPC File 1: Prime* (2010) would be followed by adventures — though in general Posthuman has focused more on big sourcebooks than on small PDF releases. Posthuman has also pushed some of their PDF-only releases to print over the years — showing that their most important publishing medium is print, not PDF.

> *"Sunward was about 90% complete when we split from Catalyst. We acquired it just in time to wrap up the artwork and layout and get it out the door in time to make Gen Con."*
>
> – Adam Jury, "Posthuman 2010 Year End Review," eclipsephase.com (February 2011)

Gen Con Indy 2010 was probably the highlight of Posthuman's brief time with Sandstorm. Not only were they able to get the second printing rulebook and the *GM Screen* produced by Catalyst out to the public, but they also released

their first Sandstorm product, *Sunward* (2010), which detailed the inner half of the solar system.



Posthuman sold 128 copies of *Sunward* at Gen Con and autoshipped about 800. By the end of the year they'd sold almost 2,000 — not including 400 PDF sales and 300 "Hack Packs." Meanwhile, the core rulebook had now sold 5,300 print copies and 1,400 PDFs. Posthuman's sales had exceeded their own projections and were generally strong numbers for a RPG released after the d20 bust and during the Great Recession. Posthuman was doing well, despite its early trials and tribulations.

A book on extra solar planets called *Gatecrashing* (2010, 2011) soon followed. It was the first book that Posthuman had produced in large part following their departure from Catalyst. Meanwhile the second printing of the *Eclipse Phase* rules was quickly selling out — which resulted in discussion of a third printing with the errata really included. Posthuman was starting to look like one of the very few success stories of the late '00s. Unfortunately, Posthuman was about to hit more publishing problems as summer 2011 approached.

Though Sandstorm had produced books for both Posthuman and WildFire, it was pushing even harder on its board game production. Unfortunately, the board game market has higher barriers of entry than its cousin, the smaller RPG market. Worse, the majority of Sandstorm's board games had low brand and name recognition. As a result, Sandstorm sank a fair amount of money into strategic products that had a hard slog because they were developing a new market — unlike the two roleplaying lines, which already had some audience.

This was probably one of Sandstorm's problems, coming into early 2011. Beyond that, sources report "shenanigans" and other power struggles. Production dried up in the spring. By the end of the year, Sandstorm was dead.

Fortunately, Posthuman had once more ducked out just in time. In July 2011, they reported that they would be leaving Sandstorm, just 13 months after they had joined.

The Future: 2011-Present

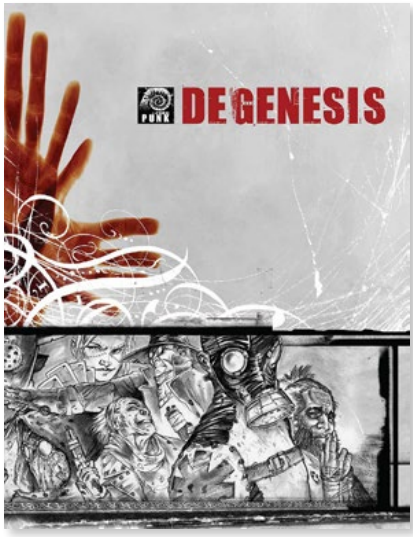
There's no way to frame Posthuman's departure from Sandstorm as anything but a setback — albeit a very necessary one. Posthuman never wanted to publish their own books, but two publishing partners later, that's exactly what they were doing.

Fortunately, they were able to send distribution off to Publisher Services, Inc. Posthuman also had a bit of a publication cushion, as some books were already near completion.

> *"[O]ur upcoming releases, such as Rimward, will be pushed back. They are in-progress, but our schedule is already behind. Instead of trying to race forwards and 'catch up,' we are keeping a steady pace – and taking the necessary time to square business matters – to maintain the high quality of our games."*
>
> – Press Release, "Posthuman Studios Evolves!," eclipsephase.com (July 2011)

As a result Posthuman was able to have three books ready to go at Gen Con 2011: their newest full-color sourcebook, *Panopticon Volume 1: Habitats, Surveillance, Uplifts* (2011); the new, corrected third printing of *Eclipse Phase* (2011); and *Degenesis Primer Edition* (2011). Posthuman also continued to show off their technical foresight by selling USB sticks containing PDFs of all their releases. They'd upgrade these to custom-printed sticks in 2012.

