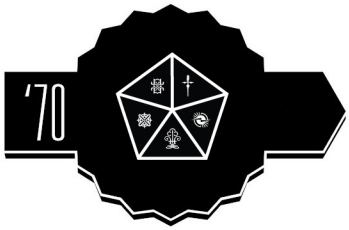
Designers & Dragons

The #RPGaDay Appendix

by Shannon Appelcline

#RPGADAY2021 EDITION



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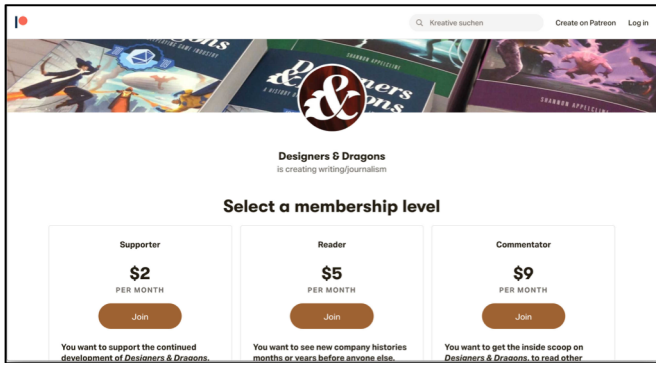

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Introduction to the #RPGaDay Appendix

What's This!?

I've seen people answering the #RPGaDay prompts on Facebook for years, and I've always wanted to participate, but usually I'd remember it was happening a few days into August, and I felt like the event had passed me by. In 2020, I was determined that things would be different. I've now got two or three days a week scheduled for work on personal projects like Designers & Dragons*, so that meant I could pay more attention to something like #RPGaDay.*

On August 1st, I was ready to go.

Except after all those years of enthusiasm, I went a little overboard. I decided that each day I'd answer the prompt once personally and one historically. And I didn't just write a sentence or a paragraph, but a little mini-essay, usually running more than 250 words long. That turned out to be a lot of work. It came out to about 19,000 words total. But I was able to write some interesting historical essays (one of which has already found its way into The TSR Codex), and perhaps reveal a little bit about myself in those personal essays.

This book is a collection of those short essays. I also added in an event mini-history for #RPGaDay itself, because that's what I do. Hopefully I'll find a place for that in the next sequence of actual Designers & Dragons *books too.*

I don't think I'll be ambitious enough to double-up on these essays next year, but I hope I'll be able to expand this booklet with historical essays from #RPGaDay2021 … and maybe even with #RPGaDay2019 in between, because it also contained one-word prompts, which made it easy to write historical essays of this sort.

For now, though, here's #RPGaDay2020, complete with an index of topics for the historical essays, so that you can reference them right along with any other Designers & Dragons *book.*

—Shannon, 9/5/20

#RPGaDay: 2014-Present

An Event Mini-History

David F. Chapman published comics in the ’90s as Autocratik, but two decades later he was firmly established in the roleplaying industry, a hobby that he’d enjoyed for decades. In 2014, he was acting as the line developer for Eden Studios’ *Conspiracy X 2.0* RPG (2006). He’d also been the lead writer and developer for Cubicle 7’s *Doctor Who: Adventures in Time and Space* (2009), shepherding the project from its initial pitch to the BBC onward. Finally, he was hoping to publish his own RPG through Autocratik: “WILD”, an RPG of technological dreamsharing whose background Chapman had also expanded in a NaNoWriMo event a few years earlier.

Despite his deep involvement in the industry (or perhaps because of it), Chapman was uncomfortable with the negativity he was seeing at the time. His answer was to create #RPGaDay, an event to be run in August 2014, the same month as Gen Con, where people would post positive things about RPGs every day through “tweet, blog, Instagram, tumblr, facebook, and G+”, based on writing prompts supplied by Chapman.

Although there was obvious influence from events like NaNoWriMo, the most immediate predecessor was The Borough Press’ #BookADay (now #BookADayUK), which had run in June, offering daily prompts to encourage people to post about books throughout the month. Chapman similarly prepared a set of questions for the first #RPGaDay, beginning on August 1 with “First RPG Played” and ending on August 31 with “Favourite RPG of All Time”. A jukebox-like infographic listing the questions was designed by Will Brooks to aid in the event.

The event was popular enough that Chapman brought it back in 2015 with all new questions, this time running from “Forthcoming game you’re most looking forward to” to “Favourite non-RPG thing to come out of RPGing”. Chapman demonstrated the widespread interest in #RPGaDay by presenting his own responses to the questions as videos, which often included guest appearances by roleplaying luminaries.

The event almost died out in 2016, because Chapman had grown too busy to organize it, but fortunately Anthony Boyd stepped in with assistance from the RPG Brigade online community. The new year’s questions began with “Real dice, dice app, diceless, how do you prefer to ‘roll’?” Boyd also organized the event in 2017, but Chapman took over again in 2018, albeit with support from Boyd, who would continue to do much of the heavy lifting.

2019 would mark the biggest change in #RPGaDay to date. After five years of questions, there was a new sort of prompt: a single word. The first prompt for August 2019 was “first” and the last “last”, with others like “space”, “focus”, “door”, “noble”, “calamity”, and “connection” in the middle. This change in prompts also led Brooks to revamp the event’s infographic as a hex map. Both changes would continue into 2020. That year, Chapman also went a step further, asking old friend Simon Miles from Dunromin University Press to produce a second infographic: an evocative dungeon map depicting the single-word prompts. (It got a lot of attention.)

The new format for #RPGaDay has offered more creativity for the participants — which despite being seven years old, is continuing as strong as ever.

Part One: #RPGaDay2020

These short essays were initially written on August 1st-31st of 2020 as part of #RPGaDay2020. The intent was for the historical essays (posted to the Designers & Dragons FB group) to be about to the industry and the personal essays (posted to my own FB page) to be about myself and my gaming experiences. This generally remained the case, although in a few cases the personal essays slipped into being more about the industry.

These essays have been slightly edited from their original appearance, mostly for clarity and proper English. The images have been more carefully selected for this appearance (whereas the posts on FB usually included any possible images, to spice up the posts).

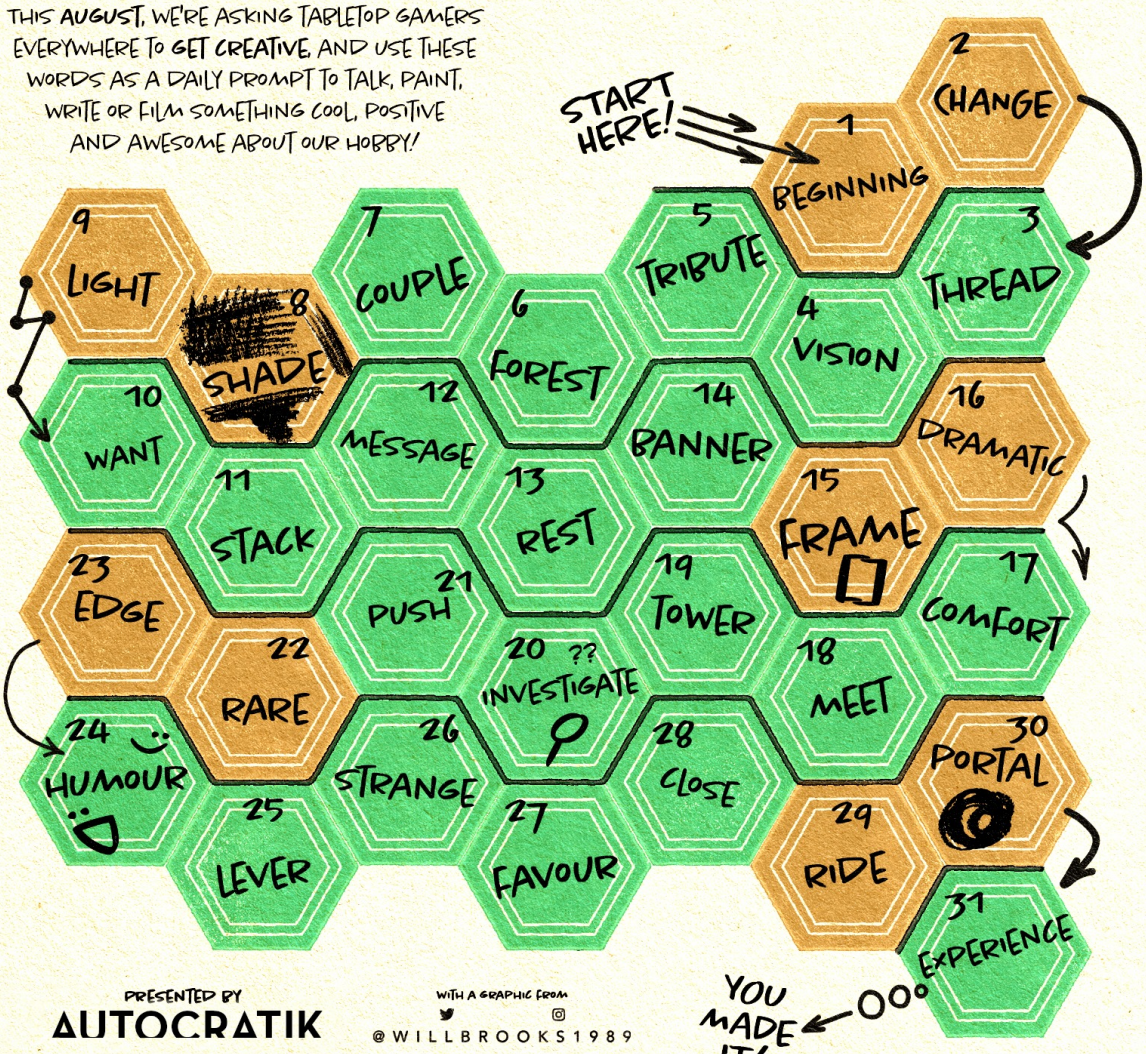
An index of just the historical essays appears at the end of this booklet.

#RPGADAY2020

RPGADAY IS BACK FOR A SEVENTH YEAR!

THIS AUGUST, WE'RE ASKING TABLETOP GAMERS EVERYWHERE TO GET CREATIVE, AND USE THESE WORDS AS A DAILY PROMPT TO TALK, PAINT, WRITE OR FILM SOMETHING COOL, POSITIVE AND AWESOME ABOUT OUR HOBBY!

USE #RPGADAY2020 TO JOIN THE CONVERSATION!



PRESENTED BY AUTOCRATIK

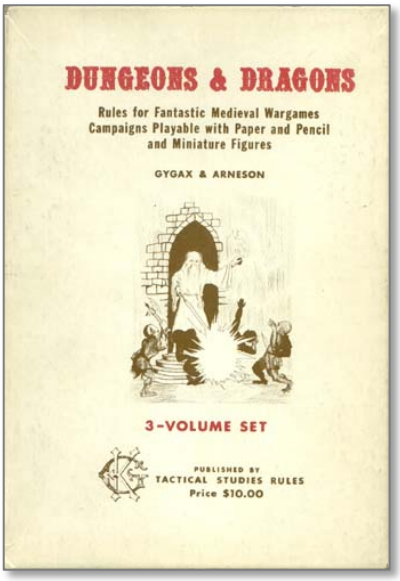
WITH A GRAPHIC FROM @WILLBROOKS1989

#RPGaDay2020

Historical Essays

Day One: Beginning

One of the wonders of the roleplaying industry is that it has so many beginnings. Twenty years ago, a knee-jerk response might have been to say that its beginning was Gary Gygax. But we've fortunately developed a much more nuanced understanding of our industry's origins since then. We know that Jeff Perren created a medieval miniatures game that Gary Gygax turned into *Chainmail* (1971), that Dave Wesely ran Braunsteins and that Dave Arneson brought together Braunsteins and *Chainmail* in Blackmoor, which Gary Gygax then developed into something publishable.

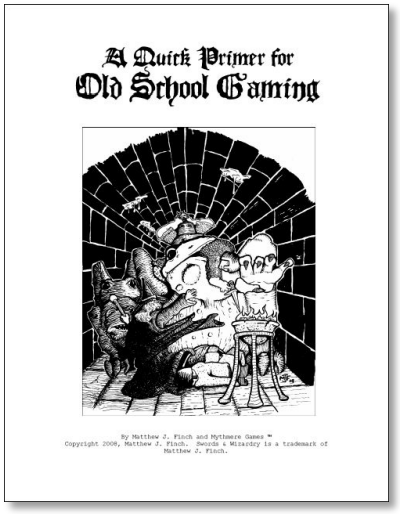


But even that's not all of our industry's origins. Ken St. Andre proved that lightning could be caught in a bottle again with *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975). Marc Miller (and friends) marked the beginning of popular science-fiction games with *Traveller* (1977). George MacDonald & Steve Peterson similarly brought superheroes into the limelight with *Champions* (1980). Meanwhile, new beginnings for *D&D* were created by J. Eric Holmes, Tom Moldvay, Frank Mentzer, Zeb Cook, and so many others. It goes on and on.

There are so many peoples' creative visions within our modern industry. Every one of them a beginning, and every one of them part of what we play today.

Day Two: Change

The OSR focuses on the changes in roleplaying between the '70s and the '00s, and they're very right that there are meaningful changes there: in how players view their roles, in how GMs view in their roles, in how challenges were constructed, and in how challenges were solved.



But those are just two points on a much larger timeline, because the roleplaying industry has always been changing.

The '70s were a time of personal puzzle solving, depending on player intuition and intelligence. It was also a time of do-it-yourself work from everyone.

The '80s became a time of increasing professionalism and growth, where polished products were more the norm and where prepackaged supplements were increasingly desired by players. It's also when the hobby went from being a college pastime to something also directed toward kids.

The ’90s for the first time reimagined both the tropes and mechanics of the hobby, resulting in everything from diceless roleplaying to comparative dice pools to deconstructive games like *Earthdawn* (1993): it was a sign of the maturity of the industry that its origins could be redefined.

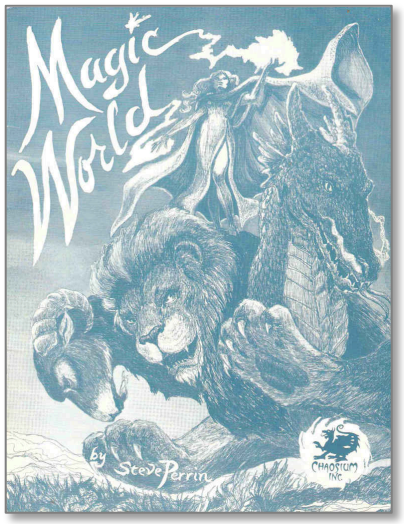
The ’00s made complexity the core of many games, but at the same time opened up the hobby to new voices, to new mechanics, and to old styles of play alike.

Finally, the ’10s have cranked up ideas of player agency and diversity that first appeared in the previous decade, while simultaneously returning to some of the simpler mechanics of decades past.

Every decade has offered its own ideal methodology for roleplaying ... and in every decade, that ideal has changed. We can only wonder what the ’20s will bring.

Day Three: Thread

One reviewer of *Designers & Dragons* commented that he was surprised that it was the same few people working their way through the entire industry. That’s an exaggeration, but there’s also a strong true component to it — which is one of the fun things revealed by *Designers & Dragons*, especially since its format of a company-at-a-time makes it easy to shift the spotlight back and forth across thousands of talented artists and designers working across hundreds of companies.



One of the earliest *Designers & Dragons* articles talked about how a single company, Chaosium, threaded across the industry. Pagan Publishing, Fantasy Flight Games, and Modiphius Entertainment are three of the most notable companies that got their start thanks to threads of products from Chaosium — but Chaosium also created the whole Swedish roleplaying industry with a license for *Worlds of Wonder* (1982)!

Designers can thread their way through the industry too. The story of Gary Gygax is particular well-known: how he founded TSR, then ended up banished and so founded New Infinities Productions, which didn’t do too well due to a TSR lawsuit. He then moved on to GDW, resulting in another TSR lawsuit, before getting a bit of peace at Hekaforge and Troll Lord Games.

Settings also thread their way across the industry. Tékumel is one of the hardest to follow. It started at TSR before moving through any number of small-to-mid-sized companies, including Different Worlds Productions, TOME, and Guardians of Order. (Different Worlds was a Chaosium spin-off; TOME was a Chaosium licensee; and Guardians of Order was named for an *Amber Diceless Roleplaying* game. More threads!)

Why are these threads important? Because they merge creativity in a constantly evolving set of ways. The roleplaying industry is stronger for the many vibrant creators within it, and for the

many creative communities, but also for the fact that they're interacted and collaborated in many different ways over time. Every unique joining of the creative threads in our industry results in something never seen before — something probably never imagined by the collaborators without each other.

So, ***thread*** is another of the strengths of the roleplaying industry, just like ***beginnings*** and ***change*** before it.

Day Four: Vision

Our industry is blessed with so many visionaries, each of whom offered their own unique answer to a question that other people hadn't considered:

- Jeff Perren: "What if we played wargames set in the Middle Ages?";
- Dave Wesely: "What if players took on individual roles in wargames?";
- Dave Arneson: "What if we explored the dungeons *beneath* the castle?";
- Gary Gygax: "What if we produced a fantasy roleplaying game for the public?";
- Ken St. Andre: "What if there was another FRP other than *Dungeons & Dragons*?";
- M.A.R. Barker: "What if fantasy roleplaying had a science-fiction basis?";
- Greg Stafford: "What if fantasy roleplaying had a mythical basis?";
- Dave Megarry: "What if fantasy roleplaying was a board game?";
- Bob Bledsaw: "What if we could produce roleplaying supplements?";
- Bill Owen: "Yeah, what if?"; and
- Tim Kask: "What if we published an independent roleplaying magazine?".

And that only takes us to 1976.

Part of the reason that the roleplaying industry has constantly grown and evolved is because of the visionaries that it has attracted, people who continue to expand it day by day, year by year, decade by decade.

Day Five: Tribute

It'd be easy to offer a tribute to those greats of our industry who have passed. And, it's wonderful that we recognize them and their accomplishments and what they've done for our hobby.

But it's perhaps more meaningful to offer tribute to those who are still with us. So, if you're Facebook friends with a designer who created a game that meant a lot to you, or you know their Twitter handle, or even if you just have an email address, perhaps even a company email address, use it. *Tell Them.*

No one's in the roleplaying industry to make a buck. They're in it because they love what they're doing. That makes it so much more meaningful when you tell them that you love what they're doing too.

Day Six: Forest

Forests were places to avoid in the Middle Ages. In Europe they were home to wolves and bears. They were places where one could be lost. If a peasant were to name one place he feared, it would not be a ruin, it would not be a cavern, and it would not be a dungeon. It'd be a forest.

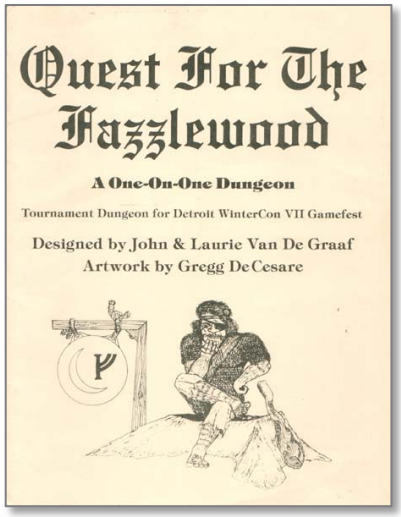
So, it's somewhat surprising that forests aren't the heart of more roleplaying campaigns — but that's because of how the hobby developed. Dave Arneson had characters delve beneath his model castle, Gary Gygax repeated that in his own Greyhawk, and the future of the industry was writ.

Which is why it's great that foreign-language companies are making their breakthrough into the international scene in the '10s. They bring with them different world views and different assumptions about the hobby. As a result, we finally have a roleplaying game all about a dark and dangerous forest: *Symbaroum* (2015). It's from Järnringen, one of the four Swedish companies to burst onto the international scene in the '10s (the others being Fria Ligan, Helmgast, and RiotMinds). If we see more of this in the '20s, it will richen our hobby.

Day Seven: Couple

The roleplaying industry started out being about *big* groups: ten or twenty people. Which shows how the first incarnation of *D&D* (1974) was more a wargame, a puzzle game, or a tactical game than a roleplaying game: there's no way 10 or 20 people could get fair spotlight!

In recent years, roleplaying games have instead developed mathematical formulas around groups of four or five players, presuming that's the sweet spot for gaming.



But one of the most intriguing player numbers has always been two: one player and one GM.

The idea might have first been writ large in "Quest for the Fazzlewood" (1978), a tournament at WinterCon VII (1978) where John and Laurie Van De Graaf designed a 30-minute tournament adventure for pairs of players. TSR published it as *O1: The Gem and the Staff* (1983), which was probably the mainstream's first exposure to the idea. A few more "one-on-one" publications followed from TSR in the *AD&D 1e* era, then they published a total of eight HHQ head-to-head adventures (1992-1995) in the *AD&D 2e* era.

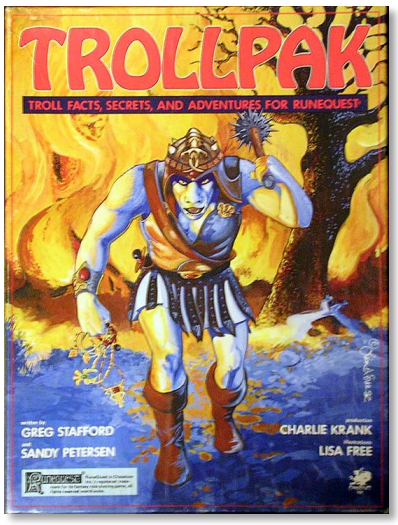
In the 21st century, two-player games have been more often directed toward couples. Kirk Johnson-Weider wrote a long-running column at RPGnet called "Duets" (2009-2014), which was meant as advice for any two-player game, but which he himself most frequently played with his wife. The indie movement

has also allowed for the publication of games specifically meant for two players. Some are romantic, and some are about relationships, which are nice genres for the playstyle. But, it's in no way limited: there are two-player games about fantasy, myth, science-fiction, and horror too.

Day Eight: Shade

White Wolf usually gets all the credit for the splatbook revolution, and they certainly turned the idea of individual species or class player books into an industry. But, there were many who preceded them, including Chaosium, GDW, Lion Rampant, and even TSR. Of those publishers, Chaosium may have produced the best splatbook of the early industry: *Trollpak* (1982), a book about the darkness-worshipping Uz of Glorantha.

Trollpak was amazing because it gave one of the most in-depth looks at a truly alien species in early RPG supplements. The trolls weren't just monsters (as they might have been in most RPGs), but they weren't just humans in funny suits either. These were critters with bizarre relations to the world and to other species, whose strange anatomy was reflected in a strange worldview.



Greg Stafford (with Sandy Petersen) did a truly wonderful job of imagining how trolls could be different. And that wasn't all they did. Though there's no Elfpak or Dwarfpak or Duckpak or Dragonnewtpack for Glorantha (yet!), one can easily imagine how those splatbooks would have been as intriguing and as original, just from the briefer descriptions of those species that appeared elsewhere. (Actually Mongoose did publish splatbooks for all of the major Elder Races of Glorantha, but they've dropped into the realm of semi-canon.)

It should be noted that one of the ways that *Trollpak* differed from later splatbooks is that it had much more GM information; one of White Wolf's innovations was splitting that material out.

Day Nine: Light

The '80s was surely the high tide of humor RPGs.

Paranoia (1984) was the most successful, in part because Greg Costikyan, Eric Goldberg, and Dan Gelber laced it with devastating social satire, a trend that Ken Rolston later continued. But humor in *Paranoia* worked not just because the authors and developers were clever, but because the game taught GMs and players how to replicate that humor. Catch phrases ("Keep Your Laser Handy!") and ridiculous situations ensured that players would be humorous too, and that's likely the hardest part of a funny RPG: translating the humor from the designers to the players. Unfortunately, not all humor is created equal: as the original creators left, *Paranoia* of the '90s became increasingly obvious parody instead of subtle satire, and then it unsurprisingly died.

Mongoose's *Paranoia* has been more successful than some of their other reboots, and that's because they recognized the different sorts of humor, and thus their *Paranoia* covers everything from Satire to Slapstick. (Now how well that translates to play is a different question.)

Other light humor RPGs of the ’80s include *Alma Mater* (1982), *Toon* (1984), *Ghostbusters* (1986), *Creeks & Crawdads* (1986), *Teenagers from Outer Space* (1987), *Macho Women with Guns* (1988), and edging into the next decade, *Tales from the Floating Vagabound* (1991). In many ways, the last feels like a curtain call for a decade of comedy roleplaying, as it was the last to be sold largely based on its humor and to be well supplemented.

There have certainly been humor games since. *Hackmaster* (2001) leaned heavily on *D&D* parody, and drew from the undeniably funny *Knights of the Diner Table* comic, but it’s since backed off from its parody with its fifth edition (2011). Mongoose’s *Paranoia* had its productive height in the ’00s. *Cartoon Action Hour* (2002) is another popular game that trends in that direction, though it doesn’t require humor.

But in general, the ’00s and ’10s have been much more serious about their roleplaying. Where has the lightness gone?

Day Ten: Want

One of the challenges of the roleplaying industry is that some fans want things that don’t match the practical reality of producing games.

We want games to be cheaper, even though the prices are fundamentally set by the costs of design and production.

We want eBooks to be a bare fraction of the cost of a printed book, even though at least half of the design and production costs remain present for eBook publishing (and even though eBooks often lose their economies of scale).

We want our favorite books to be well supplemented, even if the economics of the market might not support that.

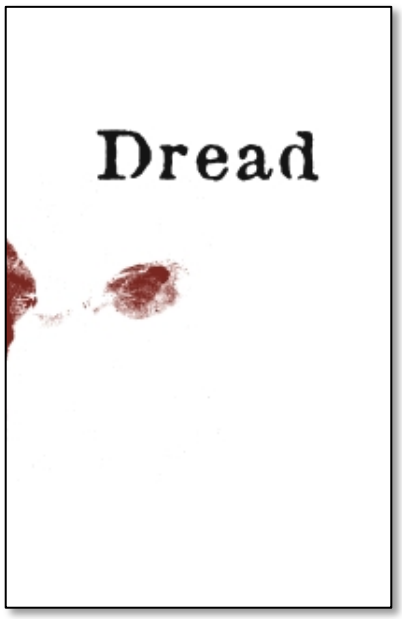
We want our books to be in print, even if PDF is all that’s cost-effective.

The disconnect often feels both fundamental and unbridgeable: there is a segment of roleplayers who feel like RPG publishers are evil profiteers if they sell a book for $50; while there is a vast majority of designers who are either working in the evenings, between their real work hours, or else are working full-time to produce games, at starvation wages, without health insurance.

But, we fans who want things, aren’t in any way bad people. We all want stuff. The author of these histories has ticked off at least one of the checkboxes above (I want my stuff in print, to read at the beach and look lovely on my book shelf!) and probably others at various times.

There’s hopefully one want we can all be unified in: we want the books we love to be produced, and the designers and artists we love to be successful, and in the end, that has a cost that we should want to pay if we can.

Day Eleven: Stack



One of the most innovative mechanics ever in a roleplaying game shows up in a little horror indie called *Dread* (2005) by Epidiah Ravachol. Its action-resolution mechanic is a *Jenga* tower. You take out one or more blocks when you attempt a task, and if the tower collapses, you fail and your character dies(!).

The perfection of the design comes from how this mechanic complements the game's theming. On the one hand you have uncertainty, which is pretty common in RPGs, but on the other hand, you have tension, which is not. That combination feels pretty critical for the design of a great horror RPG.

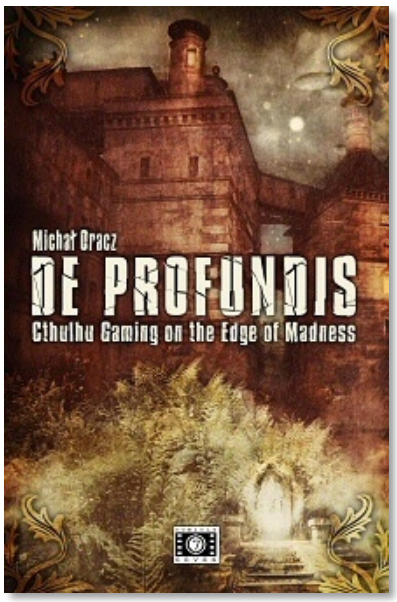
The *Jenga* tower is the jump scare of mechanics.

Generally, the '00s and '10s have been a great time for mechanics that match their themes, after increasingly simulationist designs in the '90s. In fact, seeing how Fria Ligan revamped the simulationist-heavy *Mutant* (1984) and *Coriolis* (2008) into the neotrad *Mutant: Year Zero* (2014) and *Coriolis: The Third Horizon* (2017) is a game design course all on its own.)

But we shouldn't forget the game that led the way: Greg Stafford's *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985) was in many ways the founder of the whole story game and indie movement: it was a pitch-perfect game design for its setting before anyone else even realized that was a good idea.

Day Twelve: Message

Another innovative indie game of the '00s is *De Profundis* (2001) by Michal Oracz. The game was originally published by James Wallis through Hogshead Publishing's New Style Line, which was producing indie games before indie games were a thing. The central innovation of the game is that it's played through players writing letters to each other.



As with *Dread* (2005), this is a game where the mechanic shines because it so perfectly matches the theming. That's because it's a Lovecraftian game, and not only was Lovecraft frequently writing messages to his other Weird Fiction peers, but his protagonists were often writing letters too, some times up to the very second they were killed (or driven insane).

