

# *Designers & Dragons*

A HISTORY OF THE ROLEPLAYING GAME INDUSTRY

## THE PLATINUM APPENDIX



SHANNON APPELCLINE



# *Designers & Dragons*

**PLATINUM  
APPENDIX**

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# Foreword: The Platinum Appendix

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I was warned that the *Designers & Dragons* Kickstarter was going to be like riding a dragon, but I didn't appreciate what that truly meant. It means: *extreme craziness*. If you're lucky it means: *seeing the contributions increase every time you turn away from your computer*. And then it means: *scrambling to figure out what other cool stuff you can offer to your backers*.

For the first week of the Kickstarter, I could barely catch my breath. Every morning, I awoke to a barrage of new questions — about the book, about its logistics, and about what we could offer next. Thanks to the tremendous interest in the *Designers & Dragons* Kickstarter, we were forced to think about what we could publish later in the year and also what we might be doing a year or two down the road.

This Platinum Appendix to *Designers & Dragons* is the first result. It's our thanks to you for supporting *Designers & Dragons*.

The Kickstarter had one other great result: it put us in contact with fans who were interested in the history of the industry and with people who could tell us

more about that history. So within you'll find a history of the thief and one of the first third-party *D&D* supplements, thanks to Daniel Wagner, who joined the Kickstarter and offered to tell me about the Aurania Gang. You'll also find three very special histories — about women in the industry, about the Hero Auxiliary Corps, and about my own gaming group — all thanks to Platinum Dragon patrons who wanted to learn more and to see those stories committed to paper before they were lost.

As promised, this Appendix also contains the yearly histories of the industry that I've written at RPGnet over the last six years. When added to the four topical histories, these yearly reviews bring the word count of this Platinum Appendix up to 30,000 words — somewhere between 20% and 25% of the total length of one of the printed *Designers & Dragons* volumes. Not bad for a couple of months' work — and years and years of research before that, of course.

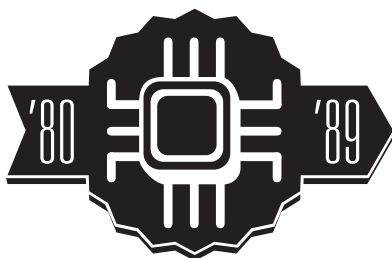
So once more, my thanks to you — as backers, as historical sources, and as patrons who asked for more. Because of your support for *Designers & Dragons*, this Platinum Appendix will *not* be the end; you'll see more from me about the history of the industry in the future.

Watch this space in two or three years' time.

Shannon Appelcline

October 31, 2014





Part One:

# Game Designers

(An Industry Trend)

**A**s the name suggests, *Designers & Dragons* is about the people who create games. They appear throughout all four volumes — from Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson to the newest creators in the ‘10s. However, those designers aren’t a homogeneous whole. Instead, they fall into many categories — united by history, interests, or innate characteristics.

The *old guard* was one of the first groups to distinguish itself, as designers from the earliest roleplaying publishers created new companies of their own. Soon afterward, storytelling designers began to explore new ground in games like *Paranoia* (1984) and *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985). Eventually this trend led to the *indie designers* of the modern day, who are creating games like *Sorcerer* (2001) and *Fiasco* (2009) — many of which are totally unlike the fantasy roleplaying games that dominated the early industry.

Roleplaying designers also come from a variety of backgrounds. There are histories to be written of how *diverse designers* have impacted the industry. However, during the Kickstarter for *Designers & Dragons*, one of the questions backers asked most was about the role of women in the gaming industry. So in this section, you’ll find a history of *female designers*, which offers a different aspect of the history of the gaming industry.

Designers	Years	First RPG	Page
Women in the Roleplaying Industry	1975-Present	<i>Alarums &amp; Excursions</i> #1 (1975)	5
<i>The Old Guard</i>	1980-Present	<i>The Space Gamer</i> #27 (1980)	’80s: 315
<i>Storytelling Games</i>	1984-Present	<i>Paranoia</i> (1984)	’00s: 137

This history courtesy of Platinum Dragons Janelle Cooper and Jacq Jones and the Women & Gaming Forum of BGG.

# Women in the Roleplaying Industry: 1974–Present

Although the roleplaying industry has had a well-deserved reputation for being male-dominated since its earliest days, women have always been involved as players, as writers, as designers, and in a variety of other roles. Through the decades, their impact and involvement has grown and evolved.

## Female Players in the Industry: 1974–1979

Before looking at the role of women in the roleplaying industry, we should first consider the role of women in roleplaying — especially in its earliest days.

RPG historian Jon Peterson began his own look at the topic with a reminder that roleplaying evolved from an extremely male-dominated hobby: miniatures wargaming. Peterson says that *Strategy & Tactics* (1967–Present) surveys showed as few as

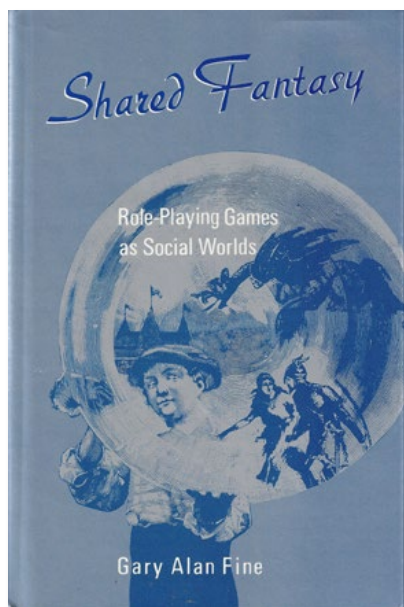


1975: Alarums & Excursions #1

0.5% of wargamers were female. This was the state of the industry when *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) first appeared.

Though it evolved from wargaming, roleplaying offered something in addition to warfare. Its focus on individual characters appealed to a wider variety of players, including more women. Gary Gygax, in *The Dragon* #22 (April 1979), opined that “at least 10% of the players are female!”

However, surveys, referee lists, and con attendance from the period show lower numbers than Gygax’s estimate, as reported in *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games*



*as Social Worlds* (1983), Dr. Gary Alan Fine’s analysis of the young roleplaying industry. Among the earliest contributors to the roleplaying industry, *The Space Gamer* offered the lowest estimate of female fans, with just 0.4% of its respondents (two people) being women — but unlike many of its contemporaries, *The Space Gamer* maintained a strong focus on science-fiction and fantasy wargames, not RPGs, which may explain the difference. A Judges Guild survey reported 2.3%, while Fine estimated that 3.8% of players from a referee’s list in *The Dragon* were women. Finally, con attendance records showed that about 5% of attendees at Origins ’78 and a contemporary Gen Con were women.

*“I offer three explanations for women’s lack of involvement: characteristics of women; the process of recruitment into the gaming world; and reactions of men to the presence of women and female characters in the gaming scenario.”*

– Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983)

The precise numbers of female players probably lay somewhere between the estimates of Gygax and Fine. Women playing at the time report that magazine subscriptions were sometimes in the names of their husbands or children, which might have led to them not participating in those magazines’ surveys, and that they often stayed home with children while their husbands attended a convention. That leaves us with an estimate of female players being between 5% and 10% of all roleplayers in the late ’70s.

So what did that mean for women in the industry?

## Female Pioneers in the Industry: 1975–1986

Lee Gold was the industry's first female star and in the '70s she was one of the ten or so most important people in the roleplaying field. She'd been a science-fiction and fantasy fan since junior high, then joined the roleplaying hobby in 1974 when her friends — Owen and Hilda Hannifen from San Francisco — shared their copy of *D&D* with her.

The Hannifens and Gold were all members of the Amateur Press Association (APA) of the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society. The Hannifens soon began sharing stories about *Dungeons & Dragons* here, but non-roleplayers in the APA asked the *D&D* enthusiasts to start up a distribution of their own. Meanwhile, Gold was worried about the increasing divergence between different groups' *D&D* games and the "culture shock" that it could cause if someone tried to join a new group. These factors led Gold to start *Alarums & Excursions* (1975-Present), an APA that freed the Science Fiction Society from talk of *D&D* and gave gamers the opportunity to form a culture around the game.

*"When I was a girl, I had Chainmail  
And a three-book boxed D&D set,  
And I used all the Platonic solids  
To determine what monsters I'd get."*

– Lee Gold, *Filker Up* #6 (2009)

*A&E* was a milestone in the history of roleplaying. With its publication in June 1975, it became the earliest periodical solely dedicated to roleplaying games — predating even TSR's *Dragon* (1976–2007). It's also *the* most long-lived roleplaying periodical, having missed just two months of publication in almost 40 years. Over those years, *A&E* has featured a lot of all-star contributors, including Gary Gygax, Edward Simbalist, Wilf Backhaus, Dave Hargrave, Steve Perrin, Jonathan Tweet, Robin D. Laws, and Rob Heinsoo. It deserves a history of its own, and that's thanks to Lee Gold.

Jennell Jaquays didn't face the same challenges entering the RPG field as Gold, because at the time she was writing under the name Paul Jaquays. Nonetheless, today we can recognize her as another influential woman in the early industry. She started out by creating *The Dungeoneer* (1976) magazine, where she wrote some of the industry's earliest adventures. She then authored numerous groundbreaking works for Judges Guild and Chaosium starting in 1979. Like the other women of the time, she offered a unique perspective on the industry.

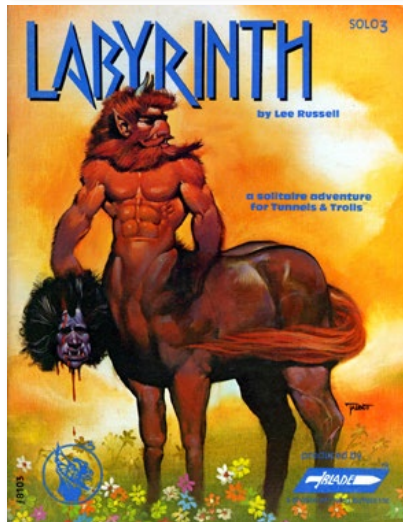
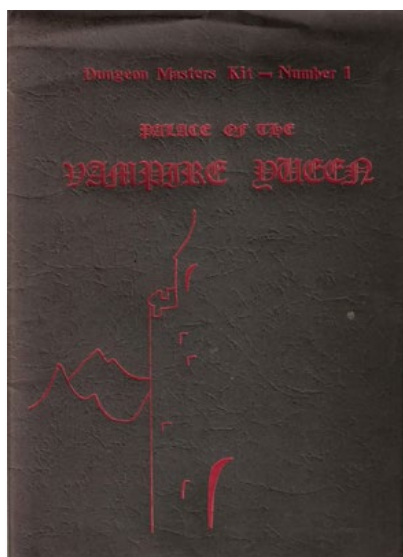
Though Gold and Jaquays entered the industry on their own, Dr. Gary Alan Fine's studies suggest that, in the '70s, the majority of women were recruited into roleplaying by a husband or boyfriend. Similarly, many of the earliest female designers appeared in the industry as the co-authors of books written with a significant other.

The earliest of these co-authored books were all third-party *D&D* supplements. *The Character Archaic* (1975), and early adventures *Palace of the Vampire Queen* (1976) and *The Misty Isles* (1977) were co-authored by Judith Kerestan of Wee Warriors; *Quest for the Fazzlewood* (1978), published by Metro Detroit Gamers, was co-authored by Laurie Van De Graaf; *Rahasia* (1979) and *Pharaoh* (1980)

by DayStar West Media were co-authored by Laura Hickman, who also contributed to a few later TSR projects; *Carse* (1980) and *Jonril* (1982) from Midkemia Press were co-authored by April Abrams; and *The Dragon Tree Spell Book* (1981), *The Handbook of Tricks and Traps* (1981), and a few others from Dragon Tree Press were co-authored by Mary Ezzell.

The first major roleplaying supplement authored entirely by a woman appears to be Flying Buffalo's *Tunnels & Trolls Solo Adventure #3: Labyrinth* (1978), by Lillian "Lee" Russell. Flying Buffalo was one of the earliest roleplaying companies to reach out to female designers; Liz Danforth joined the company in 1978 as an editor for *Sorcerer's Apprentice* magazine (1978–1983). Over the next five years, Flying Buffalo's magazine largely represented her vision.

As the '70s faded into the '80s, women designers moved from producing supplements to producing roleplaying games of their own. Liz Danforth's fifth-edition update of Ken St. Andre's *Tunnels & Trolls* (1979) marked a major revamp of the rules that would be the standard for decades thereafter. *Supergame* (1980) was co-written by Aimée Karklyn and her significant other.





Lee Gold pioneered the way for female solo design with two roleplaying games. *Land of the Rising Sun* (1980) was based on the rules from *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1977), but the historical *Lands of Adventure* (1983) was a wholly original effort. They were both published by FGU.

A few small press RPGs with female authors arrived in the early '80s, like *Wizards' Realm* (1981) from Mystic Swamp, which was co-authored by Cheryl Duval. However, it wasn't until deep in the '80s that more appeared, such as Pacesetter's *Sandman* (1985), which was co-authored by Andria Hayday, and Chaosium's *Hawkmoon* (1986), a solo effort by Kerie Campbell.

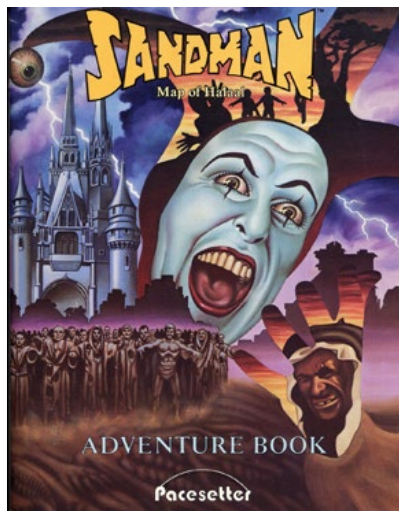
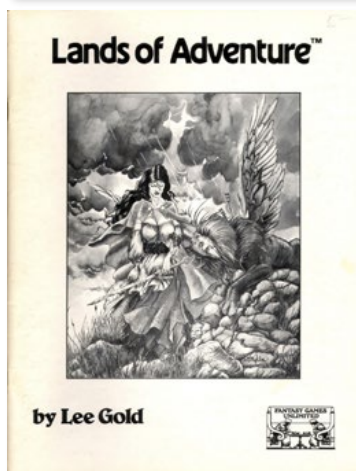
These early roleplaying designs were somewhat unusual for the industry at the time. Not only did they feature relatively few monster-bashing dungeon crawls, but Gold's RPGs included one of the first Asian-influenced fantasy RPGs and an early historical fantasy, while Campbell's was a licensed science-fantasy game.

Sadly, these games designed and written by women were also quite scarce. It was a sign of the times — a trend that was a reflection of the employee demographics at industry leader TSR.

## Female Pioneers at TSR: 1978–1997

It took a few years for TSR to consider female creators, and even then the process began with an external writer: Gary Gygax ran a *D&D* game for Andre Norton so that she could write *Quag Keep* (1978), an unofficial *D&D* novel that was the industry's first.

Things got going at TSR proper late in 1978, when Gary Gygax was thinking about creating an in-house Design Department. He began talking with a potential female recruit: a *D&D* player named Jean Wells.



Gygax flew her out to Wisconsin in January 1979 and decided she was a good fit; he announced her hire in *The Dragon* #24 (April 1979).

Though Wells was a *D&D* player and a romance writer, she didn't have any experience with rules design and development. The plan was for Gygax to teach her, but he was too busy by the time she arrived, and Wells was afraid to ask anyone else. This was the first of several obstacles she faced as TSR's first female designer.

*"He was hiring my imagination and would teach me the rest."*

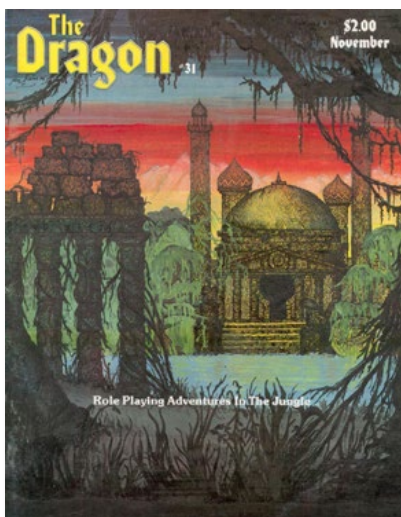
– Jean Wells, "Interview: Jean Wells (Part I)," *Grogardian* (2010)

Wells soon ran into another problem: a male-dominated culture. At first other staff members wouldn't even let her play in *D&D* games; when they relented, they initially insisted she play male characters. Unfortunately, this dismissive attitude was still obvious decades later when one of Wells' former coworkers described her as "large, insecure, brashly outgoing, and outspoken" — a *mélange* of adjectives that probably would not have been applied to a man.

Despite these problems, Wells made a number of notable contributions to *D&D* from 1979–1982. She wrote an uncredited section in the *Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979) and became the original sage of *D&D*'s "Sage Advice" rules column, answering questions from *The Dragon* #31 (November 1979) through *Dragon* #42 (October 1980). Her character Ceatitle can be found in the original *Rogues Gallery* (1980), and she was an editor for several early products, including *B2: The Keep on the Borderlands* (1981). Her artwork can also be found in a few early publications, including the third (1979) and later printings of the *Monster Manual* (1977) — which include her drawings of four monsters that had previously been

missing pictures: the eye of the deep, the giant Sumatran rat, the otyugh, and (probably) the violet fungi.

However, for better or for worse, Wells is best known for the original *B3: Palace of the Silver Princess* (1981), which she prepared with help from editor Ed Sollers. Unfortunately, after it came back from the printers, Lawrence Schick and/or Kevin Blume decided that the module wasn't acceptable. A number of reasons have been offered over the years. Some claim that it wasn't edited sufficiently because of Wells' relationship with Gygax. Others state that





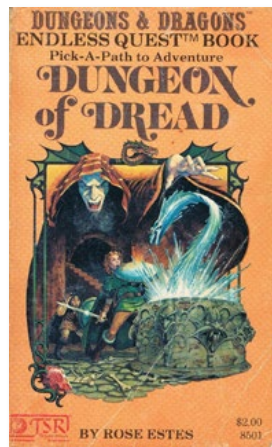
it was “mediocre.” Wells said she got called out over S&M elements (though neither she nor Sollers knew what S&M was). There were also issues with Erol Otus’ drawings — for his personal interpretation of things in the adventure, for his risqué depictions of those things, and for his inclusion of in-jokes. Whatever the reasons, the printed module was mostly trashed and a new version was produced by Tom Moldvay.

The problems with *Palace* largely meant the end of Wells’ design career; she was confined to secretarial work. Though she proposed a supplement for *Top Secret* (1980) called “L.A.S.S.” and created a prototype of a space travel board game, she wasn’t allowed to pursue their further development. Shortly thereafter, Wells married *Top Secret* supplement author Corey Kobernick and left TSR.

In TSR’s later life, its design staff was almost entirely male, but women were influential at the company in other roles. This was common in the roleplaying industry in the ‘80s, where women were credited as editors or managers instead of designers or developers. At TSR, four women involved with book publication in the ‘80s proved especially crucial to the future of the company.

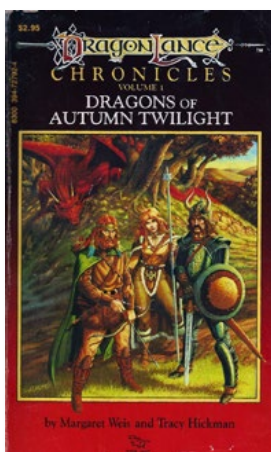
Rose Estes worked in advertising at TSR, but came up with the idea for fantasy choose-your-own-adventure books. She was given a green light on the project, and immediately wrote the first four *Endless Quest* books, beginning with *Dungeon of Dread* (1982). The books were wildly successful, with the first six books selling millions. James Ward said, “We got more mail about them than about the *D&D* game.”

However, TSR was concerned that the *Endless Quest* books were a fad, so it used their success to diversify, creating an Education Department that was intended to produce classroom modules. This new department was overseen by Rose Estes, James Ward, and new hire Jean Blashfield Black, who had been writing and editing science books since the ‘60s. Unfortunately, this new initiative didn’t work out: the Education Department completed three classrooms modules, but couldn’t get them to market. Meanwhile, the *Endless Quests* books were still selling well in 1983, so the decision was made to put even more focus on books. The Education Department



became the Book Department, overseen by Jean Black — though it was still called the Education Department for a while.

Enter Margaret Weis, hired by Jean Black as an editor for the “Book” Department. Weis became involved with Tracy Hickman’s Dragonlance project, which was to be the source of the Book Department’s first novel. Weis felt that she and Hickman could produce better Dragonlance novels than an established author, and Black gave them a chance to audition when TSR’s tiny royalty offers didn’t hook a published author who could properly do the job. On the strength of Weis and Hickman’s sample chapters, Black gave them the job of writing the first Dragonlance trilogy.



Their first book, *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* (1984), took several months to catch on, but then it became another hit. By this time the *Endless Quest* books had indeed faded; the series ended with the 36<sup>th</sup> book, *Song of the Dark Druid* (1986), but by that time Black was producing best-selling novels. Meanwhile, Weis briefly crossed over into game design, co-authoring *Dragonlance Adventures* (1987); though TSR produced 13 hardcover books for *AD&D 1e*, this was the only one that credited a woman as a major designer.

Black left TSR in 1988, and book editor Mary Kirchoff replaced her as the new head of the department. She’d once been a classmate of Ernie Gygax, but her creative portfolio was even more impressive. She was a former editor of *Polyhedron* magazine (1981–2004) and the author of a few *Endless Quest* books starting with *Light on Quests Mountain* (1983). It was also Kirchoff who found a book called *Echoes of the Fourth Magic* in the Book Department’s slush pile and was intrigued enough to work with author R.A. Salvatore on a new book called *The Crystal Shard* (1988). Kirchoff oversaw the Book Department through 1992, by which time its books were regularly hitting best-seller lists. She also wrote a few novels of her own, beginning with *Kendermore* (1989). She’d later return as Wizards of the Coast’s VP of Publishing from 1997–2004.

Just as the Book Department was taking off thanks to the initial work of Estes, Black, and Weis, TSR’s most influential female employee came on stage: Lorraine Williams. She arrived at TSR in 1985 as a manager and potential investor, but by the end of the year had taken control of the company away from Gary Gygax. She’s received mixed reviews over the years for how she ran TSR. However, for over a decade, from 1986–1997, she was clearly the most important woman in roleplaying.

Many other women played vital roles at TSR in the '80s and '90s. Among them were Art Director Ruth Hoyer and editors and project managers like Anne Brown, Michele Carter, Sue Weinlein Cook, Andria Hayday, Dori Hein, Miranda Horner, Julia Martin, Karen Martin (later Karen Boomgarden and Karen Conlin), Anne Gray McCready, Penny Petticord (later Penny Williams), Jean Rabe, Cindi Rice, and Barbara Young.

Though TSR's in-house designers were mostly men, some of these editors also did crucial design work. McCready was one of the first, writing early adventures like *CM5: Mystery of the Snow Pearls* (1985), *RS1: Red Sonja Unconquered* (1986), and *GAZ4: The Kingdom of Ierendi* (1987). Brown also wrote the occasional book — focusing particularly on Greyhawk, from *WGA1: Falcon's Revenge* (1990) to *Greyhawk Player's Guide* (1998).

Jean Rabe was even more prolific, contributing to over a dozen supplements for TSR in the late '80s and '90s, starting with *C6: The Official RPGA Tournament Handbook* (1987). She moved on to write over a dozen novels for TSR beginning with Dragonlance's *The Dawning of a New Age* (1996). In addition, she ran the RPGA for seven years, edited *Polyhedron*, and oversaw much of the Gen Con Game Fair.

Some editors never wrote books of their own, but nonetheless contributed extensively to their editorial projects. Andria Hayday, who worked at Pacesetter between two different stints at TSR, offers one example. She provided vital content for two of the earliest *AD&D 2e* settings, *Ravenloft: Realm of Terror* (1990) and *Al-Qadim: Arabian Adventures* (1992). Her work on *Arabian Adventures* included overseeing art and design and writing the background material on Al-Qadim, which was moved to the front of the book due to its high quality.

Dori Hein was similarly crucial to the creation of the *Planescape Campaign Setting* (1994), while Sue Cook contributed to *Dragonlance: Fifth Age* (1996). Cindi Rice edited the *Ravenloft* line in its final days and contributed to a few of the last books.

Barbara Young is another of TSR's best-known editors. She briefly worked at TSR as a game editor from 1984 to 1985, before succumbing to a layoff, but then rejoined TSR in 1987 as an assistant editor to Roger E. Moore on *Dungeon* magazine. She started with #4 (March/April 1987), then took over as editor with #9 (January/February 1988), a role she kept until #51 (January/February 1995). She was largely responsible for the feel of *Dungeon* during its first decade of existence. She was also a mentor to Wolfgang Baur, who went on to fame of his own. Young later moved on to become the newest head of TSR's Book Department. *Dungeon* had another female editor during its last days at TSR: Michelle Vuckovich.

Although female editors were much more common than female designers at TSR in the '80s, this began to change in the '90s, as TSR began taking many more freelance manuscripts, resulting in work from Ann Dupuis, Lisa Smedman, and Teeuwynn Woodruff. But by then the rest of the industry was changing too.