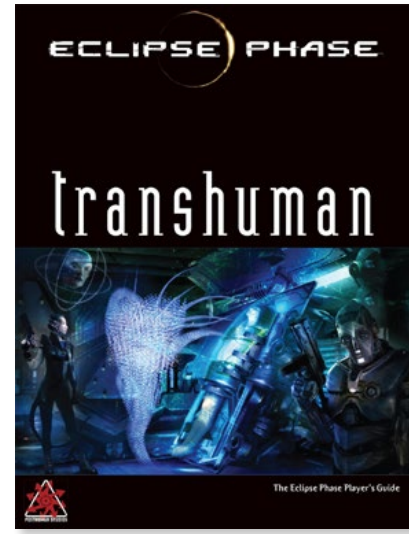
Posthuman's release of the post-apocalyptic "primal punk" RPG *Degenesis* deserves some additional commentary. It was a translation of a German RPG, something that's been pretty rare in the American hobbyist industry — with White Wolf's *Engel Corebook* (2000) and FanPro's *The Dark Eye* (2003) being some of the few exceptions. In fact, work on *Degenesis* had begun at FanPro, where it was scheduled for production in 2006, then had moved over to Catalyst, who had produced a *Quick-Start* PDF (2007). Now, Posthuman had finally published the book in a limited softcover run of just 100 copies. Hardcover and PDF editions (2012) would follow.



Degenesis' setting was generally praised, while the mechanics were not; one of the complaints was that it had a high "whiff" factor — apparently a common issue in German RPGs. Posthuman kept it available until March 2013 — at which time their license expired, taking the English *Degenesis* with it.

Since Gen Con Indy 2011 — and since Posthuman has really been out on their own — the company's production has slowed down a bit. Posthuman has described it as the slow path back from the "setbacks and slowdowns" of

2011-2012. Still, the company has put out two more major sourcebooks: *Rimward* (2012) and *Transhuman: The Eclipse Phase Player's Guide* (2013).



The latter was published thanks to Posthuman's first Kickstarter — something that the company required to even out their cash flow, which was hurting due to a reprint of *Sunward* and the impending reprinting of other books. The Kickstarter was quite successful, raising $117,965 from 1,898 backers; it showed the large audience that remained interested in *Eclipse Phase*.

Today, Posthuman continues to plan new publications — including a new line of card game releases, the first of which was Jürgen Mayer's *Shinobi Clans* (2014). Meanwhile, their game has gone international: Black Book Editions recently produced a handsome French edition (2013) of *Eclipse Phase*.

If that's a foreshadowing of their post-Sandstorm future, it's a good one!

What to Read Next ◯

- For Rob Boyle's early history, much of his work on *Shadowrun*, and more on German RPGs, read ***FanPro***.
- For more ideas about extending the *Earthdawn*/*Shadowrun* chronology, read ***RedBrick***.
- For *Eclipse Phase*'s original publisher and its problems, read ***Catalyst Game Labs***.
- For a later transhuman roleplaying game, read about *Freemarket* in ***Memento Mori Theatricks***.

In Other Eras

- For an earlier transhuman RPG, read about *Transhuman Space* in ***Steve Jackson Games*** *['80s]*.
- For another company that unsuccessfully tried to roll-up several gaming publishers, read about cybergames.com in ***Hero Games*** *['80s]*. Alternatively, read about Hasbro's various acquisitions in ***Wizards of the Coast*** *['90s]*.
- For another German RPG, read (very briefly) about *Engel* in ***White Wolf*** *['90s]*.

Read on for some fun-filled appendices.

The Story Continues!