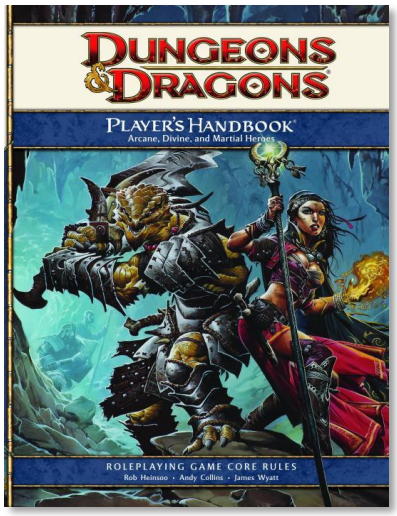
Correspondence games also recall the origins of the industry, with correspondence *Diplomacy* bringing many gamers together, then Gary Gygax creating The Great Kingdom for a correspondence wargame, all while PBMs paralleled the industry and even led to the founding of some companies, like Flying Buffalo.

There are perhaps a half-dozen modern correspondence games like *De Profundis*. Surprisingly, some are solo, such as Scott Malthouse's *Quill* (2016) and *English Eerie* (2017).

The Regency/Victorian era seems another setting where the mechanic could really match the theming, as in the 2018 winner of the 200-word RPG challenge, *Dear Elizabeth*. Todd Crapper's *By the General's Hand* (2018) is yet another theme-appropriate use of the mechanic.

Day Thirteen: Rest

One of the weirdest results of classic *D&D* (1974) play has to be the 15-minute-workday, a phrase that describes the way that a party would (theoretically) go into a dungeon and turn back after just a few rooms because their clerics and magic-users had blown through their spells. It then required a night's rest to get the party back up to full power.



How often this actually happened is a different question, but there's definitely a problem if there's a tight resource limitation on engaging in the activity that is the main activity of a game. *D&D 4e* (2008) certainly treated it as a real-life problem with its focus on ensuring that all the classes had fun, reusable powers that were constantly available.

D&D isn't the only game to have weird side effects because of its mechanics. *RuneQuest* (1978) was similarly renowned for the way that characters would carry around piles of weapons and switch them out to earn experience checks in everything. (Again: real-life mileage may vary.)

"Murphy's Rules", from Steve Jackson Games, was a hilarious cartoon in large part because it highlighted many of these weird player activities that were encouraged by the mechanics (and more widely: weird extrapolations from rules). If there wasn't a cartoon that showed a *RuneQuest* warrior reaching into a quiver of weapons for his next check, there should be

Of course, great RPG designs move in the opposite direction, encouraging players to do game-appropriate things via their mechanics. For example, in Robin Laws' *Dying Earth Roleplaying Game* (2001), players are encouraged to speak in florid prose by the very simple mechanic of an experience reward — but it worked!

Day Fourteen: Banner

Greg Stafford's *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985) was one of the most influential and important RPGs of the '80s, though you might not have known it at the time. Its publisher, Chaosium, was at the time of its publication waning, having licensed out the rights to their top-selling RPG, *RuneQuest* (1978), in what one would have to call a bad deal, and so *Pendragon* never got quite as much attention as it might have otherwise. In fact, the second edition of the game was announced but never appeared because of Chaosium's financial problems at the time. Instead, they'd jump straight to third edition (1990) without even realizing that they'd missed one.

Nonetheless, *Pendragon* was supported for about 15 years. More importantly, it was seen by future designers, and its innovations were recognized and replicated. As such, it was one of the crucial forefathers of the storytelling/indie movement, along with other games of the ’80s such as *Paranoia* (1984), *Ars Magica (*1987), and Stafford’s own *Prince Valiant* (1989).

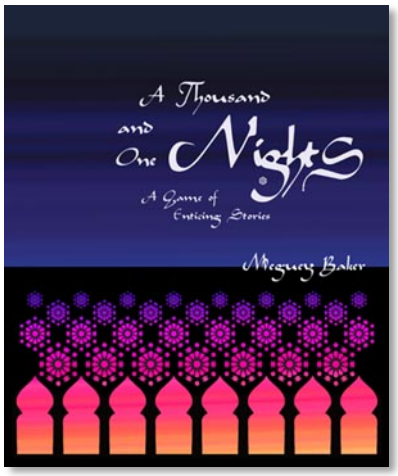
What made *Pendragon* so great? Quite simply, a pitch-perfect fidelity to its source material. Stafford made *Pendragon* all about knights. There were no thieves here, no clerics, and absent a misstep in the fourth edition (1993), no magic-users. Just knights striding bravely forth under their banners. More than that, *Pendragon* was all about knightly virtues, vices, and passions, replicating the literary view of knighthood, especially as seen in Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* (1485).

Stafford wasn’t content with that one innovation. He also envisioned the greatest roleplaying campaign ever, an 80-year story that would take players through the life of a character and his sons and grandsons, that would reveal the entire tale of Arthur from its chaotic beginning through its hopeful middle to its tragic end. It took Stafford years of his own to make the whole vision concrete, through the outlines of *The Pendragon Campaign* (1985) to the partial chronology of *The Boy King* (1991) to the complete *Great Pendragon Campaign* (2005). But the end result was a book that stands as one of the most notable accomplishments of the entire roleplaying field — perhaps as great as *Pendragon* itself.

Recently, *Pendragon* was recovered by Chaosium after a trip through a few other companies in the industry, so there may be more greatness ahead.

Day Fifteen: Frame

Do narrative devices have a place in RPGs? They certainly seem to have been used to good effect in the 21st century, with various (mostly indie) games supporting narrative concepts like flashbacks, smash cuts, in media res, and cliffhangers.



Framing stories are a narrative technique that’s somewhat more limited in its usage, but which can open up interesting new possibilities for a roleplaying game.

In a frame story, you’re telling a story within a story. This could be literal (in which a character in your main story narrates the substory) or it could be implied (often with a future scene framing a past storyline).

One of the places that frames have shown up is in games about telling stories, one of the earliest being *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1998), one of Hogshead Publishing’s New Style RPGs, but Meguey Baker’s *A Thousand and*

One Nights (2006) may have been the first RPG to really embrace the idea of narrative framing, by allowing stories within stories within stories, and by having players take on new roles in each.

When plotted RPG adventures first started appearing in the ’80s, some complained that they railroaded players. Techniques like frame stories (and flashbacks and smash cuts and in media res and cliffhanger) can introduce the advantages of plot narrative while still enabling player agency as long as they’re done right — such as in *A Thousand and One Nights* where the plotting lies entirely in the hand of the players.

Day Sixteen: Dramatic

Another way to introduce narrative techniques into an RPG is to model narrative flow, and that tends to have a pretty interesting effect on a game. Whereas modern games, with their focus on encounter balance, can settle into an eternal string of successes, a game built around narrative flow instead purposefully intermingles successes and failures, creating a more dramatic storyline.

Robin D. Laws is the master of dramatic narratives of this sort.

HeroQuest 2e (2009) is the game that most closely mimics narrative flow, thanks to its pass/fail cycle. Its conceit is very simple: the more successes a group has, the harder contests get, and the more failures, the easier contests get. It turns out to be a really notable reinvention of roleplaying, and one that some can find disconcerting, as there are (for example) no NPC stats and no monster manuals. Instead, adversarial abilities are assigned based on pass/fail (and/or credibility and/or dramatic necessity). There are also a few other narrative elements in *HeroQuest*, such as the fact that climatic confrontations result in larger consequences.

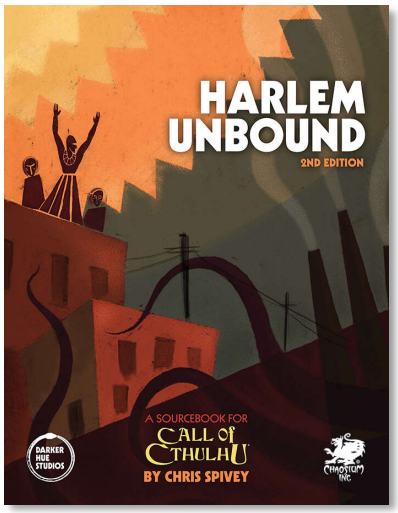
Laws’ *Hillfolk* (2013) is so focused on narrative techniques that its mechanics are called the DramaSystem. Everything about the game is about narrative, from the sorts of scenes that are used to the way dramatic scenes unfold. Here, Laws uses resources to more organically simulate narrative flow, with characters giving up drama tokens when they gain concessions and earning them when they make concessions.

Laws has also written a few books on narrative flow: *Hamlet’s Hit Points* (2010) and *Beating the Story* (2018).

Similar mechanics can be found in *Fate* (2003) and other modern games, though often they’re less core to the mechanics. The Year Zero games from Fria Ligan offer a more freeform example: in *Mutant Year* Zero (2014), for example, players tend to earn mutation points from failures over the course of the game, then blow them in the climax to make sure they overcome the final foe.

Day Seventeen: Comfort

This first trend of the ’20s may be a focus on making a variety of players more comfortable when playing RPGs.



This builds on a trend from the ’10s focusing on making players comfortable at their own table via tools like the “X” card, which allows players to note when something doesn’t feel good to them.

It’s now making its way into the professional mainstream.

First, there’s been an effort to embrace diversity among creators. This year’s Diana Jones Award for “Black Excellence in Gaming” (2020) both showed the excellence in game design among black creators and demonstrated how limited their representation is. Embracing creator diversity, in turn, has the advantage of giving us supplements that detail diverse viewpoints, such as Chris Spivey’s award-winning *Harlem Unbound* (2017, 2020).

Second, there’s been a look back at materials that might have been insensitive, with TSR’s *Oriental Adventures* (1985) one of the first to come under scrutiny, though that’s only seen a warning while the upcoming *Curse of Strahd Revamped* (2020) is retconning the Vistani — the long-lived Romani equivalents in the setting.

There is *considerable* complexity in this issue and in its solutions. There have been complaints about demonizing past players, about rewriting our history, and about the possibility of a single player controlling what everyone else does at a table. But there are also considerable advantages in finding a solution that is more widely comfortable, the best being the welcoming of a larger number of people to our tables and the assurance that they everyone is having fun — which is ultimately the purpose of these games.

This will probably be an ongoing issue that will reverberate throughout this new decade, as we find the proper balance for everyone’s levels of comfort and fun.

Day Eighteen: Meet

Conventions have always been the great meeting places of the roleplaying hobby. They’ve shaped it in ways that are almost impossible to define, but which have obviously been crucial to its continuation.

D&D was practically birthed at Gen Con, whichcreated some of the first crucial connections in what would become the roleplaying industry and gave some of its creators their pivotal ideas.

Any number of companies found their first success at conventions, including small companies like Rider Fantasy and big companies like Judges Guild, both of whom got their start unofficially selling products at Gen Con. Any number of games saw their first releases at conventions, some successfully such as *Champions* (1981) and some less so such as *Nephilim* (1994). Which is to

say nothing of the many personal connections made at conventions, from personal friendships to business development to romantic links.

Gen Con, Origins, DunDraCon, MaineCon, Continuum, PAX, Borås Spelkonvent, GothCon, EternalCon, Essen, Winter Fantasy, Gary Con, Ropecon, Big Bad Con, Games Day, UK Game Con, GloranthaCon, Dreamation, DexCon, Pacificon, KublaCon. The list of past and present conventions goes on and on.

Which is part of the reason that the pandemic has been so hard on roleplaying: meeting is in our lifeblood, and for the moment it's not possible.

Day Nineteen: Tower

A tower is just an upside-down dungeon, which makes it a great locale for classic delving. Or so you'd think: it turns out they've been used less often than you'd expect.

The roleplaying field recognized the evocative nature of towers pretty early on: the sample dungeon in Holmes' *Basic Dungeons & Dragons* (1977) is more widely known as "The Tower of Zenopus". Except it turns out there's no tower to explore in Holmes *D&D*: the sample dungeon lies beneath it!

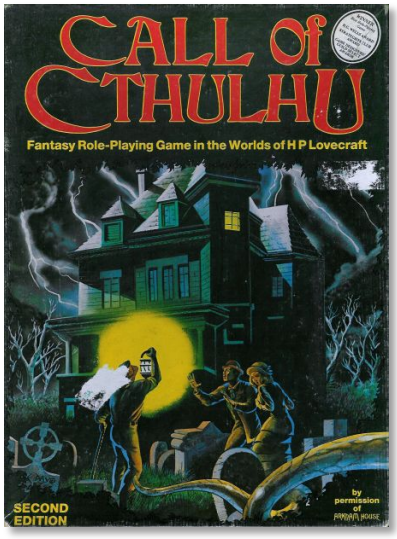
The Howling Tower (1979) by David Hargrave for *Arduin* was one of the earliest supplements to contain an actual tower adventure, but its six levels are much, much smaller than the three levels of dungeons below. And that's a problem with towers. They just aren't that big unless they're really, really tall.

Judges Guild's *Dark Tower* (1980) by Jennell Jaquays is a bit better. Though most of the delve is once more through a dungeon, it's cleverly interconnected with two towers.

That brings us to *The Ghost Tower of Inverness* (1979, 1980) by Allan Hammack. It initially appears that this is going to be a dungeon delve beneath a ruined tower, just like "The Tower of Zenopus", but the module subverts that expectation by taking the characters back in time to journey up through the tower before it was destroyed!

A full listing of tower adventures would go far beyond these primordial examples, from the sorcerous towers of Dragonlance (1984+: but much of their adventure was actually in a nearby forest or in the minds of magic-users taking a test) to Rudy Kraft and Jennell Jaquays' *Legendary Duck Tower* (1980: it turns out to be a citadel). Many more would follow, and some of them would feature more extensive adventures in the towers themselves — but they've always been plagued by the relatively small size of their cross-sections.

Day Twenty: Investigate



Investigation means one thing in the roleplaying industry: Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), by Sandy Petersen. Almost forty years on, it may be hard to envision how revolutionary *Call of Cthulhu* was — but it certainly was.

Throughout the '70s, the roleplaying field was almost entirely focused on combat, because it still lay near its wargaming roots. Certainly, the western field opened with *Boot Hill* (1975), the superhero field with *Superhero 2044* (1977), and the science-fiction field with *Metamorphosis Alpha* (1976) or *Starfaring* (1976), depending on what you count, but none of those changed the fundamentals of roleplaying.

Maybe *Traveller* (1977) did, but it took until the release of *Scouts* (1983) and *Merchant Prince* (1985) for the full potential of other career paths to be recognized.

So, instead one turns to 1980 for notable divergences from the conflictive norm. Maybe that was *Dallas* (1980), a card-driven soap opera, and maybe it was *Thieves' Guild* (1980), which opened up caper play, or *Top Secret* (1980), which introducing espionage play ... but other than the slightly far-fetched *Dallas*, the others tended toward combat too.

Which brings us to 1981 and *Call of Cthulhu*, a game that not only focused most of its energy on investigation, for the first time ever (or at least much more so than an action-driven game like *Top Secret*), but which also made combat very, very bad for its participants.

It was a game-changer.

There have certainly been other investigative games of note since, with the *GUMSHOE* (2007) games being the most important, because they offered a very different formula for play, where investigation success was an expectation, not an option.

But *Call of Cthulhu* led the way.

Day Twenty-One: Push

One of the most interesting elements in Fria Ligan's Year Zero system is its push mechanic. It's very simple: if you don't like the results of a roll, you can "push" to reroll your dice. This gives you a new opportunity to succeed, but now any "1"s that come up cause trauma (or alternatively degrade equipment). This is player agency in its purest form. Players get real choices over whether they succeed or fail.

This sort of agency has been around for a while, but it's been slowly increasing as RPGs have aged and (perhaps) matured.

Top Secret (1980) offered one of the earliest player agency mechanics with its Fame & Fortune points, which could be used to avoid death. This type of resource-based agency has continued and expanded in many modern games, including *Savage Worlds* (2003) and its bennies and *Fate* (2003) and its point economy, where the points can be used more extensively to alter results.

Other games have embraced resource-management even more fully, forcing players to decide when to use their best resources (to succeed) and when to instead fall back on their worst ones (to fail). TSR's SAGA system (1996) was one of the most interesting, with players having to decide when to play high cards and when to play low ones.

But the agency mechanic in Year Zero is very different from all of those. Where they're resource-management, it's risk-management, which is the sort of thing that can create wonderful tension in roleplaying games.

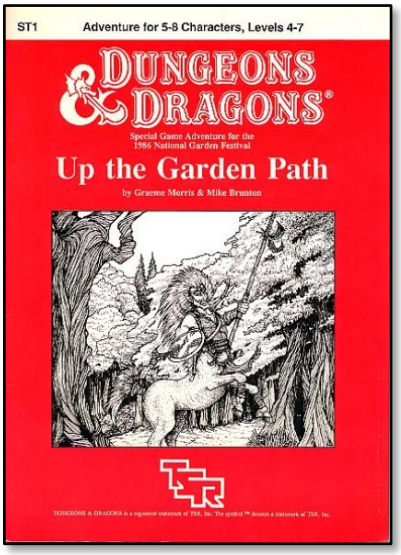
Day Twenty-Two: Rare

What are the biggest rarities in the roleplaying world? For *D&D* collectors, The Acaeum has a list. It's generally what you'd expect: items that didn't make it to the mass-market. The first two printings of *OD&D*, and some products that were TSR-only or tournament GM-only top the list, but the most valuable standalone product for *D&D* with actual (albeit limited) distribution is *ST1: Up the Garden Path* (1986), at a jaw-dropping $4,272 for a near-mint copy.

Here's a bit on the product, from The TSR Codex:

I: The National Garden Festival. *From 1984-1992, the British government held a series of five biannual garden festivals, which were intended to reclaim derelict (and often contaminated) areas within the country's industrial districts.*

The second of these Garden Festivals was the Stoke-on-Trent Garden Festival, which ran from May 1 to October 26, 1986. The festival occurred on land reclaimed from the Shelton Bar steelworks (1830-1978) — an area that had been heavily contaminated. Approximately 300,000 trees were planted and a railway with five stations was built around the area. Today, the locale still exists as a public area, now called Festival Park.



II: The National Garden Module.. *TSR UK choose to produce a "special game adventure" for the 1986 National Garden Festival. We don't know why: perhaps it was intended as an unusual bit of marketing or perhaps someone at TSR UK had a tight connection to the Garden Festival. They produced an adventure whose map is based directly on the map of the Garden Festival — down to the railroad!*

The Acaeum reports an estimated 600 copies of the module were printed and that perhaps 100-200 were sold, possibly for £2.50, with the rest being pulped — which makes it one of the rarest D&D books around. The module was initially sold at the Garden Festival and might have been made available to some local retailers, but it definitely made it to one other convention …

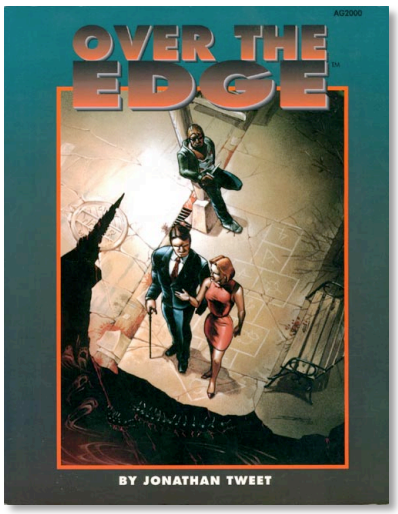
III: The Games Day. *Games Day is one of the oldest gaming conventions in Britain. The first was run on December 20, 1975 by Games Workshop. It became a yearly convention after it returned on February 12, 1977. In 1986, Games Day was run on September 27 at the Royal Horticultural Society Hall in London — an appropriate locale for a garden-festival adventure. This is the only other place that* Up the Garden Path *was sold.*

The average fan would probably be more interested in rarities that made it to the mass market, because they're more approachable. A list of Holy Grails for those fans could include: *Deities & Demigods* with Cthulhu (1980), the Last Unicorn Games *Dune* (2000), Chaosium's *Ringworld* (1984), and *Spherewalker* (1996) for *Everway*. Every fan probably has their own list of books they'd love to get. Many are more likely to go for a few hundred dollars than a few thousand.

At least two recalled adventures probably fall somewhere in the middle: rarer than the average RPG release, but less so than con, club, and fanzine exclusives. Those rarities are *Wings of the Valkyrie* (1987) for *Champions* and the original *B3: Palace of the Silver Princess* (1981) for *BD&D*. Also in the middle of the rarity scale are small-press publications from decades past. *Alma Mater* (1982), *Bifrost* (1977-1982), *Spawn of Fashan* (1981), and many, many others would all be pretty hard to find today! Our industry, now in its fifth decade, is full of rarities.

Day Twenty-Three: Edge

The indie branch of roleplaying was seeded in the '80s with games like *Paranoia* (1984), *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985), *Ars Magica* (1987), and *Prince Valiant* (1989). But there's one game from the start of the next decade that's at least as crucial: Jonathan Tweet's *Over the Edge* (1992).

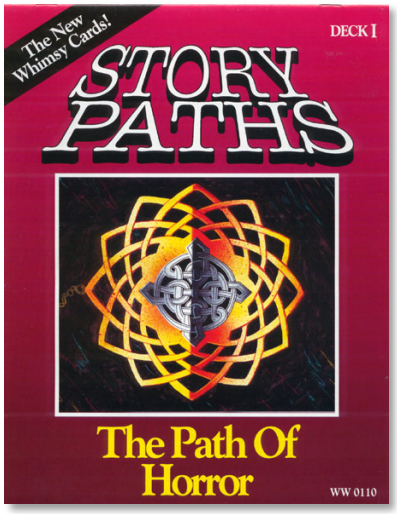


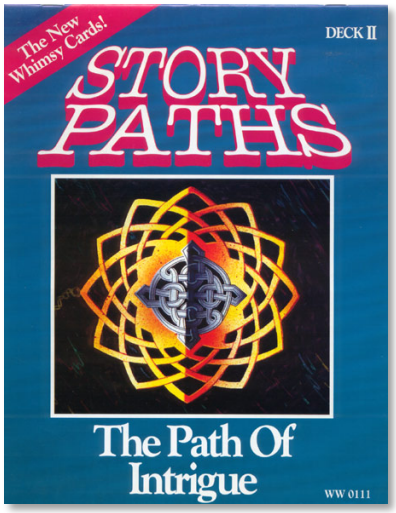
Part of that is *Over the Edge's* setting of Al Amarja and the playstyle it suggests. An urban environment with conspiracies, supernatural weirdness, and secret agents implied a game that was unlike anything before it and was so far from the dungeon delves, superhero fights, and science-fiction adventures of the industry's origins that it might as well be a different category of play.

But *Over the Edge* really broke ground with its wide-open gaming system, which allowed players to freely write down advantages and flaws without consulting any set list of skills. This sort of open play practically laid the foundation of the indie game category, influencing everything from *Hero Wars* (2000) to *Fate* (2003). If *Pendragon* was the lesser known game of the '80s that influenced the designs of innovative RPGs in the '00s and beyond, *Over the Edge* was that same game for the '90s.

Day Twenty-Four: Humour

Whimsy Cards (1987) were the first product produced by Lion Rampant, and they were thus the first product in the amazingly innovative sequence of projects headed by Jonathan Tweet and/or Mark Rein•Hagen that would later include *Ars Magica* (1987), *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991), *Over the Edge* (1992), and so many others.





The idea was quite simple. Players were randomly dealt cards that said things like "Bad Tidings", "Tables Turn", or "Ulterior Motive", and when they played the cards, they described a narrative change that resulted. (Some players inevitably used them to try and improve the position of their characters, but the best realized that it was all about creating a better story.)

This was a clear extension of the ideas of troupe-style roleplaying that were proselytized in *Ars Magica*, but the cards were focused on player agency: giving everyone the ability to shape the story, no matter who the current GM was.

Despite their innovation, *Whimsy Cards* quickly faded out. White Wolf rereleased them as *StoryPath Cards* (1990), and that edition was failed by its production. The core idea was great: releasing genre-specific decks of cards, which would have allowed for a very extensible set of cards that could have been specialized for each adventure. But they were printed on paper-thin card stock and they were perforated: players had to rip them apart! The results weren't pretty. White Wolf never got past the first two sets, and then the rights ended up with 3 Guys Gaming, where they pretty much died.

Only in recent years have *Whimsies* reappeared. Nocturnal Media has a print-and-play version of the cards available at DTRPG and put out both *Whimsies* and *Storypaths* through a Kickstarter in the late '10s. Paizo released the somewhat similar *Plot Twist Cards* (2010) around the same time — albeit, with more mechanics than the original. They were both in the family, as the companies were then each owned by White Wolf alumni.

Are *Whimsy Cards* still relevant today? Definitely! There are now many GM-less games, as well as GM-led games that tend toward more player agency than games of the '80s or '90s, but there also are plenty of games with a more traditional GM-player format, and they can sometimes benefit from the fun, humor, and empowerment allowed by giving everyone a voice.

Day Twenty-Five: Lever

The scattered indie ideas of the '80s and '90s, spanning games from *Paranoia* (1984) and *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985) to *Amber Diceless Roleplaying* (1991) and *Over the Edge* (1992), became the indie game movement of the '00s, but what's even more amazing is that many of those ideas re-entered the mainstream in the '10s to reinvigorate the roleplaying form.

Take *Leverage* (2010), a game from Margaret Weis Productions that could have been pretty simulationistic. It's a heist game, after all, so it could have been very similar to games like *Top Secret / SI* (1987). Instead, it well reflects how the roleplaying genre evolved in those intervening two decades.

To start with, some of its traits are freeform, allowing players to generate dice for anything, an element dating back to *Over the Edge*. This is part of a risk-management system. Players can often choose to add traits to rolls as dice, but every time they do increases the chance of complications — since they appear when "1"s are rolled. There's also an awful lot of player agency. Plot Points (which are a part of an economy including those complications) can be used by players to generate assets.

But *Leverage* goes beyond that, leveraging narrative elements that you usually find in only the indiest of indies. In particular, the flashback is a crucial part of *Leverage* that can also be used to generate assets by rewriting the past. There are also spotlight scenes, which give each player a chance to shine.

Overall, MWP's entire sequence of "Cortex+" games trended heavily toward the indie side of things, really showing how much indie ideas of player agency, narrative techniques, and game systems that closely aligned with their themes had infiltrated the mainstream.

Day Twenty-Six: Strange

When the history of roleplaying in the '10s is written, there's no question that Monte Cook Games will be one of the stars. That's in part because it's headed by Monte Cook, one of the more influential game designers of the 21st century, but also because MCG produces games that are uniquely strange.

Much of that strangeness comes from the fact that MCG has focused on science fantasy in most of its games. Certainly, science fantasy has been around since the earliest days of the industry, and in fact was a lot more common in those primordial days. But Cook has once more put science-fantasy front and center, and it doesn't feel like the aliens and crashed space crafts of the industry's early days, but instead a weirdly organic, almost post-human sort of science fantasy — the "new weird" that you find in the works of China Mieville and the four-color *Heavy Metal* stories of Moebius and others. (And maybe it's also Zothique and the New Sun and Granbreton too, but MCG's science fantasy is often much, much larger than life.)

Each of MCG's three major releases has blended that science fantasy with our own world in unique ways.

Numenera (2013) is Earth a billion years in the future, after the collapse of eight previous civilizations. The ruins that are iconic of fantasy roleplaying are everything that's ever lived upon the Earth. It's a reinvention of fantasy tropes just like in *Earthdawn* (1993).

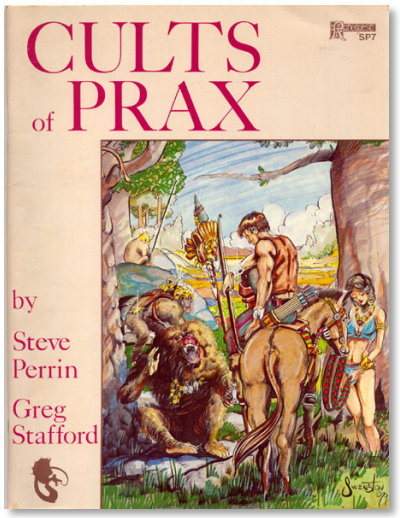
The Strange (2014) is science fiction in its ultimate conception, as a multiversal game of dimension hopping, but every week it can be set in a different genre and a different reality, from Oz to Wonderland. It's a new take on *Planescape* or *Fringe* or The Eternal Champion.

And finally, there's *Invisible Sun* (2018), which blends multiple worlds in a totally different way, this time creating a web of magic that stretches from our modern day to beyond, itself inspired by surrealism, and by surrealist comics like *Promethea* and *Doom Patrol*, mashed up with Philip K. Dick.

Monte Cook Games is psychedelic roleplaying. It's strange, it's innovative, and it's unique in the best of ways.

Day Twenty-Seven: Favour

Wizardly magic gets a lot of attention in fantasy roleplaying games, but in many ways it's pretty staid. Wizards learn spells or draw upon innate powers, and they use it to do miraculous things. The variation is usually in what those miraculous things are.



Divine favor, on the other hand, tends to be much more varied, in part because it introduces another actor: the divinity. Suddenly it's no longer about a magic-user drawing upon his personal resources, just in a slightly different way from fighters or thieves, but instead about a character drawing upon a relationship.

D&D (1974) obviously offered the earliest example of divine favor, and it's pretty mundane. Its deities are largely spell vending machines, no different from a wizard's spell books.

Instead, *RuneQuest* (1978) was the first great example of how to model divine favor so that it felt very different from sorcery. Oh, *RuneQuest* gods are still spell vending machines to a certain extent, but the spells are so powerful that they *feel* divine (something that is balanced out by the need to go to some effort to retrieve them after they've spent). The game also offered a lot of opportunities for characters to model their gods, first by requiring appropriate skills to rise within a cult, and more recently by tying that together with passions. The pages and pages of history and mythology about each god, and their unique divine spells, in products like *Cults of Prax* (1979) and *Cults of Terror* (1981), also helped to characterize deities in ways that the short paragraphs in *D&D* never did.

King Arthur Pendragon (1985) doesn't actually seem to place religion front and center, but it nonetheless does through its focus on religious traits. If a character acts in the ways appropriate for a religion (whether it be Christian or Pagan), he'll eventually get an in-game bonus for doing so. Nothing enforces roleplaying of a specific sort like an in-game bonus, so this was a very

strong model for creating religious adherence — and pretty surprisingly, it appeared in a game without an actual clergy role.

Another model for divine favor is a simple bonus for participating in worship, which has spanned games from *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1977) to *Coriolis* (2008). This divine favor is more about building a setting and a feel of a game.