## Corporate Heroines: 1980–2000

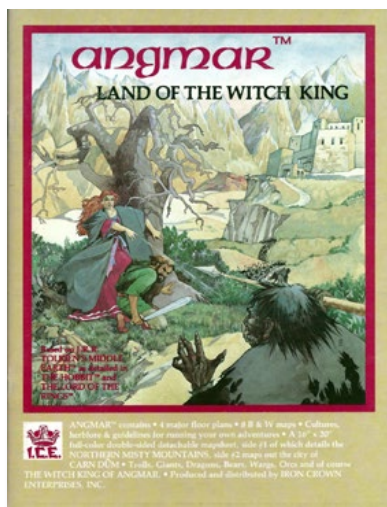
The rest of the industry largely reflected the situation at TSR in the '80s and '90s. Some women were writing roleplaying products — such as Steve Jackson Games author Elizabeth McCoy and West End Games author Jen Seiden, a second-generation employee who followed in her father's footsteps. Their numbers increased with the decades, with many more entering the field than can be recorded here. Women were also becoming more integral to companies in other roles — some of them quite innovative, such as Sue Grau's work organizing the Hero Auxiliary Corps to support Hero Games.

Women's importance to the industry was also reflected by an increasing number of women helping to found companies, either as executives or as foundational members. Women were instrumental in founding companies from the beginning, but in the '70s and the early '80s, it had been more common for women to create companies with their significant others: the Kerestans founded Wee Warriors (1975), the Hickmans founded DayStar West Media (1979), the Abrams were among the founders of Midkemia Press (1979), and the Ezzells founded Dragon Tree Press (1981). By the '80s, the "significant other" effect was fading in gaming groups and throughout the roleplaying industry.

ICE (1980) led the way for this new type of gaming company: Heike Kubash was one of its foundational members. She also co-authored the company's first

Middle-earth sourcebook, *Angmar: Land of the Witch King* (1982), then wrote their first Middle-earth adventure book, *Bree and the Barrow Downs* (1984). Many years later she was President of Mjolnir, the second incarnation of ICE, and the co-author of *HARP: High Adventure Role Playing* (2003).

Perhaps Middle-earth's familiarity outside of gaming made it feel more welcoming for women, because several others followed Kubasch: Brenda Gates Spielman wrote *Umbar: Haven of the Corsairs* (1982), Susan Tyler Hitchcock authored *Southern*



*Mirkwood: Haunt of the Necromancer* (1983), and Jessica M. Ney worked on several projects from 1988–1993.

Other companies followed in ICE's footsteps. Janet Trautvetter was one of the founding members of Gamelords (1980), where she contributed to *The Free City of Haven* (1981) and many others. Kristie Fields, Patty Fugate, and Nancy Parker were all founding members of Digest Group Publications (1985). Pacesetter (1984) was one of the more notable RPG start-ups of this period for its high level of professionalism; we've already met one of its founding designers, Andria Hayday — the co-author of Pacesetter's *Sandman* and a mover and shaker at TSR.

Though Jonathan Tweet and Mark Rein•Hagen created *Lion Rampant* (1987), Lisa Stevens and Nicole Lindroos were early volunteers. These two then became founding members of *White Wolf* (1990), and later went on to even more important roles in the industry.

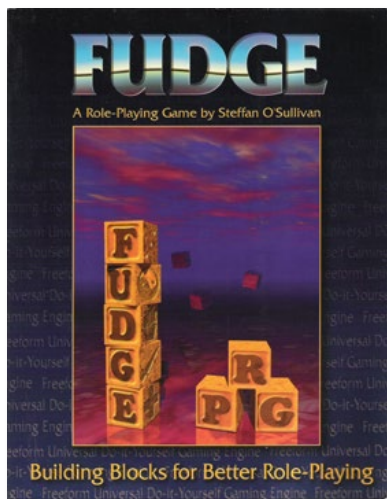
*White Wolf* deserves additional comment, in part because its LARPs, such as *The Masquerade* (1993), are widely credited with increasing the number of women participating in roleplaying games. *White Wolf* also employed a comparatively large proportion of female designers over the years — by the '00s their online writers' bios included 11 women out of 28 total designers.

Many women moved through the design halls of *White Wolf*. Kathleen Ryan was an author and graphic designer for *Mage: The Ascension* (1993). Jackie Cassada and Nicky Rea were frequent authors and also the line editors for *Changeling: The Dreaming* (1995) and *White Wolf's Ravenloft* (2002). Similarly, designer Jennifer Hartshorn line edited *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) and *Wraith: The Oblivion* (1994), while designer Deirdre Brooks line edited *WarCraft: The Roleplaying Game* (2003). Genevieve Cogman was one of the authors of *Orpheus* (2003), while Heather Heckel, Angel Leigh McCoy, Deena McKinney, and Cynthia Summers all contributed to core *White Wolf* rulebooks. Other *White Wolf* authors include Elizabeth Ditchburn Dew, Heather Grove, Sheri M. Johnson, Ellen Kiley, Judith McLaughlin, J. Porter Wiseman, and Lindsay Woodcock. In the modern era, authors like Dana Habecker and Jess Hartley continue the trend.

Three other companies from the '90s deserve special note in this history of women in the roleplaying industry.

First, *Wizards of the Coast* (1990) brought on Lisa Stevens as their first paid employee after her stints at *Lion Rampant* and *White Wolf* — a reflection of the industry experience she'd by then accrued. Stevens was a crucial member of the *Wizards* team in the '90s, suggesting early RPG acquisitions like *Talisanta* (1987) and *Ars Magica* (1987) and later becoming the brand manager of TSR properties like the RPGA, *Greyhawk*, and the d20 *Star Wars* game.





Second, Grey Ghost Press (1995) was created by former TSR freelancer Ann Dupuis. It was the first major roleplaying company founded solely by a woman — and an important one because it introduced *FUDGE* (1994) to a much larger audience. As a result, some now call Dupuis “the founding mother of indie gaming.”

Third, Sovereign Press (1998) was co-founded by Don Perrin and Margaret Weis — who later revamped the company as Margaret Weis Productions (2004). The fact that Weis has enough recognition that her name is a draw shows how much things have

changed since the ‘70s.

From ICE to Sovereign Press, women were more important than ever to role-playing companies, and that trend would only improve in the ‘00s.

## Women in the Hobbyist Gaming Industry: 1975-Present

Female professionals in the hobbyist board and card game industry followed roughly the same pattern as the roleplaying industry: they were scarce in the ‘70s, but gradually filled a variety of professional roles as the years went on. The popularity of a revolutionary new type of game — the eurogame — brought an influx of female players and designers to the field.

The earliest professional hobby game designer was Linda Mosca, a staff member for SPI in the mid-‘70s, which means she predated the roleplaying industry’s first female designer by a few years. Mosca published three wargames between 1975 and 1977. *Battle of the Wilderness* (1975) was a Civil War game and *Rocroi* (1976) was a Thirty Years War game — and one of SPI’s famous “quad” games. Mosca’s final game, co-authored with Richard Berg, was *Gondor* (1977), one of SPI’s legendary “Games of Middle-earth.”

In the years since, several other women have left their mark on the wargaming field, among them SPI author Virginia Mulholland, West End Games president Helena Rubinstein, 3W author Laura Cochran, GMT author Kai Jensen, and the award-winning Rachel Simmons.

However, it was the advent of eurogames that really revolutionized the hobbyist gaming field, giving women a new chance to shine. You can date the eurogame field

## The Modern Woman: 2000-Present

The roleplaying field still has a long way to go before it becomes gender balanced. Wizards of the Coast did a survey of 20,000 households in 1999 that said that women still accounted for just 19% of players — which is nonetheless an increase of two to four times in 20 years. In a survey of other sources from 2004–2011, RPG scientist Christopher Brace found numbers as low as 16% and as high as 34%.

*"The absence of women is not an accident of fate, nor is it something that will likely change rapidly."*

– Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983)

However, since 1999 the opportunities for female designers have increased, thanks in large part to the two major trends of the '00s: d20 and indie games.

back to Germany's creation of the Spiel des Jahres (Game of the Year) award in 1978. However, it really took off as its own style of design in the '90s, following the release of Klaus Teuber's *The Settlers of Catan* (1995).

The eurogame field was unique because it had very different aesthetics from the hobbyist games then found in the United States. Warfare was almost entirely absent from eurogames, which also featured tight mechanics and shorter gameplay. In Germany, eurogames are explicitly aimed at couples, and female players of eurogames also seem more common in the United States.

The growth of female players in the eurogame industry was mirrored by a growth in female eurogame designers. Though women contributed to some early SdJ winners, such as Dorothy Garrels' work on *Scotland Yard* (1982) and Suzanne Goldberg's work on *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective* (1985), it's only in the last 20 years that female designers have started to appear more widely.

Beginning in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a few female designers established eurogame publishers of particular note. Doris Matthäus and Frank Nestel co-founded Doris & Frank, which has published well-known games such as *Mü and More* (1995) and *Primordial Soup* (1997). Meanwhile, Andrea Meyer is the sole founder of BeWitched-Spiele, whose best-known games include *Ad Acta* (2002), *Linq* (2004), and *Mallworld* (2004).

Women have recently returned to the ranks of SdJ winners. Andreas Seyfarth was awarded the SdJ for her co-authorship of *Thurn and Taxis* (2006) while Susan McKinley Ross was the first solo female winner for *Qwirkle* (2011).

The percentage of female designers in hobbyist games is still small, but the continuing expansion of the eurogame market provides room for their numbers to grow.

D20 didn't change the playing field, but it did widen it. Atlas Games was one of the first publishers to take advantage of this, with Michelle Nephew coming onboard as the company's d20 line editor. Similarly, Green Ronin — which had been recently founded by Chris Pramas and industry vet Nicole Lindroos — earned its early success through d20 releases. Finally, Paizo Publishing was co-founded and led by Lisa Stevens, who has been frequently mentioned throughout this history; since the release of *Pathfinder* (2009), Paizo has become the second biggest company in the industry.

Individual women writers also found d20 success. Some past female designers returned with d20 books, while authors like Michelle Lyons, who were just getting their start, expanded their portfolios with d20 releases. Other female authors such as Erica Balsley, Julie Ann Dawson, and Christina Stiles joined the industry thanks to the new opportunities offered by Wizards' d20 system.

Even Wizards of the Coast increased its female design staff, with new authors including Gwendolyn Kestrel and Jennifer Clarke Wilkes. Shelly Mazzanoble became a voice for some female players through her book, *Confessions of a Part-Time Sorceress* (2007).

Indie games offered a more revolutionary change to the roleplaying industry. They introduced different sorts of games and different sorts of play. By appealing to a different demographic than the wargame-influenced RPGs of the '70s, they also attracted a new generation of female designers.



Jenna Moran (previously Rebecca Sean Borgstrom) actually predated the indie movement with her very indie game, *Nobilis* (1999); she's continued with *Weapons of the Gods* (2005) and *Chuubo's Marvelous Wish-Granting Engine* (2014).

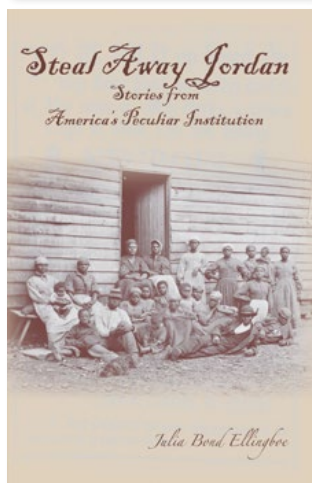
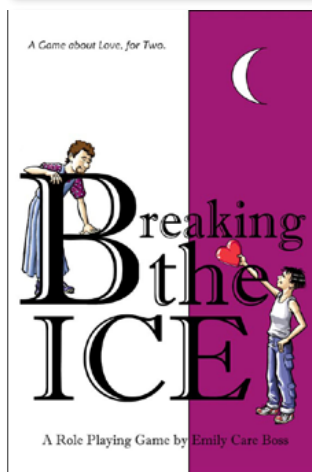
Other female designers experimented with indie ideas in many ways in the movement's earliest days. Emily Dresner-Thornber's indie thoughts mainly appeared in articles, such as those in *Daedalus* magazine (2003–2004), while CMU Assistant Professor Jessica Hammer was a regular contributor to *Game Chef* (2002–Present), and

Cynthia Miller was a developer for the *Cartoon Action Hour* (2003) line.

Then, as the indie revolution fully dawned, Ron Edwards encouraged developers to create their own publishing imprints. That's exactly what many women did in the '00s, creating the biggest boom of female-led RPG companies ever.



- Meguey Baker founded Night Sky Games to publish *A Thousand and One Nights* (2006) and has since produced *Psi\*Run* (2012) and *Valiant Girls* (2013).
- Emily Care Boss created Black and Green Games, which may be the most prolific female-led indie publisher. She's released a half-dozen games, the best-known of which are part of her "romance trilogy": *Breaking the Ice* (2005), *Shooting the Moon* (2006), and *Under My Skin* (2008). She also edited *RPG = Role Playing Girl* magazine (2009–2010).
- Julia Bond Ellingboe founded Stone Baby Games to publish *Steal Away Jordan* (2007) and *Tales from the Fisherman's Wife* (2012).
- Anna Kreider created Tasty Bacon Games, which she later renamed to the less in-joke-y Peachy Pants Press. She's best known for *Thou Art But a Warrior* (2008, 2013) — originally an expansion for Ben Lehman's *Polaris* (2006), but now its own game.
- Annie Rush originally published her three RPGs through the Wicked Dead Brewing Company, but she has since reprinted *Run Robot Red!* (2004) and others under her own brand, Itesser Ink.
- Jen Seiden, formerly of West End Games, moved on to create her own small publishing house, FireWater Productions, to publish *Chaos University* (2005).
- Elizabeth Shoemaker joined with Shreyas Sampat to found Two Scooters Press. Unlike similar co-founded publishers of the '70s and '80s, these two designers have each pursued their own interests through the Two Scooters imprint. Shoemaker's



best-known games are the espionage *Blowback* (2010) and the romantic *It's Complicated* (2008). *Deadbolt* (2012) was a nominee for IndieCade 2013.

Many other women have created indie RPGs, more than this limited history can cover.

*"We have different experiences and perspectives that can drive games to new levels of story-telling and world construction, and I believe these abilities provide a much fuller experience beyond number-crunching."*

— Jen Seiden, "Designing Women," *RPGirl* #1 (2009)

Despite — or perhaps because of — the growing numbers of women involved as players and creators, the roleplaying industry is currently beset by a number of gender-related problems. This became particularly obvious when James Desborough wrote his controversial article "In Defence of Rape" (2012), which talked about rape as a plot element, and when a Kickstarter for the feminist "Heartbreak & Heroines" RPG was met with massive misogyny (before it collapsed for other reasons).

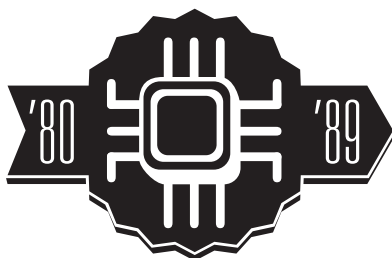
Unfortunately, this is part of a trend in the larger hobbyist field that may get worse before it gets better. The comic field has seen animosity directed toward female fans and cosplayers for years. More recently, the issue of female hobbyists exploded rather dramatically in the video game community in 2014 as part of the horrific "GamerGate" scandal — which involved reactionary male players stalking female video game designers, driving them from their homes, and even threatening terrorist actions to stop them from speaking out.

Though it would be easy to be discouraged by this backlash, it's probably a sign of revolutionary growth — a sign that women *have* become a significant part of the hobbyist community. That sort of growth is often met by reactionary hate, but things will improve as the industry continues the slow change that began when the first woman picked up a copy of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

### What to Read Next ✖️🧑🏻🧑🏻🧑🏻

- For more about the LA gaming scene, including more on APA-L, read **The Aurania Gang** [PA].
- For more on Jennell Jaquays and *The Dungeoneer*, read **Judges Guild** ['70s].
- For some of the earliest RPGs designed by women, read **FGU** ['70s], **Flying Buffalo** ['70s], **Pacesetter** ['80s], and (again) **The Aurania Gang** [PA].
- For how Jean Wells, Rose Estes, Jean Black, Margaret Weis, Mary Kirchoff, and others fit into a larger narrative, read **TSR** ['70s].
- For Sue Grau and Hero Games, read **Hero Auxiliary Corps** [PA].
- For a company that brought many female players and designers into the industry, read **White Wolf** ['90s].
- For Ann Dupuis' ground-breaking company, read **Grey Ghost Press** ['90s].
- For the indie games that grew out of FUDGE, read **Evil Hat** ['00s].
- For modern companies co-founded by women, read **Margaret Weis Productions** ['90s], **Green Ronin Publishing** ['00s], **Lumpley Games** ['00s], and **Paizo Publishing** ['00s].
- For more on the indie revolution, read many histories of the '00s, beginning with **Adept Press** ['00s]. And for Annie Rush's part in it, read **John Wick Presents** ['00s].
- For the parallel eurogame revolution, read **Mayfair Games** ['80s].
- For more on the recent problems of misogyny, read **Appendix I: 2012** [PA].





Part Two:

# Game Groups

(An Industry Trend)

**D***esigners & Dragons* focuses its narrative on the gaming companies at the center of the roleplaying industry. However, the '00s showed that companies aren't the only movers and shakers in roleplaying. Many *indie publishers* are companies in names only — with some like Luke Crane's "Burning Wheel" not even having a real company name. In other words, the '00s has allowed individual people to be just as influential as the companies of old, thanks to the indie revolution.

In between individual designers and professional companies lie gaming groups. They were quite important to the industry in the '70s and '80s because they were often the immediate predecessors to publishers; even in the modern day, gaming groups have sometimes encouraged members to enter the industry.

This section discusses three different groups that each had an impact on the industry. The Aurania Gang and the RuneQuest Mafia are traditional *gaming clubs*, focused on regular play with a regular group of players. On the other hand, the Hero Auxiliary Corps is a *convention organization*, which meets each year to run games at conventions.

Designers	Years	First RPG	Page
The Aurania Gang	1974-1984	<i>The Manual of Aurania</i> (1976)	25
Hero Auxiliary Corps	1983-1997	"The Kiros Files" (1983)	32
The RuneQuest Mafia	1989-Present	<i>The Broken Council Guidebook</i> (1995)	41

This history courtesy of Kickstarter backers who helped us to stretch to \$90,000.

# The Aurania Gang: 1974–1984

*You don't actually have to form a company to publish an RPG book, and you can still have a big influence on the industry.*

## It Takes a Thief: 1974–1975

The story of the Aurania gang begins in Hawthorne, California — located in the western Los Angeles region between Santa Monica and Long Beach. There, at the apartment of one Thomas R. Coveny III, a group of friends tried out a new game procured by Coveny: *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). It was a hit, and two of the members — Dale Doane and Daniel Wagner — became the game's long-running co-GMs, each controlling their own dungeon. The campaign of Aurania, the “land of gold,” had begun.

In its earliest days, the Aurania campaign included about a half-dozen members —including future video game designer Steve Sents and retailer Gary Switzer, the



**1976: Manual of Aurania**  
(1977 edition)

new owner of a store called Aero Hobbies. Others would soon join, including Hugh Singh, Larry Stehle, Steve Allen, Jay Hartlove, and Aimée Karklyn — all of whom would shortly become creators of one earliest supplements in the role-playing industry.

Gary Switzer's Aero Hobbies is an important character in this history too. It was a store with an old pedigree: it was founded in 1950 in Santa Monica's historic Aero Building (1940), which lent the hobby store its name. Now, Aero Hobbies was becoming a major focal point of the *D&D* revolution in Los Angeles, starting with the Aurania gang — who regularly played at the store, at least until it closed each evening.

In the early days of the Aurania campaign, the rules of *D&D* were still loose and ill-defined; it was hard to figure out how to play the game from the rules alone. This led many groups to come up with their own house rules, and the Aurania gang was no exception. However, unlike most groups, the Aurania gang's house rules entered the history of the industry.

It began when a dwarven henchman wanted to pick locks with his dagger. The solution to this dilemma was a thief class inspired by J.R.R. Tolkien's Bilbo Baggins and Jack Vance's Cugel the Clever. It was something that was rather shockingly missing from the original *D&D* game, which only included rules for clerics, wizards, and fighting men.

The thief class created by Wagner and the rest of the Auranian crew was a bit different from what would soon appear in *OD&D* and *AD&D* (1977–1979): its skills were designed like magic-user spells; a character got new skills with names like “pick locks,” “find traps,” and “disarm traps” as he went up in level. A player didn't roll against these skills, but thieves did need higher-level versions of them to do more difficult things. Otherwise, the thief was built using the basic foundation of the cleric class.

It seems unlikely that an unofficial thief class created in Los Angeles, California, could have influenced the creation of an official thief class in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, but that seems to be exactly what happened. Sometime prior to May 10, 1974, Gary Switzer made a long-distance call from California to Wisconsin to speak with Gary Gygax. This might seem a minor thing in the modern day, but in 1974 communication across the country was much more costly. If Switzer talked to Gygax for 10 minutes, he easily could have run up a bill of \$20–40 (\$100–200 in 2014 dollars). Nonetheless, Switzer was eager to talk to the creator of this strange new *Dungeons & Dragons* game — and along the way he discussed the thief class that the Aurania gang was working on.

Gygax was excited about the idea. He quickly reconstructed his own version of the class based on the bits and pieces that Switzer shared. Gygax similarly took



inspiration from Jack Vance's Cugel the Clever, but added in Roger Zelazny's Jack of Shadows. This consistent use of Jack Vance as the source for *D&D*'s thief is notable; people usually talk about the Vancian magic of *D&D*, but Vancian skull-duggery is no less important. When he was done, Gygas published an untested version of his thief in *Great Plains Game Players Newsletter* #9 (June 1974), where he also acknowledged its origin with Switzer. The thief reappeared the next year in a more polished form in *Supplement I: Greyhawk* (1975).

And that was how a small but enthusiastic gaming group in southern California forever changed the shape of *D&D* gaming. However, the Aurania gang wasn't entirely happy with the way that their thief had been "stolen," so they decided to work a bit harder to protect their next creations.

## Publishing *Aurania*: 1975–1977

The Aurania gang began publishing their creative ideas on their own in *APA-L* #522 (May 1975), the APA (amateur press association) of the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society. There, Switzer shared an article on critical hits and trips (fumbles) that originated with the group.

However, the Aurania gang were interested in doing something more — in doing something relatively unprecedented in the dawning RPG industry. They wanted to publish their own book of rules and expansions as a supplement to *Dungeons & Dragons*, in part because their ideas had been "outright stolen and soon appeared in print" and they wanted "to prevent this from happening again."

The gang printed somewhere between 200 and 300 copies of their *Manual of Aurania* (1976) as a 24-page photocopied book. Wagner was the main author, doing about 60% of the design. Larry Stehle offered some additional contributions and also typed up the book, Hugh Singh edited it, and Aimée Karklyn and Troy Hughes illustrated it. Gary Switzer received credit as the owner of Aero Hobbies, while Dale Doane was noted as the co-DM of the Aurania campaign.

*"My creative process was a lot [like] Arneson's – great ideas hastily scribbled down. If it wasn't for Hugh, the MofA would never have gotten published. Not to mention Larry's abilities to read my scrawl."*

– Daniel Wagner, odd74.proboards.com (September 2013)

The book was a set of rules expansions not unlike those found in the *OD&D Supplements* (1975–1976). New classes included the basadae, beorning, cleric of Asgard, cleric of Mitra, leprechaun, samurai, shape-shifter, and sidhe. The *Manual* also contained tons of new monsters, including the uruk-hai, the crypt keeper, the purple dragon, the crimson dragon, the sphinx, the bandersnatch, and more.

The gang sold the first edition of their *Manual* primarily through two local game stores: Aero Hobbies in Santa Monica and The War House in nearby Long Beach. They also advertised it through an ad in *Alarums & Excursions* #11 (May 1976) and moved more copies at DunDraCon 3 (1977), where they were Guests of Honor. The San Francisco Bay Area convention also ensured that the book was seen beyond the LA region.

Following the *Manual*'s initial release, the group continued to edit it throughout 1976, releasing a second edition (1977) about a year later. This time they printed the book more professionally in a quantity of about a thousand. They also got additional distribution help from Russell Powell's International Gamers Association — a Los Angeles wargaming society that Wagner (and his father) had been a founding member of.

Which all brings us to the question of the *Manual*'s historical notability. By the time of its initial publication, *D&D* was about two years old, and a rabid fandom was talking about it through roleplaying APAs like *Alarums and Excursions* (1975-Present) and *The Wild Hunt* (1976–1994), as well as in older science-fiction and wargaming APAs.

At least one commercial third-party supplement had been produced for *D&D*: Wee Warrior's *The Character Archaic* (1975), published in September 1975. By February 1976, it was being officially distributed by TSR. Meanwhile, gaming groups were producing books of house rules such as Conan La Motte's "Tome of Mid-Kimia" (1975?) for their own, non-commercial use.

Beyond that, there were still very few *D&D* publications by companies other than TSR. Jennell Jaquays' *The Dungeoneer* #1 (June 1976) appeared a month after the *Aurania* ad, while major licensee Judges Guild was formed on July 4. Little Soldier Games was one of the few other third-party publishers to produce *D&D* supplements that year — including *The Book of Monsters* (1976) and *The Book of Demons* (1976) — but the records of their publication dates aren't as clear.

So was *The Manual of Aurania* the first third-party *D&D* product? Maybe, if you discount *The Character Archaic* either because it was just a character sheet or because it quickly moved into exclusive distribution from TSR. But whether it was technically #1 or not, the *Manual* was definitely a historic release, foreshadowing the wave of such products that would batter TSR's shores in the late '70s.