There are still plenty of topics to discuss about gaming in the '00s, 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

You can also get the latest news on RPG history and on *Designers & Dragons* itself by liking us on Facebook:

- http://facebook.com/designersanddragons

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.

1990s. The Age of Innovation.
How dice pools, diceless roleplaying, and vampires fought the CCG menace.



Appendix I: 10 Things You Might Not Know About Roleplaying in the '00s

Entering the '00s, roleplaying was at one of its lowest ebbs thanks to an extended battering from the CCG industry. However, that was about to change.

1. d20 Ruled (for a Time)

The biggest change to ever hit the roleplaying industry occurred at the 2000 Gen Con Game Fair, when Wizards of the Coast released *Dungeons & Dragons Third Edition* (2000), the d20 Trademark License, and the Open Gaming License. The

two licenses allowed other companies to produce official *Dungeons & Dragons* supplements.

The idea of third-party *D&D* material was almost as old as the industry, but in the '70s, '80s, and '90s, most publishers had to hide their compatibility with *D&D* behind words like "universal" and "generic." This ultimately kept them sidelined. The few publishers like Mayfair who proudly proclaimed their compatibility with *D&D* tended to do much better, but faced intense lawsuits from TSR.

The 3E licenses were a whole new ballgame because they allowed companies to proclaim their compatibility without the fear of lawsuit. The idea was so unheard of that some would-be publishers honestly thought it was a trap, and were at first leery.

It wasn't.

Scores of new d20 publishers proliferated — including Bastion Press, Blue Devil Games, Bottled Imp Games, Fiery Dragon Productions, Goodman Games, Malhavoc Press, Paradigm Concepts, Wicked Press, and many others. More surprisingly, existing companies like AEG, Fantasy Flight, and White Wolf leapt on the d20 bandwagon to produce their own sourcebooks and adventures; and even more surprisingly other companies like Holistic Design, Pinnacle Entertainment, and Sovereign Press converted their existing games to d20 in the hope of attracting new customers.

Game store shelves literally filled with d20 products, and readers bought them — at first entirely indifferent to quality. Non-d20 product lines wilted in the face of the d20 boom, just as they had during the CCG boom that preceded it. Even when interest in adventures and sourcebooks waned, the Open Gaming License allowed publishers to go even further afield — creating new settings or even new games like *Babylon 5* (2003, 2006) and *Mutants & Masterminds* (2002, 2005). This kept d20 in the forefront of the industry through the mid-'00s.

Toward the end of the '00s, *D&D*'s biggest competitor ever appeared: Paizo's *Pathfinder* (2008). This was once more thanks to the licenses that Wizards of the Coast issued at the start of the decade. Open-ended licenses that can't ever be revoked are the gifts that keep on giving — which might be why Wizards of the Coast tried to include "poison pills" in early versions of its 4E GSL (2008). They would have forced publishers to give up the OGL to get onboard 4E; it was a huge sticking point for publishers and eventually removed.

2. Roleplaying was Somewhat Huge Again

When d20 was big, it ruled the whole industry and brought in old players who hadn't thrown dice in years. As a result, the industry saw its biggest boom since roleplaying had started to recede in the '80s, when the moral minority's hysteria began to die down.

With that said, the d20 boom wasn't as big as you might think. Atlas Games, for example, states that their (very successful) d20 adventures from the '00s didn't sell as well as their *Cyberpunk* (1988) adventures from the early '90s. Even if roleplaying was flying high during the brief years of the d20 boom, it had still taken a lot of damage from two decades of computer games and one decade of CCGs — both of which stole away young players who might otherwise have joined the roleplaying hobby.

3. Roleplaying Became Cool

Another reason for the growth of roleplaying games in the '00s was the fact that the hobby became unexpectedly cool.