There are certainly also games focused on religion without having much in the way of divine favor, but divine favor is interesting because it's a mechanic that can be developed and explored in many different ways (and has been!).

Day Twenty-Eight: Close

Everything ends. Of the 13 companies covered in *Designers & Dragons: The '70s*, not one of them exists in its original form.

But it should be no surprise that in an industry as innovative and creative as the roleplaying industry, things change and are reborn. When *Designers & Dragons* was last published in 2014, five of those 13 companies were still around in some form, and that count may still be same today. Some of those companies like Gamescience and Judges Guild are hollowed out, but Chaosium is a fine example of a company that's come back stronger in a newest incarnation.

Moreso, as companies have closed, many of their worlds and games have appeared from other publishers, often in new and different forms — allowing for innovation and creativity.

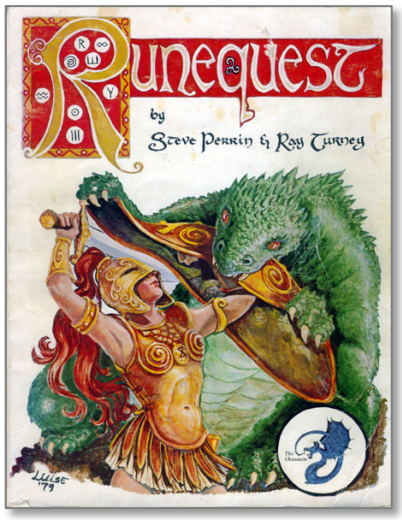
So, GDW is long gone, but Mongoose has produced a new iteration of *Traveller* (2008) that returned to the game to its classic roots; and *Space: 1889* (1988), a brilliant setting once held back by its game system, returned first in a sprightly new *Savage Worlds* version called *Red Sands* (2010) and then in a third edition using the Ubiquity rules (2014); and *Twilight: 2000* (1984) too should be soaring once more, under a Year Zero system from Fria Ligan.

So has *D&D* (1974) been reborn again and again to suit the moods of each decade. So has *Mutant Chronicles* (1993) seen new life under Modiphius (2005), and *Lord of the Rings* under Cubicle 7 as *The One Ring* (2011), and *Ars Magica (*1987) under Atlas (1996, 2004), and *Paranoia* (1984) under Mongoose (2004, 2009).

Everything comes to a close in the fullest of time, but the RPG industry has seen enough creative rebirths that, looking back from the '20s, we can now say that worlds and stories are not lost forever, but may be returning in joyous new forms.

Day Twenty-Nine: Ride

Simulationistic games can be very complex. In fact, that was a major gaming trend as the ’80s turned into the ’90s: make simulation systems more complex to better simulate. Games like *Aftermath!* (1981), *Phoenix Command* (1986), and the *Rolemaster Standard System* (1994) were the result. But, that’s not a requirement for a simulation system. In fact, the best have perfectly elegant rules that simultaneously simulate and are obvious.



RuneQuest (1978), it must be admitted, has some complexity of its own. But it also has two of the most perfectly elegant simulation rules in roleplaying. They both have to do with riding.

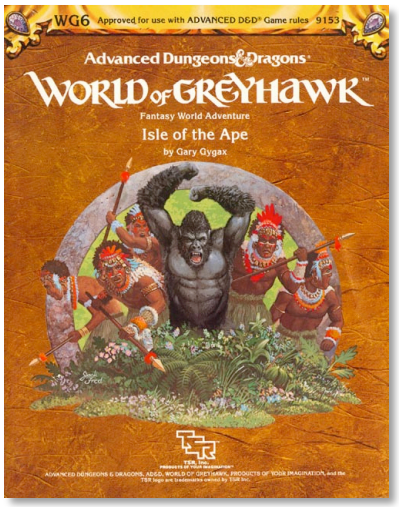
The first rule cuts through the Gordian Knot of fighting while mounted with an extremely simple answer: your fighting skill is limited to your riding skill. This is the best type of simulation: no complex charts, just a rule that feels like you always knew it.

The second rule presents a brilliant methodology for using lances, which are often a puzzle to roleplaying designers, because they have to figure out how to model a weapon that’s only particularly dangerous when mounted. In *RuneQuest*, every character has a “Damage Bonus” based on their STR + SIZ. When using a lance mounted, you use the damage bonus of your mount (which is usually large and strong), not yourself (who are usually much less so).

Neither of these rules is groundbreaking, but that’s the point. Instead, they’re quiet and unassuming, but make things work just like you think they should. (Whether what they simulate is reality or not is a totally different question, and to a certain extent, irrelevant.)

Day Thirty: Portal

Portals were an important part of the early roleplaying worlds of the ’70s.



We know that Gary Gygax’s players visited the wild west, World War II, and *The Warden*. Portals in Castle Greyhawk’s dungeons led to Wonderland and Skull Island. Meanwhile, J. Eric Holmes ran a seminar called “D&D on Barsoom”.

Bob Bledsaw’s early roleplaying campaign was set on Middle-earth. When he was ready to introduce The City-State of the Invincible Overlord, he transported the characters through a portal that they found on Weathertop. There were then gates scattered throughout the *Wilderlands of High Fantasy* (1977), one of which led to the entry (and crash!) of a MIG fighter jet.

These portals reveal a different focus for world-building in the early games of the industry. Designers like Gygax, Bledsaw, and Holmes clearly saw their D&D games as part of a fictive universe. There wasn’t the same

attention toward verisimilitude of world design. There didn't have to be an internally consistent "secondary world" that felt every bit as true as reality. No, it just had to feel every bit as true as Barsoom or Wonderland. Compare that to the reams of history created for worlds like the Forgotten Realms or Hârn or Glorantha. It's a different mindset, neither right nor wrong, but leading to different results.

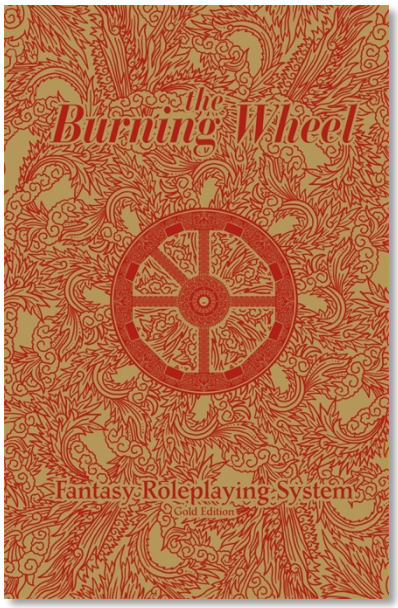
Certainly, there are portals in latter-day roleplaying games. The gate spell is a portal. Sigil is the City of Doors. But those trend more toward the internally self-consistent fiction-world designs of the '90s and beyond than the seat-of-your-pants game-world designs of the '80s.

Perhaps it's time to see some of those older worlds once more.

Day Thirty-One: Experience

Experience is a defining element of roleplaying games, so much so that when the original *Traveller* (1977) appeared without experience, it was considered a grave absence in the game.

Experience works because it's fun. Obviously, no player character should be static, and obviously some of that change is going to be character growth as characters evolve based on what they experience and what choices they make. But mechanical growth is very satisfactory too, because it gives players goals and allows them to see their alter egos improve over time.



Experience can also influence how games are played. If the original *D&D* (1974) was about killing and looting treasure, that's because players got experience points for slaying monsters and collecting gold. Mind you, it's a bit harder to say what behavior *Rolemaster* (1982) encouraged, since it gave big-time experience points for getting critically hit.

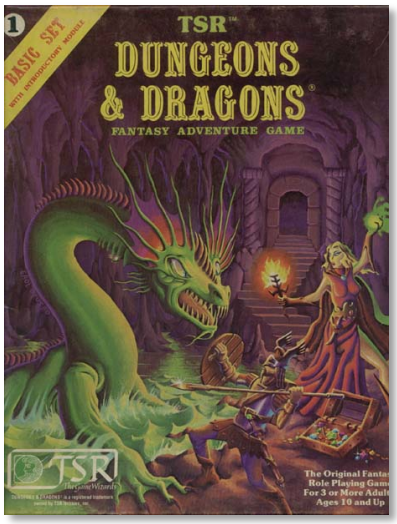
Many of the most interesting roleplaying games reward roleplaying itself. In *The Riddle of Steel* (2002), players get points for playing their personality, and in *The Burning Wheel* (2002) they do so for accomplishing long-held goals and embodying their instincts.

In the '00s and '10s there's been a trend toward just leveling up characters when the GM feels the time is right, and although there's something to be said for the simplicity of that (another trend of the '10s), it feels like it leaves a lot of options on the table — denying both the excitement of personal advancement and the possibility to shape gameplay.

#RPGaDay2020

Personal Essays

Day One: Beginning



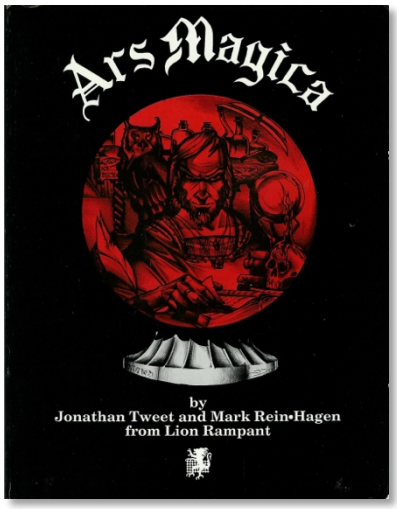
I got my start in roleplaying with *Dungeons & Dragons*: the Moldvay *Basic Set* that was one half of the famous B/X edition. That means that the year was 1981, 1982, or early 1983, because the B/X edition had a shockingly short lifespan. That Erol Otus cover is still one of the most evocative images in FRPs for me.

The set came from my dad as a birthday or Christmas present (I'd asked for it) and afterward he designed a dungeon and ran it for me. However, he hadn't quite figured out the combat so when I met skeletons, I had to figure out to pick up rocks and throw them, to make the skeletons fall apart.

We'd previously enjoyed adventures games like *The Colossal Cave*, so this sort of problem solving was natural, but as I'd soon learn, roleplaying was a totally new thing as well.

Day Two: Change

When I was young I actually played a pretty good variety of RPGs. I went from the B/X *Dungeons & Dragons* to *AD&D.* An aunt got me a copy of *Traveller*. I had friends with whom I played *Champions* every day at lunch in Jr. High. I picked up *Stormbringer* and *Hawkmoon* because of my interest in Michael Moorcock. I ran *Top Secret/SI* and my friend James ran *James Bond 007* — which had really great props. Another friend, Scott, who was obsessed with the military, ran *Twilight: 2000* and *Phoenix Command*. Yet another friend ran *RuneQuest*— though it just felt like *Stormbringer* without the cool chaotic weaponry in his run.



Despite all of that, I felt college was a big change, and it was primarily due to Matt H. and his *Ars Magica* game. And by change, I mean it changed the way I thought about roleplaying games.

Part of that was *Ars Magica's* intriguing focus. There was this whole spectrum of potential character tropes from FRPs, and it was only about the magicians. But it was more about how the game treated characters and GMing.

I was used to this universe where you either played one character or you ran a game. That was your entire role in roleplaying. But here was this game where you switched off between your "magus" and your "companion", where you could also characterize any number of "grogs" (bodyguards, basically). Without taking away any of my role as a player, we were creating a bigger world. And that became even more obvious in

later campaigns that were the creations of our "troupe", a whole group of us all GMing at different times, each focusing on different areas of the world.

Despite being a very character-focused game, *Ars Magica* was about story too, in a way like that nothing I'd played before.

Day Three: Thread

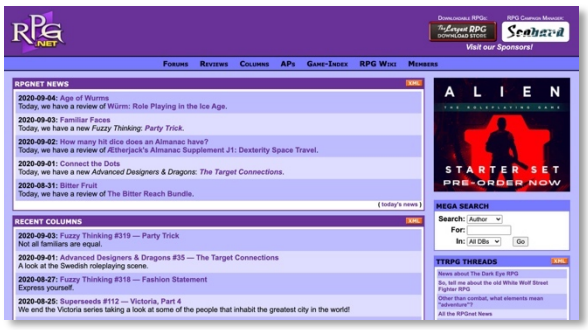
Discussion boards and forums on the internet are made up of individual messages grouped into threads, and I managed one, RPGnet, for somewhere around 15 years.

First, I should note Chris Allen's role in saving RPGnet, which I think he hasn't talked about enough. The site had been sold by the original creators to a Hollywood company trying to take advantage of the dot-com boom. Except the dot-com boom was busting and everyone who thought they could make easy money off of anything with the phrase .com (or as it happens .net) soon found out they weren't getting rich any quicker than by their old schemes. So that Hollywood company took RPGnet but never actually *paid* for it.

That could have caused years of problems and killed the site, except the former owners still held the domain name, allowing them to pull it back. Chris offered them a machine to run it on. Yes, he eventually bought it himself, but I'm pretty sure that the initial intent was just to save the site.

(Recollections may vary from reality; I was on the sidelines for the initial discussions.)

Not too long after that I became the editor-in-chief of the site. As editor-in-chief of RPGnet, I was very much *not* the community manager. I didn't want to be, I wouldn't have liked it, and we had great people already taking that role. Oh, I was the person of last resort, which means that I got an endless stream of Internet Karens wanting to reverse their bans (or even warnings! Karen is always ready to complain). I also got to deal with the legal threats, which came in about one a year. And I had to decide whether to call the FBI about various death threats. Oh yeah, I was also the target of wrath from people who decided they would *destroy* the site because they got banned or warned or admonished. That resulted in attempts to destroy my reputation and even an impersonation of me.



Anyway, positive things:

Besides being the ultimate authority on the site, I also was the content manager. I got to work with lots of great people who were writing columns and reviews for RPGnet and was really thrilled when I got to see them move on to bigger things in the hobby.

I also got to talk with lots of industry folks, either due to them buying ads, offering interviews, or requesting reviews, and that was exciting.

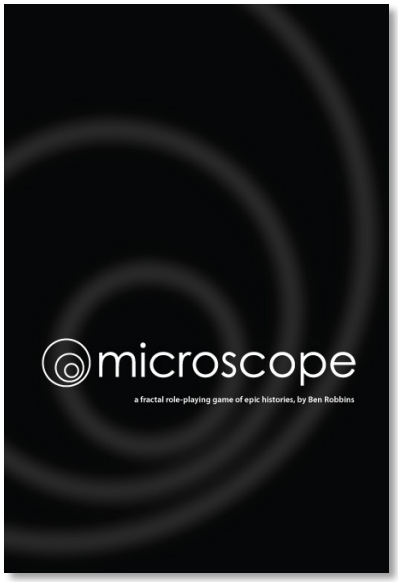
Finally, I was also the site's programmer. Though I don't really identify myself as a programmer, I'm decently good at it, and at this point almost everything on the front end of the site is mine

(outside of the forums, which are the XenForo software). The best part is I really got to do what I wanted there, so for example I coded the entire roleplaying index as an attempt to expand the site. I'd still like to see it get better usage, but it's a cool thing.

Notably, a lot of this led me to where I am now. Because I worked on the index, I got more interested in the history of the industry; because I was talking with industry folks, I got more comfortable asking them questions; and because I needed content, I started writing articles about them and their history. Which is how *Designers & Dragons* came to be. I suppose you could call that a thread too.

Day Four: Vision

For me, the joy of roleplaying has always been about creation, particularly the creation of a secondary world. Oh, that can be someone else's universe, it can even be a past or future Earth, if I can make my own corner of it, as I did in a Spinward Marches campaign for *Traveller* in the '10s, as my friends and I did in multiple *Ars Magica* campaigns in the '90s. But there's a real joy in creating an imaginary world.



That's why I was entirely delighted by Ben Robbins' *Microscope*, a story game all about creating a history. My roleplaying group and I used it for five or six sessions to create the history of a world and the history of a city that I used for about twenty sessions of a *Burning Wheel* game. The world is magnificent because of our shared vision: no one taking control, but everyone each sharing their best and most creative ideas. (That's the wonder of Ben's game: it cranks up shared creativity like nothing else.)

I have a vision of running *Microscope* campaigns out here in Hawaii, if I can find other people interested in shared creativity.

Day Five: Tribute

My family has also been very generously supportive of my interest in roleplaying games. My dad bought me my first *D&D* rules and ran my first adventure (though he doesn't like games!). My mom regularly let me have friends over to play at our dining room table. An aunt bought my first *Traveller*. My mom let me have friends sleep over, so we could play RPGs all night. My dad regularly took me to Toys 'R Us, searching for new TSR products. All of my folks bought me overly expensive RPG-adjacent products, like Mattel's *D&D Computer Labyrinth* and even memory for a computer so that it could play a DnD computer game. In more recent years, my wife has joined the legions of those willing to let roleplayers invade their house.

And I'm well aware that it didn't have to be that way. Growing up in the '80s, I got to see firsthand some crappy parents who bought into crazy conspiracy theories that *D&D* was devil worship. So, I had two friends who were not allowed to play *D&D* by their Mormon parents, so they spent their high school days sneaking out to game and lying about it. It was night and day.

So that's my tribute: to supportive family.

Day Six: Forest

I've rarely thought much about forests in roleplaying games. That's because classic roleplaying games involved dungeons, caverns, or ruins, and maybe you'd do a wilderness adventure, but that was just hexes with stuff in them. (Have you ever heard of a forest delve?)

But, there is one game that makes me think of forests, and that's *Ars Magica*, which I wrote about a few days ago, and which we ran through close to 200 sessions of play at Berkeley. One of the interesting aspects of the game is its multifaceted set of powers: the divine, the infernal, the magic, and the fay.

That meant that faeries were a large force in most campaigns, because the background actively made you think about them, and it meant that forests were actually relevant in the game, as a place of power for the fay. So that was probably the first roleplaying game for me where forests felt like a real part of the setting.

Fun history fact: the first edition of *Faeries* got White Wolf in trouble for showing a female breast on the cover.

Day Seven: Couple

Did you know I met my wife, Kimberly, while roleplaying? As *Tales of the Reaching Moon* would say: B (Generally True, but With a Substantial False Component). It was Eric Rowe's ErzoQuest game, during the summer of '90 or maybe '91. I was playing the sturdy warlike bunny-guy, she the naive young bunny-girl.

It's a good story, but:

I'm not actually sure if I was still playing my warrior Gabter, Kidzen Teko, at that point. We might have been in the second half of the campaign by then, where I'd moved on to the non-bunny-like AXen Silverhair.

And Kimberly was dating a friend of mine (which is why she was there: he brought her). I only noticed her because she was a real rarity at the table, *a girl*. She didn't particularly notice me, as we had a dozen players or something. (Believe it or not, that group was 20 people on the day or two that it had the most people! Crazy!)

After that one game, I didn't see her again for eight years or so, except maybe in passing. Then said friend, now long her ex, got the three us together to go the gym.

Not long after that, Kimberly and I became a couple.

As time goes by: we'll always have Erzo!

Day Eight: Shade

Throwing shade is a wonderful bit of slang because it defines something that was previously undefinable: insulting or criticizing someone publicly, but in a subtle way. And it also reminds me of all the arguments that arise in roleplaying groups. I mean, it's not unnatural. Roleplaying groups are close little communities. You're interacting with the other members in a highly social way for hours on end, sometimes every week. Though I remember dramatic blowups from our groups over the years, they were in the vast minority.

But, way back in elementary school, I had friends that I played *D&D* with, and there was some fight, and we never talked again. I have no idea what it was about. But, it's OK, because they were total munchkins. (When I later checked in, they were all playing gods. Actually, maybe that's what the fight was about: that they were playing *D&D wrong*.)

I remember arguments from college days better, such as when our *Ars Magica* group nearly split up over an argument over how many sacraments there were. There was another fight around the same time over the appropriate response of guards in a *RuneQuest* city.

I think maybe I helped mediate those, but I wasn't always that cool-headed. A few years earlier, I'd gotten so angry over a new player that I stomped out of the game. The problem was that it was at my apartment, and I hadn't thought to grab anything like my wallet.

So, there have been fights — though little shade was thrown afterward. And they were pretty small in the scope of things. In general, RPGs have instead been the place where long-lived friendships have developed.

Day Nine: Light

Roleplaying is certainly my "dark" hobby. Not, like it's evil or anything, though the moral minority were hot on claims that it led kids toward devil worship in the '80s, following their demonization of rock-and-roll and prior to their demonization of computer games. But it's the hobby that happens inside four walls (and beneath a roof). Hence: dark; away from the sun. I can only remember gaming out in the open once, on a day that our Berkeley gaming crew was helping Eric move stuff into the ill-fated Wizard's Attic warehouse, but even then, I think we played *Settlers of the Stone Age* on a folding table, not an RPG.

My "light" hobby is hiking. (And at times over the past few decades, it's been biking, but that was already fading away in the Bay Area, long before I moved to an island with few bike lanes.) And I say light because it's the one outside, in the sun (and on Hawaii, very much requiring sun screen). Saturday is usually my outside-rec day, which for months has meant a hike out to Mahalaupu Beach, as I wait for my knee to be better enough to return to the hills.

Though I don't game outside, my two hobbies do intersect. That's primarily because hiking (or biking) is often my quiet thinking time, away from people — and that allows for creativity. I turn problems around in my head and come up with solutions. Most frequently that's related to writing: yesterday I figured out a way to supplement a *Designers & Dragons* article I'm working on for late in the month, and on previous Saturdays I've outlined *Designers & Dragons* histories in my head. But in days past I've often plotted out roleplaying adventures while outside too.

Day Ten: Want

I can't help it, but I'm a collector. When I become interested in something I want *all* of it. So, in the mid '90s, once I had regular paychecks coming in, I managed to put together pretty complete sets of my favorite games, including *Ars Magica*, *King Arthur Pendragon*, and *RuneQuest*.

The *Ars Magica* collecting was relatively easy because the game just dated back to 1987. Well, except getting a first edition with a first printing cover. (Yes, there were two different covers on the first edition, and I actually cared.)

The *King Arthur Pendragon* was similarly pretty easy, though I was the one who alerted Greg Stafford to the fact that there'd never been a second edition. (He listened to my reasoning, which was that they were planning it as a boxed set just when they almost went bankrupt, and agreed that I must be right.)

The *RuneQuest* collecting was the most challenging because the game dated back to 1978, and even the old Chaosium boxes were rare by the time I was collecting, let alone stuff like *Wyrms Footprints* or fan products from other countries. (I think I got all the official stuff, including real rarities like *Wyrms Footnotes #1* and the first edition of *White Bear, Red Moon*, but my foreign collection was a little spottier.)

Here's the thing: even though I like collecting, I've been able to let the things go that just aren't going to be important. I passed on all my rare Chaosium board games to my friend Mike D. (unfortunately, not long before he very suddenly passed). I got rid of many more "irrelevant" things just before the move to Hawaii, like the non-Gloranthan products from Mongoose and Avalon Hill.

But I still *want* things. I've started picking up the POD books from the Jonstown Compendium and am looking into products that I didn't get when my interest waned in the '00s and '10s. Another fan was kind enough to send me some dupe copies of *Pavic Tales* so that I can index them, and I'd now love to get the four remaining ones.

I'm looking forward to having it all on shelves again, even if the humidity is going to play havoc with my poor books.

Day Eleven: Stack

There were a number of years where I wasn't really buying roleplaying books, but I am again in the last few years, and that means that there's inevitably a stack, which is to say a pile of unread books.

From before-the-move I have a few books meant to support my historical knowledge for *Designers & Dragons*: *Coleco: The Complete History*, *The Fantastic Worlds of Grenadier*, *The Fantastic Worlds of Grenadier Supplement*, and *Through the Moongate.* My actual roleplaying purchases from before the move were almost entirely indies, as I looked for something new that fulfilled some of the same creative desires as *Microscope*, so I've still got *Companions Tale*, *Follow*, and *Archives of the Sky* waiting.

I'd put off buying the new *RuneQuest: Roleplaying in* Glorantha until the move, so I didn't have to ship it, but I ordered that in March, and I've since read through the rules and the *Bestiary* (yay! Good and Great, respectively.) But I haven't yet read the *GM Screen Pack* material, nor my first Jonstown Compendium purchase, *A Rough Guide to Glamour*. I also picked up the older *Gloranthan Sourcebook* and Red Cow duology to bring my collection up to date. They're on the stack too.

Right now I'm reading *The Gamesmaster*, Flint Dille's disorganized and overwritten memoir about work in media (and with Gary Gygax) in the '80s. So, I'm not ignoring the stack, it's just waiting its turn!

Stacks can be very old in the roleplaying hobby. If my collection was on the shelves, I might be able to find something from the '80s or at worst '90s that's never been read, but it'd be somewhat hard now ... I culled a lot before I moved.

Day Twelve: Message

In 1990 or so, I chanced upon becoming the moderator for the Ars Magica mailing list. David Martin had run the mailing list from UC Davis servers for a few years, but he was graduating. Meanwhile, I had administrative access to the Open Computing Facility (OCF) at UC Berkeley, so I was able to bring it over. A short time later I moved it up to soda.csua, where it remained for decades, becoming known as the BerkList.

In those very early days, we were fortunate to have Mark Rein•Hagen, one of *Ars Magica's* designers, occasionally stop by; he felt like a member of our community.

Meanwhile, my group had moved on to our third major *Ars Magica* campaign, set in Rome. It was quite long-lived, and we'd generated a lot of great content. One day I sent Mark a message, and asked if White Wolf would like to have a book on the Roman Tribunal. Perhaps I included an outline. I love outlines, as I feel like they show I've figured out the content of a project, and just need to put it together.

Mark said yes!

Chris Frerking, one of my compatriots in that campaign, and I thus put together a supplement sorta based on that game. It was my first major roleplaying work, and my first indication that I could write a book.

Much of our lives spin out of such small decisions, such as that message to Mark. Would I have asked Chaosium a similar question if I hadn't had the positive reaction from that first one? I dunno, but if not I wouldn't have met Chris Allen, and I wouldn't have worked with him for over two decades, including my current work with Blockchain Commons. And would I have written *Designers & Dragons* without the learning experience of that first book? Again, I don't know.

Day Thirteen: Rest

In high school, I roleplayed ... most afternoons? I don't really remember. I do remember going over to my friend James' house day after day during the summer, and roleplaying while his grandmother was at work.

I remember college more concretely. We had marathons from Friday night to Saturday night. Friday night was A*rs Magica*, then it was home and to bed, and over to campus by noon, at which point we started calling Dave W. to wake him up and get him to campus. Then when he showed up there was an afternoon game until dinner and an evening game after dinner and sometimes *Battletech* after that. I most clearly recall the conjunction of John T.'s AD*&D* and Eric Rowe's *RuneQuest*, probably because it was one of my earliest semesters at Cal.

Now: that amount of roleplaying is absolutely unfathomable.

The thing is, I'm an introvert. I find interacting with people tiring. In recent years, before our roleplaying fizzled out in the Bay Area, I was doing one game every other week, and I needed the weeks in between to rest and recharge my batteries.

What's changed?

I think I used to interact with people less while roleplaying, as weird as that sounds. But I was more self-absorbed in high school and college. And, I lived alone during the latter half of college and afterward, which meant that was my main social interaction. More recently, I've also GMed more (since Eric moved to New Zealand), and that certainly takes more out of me.

We'll see what the post-COVID future brings here in Kauai. Because, being the ornery person that I am, all this being forced to stay home (by my good sense, not by the lax rules on Kauai) just makes me want to get out there and game.

I'd love to play another obnoxious trickster (lower case-t, in any game system!).

Day Fourteen: Banner

I've been to Gen Con twice, once in Milwaukee in 2002 and once in Indianapolis 2005. They were to support the online game company, Skotos, so they weren't trips for fun. Actually, I don't think I've been to a convention strictly for fun since the '90s. Running booths for Chaosium in the mid to late '90s really burned me out on the idea. (No, I don't want to know about your character.)

I remember all the prep that went into those Skotos cons. We had a booth designed out of banners for our various online games, which hung on piping at the show. It all went into a huge rolling case. I don't know if we were allowed to roll it onto the floor ourselves, or had to have the union do it. (Generally, you could only bring things you could carry onto the dealer's hall floor; if a tool like a handcart was necessary, then the union had to do it.)

My memories of the con itself are pretty faint. We had a lot of players at least at the first one, and a party/dinner. Some of the players gave me a little painted Cthulhu investigator miniature at

I think the second one, which is still in my box of treasures. (It needs to be unboxed sometime.) We did some business development with James Mathe at the later one, which led to our attempt to create a BoardGameInfo site. The cons were productive, considering our goals at the time.

I do remember walking the dealer's hall, and it was awesome. I loved to see so much stuff out, including used-product dealers and booths for "legendary" games like *The Riddle of Steel*. I made my connection with Mayfair at one of those cons, which let me do a lot of fun board game reviews over the next decade.

Nope, I didn't game. All of the booth-manning and hall-walking and business-developing was too exhausting. And so that probably makes this a very boring memory of Gen Con.

If you know me, you won't be surprised that I walked the city some too. I don't think I went far in Milwaukee, but in Indianapolis I walked far enough to literally end up on the wrong side of the tracks. I went under a train track, and then suddenly I was on a side of town that I clearly didn't want to be in. Despite that, I always love to see the cities I visit.

I think I may be ready to attend a con again. When there's not a pandemic.

Day Fifteen: Frame

I have one piece of framed RPG art: the original of the cover for *The Collected Griselda* by Dan Barker.

It came from the years that I was haunting RPG auctions, pretty much the early and mid '90s until I started working for Chaosium in 1996 and thus stopped having any disposable income. Pacificon had long been my favorite, with the biggest prize there being a collection of the earliest issues of DGP's *The Travellers Digest*, which of course ended up being useful decades later when I wrote a history of DGP for *Designers & Dragons*.

But the *RuneQuest* auctions were something special: I attended three, at RQ-Con, RQ-Con 2, and Convulsions 3-D. They were inherently full of *RuneQuest* material, including special one-of--a-kind items such as originals from Greg Stafford. I was busy collecting through *RQ2* material and *Wyrms Footnotes* magazine and *Different Worlds* magazine (the latter two of which were, again, invaluable for *Designers & Dragons*), and so though I sometimes bid on the unique bits, I didn't bid high.