The Aurania gang also worked on a second release called the "Libram of Aurania." It was fully written and illustrated, but poor typing kept it from publication. And that was the end of the Aurania group's major influence on *D&D*: one core character class and one very early *D&D* publication.

## Southern California Prospers: 1974-Present

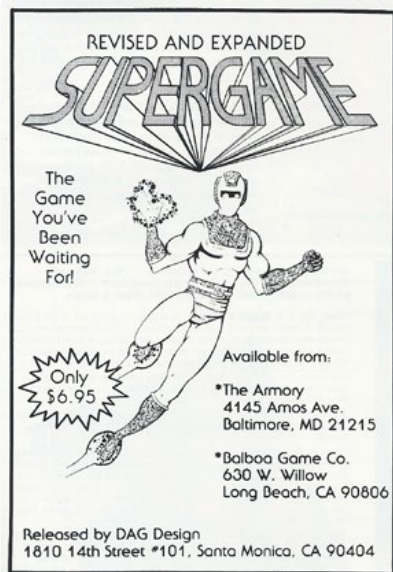
In the years that followed, the Aurania gang continued to game together. Their catalog of campaigns is a history of the early roleplaying industry: besides *D&D*, they also played *Boot Hill* (1975), *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975), *Bunnies & Burrows* (1976), *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1977), *Gamma World* (1978), and *RuneQuest* (1978).

A game written by two of the gang's members was another favorite. Jay Hartlove and Aimée Karklyn (by this point, Aimée Hartlove) produced an RPG called *Supergame* (1980). It was one of the earliest superhero games, postdating only *Superhero 2044* (1977, 1978) and *Villains & Vigilantes* (1979). It avoided random

rolls, instead using a point-based character creation system that wasn't "limited" by ideas about the universe. A second edition followed (1982), but it couldn't compete when northern California produced *Champions* (1981).

Meanwhile, Daniel Wagner, Gary Switzer, Steve Allen, and Howard Marcus purchased a retail store in Westwood, just five miles northeast of Santa Monica. Kennedy's Historical Models & Games had originally focused on the model side of the things, but after the gang bought it from Edward Kennedy, they changed the focus to gaming — bringing roleplaying to another Los Angeles community. They even added a dungeon-themed game room, with its walls painted to look like the stones of an underground passage. Wagner ran the store for the gang until around 1982, when he sold his share to Noah Dudley — who attracted people to the store with his own GMing, but was less successful on the business side of things. Kennedy's Models & Games only lasted for another year or so; shortly before its demise, distributors were addressing products to "Dead Kennedy's."

All of the actions of the Aurania gang were played out against the background of a vibrant roleplaying community in Los Angeles — the community that was gelling around *APA-L* and Lee Gold's *Alarums & Excursions*. Aero Hobbies was also strong focus of this community. On a good day you might even find J. Eric Holmes there, leading youngsters in a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* — advocating the same goals of teaching that caused him to write the first *Basic Dungeons & Dragons* (1977) for TSR. Holmes might have been influenced by the Aurania gang



as well, because he talked about one of his sons playing a “Beorning” in an article that he wrote for *Alarums & Excursion* #16 (August 1976).

Moving out from Los Angeles — from Aero in Santa Monica, The War House in Long Beach, and Kennedy’s in Westwood — you can see the continued influence of these western LA stores and their communities.

Caltech — located on the opposite side of Los Angeles, about 30 miles east of Santa Monica — is known for their *Warlock* RPG system, an early *OD&D* variant. It was first published in *Spartan Simulation Gaming Journal* #9 (August 1975) and later updated and reprinted as *The Complete Warlock* (1978) by the Balboa Game Company — a publishing house that shared an address with The War House in Long Beach. *Warlock* included a spell point system, a critical hit and fumble system, and a “spell-like” system for thieves — which sounds more like the Aurania gang’s thieves than the ones published by Gygax in *Greyhawk*.

*“All we have tried to do is present a way of handling D&D without the contradictions and loopholes inherent in the original rules.”*

*– Spartan Simulation Gaming Journal* #9 (August 1975)

Perhaps we can even trace the influence of the western LA gaming scene to San Diego’s Midkemia Press; that company was set on its road to publication in 1975 when Conan La Motte purchased a copy of *OD&D* in Los Angeles. Though we don’t know *where* he made his purchase, Aero Hobbies and The War House both seem like likely candidates.

Around 1984, the Aurania gang began to splinter apart, as gaming groups eventually do. Coveny and Sents went on to design a 54mm cavalry miniatures game, then Sents (and Dudley) went into video games. Karklyn became a glass jewelry designer. Other members disappeared entirely. Aero Hobbies, now over 60 years old, still can be found in Santa Monica. Gary Switzer passed away in 2006, but left the game store to one of his employees.

For a brief time the Aurania gang influenced the whole hobby through their creation of a thief and their publication of the *Manual of Aurania*. However, unlike many early RPG publishers of the ‘70s, the Auranians quickly decided they’d had enough.

But how can you top creating the fourth and final core class for the world’s most popular tabletop RPG?

### What to Read Next ✖️🌀👤🕒

- For *D&D* and the thief, read **TSR** ['70s].
- For other publishers of *D&D* supplements in 1976, read **Judges Guild** ['70s], the **Little Soldier Games** mini-history in **Gamescience** ['70s], and the **Wee Warriors** mini-history in **TSR** ['70s].
- For the early northern California gaming scene, including DunDraCon, read **Grimoire Games** ['70s].
- For an early San Diego gaming company, read **Midkemia Press** ['70s].
- For other early superhero RPGs, read **Gamescience** ['70s], **FGU** ['70s], and **Hero Games** ['80s].
- For the makers of some of those RPGs that the Aurania gang played, read **TSR** ['70s], **Flying Buffalo** ['70s], **FGU** ['70s], and **Chaosium** ['70s].
- For another gaming group that touched the industry, read **The RuneQuest Mafia** [PA] and for a very different sort of gaming group, read **Hero Auxiliary Corps** [PA].

# Hero Auxiliary Corps: 1983–1997

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*The Hero Auxiliary Corps was a volunteer organization that ran innovative tournaments for Hero Games throughout the '80s and '90s. They're a prime example of how fans can make a difference.*

## Prelude to a Legion: 1982–1983

The story of the Hero Auxiliary Corps (HAC) begins with two gamers from New Jersey. High school student Keith Hannigan and recent graduate Mike Malony met at one of the East Coast's 1982 gaming conventions — during a *RuneQuest* (1978) game run by none other than Ken Rolston. They immediately struck up a friendship.

Hannigan and Malony stayed in touch through the rest of 1982, then in spring 1983 Hannigan invited Malony up to northern New Jersey to play a guest villain in his home *Champions* (1981) campaign, which starred a group of heroes called the Texas Rangers. In advance of the game, Malony was given investigative dossiers on the Rangers — who had been captured in the previous week's play. Malony studied them while hiding in Hannigan's dining room, and then at Hannigan's cue he strode into the living room, resplendent in dress clothes and a black cloak — at which point he began to interrogate the characters.

This focus on roleplaying and on dramatic action would inform the group that Hannigan and Malony would soon create — but first another convention had to enter the story.

## From EastCon to Gen Con: 1983–1984

In its earliest days, the Origins Game Fair was a roving East Coast gaming convention that landed at different locales throughout Maryland, New York, Michigan, and Pennsylvania in different years. But then in the early '80s, the Origins organizers decided to go further afield, traveling to San Mateo, California, for Pacific Origins (1981) — which was the same convention where *Champions* premiered.

This left a convention-sized hole in the East Coast's gaming schedule. The Eastern Gaming Association (EGA) — who ran Origins '80 in Chester, Pennsylvania — decided to fill that hole by creating their own convention: EastCon. But before they could finalize plans, TSR offered to get involved, resulting in the creation of Gen Con East.

Gen Con East lasted two years, appearing in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, in 1981 and in Chester, Pennsylvania, for 1982. Afterward, TSR withdrew but the EGA crew continued on, resulting in one more gaming event. This time, though, it kept its original name. EastCon (1983) ran at Glassboro State College (now Rowan University) in Glassboro, New Jersey, from June 24–26, 1983.

We now return to our New Jersey *Champions* players — and to Keith Hannigan in particular, who contacted Hero Games to request sponsorship for a *Champions* tournament at EastCon. This wasn't an unusual request, as EastCon was still a pretty big deal, even without the TSR partnership. James Ward famously ran Rob Kuntz's "The Maze of Xaene" as a *D&D* tournament at the convention, while there were also official tournaments for TSR's *Gamma World* (1978) and GDW's *Traveller* (1977). Unsurprisingly, Hero Games gave Hannigan the go-ahead to run an official *Champions* tourney too.

Hannigan and Malony quickly set to writing an adventure starring the Texas Rangers, and "The Official Champions Tournament: The Kiros Files" (1983) premiered as planned at EastCon. The two were assisted in running the tournament by another New Jersey roleplayer, Sue Grau — who handled some of the game's logistics,



so that the other GMs could concentrate on the roleplaying. She'd be a full GM by the third year of the tournament and would grow even more important to the group in later years.

The Texas Rangers adventures are well-remembered because they were innovative and quite unlike the other big tournaments found at conventions at the time. To start with, they focused on roleplaying — at times becoming live action games where players were encouraged to get out of their seats and move around. However, the unique heart of the Texas Rangers games was what the GMs called “The Question.”

These *Champions* tournaments were run in multiple rounds, as was typical for convention adventures. The GMs of the first round ensured that the best roleplayers advanced to the second round; then at the end of the second round, the players were faced with a Question. Questions were a natural outgrowth of the disadvantage system already built into *Champions*, which suggested that heroes could be conflicted in their choices. However, the tournament went beyond that, introducing a subgenre of the game that's been called “moral dilemma Champions.”

That first adventure, “The Kiros Files,” was based in part on the Keith Hannigan adventure that Mike Malony participated in a few months earlier: the PCs discovered a “villainous” organization and traced it to a secret lair. There, they were given the opportunity to join the organization, and perhaps do more good than they could as a local hero group. Would they do so? That was the first Question.

*“And because I had always been far more interested in roleplaying than in just beating up villains, these events had tremendous appeal to me.”*

– Rod Currie, “Playing the Con Game,” *Digital Hero* #9 (April 2003)

It was an exciting new focus for roleplaying and one that continues to influence GMs in the modern day — including the patron of this article. This would be one of the biggest impacts that the Texas Rangers tourneys had on the field.

Keith Hannigan got to meet Ray Greer, Bruce Harlick, and Stacy Lawrence of Hero Games a few weeks later at Origins '83, which was back in Michigan that year. At Hero's urging, Hannigan, Malony, and Grau ran The Kiros Files again at Gen Con XVI (1983). The game was once more well-received — and exactly what Ray Greer had been looking for.

Participating in Gen Con was difficult for a small company like Hero Games. Their convention presence was usually too small, and most of that convention time was already taken up with selling product and with meeting artists, authors, and distributors. As a result, Hero had been looking for local talent who was interested in carrying the banner for Hero Games. Hannigan, Malony, and Grau were a godsend; Greer definitely wanted them to continue producing tournaments for *Champions*.



Hero worked with the group through the next year — by which time Greer had conceived of an organization he called the Hero Auxiliary Corps (HAC). Though it would also include star GMs from Canada and from across the East Coast, the Texas Rangers GMs were the heart of organization. In later years, it was Sue Grau who coordinated HAC tournaments across the country, and it was her group that survived when the rest of HAC faded out.

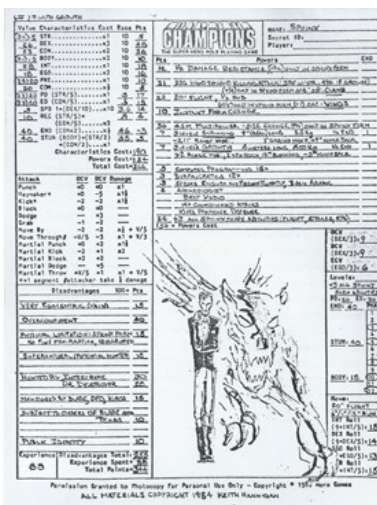
## The Core of the Corps: 1984–1993

Following the Gen Con run of *The Kiros Files*, Keith Hannigan's Hero Auxiliary Corps quickly grew. This began in fall 1983 when Keith Hannigan moved to Chicago for college. There he connected up with Marc Blumberg and Joseph Adlesick, who he met at Gen Con. They joined Hannigan's new college gaming group and would go on to help with HAC's *Champions* tournaments, starting with the second adventure, "Killing Miss Texas" (1984) — in which players had to decide whether to take one innocent life in order to save a city. It was the only HAC *Champions* adventure ever where some of the players could break away from the group (here, to kill Miss Texas) rather than everyone deciding *The Question* as a group.

"Killing Miss Texas" also revealed another important fact about the Texas Rangers stories: they were a continuing narrative, with each adventure building on the one before it. Rod Currie later described it as "an ongoing campaign with one game session per year."

The tournaments continued in 1985 with not just the third *Champions* tournament but also something new: a *Justice Inc.* (1984) tournament organized by Blumberg, Hannigan, and Malony. It was best remembered for "Bandit, raccoon of the future," a sidekick to a scientist character in the game. The tournaments were always bringing new GMs to HAC, and this was the case here: Canadian Dean Edgell joined the group after his *Justice Inc.* play.

Meanwhile, Malony also moved to Chicago for college in 1985 while more Chicago gamers joined the group, including Mitch Gitelman and Drew Novick. What had begun as a New Jersey group of GMs would now receive more attention as a Chicago group — and was even called the "Chicago HACs" by Ray Greer. Despite the name, the group had members in New Jersey, New York, Wisconsin, Quebec, and Toronto.



Throughout the rest of the '80s, the Chicago HACs ran *Champions* and *Justice Inc.* tournaments at Gen Con and (when it was nearby) at Origins. By this time they'd registered as an official club at Gen Con — making it easier for Sue Grau to organize things, which probably contributed to the longevity of the organization.

Meanwhile, HAC was growing increasingly important to Hero Games. This was in part due to the transformation of Hero that occurred in January 1986, when Hero Games signed a publishing deal with ICE. Though the HAC's *Champions* tournament took a year off in 1986 due to illness and the pressures of college, the group bounced back in 1987; working with ICE, they were able to ensure continuity in Hero's convention presence.

*"It was a draining event. Physically, since it is always warm in the room (small room, too many bodies; it always draws an audience) but emotionally as well. ... Hugs and handshakes were exchanged all around, players, GMs, audience."*

— Terry O'Brien, "Gen Con 1993" (1993), [terryobrien.me](http://terryobrien.me)

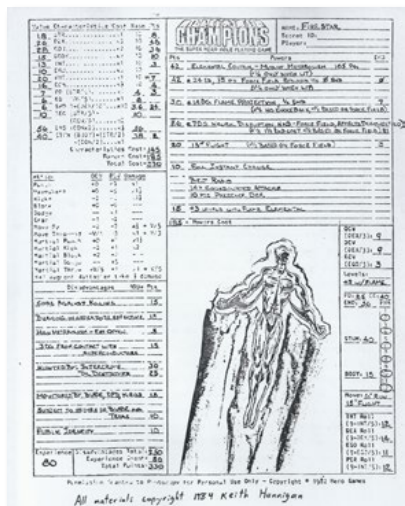
As the '90s dawned, the first chapter in the story of the Hero Auxiliary Corps was drawing to an end. The seventh tournament, "Rangers in Hell" (1990), was the last one to star the Texas Rangers. "The Confederation" (1991) then introduced

a new group of heroes. Keith Hannigan decided to leave the group after the ninth tournament, "The Blade Stigma" (1992). The next year, the Chicago HACs recognized Hannigan's departure by producing a big finale for the gritty world that had been the setting of the first 10 HAC adventures.

In "Paranormal Zero" (1993), the heroes discovered that super powers were the result of an experimental virus that also caused sterility. It was about to be unleashed on every person on Earth, which would effectively end the human race. The heroes could stop the virus, but doing so

would kill everyone who already had it — including themselves. The final round of "Paranormal Zero" was played out in a side room at Milwaukee's MECCA that was packed full of spectators. They tensely watched as the heroes ultimately decided to end themselves and the age of heroism.

It was the biggest Question ever, and a glorious end. Though the *Champions* tournaments continued afterward, it was with new heroes, in a new world.



## The Original Ten Tournaments: 1983–1993

**"I: The Kiros Files" (1983).** After tracing a secret organization to Baron Kiros, the heroes must choose whether to follow the letter of the law or take on a greater responsibility.

**"II: Killing Miss Texas" (1984).** A mage's spell curses the city of Dallas, and the heroes must decide whether to sacrifice Miss Texas to save the city.

**"III: The Scarborough Affair" (1985).** Senator Scarborough is holding together a US crumbling from within; the Rangers must decide what to do when he's revealed as the creator of those problems – and how to respond to his offers of "perfection" for each of the heroes.

*Afterward the Texas Rangers' leader, Sphinx, becomes the new President of the United States by popular acclaim.*

**"IV: Project Soulstar" (1987).** As the USSR prepares to attack the Middle East and Japan develops a missile shield, the players must help the Sphinx to decide whether to drop The Bomb on the Soviet Union's massed forces.

**"V: Vox Populi" (1988).** The Sphinx is running for reelection as President, while the Rangers are fighting against a repressive anti-gay bill. Though this is all a plot by Doctor Destroyer, the Rangers have no proof. They must decide whether Sphinx should veto the bill – which will doubtless lead to his defeat in the election and the bill's passage anyway in the next year.

**"VI: A Matter of Faith" (1989).** After Firestar sacrifices himself, the Rangers (now largely retired from public life) are given the opportunity to convince a faith healer to help him; instead, they lament the loss of their comrade.

**"VII: Rangers in Hell" (1990).** The Rangers come together one last time to try to save Firestar from Hell. They succeed after a rather philosophical Question makes them realize that their powers and morals came from within and are without limit.

**"VIII: The Confederation" (1991).** After the escalation of the previous years, a fresh start allows for simpler adventures. A new group of heroes comes together and must decide whether they trust each other in the face of attacks by a shape-changing foe.

**"IX: The Blade Stigma" (1992).** Following a chase around the world, the Confederation must choose what to do when they learn that their main supporter is using drug money to fund them.

**"X: Paranormal Zero" (1993).** After defeating natural disasters, the Confederation must decide whether to sacrifice all of their lives in order to save the human race.

## A Publishing Interlude: 1987–1996

After Hero Games arranged their publication deal with ICE, the principals of Hero moved on to other jobs in the roleplaying and video game industry. This left ICE with a bit of a dilemma: they had a well-loved mature game system thanks in part to Hero's great convention presence, but they didn't have anyone to produce new material.

Rob Bell eventually stepped up to manage the Hero System for ICE; he was another tourney GM, who'd been running his own Capitol Patrol convention adventures since around 1985. However, the Hero Auxiliary Corps was also given

the opportunity to influence Hero's publishing future.

For a short time in 1987, ICE tasked Blumberg, Gitelman, Hannigan, and Malony with "evaluating proposals" for new Hero products, but the plan didn't work out. Blumberg, Grau, and Malony edited and contributed to one book, *Robot Gladiators* (1987), while Blumberg, Hannigan, and Malony wrote an article for Hero's *Adventurers Club* #10 (Summer 1987) called "Champions Minus," and that was the majority of HAC's contributions to Hero's official publications.

In the following years, some individual Chicago HACs opted to write books of their own for ICE. Dean Edgell and newer member Chad Brinkley were the most prolific, contributing to a small handful of books — beginning with the *GM Screen for Champions* (1989) and ending with Edgell's *Blood Fury* (1996). Meanwhile, Blumberg and Hannigan were among many contributors to *Hero System Almanac 2* (1995).

However, by 1996, the Hero/ICE relationship was growing dysfunctional, which caused Hero to break away and to form troubled relations with a few other companies. These latter-day changes also marked the end of the HACs' contributions to



published Hero Games, with one exception: the much-later *The Ultimate Speedster* (2006), which Marc Blumberg co-authored with Steven S. Long.

However, HAC was never *really* about publication. They would continue to influence Hero Games in big ways, but it would be through tournaments, not books.

## Ever Expanding: 1990–1997

In 1990, the Chicago HACs gave the Texas Rangers their finale, while their *Justice Inc.* adventures continued on. That year the group also decided to create a second generation of games with three more regular tournaments: Brian Curley, Dana Edgell, Dean Edgell, and Drew Novick began running “Drive-In Hero”; Sue Grau started a second superhero tournament, called “Octagon”; and Chad Brinkley, Mike Evans, Aaron Loeb, Dan Silver, and David Simkins began running a *Fantasy Hero* (1985) tourney. HAC’s registration as a Gen Con club made this expansion easy — co-opting new GMs into HAC who might otherwise have run tournaments on their own.

This was just the first step in HAC’s rapid growth in the ‘90s. There had previously been a variety of Hero events at Gen Con, such as Rob Bell’s “Capitol Hero” and Mike Nystul’s own “Fantasy Hero,” but in the years that followed an increasing number of Hero tourneys came under the Hero Auxiliary Corps’ banner. Though the logistics were growing more challenging than ever, Sue Grau coordinated them for the ever-expanding group.

Sadly, this Gen Con expansion occurred at the same time that the larger HAC group that Ray Greer had created was disintegrating. Though ICE made good use of the group in the late ‘80s, by the early ‘90s they let it fade away, resulting in the Chicago HACs being the sole inheritors of the Hero Auxiliary Corps name. Today, if someone mentions the HACs, they probably mean the Chicago group.

At Gen Con ‘95, Grau reported 47 different Hero events, making it the second most popular game system after *AD&D* — something that had occasionally been true since the ‘80s, showing the power of the HACs. Of those, over a dozen of the events had been run by HAC, including: Agents of Fortune, Anime Hero II, Champions XII, The Dark, Dark Champions II, Drive In Hero VI, Fantasy Hero VI, Force 10, Justice Incorporated X, Octagon, Re-Run Heroes, Starship T-11, Team Justice, and What About Dessert. Classic GMs like Marc Blumberg, Chad Brinkley, Brian Curley, Dana Edgell, Dean Edgell, Sue Grau, and Drew Novick were joined by relative newcomers like Mike Naylor and many more.

HAC planned for 16 games at Gen Con ‘96, and continued to run events at the 1997 Gen Con Game Fair, but that would be the last year for the organization.

Officially.

The problem wasn’t too little success, but instead too much. By 1997, HAC was also coordinating with Don Prust’s convention group, SLASH, who was interested



in things outside of the Hero Games wheelhouse. Meanwhile, potential HAC members wanted to run convention adventures for *Deadlands* (1996), *D&D* (1974+), and other games. At the same time, Hero Games publication was moving from ICE to R. Talsorian to Cybergames. As a result of all these factors, Grau and the others decided to shut down HAC — leaving their Hero Games sponsorship behind and instead creating something new.

## Infinite Futures: 1997-Present

Though the Hero Auxiliary Corps was officially shut down in 1997, Infinite Imaginations immediately replaced it — revealing the transformation to mainly be a change in name and focus. This revamped organization continues to the modern day.

Today Infinite Imaginations includes about 40 GMs. They still run roleplaying-heavy tournament adventures, including a regular *Champions* tournament, and Sue Grau remains in charge. Rob Wiener and Geoff Speare ran “Champions 2014” at Gen Con Indy 2014; it featured the same focus on moral dilemmas and continued character development that HAC had kicked off decades before.

However, Infinite Imaginations runs a *lot* more. At Gen Con Indy 2014 they also hosted adventures for *Adventure!*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Commando*, *Dragon Age*, *DragonQuest*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Godlike*, *GUMSHOE*, *Immortal*, *InSpectres*, and *Mutants & Masterminds*. Despite this breadth, the Hero System got the most attention by far.

Besides popularizing moral-dilemma roleplaying and contributing to the success of the Hero System, the Hero Auxiliary Corps created an organization that’s lasted over 30 years.

And that’s how fans can make a difference.

### What to Read Next

- For the origins of *Champions*, *Justice Inc.*, and the Hero System, read ***Hero Games*** [‘70s].
- For another glance at EastCon history, read ***Creations Unlimited*** [‘80s].
- For Hero’s partner in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s and more on Rob Bell, read ***ICE*** [‘80s].
- For how tournaments were crucial to *D&D*’s early adventure production, read ***TSR*** [‘70s].
- For modern takes on moral-dilemma roleplaying, read about the indie movement of the ‘00s, including games like *Dogs in the Vineyard* from ***Lumpley Games*** [‘00s].
- For other gaming groups that influenced the industry, read ***The Aurania Gang*** [PA] and to a lesser extent ***The RuneQuest Mafia*** [PA].

This history courtesy of a wing of Platinum Dragons who are members of the 2014 RQ Mafia: Dave Woo; Dave Pickering; Donald and Mary Kubasak; Dave Sweet; Eric Fulton; and Christopher and Corina Wong.