Part of this was due to a growth in fantasy literature. *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) started this new fad, but it was kicked into even higher gear by the *Lord of the Rings* movies (2001-2003, 2012-2014). Part of this was due to the growth of MMORPGs. These games were often fantasy-oriented as well, and they also brought roleplaying tropes of adventuring and exploring into the mainstream. Part of this was due to geek culture becoming more mainstream thanks to TV shows like *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-Present), the new *Doctor Who* (2005-Present), and *Community* (2009-Present).

However *Dungeons & Dragons* itself also got an increasing amount of interest and accolades. Celebrities became willing to say that they enjoyed roleplaying: Vin Diesel contributed an introduction to *30 Years of Adventure: A Celebration of Dungeons & Dragon* (2004), while Wil Wheaton began regularly appearing at Gen Con and playing games in the *TableTop* webseries. Meanwhile, characters in *The Big Bang Theory* actually played *D&D*, beginning with "The Wiggly Finger Catalyst" (2011), while the *Community* crew did the same in "Advanced Dungeons & Dragons" (2011).

In a variety of ways, the mainstream media recognized roleplaying as something more than a weird hobby conducted in basements — and so *D&D* got past its role as an evil game hated by angry moms.

4. Corporations Warred with the Hobbyist Industry

Roleplaying has been big business since the '80s, when TSR grew big enough to get mentioned by *Inc. Magazine*. Sadly, that decade was also punctuated by numerous lawsuits — showing that roleplaying wasn't just a hobby anymore. So, corporate ideals and hobbyist ideals had long warred.

These problems grew more notable in the '00s, as the biggest and most successful roleplaying companies got scooped up by big corporations. These roll-ups started right at the start of the decades. The original Hero Games was essentially killed by their merger with Cybergames, while Pinnacle Entertainment Group almost suffered the same fate. Wizards of the Coast was bought by Hasbro around the same time and has since fought a holding war; this started almost immediately when they were forced to lay off staff at Christmas time despite the fact that they were making money.

However, the release and later cancelation of *D&D 4E* (2008) shows the corporate influences on Wizards at their worst. From the outside looking in, we don't know all the specifics, but it's long been obvious that decisions about 4E have been beholden to corporate demands about profits. As a result, 4E was never given a chance to grow, but instead leapt from one self-manufactured crisis to another before finally going down in ignoble and smoldering defeat.

White Wolf faced similar problems after it was purchased by CCP. Production was cut back by management and White Wolf's very successful RPGs suddenly disappeared from store shelves. It took the formation of a new company to get White Wolf's roleplaying production back on track, and even now it hasn't recovered its store presence.

The second Hero Games sold its IP off to Cryptic Studios, who wanted to use it for an MMORPG (just like CCP). In many ways Hero Games has done the best in its corporate dealings, because the relationship was more distant, and so Cryptic didn't directly interfere with Hero's publications. With that said, the deal tied Hero to the ups-and-downs of MMORPG production: they were very successful for a while, publishing huge, colorful books, and now they've all but shut down.

Mongoose Publishing offers yet another cautionary tale. They merged with Rebellion Group, decided it was a mistake, and were able to get out of the deal. However, their exit required them to sacrifice more than half of the staff, and the company has yet to recover fully.

In general, when corporations and the hobbyist industry warred in the '00s, the principals of those hobby companies often (rightfully) won, but the hobbyist industry itself was the loser, as companies were strip-mined for their properties, and hobby publication was largely considered an afterthought.

5. PDFs, POD, and PayPal Appeared

Just as it looked like the hobby industry was getting bigger and more focused on big business, the barriers of entry to the industry came down, thanks to three vital technologies:

- PDFs allowed publishers to create and distribute products online, at almost no cost.
- PODs allowed publishers to produce print books in small quantities and with small production costs.
- PayPal allowed publishers to get paid for those PDF and POD products without needing credit card processing, distribution, or retail sales.

As the Internet matured throughout the '00s, these technologies melded together at sites like DriveThruRPG — which took all of these technological improvements and combined them into a homogeneous whole that could almost replace the traditional retail store.

These technologies may have appeared just in time because the new online stores soon became the only way to get the products of formerly large companies like White Wolf.