The exception was Barker's Griselda picture, which I'd always found very beautiful in its original publication by Reaching Moon. I bought that at RQ-Con 2.

Mind you, I probably paid too little. Eric scheduled the auction horribly, both in time and place, and so we had lower turnout than we should have. It wasn't catastrophic, but it meant everything went for a lower price than it might have otherwise. I felt bad about that when Dan was cutting the picture down for me in his room, after the auction, but what can you did?

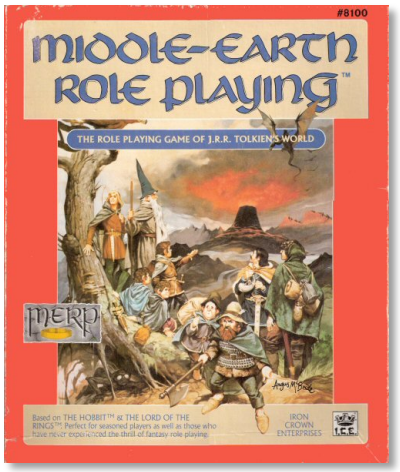
What I've done is appreciated the artwork for 25 years. It's been over my desk at times, but for at least the last 15 years or so Griselda has instead guarded the entrance to my office, so I see the artwork every time I go in. That piece is also the first piece of art that went up here in Hawaii (and to date we've only got four pieces of art up: one of Kimberly's collages, my grandmother's painting of the Arch, a new print of *The Starry Night*, and Dan's Griselda). I also made sure it was framed with archival glass when I did so 25 years ago, so Griselda should be safe even here in Hawaii (mind you, my office also has UV-protected windows).

Fun story: the moon on the cover of the printed book was added after Dan's painting.

Day Sixteen: Dramatic

I used to have two or three wonderful d10s that I used as percentile dice in *RuneQuest*. I'm pretty sure they originally came from ICE products, a pair of them from *MERP*, the other one from one of their board games.

There was a black one and a brown one from *MERP* (a percentile system) and then another black one from elsewhere. Here's the thing: they were actually twenty-sided dice, but numbered 0-9 twice. Now that was how d20s were actually made back in the '70s, and you had to ink in half the numbers so you knew if you'd rolled 1-10 or 11-20. But these guys were several years later, and they were definitely intended for use as d10s, not d20s.



They were made out of hard plastic that was just a little bit rounded and they had a good weight to them. They were nice dice to use.

But, the reason I really loved to use them was probably that I felt like they rolled crits a lot for my warrior gabter, Kidzen Teko. Which was exciting! Oh, they rolled fumbles a lot too (and I'm even surer this was the case), but that was usually funny. And it really developed my character of Kidzen, as he was alternatively utterly deadly and utterly incompetent.

After I'd used them for a year or two I took a close look at them, and realized that they were molded kind of funny. (I think someone commented on them in some way, leading me to this examination, but it was 30 years ago, so what do I remember?) Not all the faces looked exactly even and/or some of the corners looked more rounded than others. My guess is that the "0" was biased toward on at least one of those dice, which would have made both crits (often 01, 02, 03, and maybe 04 and 05) and fumbles (often 00) more likely. So, the dice were retired, and sometime over the next five house moves, they went missing. Which is too bad, they'd have a place of honor on my shelf of bric-a-brac if I still had them.

I think my GM, Eric, realized that there was something funny about those dice before I did, but if so he didn't say anything. Probably because they were dramatic. Besides, he could just face me with harder foes if my dice critted too much, and then he could enjoy the results of any fumbles.

Day Seventeen: Comfort

I think my favorite roleplaying space will always be the classrooms in Dwinelle Hall, on the UC Berkeley campus. Oh, they always felt a bit cramped, because they tended to have a long line of tables running down the center of a long room that felt like it wasn't much wider than the table (and chairs). It was like roleplaying in a lane at a bowling alley. But they had chalkboards (and chalk) and those were about the best playing surface ever for tactical combat. Yep, I liked it better the minis and playmats that I used in *D&D 3e* and *Pathfinder* days, because it was so easy to draw and erase battles, and to supplement the game with drawings. Chalk boards rule (though that also points out how old I am: drawable electronic walls would rock even more in the 21st century: no chalk dust). Those long tables that could easily sit a dozen players were pretty cool too! (Though I never understood how Eric and a few others could manage groups that size; when my own game hit 7 or 8 for a little bit, it was exhausting!) And finally, they were quiet, because class rooms are really well soundproofed.

But the #2 most comfortable gaming space was probably when we played in someone's living room (often my living room in Berkeley). It's funny, because most frequently my roleplaying games have been around tables: in my mom's house, in UC Berkeley classrooms, at Endgame. Whenever we were playing in someone's living room, we'd inevitably have a dining room table within a dozen yards or so. But, no, we always preferred to lounge back on couches and chairs, even if meant that battle mats and figures were precariously balanced atop a too-small coffee table.

Meanwhile, the biggest problem with comfortable roleplaying has always been noise. That's not a problem when you're at your own house or in a closed-off classroom, but it always made roleplaying at a café or in a game store or at a convention uncomfortable. More than once, I returned home barely able to talk because I'd been shouting for the last four or five hours to make myself heard. We need Get Smart Cone of Silence technology, stat!

Day Eighteen: Meet

The joy of gaming is that I've met the majority of my long-term friends there. In high school, college, and afterward, it's always been my gaming friends who I see week after week, month after month, year after year. But more than that, these are the people who have shaped my life.

I met Eric Rowe in Matt H.'s *Ars Magica* game, and then in his own ErzoQuest game, and he was one of my best friends for over a decade. We lived next door for a few years and would frequently wander out to book stores together. He got me an interview at Chaosium. I later served in his wedding party.

I met John T. in those same games. He'd often crash at my place on gaming nights after he'd graduated Cal and was coming in from Sacramento for gaming. We'd often have great late-night talks. I served in his wedding party too.

I think I met Donald K. in the OCF before he started gaming with us, but we gamed together for decades, and he later introduced me to Kimberly.

The list of names could go on and on, and expand from people I met while roleplaying to people that I met while board gaming. They're all special people, and almost all people I wouldn't have known without gaming.

It's a great hobby, especially for introverts like me who need an excuse to get out and socialize.

Day Nineteen: Tower

When I think of the roleplaying campaigns that I've played in, one towers above the rest: Eric Rowe's ErzoQuest game.

It was a *RuneQuest 3* game, and that alone gave it a lot of heft because *RuneQuest* is a great system for simulation play, especially with goal-driven players. So, it had combats that were exciting and fun, lots of skills to roll and improve, and the ability to reach new levels of recognition in cults. There's a lot in *RuneQuest* that can provide great object lessons in how to incentivize players.

Beyond that Eric was a great GM. Before it was cool to let players have agency and really decide their direction, Eric was doing the same (though he sometimes pleaded for us to decide our general plans at the end of a session, not the beginning). The game was evocative and exciting, and it always felt like there was at least as much chance of failure as success, unlike the simple walk-throughs suggested by a lot of balanced, modern game design.

But the heart of the game was the world of Erzo, which Eric designed extensively before the game. Though it inherited the idea of runes, it very much wasn't Glorantha. Instead humans were a dying species and the rock-like Vikul ruled. There were dragonewt-like critters (the Jiliroth) and Aldryami-like critters (the Rezla), but also races of Eric's own, like the warrior rabbit Gabter, one of my favorites. And the whole world was designed around Ages, which were based on runes. Glorantha had three? We had 15!

Our initial campaign was set at the cusp of the Age of Civilization and was an epic game of warfare, adventuring, and politics alike, as the previous Age fought against the new Age waxing. That's where I played my foolish warrior Gabter Kidzen and my taunting trickster AXen Silverheart. Later we played a second campaign starring blink dogs set in the Age of Movement, then a third campaign set in the Age of Cold. That was the one that ended just before Eric moved to New Zealand.

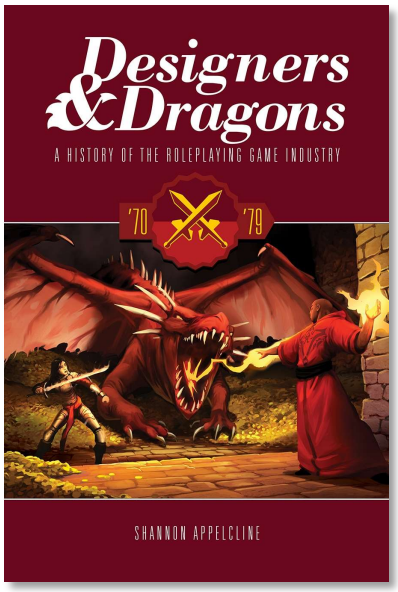
One of the amazing things about Erzo was its epic scope. Those games we played in spanned from the Sixth Age (that was Civilization) to the Thirteenth (that was Cold). It was obvious that much had happened in between, but we never knew all the details, and it also felt like Eric knew where the whole world was going, but if so, he never told.

I wore out copies of the *RuneQuest* box and *Gods of Glorantha* during those games. Heck, I wore out a *RuneQuest* box and a *RuneQuest* perfect bound, but then Avalon Hill had amazingly poor-quality publications, especially given the fact that they were a printer.

Wonderful games. I wish I could play in another Age in Erzo.

Day Twenty: Investigate

The thing that got me writing *Designers & Dragons* in the first place was a desire to investigate the history of the industry, to really figure out how it all went together.



That began with a company called Imperium Games who was publishing *Traveller Fourth Edition* (*T4*) material after GDW's demise. It was sadly super mediocre material, but I bought it religiously because I loved *Traveller*, and that's all there was.

Then I went to work for Chaosium and I stopped having disposable income, and by the time I got back into the computer industry 2+ years later, I discovered Imperium was gone. Fast forward to 2005, and after returning from Gen Con, I was building an index of roleplaying products for RPGnet, and I got to the Imperium Games books in my collection and I said ... whatever happened to them!?

Investigation followed, then an article, then discussions with people who'd worked at the company ... and eventually there were more histories and ultimately *Designers & Dragons*.

So that's what investigation has brought me!

Day Twenty-One: Push

It's easy to fall into a routine pattern of gaming, particularly roleplaying, where you return to your old favorites. But there's so much variety out there that it really behooves gamers to push themselves. Maybe they'll find new games that they really love, but if not, they'll likely find new ideas to improve their preferred games.

Before college, my gaming had mostly been with the genre leaders: *D&D* for fantasy, *Champions* for superheroes, and *Traveller* for science-fiction. (There was also *Stormbringer* and *Hawkmoon*, but I was and am a big Michael Moorcock fan.)

I don't know if I pushed myself in college or was pushed, but I very quickly found *Ars Magica* and *RuneQuest*. Not only did they become some of my favorite games, but they impacted my gaming more generally. This was particularly true of the new ideas about troupes in *Ars Magica,* where you might take turns GMing and where you might play different characters. I adopted the idea of rotating GMs years later for my third or so *Pendragon* campaign (albeit, to limited success).

After college, we played many joyful years of classics, including *Gamma World*, *Star Wars*, *D&D*, *Rolemaster*, and *MERP*. But I purposefully pushed myself again after I wrote *Designers & Dragons 2e*, which really cranked up its focus on indie games (because I had a whole book for the '00s). I thought a lot of those indies sounding really intriguing. So, over the course of several years following the publication of *Designers & Dragons 2e,* I ran several *Microscope* games and a *Kingdom* one-off and a short *Mouse Guard* campaign and an extended *Burning Wheel*

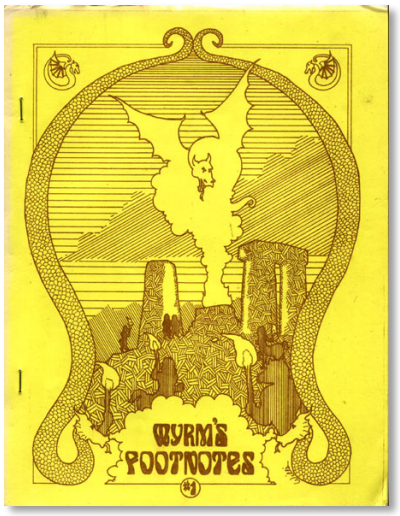
campaign. I really loved everything but *Kingdom* (and that was just a case of it not being for me: the social interaction and conflict was too high; which meant that even trying it out was definitely pushing myself).

The future is unclear. *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Magic: The Gathering* seem to be the games of choice on this island. And I definitely love the new *RuneQuest: Roleplaying Glorantha*. Those would all represent old, safe gameplay. But I also crowdfunded *Torchbearer 2e*.

We'll see what that future brings.

Day Twenty-Two: Rare

Most of the rarities in my roleplaying collection are magazines and fanzines. I think this comes from my decades when I used to collect individual issues of comics. I see something with a number on it, and I try to put together a complete set.



This was a lot of fun back in the olden days, when I would scour flea markets and sit through auctions, looking for missing numbers. Perhaps those still happen? I dunno. I've mostly shied away from cons in recent years. I actually tried to make a return while I was working on *Designers & Dragons*, figuring that I might be able to turn up some flea-market material that could help me with the book, but the con in question had their flea market set up to run somewhere around midnight, so that there was no reasonable way to take public transit out there. (Or rather, there was no reasonable way to get home.)

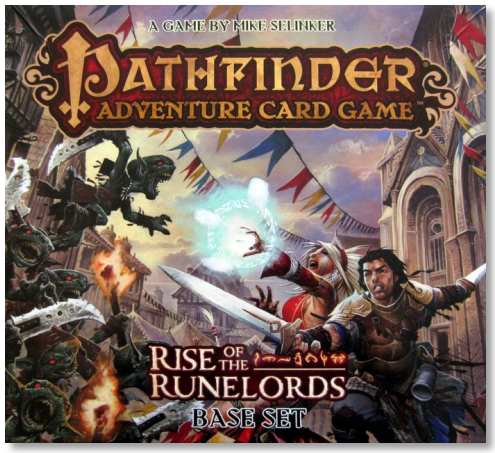
Sadly, collecting on the internet is somewhat spoiled. That's largely due to robots (and loads of possibly warranted optimism on the part of price gougers, who often buy rarities just so they can resell the item for even higher prices). It's difficult to win an eBay auction nowadays without getting sniped, and for anything with moderate rarity, Amazon robots jam the price up into the stratosphere, hoping that someone will be stupid/desperate/rich enough to buy it. It's pretty much the same model as spamming: it only takes one atmospheric sale to make up for a few purchases.

In the last few months, I've taken up the collector's gauntlet again, so that I can complete my Gloranthan magazine indexing project from the '90s. I'd say that most of what I'm looking for isn't available for love or for money, but actually some people have been very kind in helping me get missing issues, so maybe it's just not available for money. (Thanks folks!)

And despite my love of collecting, I've actually been able to let some of it go. My early *Dragon* collection (almost all of #70-250, with spotty issues before that) and my whole *JTAS* (#1-21) and *Challenge* (#22-80) collection went when I moved, because Wizards and Marc Miller, respectively, had put out electronic collections. More of that! Despite my physical collections, and despite the fact that I usually consider eBooks seconds best, for magazines I love having easily searchable references! It makes *Designers & Dragons* that much more comprehensive.

Day Twenty-Three: Edge

Where does roleplaying end and where do other hobbies begin? That's clearly been a question we've been asking since 1974, when D&D was advertised as "rules for fantastic medieval wargames". In fact, a lot of early RPGs were right on the edge, such as *Boot Hill* and *En Garde*.



Personally, my favorite edge case is Mike Selinker's *Pathfinder Adventure Card Game* (*PACG*). Obviously, it reuses the Pathfinder branding and almost all of its thematic elements, from the iconic characters to their character classes to the many spells and items from the RPG. But is it roleplaying? In my opinion: no. Or at least, not generally. It's more about pushing through decks of cards, and succeeding at enough challenges to win in a game. That's not to say you couldn't have roleplaying if you wanted. We tended in that direction when we played villains and took that as an excuse to be greedy and selfish. But, it wasn't the norm.

However, there's at least one place where PACG really does scratch some of the same itches as roleplaying, and that's in its experience system. Frankly, that's one of the things I *love* about roleplaying: improving a character. I especially love it when the improvement is very granular, which is one of the reasons that I like *RuneQuest*: you improve individual skills a few points at a time. *PACG* has a similar feel: you might improve one or two cards over the course of a session, but you put that together over the course of 30 sessions, and you've entirely redefined your character.

So, in *PACG*, you play individual characters, you improve them over time, you participate in a storyline, and you can roleplay. Why isn't it an RPG? I think the storytelling and the roleplaying are too weak to really place it in the category, but maybe players would have disagreed in 1975. It's definitely an edge case, and one that is great at what it does.

Day Twenty-Four: Humour

My old roleplaying group didn't really play humor RPGs. *Paranoia* was probably the closest, though that's more a humor-by-situation thing. And even that didn't get a lot of play because some of our group found it too confrontational.

That's not to say there wasn't humor in our games. There was a lot, but that's primarily because we had fun gamers.

There was the day that a new GM tried to run an *Ars Magica* game and had some faeries ask for help or some such thing. Faeries, by the by, were known as "vis on the hoof" because their essence could be used to power magic. Dave P.'s character kept asking them to bunch up closer and closer together, and they were confused but did so. The GM was apparently confused too, because his jaw dropped when Dave said, "Are they all in a 60-degree arc?", and when the GM agreed, stated: "I arc of the fiery ribbon them."

When you're talking about murderous PCs being funny, there was the day that Donald's Dak Eleron (basically, a paladin-like warrior in our ErzoQuest game) took a prisoner, and I ran up and killed him, and then when Donald's character turned to me in rage, I cast a Lie spell to explain how I hadn't done that. (Trickster, me.)

Our group was funny too, and had quick wits. I'd often keep lists of quotes, and maybe there's still a file of them somewhere, but I can only find the *Ars Magica* ones because they're part of logs.

"Wow! You're a dirty dog, reading someone's diary."
-Felix

"I stepped into that punch just to show how tough I am!"
-Franz

"Give him a second. Second's up."
-Incendium, on the Flambeau Credo

"Party is just trap backwards with a 'y'."
-Risus, on Criamon subtlety

"So he's not a demonic mouse."
"There's no proof."
"He's not red!"
-Albus, Catorse, and Lorum, on color-discrimination

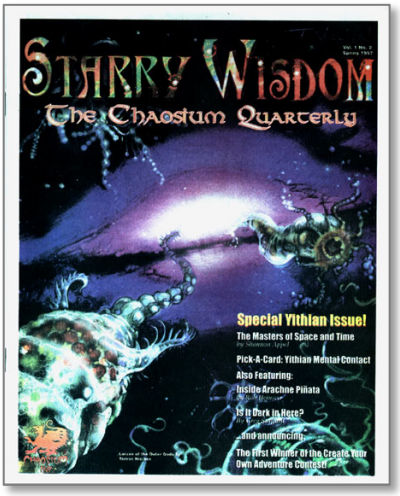
Rereading those tells me how much of RPG humor is about context. A lot of the funny quotes were based on references to character traits or mocking of character traits or the irony of a situation or mocking of things that someone said a decade earlier.

At one time, early on, our RPG group had a pun fund. If you made a pun, you had to put a quarter into the fund. When we had enough money, we got pizza. The problem was that people liked pizza, so the pun fund became a "reference fund" and then an "anything that kinda sounded funny fund". And then it disintegrated amidst bickering, and we could pun for the rest of our days.

Day Twenty-Five: Lever

GMs have a whole host of tools that they can use when running a game, but my favorite has always been the story seed: a little one-paragraph idea that can spark a whole session (or campaign). When I was writing a lot for roleplaying 'zines, I'd almost always put a set of three story seeds in each article. It wasn't *crunch*, but it was still something very playable in what otherwise might be an abstract article.

I recently read through my "Races of the Mythos" articles that ran through *Starry Wisdom*, *Tradetalk*, and *Ye Booke of Tentacles* from about 1997-2002 or so, and I was pleased to see that



each one had a trio of story seeds, and even more I was pleased to see that I really liked some of them, such as the patron who is slowly turning into a ghoul as he tasks the investigators with turning up ingredients that he might be able to use to reverse the change. At a much larger scale, I had a story seed for the Elder Things about how following the destruction of their civilization, they now had to enact their third great task. (I'm trying to figure out how to make those old articles into a big book sometime. I've got them laid out as the first part of "Elder Secrets of Earth", but I need to figure out what else goes there, and it's not a task for right now. That's now my seventh or eighth book on my TODO list.)

I similarly would often have a trio of story seeds about a forest in the Aldryami articles I ran in *Tradetalk*. I figured that if I could come up with a description of a forest, I could also fill it with a few adventures, and the creative energy usually fed back and forth.

In the GM's toolbox, the story seed is the lever: it's a small little tool that can be used to move a whole game. A good one could be the heart of a whole session — but I rarely had the guts to show up for a session with just a story seed. I was always over prepared.

Day Twenty-Six: Strange

It's really strange the twists and turns that life takes to deliver us to our destinations. I've written about it more than once in *Designers & Dragons*, where an unlikely sequence of events resulted in someone ending up in an influential position in the industry. But it's true for myself as well.

In the summer of 1989 (I think) Eric M. decided to paint a sign to hang at Sather Gate on the Cal campus, to encourage more people to join the Berkeley Campus Adventurers Club (BCAC), a roleplaying organization. I happened to see it and showed up the next Saturday.

If I hadn't joined BCAC, I wouldn't have met Eric Rowe.

If I hadn't met Eric Rowe, I wouldn't have discovered how amazing *RuneQuest* was. I wouldn't have helped him run RQ-Con 2, and I probably wouldn't have started the Chaosium Digest, nor would I likely have written or edited various projects for *Call of Cthulhu, Nephilim*, and *Pendragon*.

If I didn't have that connection to Eric Rowe (who got a job at Chaosium based on the strength of his RQ-Con2 work), I likely wouldn't have had the confidence to ask for an interview at Chaosium myself. And even if I had, I likely wouldn't have had the credentials in those published books, that online 'zine, or that convention support. (As I wrote some days ago, many of these events might also have had their genesis in my writing a letter to Mark Rein•Hagen, leading to the creation of *Tribunals of Hermes: Rome*. Our strange twists in life often have multiple origins!)

If I hadn't worked at Chaosium, I wouldn't have met Christopher Allen, who I first encountered at a convention, as he was a Chaosium fan. I wouldn't have worked for him at Certicom, then Alacrity Ventures, then Skotos Tech. I wouldn't have ended up the editor-in-chief of RPGnet.

If I hadn't been the editor-in-chief of RPGnet, I wouldn't have decided to expand it with the RPGnet Gaming Index.

If I hadn't created the Gaming Index and begun cataloging my own books, and if I hadn't wanted to further support the site with my personal content, I wouldn't have begun writing histories about the RPG industry.

If I hadn't written those columns originally for RPGnet, I wouldn't have later compiled (and expanded) them as *Designers and Dragons.*

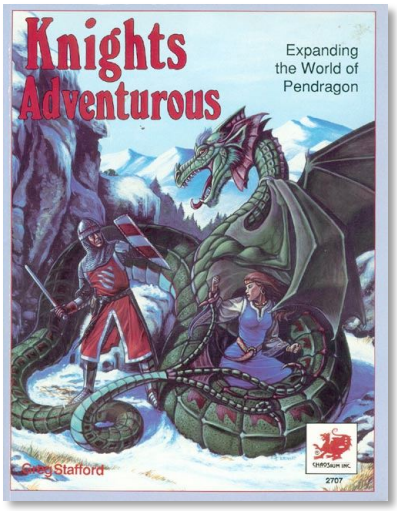
Life is strange. The littlest things can make the biggest difference.

Thanks for that sign at Sather Gate, Eric M.

Day Twenty-Seven: Favour

Over at *Designers & Dragons*, someone commented that *Pendragon* has gotten little play at their table because of their "inherent sexism" of the source material (meaning primarily Malory, not the game itself). It's a valid concern.

A lot of classic fantasy roleplaying games are based on Medieval tropes, but because they're usually set in fantasy realms, they can move away from those tropes when it's helpful to accommodate our modern sensibilities. There's no reason that the Lords of Waterdeep can't be Ladies. Even a game set heavily in the Medieval millieu like *Ars Magica* has a lot of leeway: there's no record of historic sexism in the Order of Hermes because, well, it didn't exist, and if anything stories of the Fay highlight strong women like Titania.



But *Pendragon* is something different. It's a very specific portrayal of a very specific subgenre: The Matter of Britain (and even moreso Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*). Woman have a very specific role there: they're the ladies who grant favours, not (in the literature at least) the knights who win them. Oh, there are certainly powerful women in The Matter of Britain, but many of them, such as Guinevere, Iseult, Morgan Le Fay, Morgause, and Nimue follow the trope of the temptress.

So, what does one do to run *Pendragon* today? Obviously, one talks to ones' players. Everyone should always be comfortable with the assumptions built into a roleplaying campaign. And one should certainly allow female knights. They've been around since at least *Pendragon 3e* (1990) if memory serves. Obviously, one should also be careful with tropes like women-as-temptress. But it's a great game, and it seems that there are plenty of opportunities to run it within the context of Malory while also considering what we've learned in the modern day.

Even moreso, one can create interesting moral dilemmas and social questions by challenging the tropes and stereotypes of the source material — by both accepting them and applying pressure to them.

I'd like to think that's what I did when I wrote "The Adventure of the Reluctant Bride", which appears in *Ye Booke of Tentacles #2* (1999). In short (and with spoilers), there is a contest for a lady's hand, but the lady wishes to be a knight, so she secretly joins in the contest to try and win her hand for herself.

Does that just buy into bad tropes of The Matter of Britain, or does it challenge them? I dunno. But there's surely a point where the latter *is* possible.

Day Twenty-Eight: Close

I hate when a great roleplaying campaign ends, but I love closing them out.

Most published campaigns seem to go for the big explosions: fighting with Zuggtmoy in *The Temple of Elemental Evil* or Demogorgon in *Dungeon's* "Savage Tide". (Yes, we ran both of those in the '00s.)

But I prefer a more contemplative ending where we get to revisit the highlights of a campaign and remember them. One of my favorites is the ending to our 100-session-or-so Roman Tribunal game in the '90s (the source of the *Tribunals of Hermes: Rome* book for *Ars Magica 3e*). We took about a month for each of the GMs in our troupe to close out their plots, then I ran the finale ... where I fast-forwarded the clock 20 years (and then ran a largely systemless session, because there was no way we were updating our characters for 20 years). Luke, one of the elder magi in the covenant, had passed, and the final adventure was a trip to the Graveyard of the Arch Magi to bury him. The result was a largely picaresque adventure, where we encountered many old foes and friends on the way, and truly put the campaign to rest too.

For our most recent published campaign, *Kingmaker* for *Pathfinder*, which I ran in the '10s, we also managed a more contemplative ending, because I stuck on a coda to the published adventures, which was a big marriage ceremony closing off a long-running plot. Oh, it was *D&D* (*Pathfinder*) so there was a big battle against a pair of red dragons, but there were also a couple of familial reconciliations and/or resolutions, bringing lots of long character arcs to an end.

One thing that I love doing when closing out a campaign is sitting around afterward talking about what happened to all of the characters after the game ended. It's another way to give closure to a world, and I know we did it in the Roman Tribunal campaign, the *Savage Tide* campaign, and the *Kingmaker* campaign. It's totally freeform creativity, where we can express our hopes or fears (or offer our ironic endings) for our characters.

I find closure pretty important in season finales too, where we intend to take a break, if for no other reason than that they often become campaign finales. In my *Stormbringer* campaign of the ’00s, the players ended the necromantic threat to the Purple Towns; in my *Traveller* campaign that followed, they resolved problems on Nexine and them jumped off into the unknown; and in my recent *Burning Wheel* game, they finished a final promised task for a patron, but in doing so unleashed a dark time upon their home town of Eligium. They were each satisfying conclusions after 20-25 sessions of play, and though they promised more (especially the latter two), they may remain in peoples’ heads more because of their openness, just as the final episode of *Stargate Universe* does for me (where they also jumped into the unknown).

I actually don’t have much memory of the endings to Eric’s ErzoQuest games from the ’80s, ’90s, and ’00s. They each led up to big climaxes, that much I recall. But what I do remember is the season finale for the first campaign, after which Eric took a break to concentrate on his Masters (and kept GMing, just with games that took less energy). We were on a huge battlefield as the world was trying to totter over into the Age of Civilization. My warrior rabbit gabter, Kidzen Teko, stood on the battlefield, but without his belovéd Blade of AXalt. Then Egg, a young Jiliroth (dragonewt) that we had long nurtured appeared. Kidzen held up his hand, and Egg launched his own battle axe across the field. Kidzen caught it and then turned to face his foes.

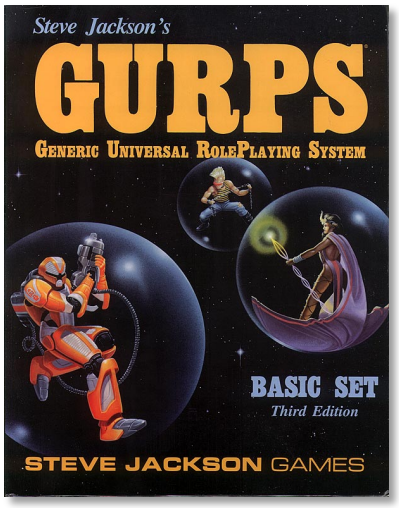
And we faded to black.

At least that’s how *I* remember that ending.

Day Twenty-Nine: Ride

Not long after I began gaming with the Berkeley Campus Adventurers Club at Cal, I got invited by some of the members to an off-campus game. I didn’t know the area that well yet, but no problem, another of the players, Alex P., kindly offered to give me a ride.

I didn’t even realize there was a catch until the moment that I saw Alex pull up, near the dorms that I lived in that year. On his motorcycle.