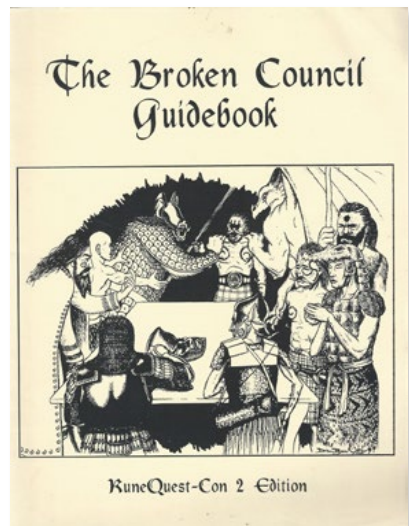
# The RuneQuest Mafia: 1989–Present

*Gaming groups can survive for decades, holding together friends who might otherwise have drifted apart. The RuneQuest Mafia is one of those — though its members have also touched the larger roleplaying industry.*

## Bringing Together the Mafia: 1987–1990

The story of the RuneQuest Mafia begins with Eric Mehlhaff — a student at UC Berkeley who decided to form a roleplaying club around 1987. He had to register the club at Sproul Hall on the Cal campus and to gather four students to sign up as officers; afterward, he could reserve rooms for gaming in buildings on campus. He also got one other benefit: permission to hang a permanent sign at Berkeley's Sather Gate, on the bridge over Strawberry Creek. The painted wooden sign that he posted read "Berkeley Campus Adventurers Club," the club that would be the immediate predecessor to the Mafia.

During BCAC's first two years, rooms were reserved and games were played. The



1995: The Broken Council Guidebook



club's gaming schedule was *GURPS* (1987) heavy in those early days, but Mehlhaff also ran a short campaign for a new game that we'll soon return to: *Ars Magica* (1987). The larger story of BCAC lies outside of the history of the Mafia, but a few of the club's first members would eventually become Mafia members too — among them Matt Harris, Eric Mehlhaff, Alex Purl, and John Tomasetti. The fall of 1988 brought one other early member of note: grad student Eric Rowe, who would soon become the nexus of the Mafia.

In the Fall of 1989 more future Mafia members came on stage. Shannon Appelcline (then Shannon Appel), Dave Pickering, and Dave Woo were all freshmen, newly arrived at Cal, while Bill Filios was another newcomer to the BCAC community. Yet more future Mafioso trickled into BCAC in the next year, among them Donald Kubasak, Doug Lampert, Matt Seidl, Dave Sweet, and Kevin Wong. Some would find their way to the BCAC from that wooden sign over Strawberry Creek, while others were brought into the club by friends.

These histories often discuss how game stores are a crucial locus for roleplaying — as places to find new games and new releases alike. And they are. The history of the Aurania Gang tells how game stores were crucial to the western LA gaming scene, while the histories of Columbia Games and White Wolf talk of the dangers of abandoning the distribution chain.

However college gaming groups were at least as important in the '70s and '80s. They're full of wild creativity — of people at the start of their lives daring to imagine *anything*. ICE, Lion Rampant, Midkemia Press, Palladium Books, and Jennell Jaquays' Fantastic Dungeoning Society all grew out of college gaming groups.

College is also the place where gaming tastes evolve — where players learn about new RPGs, extending their horizons beyond the scant games they played in high school. Retail stores might still be crucial to this evolution, such as when Matt Harris found *Ars Magica* (1987) at Don Reents' Games of Berkeley, but it was on the Berkeley campus that Eric Mehlhaff actually brought that game into play.

When the future Mafia members came to Berkeley in 1989 and 1990, they'd almost all been introduced to roleplaying by *Basic Dungeons & Dragons*; most of them arrived through Tom Moldvay's edition of the game (1981), but Sweet remembers the blue cover of J. Eric Holmes' game (1977) and Wong remembers the more professional boxed set produced by Frank Mentzer (1983). About half of them had played other games, including *Phoenix Command* (1986), *Paranoia* (1984), *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), *Stormbringer* (1981), *Champions* (1981), and *Shadowrun* (1989). However, *D&D* in its several forms had been the main course, and they were ready for something new.

We now return to Fall 1989 and the initial influx of Mafia members. At the time, BCAC reserved several rooms in Dwinelle Hall — one of the most labyrinthine buildings on the Berkeley campus. Roleplayers would arrive in the building around noon each Saturday and choose games *à la carte*. One game would run from lunch to dinner, and then another would run from dinner until late in the evening. Players could wander from one room to the other between the sessions and play with a different group each time. Eventually, cliques would develop, but they would take time.

During that period, there were two games of importance to the Mafia.

The first was Matt Harris' *Ars Magica* game, the BCAC's second such campaign. As an early independent RPG, *Ars Magica* offered very different play from the *D&D* norm. Players took on the roles of characters at vastly different power levels — including guard-like grogs, a variety of companions, and of course wizards. They also participated in stories that weren't just dungeon crawls. Harris' campaign was short-lived, but "Gilliam's Keep" — named for Filios' grog character — showed the future members of the Mafia that there was more to roleplaying than *D&D*. It would also lead to *many* other *Ars Magica* games over the years, one of which would be published by White Wolf.

*"I was thinking of taking Gentle Gift, so I can sneak up on people."*

– Dave Pickering, *Ars Magica* game

The second was Eric Rowe's ErzoQuest campaign, which would become the group's defining game. ErzoQuest was a *RuneQuest* (1978) game set in an original world that Rowe had created. The inventiveness of the world melded well with Rowe's star GMing. He was adroit at thinking on his feet — to the point where he was sometimes mocked for coming to games unprepared. But that was possible in part because of the extensive time that Rowe had spent designing Erzo: he began writing the world's underlying mythology in Summer 1989 and was working on a massive 32-page map of the world around the time that the Loma Prieta earthquake shattered the Bay Area on October 17, 1989. Even today, Rowe still has a head full of Erzo lore he's never committed to paper.

Like the world of *Talislanta* (1987), Erzo was an innovative setting that deviated from standard fantasy tropes. Humans were a dying race, while the rock-like Vikul were the inheritors of the world. Other major races included a warrior race of giant rabbits called the Gabter, the plant-like Rezla, and the draconic Jiliroth. Beyond that, the story of Erzo was *epic*. Rowe imagined a world history that moved through 15 major eras, one for each of the major runes. In this first campaign, Erzo stood at the divide between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> ages. As the Age of Civilization

approached, empires rose and fell, and the characters played major roles in those happenings.

That was the first chapter in the history of the RuneQuest Mafia. A group of old-timers including Harris, Mehlhaff, Purl, and Tomasetti were joined by newcomers like Appel, Filios, Pickering, and Woo to play a transformative game run by Rowe. And then in Spring 1990 their numbers began to swell thanks to Kubasak, Lampert, Seidl, Sweet, Wong, and others.

And that was just the beginning.

## Erzo Days: 1990–2004

Harris' *Ars Magica* game ended in the Spring of 1990, but new roleplaying options immediately appeared within the large, vibrant BCAC group. Many of the future Mafia members moved over to an *AD&D 2e* (1989) game run by Tomasetti, but some opted instead for yet another *Ars Magica* game, running across the hall. Saturday gaming days were also growing in length: the day's two roleplaying sessions were sometimes followed by a middle-of-the-night *Battletech* (1985) game and then a trip to Berkeley's Open Computer Facility, where gamers could play tournament *Xtrem* games until they were kicked out by cleaning staff at 5am — about 17 hours after the gaming day began.

Meanwhile Erzo was ramping up in popularity. Early histories of roleplaying often tell about primal roleplaying campaigns growing vast due to their success, and that's exactly what happened with Erzo. At its height, it had somewhere between 12 and 20 players — arranged at not one but two large tables.

*"He was born a farmer, but died a not-very-good-warrior."*

— Dave Pickering as the Vikul Tok, ErzoQuest game

Following that summer, Erzo's numbers settled down to a more manageable number. This was in part because some of the old guard was fading away: Harris moved on to UCLA while Purl joined the army. A bit later, Lampert headed back east — forever costing the group its rules lawyer, who knew where *everything* was in the rulebooks. As players faded away, the remaining members of Rowe's Erzo campaign were gelling into a coherent whole — more likely to play the same games together, rather than splitting up into the larger BCAC community. Because of their strident love for the Erzo campaign, they were now (at last) named the RuneQuest Mafia by another clique that developed within the BCAC — one that the Mafia in turn named the Chaos Gamers.

Around this time, one of the last members of the Mafia to join during college days showed up: Chris Van Horn. His late arrival was probably why he alone

moved effortlessly between the two cliques. He was the taunted-and-teased baby of the group for years, because in college a year or two feels like it makes a difference.

Erzo continued into 1991, and then was put on hiatus while Rowe worked on his thesis. When it returned, the players created new characters, but continued with the same storyline, which eventually reached its epic conclusion. It was the first of three Erzo games that Rowe ran over the years. In the late '90s a second Erzo campaign was set in the Age of Movement, where most of the players played a blink-dog-like race called the Lapadors. The last Erzo game ran from 2001–2004 and was set in the Age of Cold. Snowmen and yeti joined favorite races like the Gabter, Jiliroth, and Vikul. Fifteen years after Rowe ran his first Erzo game, this final campaign offered another epic conclusion to the group's most long-running game.

*"Party is just trap backwards with a 'y.'"*

– Dave Woo as the Criamon Risus, *Ars Magica* game

During these years, from 1990–2004, there were many other games. *Ars Magica* was the next most important. Though it faded away from BCAC's Saturday gaming, it reappeared on Friday nights thanks to Dave Martin, a recent graduate of UC Davis who met Appelcline and others through the *Ars Magica* Mailing List. He was instrumental in the creation of a new "St. Neriuss" campaign that ran for just three months in 1991. It was followed by the long-lived Roman Tribunal campaign (1991–1993), the fleeting Nature's Teeth campaign (1993–1994), and after a few years' hiatus, the Prospectus Locus campaign (1998–1999). All of these later *Ars Magica* campaigns were run in a full troupe style, with multiple GMs coming together to create a joint story; Appelcline, Filios, and Van Horn were usually the leads.

However, it was more typical for one GM to maintain control of a game, and that one GM was most frequently Eric Rowe. Over the course of a decade and a half he also ran a long-lived *MERP* (1984) game, two Gloranthan *RuneQuest* campaigns, and an "Accursed" *AD&D 2e* campaign. One of the Gloranthan games ran on Sundays, meaning that a RuneQuest Mafia member could game from Friday night through Sunday evening if he wanted.

Other GMs contributed games of their own, including: a few *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985) campaigns and a fatally short-lived *Hawkmoon* (1986) game by Appelcline; a *DragonQuest* (1980) game by Filios; *Boot Hill* (1975), *Rolemaster Pirates* (1982) Pirates, and *Star Wars* (1987) games by Pickering; and *Mechwarrior* (1986), *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1998), and *DC Heroes* (1985) games by Wong.

Most intriguing about the RQ Mafia's list of campaigns over the years is that Wong is the only GM who's successfully run a game that originated later than the group's origin date of 1989. The group has certainly embraced new versions of classic rules — for example moving from the original *Ars Magica* (1987) to fourth edition (1996) over the course of six or more campaigns. However the group's fundamental ideas about roleplaying seem to have become set when it started playing at Berkeley. It makes one wonder how important nostalgia is for a long-lived group.

Throughout those dozens of campaigns and across those 15 years, the Mafia evolved. The biggest changes came when the core members of the group left UC Berkeley, a process that began as early as 1993. For a few years, the Mafia worked with younger Cal students to try and keep BCAC registered every semester. By 1994 or 1995 they gave up, retreating off campus; for a long while afterward the games were held in Appelcline's apartment. They later moved on to apartments first shared by Wong and Kubasak, then Rowe and Kubasak. Still later, Pickering's basement was a Saturday gaming space for a while.

Sadly, the larger BCAC group faded away within a few years of the Mafia's departure from the campus.

## Tales of the Mafia

**Alex & The Character Sheet.** During one of Eric Rowe's ErzoQuest games, Alex Purl found his character mortally wounded. Again. In frustration he ripped his character sheet up. However within the next round, a healer got to Alex's character and saved his life. Looking at his shredded character sheet, Alex called for scotch tape.

**Don & The Chair.** In an *Ars Magica* game, Don Petrovich found his new character, Angus, killed. He hadn't really had a chance to play the character, so he just erased the name, wrote something new, and continued on. One of the other players at the table thought this funny, and kept calling the "new" character "Angus the Younger." Don said, "Don't do that," but the jokester continued. Don said, "No, really, don't do that." When the other player called him "Angus the Younger" one more time, Don picked up a chair and threw it. But he missed his taunter and hit someone else instead!

**Dave S. & The Horse.** Shannon Appelcline occasionally turned his *Pendragon* games over to the rest of the troupe to run, and Dave Sweet decided to give it a try. The players insisted on toiling through cold and snow, well past where they were supposed to go, and Dave kept making them roll their Energetic trait. When a character failed his roll, the personality trait dropped. No one was too concerned, though Dave kept saying, "You feel cold." Then Mike Lee's Energetic dropped to zero and Dave said, "You freeze to death on your horse." The group was flabbergasted.

Many college gaming groups die as college days end, but the Mafia continued on because many of the members stayed in the Bay Area — in large part because most of them either studied computer science or else moved into the computer field. Some members moved south to Oakland, Fremont, or San Jose, but they continued to game; Berkeley would remain the nexus of the group until at least the late '90s.

However, as Cal days came to an end, there were more departures as well. Filios moved to Iowa when his wife was offered a professorship there, while Seidl moved on to grad school in Colorado. Van Horn largely faded away, in part due to his participation in archaeological digs. Tomasetti moved to Sacramento, and Woo returned to his native southern California.

*"My advantage is that I don't have a plan so we can't be foiled by it failing."*

– Shannon Appelcline as Filbert the Fighting Bard, *AD&D 2e* game

Surprisingly, they all returned at times. Filios would visit for major events; Seidl would stop by in later years when his job brought him to the Bay Area; Van Horn would occasionally return for six months or a year at a time; and Tomasetti would travel an hour and a half for Erzo games. Finally, Woo would make a more full return after about two years.

**Clayton & The Faeries.** Clayton Springer was one of many players who joined the Mafia just for *Ars Magica* games. Like many such casual attendees, he didn't really understand the mindset of the group. One day he was running a game where the players met a group of faeries. Clayton clearly expected everyone to talk and so was unconcerned when Dave Pickering kept asking the faeries to crowd closer and closer together. Dave finally confirmed that the faeries were in a very tight group in front of him and said, "I Arc of Fiery Ribbon them." In *Ars Magica*, faeries are magical power personified (or as we say, "*vis on the hoof*"). The faeries died. The GM was flabbergasted.

**Dave S. & The Pit.** During a *Star Wars* game, Dave Sweet embraced the spirit of roleplaying when his Wookiee warned the rest of the party about a pit he'd discovered. There was of course a language problem, so Dave simply shouted, "Woowworrah!!" The rest of the players acted like they had no idea what Dave was talking about – but for the rest of the campaign whenever Dave's Wookiee spoke they said, "Watch out! There's a pit!"

**Kevin & The Car.** When a few members of the gaming group had too much to drink one evening, Kevin offered to drive them home. Unfortunately, he was driving a stick shift, and he wasn't any good at it. At a stoplight, Kevin accidentally rolled the car back into the vehicle behind him. And then that vehicle's *police siren* came on. Kevin had to explain to the officer how he was the sober one, driving everyone else home.

It showed how the group was becoming as much about friendships as gaming.

Eric Fulton was the last member to join the group in this era, showing up in 1997. Chris Van Horn finally stopped being the new guy as that title was transferred on to a new recipient, who held it for about a decade. However Fulton didn't let that stop him from running games of his own, including *Dark Sun* (1990) and Middle-earth games, both of them using the *D&D 3E* (2000) rules.

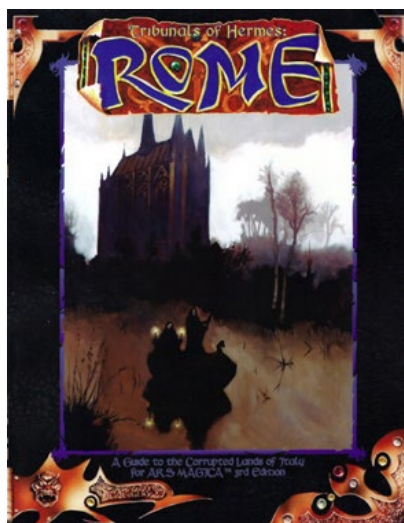
At heart, a young gaming group is about games, and the RQ Mafia played *lots* of them in the '90s and early '00s, before life finally started catching up.

## The Inevitable Publishing Interlude: 1992-Present

During the '70s, it was easy to break into the gaming industry because publishing standards were low: anyone with a typewriter and a mimeograph machine could produce books that were similar in quality to those published by professional companies. In the '80s, professional publishers' standards went up, but then Desktop Publishing arrived, allowing a new wave of fans to enter the industry. In the '90s, publishing standards were climbing even higher, but a new entry point appeared for the industry: the internet.

The RuneQuest Mafia never fully jumped into publishing, but throughout the '90s, members of the group came together to work on professional publications. It all started in 1990, when Shannon Appelcline took over the *Ars Magica* Mailing List from Dave Martin. By chance, this put him in direct contact with *Ars Magica* designer Mark Rein•Hagen. As Appelcline had been an aspiring author since writing *Doctor Who*-inspired short stories in grade school, he took this the opportunity to pitch a gaming book to Rein•Hagen: a supplement about Mythic Europe Rome, based on the Mafia's Roman Tribunal campaign.

*Tribunals of Hermes: Rome* (1993), was co-authored by Shannon Appelcline and Chris Frerking — a member of the group in the early '90s who only attended the Friday night *Ars Magica* games. It was the gaming book that most fully belonged to the Mafia as a whole, as it'd been written by two of its members and based on one of their campaigns. The "authors' dedication" was also a who's who of the group's *Ars Magica* players at the time, including: Philip Brown, Bill Filios, Scott Gier, Philip Gross, Donald Kubasak, Doug Lampert,





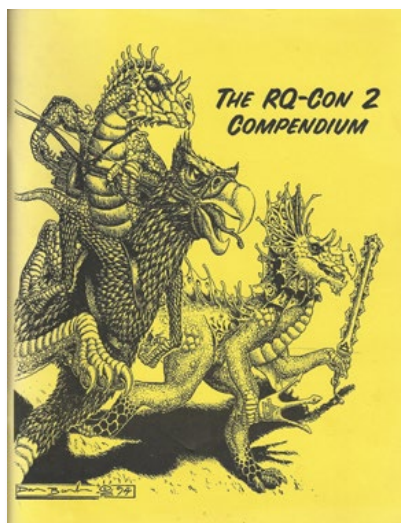
Dave Martin, Doug Orleans, Don Petrovich, Dave Pickering, Eric Rowe, Matt Seidl, John Tomasetti, Dave Woo, and Kevin Wong. There were some changes between the campaign and the book, which made the setting less pragmatic and more fantastical; then, White Wolf asked Appelcline to add more demons. Still, it was an interesting mirror of two and a half years of play.

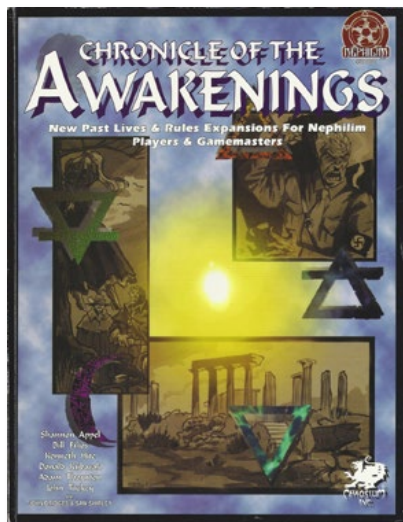
A year after the publication of *Tribunals of Hermes: Rome*, two events led a few members of the group to more work in the industry.

The first major event was Appelcline and Rowe's attendance of RuneQuest-Con (1994), organized in Baltimore, Maryland, by *RuneQuest* fan David Cheng. Rowe decided to follow it up with RQ-Con 2 (1995) in San Francisco the next year. He and Appelcline also opted to write a LARP, "The Broken Council," since Gloranthan live-action games had become a staple of *RuneQuest* conventions in the UK and the US. They received help from Gloranthan fan Stephen Martin — who as it happens was Dave Martin's brother, proving how small the roleplaying world is.

Everyone involved learned *not* to simultaneously plan a convention and write a LARP, but nonetheless it all came together on January 13–16, 1995. Kubasak was shanghaied at the last minute to help with LARP prep and to sign books (using Rowe's name) and everything came off mostly okay. The weekend convention also resulted in the only books that members of the Mafia produced themselves without releasing them through a publisher. There was a pre-con book (1994) and a con book (1995), but the LARP's *The Broken Council Guidebook* (1995) was more notable for the roleplaying field; it was the first ever in-depth look at Glorantha's First Age, written following discussions with Gloranthan creator Greg Stafford. The book was authored by Appelcline, Rowe, and Martin and included artwork by Filios.

Later that year Appelcline produced *The RQ-Con 2 Compendium* (1995), bringing the RQ-Con 2 experience to a close with LARP reports and seminar transcripts. However that wasn't the end for Rowe. If the Internet was the main conduit to professional roleplaying work for amateurs in the '90s, then fan communities were second. Based primarily on his experience managing RQ-Con 2 — and the connections he made with Chaosium — Eric Rowe was soon hired by the game company as a marketer.





Meanwhile Appelcline had started an electronic newsletter called The Chaosium Digest (1994–2012). It was a weekly or biweekly collection of articles for Chaosium's games, largely written by Appelcline with help from Rowe, but with contributions from internet subscribers as well. Appelcline hoped it would eventually give him a foot in the door at Chaosium, and that's exactly what happened.

In short order, Appelcline and Rowe were asked to contribute to a few of Chaosium's upcoming books: *Chronicles of the Awakenings* (1995) for Chaosium's new *Nephilim* (1994) game and *Taint of Madness* (1995) for *Call of Cthulhu*. In the years afterward, Appelcline also edited a few books that he organized himself: the *Gamemaster's Companion* (1996) for *Nephilim* and *Tales of Chivalry & Romance* (1999) and *Tales of Magic & Miracles* (1999) for *Pendragon* — though the last two were delayed for a few years by Chaosium's financial problems and shifting priorities. As had been the case with other industry connections of the '90s, Kubasak and Filios both contributed to these projects.

"Ooh, killed by another vegetable."

– Shannon Appelcline as GM, *Pendragon* game

As Appelcline hoped, Chaosium hired him in 1996. He worked for them as a layout artist and editor for two years. Rowe continued his own marketing work during this time, but their paths diverged in 1998 when Chaosium ran into financial problems related to its overprinting of the *Mythos* CCG (1996). Appelcline, more risk adverse, went back to the computer field, while Rowe took over Chaosium's mail order arm in exchange for debts owed to him. He then made Wizard's Attic into a fulfillment house, just in time to take advantage of the d20 explosion.

These histories have told the stories of several gaming groups that impacted the entire industry, and the RuneQuest Mafia is one of them. Through the group's interest in *RuneQuest*, *Pendragon*, and other Chaosium games and through Rowe and Appelcline's work on RQ-Con 2, Rowe ended up running a company that distributed the products of approximately 80 RPG companies in

the early '00s. When it crashed, for reasons described in its own mini-history, it took some of those companies with it. Even big companies like Mongoose were affected.

Following the crash of Wizard's Attic in 2003 and the results of the US presidential election in 2004, Rowe decided to move back to his birthplace in New Zealand, which would result in the groups' biggest shake-up ever.

Meanwhile, with the coming of the '00s, the era of members of the group working together on roleplaying projects was past. Appelcline is the only one who's continued in the field. He's run RPGnet since around 2003 and for a while regularly wrote for *Chaosium* and *Gloranthan* fanzines. He also contributed to *Hero Wars* (2000), and authored two *Gloranthan* elf books: "Oak & Thorn" for *Issaries*, which was never published, and *Elfs: A Guide to the Aldryami* (2007) for Mongoose, which was. The fact that a 100,000-word book ended up unpublished due to the vagaries of changing companies and ownerships in the industry led Appelcline to focus on projects he fully owned instead. The first of these was *Designers & Dragons* (2011, 2014).

Meanwhile, the rest of the Mafia was focusing more on their own professional careers, a general trend for a group that had by now entered its second decade.

## Mature Gaming: 1999-Present

There's a difference between a young gaming group and a mature gaming group. The young group is all about the games, and players might flit in and out of the group at any time. As a gaming group matures it becomes about the people, and the games become the glue that holds them together.

With more than a decade gone by, some of the members of the Mafia were held together by more than that. They'd almost all ended up in the computer industry and as often as not a few of them worked at the same company.

Meanwhile, the group's social fabric was maturing in another way. John Tomasetti was married in June 1999, Shannon Appelcline in August 2000, Eric Rowe in October 2002, and Dave Pickering in April 2003. This sort of maturation represents another danger to a college group, just as the ending of college days does: though Appelcline and Pickering stayed with the group, Tomasetti faded away after he met his wife, and Rowe would leave for New Zealand just two years after his own wedding.

By 2004, the Mafia was composed of Shannon Appelcline, Eric Fulton, Donald Kubasak, Dave Pickering, Eric Rowe, Kevin Wong, and when circumstances allowed Dave Sweet and Dave Woo. The group was still a healthy size, but it would have been easy for it to disintegrate after Rowe's departure, because he'd been the central GM of the Mafia for 15 years.