6. The Indie Scene Prospered

The appearance of PayPal, PDF, and POD also allowed the formation of a new independent game publisher's community — a fact that was first pointed out by one of the principals of that community. These new indie publishers were founded by designers who owned their own games and who often designed, developed, edited, laid out, published, and distributed their own games too.

Independent publication itself was an old idea; designers like Dave Hargrave were self-publishing back in the '70s. Any number of companies similarly came together to publish their own books in the '70s and '80s — especially after the advent of desktop publishing. However by the '00s, it seemed like the industry might have gotten too mature for young, new designers to leap in, and then technology made it possible once more.

The indie community quickly grew beyond its initial conception of independent self-publishers. Companies like IPR and Key 20 appeared to sell and distribute indie publishers. Meanwhile indie publishers like Galileo Games and Evil Hat started releasing highly professional books by a variety of designers, and in the process became larger than surviving classic publishers like Chaosium and Flying Buffalo.

The indie community also evolved. Where once it had been about *anything* that was self-published by independent designers, it soon became focused on "narrativist" games and rules-light offerings; as a result, the phrase "indie games" is today used to describe narrativist, rules-light games rather than independently published RPGs.

By the end of the decade, the success of indie games became obvious when more "mainstream" companies like Margaret Weis Productions and Cubicle 7 Entertainment published indie-influenced games.

7. Story Games Appeared

The idea of story games originated as early as the New Style (1998-2001) RPGs from Hogshead Publishing. However, they proliferated amidst the indie publishers of the '00s, particularly in the wake of Ramshead Publishing's *Universalis* (2002).

Story games subvert common expectations of the roleplaying form by focusing on stories rather than on individual characters. They still *can* contain roleplaying within individual scenes (and often do), but characters tend to move in and out of the game, and they aren't always linked up with specific players.

Story games aren't the dominant form of indie game, nor has the form expanded much beyond the indie community. Nonetheless, story games were an intriguing new way to look at the genre of roleplaying.

8. New Mechanics Proliferated

Indie designers also played with numerous mechanics that hadn't been seen much in previous generations of roleplaying. Among these were:

- ***Distributed Authority***, where players take on some of the powers that are usually held by a GM.
- ***Scene Framing***, a sort of distributed authority where individual players get to lay out specific scenes over the course of the game.
- ***Stake Setting***, another variant of distributed authority, where players get to decide what the stakes are in a conflict before they engage in it.
- ***GM-less Play***, an extreme case of distributed authority, where no player is the "master" of the game.
- ***Diceless Play***, where randomizers are largely removed from the game.
- ***Resource Management***, a specific sort of diceless play where the role of randomizers is instead taken by limited resources that players have to manage — effectively letting them decide when they win and when they lose.

- ***Resource Economies***, where resources aren't just something that players spend, but are also something that they can earn back as part of a more complex economy.
- ***Bidding***, where opportunities are auctioned among players during gameplay.

Some of these mechanics have been seen previously, particularly in *Amber Diceless Role-Playing* (1991) and in *Nobilis* (1999, 2002). However they only became a trend in the '00s, primarily thanks to the indie community of the Forge, where these techniques could be discussed, analyzed, and then used in dozens of different roleplaying games; *Universalis* (2002) was the indie trailblazer for most of these techniques.

9. Companies Went Virtual

Metropolis and Imperium Games may have been the first virtual RPG companies, during the short periods that they existed in the '90s. However, this sort of organization was still pretty hard to manage in the '90s, because the internet was just appearing and (very) limited bandwidth made it difficult to move art files or to video conference.

The improving technology of the '00s has turned an occasional oddity into the norm. RedBrick Limited is probably the most notable of the virtual companies, because it had two main nexuses — in New Zealand and in Germany — while it primarily sold to the US market. Evil Hat similarly has virtual offices on the East and West Coasts.

This history book itself shows how powerful (and simple) virtual work is today: the author worked with managers, editors, proofreaders, indexers, and graphic designers just by moving files into virtual folders. Readers in the Berkeley-Oakland area, on the East Coast, and even in Canada all effortlessly accessed these files.