I mean don’t get me wrong. Alex was perfectly safe and responsible (two words I would not have associated with him as I got to know him better). He had a second helmet and everything. But riding a motorcycle through the streets of Berkeley was pretty far out of my comfort zone.

I dutifully put the helmet on.

Alex told me I could put my arms around him on or lean back on the rack behind me. Since 17-year-old me wasn’t willing to hug someone I barely knew, I used the rack to balance myself. Not very comfortable or stable, it turns out. Alex also told me to lean into the turns, but not too far into the turns, so that we didn’t wipe out. I had ridden a motorcycle before, or at least a dirt bike, when I’d been

vacationing with my grandparents at their cabin in the country. So, I didn't entirely think I was going to die. But the whole idea that I could make us crash didn't make me feel any better as I clung to that luggage rack for dear life over the course of the trip.

(Spoiler: we survived.)

The game that we played was *GURPS*, a campaign that had been running since before my arrival at the University. I'm pretty sure John T., who later became a pretty good friend, was the GM. I'm vaguely recalling it being a dimension-jumping game, to really take fullest advantage of GURPS' universal nature, but that could be conflation on my part. I mean, *GURPS* pretty much exists to be a dimension-jumping game in my mind.

They were very kind to invite me. It was generous that they brought me into their games not just at Cal, but into a longer-running campaign outside of the University. But I don't think I ever returned. In fact, I was never a big fan of *GURPS* afterward.

And then I had to ride home too.

Day Thirty: Portal

One of my most memorable sessions in Eric's first ErzoQuest campaign involved a portal. We were down in the basement of the Emperor, and we found what appeared to be a bottomless pit. We sat there examining it for quite a while, throwing things down and never hearing them hit bottom.

So, being PCs, what did we do? We eventually started jumping in. Because why not? (I couldn't explain the logic to you today, but then I'm not sure there was any at the time.) One by one, the whole party went in, until everyone had jumped into the apparently bottomless pit.

Eric called the session, and I think then spent the next week figuring out what to do, not certain if the whole party had killed themselves.

Fortunately, the next week we landed on the Earth rune. Whew! It had been a tense week.

Day Thirty-One: Experience

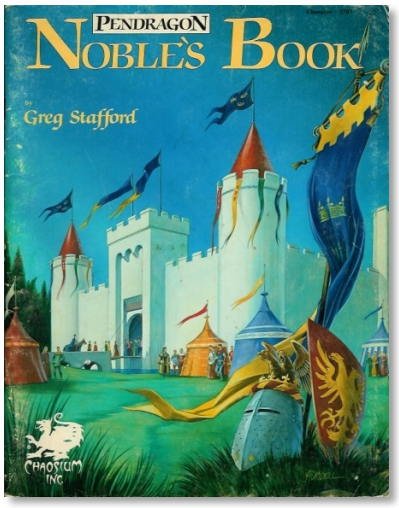
One common factor in many RPGs I love is a seasonal or winter experience system, where players get to really focus on how they want their characters to improve over an extended period of time.

I think *Ars Magica* was the game that won me over, because it had one of the earlier systems of this type, and it's really quite exhaustive. These are the "lab rules", allowing you to do everything from improve your skills to brew potions and even invent totally new spells.

It's like there was the promise in *D&D* that you could do things like make magic items and invent spells, but it was never really fulfilled. So, there was this great potential, and *Ars Magica* finally fulfilled it by making a game all about magic-users.

I say that *Ars Magica* was one of the earliest, and it was the first one I encountered, but we also got lots of use out of the study and training rules in *RuneQuest 3e*. They're neither as extensive nor as interesting (nor as integral) as the *Ars Magica* rules, but if a GM gave you occasional breaks, you could have some fun improving your character (and Eric occasionally did).

And then there's *Pendragon*, which I suspect is the game that introduced the idea of a "winter" phase. It supplements improving your character with also managing your family and (in some versions, such as the classic *Noble's Book*) your estate! It's character improvement taken to the next level.



(Mind you, we used a similar land-improvement system when we played *Kingmaker* for *Pathfinder*, and eventually the players got tired of the complexity.)

The idea of winters is somewhat mirrored in the new *RuneQuest: Roleplaying in Glorantha*, which takes a few cues from *Pendragon*, but its seasonal system feels like a bit more of an afterthought to me, though perhaps I'll feel different after I read a few adventures. *The One Ring* is another modern game that had a winter (Fellowship) session that ended up being pretty minor.

Why do all these appeal to me? Because I like the gamist aspect of having a character that I make better. (Or a family or an estate or whatever.) Me! Me! Me! (But while I'm doing that, everyone else gets their own spotlight as they run their winters or seasons.) But I also feel like there's a lot of agency there, where you get to direct the way in which you character improves, in a way that you don't just from random experience points, checks, or whatnot that you gain during a game, based on what happened to occur during that game.

And who doesn't like a little agency in their game?

Part Two: #RPGaDay2021

These short essays represent another thirty-one historical (and in some cases philosophical) looks at the roleplaying industry, this time written from August 1st-31st of 2021 as part of #RPGaDay2021. There are no personal essays this time around, because trying to write both at the same time proved to be way too much work. Mind you, I just ended up writing longer historical essays, so it was still a lot of work.

As before, these essays have received a light edit from their online publication on Facebook, with images more carefully selected and laid in as appropriate.

Again, the historical essays are indexed at the end of the book.

RPGaDAY 2021

#RPGaDAY is back for its **EIGHTH** year, and again we're asking tabletop gamers everywhere to get creative and use the word of the day to inspire you to talk, paint, write, vlog, or blog something cool, positive, and awesome about our hobby, every day through **AUGUST**.

1 SCENARIO						
2 MAP Senses Plan Voice	**3** TACTIC Risk Support Image	**4** WEAPON Search Reward Figure	**5** THRONE Gamble Include Community	**6** FLAVOR Chase Explore Path	**7** SMALL Inspiration Better Engage	**8** STREAM
9 MEDIUM Role Emotion Percentage	**10** TRUST Conscience Light Advantage	**11** WILDERNESS Listen Heavy Despair	**12** THINK Consensus Deep Triumph	**13** FLOOD Improvise Doom Pool	**14** SAFETY Limits Fun Momentum	**15** SUPPLEMENT
16 MOVE Tribute Villain Fiend	**17** TRAP Crime Nemesis Found	**18** WRITE Duel Honour Rival	**19** THEME Storm Style Patron	**20** FOUNDATION Peace Lineage Ally	**21** SIMPLICITY Challenge Fear Motive	**22** SUBSTITUTE
23 MEMORY Innovation Quick Surprise	**24** TRANSLATE Share Ancient Solve	**25** WELCOME Tradition Fresh Box	**26** THEORY Play Origin Renew	**27** FRACTION Practice Kindle Group	**28** SOLO Dream Open Delve	**29** SYSTEM
30 MENTION	**31** THANK					

If you want to shake things up, on most days you can roll a **D8** (half it) to get a random prompt, or just use the primary word for that day. Just remember to tag everything **#RPGaDAY2021** to join the conversation!

Presented by: www.autocratik.com and castingshadowsblog.com

AUTOCRATIK

#RPGaDay2021

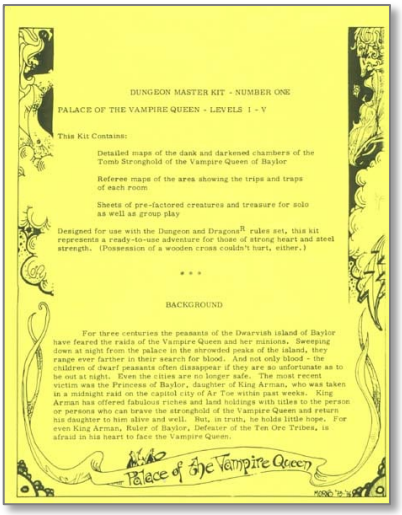
Historical Essays

Day One: Scenario

It's shocking how much scenarios have changed from the '70s to the modern day. From the earliest dungeons, which had terse descriptions such as "3 skeletons, 14 gp", to the modules of the 21st century, they're almost different art forms. And one could certainly mark major milestones along the way, with some of the most notable being the Tracy Hickman adventures that appeared at TSR in the '80s, from The Desert of Desolation (1982) to Dragonlance (1984-1986), which were some of the prime publications that developed the dungeons of the early industry into full-fledged stories.

But there's something to be said for just recognizing some of the most notable early adventure. Here's a look some from the first five years that the industry was publishing scenarios.

1976: Palace of the Vampire Queen (Wee Warriors)



DUNGEON MASTER KIT - NUMBER ONE

PALACE OF THE VAMPIRE QUEEN - LEVELS 1 - V

This Kit Contains:

Detailed maps of the dank and darkened chambers of the Tomb Stronghold of the Vampire Queen of Baylor

Referee maps of the area showing the traps and traps of each room

Sheets of pre-factored creatures and treasure for solo as well as group play

Designed for use with the Dungeon and Dragons® rules set, this kit represents a ready-to-use adventure for those of strong heart and steel strength. (Possession of a wooden cross couldn't hurt, either.)

* * *

BACKGROUND

For three centuries the peasants of the Dwarvish island of Baylor have feared the raids of the Vampire Queen and her minions. Sweeping down at night from the palace in the shrouded peaks of the island, they range ever farther in their search for blood. And not only blood - the children of dwarf peasants often disappear if they are so unfortunate as to be out at night. Even the cities are no longer safe. The most recent victim was the Princess of Baylor, daughter of King Arman, who was taken in a midnight raid on the capitol city of Ar Toe within past weeks. King Arman has offered fabulous riches and land holdings with titles to the person or persons who can brave the stronghold of the Vampire Queen and return his daughter to him alive and well. But, in truth, he holds little hope. For even King Arman, Ruler of Baylor, Defeater of the Ten Orc Tribes, is afraid in his heart to face the Vampire Queen.

Palace of the Vampire Queen

Usually counted as being the first standalone scenario, *Palace of the Vampire Queen* was published by Wee Warriors, back when TSR wasn't even considering scenarios because they thought that the wargamers playing D&D just wanted rules. TSR quickly picked it up to distribute themselves.

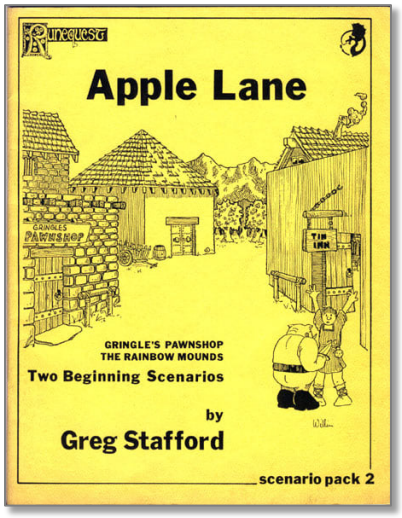
The five levels of the Palace are pretty standard dungeon levels for the era, with big charts simply listing the monsters and loot in each room. A simple page of text at the beginning gave the only background details. It was a start.

To be fair Jennell Jaquays' first issue of *The Dungeoneer* appeared almost simultaneously with Palace, and had a dungeon, but it's usually not included in lists because it doesn't meet the "standalone" criteria, which keeps us from having to figure out which technically was sold first.

1977: Tegel Manor (Judges Guild)

Meanwhile, Judges Guild was also recognizing the value of scenarios — and they even had a license from TSR to publish them. They included dungeon maps in the first two issues of their subscription service (1976), but their first true scenario appeared in the fourth: Bob Bledsaw's *Tegel Manor* (1977).

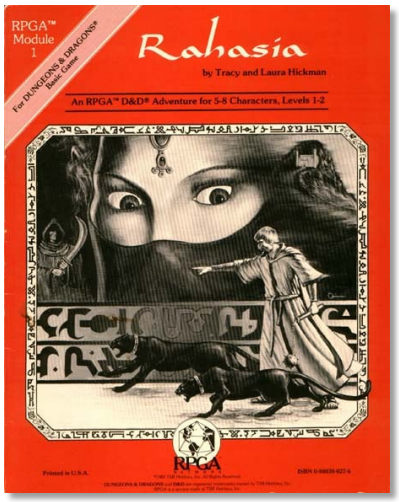
In many ways, *Tegel Manor* is just a step beyond *Palace of the Vampire Queen*: it's another funhouse dungeon with little rhyme or reason to its contents. It's also huge, at 240 rooms.



1978: Apple Lane (Chaosium)

It would be easy to list TSR's *Tomb of Horror* (1978) as the top scenario for 1978. It's certainly the best-known, and its killer dungeon design represents a valid and interesting style of play for the era. However, that style was already fading when *Tomb of Horrors* saw print, and so it may be the scenario that ended 1,000 RPG groups.

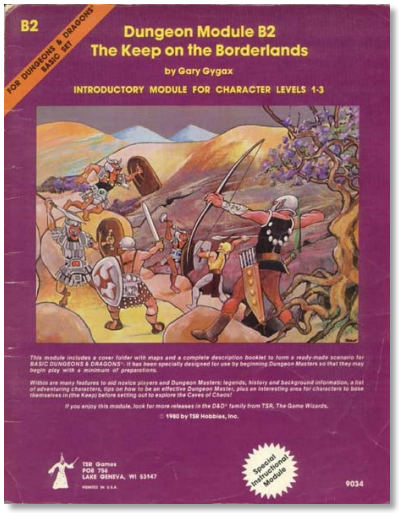
Instead, I suggest *Apple Lane*, for Chaosium's *RuneQuest* game (1978). A year before TSR published *Village of Hommlet* (1979), Greg Stafford revealed a village from his own campaign, filled with NPCs to interact with: NPCs who even had names. Add in a unique adventure for the time, where the players have to defend a pawnshop from attack, and you have a milestone in the industry. (There are caves to explore too, but there's also some extra depth here, with a few different storylines intertwining in the caverns.)



1979: Rahasia (DayStar West Media)

Though it was small press, *Rahasia* by Tracy and Laura Hickman, was still the stand-out adventure of 1979. In many ways it's a fairly standard dungeon crawl, with a temple being the site of exploration this time around. But it shows the increasing focus on wrapping stories around those dungeons. So, there's a curse to break, a maiden to rescue, and a priest to capture.

That's probably less story than appeared in *Apple Lane* the year before, and it wouldn't have been that influential on its own, with just a few hundred copies published. But, it showed the Hickmans' focus on story, which they'd soon bring that to TSR, where they'd renovate the form for fantasy adventures (and would also republish *Rahasia* as an RPGA adventure and as a Basic D&D adventure).



1980: The Keep on the Borderlands (TSR)

The most appropriate adventure to end a list of top scenarios in the first five years that the hobby published adventures is definitely *The Keep on the Borderlands*. It may be the most played adventure in all of RPGdom, as estimates put it at 1.5 million copies printed. It certainly was many players' first adventure, as it was included in *Basic D&D* from late 1980 to early 1983, when D&D was seeing its biggest explosion.

Beyond that, the adventure is a clever dungeon crawl. Besides reusing the home base trope from *Village of Hommlet* (and *Apple Lane*), it also includes intricately interconnected caverns that players can explore as they see fit, creating an open sandbox.

Though we never got to see the Blackmoor and Greyhawk Castles in their original form, *Keep on the Borderlands* may be an equally important view into how the open designs of megadungeons worked at the dawn of the industry.

Day Two: Map

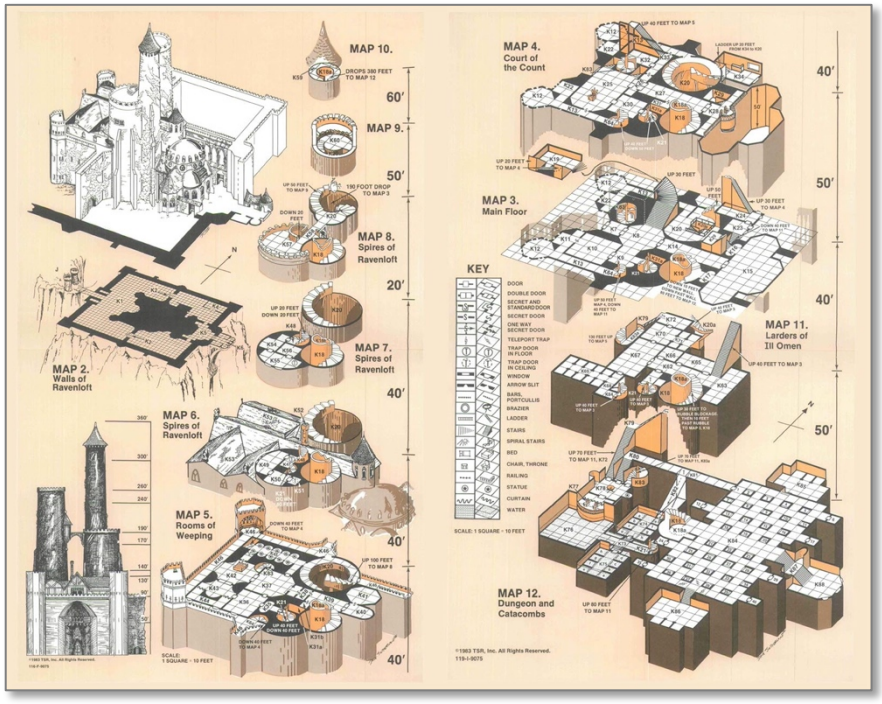
The mapping tropes of the FRPG industry developed pretty quickly ... but it wasn't immediate.

Surprisingly, if you look at the sample dungeon of *OD&D* (1974), there are no grid and no scale. Square grids did appear for The Temple of the Frog in *Blackmoor* (1975), but they look like an artifact of the drawing and reproduction process, not something to be used by a GM. You also have to guess at the scale from the text descriptions.

More purposeful square grids appeared in the *Dungeon Geomorphs* (1976), which were also printed in TSR's famous non-repro blue, as would be the case for most of their maps over the next decade. TSR's first adventure, *G1: Steading of the Hill Giant Chief* (1978) then carried that style to their scenarios.

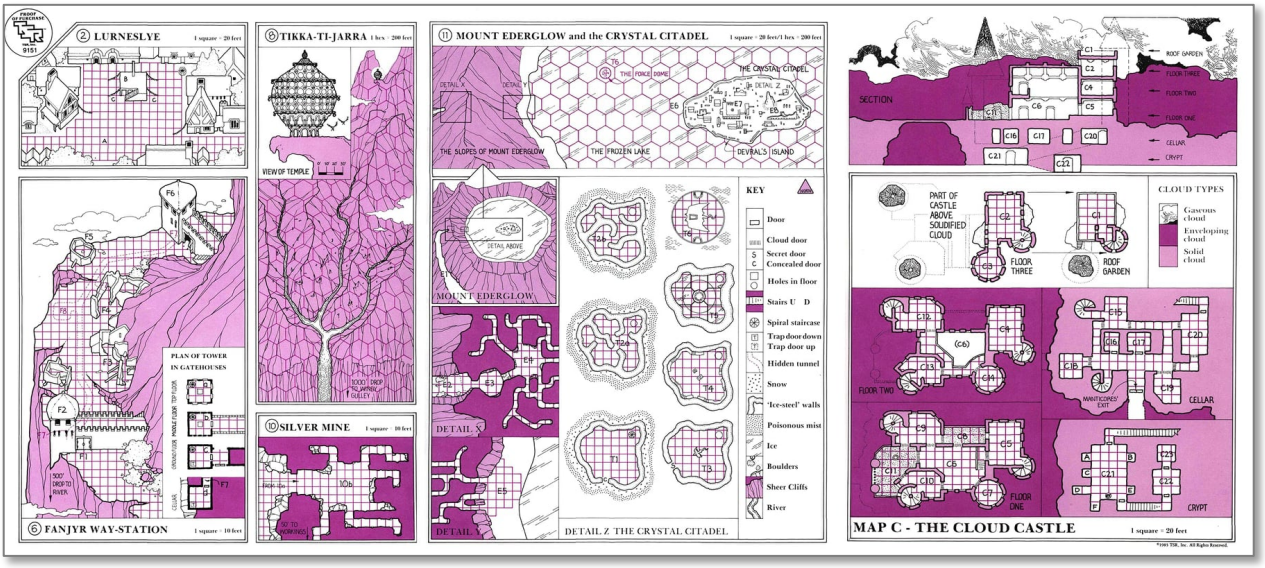
The Fantasy Trip (1977) was a rare game to use hexes instead of squares for its tactical maps. There was more variation in how to present larger scale maps, but Wilderlands and most later wilderness adventures would settle on those self-same hexes.

Much more interesting than the story of how early FRPG maps standardized is how they varied, which began to occur more in the '80s, now that a standard had been set.



Dave Sutherland made the first great leap forward for dungeon map design when he invented an isometric mapping style solely so that he could present the vertical dungeon of *I6: Ravenloft* (1982). It was later used to good effect in many other modules, with *DL1: Dragons of Despair* (1984) being one of the more notable.

Other very innovative early maps came out of the short-lived TSR UK division, the main sector of TSR at the time that was considering how to push the graphic envelope. *UK2: The Sentinel* (1984) showed how to integrate multiple maps. By *UK7: Dark Clouds Gather* (1985), they were becoming full-fledged art pieces. *UK5: Eye of the Serpent* (1984) offered an intriguing variant: A Flowchart to Adventure.

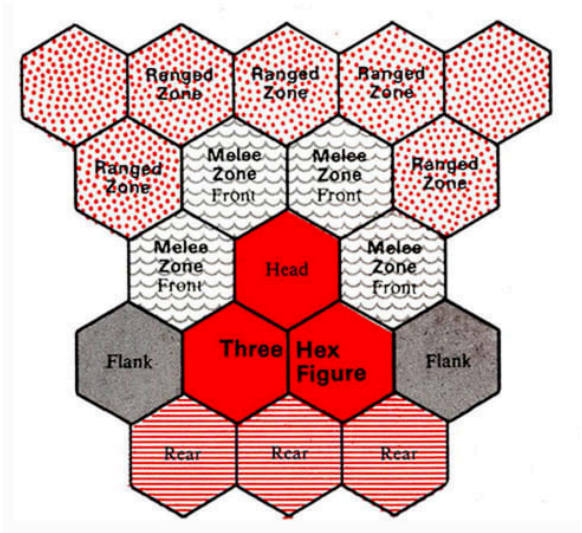


Obviously, you can find even more map innovation as you go forward, particularly in genres not beholden to the dungeon-delve tropes of FRPGs. But even in the first decade of the industry, even mainly focused on FRPGs, there were a lot of interesting innovations, pointing to a lot of different ways that the industry could have gone.

Day Three: Tactic

One could argue that one of the prime innovations of *Chainmail* (1971) was the introduction of more varied tactics into miniatures wargaming play. Where before units were relatively limited in their choices, with movement, missile combat, and melee combat being the main possibilities, now players could have a wizard unit with almost 20 spell options.

Obviously, these new tactics carried into *OD&D* (1974), but there they created a balance problem that would bedevil the game (and to a large extent all FRPGs) for decades: a tactic gradient. Magic-users were given a wide variety of options in combat; clerics were given almost as many; thieves were given some interesting possibilities to set up tactical backstabbing situations, and maybe use their other skills, but that was largely based on GM fiat, and the class was otherwise limited; and fighters were back to the move-melee-or-missile options. What worked fine on a *Chainmail* battlefield had the possibility of also creating a fun gradient in RPGs.



Much of the history of RPGs since *OD&D* has been about improving these tactical options, to even out the tactic gradient for everyone. *The Fantasy Trip* (1977) introduced options to combat; while *Dragonquest* (1980) similarly created tactics on a hex grid. *Traveller* (1977)

focused on creating tactics using 15mm terrain; while *RuneQuest* (1978) made tactics widespread by democratizing spells. Other attempts have been less successful, such as the introduction of the tactical options for grappling, pummeling, and overbearing in the AD&D *Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979) ... which were so complex that no one used it.

New genres that moved away from the fantasy tropes really opened up the field, as there are vast numbers of tactical options available in a game of *Champions* (1981), *Battletech* (1984), or *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991). Meanwhile, some newer games in the fantasy genre just embraced the implicit tactic gradient that's been in FRPGs from the start and focused on those spell-casters, with *Ars Magica* (1987) being the example that went the furthest in that direction.

The 21st century has gone in a number of different directions, with a lot of new tactical possibilities coming out the indie field. *Hero Wars* (2000) side-stepped the issue by making extended conflicts possible outside of the combat field, which did remove the typical tactic gradient, but didn't necessarily offer new tactical options. However, it kind of solved that, in the same way as *Fate* (2003), by allowing freeform use of skills, including to boost other skills.

Resource management was perhaps the most innovative new way to introduce tactics because it moved them from the game to the metagame. Tactics were no longer about what you did in a conflict, but instead what resources you expended while engaging in that conflict. A few mainstream games like *Dragonlance: Fifth Age* (1996) and *Marvel Universe* (2003) were front-runners on the idea, but it appeared more often in indies. When you delve further into indie design you get other mechanics involving scene setting, construction, and resolution that take the idea of tactics in a whole different direction.

Of course, *D&D 3e* (2000) went heavily into tactics with its revived focus on grid-based combat, with nuances such as more specific rules for thief backstabbing and of course the infamous attacks of opportunity, all creating new options. Then *D&D 4e* (2008) doubled down on that and additionally removed the tactic gradient from D&D for the first time ever with its powers for everyone approach. However, both games are out of favor now, and *D&D 4e* was not well-received (on average) from the start, partially due to the extreme changes in its rule system.

Does that mean the tactic gradient is with us permanently? Or at least for FRPGs? Or at least for D&D?

Day Four: Weapon

In the epic fantasy and the sword & sorcery that inspired D&D, weapons were almost characters of their own. Fafhrd carried Heartseeker and Gray Mouser wielded Scalpel and Cat's Claw. Glamdring, Orcrist, and Sting all shone across *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*. And of course no sword was greater than Elric of Melniboné's Stormbringer — who truly was a character.

OD&D (1974) spent a full four pages on intelligent swords, items that I've rarely seen used in a real game. But it didn't give them names, which I would suggest was a crucial misstep that kept them from reaching their full potential. *Greyhawk* (1975) upped the ante with the "Dancing Sword", the "Dragon Slaying Sword", the "Sword of Sharpness", the "Vorpal Blade", and the ever-evocative "Nine Steps Draining Ability" sword. They're well remembered, but still proper-nameless.

Instead, if you wanted to see the first weaponry in D&D that truly matched that of its source material, with names and powers alike, that appeared in *Eldritch Wizardry* (1976), which featured the Mace of Cuthbert, the Sword of Kas, the Axe of the Dwarvish Lords, and the Wand of Orcus. (Surprisingly, non-weapon artifacts such as the Eye and Hand of Vecna gained more attention than the weapons.) A few more traditional weapons, such as Mjolnir and Hofud, appeared in *Gods, Demi-Gods, and Heroes* (1976).

However, what is probably D&D's most renowned weaponry appeared in *S2: White Plume Mountain* (1979), a simple MacGuffin quest for three weapons of note: the trident Wave, the warhammer Whelm, and the sword Blackrazor. Of those, Blackrazor touched back on one of D&D's influences, as it's a blatant rip-off of Stormbringer. Author Lawrence Schick would never have included such an item if he'd know *White Plume Mountain* was going to be published, but at the time he wrote it, it was part of his application for a job at TSR.

Did *White Plume Mountain* finally get its weaponry "right" by at last giving them names like those in D&D's source material? Perhaps.

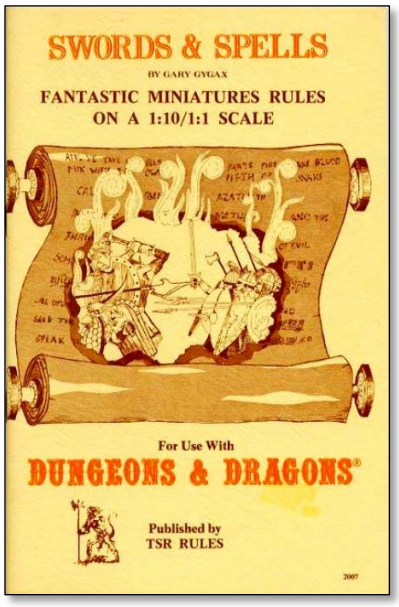
It's pretty easy for a fantasy game to make its weaponry evocative by just applying a name (and perhaps some special powers), but what about a science-fiction game? Certainly, some people might swear by their PGMP-12, their FGMP-16, or other such weaponry in *Traveller* (1977), which tended to be carefully considered and well described.

However, I think one of the most evocative bits of "weaponry" in *Traveller* uses only the names. I'm talking about the Sword Worlds, a confederation of planets in the Spinward Marches settled by Earthers (Solomani). Most of the planets are named after famous weaponry from Earth. Among these planets are: Anduril, Anselhome, Beater, Biter, Bronze, Colada, Durendal, Dyrnwyn, Enos, Entrope, Excalibur, Gram, Gungnir, Hofud, Hrunting, Iron, Joyeuse, Mithril, Mjolnir, Narsil, Orcrist, Sacnoth, Steel, Sting, Tizon, Tyrfing, and Winston. Just figuring out all the name is itself a fun exploration of magic weaponry!

Because we already know many of those names, they give the worlds characters — character that has been developed over the years, but which doubtless originated from the simple term "The Sword Worlds". It suggests that for all those named and magic weapons that appeared in stories, novels, and then roleplaying games, it was the names that had the power all the time, not the weaponry itself.

Day Five: Throne

When *OD&D* (1974) was first published, it promised three distinctive styles of play: dungeon exploration; wilderness exploration; and warfare and rulership. The dungeon exploration was available at once, while the wilderness exploration was certainly played in early days, as witnessed in both the Blackmoor and Greyhawk campaigns, but it didn't really gel into a published playing style until the release of the *D&D Expert Rule Set* (1981) — though there were some predecessors such as the *Wilderlands of High Fantasy* (1977).



Which left warfare and rulership.

Unfortunately, through many, many iterations TSR was never able to make warfare and rulership really popular among D&D players, or at the least it didn't do so continuously: there were a number of attempts that seemed strong for a few years, then faded away.