**Prospectus**

Player Name: John J. Galt (Felix)

Character Name: John J. Galt

Class: Warrior Warrior Warrior Warrior

Age: 20 Sex: M Height: 5'10" Weight: 180 Eyes: Blue Hair: Brown

**CHARACTERISTICS**

STR 12 DEX 10 CON 10 INT 10 WIS 10 CHA 10

PER 10 STA 10 COM 10 LCK 10

Challenge 2 Size Medium Deeds None

**PERSONALITY TRAITS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**REPUTATIONS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**VIRTUES AND FLAWS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**ADULTERIES**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**RuneQuest**

Player Name: John J. Galt

Character Name: John J. Galt

Class: Warrior Warrior Warrior Warrior

Age: 20 Sex: M Height: 5'10" Weight: 180 Eyes: Blue Hair: Brown

**CHARACTERISTICS**

STR 12 DEX 10 CON 10 INT 10 WIS 10 CHA 10

PER 10 STA 10 COM 10 LCK 10

Challenge 2 Size Medium Deeds None

**PERSONALITY TRAITS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**REPUTATIONS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**VIRTUES AND FLAWS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**ADULTERIES**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**Black Combs**

Player Name: John J. Galt

Character Name: John J. Galt

Class: Warrior Warrior Warrior Warrior

Age: 20 Sex: M Height: 5'10" Weight: 180 Eyes: Blue Hair: Brown

**CHARACTERISTICS**

STR 12 DEX 10 CON 10 INT 10 WIS 10 CHA 10

PER 10 STA 10 COM 10 LCK 10

Challenge 2 Size Medium Deeds None

**PERSONALITY TRAITS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**REPUTATIONS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**VIRTUES AND FLAWS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**ADULTERIES**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**Pendragon**

Player Name: John J. Galt

Character Name: John J. Galt

Class: Warrior Warrior Warrior Warrior

Age: 20 Sex: M Height: 5'10" Weight: 180 Eyes: Blue Hair: Brown

**CHARACTERISTICS**

STR 12 DEX 10 CON 10 INT 10 WIS 10 CHA 10

PER 10 STA 10 COM 10 LCK 10

Challenge 2 Size Medium Deeds None

**PERSONALITY TRAITS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**REPUTATIONS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**VIRTUES AND FLAWS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**ADULTERIES**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**RuneQuest**

Player Name: John J. Galt

Character Name: John J. Galt

Class: Warrior Warrior Warrior Warrior

Age: 20 Sex: M Height: 5'10" Weight: 180 Eyes: Blue Hair: Brown

**CHARACTERISTICS**

STR 12 DEX 10 CON 10 INT 10 WIS 10 CHA 10

PER 10 STA 10 COM 10 LCK 10

Challenge 2 Size Medium Deeds None

**PERSONALITY TRAITS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**REPUTATIONS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**VIRTUES AND FLAWS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**ADULTERIES**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**ADVENTURER SHEET**

Player Name: John J. Galt

Character Name: John J. Galt

Class: Warrior Warrior Warrior Warrior

Age: 20 Sex: M Height: 5'10" Weight: 180 Eyes: Blue Hair: Brown

**CHARACTERISTICS**

STR 12 DEX 10 CON 10 INT 10 WIS 10 CHA 10

PER 10 STA 10 COM 10 LCK 10

Challenge 2 Size Medium Deeds None

**PERSONALITY TRAITS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**REPUTATIONS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**VIRTUES AND FLAWS**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

**ADULTERIES**

1. Brave 2. Brave 3. Brave 4. Brave 5. Brave 6. Brave 7. Brave 8. Brave 9. Brave 10. Brave

Instead, it kept on. Appelcline stepped up as a regular GM, running games of *Elric!* (1993), *AD&D 1e* (1977), *D&D 3.5E* (2003), *Mongoose Traveller* (2008), and *Pathfinder* (2009). Wong had been regularly running since 1997 and he continued on with *GURPS*, *Deadlands: Hell on Earth* (1998), and *Pendragon* campaigns. Kubasak and Fulton also ran a few games of their own.

Though gaming continued, there were changes to both its tone and its frequency. All of the GMs were now more likely to use packaged adventures than the more imaginative and responsive games run for *Ars Magica* and *RuneQuest* in days past, and the frequency of the games decreased: though there were sometimes still two games on a Saturday, not everyone stayed for both sessions, and at other times there weren't games for weeks.

*"I can't believe how adverse to work you are in this imaginary world."*

— Dave Sweet, *Pathfinder* game

Nevertheless, the group started to grow again. Kevin Wong's younger brother, Christopher Wong, became a regular participant and even GMed some *D&D 4E* (2008) games; he was soon joined by his fiancé Corina Borroel. Meanwhile, Donald Kubasak brought in his girlfriend Mary Seabrook, who briefly ran *The Dresden Files Roleplaying Game* (2010). Suddenly a group that had been shrinking since the late '90s topped out at an almost unmanageable size of 10! These new attendees also brought the first paired gamer weddings: Donald and Mary were married in January 2010 and then Christopher and Corina were married that October.

A gaming group grown mature had also become family. They played together, they worked together, and they even vacationed together on occasion. Dave Sweet, Kevin Wong, Christopher Wong, and Chris Van Horn all drove in a van from California to Milwaukee to attend the 2002 Gen Con Game Fair together, where they were met by Dave Woo (who flew). Several members of the group also attended DaveCon in Apple Valley, California, in 2004, a convention just for the Mafia. Some visited Rowe in New Zealand in 2009 for DaveCon II: Go'n Kiwi, while another Gen Con trip happened in 2012.

Unfortunately the 2000s also brought one tragedy: Chris Van Horn passed away in December 2008. He hadn't been a regular member of the Mafia for years, but he was still missed and mourned.

Today, the RuneQuest Mafia is surprisingly spry for a group that's 25 years old. Appelcline is finishing a four-year run of *Pathfinder's Kingmaker* campaign — though he's been claiming that it's almost over for a year. His recent campaigns



have all been run at EndGame, a game store in Oakland, California, that's also the nexus of Evil Hat Production's West Coast presence. Meanwhile Wong is near the start of *Pendragon*'s Great Campaign.

Sometimes members of the Mafia disappear for a month or a year or two due to any number of life reasons. However, they always seem to return, drawn back by the inexorable schedules of gaming.

#### What to Read Next ✖️🔧🕒

- For more on college gaming groups, read **ICE** ['80s], **Lion Rampant** ['80s], **Midkemia Press** ['70s], and **Palladium Books** ['80s]. Also read about the Fantastic Dungeoning Society in **Judges Guild** ['70s].
- For *RuneQuest*, the group's definitive game, read **Chaosium** ['70s].
- For *Ars Magica*, the group's other game of note, read **Lion Rampant** ['80s].
- For the company that published *Tribunals of Hermes: Rome*, read **White Wolf** ['90s].
- For the state of *RuneQuest* publication when Rowe put on RQ-Con 2 in 1995, read **Avalon Hill** ['80s].
- For the gaming company that Appelcline and Rowe briefly worked at, again read **Chaosium** ['70s].
- For more on **Wizard's Attic**, read its own mini-history, which appears in **Issaries** ['00s].
- For more on EndGame and Evil Hat West, read **Evil Hat Productions** ['00s].
- For another gaming group that touched the industry, read **The Aurania Gang** [PA] and for a very different sort of gaming group, read **Hero Auxiliary Corps** [PA].

These yearly chronicles courtesy of Kickstarter backers who helped us to stretch to \$80,000.

# Appendix I: Yearly Chronicles: 2008–Present

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The first 11 histories from *Designers & Dragons* (2014) were published online at RPGnet, but by April 2008, plans were underway for their publication as a book. As a result, the nature of the articles being published at RPGnet changed; histories that would appear in the book mostly faded away, but in return some new, complementary articles appeared.

These new articles included yearly looks at the industry, each published just past the end of the year. The first was published on January 1, 2009; additional articles have appeared every year since. Now, thanks to the 2014 Kickstarter, all the articles from 2008–2014 are being reprinted here.

Please note that these articles are written in a different style than the main histories of *Designers & Dragons*. They're written in the first person, and they're more emotional as well. This all probably arises from the fact that they weren't exactly written as history, but rather a chronicle of the good and the bad of the year before — one that the author was directly involved with.



These articles have been reformatted and edited for style. However, the content has been left untouched, for good or ill. Side comments give more recent perspectives of some of the events, but reports, suppositions, and predictions have been left as they were originally written. The result hopefully provides as interesting of a perspective on these years as a more unbiased history would, because it gives insight into what we were feeling at the time.

So enjoy these histories of the years gone by, when the first two editions of *Designers & Dragons* were being researched and written.

## 2008: The Year of Reborn Games

*It was the year when the old was made new again. Of course, Wizards of the Coast released the fourth iteration of D&D, but there was far more than that: Chaosium released a fully featured version of their Basic RolePlaying system, OSRIC was revised into a 2.0 form, and Wild Talents returned in an Essential edition. Perhaps most importantly, D&D 3.5E returned as Pathfinder, in alpha and beta editions, and Warhammer 40k finally returned as a roleplaying game after flirting with the idea in the days of Rogue Trader (1987). So, it was a new year, but an old one too.*

**The Passing of the Old Guard.** Ours is an aging hobby, and it is with great sadness that I must note the passing of some of its pioneers in 2008. Most notably, we lost Gary Gygax, Bob Bledsaw, N. Robin Crossby, and Erick Wujcik.

Gary Gygax invented our medium and so touched all of our lives in ways that we can't begin to define.

Bob Bledsaw created the market for gaming supplements and his Judges Guild was an important force through the hobby's youngest days.

N. Robin Crossby discovered Hårn; alongside Glorantha and Tékumel it is one of what I consider to be the hobby's three great settings, which helped to define the ideas of world-building in RPGs.

Erick Wujcik was integral to the history of Palladium, one of the most successful RPG companies in its time, and also created one of the most innovative games in the hobby, *Amber Diceless Role-Playing* (1991), which presaged a lot of the indie development that's followed.

Everyone passes too soon, but I think that's particularly the case for these trailblazers of our medium.

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*I can't believe that Bledsaw, Crossby, Gygax, and Wujcik were all with us when I started writing Designers & Dragons, because it seems like they've been gone for so long.*

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***D&D Moves Onward.*** Meanwhile, life goes on. Our hobby's flagship game continued its evolution with the release of *D&D 4E* (2008), created by some of the younger generation: Rob Heinsoo, Andy Collins, and James Wyatt.

Though some have argued otherwise, I think there's little doubt that 4E was the release that merged tabletop roleplaying with MMORPG play — at least in its strategy, terminology, and themes. I haven't seen any indication that anyone else is following this path — but it's probably too early to tell. If *D&D* ultimately acts as a gatekeeper between the MMORPG and RPG domains, it might actually keep everyone happy.

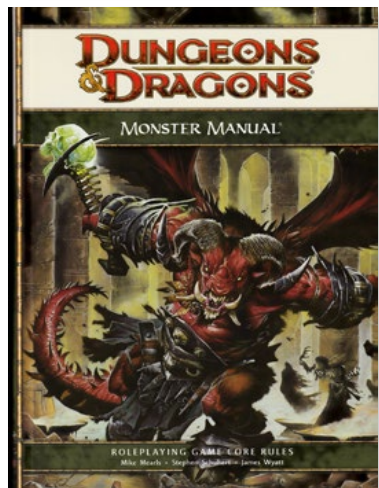
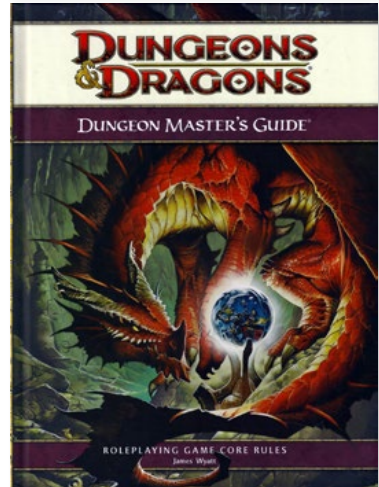
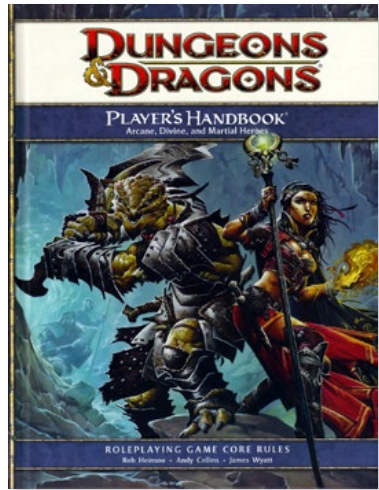
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*'Happy' generally isn't the word I'd use to describe the reception of D&D 4E, sadly.*

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***D20 Fractures.*** The release of *D&D 4E* was accompanied by a trend that should be scarier for Wizards of the Coast: the fracturing of the d20 market.

Some sort of fracture was probably going to happen in any case, as many folks felt that *D&D 3E* (2000) didn't need a total revamp. However, Wizards made it much worse than it might have been. First, they called back all of their external licenses, such as *Dragon*, *Dungeon*, and *Dragonlance* — ensuring that no one else had “skin” in the game. Second, their new “open game license” was badly delayed and finally appeared in a pretty unfriendly state; many publishers were forced out of the *D&D*-support biz, just because they couldn't afford to wait and see.

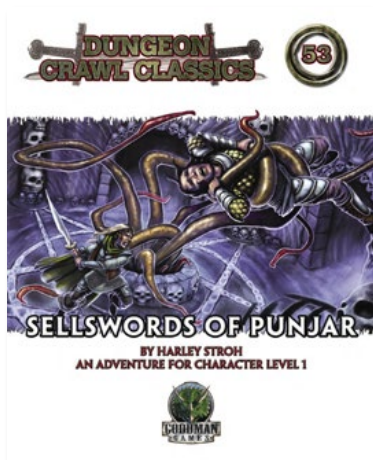


As a result, the top *D&D* 3E supporters have decided to depend upon their own games. Green Ronin is concentrating on *True20* (2005) and *Mutants & Masterminds* (2002); Troll Lord Games is focusing on *Castles & Crusades* (2004); and Paizo was forced into the position of creating a brand-new 3E-compatible game, *Pathfinder* (2009) — which will do the most to emphasize the d20 rift if it's successful.

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*If it's successful? I think Pathfinder succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams.*

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Of the notable d20 publishers, only Goodman Games immediately made the leap from *D&D* 3E to 4E — though others who had gotten out of the market (such as Mongoose and Fantasy Flight) appear to be tentatively finding their way back in. However, there are many fewer 4E publishers than there were for 3E — while many more publishers continue to publish for 3E than ever considered doing so for 2e.

Retail reports suggest that after a spike surrounding the release of 4E its sales have

very quickly died down to old 3E levels, which has been a disappointment to many retailers. Likewise publishers like Adamant and Mongoose have expressed disappointment in their own 4E supplemental sales. Though it's impossible to say why, I'd guess it's because of the market fracture rather than anything about 4E itself — though of course some of the elements of 4E's differentness could have accentuated the market fracture.

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*The 4E market continued to head downward, and so Fantasy Flight never got into 4E support, and Mongoose put out just a few supplements. Even Goodman slowed down their production after only a few years.*

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***The Continued Roll-Up of the Hobby.*** I don't think many of us blinked when the big boys started buying up hobby IPs in the late '90s. Microsoft's 1999 purchase of FASA Studios made perfect sense given the success of the *MechWarrior* video games (1989+). Similarly, the roll-up of Wizards of the Coast into Hasbro was reasonable given the size of the company.

The last few couple of years have brought more surprises as big companies dug deeper into our hobby world, looking primarily for IPs. CCP bought White

Wolf back in 2006 and now, the process seems to be accelerating. Cryptic Studios purchased the *Champions* IP in February. Then, the Rebellion Group acquired Mongoose Publishing.

Content is truly king in the world of the internet, and a lot of computer companies are realizing that RPG companies are sources of really cheap, yet well-developed IPs. I expect we'll see more of those roll-ups in the years to come.

Mongoose is sort of a weird case, since they had a lot less IP to offer, as they've gone so heavily with licenses. On the other hand, Rebellion Group has a lot of IP of its own, in the form of the *2000 A.D.* properties. So, it'll be interesting to see where that goes.

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*Sadly, these corporate roll-ups did not go well for our industry. Hasbro policies seem to be the prime cause behind the strangulation of D&D 4E, while White Wolf was ultimately killed by CCP and Mongoose was nearly killed by its Rebellion deal. Finally, Cryptic didn't do Hero much good in the long run. As these early corporate roll-ups began to flounder, the trend quickly fizzled out.*

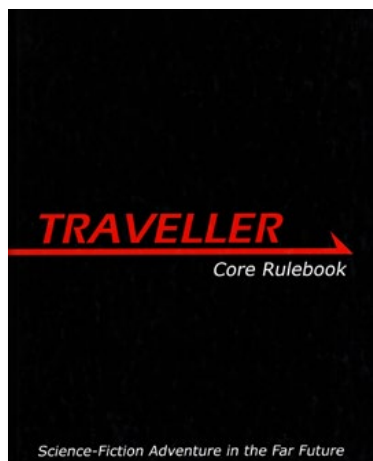
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***Companies Rise & Fall.*** A year of roleplaying just wouldn't be complete without companies rising and falling.

The most unexpected departure of the year was Games Workshop, who put out *Dark Heresy* (2008) — the *Warhammer 40k* RPG that they'd been promising for decades — then pulled the plug on it (and their entire RPG line) mere days later. GW's announcement that they were dumping their successful roleplaying products could as easily have come from the '80s as the '00s. History repeats itself.

GW's RPG departure led to one of the most unexpected returns of the year: Fantasy Flight Games, who had largely abandoned the roleplaying market for their very successful adventure games like *Arkham Horror* (2005) and *Descent: Journeys in the Dark* (2005). They picked up the *Warhammer* RPG licenses and immediately started putting out new supplements. There was also some talk of them returning to the world of *D&D* production with 4E, but thus far that hasn't occurred.





*The Return of Traveller.* GW's attitude toward roleplaying wasn't the only thing reminiscent of the '80s. 2008 also saw the return of our hobby's premiere science-fiction game: *Traveller* (2008).

Mongoose Publishing's resurrection (and continued support) of three of the greatest lines from the '80s — *Paranoia* (1984), *RuneQuest* (1978), and *Traveller* (1977) — is nothing short of amazing for my generation of gamers. Hopefully, even with the entire *2000 A.D.* catalog in their hands, we'll see stories of Alpha Complex, Glorantha, and the Imperium for many years to come.

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*Sadly, Mongoose's Rebellion deal would ultimately impact these three lines. Mongoose's RuneQuest has largely faded out and Paranoia was quiescent for a few years until its 2014 Kickstarter; only Traveller has stood strong throughout these problems.*

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*What's to Come.* So what's 2009 to bring? Further fracturing of the d20 market as *Pathfinder* goes gold or a slow consolidation around *D&D 4E*? Indie publishers rising up to become the newest full-time manufacturers or another older company disappearing forever? More roll-ups or more amazing new releases? We'll have to wait 365 days to see.

#### What to Read Next ✖⚙️♀️🕒

- For the history of Gary Gygax, read **TSR** ['70s], for Bob Bledsaw, read **Judges Guild** ['70s], for N. Robin Crossby, read **Columbia Games** ['80s], and for Erick Wujcik, read **Palladium Books** ['80s] and **Phage Press** ['90s].
- For *D&D 4E* and the fracture it caused, read **Wizards of the Coast** ['90s].
- For corporate roll-ups, read **Wizards of the Coast** ['90s], **White Wolf** ['90s], **Hero Games** ['80s], and **Mongoose Publishing** ['00s].
- For the unexpected *Warhammer 40k* changeover, read **Games Workshop** ['70s] and **Fantasy Flight Games** ['90s].
- For a love affair with the '80s, read **Mongoose Publishing** ['80s].



## 2009: The Year of Growth Interrupted

*It was the year when the industry seemed to be on the move. The doldrums of the d20 crash were finally receding, allowing for new growth. The most important release was the completed edition of *Pathfinder*, but old-timers were just as enthusiastic over classic games returned like *Arduin Eternal*, *Earthdawn Third Edition*, *Hero System Sixth Edition*, *Paranoia: Troubleshooters*, and *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay Third Edition*. Indie players tried out new releases like *Diaspora*, *Fiasco*, *HeroQuest Second Edition*, and *Swashbucklers of the 7 Skies*. Finally, the rest of the market enjoyed innovation of its own with releases like *Doctor Who: Adventures in Time & Space*, *Dragon Age*, *Eclipse Phase*, and *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Sadly, this was all about to come crashing down.*

***Farewell to Dave Arneson (& Keith Herber).*** There were two fathers of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974): Gary Gygax who came to the game via *Chainmail* (1971) and Dave Arneson who came to it via the Braunstein wargames. In 2009 we lost the second and less heralded of these two. Though quiet and unassuming, Arneson was just as important to our hobby as Gygax was.

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*Losing both Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in just 13 months was heartbreaking.*

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When speaking of luminaries who passed in 2009, we should also remember Keith Herber, the author of many notable *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) products, but also the man who revitalized the line with the Lovecraft Country setting books — which incorporated Lovecraft's writings into the game more thoroughly than anything before it. It's a particular tragedy that he was taken just when his Miskatonic River Press was bringing him back to the hobby.

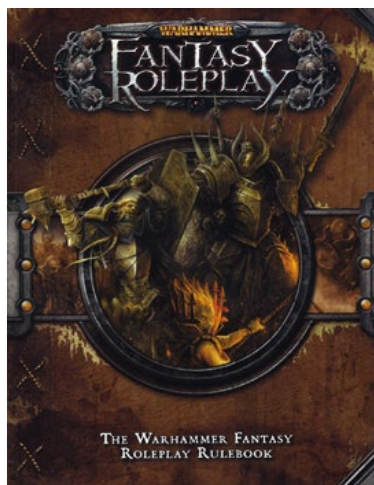
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*In this year's farewells, I unfortunately missed remembering Wilf K. Backhaus of Chivalry & Sorcery (1977) fame.*

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***The Rise of the New Giants.*** The '00s saw many companies rise up due to the easy success of d20, but it was only in 2009 that we saw two of them solidified their claim as new giants in the industry, grown far beyond their early d20 success.

The first is *Fantasy Flight Games*, whose return to our industry thanks to their Games Workshop *Warhammer* licenses has allowed them to apply their high degree of professionalism and the artistic skills required of a board game publisher back to the roleplaying field. I have no doubt that their *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay Third Edition* (2009) is a truly innovative product — though I don't



expect other companies to follow the biggest trends of the game because they don't have the component-producing infrastructure that FFG does. Nonetheless, FFG is making waves with all three of their *Warhammer* lines, which have together turned them into a giant in the RPG industry.

The second new giant of the industry is *Mongoose Publishing*, who has been on the way up ever since their first d20 product in 2001. I think that their publication of *Traveller* (2008) was what really locked them in as a publisher of many systems. The number of successful lines

they have is pretty amazing, as are the facts that they've been continuously hiring over the last few years and that they're the only company I know of who always talks about how their sales are up when the rest of the industry looks downward.

2009 also saw the very sudden appearance of a company that I think is going to rise up into the hallowed halls of the major RPG publishers, perhaps in the coming year: *Cubicle 7 Entertainment*. It's been a while since we've seen a major publisher appear, especially without the crutch of a major license — and Mongoose got started with d20 (2000) while Fantasy Flight got its beginning with *Call of Cthulhu* (1981). But Cubicle 7 already seemed to know where it was going even before it picked up funding from Rebellion Group, linked up with Mongoose, and acquired licenses for both *Call of Cthulhu* (from Chaosium) and *Doctor Who* (from the BBC). They've also followed Mongoose's lead in picking up a huge slate of smaller publishing partners, and I think that's really got the potential to place them at a nexus of opportunity in 2010 and beyond.

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*There would be no nexus of opportunity in 2010 due to any number of factors smashing this short-lived roleplaying renaissance. Mongoose and Cubicle 7 both failed to prosper, and although they could be headed upward again in 2014, it took them a few years to get there. Today I'd instead note two other companies as new giants: Paizo Publishing and (to a lesser extent) Green Ronin Publishing.*

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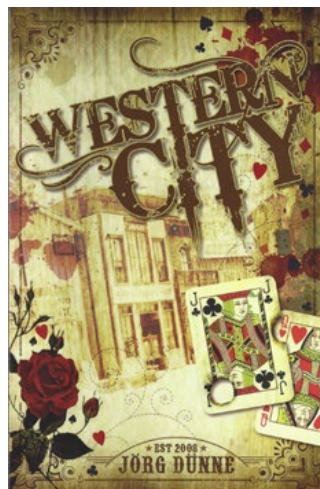
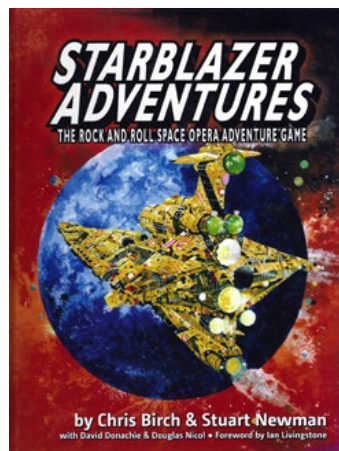
***The Rise of the Indie.*** If you want to talk about decade-long trends, the rise of indie games is certainly one. I personally date its beginnings back to the publication of *Ars Magica* (1987), the game that brought Mark Rein•Hagen and Jonathan Tweet into the roleplaying industry. However it was the growth of the internet and PDFs that changed what could have been a blip on the RADAR into a major gaming trend.



In 2009, indies went mainstream. If you accept my categorization of Cubicle 7 as a major publisher, then you have to accept *Starblazer Adventures* (2009) as an indie product gone mainstream. That of course wouldn't have been possible without Evil Hat creating the third edition of *FATE* for their own *Spirit of the Century* (2006) a few years previous — and I think Evil Hat themselves might break out into bookstores and the rest of the mainstream with their (probable) 2010 publication of the a Harry Dresden RPG.

However, the mainstreaming of indies in 2009 wasn't just the product of one or two companies. The year also saw Mongoose's publication of *Western City* (2009), while Cubicle 7 is giving a whole bunch of indie games more exposure, starting with *Qin* (2006, 2009) and *Wild Talents* (2006).