Going forward, virtual RPG companies will become even more common; it seems like the *de facto* way to set up such an enterprise in the modern day.

10. Roleplaying Flew Too High & Fell

We saw that roleplaying games were flying high at the start of the '00s. Unfortunately by the end of the decade, they had crashed and burned.

The problems started with d20.

As we've seen throughout the history of the roleplaying industry, a bust follows every boom. When the d20 bust began as early as 2003, it caused most of the new fulfillment houses to crash — among them Wizard's Attic, Fast Forward Entertainment, and Osseum. They in turn killed publishers who had been using those fulfillment houses. Chaosium, FanPro, Green Knight, Green Ronin, and

Mongoose Publishing are just a few of the publishers badly affected by crashing fulfillment houses; not all of them survived the experience. There were many other companies who were equally hard hit, but who do not appear within these pages.

By the mid-to-late '00s the RPG industry still hadn't recovered. This was probably because retail stores had given a lot of support to the d20 fad, damaging the long-term prospects of non-d20 companies in the process. Then things got worse when the Great Recession (2007-2009) hit.

By the end of the '00s, the prospects of the roleplaying industry were grim.

Meanwhile, Wizards of the Coast had an opportunity to revitalize the industry with the release of *Dungeons & Dragons 4E* (2008). Though they did manage to briefly suck the attention away from other publishers — which was something that those other publishers could scarce afford — a new boom never appeared. Blame it, as you prefer: on Wizards servicing corporate needs above the needs of the industry; on Wizards pushing some of their best products into electronic media that didn't support brick-and-mortar stores; on Wizards producing a skeletal product line; or on Wizards producing a version of *D&D* that was too different from expectations or past products for many gamers.

A new *independent* revolution was needed that would allow companies other than Wizards of the Coast to find new success.

PDFs, POD, and PayPal had partially prepared independent publishers for this increasingly grim market, but they weren't enough. Publishers had easier access to production, to distribution, and to sales, but they were missing a vitally important element that historically originated in brick-and-mortar stores: marketing.

Then Kickstarter premiered on April 28, 2009. Though it wouldn't have much impact on the hobbyist industry in the '00s, by the '10s it would become the marketing force that the industry needed.

Appendix II: Bibliography & Thanks

This book was built from thousands of primary sources including interviews, design notes, reviews, news articles, press releases, catalogs, forum postings, and other non-fiction articles. It was also built with the assistance of hundreds of readers, fact-checkers, and scanners. This bibliography does its best to note the most important resources and thank all the people involved.

Books

Laws, Robin D. *40 Years of Gen Con*. Atlas Games, 2007.

Magazines

Magazines are sadly fairly limited in the modern age, but the following contributed some of the content to this book. Others are referenced in individual quotes.

Dragon (TSR, Wizards of the Coast, Paizo), *The Escapist* (Alloy Digital), *Greater Games Industry* (GGI), *Kobold Quarterly* (Open Design), *Pyramid* (Steve Jackson Games), *RPG Review* (rpgreview.net), *The Silven Trumpeter* (Silven Publishing), *Valkyrie* (Partizan Press), *Wyrms Footnotes* (Moon Design).

Podcasts

Podcasts are the great new information resource of the '00s. They're unfortunately impossible to search and they're rarely indexed, but there's a lot of good content in them if you have the time to really dig in. The following contributed the most information to this book, with others being referenced in individual articles.

2d6 Feet in a Random Direction, *Bear Swarm!*, *The Game's The Thing*, *Geeks On*, *The Independent Insurgency*, *Jennisodes*, *Master Plan*, *Ogre Cave Audio Reports*, *Penny Red*, *Pulp Gamer Inside Track*, *Theory from the Closet*, *Voice of the Revolution*, *The Walking Eye*.

Unfortunately, podcasts are already proving ephemeral too — disappearing forever when their creators are done with them, which will be a problem for the next generation of historians.