Obviously, D&D had the mechanics to support warfare from the beginning, since it was built on *Chainmail* (1971), but even when TSR produced son-of-Chainmail as the *Swords & Spells* supplement

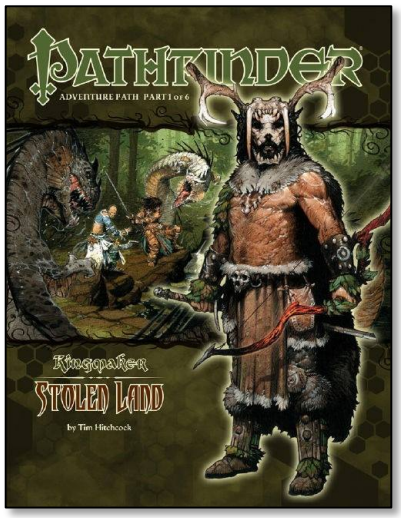
(1976) they weren't able to make it catch on. *Battlesystem* (1985) didn't do much better. It was a hefty and attractive mass-combat system that TSR pushed hard many times for over a decade, and it never seemed to find widespread interest, despite some well-loved Battlesystem modules, such as the Bloodstone Pass series (1985-1988) and the Dragonlance Chronicles (1984-1988).

Maybe the missing aspect was rulership: the throne to go with the warfare. The "CM" Companion adventures (1984-1987), which were the first D&D adventures to really focus on domains, managed nine publications but never received the acclaim of the "B"/"X" lines that preceded it. *Birthright* (1995-1997), which offered a better-polished and more consistent domain-focused gaming line was certainly the most successful of TSR's various attempts to sell games of warfare and rulership, but it was cut short by TSR's implosion.

The inability of TSR to sustain games of thrones for more than a few years at a time suggests that there might be flaws in the core playstyle. Might it keep players too isolated from each other? Might it cause them to turn inward toward their domains rather than outward toward roleplaying with their fellows? Those are certainly concerns with games of this sort, but any number of other RPGs have proven much more successful on the topic.

Chaosium's *Pendragon* (1985) was one of the first RPGs to make rulership of fiefs not just an objective of play but also a fully integrated mechanical aspect of gaming. It did so by introducing winter phases to campaigns, where players could temporarily focus on their own concerns before returning to group play when the season ended.

Lion Rampant's *Ars Magica* (1987) offered a very different model, where the default setting centered on the players' mages ruling over a small fortress (a covenant) and its peoples. Like *Pendragon*, it did so using an interstitial gaming phase, here seasons of covenant play that occurred between the adventurous gaming sessions.



One might think that the limitation was in D&D itself, if not for what we've seen in the 21st century. To start with, domain and warfare rules have been popular in the OSR, particularly among players of B/X retroclones, perhaps because B/X never had its own Companion rules.

More notably, one of the most successful games of rulership in the 21st century was built in a game just one short step removed from D&D: *Pathfinder* (2009). Its Kingmaker Adventure Path (2010), which allowed players to build up a domain over the course of a campaign, was one of the earliest for *Pathfinder*, and also one that was well-acclaimed. It received a gold ENnie in 2010 and has since been converted into a computer game (2018).

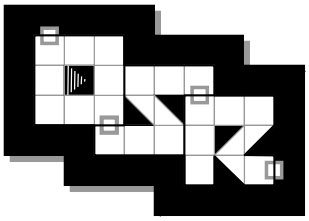
Certainly, we today realize that the possible playstyles of RPGs are not just limited to dungeon exploration, wilderness exploration, and warfare and rulership. Instead, they're limitless. Nonetheless the control and creativity implicit in a game of rulership make it very tempting, and thus something we'll likely continue to see in the future.

Day Six: Flavor

One of the most amazing things about roleplaying games in the twenty-first century is that they now come in a variety of flavors.

We've always had mainstream games, though that's meant different things at different times. In the '70s, they were barely professional games, D&D included. But year by year it came to mean more experienced and skilled work, well-polished in both writing and mechanics, and ultimately looking pretty nice. Today, mainstream games are relatively complex mechanically (but nothing like the games of the late '80s and '90s) and meant to appeal to a wide audience. The biggest focus is on fantasy, and in particular fantasy with a combat element.

Indies were the second modern flavor of RPGs, developing in the '00s. They are more likely to delve into far-flung genres and they are much more likely to focus on modern themes such as corruption and romance. They also tend to be mechanically innovative, approaching RPGs from totally new perspectives. The narrative focus of early indies meant that scene-framing and other story-based mechanics appeared early on, but there are also mechanics totally separate from stories, such as freeform descriptions, freeform resolutions, and resource management.



OSR was the third modern flavor of RPGs, developing in the '00s, a few years after the indies. They tend to focus on foundational styles of RPG play, or at least how those foundational styles of play are interpreted today. So, they are more often about delving and exploration, their rules tend to be simpler, and they depend more on both player ingenuity and GM ruling as opposed to hard and fast rules. (CC-by-3.0 OSR logo by Stuart Robertson remixed by G.B. MacKenzie.)

One of the beautiful things about the 21st century as it enters the '20s is that all of these flavors of gaming, once distinct, are increasing blending together in the mainstream releases, allowing a smorgasbord of designs that combine all the best flavors of the last few decades. It's exciting to consider what might come next.

Day Seven: Short

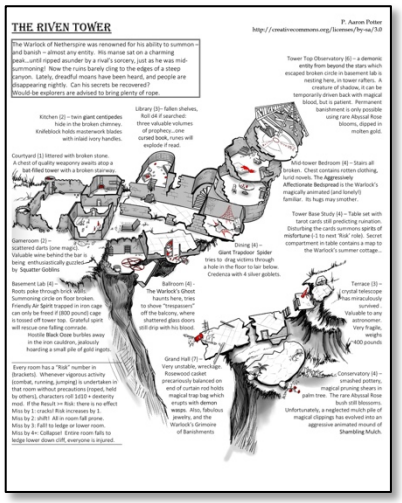
One of the most interesting trends of the 21st century is the one-page RPG, which as it suggests encapsulates an entire game onto a single page (or sometimes two, but in any case, they remain small). Out of necessity, one-page RPGs tend to be one-shots. A lot of them are over-the-top humorous.

Now, one can certainly argue their efficacy, as some critics say they reduce content to a single page by putting all the weight on the GM. Even if that's the case, however, they manage to get gamers rapidly playing on a variety of topics, often with some intentionally focused moral dilemmas.

Although it's unlikely that he wrote the first one-page RPG, Grant Howitt usually gets attention as one of the most popular one-page RPG writers. As with so much in the hobby, it started by an

accumulation of coincidences. Howitt moved to Australia, and wasn't able to legally work there, so he started a Patreon for producing RPGs. He designed larger pieces such as the 132-page *Goblin Quest* (2015) but found the scheduling too grueling.

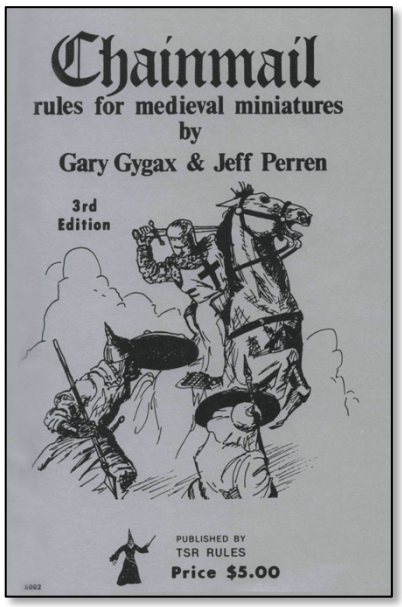
Howitt's wife, Mary "Maz" Hamilton, then suggested one-page RPGs. Howitt embraced this model starting with *Force-Blade Punk* (2016), which like many one-pagers was as much of an artistic design as a game. Howitt's most famous design was certainly *Honey Heist* (2017), a game of animals stuck between criminality and bearness. Multiple *Critical Role* sessions ensured that the whole world knew about the one-page game. Meanwhile, the idea has continued to explode, with itch.io beginning to run One-Page RPG Jams in 2020.



Just as the gaming designs of the 21st century are divided between indie games and OSR games, so are the new gaming shorts. Whereas one-page RPGs tend toward the indie side of the industry, the OSR instead has one-page dungeons, which are exactly what they sound like, and are often even more artistic designs than the one-page RPGs.

The one-page dungeons appeared courtesy of David Bowman in 2009, with assistance by Michael Shorten. It was then popularized by Philippe Antoine Menard, who together with Shorten organized the first One Page Dungeon contest that year. The One Page Dungeon Contest has appeared every year since. It's been coordinated by Alex Schroeder (2010-2013), Random Wizard (2014-2016), and Shattered Pike Studio (2017-Present) over the years. With over 150 entries last year, it obviously remains a potent wellspring for small-form OSR creativity.

Day Eight: Stream



One of the most wonderful things about the stream of RPG development — now 50 years long, from the release of *Chainmail* (1971) to this month's debut of *Fallout: The Roleplaying Game* (2021) — is that it's genuinely a stream, with ideas flowing in and out of the mainstream in one of the largest and most long-lived collaborations ever.

The OSR and indie games broke into their own niches about 20 years ago, and now they're influencing major games such as *D&D*. That's how it's always been, with new ideas accumulating and raising the design of these games of ours to ever-greater heights.

Empire of the Petal Throne (1975) introduced rough ideas of skills, albeit with no way to roll against them. *Traveller* (1977) debuted a full-fledged skill system, but with no way to improve them. *RuneQuest* (1978) made improving skills the core of its system.

D&D itself brought this flow of mechanics back to the mainstream with *Oriental Adventures* (1985), the *Survival Guides* (1986), and eventually *AD&D 2e* (1989).

This pattern repeats across so many other mechanics. There are rough attempts, there are major successes that mainstream the mechanics, and eventually they flow back to the biggest games in the hobby.

Handfuls of dice came via *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975), then *Champions* (1981). *Star Wars* (1987) turned them into a full-fledged skill system, but itself was built on the *Ghostbusters* (1986) mechanics. Then *Shadowrun* (1989) introduced a whole new way to roll handfuls of dice, with comparative dice pools, but *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) brought it to even greater success.

Looking at a mainstream game such as *D&D 3e* (2000), one can see the tributaries that flow into it. The style of tactical combat perhaps originated with *The Fantasy Trip* (1977) while the die+skill mechanic certainly came from *Ars Magica* (1987), also by designer Jonathan Tweet. The list of feats was a larger innovation, but one can certainly see precedents in advantage/disadvantage systems such as *Champions* (1981).

Even flashbacks to the past like the OSR are built upon this stream of development. *Shadow of the Demon Lord* (2015) and *Forbidden Lands* (2018) are both old-school games with more modern mechanics, while *OSRIC* (2007) was an OSR game with reconsidered organization and *Old-School Essentials* (2019) is built upon next-generational layout, but with ideas going back to at least *The Black Hack* (2016).

It often feels like the games of our hobby are ever reaching greater heights, and if so, this stream of development is one of the reasons, because it allows us to ever plumb the depths of past designs for the best and brightest that we can bring forward.

Day Nine: Medium

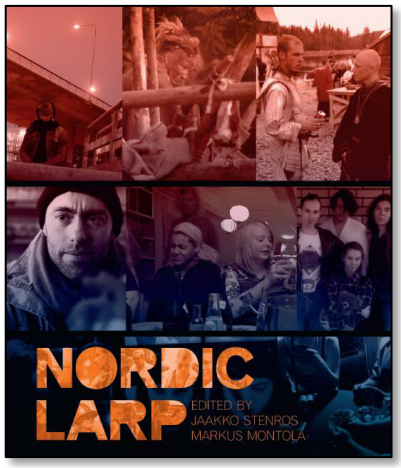
Are roleplaying games a medium?

Webster's defines a medium as "a means of effecting or conveying something, such as: a channel or system of communication, information, or entertainment; or a mode of artistic expression or communication". By that definition, I'd say "tentatively, yes".

Roleplaying games are built upon two other mediums. Roleplaying rules focus on the medium of books (and PDFs and cassette tapes and CDs and other mediums that convey the same information). Roleplaying itself is then built upon the medium of talking. But, I think the act of roleplaying goes beyond simple talking. There are supplements to the conversation, particularly maps; there are constraints to the talking, based on the success of skills; and most importantly there are nuances to the conversation, based upon the role you are taking. You put all of that together and I think you have "a channel or system of communication" that is sufficiently

different from mere conversation to be a medium of its own. It entertains and communicates in a unique way.

However, I believe that the depth of roleplaying games *as a medium* increases when they are also used to convey ideas. In saying that, I don't denigrate roleplaying games that are merely about entertainment. Perhaps 99% of every game I've ever played has fallen into that category. It's why I love the hobby and forever return to it.



But roleplaying also has the possibility of casting us in the roles of people utterly unlike ourselves. It has the option of making us think about tough, even unsolvable problems — and then forcing us to make decisions related to them. Moral dilemmas, insertion into other cultures, and revelation of flaws in our own societies are all content that can increase the depth of roleplaying *as a medium*.

Nordic LARPs and indie RPGs have been some of the prime movers in this category, focusing on topics of inequality, intimacy, romance, death, misery, justice, and much more. They make us think about broad problems; they introduce us to marginalized groups and reveal our shared humanity. They amp up the medium of roleplaying games from just covering communication and entertainment to also conveying information.

Is that required? Obviously not. We play games to be entertained. But that our *medium* also allows for something different, perhaps something more, is thrilling.

Day Ten: Trust

In the infancy of roleplaying, games were very much about trust. That's because *OD&D* (1974) in its original form was competitive. The GM was aggressively challenging the players, and the players were often working at cross-purposes. You genuinely had to decide if you trusted the thief to support your group, and not to stab you in the back and take your stuff.

Now, not so much. Part of the evolution of roleplaying over the years has been to change it from a somewhat competitive category of play to an almost entirely cooperative medium. You still have to trust that your fellows aren't going to do something stupid or unpredictable (and we tricksters endeavor to violate that trust), but beyond that, you can have faith in your group's desire to work together, toward the same goals.

Obviously, there have been a few exceptions along the way. *Paranoia* (1984) was in large part about boosting PvP play to the nth degree. But is it really a question of trust when you absolutely know you can't trust your fellows? (Trust the computer; the computer is your friend; keep your laser handy.)

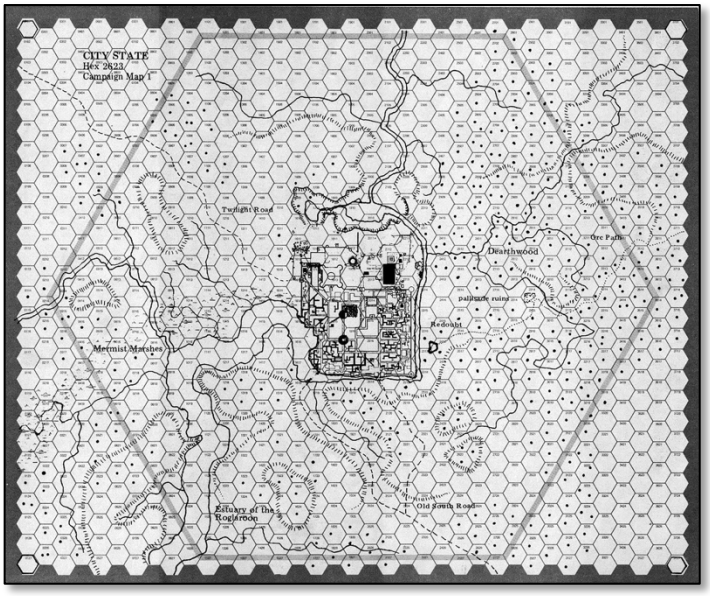
I bet there are also a few indies built solely around the idea of trust. *The Mountain Witch* (2005) is one such example, built on the risk and reward of trusting other ronin. But even among indie games, trust continues to be an exception in the world of roleplaying.

The thing is, it doesn't have to be this way. Even if you accept the modern-day premise of RPGs as cooperative, you can still have trust as a core component of play. I know this because Christopher Allen and I wrote a whole book on cooperative board games, called *Meeples Together*. Trust tends to be a major factor in games of this sort.

In those games, it often comes down to the question of each player having some unique information. They have to be trusted to act correctly on that information, usually without revealing it to anyone else, or even consulting with them. It's very real faith.

Hanabi (2010) is one of the most interesting trust-based cooperative strategy games. In it, each player has a hand of cards that he can't see — but that the other players can. The other players can give them hints as to what the cards are, but can't quite say anything explicitly. Eventually, the player has to play or discard a card, and in doing so makes an extreme leap of faith, trusting that the other players were saying rational things, and trusting that they understood them.

It'd be wonderful to see more of that in RPGs. Trust is a powerful mechanic.



Day Eleven: Wilderness

Obviously, dungeon exploration is the most iconic sort of roleplaying adventure. But I put wilderness exploration right up there. When I dream of youthful D&D, hexes dance in front of my eyes. There's something about the idea of venturing into blank spaces and discovering what's there that really appeals to the feeling of novelty and discovery that inhabits my most primordial and nostalgic roleplaying memories. The neat thing about wilderness exploration is that it doesn't even have to be limited to fantasy roleplaying. In *Traveller* (1977), you can explore entire worlds, they're just laid out in triangles rather than hexes.

Wilderness adventures have had a number of milestones. I'd rate these as some of the top five:

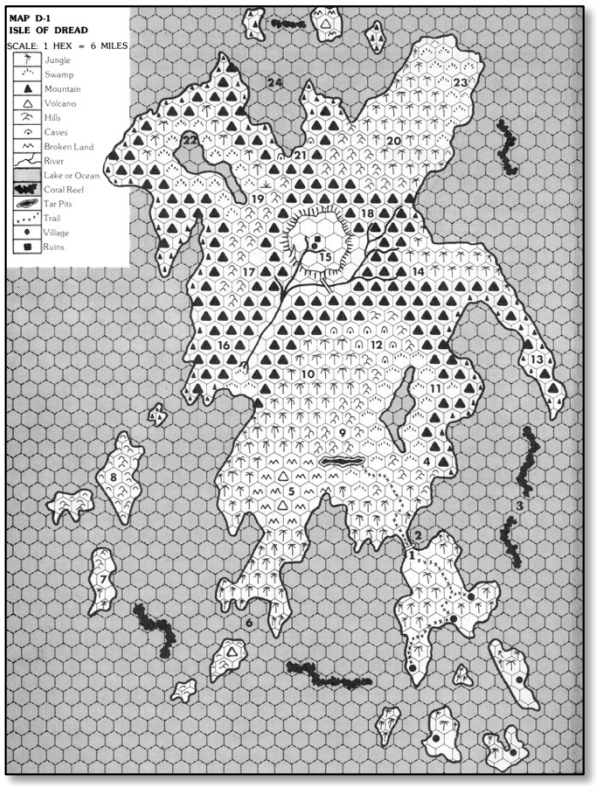
1977: The Wilderlands of High Fantasy (Judges Guild)

Typically, a later adventure gets credit as the first wilderness adventure, but it really began here. The map in *Wilderlands* is pretty great. It's Judges Guild's first hex-of-hexes maps, which would be supplemented by a number of others over the years, creating one of the industry's first detailed campaign worlds. The wilderness adventure is less so, as it's just pages of random charts.

Dave Arneson's *First Fantasy Campaign* (1977) would offer a more detailed campaign world that same year, also with a nice hex map, but without quite as much of a wilderness focus.

1980: X1 — The Isle of Dread (TSR)

Zeb Cook and Tom Moldvay's first Expert adventure is what most people mark as the first true wilderness adventure, and it's certainly a big step forward. It's not just that it's a complete adventure, with fully described areas and a few subregions taking the form of caves, dungeons, and a village. It's that there are also thumbnails of cultures here, including new races such as the phanton and rakasta, both of whom went on to much greater fame in the Known World.



One could probably make a whole list of top wilderness adventures just in the "X" series. *X4: Master of the Desert Nomads* (1983) and *X5: Temple of Death* (1983) depict the Great Wastes and Hule and are considered another height of the "X" — albeit that's with a lot more story and a lot less wilderness focus. *X9: The Savage Coast* (1985) received more mixed reviews, but was another very pure hex crawl.

The Isle has made some notable returns in *Dungeon #114* (2004), *Dungeon #143* (2007), and *Original Adventures Reincarnated #2: The Isle of Dread* (2018), just in case you weren't convinced of its iconic nature.

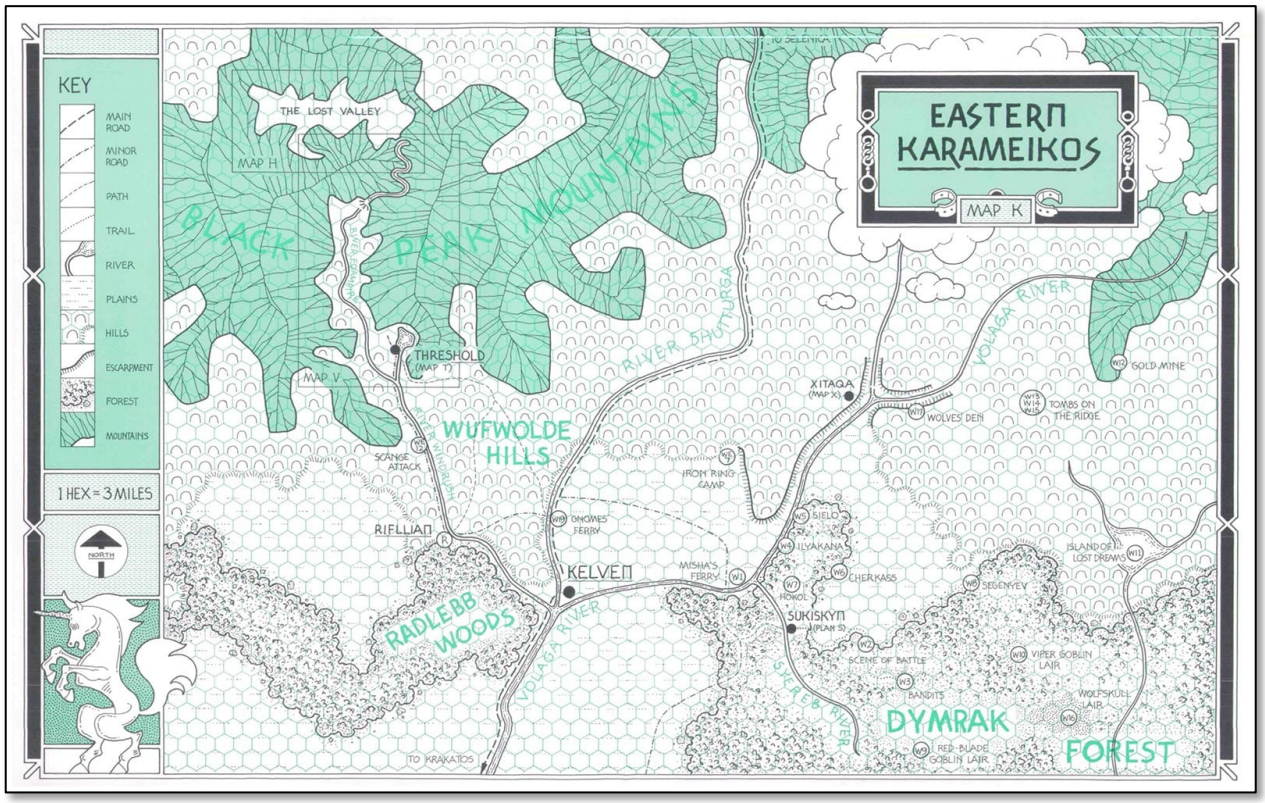
1981: Griffin Mountain (Chaosium)

Other fantasy games did wilderness adventures too, with RuneQuest's *Griffin Mountain*, by Rudy Kraft, Jennell Jaquays, and Greg Stafford being a top contender. Like *Isle of Dread* before it, *Griffin Mountain* takes wilderness adventure up to the next level, and that's not just because it's a massive volume, running 200 pages in its first incarnation, compared to *Isle of Dread's* scant (but dense) 32 pages.

It's that those 200 pages contain entire cultures. There are Balazaring barbarians and civilized citadels, traveling caravans and well-detailed leaders. Glorantha is one of the richest fantasy worlds created for roleplaying and *Griffin Mountain* manages to encapsulate that through peoples, encounters, and locales. It's a Master's Thesis in how to show not tell, all laid out as a massive wilderness.

Griffin Mountain hasn't been repeated and revisited as much as *Isle of Dread*, though *Griffin Island* (1986) and a *Gloranthan Classics* edition (2001) both exist, but nonetheless characters like Blueface, Joh Mith, and Gondo Hoist, all introduced here, are some of the most memorable in Glorantha.


ELF SEA
DANGERGROUND
BEAR
WOODS
Ranswood
Brothers
Hills
Oakwood
Rodi's Gap
EAST
PLAIN
BEAR
HILLS
Trillus
Elmwood
Dykene
Kingdom of Luther
Kingdom of Holay
Elkor
Hills
PLAIN
Dos
WEST
HIGH
WOOD
WOOD
SOUTH
Kingdom of Tarsh
DRAGON PASS
Map of
BALAZAR


KEY
MAIN ROAD
MINOR ROAD
PATH
TRAIL
RIVER
PLAINS
HILLS
ESCARPMENT
FOREST
MOUNTAINS
1 HEX = 3 MILES
NORTH
THE LOST VALLEY
MAP H
BLACK PEAK MOUNTAINS
EASTERN KARAMEIKOS
MAP K
THRESHOLD (MAP T)
MAP V
RIVER SHUTURGA
VOLAGA RIVER
XITAQA (MAP X)
GOLD MINE
WOLVES' DEN
TOMBS ON THE RIDGE
WUFWOLDE HILLS
SCARGE ATTACK
IRON RING CAMP
GNOMES FERRY
RIFLLIAN
KELVEN
MISHA'S FERRY
SIELO
ILYAKAIA
CHERKASS
HOKOL
SUKISKYN (PLAN 5)
ISLAND OF LOST DREAMS
SEGENYEV
SCENE OF BATTLE
VIPER GOBLIN LAIR
BANDITS
WOLFSKULL LAIR
RED BLADE GOBLIN LAIR
RADLEBB WOODS
VOLAGA RIVER
SEREB RIVER
DYMRAK FOREST
TO KRAKATOS

1986: B10 — Night's Dark Terror (TSR UK)

One must include one other Basic D&D adventure in a list of wilderness milestones, and that's *Night's Dark Terror*, created by the TSR UK crew of Jim Bambra, Phil Gallagher, and Graeme Morris. If the *Wilderlands* offered bare wilderness exploration, the *Isle of Dread* thumbnails of wilderness cultures, and *Griffin Mountain* a fully detailed setting, then *Night's Dark Terror* marks another step forward by presenting the interface between wilderness exploration and narrative stories. Though the adventure remains a sandbox, there's a MacGuffin quest, ongoing events, and stories that cover multiple locales.

Night's Dark Terror was good enough, and detailed the wilderness sufficiently, that it quickly led to the publication of *GAZ1: The Grand Duchy of Karameikos* (1987), the beginning of TSR's first extensive description of a campaign world, months before they repeated the idea with the Forgotten Realms.

2015-2018: Wormskin

In the modern-day, one of the wilderness settings with the greatest potential is that of Dolmenwood, originally described by Gavin Norman with Greg Gorgonmilk in a series of eight magazines called *Wormskin*. Of themselves, the magazines are amazing. Not only do they offer hex by hex descriptions of dozens of locales within the forest, but they also fill it out with races, NPCs, fungi, psychedelic compounds, and more. Beyond that, the monster-haunted woods, wit its fairies, dungeons, and dark creatures is deeply evocative and entirely unique.

There's a plan for much more: Norman has been working on a full campaign guide for Dolmenwood for a few years now. Though the magazines themselves probably qualify Dolmenwood for this list, when the full books are produced, they're likely to be one of the greatest wilderness settings ever.

Which is a wonderful way to say that wilderness exploration isn't just something of the past: some of the best examples are also occurring right now, courtesy of the OSR.

Day Twelve: Think

In the primordial days of gaming, players had to think in a very different way than they do in modern-day RPGs. That's because classic RPGs were much more puzzle-games, where a gamemaster laid out challenges and players thoughtfully came up with ideas for how to solve them. Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was a classic RPGer. Swapping the bag for the

idol, that's the exact sort of puzzle thinking that was required in games at the dawn of the industry (and it worked about as well as most player plans do).

Certainly, players still do a lot of thinking in modern games. They make strategic plans for conflict; they figure out what other characters are doing and how to foil (or help) them. But a lot of the puzzle-thinking of classic RPGs had been replaced by simulation. Rather than come up with a plan to outwit the trap, a player might roll a Trap-solving skill; rather than convince a king to help them, they might roll Diplomacy.

This is not to suggest that one is better than the other. They're both fine forms of entertainment that are enjoyed by large numbers of people. What's striking, however, is the fact that they are so different that they almost could be different gaming forms.

It's also interesting to look at this all from the lens of Ron Edwards' GNS Theory in "System Does Matter" (1999), which suggested that gamers were either gamists (who enjoy challenges), simulationists (who enjoy the creation of secondary worlds), or narrativists (who enjoy stories).

Today, as it happens, we also have three major categories of RPGs: OSR, mainstream, and indie. It's perhaps not a coincidence that there's a rough correspondence between the three gaming categories and Edwards' three categories of games. OSR games are largely gamist and indie games are largely narrativist. The mainstream games are the rougher correlation, but they do tend toward simulationist on average.

Makes you think that Edwards was on to something.

Day Thirteen: Flood

The flood of releases that followed Wizards of the Coast's creation of the Open Game License and the d20 Trademark License initially seemed to revitalize the roleplaying industry, but within three years its effects were catastrophic, driving distributors, publishers, and retailers out of business.

This wasn't the first time that the roleplaying industry has seen such boom and bust cycles, though it was the one most directly connected to roleplaying itself. But, in the '80s and '90s many roleplaying publishers were effected by floods of first black & white comics, then CCGs, as well as by the crashes that followed.