Mainstream designs and indie games are now being put out by the same publishers for the first time since the indie label appeared. That's just a small step from them being blended into the same games, truly integrating indies into our roleplaying hobby — which is a trend I expect to see as we move into the '10s.




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The Dresden Files (2010) RPG was indeed a good indicator of the continued success of indie games, as I discuss more in 2010. Though a lot of the trends from 2009 were reversed by a bad economy and a bad industry, the indie revolution kept on trucking.

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**The Uncertainty of PDF.** The growth of the PDF industry in the '00s was just as big of a story as the growth of indie publishing — and integrally tied to it. DriveThruRPG has changed the face of gaming and will continue to do so. However, 2009 also showed how cutting edge the technology still is, when Wizards of the Coast abruptly pulled all of their books out of the PDF market.

Personally, I find their decision a colossal misstep. If Wizards was telling the truth when they claimed that getting out of PDFs was an attempt to combat piracy, then they're surprisingly deluded. Given how many of the pirated Wizards PDFs were printers' proofs and internal documents and that pirates are willing — nay, happy — to scan books page by page, every new WotC book is still out there.

Many of us gave Wizards the benefit of the doubt, figuring that they were going to merge their electronic publication with their other electronic interests, but the rest of 2009 sure didn't pay that theory out...

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*This was just a bump in the road. The rest of the PDF industry didn't notice and there were new innovations noted in 2011. Meanwhile, Wizards returned to DriveThruRPG at the start of 2013.*

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**The Growth of Electronic Accessories.** It's pretty ironic that Wizards looks like a bunch of machine-smashing luddites in their PDF decision, because their D&D Insider service certainly seems to have blossomed (despite the problems with release dates and the employee layoffs that plagued it in 2008).

Every report I've seen suggests that the Character Builder has entirely revolutionized the way players interact with their *D&D* characters, to the point where third parties don't want to publish new character classes (unlike in the giddy days of d20), because players aren't interested in Character Builder-less classes.

Though *Warhammer Third Edition* showed off FFG's ideas about recreating physical RPG components, I think that Wizards' focus on electronic RPG components may be much more important.

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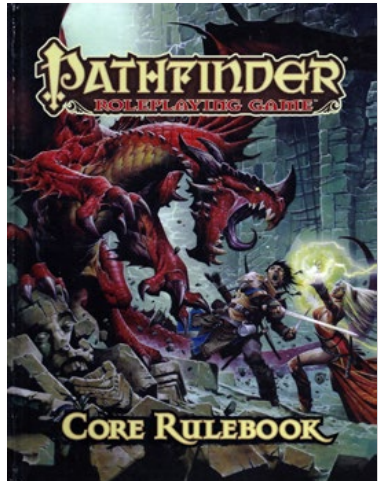
*Despite some missteps, D&D Insider continued to be D&D 4E's biggest success story throughout its run – at least from a subscription point of view, as the actual economics are less obvious.*

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**D&D Only Fractures a Little.** The final big roleplaying event of 2009 was almost a fizzle. Perched on the edge of 2009, with games like *Pathfinder Beta* (2008) and *True20* (2005) already available, it looked like the entire d20 market might shatter. 2009 saw more releases such as the full *Pathfinder* (2009), *Trailblazer* (2009), and *FantasyCraft* (2009), but no real shattering.

Though some games like *FantasyCraft* have gotten pretty big kudos, I'm pretty surprised that only one game has received much third-party attention: *Pathfinder*. The scale is smaller, but the flocking of PDF and small-print publishers to *Pathfinder* reminds me of nothing less than the third-party adoption of d20 back in 2000–2001. I think that some of Paizo's hype on *Pathfinder*'s success is just that, but you can't argue with the fact that an increasing number of publishers seem to be treating *Pathfinder* as the de facto system to publish for if you want to continue supporting *D&D 3.5E* (2003). If that success continues into 2010, then Paizo will have achieved their goal with the new game.

I find Paizo's success particularly notable because it coincides with Mongoose backing off of their *RuneQuest* (2006) open license. Mongoose made their *RuneQuest* system available for easy licensed development starting in 2006, but in the span of just four or five months, Paizo has already surpassed Mongoose in both the number of third-party developers and the number of third-party products. Mongoose's decision to drop the OGL from *RuneQuest II*, scheduled for this January, is a clear acceptance of the fact that *RuneQuest* just won't be the next big open system. Neither, I suspect, will *FantasyCraft* or the many other worthy contenders. *Pathfinder* seems to have the spot sewn up tight, as 2009 comes to a close.




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*Indeed, Pathfinder did sew that spot up tight, and third-party publications have continued to be a big thing, helped by the marketing of the Paizo Store.*

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**What's to Come.** It feels like some long-term trends are finally cresting in 2009, be they indie games, PDFs, or even the final (?) fallout of the d20 OGL. It leaves the future pretty open, so I'm not sure what tomorrow will bring, but I'll talk about it in 365 days.

#### What to Read Next ☼♀○

- For the history of Dave Arneson, read **TSR** ['70s]; for Keith Herber, read **Chaosium** ['70s]; and for Wilf Backhaus, read **FGU** ['70s].
- For the publishers that I thought at the time would be new giants, read **Fantasy Flight Games** ['90s], **Mongoose Publishing** ['00s], and **Cubicle 7 Entertainment** ['00s]. For a more recent star, read **Green Ronin Publishing** ['00s].
- For some of the first mainstreaming of indie ideas, read **Cubicle 7 Entertainment** ['00s].
- For more on PDFs and D&D Insider, read **Wizards of the Coast** ['90s].
- For the rising d20 star, *Pathfinder*, read **Paizo Publishing** ['00s].

## 2010: The Year of the Next Crash

*It was the year that things went bad; the less said of it the better. There were highlights such as DC Adventures, The Dresden Files, and RuneQuest II, but the industry was too busy staying alive for many new games to find a foothold.*

**A Bad Year.** Overall, it felt like 2010 was the year that the Great Recession really hit the hobbyist field. I've been hearing retailers and publishers alike talking about poor sales for the year. I think it was Mongoose whose yearly update struck me the most. Year after year, they've talked about how great things are going for them — and how they don't know why other people are complaining. This year, they admitted the RPG market was down.

You can measure a bad year by the tombstones along the road. Though a lot of them weren't caused directly by the Great Recession, I suspect they're all related to poor economics of the hobbyist market.

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*I stopped writing about the designers we lost in 2010, but I wanted to mention that J. Eric Holmes passed away that year; as the producer of the first D&D Basic Set (1977), he was responsible for a lot of the game's success in the '80s. We also lost Tom Moldvay back in 2007, before these yearly histories began, making the four years from 2007–2010 a really bad time for D&D's original creators.*

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You can't blame *Catalyst Game Labs'* problems directly on the economy, since they appeared to involve personal fraud, but it was another downer for the year. Perhaps most surprisingly, they seem to have recovered — something that pretty much no one expected. We'll see if it sticks.

*Goodman Games* had nothing coming out for months at the start of the year and their 4E magazine, *Level Up* (2009–2010), saw a 9-month gap in its schedule, but they've gotten a few books out toward the end of the year, so they might be on the mend.

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*Catalyst indeed recovered, and Goodman's slowdown was in part because they were secretly working on their next big design, the Dungeon Crawl Classics RPG (2012).*

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ICE's problems were long-standing, but they collapsed completely in 2010 thanks to the actual owner of the ICE properties pulling their license. Word is the old ICE staff is now working on their own fantasy heartbreaker.

*Mongoose* had some of their only layoffs ever, though that was in part due to changing economics caused by their leaving the Rebellion Group. Despite their problems, they maintained an impressively comprehensive schedule throughout the year.

*Necromancer Games* has really been dead since 2007 — another 4E casualty — but they finally gave up the ghost this year when they passed the baton (rod?) to Frog God Games.

*White Wolf* isn't dead and hasn't laid anyone off, but their retreat from the RPG industry is obvious.

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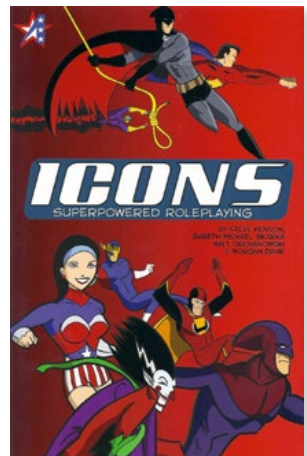
*These other companies struck down in 2010 haven't recovered. The second ICE, Necromancer Games, and White Wolf are all dead, while Mongoose Publishing had a few more bad years, and only looks to be headed back up in 2014. They're just getting back into distribution and running their first RPG Kickstarter.*

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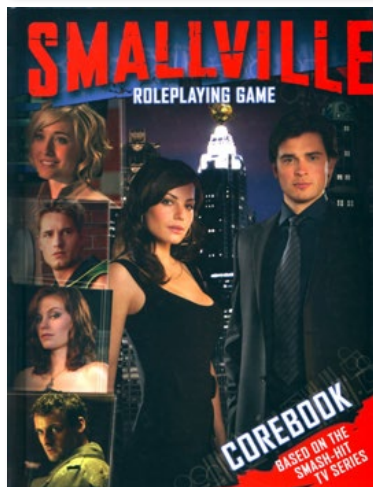
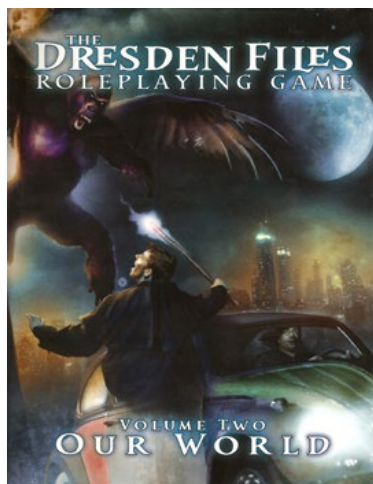
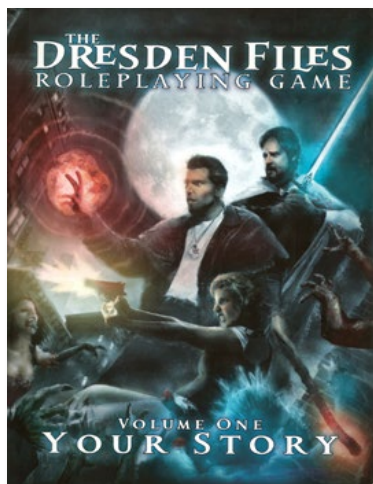
**A Super Year.** A surprising amount of enthusiasm was shown for the superhero genre. It's been almost a decade since the Big Two were available as licensed RPGs, thanks to the failures of the d6-based *DC Universe* (1999) and the resource-based *Marvel Universe* (2003), but now DC has finally returned, with not only *DC Adventures* (2010) as a *Mutants & Masterminds* (2002) game, but also *Smallville* (2010) as a Cortex game.

The indie world saw *ICONS* (2010), a *FATE*-derived game, as well as a couple of small press offerings like Beyond Belief Games' *Supers!* (2010). In a very surprising blast-from-the-past, *Villains & Vigilantes* re-emerged in a new 2.1 (2010) edition produced by the game's original authors. Could it have finally escaped FGU's deathless grasp?

This all occurred against a backdrop of strong existing games. *Wild Talents* (2006) continued happily on with new supplements, *Champions* (1981) reappeared in a Sixth Edition (2010), and *M&M* got a pretty big revamp for its third edition (2010, just under the wire on December 29!).







I can't remember that many superhero RPGs ever hitting the market together, even in the superheroic heyday of the '80s.

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*Things got better before they got worse: in 2011 I talk about some more superhero RPGs. Sadly, the genre has become pretty moribund since. Though most of these games are technically still in print, they're not seeing much development.*

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### *The Continued Rise of Indie and FATE.*

Last year I talked about how indie games were starting to go mainstream thanks to Cubicle 7 and Evil Hat. This year, it felt like the trend sped up even more.

Evil Hat put out *The Dresden Files* (2010), their biggest success ever, while the *FATE* system's market penetration multiplied, with other releases including the aforementioned *ICONS* (2010), Cubicle 7's *Legends of Anglerre* (2010), Void Star Games' *Strands of Fate* (2010), and a variety of reprints, small press releases, and supplements. I suspect more *FATE* books came out this year than in all previous years combined.

In addition, indie ideas continued to seep into mainstream games, with Margaret Weis Productions showing the trend off the most. Their *Leverage* (2010) roleplaying game had aspect-like distinctions while *Smallville* (2010) described its characters with values like truth, justice, and duty rather than traditional characteristics.

Descriptive characteristics were truly the new statistic in the field in 2010.

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*I think 2010 might have been the height of interest in Fate for a few years, and so a big factor in the success of Fate Core (2013).*

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*The Rebirth of D&D.* Heading into 2010, *D&D* was burdened by a fourth edition that fractured WotC's user base, a bad decision to stop selling PDFs, and a Marketing Department that seemed unwilling to talk to retailers or consumers. Though those factors all continued into 2010, WotC also did quite a lot to reinvigorate their prime RPG.

WotC's most notable move might have been their launch of "Encounters," a new hour-long weekly gaming session intended to get lapsed RPGers back into the fold. In a stroke of marketing genius, WotC decreed that the same Encounter would be played everywhere each Wednesday night, allowing people to talk with other players across the world about their experiences — and hopefully giving WotC a lot of guerilla marketing on social networks as a result.

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*Encounters would become Wizards' most innovative program for D&D ever – right up to the point where they sabotaged it in 2013 or 2014 by turning it into a club to run modules that anyone could buy.*

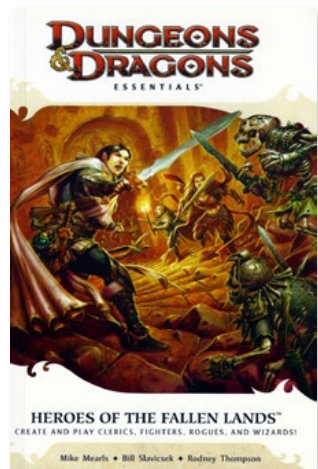
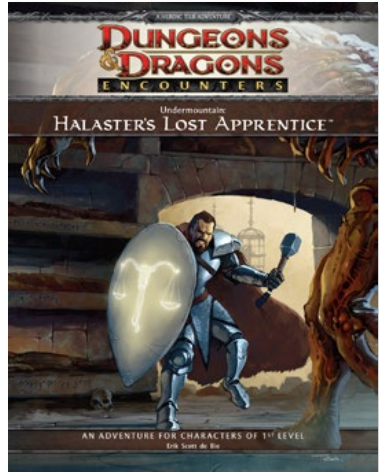
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*D&D's* new *Essentials* line likewise seemed directed toward lapsed RPGers. A lower price point and books that are more bite-sized are both likely to lower resistance and get people into the game. (Of course, *Essentials* was hindered by WotC's aforementioned marketing problems, as the year opened with no one knowing what it was or what its intent was.)

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*Sadly, Essentials was never given a chance to succeed. It clearly marked the start of D&D 4E's flailing death throes.*

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Though I noted that WotC was sticking with their fearfully luddite view of PDFs, they've actually pushed into electronic publishing in one way: their novels. You can now get *D&D* fiction for the Kindle and other platforms.

It's hard to say if WotC's decision to reinvent their popular *D&D* 4E Character Builder as a web-only app was intended to also attract new players by making it easier to use or if it was another piracy-phobic response to a problem that actually can't be solved, but in either case I'm pretty sure it'll be WotC's least popular initiative of the year. Of course, people immediately converted the new web-based Character Builder files to the old platform, so if WotC was trying to fight against pirates their effort was as futile as ending PDFs sales of their products (and likely as counterproductive, since both decisions seem destined to actually drive players to illegal copies).

***The End of the Old d20 Market.*** The d20 market has been a long time going, since the d20 bust in 2003, the announcement of 4E in 2007, and the revocation of the d20 Trademark License at the start of 2009. However, 2010 seems to be the year that the d20 market entirely collapsed in its old form. The reason: *Pathfinder* (2009).

Over the last 12 months any product that would once have been released under the d20 Trademark License (or more recently as an "OGL" product) has instead made use of the *Pathfinder* trademark. It was always obvious that Paizo wanted *Pathfinder* to become the *D&D* 3E replacement, but I find it astounding that they were so successful at doing so. This changeover also seems to have resulted in more and higher-quality PDF and print products for *Pathfinder* than were being seen for d20 just a year or two before. Owen K.C. Stephens partially attributes this to Paizo's supportive attitude to third-party publishers<sup>1</sup>.

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*The growing power of Pathfinder was obvious and would continue.*

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Meanwhile, the companies that were major d20 movers have largely completed their diaspora away from the system. Mongoose closed down its final d20 system, *Conan* (2003), over the course of the year — and though this was largely due to licensing issues, those licensing issues originated because Mongoose wanted to shift *Conan* from d20 to *RuneQuest*. Meanwhile, companies like AEG or FFG had left d20 long behind.

Finally, publishers who created standalone d20 games under the OGL now seem increasingly comfortable with moving away from the d20 standards. Therefore we've seen the slow rollout of Kenzer's new *HackMaster* 5E (2009). However, the evolution of *Mutants & Masterminds* (2002) into its third edition (2010) may have been more notable: Green Ronin pared down the skill list and

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1 Joela. 2011. "3.X versus PFRPG from 3PP's Perspective." RPGnet.  
forum.rpg.net/showthread.php?t=554795.

even added two stats! In five years, when games like *Castles & Crusades* (2004), *HackMaster*, *Mutants & Masterminds*, and *True20* (2005) have enjoyed yet another revision, I expect it'll be increasingly hard to see the similarities among them.

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*In these older yearly chronicles, I'm surprised to see so much discussion of True20, which looked like it was going somewhere, but didn't.*

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**The Winners of the Year.** Since I started off with a look at some of the companies that had a bad year, I want to end with their opposites. The success of Wizard of the Coast's new initiatives and Paizo's *Pathfinder* have already been noted. I'll add that I've heard the occasional rumble that *Pathfinder* matches Wizard's sales in some hobbyist stores. Fantasy Flight's Games Workshop RPGs seem to be going gangbusters, a pretty big turnaround for someone who was out of the RPG market just a few years ago. Cubicle 7 got out a ton of books, just like they hoped, and next year (?) their *One Ring* RPG should be even bigger. Finally, I think that Evil Hat broke the indie barrier by making *The Dresden Files* (2010) a hit in hobbyist stores.

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*I'd guess that my top three winners from 2011 (Wizards, Paizo, and Fantasy Flight Games) remain the top three publishers in the RPG business, and as of late 2014, they're probably in that order again.*

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### What to Read Next 🧐🧐🧐

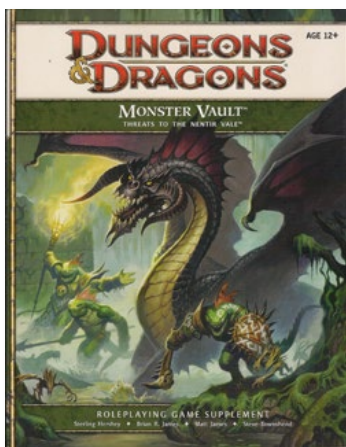
- For companies that were dying, read **ICE** ['80s], **Necromancer Games** ['00s], and **White Wolf** ['00s]. For companies that hung in there, read **Catalyst Game Labs** ['00s] and **Mongoose Publishing** ['00s]. For a company that reduced its production while it worked on other stuff, read **Goodman Games** ['00s].
- For the newest supers games, read **Cubicle 7 Entertainment** ['00s], **Green Ronin Publishing** ['00s], and **Margaret Weis Productions** ['90s].
- For the rise of *FATE*, read **Evil Hat Productions** ['00s] and for indie's influence on a more mainstream publisher, read **Margaret Weis Productions** ['90s].
- For *D&D*'s newest innovations, read **Wizards of the Coast** ['90s].
- For the rise of the post-d20 market, read **Paizo Publishing** ['00s].
- For the big dogs of the industry, read **Wizards of the Coast** ['90s], **Paizo Publishing** ['00s], and **Fantasy Flight Games** ['90s].

## 2011: The Year that Was Darkest

*It was the year that a dark depression settled upon the roleplaying industry. The problems of 2010 had come home to roost, and we didn't yet see the new hope that was right in front of us. In general, the industry seemed to be treading water, with new games like *Ashen Stars*, *Cosmic Patrol*, *HARP SF*, and *Mistborn* offering new interest, but not shaking up the industry.*

**Roleplaying Has a Bad Year.** As the economy continued to fight through the doldrums of the Great Recession, the RPG hobby had more downs than ups. Hero Games let go two of their three full-time staff, effectively ending their ability to produce new products on a regular basis. White Wolf had big layoffs, but those affected their MMORPG team, not the scant remaining folks working on tabletop RPGs. Goodman Games' production dropped to a mere handful of products.

And then there was what was going on at Wizards...



### ***D&D Has its Worst Year Since 1979.***

I don't say this lightly, but I think that *D&D* (and Wizards as an RPG publisher) had its worst year for as long as the game's been a professional and public hobby. I think this is best shown by the fact that Wizards only released eight actual RPG books: *Heroes of Shadow* (2011), *The Shadowfell* (2011), *Monster Vault: Threats to the Nentir Vale* (2011), *Neverwinter Campaign Setting* (2011), *Mordenkainen's Magnificent Emporium* (2011), *Madness at Gardmore Abbey* (2011), *Heroes of the Feywild* (2011), and *Book of Vile Darkness* (2011). The first half of the year looked even

grimmer, with only three of those books out before Gen Con. Yes, there was *D&D Insider* (DDI) content too, but considerably less than you used to see in the *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines.

If you want to nigger, you could generate a higher product count for 2011 by including *Dungeon Tiles*, a new edition of the DM Screen, a *Gamma World* expansion, the Free RPG Day *D&D* book, or even the *D&D* Encounters books — but by whichever benchmark you use, 2011 was a historic low. Using the same criteria, it's down from 25 books in 2010. In fact, I had to go back to 1979 to find a year during which the makers of *D&D* put out fewer RPG books. That year primarily saw the release of the original *Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979), *S2: White Plume*

*Mountain* (1979), *T1: The Village of Hommlet* (1979), and *B1: In Search of the Unknown* (1979) — though some sources say 1978 for this last one. However, there were also a half-dozen print issues of *The Dragon* and enough third-party products to make the modern Wizards weep (primarily thanks to Judges Guild).

1980 saw more *D&D* books releases than 2011 thanks to *Deities & Demigods* (1980) and the publication of the first four-color covered adventures. So did most years after that, though TSR occasionally put more focus on the other RPGs that they were introducing — such as in 1982, which also saw minimal *D&D* production, but which saw support for *Boot Hill* (1975, 1979), *Gamma World* (1978), *Gangbusters* (1982), *Star Frontiers* (1982), and *Top Secret* (1980). Even in 1997, the year that TSR stopped publication and went out of business, around 20 *D&D* books were published, primarily thanks to Wizards of the Coast.

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*Pretty mathy? Sure. But it's the prime means that we as consumers have to measure the success of a line.*

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It initially looked like *D&D* might have hit its nadir when Bill Slavicsek was let go from Wizards in June — as a pretty obvious fall-guy layoff for the continuing problems with the *D&D* brand. Production picked up after that, including one previously canceled product finally hitting print. The rehiring of Monte Cook also looked like the work of a company once more wanting to expand into the future. But now, the schedule for first half of 2012 looks like more of the same, with just two RPG books scheduled in five months.

This isn't to say that Wizards isn't doing well overall, as *Magic: The Gathering* (1993) and *D&D* fiction both continue to sell. Wizards has also made a hard push into board games, from *Conquest of Nerath* (2011) to *The Legend of Drizzt* (2011) — which is a topic I'll return to. However, *D&D* support proper really appears to be suffering at Wizards. Again, you could argue economics of DDI, which you could compare to the subscriptions that Wizards used to get for *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines; those subscription numbers are probably at the same order of magnitude as DDI, at least when the magazines were at their best. However, a 60% drop in production, the layoff of Wizard's RPG Department head, a right-hand turn toward board gaming, and a considerable dwindling of new RPG products in stores combine to paint a grim picture for the industry's lead roleplaying producer in 2011.

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*I'm struck by how hard I worked to sell this case, which suggests how unthinkable it was that D&D might be wavering. Unfortunately, that's exactly what was happening.*

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Generally, Wizards of the Coast has given me whiplash over the last few years. In 2010, they seemed to be faltering, then Encounters and *Essentials* exploded onto the scene — only to have *Essentials* trail off in ‘11 with at least one book cancelled, following by a wholesale slow-down of the *D&D* line. Things were looking up again with the schedule at the end of ‘11, only to have ... nothing appear on the schedule for next year. However, the end may be in sight, as industry folks Margaret Weis<sup>2</sup> and Matthew Sprange<sup>3</sup> have both suggested that 5E is on its way, possibly for 2013.

**PDF & POD Come of Age.** PDF and print-on-demand technology have been increasing in importance to the RPG hobby for the last decade. However, back in 2009, I said that Wizards’ decision to pull out of PDF showed that the format was still bleeding edge. Two years later, Wizards is still (surprisingly) out of the PDF business, but the rest of the digital market has matured enough that their singular (if important) absence is no longer enough to hold the industry back.

For years, we’ve seen the small press use PDFs to get cheap entrance into the RPG market. More recently, however, we’ve seen it really blossom as a way for publishers to get their extensive backlists back into print. Thus ICE Mk. 3 has spent much of the year getting their old books online as PDFs, while White Wolf has been doing much the same.