Websites

The web proved an invaluable resource for these modern companies. Following are a few of the websites that I visited multiple times over the course of the project:

darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/ — an impressive list of game companies and locations — particularly useful for foreign publishers.

enworld.org — a d20/D&D site that often had great discussions and official info.

examiner.com/rpg-in-national/michael-tresca — a source for news and discussions.

flamesrising.com — a site focused on dark fantasy and horror RPGs that includes reviews and interviews.

indie-rpgs.com — The Forge, home of indie discussions.

koboldquarterly.com — Kobold Press' website, also a source for post-d20 publisher news.

pelgranepress.com/seepagexx — Pelgrane's online 'zine, which was particularly notable for seven great indie interviews conducted by Luke Crane in 2008.

rpg.net — the source of an RPG index that was used to date most things and home of forums that often contained official news & discussions.

story-games.com — more indie discussions.

web.archive.org — the Way Back Machine, source for dead websites — overall the most invaluable web resource of all.

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.

Thanks to scanners: Dave Ackerman, Michael Beekman, Marius Bredsdorff, Nick Brooke, Tim Bryant, Nicholas Caldwell (of Guild Companion Publications),

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Thanks to stores that let me scan their stock: EndGame, Games of Berkeley.

Special Thanks

Since the '00s was the decade where this series of books started being written, I'd like to use this book to specially thank the person who ultimately made that possible.

Thanks to Kimberly Appelcline, my wife, who has always been patient and understanding despite the thousands of hours that were spent researching, writing, and editing these books from 2005-2013.

We were married on August 12, 2000, so that's a bit of the history of the '00s too.

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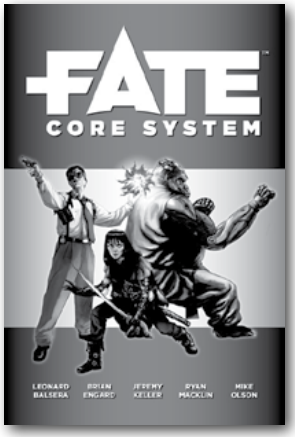

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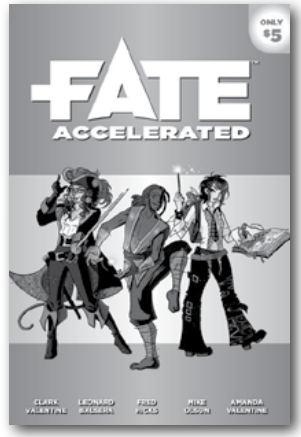

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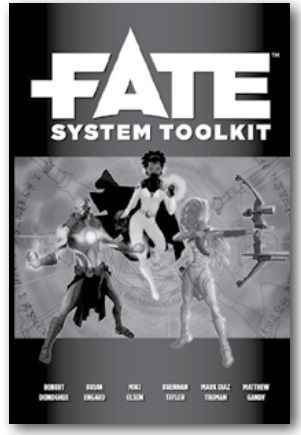

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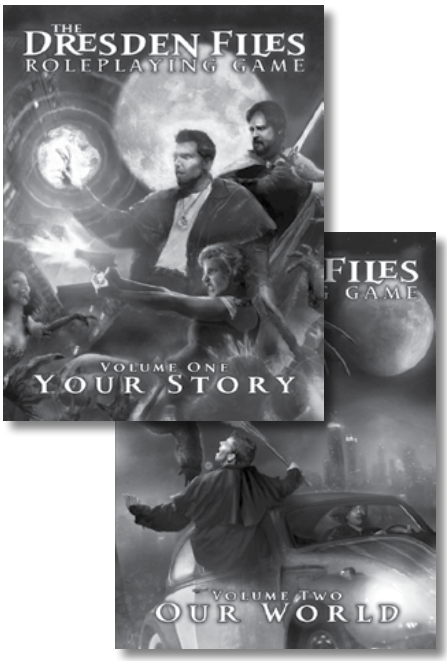

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