The modern day has seen some new floods post-d20. The '00s saw a flood of products thanks to digital publishing, then the '10s saw even more, thanks first to Kickstarter and then to community content programs. But these new floods have not resulted in the same crashes as we saw in the past. This is likely due to fundamental changes in sales models from the 20th century to the 21st century.

Classic sales models revolved around sales uncertainty, with danger being multiplied by the

multilevel sales chain. A publisher had to decide how many products to produce, then both a distributor and retailer had to decide how many to buy. Any failure to correctly assess the market could leave someone with a loss instead of a gain. When the entire field was soaring on the irrational exuberance of a trend such as d20 or CCGs, those failures multiplied across an entire category, resulting in catastrophic failures.

The same just isn't true for the new sales methods of the 21st century. Digital products and community content don't carry any inventory, so costs are limited to creating the content, which is usually a fraction of the publication costs and often spread out among many more investors.

Kickstarter is a little trickier, because the irrational exuberance of its early days cost some companies dearly. But when used well, a Kickstarter can accurately determine interest in print runs, taking out all the guesswork that used to be so problematic. Some companies such as Fria Ligan say that they use Kickstarter precisely for this purpose.

Now that publishers know some of the most notable dangers of Kickstarters, such as unbounded stretch goals, unrelated add-ons, and unbalanced shipping costs, they seem largely a boon, even if they continue to raise funds at a level that appears to be a boom waiting to bust.

The thing is, the danger of a flood of products was never in the products themselves, but rather in dangerous sales mechanisms surrounding them. Those mechanisms are still around (and remain vital to the industry), but they're insulated from the booms, which should allow them to act as a more conservative aftermarket, for post-Kickstarter products and the best digital and community content alike.

Day Fourteen: Safety

Here's the darkest secret of the roleplaying industry: most of the creators who design the games and adventures that bring joy to millions of fans do so without a safety net.

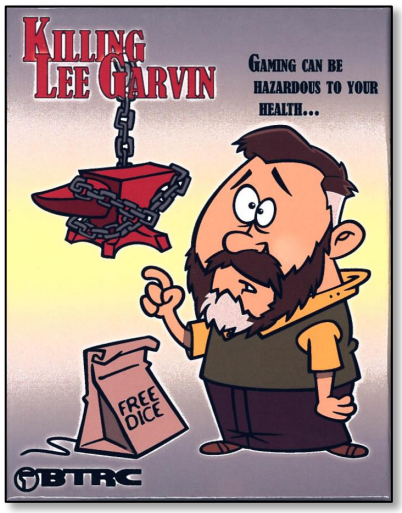
At the foundation, this is a lack of financial safety. There are few full-time jobs in the industry; most creators work as freelancers. When a full-time job does exist, it tends to pay poorly for its region. When I worked at a successful publisher in the mid '90s, I earned $19,500 a year, which was not enough to pay even my modest standard of living, commuting by bicycle, in the California Bay Area. One of my coworkers sometimes joked about the company's retirement plan. Depending on how black her humor was that day, she'd say it was either buying lottery tickets or dying.

I fortunately had savings from my previous years working as a technical writer, but I spent out $4,000 or $5,000 of those savings for the privilege of working my dream job. (It was worthwhile; I've never regretted it.)

I'm sure my story isn't unique, and life is worse for freelancers. Just a few years ago, the SFWA raised its minimum rate for professional fiction to 8 cents a word. Simultaneously, there are roleplaying publishers that consider themselves at least semi-professional that offer a half-cent a word. Second-tier companies with strong games and strong audiences still offer just 4 or 5 cents a word. Assume 2,000 final words a day, and that comes out to between $1,600 to $2,000 a

month before you even pay your 15.3% in self-employment tax. Which means that it's less than I was earning 25 years ago, unless you have high speed or never stop working. There's a reason that it was a big bonus when TSR started offering its staff the opportunity to moonlight as module writers in their evenings.

If you have sticker shock at the newest roleplaying book, the real question should be, "Why doesn't it cost more?" Because as is, it's probably not offering its creators a living wage (a couple of top companies excepted).



But here's the even darker secret that goes hand-in-hand with that: it's not just that creators are living without a financial safety net. They're often living without a medical safety net, at least in the United States. They are often putting their health, and quite literally their life, on the line to bring you entertainment.

Unfortunately, recent years have made that very clear with a number of creators who have been driven to charity when the financial burden of their American health care became unbearable. Lee Garvin, the creator of *Tales from the Floating Vagabound* (1991) was one of the most obvious victims of the medical cruelty of the United States and his need to work without a safety net to create the games he loved; he succumbed to medical bankruptcy following an unexpected medical emergency, and the repercussions of that eventually killed him. But there are many others who died too young, and it seems likely that many of them fell to insufficient medical care because of the high costs of even simple preventative care.

We know that Aaron Allston, Richard Tucholka, and Loren Wiseman all had similar financial issues due to medical problems. More recently, seeing medical Go Fund Mes for professionals such as Rick Loomis and Luise Perrin has been heartbreaking, but at least we have some chance to help now. Just yesterday, we lost Steve Perrin, who two weeks ago noted, "we are covered for a couple more weeks. Things get tight" when speaking of the health problems then besetting both him and his wife.

It shouldn't be like that. Our creators deserve so much more.

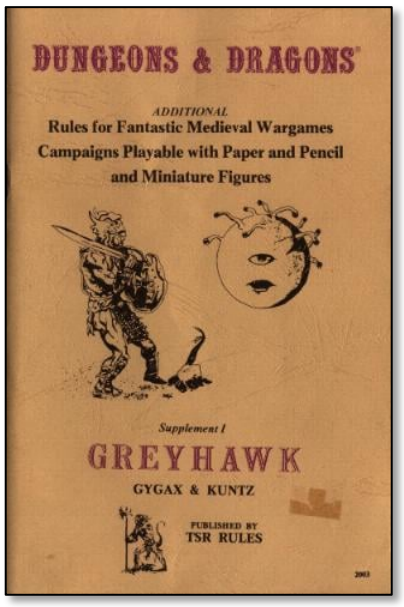
And to be clear, this isn't a simple problem: roleplaying books don't sell for enough, and roleplaying companies often can't pay enough as a result. It's a vicious cycle. Christian Petersen tried to break that cycle by increasing the valuation of RPGs when he released *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay 3e* (2009) with a price point of $100. It didn't work, so there aren't simple solutions either.

But the core cancer here is the United States' decision to offer medical care as a luxury, something only affordable to the rich. That's wrong. It's evil. And it's ultimately what needs to be fixed to give our creators at the least the medical safety net that they deserve.

Day Fifteen: Supplement

Obviously, supplements have a long history in roleplaying game, but what's impressive is how much they've changed, following one trend after another, while still continuing to focus on the same few topics.

The first supplement for a roleplaying game appeared in 1975, approximately a year after the release of *OD&D* (1974): *Supplement I: Greyhawk* (1975). It even had the word supplement in the title! So what did the primordial industry think a supplement should contain? It was a set of new rules structured exactly like the *OD&D* books, featuring new character classes, new spells, a new combat system, new monsters, new magic items, and new tricks and traps. Meanwhile, Wee Warriors offered the first character sheet, *The Character Archaic* (1975), as a different sort of supplement.



The next year brought two other sorts of supplements, neither of them by TSR. Wee Warriors again led the way, this time with the first adventure supplement, *Palace of the Vampire Queen* (1976). Meanwhile, Judges Guild released the first setting supplement with its *Map of the City-State of the Invincible Overlord* (1976). Judges Guild would soon expand that, producing bimonthly subscription packs that combined game aids, adventure building blocks, and more setting material. Though Wee Warriors had been the first great innovator of supplements, Judges Guild was the first great supplement producer.

Together, the products of 1975 and 1976 laid out what has defined gaming supplements for decades: accessories (like character sheets), adventures (like *Palace*), GM material (like new rules and magic items), GM aids (like random tables and dungeon geomorphs), player material (like new classes and spells), setting books (like the City-State material), and player aids (like quick-reference charts).

What's changed over time is how publishers have emphasized these different types of supplements.

In the early industry, big game publishers like GDW and TSR actively believed that players wouldn't want publishers to provide them with adventures, so they kept to rules and accessories and let other publishers such as Judges Guild take care of the rest — before they realized how lucrative it was and jumped in.

Adventures were getting strong attention from pretty much everyone by 1978, but setting material took a bit longer to catch on. Judges Guild was again a leader here, with a whole series that revealed the Wilderlands. Meanwhile, a number of different licensed publishers were all adding detail to Traveller's Third Imperium. But 1984 was perhaps

the biggest milestone for settings because that's when Hârn and Middle-earth started really being detailed through sourcebooks from Columbia Games and ICE.

As was so often the case, TSR took a few years more, with their "GAZ" (1987) and "FR" (1987) series for the Known World and for the Forgotten Realms not appearing until 1987. Of course, the care that TSR initially showed was in retrospect a good idea, as the cannibalization of TSR's own sales in the '90s with an ever-growing variety of settings is often listed as one of the many factors leading to their downfall.

Just a few years after settings became big supplement business, something totally new appeared: the splatbook supplements. These were player-focused supplements that were thus sellable to a much larger percentage of gamers than books such as adventures and settings that were theoretically just for GMs. Technically splatbooks date back to the '70s and releases like *Cults of Prax* (1979) for RuneQuest, but it was in the '90s that they really became full-fledged lines with streams of books each minutely defining an individual class or race. White Wolf's splatbook supplements are the best known, beginning with *Clanbook: Brujah* (1992), but TSR was actually in the lead on this one, beginning with *PHBR1: The Complete Fighter's Handbook* (1989).

Perhaps splatbooks and other player-facing releases were the reason for Wizards of the Coast's big reversal on adventure supplements in 2000. That's when they declared that adventures weren't profitable at all and created the d20 Trademark License in large part so that other people would publish them. Even more befuddling, with the advent of *D&D 5e* (2014), Wizards of the Coast's publications began to focus almost entirely on ... adventures, with setting and rulebooks being fairly new additions to the line (and adventures still being the main course). Call it a re-reversal.

As for what the future will bring? That's an open question given the changing nature of supplement production. Big publishers seem content with big releases, whether they be adventure, setting, or rulebook. Meanwhile, community content is the next big frontier for supplement production, and it's allowed supplements to (sometimes) go small again, with smaller adventures and GM aids. (Not that community-content supplements can't be big too.)

Because of the many changes over the year, the future of supplement production is largely dependent on which way the common-wisdom wind blows next.

Day Sixteen: Move

In *OD&D* (1974), move was rated in inches. At various places, characters are said to move between 6" and 12", depending on armor level. (Monsters have a somewhat wider range.) The following paragraph, placed way back in Book III ("The Underworld and Wilderness Adventures") sort of explains it:

"In the underworld all distances are in feet, so wherever distances are given in inches convert them to tens of feet. Movement (distances given in Book 1) is in segments of approximately ten minutes. Thus it takes ten minutes to move about two moves — 120 feet for a fully armored character. Two moves constitute a turn, except in flight/pursuit situations where the moves/turn will be doubled (and no mapping allowed)."

So in other words, dungeons in *OD&D*, where most of the adventure occurred, had a totally different sort of movement from the base rates given in the game, and you had to convert to it from the strange inched movement given in the rules.

Why?

The move in *OD&D* was of course drawn from *Chainmail* (1971), where you'd find the foundation of these numbers: 6" for armored foot, 9" for heavy foot, and 12" for crossbowmen and longbowmen. Those *Chainmail* battles were meant to be fought on a sand table, between 4' to 7' wide and at least 8' long. The inches of movement were thus in relation to that table and referred to warfare aboveground.

ARMOR, ARMOR CLASS & WEAPONS

TYPES OF ARMOR & ENCUMBRANCE

The encumbrance factor for armor does not consider weight alone; it also takes into account the distribution of the weight of the armor and the relative mobility of the individual wearing the protective material. Therefore, weights for armor shown below are adjusted weights, and base movement speed is likewise shown.

Armor Type	Bulk	Weight*	Base Movement
BANDED	bulky	35#+	9"
CHAIN	fairly	30#+	9"
CHAIN, ELFIN	non-	15#	12"
LEATHER	non-	15#	12"
PADDED	fairly	10#	9"
PLATE (MAIL)	bulky	45#	6"
RING	fairly	25#	9"
SCALE	fairly	40#	6"
SHIELD, LARGE	bulky	10#	—
SHIELD, SMALL	non-	5#	—
SHIELD, SMALL, WOOD	non-	3#	—
SPLINT	bulky	40#	6"
STUDDED (LEATHER)	fairly	20#	9"

*Assumes human-size.

We certainly know that there was a mixture of aboveground warfare and below-ground exploration in Dave Arneson's Blackmoor, so the paired movement scales probably made sense for his original design. But it made less sense by the time it got into *OD&D* since Gary Gygax roughly envisioned a new system for outdoor play, based on the *Outdoor Survival* gameboard from Avalon Hill. As a result, there's a light discussion of hex-based travel in the *OD&D* books, totally separate from the inches.

The overall intent was probably to have strategic hex-based travel (move=hexes), tactical above-ground warfare (move=inches), and tactical below-ground exploration (move=feet), but one suspects that the mixed system was somewhat impenetrable to new players, especially those who had never seen *Chainmail*.

This vestigial system would remain a part of D&D for twenty-five years, with AD&D (1977-1979) losing the outdoor hexes, but instead offering a perhaps even more impenetrable movement system: "The base speed is inches, indicating tens of feet in the dungeon or similar setting indoors, tens of yards outdoors." *AD&D 2e* (1989) maintained that rule almost precisely, losing only the inches marker. Nonetheless, characters moved at rates of 3, 6, 9, or 12, which was tens of yards outside and tens of feet inside.

Table 64:
Base Movement Rates

Race	Rate
Human	12
Dwarf	6
Elf	12
Gnome	6
Half-elf	12
Halfling	6

Twenty-nine years after the release of *Chainmail*, D&D characters were still moving at rates based on the size of a standard sand table! Then *D&D 3e* appeared.

Day Seventeen: Trap

As I wrote for "Think", classic FRPGs required a different type of thinking because they were puzzle games in a way that modern-day RPGs aren't. A lot of that thinking came about thanks to traps. They're right there in *OD&D* (1974) in the "Tricks and Traps" section.

The remarkable thing about the original *OD&D* traps is that they mention the "fear of 'death'", but they're not deadly at all. The majority of them are mapping traps: fake stairs, collapsing stairs, slanting passages, sinking rooms, teleportation traps, and spatial-distortion rooms. They suggest that a lot of the puzzle solving of the earliest dungeons was in the mapping of the dungeons themselves. *Greyhawk* (1975) had some more of the same, but more damaging traps and more obstacles.

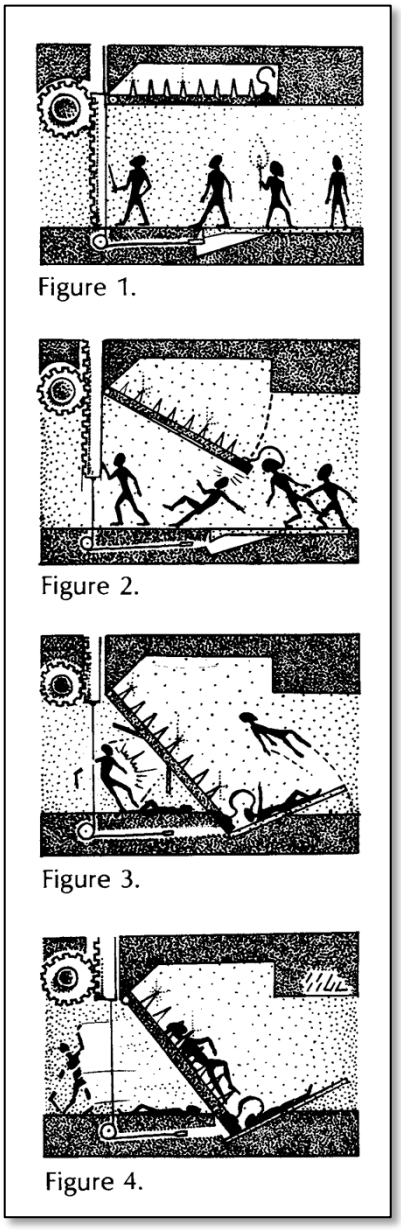


Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

The best-known traps appeared a few years later in *S1: Tomb of Horrors* (1978), the first published killer dungeon. As the name suggests, its traps were very deadly, including some of the first instant-death traps in D&D. That's a very different flavor of traps from the thinking traps of just a few years earlier, but that's probably because Gygax created *Tomb* for a very different reason: to challenge overly powerful characters. So, it might have not been typical on purpose — but then it became typical when it created a whole school of adventure design.

Grimtooth's Traps (1981) from Flying Buffalo is obviously the next great milestone in trap design, but its Rube Goldberg traps were satirical, meant for reading and laughing, not for use in dungeons. This deconstructive element suggests that some were already getting tired of the classic trap tropes of D&D (or perhaps of the killer trap tropes of *Tomb of Horrors*). However, some players actually took the traps seriously, which suggests other people weren't tired of the trap tropes at all. The Grimtooth traps continued through a number of volumes, ending in *Grimtooth's Dungeon of Doom* (1992). By the '00s they were clearly nostalgic, because d20 saw the release of *The Wurst of Grimtooth's Traps* (2005) and then Goodman Games was able to raise $170,000 on Kickstarter for *Grimtooth's Ultimate Trap Collection* (2015).

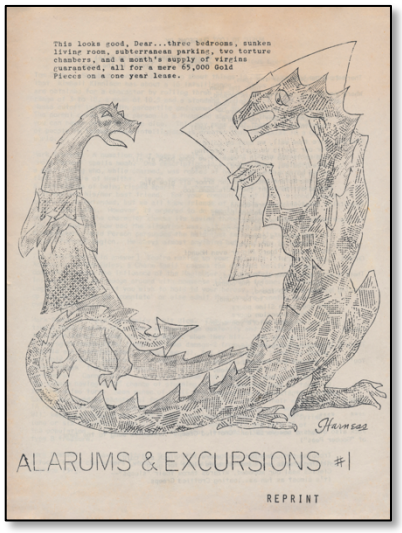
Meanwhile *D&D 3e* (2000) showed how much the more serious sort of traps had changed. They were no longer being used in dungeon design as a thinking puzzle, but instead as an attrition device, intended to shave away a few hit points or a few spells from characters as part of the overall challenge of a dungeon. As I've written elsewhere: the games of yesteryear (still found today in the OSR) and those of today (by which I mean non-OSR mainstream games) are very different beasts.

Day Eighteen: Write

One of the amazing things about the roleplaying industry is how much the average consumer can contribute to it. They've been able to write their own content from the start.

I mean, that kind of makes sense, because the earliest roleplaying industry was in large part semi-professional. But then many of those semi-pro writers went on to a high level of success. Tracy Hickman, Carl Smith, and Paul Reiche (with Erol Otus) were just a few of the small-press writers who ended up working for TSR. Meanwhile, other big companies started out with one person writing (or sometimes drawing): FASA may be the most notable company that literally started at a dining room table.

But even putting aside those semi-professional ascensions, roleplaying fans have always had their own writing venues. APAs were the first great writing communities of the industry, with *Alarums & Excursions* (1975-Present) being not just one of the earliest roleplaying publications, but also the most long-lived: it's still around today. More cohesive fanzines quickly followed, with their high-tide being in the '90s, when there were many to support games not being supported by their publishers. *Tales of the Reaching Moon* (1989-2002), the RuneQuest Magazine, may be the most notable for the fact that it led to the reinvigoration of a moribund Chaosium in the '10s, restoring one of the oldest companies in the industry.



It's also astonishing how quickly roleplaying fans and writers have responding to changing technologies.

Rec.games.frp was a "newsgroup" on the early internet of the '80s that allowed for worldwide discussions of roleplaying games, while mailing lists allowed discussion on specific games, some in list form, such as the Ars Magica Mailing List and the Traveller Mailing List, some in semi-curated digest form, such as the GURPS Digest and the RuneQuest Digest. These too were innovations of the late '80s.

Netbooks and smaller written texts followed in the '90s as Gopher and FTP allowed the transfer of files even before the advent of the World Wide Web; then with the dawn of the new century OSR websites debuted with full-length adventures and supplements for classic games. Shortly afterward, DTRPG and other commercial PDF sites made it so that anyone could publish semi-pro releases, just as they had in the '70s, before the barriers of entry ramped up.

But if there's a game changer for fan writing this century, it's probably the appearance of community content. Suddenly, everyone can write for many of their favorite games — and the quality of writing, artwork, and design is often amazing.

We've come a long way from that first semi-pro writing of the '70s. It's terrific that decades later, our creative industry still allows its fans and players to share in that same creativity.

Day Nineteen: Theme

Do classic roleplaying games have themes? That is, do they have underlying and repetitive ideas that are central to the games and reinforced by the gameplay? Or, do those themes only come out through the original stories told by gaming groups?

There are also certainly games that don't have themes. Maybe you could work out a theme based on the design of a universal game like *GURPS* (1986) or *Fate* (2003) ... but good luck.

However, classic games with a set genre and milieu are more likely to contain at least foundational themes, which individual gamemasters can ignore or not. They're revealed through setting and more importantly through mechanics. The more thematic a game, the more that their "System Does Matters", the more likely that theme is to shine through.

Here's my thoughts on possible themes for ten classic RPGs:

1. *OD&D* (1974): exploration & discovery
2. *Traveller* (1977): self-determinism
3. *RuneQuest* (1978): community, change
4. *Call of Cthulhu* (1981): our ultimate insignificance
5. *Champions* (1981): larger-than-life heroism
6. *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985): fealty, family, glory
7. *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (1986): corruption, decay
8. *Cyberpunk (1988): individuality, rage against the machine*
9. *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991): morality, power, temptation
10. *Legend of the Five Rings* (1997): honor, glory

Meanwhile, the modern era of indie design is much more likely to have games with a discernible theme. As already noted, "system does matters". That was Ron Edwards' core statement on why the mechanics matter to the style and genre of gameplay. Though we may have to engage in an archaeological dig to figure out the theming of a classic game, indies often wear their themes on their sleeves.

Day Twenty: Foundation

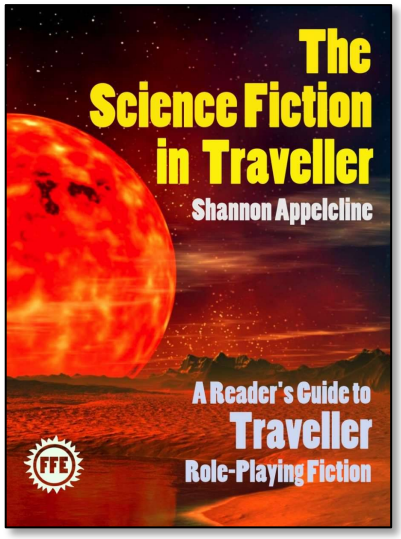
In my opinion, Appendix N of the *AD&D Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979) is one of the most important historical artifacts for roleplaying. By laying out the influences for AD&D, Gary Gygax told us as much about the creation of the game as any several interviews. In particular, he revealed a sword & sorcery foundation that was never understood by a majority of players, but which underlines the importance of more pulp-ish products such as *X1: Isle of Dread* (1980) and the Red Nails–influenced *I1: Dwellers of the Forbidden City* (1981). It's what's allowed newer games such as the dark fantasy of *Lamentations of the Flame Princess* (2010) and newer settings such as the weird fantasy of Dolmenwood (2017+) to go back to the the fictional foundations of the game.

Traveller (1977) never had an Appendix N, and I thought it needed one, because in many ways it's the other core game of our hobby, the universal science-fiction game to D&D's universal

fantasy and thus the game that built up many of the tropes either used by every other science-fiction RPG out there or else purposefully ignored by them.

So I wrote one.

I scoured Marc Miller's interviews, made a few obvious additions of my own, and later talked with Marc directly. Based on the initial work, I began writing book reviews on RPGnet, covering both books that were inspirational to Traveller and actual Traveller fiction. Later, under contract to Marc directly, I compiled them into a book. And that book, at last, had a Traveller Appendix N (though sadly it's labeled Appendix 2).



What did I come up with from my various sources as a list of foundational authors for Traveller? Poul Anderson, Isaac Asimov, Alfred Bester, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Gordon Dickson, David Drake, Harry Harrison, Robert Heinlein, Keith Laumer, Larry Niven, Alexei Panshin, H. Beam Piper, Jerry Pournelle, Christopher Rowley, E.E. "Doc" Smith, E.C. Tubb, and Jack Vance. If you'd like to see the complete listing, as well as my reviews of six of those volumes, the book I produced with Marc is called *The Science Fiction in Traveller* (2016).

Ironically, one of the foundational books that I didn't review in more depth was Isaac Asimov's Foundation. I currently place it as #2 in inspirational importance, after E.C. Tubb. Tubb's Dumarest of Terra books are amazing sources of Traveller adventures, with the idea of a world-jumping adventurer being every Traveller party ever, but Isaac Asimov's ideas of a rise and fall of a huge galactic empire feels more like the Traveller Imperium than anything else I've read (though H. Beam Piper repeats some of these same ideas).

Day Twenty-One: Simplicity

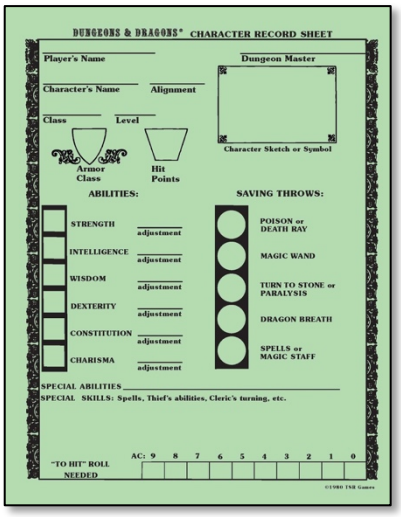
A lot of old-school fans remember *Basic D&D* fondly for its simplicity. Indeed, if you look at the Tom Moldvay version of *Basic D&D* (1981), which was my own entry to the hobby, it's a mere 64 pages in relatively large type.

It certainly helped that the book only went up to third level, reducing spell lists, magic-item lists, and monster lists, but overall the volume is a guide to simplicity. All of the core powers for the seven character classes in Moldvay, for example, are overviewed in a mere three pages: two pages of text, one page of charts. Compare that to the neat, tight 5-8 page spread for *each* class in the D&D 5e *Player's Handbook* (2014) and the different is obvious. Moldvay's Monsters are similarly tight, with under a dozen stats each and usually just a paragraph of description. The scant magic items appear more than a dozen to the page.

There just isn't a lot of fat on the B/X *Basic D&D* bones, but despite that there's enough crunch to keep players happy. There's plenty of equipment and a variety of monsters. Every characteristic cause some adjustments to play at a variety of values. Each class has at least

something that makes it unique. Well, except the fighters, who are primarily lauded for having high stats, which isn't even necessarily the case.

There is sufficient crunch in *Basic D&D* that there are even a few rules that likely get ignored, such as morale and encumbrance (both listed as optional).


DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® CHARACTER RECORD SHEET
Player's Name
Dungeon Master
Character's Name
Alignment
Class
Level
Character Sketch or Symbol
Armor Class
Hit Points
ABILITIES:
SAVING THROWS:
STRENGTH
INTELLIGENCE
WISDOM
DEXTERITY
CONSTITUTION
CHARISMA
adjustment
POISON or DEATH RAY
MAGIC WAND
TURN TO STONE or PARALYSIS
DRAGON BREATH
SPELLS or MAGIC STAFF
SPECIAL ABILITIES
SPECIAL SKILLS: Spells, Thief's abilities, Cleric's turning, etc.
"TO HIT" ROLL NEEDED
AC: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
©1981 TSR Games

The simplicity of *Basic D&D* always came across best in its memorable green character sheets, which are full of empty space. Six characteristics, six modifiers, five saving throws, and class, level, alignment, AC, and HP largely define your character. Special abilities get a line, special skills an inch of space. It's a different world from the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Permanent Character Folder & Adventures Records* (1979) that TSR would release just a few years later, whose name contained nearly as many words that the entirety of the *Basic D&D* record sheets.

Basic D&D's simplicity isn't necessarily the same thing as the Smallness of modern one-page RPGs. *Basic D&D* really had everything you needed to play three levels of Dungeons & Dragons, just without a lot of the nuance (or complexity) or modern versions of the game, while one-page RPGs tend to just give the barest outline of a game and lean on the GM to do the rest. In their own ways BD&D and one-page RPGS are as different as BD&D and D&D 5e are.

Day Twenty-Two: Substitute

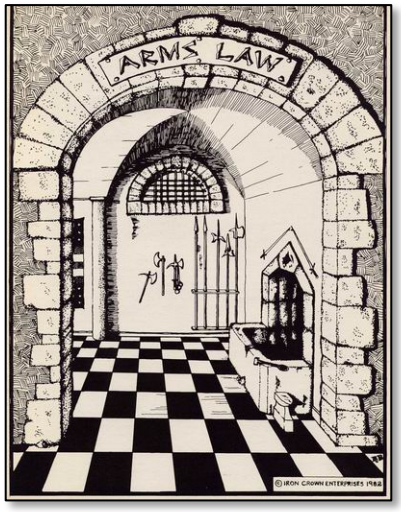
After *OD&D* (1974) was published, it became the talk of the APAs, first classic APAs such as *APA-L* (1964), then new APAs created specifically to discuss Dungeons & Dragons, such as *Alarums and Excursions* (1975). Much of that early conversation was focused on figuring out how to play the game and talking about different interpretations. There were also new character classes, new monsters, and new magic items, as well as considerable discussion on substituting out the existing game systems for new ones that the players preferred. No other game has ever created such a community of "modding", nor spawned so many new games as a result. There was even a name for these games that substituted game systems until they were (perhaps) somewhat different publications: VD&D, or Variant Dungeons & Dragons. Two game systems were particularly prone to substitution.