Meanwhile, DriveThruRPG has made POD an option for an increasing number of their PDF books, putting backlist like *Pendragon* (1985) back into actual print again. White Wolf, DriveThruRPG’s sister company, has even announced that all of their future releases will be POD. Extending the low entry cost of PDFs to a low entry cost for print books is a pretty exciting move for the future of an industry that has dwindled in size from its heyday(s).

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*Newer innovations like DriveThruCards continue to expand the possibilities of POD production, as is discussed in 2013.*

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**Crowdfunding Appears.** Another exciting innovation for the future comes from the idea of “crowdfunding” products to let customers pre-pay for books (and associated privileges), which really hit the mainstream this year thanks to Kickstarter and other companies. RPGnet has over 30 pages<sup>4</sup> of notes on crowd-funded roleplaying

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2 Weis, Margaret. 2011. “Interview with WoTC CEO.” Dragonlance Forums. [dragonlanceforums.com/forums/showthread.php?21813-Interview-with-WoTC-CEO&s=45551839b6d26903d3fb6a5fa3f9f95d&p=491745#post491745](http://dragonlanceforums.com/forums/showthread.php?21813-Interview-with-WoTC-CEO&s=45551839b6d26903d3fb6a5fa3f9f95d&p=491745#post491745).

3 Sprange, Matthew. 2011. “State of the Mongoose 2011.” Mongoose Publishing Forums. [forum.mongoosepublishing.com/viewtopic.php?f=116&t=49405](http://forum.mongoosepublishing.com/viewtopic.php?f=116&t=49405).

4 Sethra007. 2011. “Crowd-Funding Spotlight: Role-Playing Games and Accessories.” RPGnet. [forum.rpg.net/showthread.php?575709-CROWD-FUNDING-SPOTLIGHT-Role-Playing-Games-and-Accessories](http://forum.rpg.net/showthread.php?575709-CROWD-FUNDING-SPOTLIGHT-Role-Playing-Games-and-Accessories).



games in the forums, and many of those have been successful. *Bulldogs!* (2011) hit \$13,430 of its \$3,000 goal, *Stealing Cthulhu* (2011) hit \$13,001 of its \$1,000 target, and *Do: Pilgrims of the Flying Temple* (2011) made a massive \$24,383 — over \$20k past its \$4,000 goal; these were just three of the new sales method's earliest successes.

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*Though Kickstarter was right in front of us, we didn't see that it might be the way out of the doldrums caused by the slow-down in D&D production.*

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By mid-year, there was no doubt that crowdfunding could be used by small press and indie publishers to get books to market. However, I think the scope of crowdfunding became more obvious when more experienced small publishers like Savage Mojo, BlackWyrn Publishing, and Arc Dream got involved.

As already noted, the end of the year brought with it a nasty downturn for Hero Games. In previous years that might have been the end of the company. Instead, they've turned to Kickstarter for their next product, *Book of the Empress* (2012). They've got a more ambitious Kickstarter goal of \$10,000, but that's within the range of some of the strong, early crowd-funded products. In another 30 days, we'll see whether the crowd-funding revolution is strong enough to support an existing game line like Hero's.

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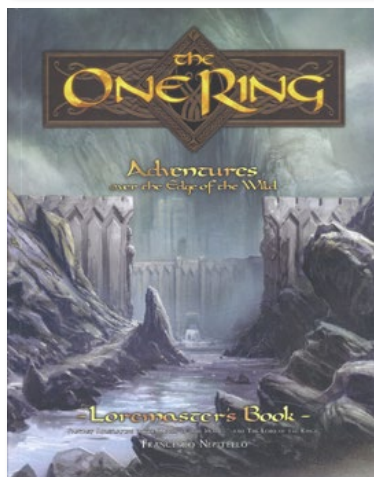
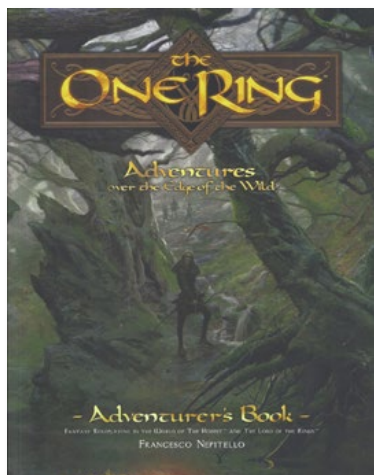
*Book of the Empress raised \$15,660 and was published as planned, but within a year, I wasn't counting Hero Games as one of crowdfunding's winners. More generally, these numbers from 2011 would be marginal successes in future years.*

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Though PDF, POD, and crowdfunding all offered new opportunities for role-playing production, the old methods were still there too and they did well within certain constraints.

**Licensing Hits Big.** Licensed RPGs have been on the upswing for years. However, I think that several-year trend really crested in 2011, when all five of my top five RPG licenses were put back on the playing field:





*The Lord of the Rings* reappeared thanks to Cubicle 7's well-received *The One Ring* (2011), perhaps the best-themed Middle-earth game ever.

*Star Trek* proper is still missing-in-action (which seems to have been a general problem with their licensing since the movie reboot), but Amarillo Design Bureau has kept *Prime Directive* (1993) in print for a variety of systems and Mongoose is getting ready to release *A Call to Arms: Star Fleet* (2012) — thanks to connections made during the fact-checking of *Designers & Dragons* (2011) itself.

*Star Wars* is under license to Fantasy Flight Games. They do have the RPG rights, but haven't announced an RPG game. Yet.

The *DC Heroes* are the focus of not only the *DC Adventures* (2010) *Mutants & Masterminds* game from Green Ronin, but also the *Smallville* (2010) game from Margaret Weis.

The *Marvel Heroes*, finally, are being developed for a new game from Margaret Weis (2012).

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*Licensed publications are very dangerous, and so Marvel Heroic Roleplaying (2012) has already come and gone, as is discussed starting in the 2012 history.*

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Though not on my top five list of historically strong RPG licenses, Green Ronin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (2009) and Evil Hat's *The Dresden Files* (2010) show other modern licenses that are doing well.

However, recent years have also shown clearly how troublesome licenses can be. *DC Adventures* (2010), *Doctor Who: Adventures in Time and Space* (2009), and *Dragon Age* (2009) have all been subject to extreme delays, which we can guess are at least partly due to slow licensor approvals. Meanwhile, the *Doctor Who* and *DC Adventures* games showed off an even bigger problem: the source material changing under you.



Cubicle 7 announced its *Doctor Who* license in late 2007. By the time they got their core game out in 2009, Matt Smith had been announced as the new Doctor, replacing David Tennant and requiring Cubicle 7 to start revamping their books as soon as they had them out the door. Green Ronin faced an even more surprising problem when the DC Universe was very suddenly rebooted in mid-2011, while Green Ronin was partway done with their *DC Adventures* releases. Though Green Ronin's game has generally depicted "iconic" versions of the DC Heroes, some of their histories were wrong as soon as they went to print.

Finally, Mongoose displayed another problem with licensed properties. With the d20 boom thoroughly dead, they wanted to shift their *Conan* RPG (2003, 2004, 2007) to their *RuneQuest* (2006, 2010) system, but the licensors refused. The *Conan* line is now dead at Mongoose, while the *Conan* licensors — apparently waiting to get a better offer from a new licensee — seem to still be waiting.

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*A new Conan RPG was finally announced by Modiphius Entertainment in early 2015, though a publication date isn't yet set.*

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**Old is New Again.** The trend of old games reappearing has also been building for several years. *Designers & Dragons* covers some of this trend with its discussion of "Retroclones." Starting with games like *Castles & Crusades* (2004) and *OSRIC* (2006), designers have used the d20 OGL rules to create games mimicking old *D&D* rules. Meanwhile over at Mongoose Publishing, many games from the '80s reappeared, such as *Paranoia* (2004), *RuneQuest* (2006), and *Traveller* (2008).

If anything, both of these trends have accelerated in recent years. On the Old School Renaissance (OSR) side of things, the market may be oversaturated<sup>5</sup>, with multiple retroclones existing for some versions of *D&D*. Simultaneously, some OSR publishers are using their success to expand beyond *D&D*, such as Goblinoid Games, who has licensed *Starships & Spacemen* (1978, 2010) from FGU and *Timemaster* (1984, 2011) from one of Pacesetter's successors.

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*Whether it's because of oversaturation or not, I feel like the OSR movement has slowed a bit in recent years, even though nostalgic publications from the '80s and '90s continue.*

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Mongoose, meanwhile, has continued to bring out classic games through their Flaming Cobra partnerships. Most notably, RedBrick is returning to the

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5 BMonroe. 2011. "The OSR is Killing Itself." RPGnet. [forum.rpg.net/showthread.php?602351-OSR-the-OSR-is-killing-itself](http://forum.rpg.net/showthread.php?602351-OSR-the-OSR-is-killing-itself).

'90s with new editions of *Earthdawn* (2009) and (in the near future) *Fading Suns* and *Blue Planet*.

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*It would take a successor company to publish that new Fading Suns and Blue Planet.*

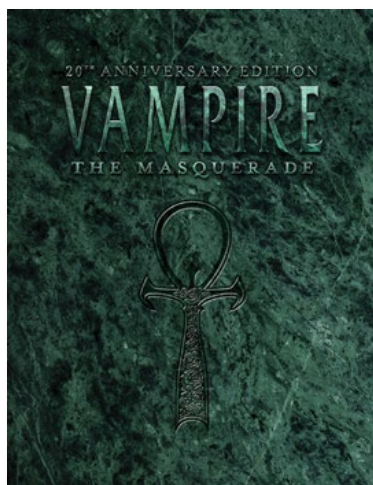
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However, I marked 2011 as the year when old RPGs really became a trend mainly because of how it impacted the mainstream. That's when White Wolf announced that they were relauching their Original World of Darkness as a new product line thanks to the success of *V20*, the *Vampire: The Masquerade 20th Anniversary Edition* (2011). A company returning to an old game system and an old setting like this is pretty unheard of.

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*The Onyx Path has continued to ride that horse in Kickstarter after Kickstarter, while many of the major publications of 2012 would also be nostalgic revisions, so this trend had legs.*

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Personally, I also see this trend in Wizards' rehiring of 3E architect Monte Cook, but we'll probably need to wait a bit to see how that plays out.

**RPG is IP Again.** A few years ago companies like Hero Games and White Wolf were getting scooped up by corporate entities because of the value of their IPs. That didn't work out too well, but it may have caused RPG companies to think about their own value in different ways, and so begin produced auxiliary products that originate in their RPG worlds.

I see this most strongly at Wizards of the Coast, who has long published novels based on their game IPs, but just turned to board and card games in the last year or so with products such as the aforementioned *Legend of Drizzt Board Game* (2011) and *Conquest of Nerath Board Game* (2011). Meanwhile Wizards' top competitor, Paizo, is moving forward on a *Pathfinder* MMORPG. Fantasy Flight Games doesn't actually own the *Warhammer* IP, but they've been sure to develop the property into both RPGs and card games like *Warhammer: Invasion* (2009-Present). More generally, FFG is also pushing their board game lines like *Arkham Horror* (2005) toward novels. Even the indies are getting into the trend, with *Race*

to *Adventure* (2013), a card game themed for *Spirit of the Century* (2006), planned for next year.

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*Paizo Publishing seems to have been phenomenally successful at leveraging its IP. They've been quite successful with their Pathfinder comic (2012-Present) and their Pathfinder Adventure Card Game (2013-Present). Personally, I've been playing the Adventure Card Game for about half a year, and I've already spent maybe half as much money on it as I have on Pathfinder itself to date.*

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**What's to Come.** Despite another down year, 2011 has really shown the resilience of the RPG industry — with PDFs, PODs, crowd-funding, and related board and card games being some of the ways that RPG publishers have responded to today's challenges. As politicians in Washington seem to be purposefully keeping our economy depressed to score political points, more of this will probably be required in 2012, but I'm hopeful companies will excel in the environment and end up poised for new growth afterward.

### What to Read Next

- For more on the dying days of *D&D 4E*, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** ['90s].
- For a company laying off staff and crowd-funding, read ***Hero Games*** ['80s].
- For a company having problems but was about to see some new life, see ***White Wolf*** ['90s].
- For licensors of the Big Five, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** ['00s], ***Task Force Games*** ['80s], ***Fantasy Flight Games*** ['90s], ***Green Ronin Publishing*** ['00s], and ***Margaret Weis Productions*** ['90s].
- For companies with problematic licenses, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** ['00s], ***Green Ronin Publishing*** ['00s], and ***Mongoose Publishing*** ['00s].
- For companies reviving the past, read ***Mongoose Publishing*** ['00s] and ***RedBrick*** ['00s].
- For companies making strong use of their RPGs as IP, read ***Paizo Publishing*** ['00s] and ***Wizards of the Coast*** ['90s].

## 2012: The Year without *D&D*

*It was the year when things still looked bad. However, Kickstarter was growing increasingly successful and helping the industry to break out of its doldrums. It was also another year of deep nostalgia, when much of the industry looked backward, just as they had four years previous. Now, AD&D 1e, Champions, The Dying Earth, Earthdawn, Fading Suns, Iron Kingdoms, Over the Edge, RuneQuest, and Vampire: The Masquerade were all making returns. Dungeon Crawl Classics was probably the most notable game of the year that was entirely new, but even it returned to the style and feel of older games, as did Dungeon World.*

***D&D Has Its Worst Year Since 1975.*** Last year I wrote that *D&D* was having a terrible year because Wizards only put out eight roleplaying products. We hadn't seen nothing yet!

On January 9, Wizards of the Coast announced that they were killing *D&D 4E* (2008). It was a stunning announcement because they didn't have anything ready to replace it. It now looks like it might be August 2014 before the so-called *D&D Next* is released — which would make a full two-and-a-half year gap without a viable edition of *D&D* on the market.

Compare that to the precise one-year gaps that preceded 3E and 4E ... but then those games had actually been in preparation for years before their announcement. That's clearly not the case for *Next*, which at best went into development sometime in 2011.

And if you want to talk about other bad signs, how about Monte Cook being announced as the Design Lead of *D&D Next* in January, then resigning on April 25.

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*Dearly departed that I missed this year: TSR's first female designer, Jean Wells, and M.A.R. Barker, the creator of one of the most in-depth fantasy worlds ever.*

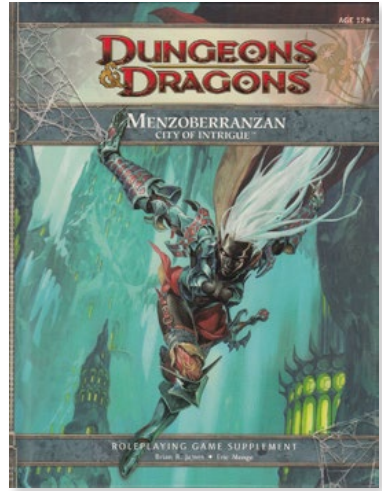
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I've said that Wizards has been showing signs of trouble since 2008 when they laid off some of the company's stars, and even more so since 2010 when they started canceling *D&D* products for the first time ever. Even given that, I would never have predicted the cancelation of their main RPG line with absolutely nothing to replace it and the loss of the new project's lead just three months after that. Those aren't just signs of a company in trouble, they're signs of a company gone horribly wrong. I'd predict that Wizards/Hasbro is out of the roleplaying business by 2016 if *D&D Next* doesn't do great for them ... and I don't think two and a half years of dead air is a very good way to lead things off.

With that said, Wizards did publish what I expect will be the final four books for 4E: *Heroes of the Elemental Chaos* (2012), *Halls of Undermountain* (2012), *The Dungeon Survival Handbook* (2012), and *Menzoberranzan: City of Intrigue* (2012).

Their release of reprinted *AD&D 1e* (1977) books was more of a surprise, but it also looked a lot like a desperate attempt to find anything to sell — especially when you look at Wizard's 2013 schedule, which includes 2e and 3E reprints. The phrase “throwing everything at the wall and seeing what sticks” comes to mind.

When I wrote up my thoughts on 2011, I said that *D&D* had its worst year since 1978, comparing printed products. I think you have to go back to 1975 to find a worse year for new *D&D* production than 2012, as that year “only” saw the release of *Greyhawk* (1975) and *Blackmoor* (1975) — plus five print issues of *The Strategic Review* (1975–1976).




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*Though I wrote this 12 months after Wizards' announcement, I was clearly still in shock. I've been playing D&D since around 1982, and other than those six bad months in 1997, this was my first indication that my hobby wasn't immortal. I've kept most of my original words, even though I now think some of them may be too strident.*

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**And The Industry Does Just as Badly.** The roleplaying business has always been about the industry leader, which is to say *D&D*. It generates most of the sales, and it also generates sales for other publishers — because people go into stores, pick up their newest *D&D* product, and then pick up something more from Chaosium or White Wolf or Green Ronin or whoever. With *D&D* pretty much dead in 2012, those complementary sales went out the window.

Some of us hoped that *Pathfinder* (2009) would help retailers pick up the slack, but that doesn't seem to have been the case. There were at least three problems that I think kept Pathfinder from stepping up.

The first issue is that Paizo left the market free of “big” releases between their December release of the *Bestiary 3* (2011) and their July release of the *Advanced Race Guide* (2012) — one of three “big” products published in summer, following that six-month scheduling gap. Worse, no one else published a big destination product in the first half of the year — something that would have brought people into game stores in the way that *D&D* once did.

The second issue is Paizo's well-supported subscription system, which gets people to Paizo but not to the game stores.

The third issue is the simple fact that *Pathfinder* just doesn't seem to have the heft that *D&D* did. Sure, it's passed *D&D* up temporarily, but having seen the game with the industry all to itself for a year, I now think we're going to see *D&D* pretty quickly leap back into first place when Next emerges.

If there's an industry left, that is, after two and a half years without a market leader!

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*"If there's an industry left"!! Dramatic much?*

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**Kickstarter RULES!!** There was one bright spot in the roleplaying picture for the year, and that was Kickstarter. I was surprised to see that I mentioned Kickstarter in my 2011 year in review. I also mentioned how excited I was that games were managing to raise \$10,000–\$25,000. Compare that to 2012 when 20 different RPG and related products topped \$100,000 (and three topped \$1,000,000).

Product	Category	Raised
Reaper Miniature Bones	gaming miniatures	\$3,429,235
<i>Shadowrun Returns</i>	RPG computer game	\$1,836,447
<i>The Order of the Stick</i> Reprints	RPG comic	\$1,254,120
<i>Ogre Designer's Edition</i>	classic board game	\$923,680
<i>Shadowrun Online</i>	RPG online game	\$558,863
<i>Pathfinder Online</i> Sandbox	online RPG	\$536,073+
Monte Cook's <i>Numenéra</i>	science-fantasy RPG	\$517,255
<i>Werewolf 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary</i>	classic horror RPG	\$380,015
Dice Rings	gaming accessory	\$344,069
<i>Pathfinder Online</i> Demo	RPG online game	\$307,843
<i>The Complete Elmore Artbook</i>	fantasy art	\$299,914
<i>Traveller 5<sup>th</sup> Edition</i>	classic SF RPG	\$294,628
<i>The Guide to Glorantha</i>	RPG	\$260,962
<i>Rappan Athuk</i>	adventure for <i>Pathfinder</i> and <i>Swords &amp; Wizardry</i>	\$246,541
<i>Horror on the Orient Express</i>	adventure for <i>Call of Cthulhu</i>	\$207,804
<i>Dungeons &amp; Dragons: A Documentary</i>	history movie	\$195,480
<i>Through the Breach</i>	skirmish-game/RPG	\$192,182
<i>Fate Core</i>	indie RPG	\$188,769+
<i>Tenra Bansho Zero</i>	Japanese RPG	\$129,640
<i>Deadlands Noir</i>	1930s RPG	\$117,648

Clearly Kickstarter is cool because it allows publishers to test out the viability of projects and to raise the money to print them in advance. However, it also gives them the ability to do really unique things. I think that Goblinworks is being really daring in trying to raise money to produce an MMORPG in small Kickstarter-sized chunks, with their second Kickstarter now ongoing and looking for a cool million. I also loved Matt Forbeck's successful drive to raise money to create 12 novels. Meanwhile, *Hillfolk* (2013) not only did great for an indie game, but it also showed a really clever incentive system for stretch goals — with new designers coming on board for every couple of thousand dollars raised.

I feel like Kickstarter is a boom waiting to bust, but whether that's the case or not, I think it's already been proven that it's not the panacea to all of the roleplaying industry's woes. Hero Games successfully managed to raise money to publish two books that had been orphaned by the company mostly closing down last year, but their \$15,000+ totals aren't looking nearly as impressive as they would have at year's start.

Hero has also had more mixed success when they tried to Kickstart RPG books fully loaded with development costs. *Monster Hunter* did great with \$80,000 raised, but Steven Long failed to raise \$33,000 for *Mythic Hero*. Meanwhile, BlackWyrms barely met its modest \$4,500 for a *Champions* adventure and Silverback Press just eked in its \$9,000 for *Champions Live Action*.

I don't mean to pick on *Champions*, but rather to say that if a company was having problems selling enough products before Kickstarter, then Kickstarter may not fix that problem.

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*If I had one notable failure in these yearly histories, it was in underestimating Kickstarter, because I now think it was a major player in getting the industry back on its feet in 2013, even with D&D still playing hooky.*

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**Old is New Yet Again.** Again, this trend continues straight out of last year. It used to be just retroclones, but now we've got a variety of games returning from the '70s, '80s, and '90s.

I've already touched upon Wizards bringing back the greatest TSR hits of the '70s with the original *AD&D* books. However, the biggest news in this category was probably the creation of Onyx Path Publishing to save the White Wolf line; they're already doing a great job of bringing back the best World of Darkness games from the '90s, though with their dependence on Kickstarting and POD they're not doing much good for the overall market.

The reuse of the names TSR (by Gygas's heirs) and FASA (by RedBrick) got big attention too, and RedBrick/FASA is bringing back even more classics from the



'90s like *Blue Planet* (2012) and *Fading Suns* (2012). Again, I haven't seen this stuff in stores, with the only report of publication coming from one of the online sellers.

*RuneQuest 6* (2012) from The Design Mechanism is yet another example of the trend. So is Goodman Games' *Dungeon Crawl Classics* (2012) — which unlike the others on this list is a thematic return to the past. It was also one of the most successful, showing up high on sales lists during the quarter of its release.

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*I'd still like to see more of these in stores. The second incarnation of ICE demonstrated that nostalgic publications that bypass retail and only go out to fans are just a slow spiral downward.*

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**Yet More Media Licensing.** Though I said that I thought that 2011 was the zenith of this trend, 2012 brought even more major media RPGs to market, including *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying Basic Game* (2012), *Star Wars: Edge of Empire Beta* (2012), and *Star Wars: Edge of Empire Beginner Game* (2012). Atop existing *The One Ring* (2011) and *DC Adventures* (2010) games, that's almost all of the major media licenses now accounted for, with *Star Trek* being the only one conspicuously missing — and nonetheless available in *Star Fleet* variants that have been around for ages.

**Massive Misogyny.** Sadly, 2012 was also the year that RPG, comics, and hobbyist entertainments were rocked multiple times by charges of misogyny.

In the RPG industry, James Desborough got much of the flak for coming out "In Defence of Rape"<sup>6</sup> as a roleplaying plot element — which wasn't well-received, especially when compared to some of his older writings about women in gaming. There was also a sadly misogynistic response to a woman who dared to Kickstart a feminist RPG<sup>7</sup> — though her Kickstarter then failed for other reasons that confused the issue.

In the wider world, nerd girls were taking it on the chin too, including harassment at Readercon<sup>8</sup> and rants about women who cosplay<sup>9</sup>.

The question wasn't whether misogyny was on display in hobbyist fields in 2012 (because it was), but rather why. I'd like to think that it's because there are

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6 Desborough, James. 2012. "In Defence of Rape." Grim's Tales. [talesofgrim.wordpress.com/2012/06/12/in-defence-of-rape/](http://talesofgrim.wordpress.com/2012/06/12/in-defence-of-rape/).

7 Snow, Caoimhe Ora. 2011. "Heartbreak & Heroines RPG." Kickstarter. [kickstarter.com/projects/caoimhe/heartbreak-and-heroines-rpg](http://kickstarter.com/projects/caoimhe/heartbreak-and-heroines-rpg).

8 Baker, Katie J.M. 2012. "Here's How You Deal with Sexual Harassment at a Sci-fi Convention." Jezebel. [jezebel.com/5932129/heres-how-you-deal-with-sexual-harassment-at-a-sci-fi-convention](http://jezebel.com/5932129/heres-how-you-deal-with-sexual-harassment-at-a-sci-fi-convention).

9 Placko, Meredith. 2012. "RANT: Cosplay Girls Don't Know Sh\*t about Comics." Geeks Are Sexy. [geeksaresexy.net/2012/11/13/rant-cosplay-girls-dont-know-sht-about-comics/](http://geeksaresexy.net/2012/11/13/rant-cosplay-girls-dont-know-sht-about-comics/).

more women in gaming<sup>10</sup> (and other hobbies), and so unacceptable behavior is more likely to be called out, while the misogynists are simultaneously flipping out more because of those women.

Of course, some of the misogyny on display in our hobbies might have been a reaction to (or continuation of) misogyny being offered up on the political stage — starting when Rush Limbaugh called a woman a slut for wanting birth control, then moving to numerous would-be Republican legislators trying to delegitimize rape, including Todd “Legitimate Rape” Akins, Richard “Gift from God” Mourdouck, and Roger “Some Women Rape Easy” Rivard.