The first was the combat system, and fans were willing to do anything and everything to it. Popular variants included critical-hit systems, fumble systems, hit-location systems, and fatigue-point systems. These various changes were intended to make the system more tactical, more granular, more surprising, or all three.

The second was the magic system, and here the substitutions tended to be more focused on a singular idea: getting rid of the Vancian system of spell memorization and casting and replacing it with a spell-point system where players could use points to (tactically) cast a larger variety of spells. Other popular mods were new spheres of magic, new types of spell casters, and (once again) fatigue systems.

At first Gary Gygax was OK with players substituting in their own systems. In *Alarums & Excursions #2* (July 1975), he wrote, "My answer is, and has always been, if you don't like the way I do it, change the bloody rules to suit yourself and your players. D&D enthusiasts are far too individualistic and imaginative a bunch to be in agreement, and I certainly refuse to play god for them".

But within three years, amidst the release of *AD&D* (1977-1979), Gygax's tune totally changed. In *The Dragon* #16 (July 1978), he went on full offensive, saying first that "APAs are generally beneath contempt, for they typify the lowest form of vanity press" and then "Additions to and augmentations of certain parts of the D&D rules are fine. Variants which change the rules so as to imbalance the game or change it are most certainly not. These sorts of tinkering fall into the realm of creation of a new game, not development of the existing system, and as I stated earlier, those who wish to make those kind of changes should go and design their own game."



Gygax especially hated some of the popular substitutions. Critical hits, he said, "perverted" the game. Meanwhile he claimed, "Spell points add nothing to D&D except more complication, more record keeping, more wasted time, and a precept which is totally foreign to the rest of the game."

It's no wonder that as the '70s faded into the '80s, fans stopped substituting systems for D&D and instead started making games of their own, exactly as Gygax suggested. The last great substitution game was probably *Rolemaster* (1984), which replaced D&D's game systems one by one, starting with a new combat system in *Arms Law* (1980).

And then, following the release of *Rolemaster*, a new era began.

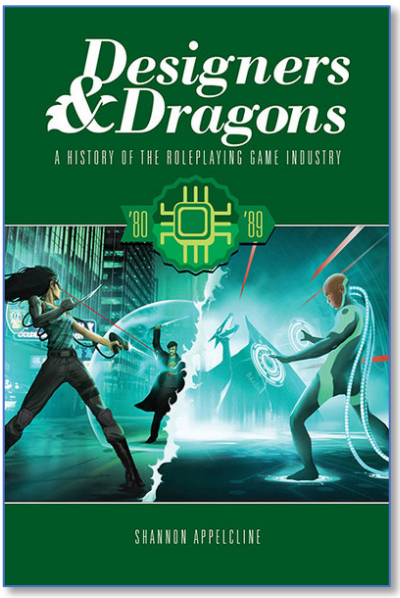
Day Twenty-Three Memory

When writing histories of the roleplaying industry, the trickiest and most untrustworthy thing that I have to deal with is memory. The origins of our hobby still live (somewhat) in living memory, and so whenever I can I talk with designers, artists, creators, and really anyone else in our hobby, I do. Every history that I write gets checked by people involved with the company, if it's possible. But I always have to take what's said with a grain of salt.

I've learned this from reading the interviews of game designers from the '70s, especially those who continued giving interviews up into the 21st century. Their answers tend to change over time. Their perceptions change over time. Presumably, their memories also change over time.

I shouldn't be surprised by this. I've occasionally had people ask me questions about my history in the hobby, from when I received a Cease & Desist from TSR for running an Ars Magica FTP site to when I began work on *Designers & Dragons*. My memories of those events generally fall into two categories. On the one hand, I have events that I didn't think about very much for decades, such as that ridiculous (and alegal) C&D from TSR, and there I struggle to remember

the specifics; on the other hand I have stories that I've returned to many times, from pretty early on, such as the one of how work began on *Designers & Dragons*, and there I'm clear on what happened, but I'm pretty sure that I'm repeating the story I've told before, rather than actually recollecting the original events. Because that's how memory works, or at least how we think it works currently: it's constantly being overwritten as we turn memory into story.



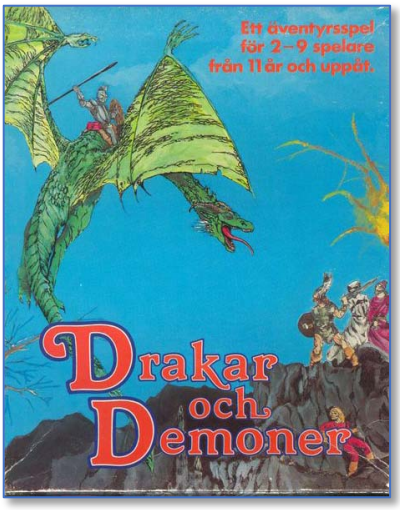
As a result of this, I prioritize the sources I use in my research for *Designers & Dragons*. Anything said at the time by the people involved has top priority. These are primary sources, including interviews and design notes. Next priority goes to secondary sources at the time, such as news, reviews, and gossip. After that, priority decreases the further it gets from the originating events. Lowest priority is actual discussion with the principals.

Still, I always try and talk with the principals if I can. Sometimes it's just double-checking my work, since offering my foundation of written history seems to do a lot to help memory. But often it's questions. I try to make the questions very specific, intended to fill in gaps. I find that memory is worst for dates, for order of event, and for details, but it often seems pretty good for cause and effect and for reasoning. That is, we can remember that we did something and we can remember why we did it, but we can't necessarily remember when it happened or what the specific were.

Based on the great discussions I've had with a variety of designers on events decades old, I also suspect a lot of them have better memories than I do.

Day Twenty-Four: Translate

The shockwaves of *D&D's* release resounded across the globe faster than TSR, then a small press in Wisconsin, could control it. It took TSR almost a decade to catch up, with the *Donjons & Dragons Niveau Dèbutant* (1982) in France being one of their first translated releases, thanks to Gary Gygax's personal work with the French gaming scene. Germany saw its own *Basis Set* (1983) a year later courtesy of Fantasy Spiele Verlags. Italy, Japan, and Spain had to wait until 1985, Sweden until 1986.



This vacuum created by a shortage of translated D&D rules gave the opportunity for local publishers to get out their own fantasy roleplaying games. The story in Sweden is the most famous, where Äventyrsspel (Target Games) published *Drakar och Demoner* ("Dragons and Demons", 1982) based on Chaosium's BRP (1980) and *Magic World* (1982) rules and took over the whole market. When a local gaming story called Titan Games tried to publish the official *D&D* rules four years later, it was an abject failure.

Germany's *Das Schwarze Auge* ("The Dark Eye", 1984) actually postdated the country's translated edition of *D&D* by a year, but it's the other major success story among FRPGs in the wild west days of the international market, before D&D tightened its grip. Like *Drakar och Demoner* before it, it managed to outsell D&D on its home turf. There were also notable FRPGs in other markets, such as *I Signori del Cao* (1983), *Kata Kumbas* (1984), and *Lex Arcana* (1993) in Italy, *Rêve: the Dream Ouroboros* (1985) in France, and *Aquelarre* (1990) in Spain, but they weren't able to surpass D&D like *Drakar och Demoner* and *Das Scwarze Auge* did.

The consolation for TSR (and now Wizards of the Coast) is that though their slow movement into the international scene cost them some of those markets for a few decades, it didn't have many repercussions on their US sales. Though different RPGs became the foundational FRPGs of Germany and Sweden, they've never been able to push into the US market.

Two attempts have made made for *The Dark Eye*, one by FanPro (2003) and one by Ulisses Spiele (2016), and it's remained an also-ran next to the more distinct RPGs published by those companies. *Drakar och Demoner* has done better, but it's been so totally revamped by its recent owners, RiotMinds, that it's not really the old-school game from the '80s any more — and more notably it made itself unique through a highly evocative setting, which is primarily how it's been sold in the US, as *The Trudvang Chronicles* (2017). (What Fria Ligan, who just acquired the property, will do with it remains an open question.)

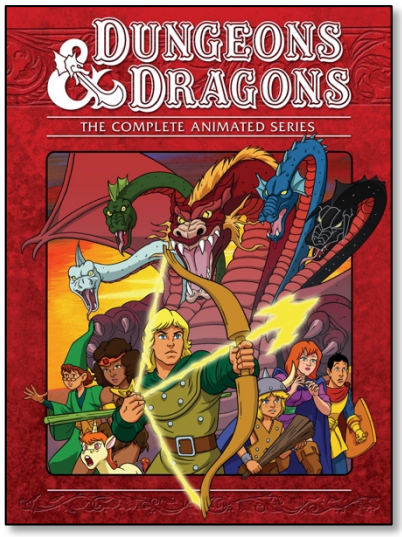
Times may be changing now, as the '10s saw a strong wave of games being translated from other languages to English, with Swedish publishers leading the way. But the story of how more far-flung foreign RPGs — ones that aren't just replacements for D&D — failed to penetrate the English-language market in the '90s, then became some of the most successful games in the industry in the '10s is a whole other story.

Day Twenty-Five: Welcome

When *OD&D* (1974) was released, it was directed at a narrow group of potential players: miniature wargamers. Without the existing knowledge of wargaming conventions, such as inched movement on a sand table, newer players could find *D&D's* gameplay somewhat intimidating — and even with that, the rules were obscure, because Gary Gygax was creating a whole new type of play.

In his *Basic Dungeons & Dragons* (1977), J. Eric Holmes' goal was to create a game that was more welcoming to newcomers. That goal was refined and reiterated in the later editions of *Basic D&D* produced first by Tom Moldvay (1981) and then by Frank Mentzer (1983). The results were phenomenal. Not only did the game explode in popularity, but it reached new, younger players; it was roleplaying's first demographic expansion.

Another critical component was interwoven with those later *Basic Dungeons & Dragons* sets: the *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon (1983-1985). In it, players young and even younger, male and female, and black and white all got to see representations of themselves in *D&D*. They all knew they were welcome.



It's somewhat shocking that after the increasing diversity of D&D in the early '80s, the idea seemed to go on hiatus until at least the '00s. Maybe White Wolf was carrying the water for the rest of the industry, with its improving female demographics, particularly after the release of *Minds Eye: The Masquerade* (1993). What's more certain is that the industry was stepping back from its heights of success in the previous years. *Magic: The Gathering* (1993) and computer games are usually listed as the prime reasons, but an industry that focuses on its existing player base rather than welcoming new players rarely is successful.

2000, and the advent of *D&D 3e* (2000), was a milestone for once more improving welcome through increased diversity. The iconic characters of the new edition were still pretty white, but included a black monk and an Asian sorcerer and were nearly split between men and women. More players than ever could see characters that represented themselves and feel more welcomed. *Pathfinder* (2008) and later editions of *D&D* have continued and advanced these trends — but they aren't new, just a return to the welcoming nature suggested by the *D&D* cartoon two decades earlier.

However, being welcoming is more than just showing players that people like them are a part of the game. It's also about presenting dilemmas and stories that are important to people from a

variety of cultures. This concept seems to be really bubbling up in the ’10s and ’20s, offering a wider variety of stories than our industry has ever previously seen.

A lot of this has come about through the indie community. *Dogs of the Vineyard* (2004) was designed to treat “the concerns of Mormonism with subtlety and respect.” The whole “belonging outside belonging” gamestyle, as first revealed in *Dream Askew* and *Dream Apart* (2014, 2019) was meant to highlight marginalized peoples building community, in this case Queer and Jewish peoples.

Even more impressively, the new welcoming diversity has hit the mainstream with the award-winning Call of Cthulhu supplement *Harlem Unbound* (2017) from Darker Hue Studios, published in a second edition (2020) by Chaosium themself. The book does more than just reveal Harlem as a game setting, it also reveals the experiences of Black Americans and puts the players in their shoes.

The tradition of welcome in our hobby is an old one, and it’s great to see it expanding even further in the modern day. But, new games and supplements do more than just allow diverse peoples to see their own experiences represented in a game. They also reveal those experiences to the rest of us, putting us in different cultures: different worlds, even within our world. And isn’t that what roleplaying is all about?

Day Twenty-Six: Theory

There is just one theory in roleplaying, and that is GNS, which is GNS Theory, as proposed in “System Does Matter” (1999), by Ron Edwards. It basically says that there are three types of player activity in RPGs, which are exclusive to each other, and thus three types of RPGs: gamist RPGs where players try to win; narrativist RPGs where players try to tell stories; and simulationist RPGs, where players try to recreate a genre or source, usually through a well-simulated world.

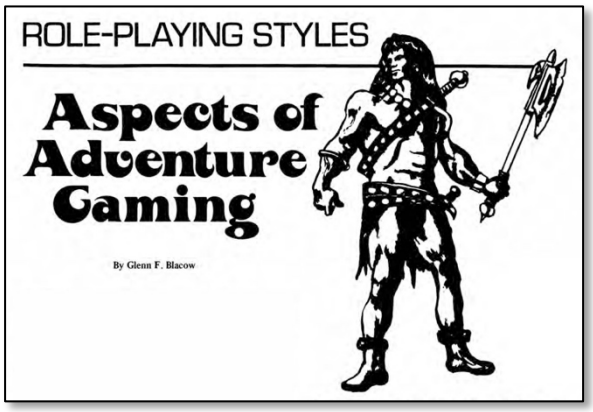
In the years after the publication of GNS theory, there were such massive online flamewars that GNS itself sometimes became a proscribed topic. Some of these flamewars centered around the claim that GNS said that Narrative games were the best, which it did not. However, GNS theory is quite dogmatic in the claim that games are “incoherent” if they didn’t fulfill exactly one of the G-N-S criteria. Universal games were particularly attacked, but assaults were made on almost all then-current RPGs, because none of them were trying to highlight just Gaming, Narrative, or Simulation.

There are other entirely valid complaints about the theory, most notably that it’s hard to nail down how games invoke Gamist, Narrativist, and Simulationist elements. Is *Vampire: The Masquerade* narrativist because it’s not just about fighting, or is it gamist because it’s about winning in a different way? Is *RuneQuest* simulationist because it has training and learned-experience systems or is it narrativist because it tells the story of the oncoming Hero Wars? The terms often mean what people want them to mean.

It’s also not actually true that there is just one theory in the roleplaying field, as GNS itself developed out of The Threefold Model, discussed on rec.games.frp.advocacy as far back as

1997. The biggest difference was that the Threefold Model highlighted GM choice while GNS is more about player desire and game design.

There have also been other theories, such as Color Theory and Channel Theory, but few have caught on. In fact, to find other well-known theories you have to go back to the dawn of the industry where some of the earliest theories had to do with player types.



Glen Blacow's "Aspects of Adventure Gaming" in *Different Worlds #10* (October 1980) laid out adventure gaming as containing power gaming, roleplaying, wargaming, and storytelling — and power gaming has definitely become one of the classic roleplaying archetypes.

Similarly, Sandy Petersen, Jeff Okamoto, and others came up with "Real Men, Real Roleplayers, Loonies and Munchkins" (1983) as player archetypes. At least the term munchkin predated the article, but it was another powerful classification of players.

The GNS flamewars have died down in the last decade. Perhaps just like once controversial terms such as power gamer and munchkin, the G's, the N's, and the S's are on their way to simply becoming part of our lexicon.

Day Twenty-Seven: Fraction

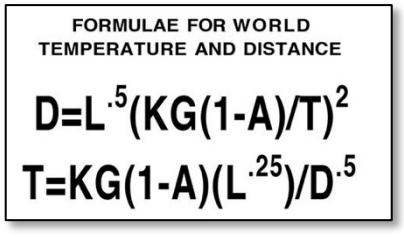
I've written on previous days how much roleplaying has changed from the dawn of the industry in the '70s to the modern day, so much so that games from the two eras often feel like they're totally different categories of play. But, that's generally been true for every era of roleplaying, with distinctively different mechanics, tropes, and styles of play appearing in each decade.

In the '80s (but starting earlier), one of the biggest trends of the industry was complexity. Much of this was in response to *OD&D* (1974): new games such as *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1977) tried to create more realistic settings and more realistic mechanics — perhaps speaking to a desire for simulation in gaming.

The massive charts and tables of *Chivalry & Sorcery* are notable, but perhaps not as much as a smaller press fantasy RPG, *Ysgarth* (1979), which really showed the possibilities of complex simulation. It includes attributes such as "Resistance to Surprise", which is defined as "100-(EYE+WIS+(2xHEA))", and "Chance to Hear Noise (CHN)", or "EYE+(DEX+INT+WIS)/3". Yes, the complex math of the second generation of RPGs even had fractions.

This tendency would continue through a stream of RPG development into the '90s, with the *Bushido* (1979), *Aftermath!* (1981), and *Daredevils* (1982) trilogy by Paul Hume and Bob Charrette being leaders in the category. *Champions* (1981), which debuted the Hero System, revealed how math would continue to be important for that first generation of universal systems.

Phoenix Command (1986) and other releases by Leading Edge Games are generally considered the epitome of mathematical complexity in roleplaying design.



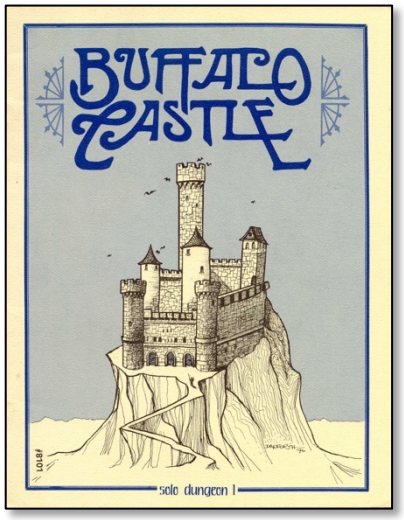
Some games had a relatively simple core but found their complexity when they dove deeper into simulation through subsystems. Thus, the world generation of *Traveller Book Six: Scouts* (1983) has formulas such as this one, to find the period (or year length) of a planet: "P=(D^3/M)^.5". Not only does it have fractions, but powers and even fractional powers! I can't even imagine a modern game having mathematical formulas of this sort.

Even *RuneQuest* (1978), which used lots of fractions in previous editions for averaging derived characteristic, has moved over to a simpler system in the newer *RuneQuest: Roleplaying in Glorantha* (2018) of using one stat as the core for a derived characteristic and slightly varying that based on other values.

Will we see a CMR (Complex Math Revival) in a few years, bringing back that older design style? My guess is no.

Day Twenty-Eight: Solo

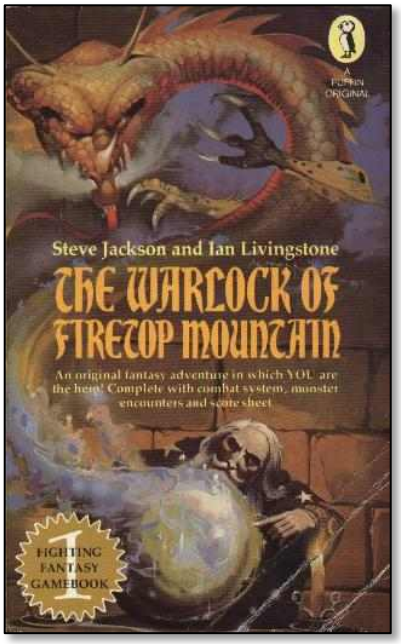
Solo roleplaying started with *Buffalo Castle* (1976) for *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975), where Rick Loomis and Flying Buffalo said, "What if these roleplaying games were used as solitaire exploration exercises?" *Tunnels & Trolls* pushed hard on the idea, through *When the Cat's Away* (1993), the twenty-fourth Solo adventure for *Tunnels & Trolls*, almost two decades later.



But, Flying Buffalo wasn't alone: the concept was surprisingly strong in the industry's early days, probably because the number of roleplaying fans was smaller, and it was harder to make gaming connections without an internet (though the number of fans who made connections through letter columns and conventions is impressive). *The Fantasy Trip* (1977) kicked off its own line of solo adventures with *Death Test* (1978), while Judges Guild also played in the arena in the '70s. There was even random dungeon generation in the *AD&D Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979) that could be used for solo play. By the '80s, Chaosium and even TSR had joined in with full solo adventures.

The decline of solo adventures in the '80s may have been due to the growth of the industry and the increased ease of finding other players, but there was also a major move toward book-sized solo adventures for the mass-market. This new market also placed new constraints, such as the need to have tight little rules within the book itself. TSR's *Endless Quests* (1982) led the way, but weren't quite games. Game systems appeared in *Fighting Fantasy* (1982), *Steve Jackson's Sorcery!* (1983), *Lone Wolf* (1984), and many others.

Surprisingly, the very successful gamebook market, which eclipsed the original solo adventures, itself sputtered out in the ’90s, most likely due to the advent of computer games offering much more immersive solo gaming experiences. (Coming full circle, many classic gamebooks such as *Fighting Fantasy* and *Sorcery!* are now available as computer games.)



Those solo adventures and gamebooks are the obvious thing to talk about when considering individual gaming, but there’s one type of solo gaming in the early industry which gets less attention: many early roleplaying games had creative subsystems that were essentially solo games of their own.

Traveller (1977) led the trend with its character creation being the first subsystem of its sort, where players might spend hours playing the system on their own. It later followed that up with many more systems that could engage players for hours of solo time, including the ship construction of *High Guard* (1980) and the world generation of *Scouts* (1983).

Champions (1981) was another major game of this sort, with its point-based character creation allowing players to spend hours piecing together powers. The headquarter and vehicle generation of *Champions II* (1982) and the danger-room generation of *Champions III* (1983) continued this trend. Though some of the *Traveller* systems were random, many of the other subsystems were purposefully creative, allowing a very different sort of solo play.

Unfortunately, just like the solo adventures and gamebooks, solo subsystems have largely disappeared from roleplaying games in the modern day. They all three tended to be a trend of the ’70s and ’80s, and have appeared much less frequently since — though some classic games like *GURPS* and *Traveller* continue them in their newest incarnations.

Day Twenty-Nine: System

“System Does Matter” (1999), by Ron Edwards, of course started the great GNS wars. However, it’s probably far more important (and perhaps less controversial) in its core claim: that system does matter. Edwards states it right at the start:

> *“Here it is: ‘It doesn’t really matter what system is used. A game is only as good as the people who play it, and any system can work given the right GM and players.’ My point? I flatly, entirely disagree.”*

Edwards sort of returns to the point at the end, too, but in between he focuses on terminology and definition, not just GNS, but also the less well-known Fortune/Karma/Drama. And, that’s too bad, because the core concept, that system is crucial to the creation of a game, might have resulted in much more nuanced discussions than the GNS arguments (and in some places it did).

For me, Greg Stafford's *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985) has always been the game that proved to me that system does matter. It's a masterwork in how to design a game to evoke a specific setting and genre. Characters are ruled by their passions and are fighting to upholds the beliefs of their religion. They're loyal to their lord and to their family. They're willing to put their lives on the line. Each of these elements, all true to The Matter of Britain, arises from specific mechanics in the game, among them passions, personality traits, religious bonuses, the armor of chivalry, loyalty traits, wintering rules, yearly adventures, and glory. Together, they prove that system does matter.

Certainly, generic systems have had their hey-day, prime among them the Hero System (1981) and *GURPS* (1986). For a while, in the '80s, it looked like they might overtake the industry, and certainly they were good systems for simulation-hungry players. But even though newcomer *Savage Worlds* (2003) has proven that you can tell evocative stories with a universal system, in general, system does matter, and many more publishers have gone the way of creating individual systems for individual games.

Fria Ligan may be the best modern-day example of a compromise between reusing mechanics and creating game-specific systems. Though they constantly reuse the Year Zero system, it's a house system, not a universal system, which means that it's varied from game to game. After originating the system with *Mutant: Year Zero* (2014), they used a looser version for *Coriolis: The Third Horizon* (2016) because it was designed out of house, they removed death from *Tales from the Loop* (2017) because it was about kids, and they added polyhedrons to *Forbidden Lands* (2018) because it was old-school.

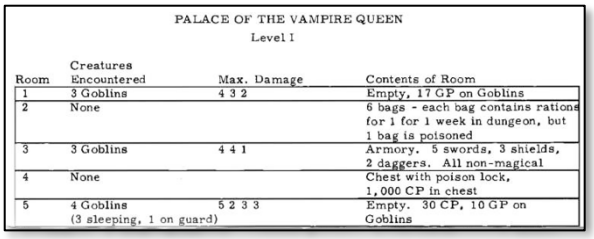
Even in a house system, system does matter, and can produce evocative games that encourage the players to enact specific genres and themes.

Day Thirty: Mention

The earliest dungeons in the industry has the barest room descriptions. *Palace of the Vampire Queen* (1976) demonstrates what the early scene looked like, with its listing of monsters and treasures for rooms: "3 goblins (4, 3, 2), empty, 17 GP on goblins" says one entry in its tables of room contents.

By the time TSR's first standalone adventure, *G1: Steading of the Hill Giant Chief* (1978), was published, adventure descriptions had seen a big leap forward. Those monster and treasure listings were now bridged with text mentioning evocative elements, and tying it all together: "BARRACKS: 2 soundly sleeping giants (H.P.: 39, 38) can be heard snoring among the 10 beds and 10 chests in this room. There are items of clothing hanging from walls and a couple of torches are smouldering in wall cressets. No treasure is in the room, save a small pouch in the first chest searched, which will contain 110 p.p."

Starting with *C1: The Hidden Shrine of Tamoachan* (1980), and in fact dating back to the tournament printing of the adventure as *Tamoachan: The Hidden Shrine of Lubaatum* (1979), TSR had a new innovation: boxed, read-aloud text, which told the players exactly what they saw. "The walls of this corridor are wet and slimy. The stucco covering has become saturated with water and is decomposing and sloughing off in spots on the southern wall, exposing the seams of one of the large stone blocks from which the structure was built." This innovation soon was used across all of TSR's adventures and has only fallen out of favor in the recent day.



PALACE OF THE VAMPIRE QUEEN
Level 1

Room	Creatures Encountered	Max. Damage	Contents of Room
1	3 Goblins	4 3 2	Empty, 17 GP on Goblins
2	None		6 bags - each bag contains rations for 1 for 1 week in dungeon, but 1 bag is poisoned
3	3 Goblins	4 4 1	Armory. 5 swords, 3 shields, 2 daggers. All non-magical
4	None		Chest with poison lock, 1,000 CP in chest
5	4 Goblins (3 sleeping, 1 on guard)	5 2 3 3	Empty. 30 CP, 10 GP on Goblins

The Companions, one of the most innovative fantasy supplement producers of the '80s, was one of the few companies to take the idea further. Their unique locale description came in a multitude of levels, with different text to be read depending on how much attention the players were playing!

What's typically unsaid when describing this evolution of adventure descriptions is the fact that it represented a massive change in how the gamemaster was treated — a change no less important than the changes from exploration to story that came about as part of the Hickman Revolution. These descriptive changes transformed the GM from being a creative demiurge who freely described his world to increasingly acting as an interface with someone else's creativity. Sure, the GM still had creativity, but it was at a whole different level.

When the earliest game producers put out releases like *OD&D* (1974) and *Traveller* (1977), they saw no need for adventure publication, and this is why: they saw each referee as an independent creator. But year by year, that primordial vision would change, probably reaching a low sometime in the '80s or '90s.

Day Thirty-One: Thank

It's easy in the roleplaying industry to just focus on the creators. As the name suggests, *Designers & Dragons* mainly concentrates on the game designers themselves, while other books such as the excellent *Art & Arcana* look more deeply into the artwork and thus the artists. However, there are lots, lots more people involved with the creation and release of any roleplaying product, and they should all be offered thanks. I'm talking about editors, proofreaders, layout artists, and graphic designers who produce books, but also the accountants, marketers, administrators, attorneys, shippers, and everyone else who keep a roleplaying company running. Even those who don't directly contribute to a product do directly contribute to that product getting out into the marketplace, and they're almost all doing it at lower rates than expected for their expertise because they love the hobby.

In fact, usually the larger a roleplaying company grows, the more people there are doing non-design work. A one-man indie company or designer publisher is likely doing actual design, but when a company gets large enough, it can easily have no designers on staff, and instead be depending on freelance talent.

When I worked at Chaosium in the ’90s, it had about 20 staff at its height, based on the short-lived success of the *Mythos* CCG (1996). Of those staff members, president Greg Stafford was quite possibly the only one spending almost all of his time doing design work. Charlie Krank was perhaps next, but this was all focused on the design of *Mythos* itself, and so it came and went in a few years. Eric Vogt did some of the same, but his focus was on graphic design. Lynn Willis was a brilliant line editor for *Call of Cthulhu* and certainly revised the design of both it and the *Elric!* game, as well as innumerable supplements that passed over his desk, but he was more often wearing an editor hat, improving everyone else’s design. Sam Shirley did the same with *Nephilim* and *Pendragon*. Janice Sellers and I mixed graphic design, layout, and editorial, with just a tiny bit of design work as required to fill in the blanks. Drashi Khendup did graphic design. From there, you come to the names that mostly aren’t in published works, but still kept the company running. Eric and Dana did marketing; Anne and Cathy did accounting; Peter did shipping; Christine answered the phones and did other administrative duties; Iggy supported those tasks. When we bloomed from the staff of seven or eight when I joined, to the height of 20, we had another half-dozen staff members who I can no longer name.

The point being: a lot went into the maintenance of that roleplaying company — into the maintenance of any roleplaying company. So thanks to all the unsung heroes of roleplaying, who get it all done, but whose names don’t necessarily appear on the products, and who generally don’t appear in the historical records afterwards.

The Indices

The short, prompted essays in *The #RPGaDay Appendix* cover a large variety of topics at lightning pace, so these indices are meant to assist in the location of specific topics of discussion.

Index I is a regular index, like those found in the other *Designers & Dragons* books, which is to say, a listing of people, publications, companies and other things. It only covers the historical articles.

Index II is a listing of the original #RPGaDay prompts. It does include both the historical and personal essays because they're easy to separate: the first entry is always the historical essay, and if a second entry exists, it's the personal essay.

Index I: Articles

Covering only the Historical Articles

Index II: Prompts

Covering both Historical & Personal Articles