So, it wasn’t just These Hobbies of Ours having a trouble with women.

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*I've been pleased to see these problems die down a bit in the RPG industry. Unfortunately, female cosplayers are still being forced to fight off reactionaries in the comic world, and the video game community's GamerGate showed off the worst explosion of hobbyist misogyny that I've ever seen this year. There was one slight connection to the RPG community: James Desborough came out as a pretty strident supporter of GamerGate.*

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**What’s to Come.** 2012 was much like 2011, but more so. The lows for Wizards and for the hobby in general were lower, but the highs for Kickstarter, old games, and media licenses were higher. Which means that I’m now looking for the next trend. Maybe in 2013, but more likely 2014; I think it might take D&D Next to get the RPG field out of its current holding pattern.

### What to Read Next

- For the death of *D&D 4E* and the transition that followed, read **Wizards of the Coast** [‘90s].
- For more thoughts on *Pathfinder*, read **Paizo Publishing** [‘00s].
- For some of the publishers with huge Kickstarter success, read **Catalyst Game Labs** [‘00s], **Evil Hat Productions** [‘00s], **Steve Jacks Games** [‘80s], and **White Wolf** [‘90s].
- For the new FASA Games, read **RedBrick** [‘00s].
- For the newest media licenses, read **Margaret Weis Productions** [‘90s] and **Fantasy Flight Games** [‘90s].
- For misogyny in the industry, read **Women in the Roleplaying Industry** [PA].

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10 Brace, Christopher. 2012. “Women in Gaming.” RPGnet. [rpg.net/columns/thescienceofroleplaying/thescienceofroleplaying6.phtml](http://rpg.net/columns/thescienceofroleplaying/thescienceofroleplaying6.phtml).

## 2013: The Year of the Dawn

*It was the year when things rather surprisingly improved, when the roleplaying industry temporarily got out from under the shadow of D&D and managed to prosper on its own, much to this historian's surprise. We're still close enough to this year that it's hard to definitively say what its long-term successes will be, but it seems likely that 13<sup>th</sup> Age and Fate Core will be on the list. Monte Cook's Numenéra and Burning Wheel's Torchbearer got some attention too and old classics were once more revised, including Shadowrun, Sorcerer, Victoriana, and Werewolf: The Apocalypse.*

**D&D Continues to Coast.** The cataclysmic collapse of D&D in 2011 and 2012 has been halted a bit by some careful work at Wizards of the Coast. Much of this was due to *AD&D 2e* (2013) and *OD&D* (2013) reprints getting D&D back on the shelves. I also think the D&D brand was helped a lot by Wizards reversing their weird withdrawal from PDFs by creating DnDClassics.com with the folks at DriveThruRPG.

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*I should note another passing in 2013: Lynn Willis. He was the man behind Call of Cthulhu, a sturdy stalwart for Chaosium, one of my mentors, and a friend.*

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However, I think that D&D Next did even more to get the game back into the public eye. The D&D Next playtest matured and with the help of articles from Wizards about the upcoming game, it gave fans something to talk about all year. The special Gen Con release of *Ghosts of Dragonspear Castle* (2013) probably helped even more. However, I think that Wizards' best D&D-related decision was to begin selling the Encounters adventures. Though Encounters GMs were angry at having to purchase their adventures, and predicted the collapse of the program, the publication of

*Murder in Baldur's Gate* (2013) and *Legacy of the Crystal Shard* (2013) put new D&D products back on store shelves for the first time in a year.

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*Unfortunately, this also put Encounters down the road where they're now just playing the newest D&D 5E adventures, which I don't think is to the program's benefit in the long run.*

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With that said, all's not roses and puppies for *D&D*. We know that *Pathfinder* (2009) has been outselling *D&D* for years, while the latest reports from ICv2<sup>11</sup> say that FFG's *Star Wars* (2012+) has now passed *D&D* too. Meanwhile, interest in *D&D* Next seems extremely mixed. Some people are certainly interested, but a surprising number of fans are very ambivalent about the playtest information and claim they probably won't be buying the new game.

I'm still fairly certain that *D&D* will soon be top dog again — even in mid-2015, after the new-car smell of *D&D* Next wears off. Of course, I also still think there's a possibility that Wizards will get out of the tabletop RPG business by 2016 or so if *D&D* Next doesn't do well enough by Hasbro's weird yardstick.

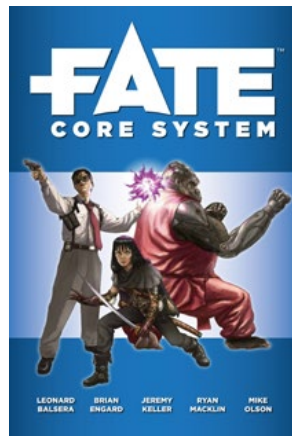
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*I'll stand by those predictions, especially since D&D 5E seems to be doing pretty well. Of course, it's still not clear if Hasbro will think enough of D&D to keep supporting it, as their policies apparently caused a lot of the problems related to D&D 4E.*

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***The Industry Did ... Surprisingly Well.*** I feel like the RPG industry has had about a decade of badness. The d20 bust caused by *D&D* 3.5E (2003) and the over-saturation of d20 products ran right into the Great Recession. Meanwhile, *D&D* 4E (2008) utterly failed to prop up the market and probably even damaged it when Wizards slowed its production and then shut it down entirely in 2011–2012.

However in 2013, things have looked ... brighter. A lot of different publishers seem to be succeeding with a lot of different sorts of games. *Pathfinder* (2009) and *Mutants & Masterminds* (2002) show that post-d20 games can still do well; *Dungeon World* (2012) and *Fate Core* (2013) demonstrate how mass-market the indie community has gotten; FFG's *Star Wars* (2012+) reveals the continued power of licensed games; *Shadowrun* (1989) and *Exalted* (2001) demonstrate the power of older games; and *Eclipse Phase* (2011) shows that new companies can be successful too.



I think a lot of the other trends of 2013 are contributing to this new success, including great Kickstarters, new sales methods, new publication methods, new sources of RPGs, and (maybe) even new licensing.

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11 Uncredited. 2013. "Top 5 RPGs — Summer 2013." ICv2. [icv2.com/articles/news/27068.html](http://icv2.com/articles/news/27068.html).

**Kickstarter Kicks It! (Mostly.)** The top Kickstarters for the year included:

Product	Publisher	Raised
<i>Deluxe Exalted 3e</i>	Onyx Path	\$684,755
<i>Call of Cthulhu 7e</i>	Chaosium	\$561,836
<i>Fate Core</i>	Evil Hat	\$433,365
<i>The Strange</i>	Monte Cook	\$418,478
<i>Achtung! Cthulhu</i>	Modiphius	£177,557
<i>Demon: The Descent</i>	Onyx Path	\$150,235
<i>Cthulhu Britannica: London</i>	Cubicle 7	£90,412
<i>Shadows of Esteren: Travels</i>	Agate Editions	\$137,024
<i>Deep Magic</i>	Kobold Press	\$126,031
<i>Deluxe Tunnels &amp; Trolls</i>	Flying Buffalo	\$125,440
<i>Razor Coast</i>	Frog God	\$123,366
<i>Transhuman</i>	Posthuman Studios	\$117,965
<i>Changing Breeds</i>	Onyx Path	\$114,155
<i>Space: 1889</i>	Chronicle City	£72,379
<i>Mummy: The Curse</i>	Onyx Path	\$104,831
<i>The Lost Lands</i>	Frog God	\$104,116

There were just eight tabletop RPG books in 2012 that topped \$100,000, while in 2013 there were twice as many. And then there are the 10,000 people who signed up for Evil Hat's *Fate Core* (2013) Kickstarter. It's a phenomenal number that I don't think anyone else has come near. Sure, much of that was due to a cheap \$10 buy-in that let backers get electronic copies of ... everything, but companies like Posthuman and Paizo have similarly suggested that cheap PDFs are a great way to regrow the industry.

Meanwhile, I've been waiting for the inevitable Kickstarter bust to follow the Kickstarter boom. I was pretty certain that it was going to hit when Kickstarters started to fail to deliver. However, we've now had some pretty big, openly-acknowledged failures like The Forking Path's *The Doom That Came to Atlantic City!* and James Maliszewski's *Dwimmermount* — with many more Kickstarters like e20 and Nystul's *Infinite Dungeon* hanging about in limbo ... and I haven't seen the repercussions that I expected. Mind you, the individual creators have been taken out to the woodshed, but there still seems to be faith in the Kickstarter system.

This may still be a bomb waiting to explode, as Kickstarter's requirement for creators to list "Risks & Challenges" is so toothless as to be laughable ... but I have more faith in Kickstarter continuing to work than I did a year ago.

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*I will now officially stop listing Kickstarter as a boom that's waiting to bust. We've certainly had plenty boom & bust cycles in the industry, but they tended to be publishing fads while Kickstarter is a new marketing and sales method. So, it's hopefully different. Fingers crossed.*

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Another problem has arisen for Kickstarter in the last year: the US Postal Service's refusal to support cheap international shipments for US customers has increasingly led Kickstarter creators to abandon international sales. This problem isn't likely to be solved any time soon since most RPG companies (and Kickstarter) are located in the US ... and the US Postal Service is being purposefully strangled to death by conservative lawmakers. Which all means that the Kickstarter RPG resurgence will be a little less successful than it could be.

(This problem increasingly affects POD publishing too.)

**New PDF Sales Methods Increase Sales.** Some intriguing new ways to sell PDFs appeared during the year. Allen Varney's Bundle of Holding<sup>12</sup> groups together a bunch of related PDFs and lets buyers choose their price, while DriveThruRPG premiered a Pay What You Want<sup>13</sup> model. Unsurprisingly, Evil Hat was one of the first companies to use the PWYW model for *Fate Core* (2013) and *Fate Accelerated* (2013) because Fred Hicks continues to be a strong proponent of getting cheap rulebooks out to players. So far, companies seem quite pleased by the success of these new payment models.

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*I'd now add Patreon to this list; Evil Hat has taken good advantage of that one too, using it to produce new adventures.*

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**PDF & POD Continue to Mature.** PDF has been around for over a decade, but it's only in recent years that *traditional* print publishers have also begun to put out PDF-only products. You can now find free PDF-only adventures from Cubicle 7 and Galileo Games and PDF-only supplements like *Minor Alien Module 1: Luriani* (2012) from Mongoose.

Meanwhile, print-on-demand (POD) technologies are maturing too. RedBrick had a lot of troubles with POD hardcovers when they got their products started in the mid-'00s, but now they're pretty standard. The folks at DriveThru also expanded the boundaries of what's possible with their DriveThruCards — which has allowed the creation of RPG products like Evil Hat's *The Deck of Fate* (2013) and Bully Pulpit Games' *Carolina Death Crawl* (2013).

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12 Bundle of Holding Website: [bundleofholding.com](http://bundleofholding.com).

13 DriveThruRPG Website: Pay What You Want Search.  
[rpg.drivethrustuff.com/index.php?pwyw=true](http://rpg.drivethrustuff.com/index.php?pwyw=true).

**Foreign Language RPGs Go Wild.** Perhaps the most surprising and interesting trend of recent years has been the increased number of translated foreign RPGs that are appearing in the US.

Japanese RPGs seem particularly well-supported. *Maid* (2008) predated the trend, which really started with *Tenra Bansho Zero* (2013). *Double Cross* (2013) followed, *Golden Sky Stories* (2014) is literally on its way, and *Ryuutama* (2014) was just funded.

French RPGs have also gotten good attention. Cubicle 7 has long published *Qin* (2006, 2009), but recently added *Kuro* (2012) and *Yggdrasil* (2012) to their catalogue. *Little Wizards* (2013) was translated from French by Crafty Games and is an example of another trend: the increasing number of kid-friendly RPGs that are appearing. Finally, *Shadows of Esteren* (2012–2013) seems like it's been getting Kickstarted constantly for the last year.

There's word of an upcoming translation of the Spanish *Aquelarre* and a few more Japanese RPGs are in process, so it seems likely this trend will continue to grow. With any luck, it'll bring some new variety and some new designs to the industry.

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*Aquelarre never appeared on Kickstarter, and newer foreign products have slowed down, but the translations of 2012–2013 still added a lot to the industry.*

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**New Open Licenses for the Industry.** The time of d20 is over, but it looks like Ryan Dancey permanently changed the gaming industry with his thoughts about open gaming licenses. As a result of Kickstarters, both *GUMSHOE* and *Fate* were released this year under Creative Commons and OGL licenses. The *Dungeon World* SRD was similarly licensed under the Creative Commons. Finally, the *WaRP* system from *Over the Edge* (1992) has been released under the OGL too.

I'm not sure that any of this will have a big impact on the industry, as Mongoose wasn't able to make much progress with their *RuneQuest* (2006) license of the late '00s, but it's an interesting trend that offers up neat possibilities.

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*Indeed, I haven't seen other publishers leaping up to produce new GUMSHOE or WaRP games, and even Fate doesn't seem to have returned to its 2010-or-so height of third-party production.*

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**Author Delivers Grain of Salt.** Of course, not all is great. The industry is still way down from its height of the '80s and even from the d20 boom of the '00s. The fate of *D&D* continues to be a big question mark, and the market leader usually sets the direction for the market.

In addition, there's continued upheaval in getting games to players ...



***Distribution and Retail Are Unsettled.*** In Ye Days of Olde, RPG products got to players through distributors and through game stores ... and this was a good thing because retailers didn't just sell desired products, but also introduced players to new products that they might not have otherwise seen. Unfortunately, the internet, POD, and Kickstarter all run at cross-purposes to this classic setup. At the moment, this means that there are lots of games that you can't see when walking into a retail store.

There's some indication that this problem might be settling. The better Kickstarters now allow retailers to buy discounted products (though Kickstarter doesn't allow enough products to be sold in this way). Sales of Kickstarted books through retail have also appeared to be pretty strong, proving wrong retailers' fears that Kickstarter games wouldn't sell. However, Kickstarted games (and POD games) still aren't getting into the hands of distributors — which means that some Kickstarted products show up in stores once and are never seen again.

If this doesn't get sorted out in the near future, then there's going to be an increasing bifurcation between fans (who know all the weird places to go to get books that aren't available through retail) and casual players (who don't), and that won't be good for the industry.

Of course it's already been going on for years ...

### What to Read Next ✖♀♂

- For more on the path to *D&D 5E*, read ***Wizards of the Coast*** ['90s].
- For the most successful Kickstarters, read ***Chaosium*** ['70s], ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** ['00s], ***Evil Hat Productions*** ['00s], ***Flying Buffalo*** ['70s], ***Kobold Press*** ['00s], ***Posthuman Studios*** ['00s], and ***White Wolf*** ['90s].
- For print publishers producing PDF-only supplements, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** ['00s], ***Galileo Games*** ['00s], and ***Mongoose Publishing*** ['00s]. And for print publishers taking advantage of DriveThruCards, read ***Bully Pulpit Games*** ['00s] and ***Evil Hat Productions*** ['00s]. Is it any surprise these PDF-friendly companies are all from the '00s?
- For some recent foreign translations, read ***Cubicle 7 Entertainment*** ['00s] and maybe spend a bit of time with ***Metropolis*** ['90s] and ***RedBrick*** ['00s] to brush up on the history of the topic.
- For recently open licensed game systems, read ***Atlas Games*** ['90s], ***Evil Hat Productions*** ['00s], and ***Pelgrane Press*** ['00s].
- For some brief thoughts on the power of game stores, read ***The RuneQuest Mafia*** [PA].

## 2014: The Year of Reborn *D&D*

*It was the year when D&D was reborn (again) in a sparkling new 5th edition, and all was well again in the industry. Sort of. Other games like Doctor Who: Adventures in Time and Space (2009, 2014) and The One Ring (2011, 2014) made appearances in new editions as well, while Lords of Gossamer & Shadow (2014) and Mindjammer: The Roleplaying Game (2014) marked more far-flung revivals. Meanwhile, Kickstarter settled into the industry with care, with hope that crowdfunders would soon be there. It was no d20 boom, but good times were here again. Mostly.*

**A Few Farewells.** Sadly, we lost a few more of the industry's pioneers in 2014.

Aaron Allston may be best-known for his Mystaran work on *GAZ1: The Grand Duchy of Karameikos* (1987) and the *Basic Dungeons & Dragons Rules Cyclopedia* (1991) or maybe for producing one of the first intimate looks at a personal campaign in *Aaron Allston's Strike Force* (1988), but he generally did great work for a variety of publishers from Steve Jackson Games to TSR, then went on to a successful novel-writing career.

Jean Blashfield Black was the first managing editor of TSR's Book Department. She greenlit Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman to write the *Dragonlance Chronicles* series, and so was responsible for much of the Book Department's later success.

Dave Trampier was one of TSR's earliest artists. He's best known for the idol-thieving cover of the original *AD&D Players Handbook* (1978) and for his long-running "Wormy" comic strip in *Dragon* magazine. He rather mysteriously disappeared in 1988 and never again worked in the gaming industry for still unknown reasons. Around 2002, a few people reported that he was alive and driving a taxi cab. He finally reconnected with the gaming industry last year by talking to Scott Thorne, the owner of Castle Perilous Games & Books in Illinois, and arranged to appear at a local Illinois gaming convention, where Thorne hoped to put him in touch with Troll Lord Games ... but Trampier died three weeks before the convention.

**The Return of *D&D*.** The biggest news of the year was the reappearance of *D&D* in a new 5<sup>th</sup> edition (2014). It premiered with a *Starter Set* (2014) in July and has continued through a traditional set of three core 5E rulebooks as well as a pair of adventures: *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* (2014) and *The Rise of Tiamat* (2014). In a big change from 3E days, it looks like Wizards will be focusing more on adventures; and in a big change from 4E days, it looks like these adventures will be the spine of Wizards' *D&D* production. It'll be interesting to see how this adventure-focused 5E product line develops, but in

the meantime it was a joy to see six *D&D* products — or nine if you include the PDFs of the new *Basic D&D* game and the final two Encounters adventures. That's the most new *D&D* publications since the eight seen in 2011 ... hopefully there will be even more in 2015.

The response to 5E seems to be generally good, and certainly not as divisive as the 4E (2008) release, which rent the entire hobby for five years. However, the response to 5E has also been a bit middling. Local reports suggest that sales have been good, but not great, and that player base has been interested but not ecstatic.

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*I probably shouldn't worry about a "middling" response. I mean, it's D&D; it's the entry point to our hobby, so some folks love it and some folks hate it and some don't care anymore.*

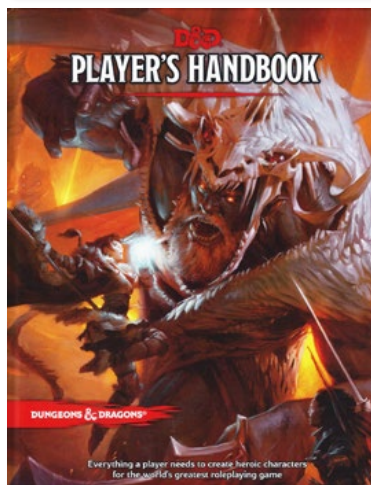
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Unfortunately, *D&D* had some issues as well in 2014.

The Encounters program —perhaps the best thing to come out of the 4E era — seems to have lost its focus. Its adventures first went PDF-only, then got totally subsumed into Wizards' standard production schedule. So, Encounters players were running the *Starter Set* adventure in summer, and have since moved on to the two "Tyranny of Dragons" adventures. As a result, the program has lost its uniqueness; Encounters is now just a venue to play the same games you could play anywhere else.

Meanwhile, the official *D&D* support team seems to be shrinking, with the latest defection being superstar James Wyatt, who headed over to the *Magic: The Gathering* division. This followed most of the 5E design team — including Robert J. Schwalb, Bruce Cordell, and Monte Cook — leaving in 2013 and 2014. Recent reports suggest a surviving *D&D* team of just a dozen members, including Mike Mearls, Greg Bilsland, Jeremy Crawford, Chris Perkins, Rodney Thompson, Peter Lee, Matt Sernett, Chris Sims, and a few others.

Finally, the release of 5E was paired with the disappearance of a decade and a half's worth of old *D&D* content from the web, dumping the history of *D&D*



straight down the memory hole. Much of it has reappeared at [archive.wizards.com](http://archive.wizards.com), but it's still incomplete and a bit difficult to get to. This historian in particular is eager to see everything return and get properly indexed, as it's grown harder to write about the history of *D&D* in the last several months.

Overall, I think 5E is just what both Wizards and *D&D* needed, which means it's just what the industry needed. But I think a higher level of success has been lost from the high-flying days of d20, or even from the earliest days of 4E, and I'd like to see the industry recover that.

**Paizo Levels Up.** Paizo is certainly still a top-two producer of RPGs, but the publication of *D&D 5E* has to make their position precarious. However, they've proven themselves to be one of the most agile publishers around, and once more they've started work on a major new initiative that could replace their old bread-and-butter just in time. The *Pathfinder Adventure Card Game* (2013) is one of the most innovative releases to hit the industry in some time, and this year they pushed it hard. I'd hate to see Paizo move from RPGs to board games, as many publishers in the industry have, but I'm thrilled to see them with a major, successful line that shouldn't be as sensitive to the changing tides of fantasy roleplaying.

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*I played more games of Pathfinder Adventure Card Game than the Pathfinder RPG last year. And I'm running a Pathfinder RPG campaign! I dunno how the Paizo crew keeps knocking it out of the park like that.*

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**The Field is Expanding Again.** I said that 2013 was a surprisingly strong year for much of the roleplaying industry, and that trend seemed to continue in 2014. I think our biggest new entrant for the year is Modiphius Entertainment, who has supplemented last year's successful *Achtung! Cthulhu* (2013) with the release of



Sarah Newton's *Mindjammer* RPG (2014) and a very popular Kickstarter for *Mutant Chronicles 3E*. Going forward, I look forward to seeing Chris Birch's continued work in the roleplaying field.

Modiphius is a UK-based company, and that's a region that produced some major roleplaying publishers in the '00s, including Cubicle 7 and Mongoose Publishing. Though they both hit some harder times in the early '10s, they seem to be on their way back up too. Cubicle 7 is publishing more regularly, with a focus on their own hits like *Doctor Who*:

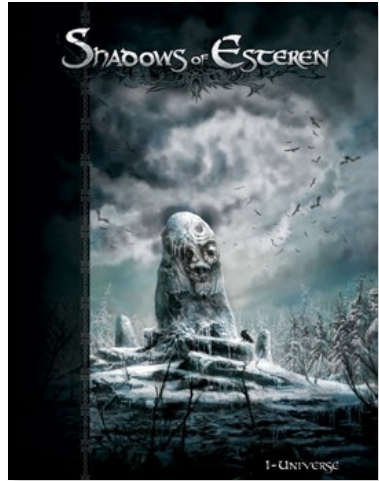
*Adventures in Time and Space* (2009) and *The One Ring* (2011), while Mongoose is back in distribution after a few (surprising) years away. This is thanks to Studio 2 Publishing, a fulfillment company and publisher who's also been helping out Agate Editions, the creator of *Shadows of Esteren* (2012+), in recent years.

However not all growth is happening in Britain. Monte Cook Games is the newest example of the Old Guard making good with new companies of their own. Monte Cook's *Numenéra* (2013) and *The Strange* (2014) RPGs have both been getting good attention this year, and once more it'll be interesting to see if they're able to build on that foundation.

**Corporate Hijinks Continue.** I first wrote about corporations scooping up RPG publishers way back in 2008, when Mongoose Publishing, White Wolf, and the *Champions* IP all got grabbed. Unfortunately, that's turned out pretty terribly for folks who actually like tabletop RPGs. Hero Games has largely closed up shop, Mongoose Publishing was maimed and is only now recovering, and White Wolf, well ...

I've been writing about the latest damage done to the "it" RPG publisher of the '90s because of their corporate takeover for years now, and sadly 2014 saw the final shoe drop when the *World of Darkness Online* was shut down<sup>14</sup> and the final vestiges of White Wolf were mostly killed. Fortunately, White Wolf's RPG production had largely moved to Onyx Publishing already, but the long, drawn out death of White Wolf itself was still a terrible thing to watch.

Meanwhile, in the haven't-we-learned category, Fantasy Flight Games merged with Asmodee Group, a French board game publisher who had themselves been purchased by investment group Eurazeo at the start of the year. Here, FFG joined



14 Gera, Emily. April 2014. "World of Darkness Canceled as CCP Atlanta is Hit with Layoffs." *Polygon*. [www.polygon.com/2014/4/14/5613218/world-of-darkness-cancelled-as-ccp-atlanta-is-hit-with-redundancies](http://www.polygon.com/2014/4/14/5613218/world-of-darkness-cancelled-as-ccp-atlanta-is-hit-with-redundancies).



successful board game publisher Days of Wonder, who was scooped up earlier in the year.

Now, every claim has been made that FFG is going to continue with business as usual, but much the same was said when CCP picked up White Wolf. It seems likely to me that FFG's board games are going to continue well under Asmodee, but I would not be making any long-term investments that depend on Fantasy Flight being in the roleplaying business — especially given this year's cancellation of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay 3E* (2009) and the mixed reception they received for *Dark Heresy 2E* (2014). I hope to be proven wrong, but the record of corporate roll-ups of RPG companies has been very poor, with even *D&D* failing to meet the expectations of its megacorp masters.

**Controversies Continue.** For better or for worse, the internet drives controversies and there were a few of particular note in 2014. They started with the publication of the 5E *Starter Set* and the reveal that two persons who are widely viewed as internet bullies were consultants for the game. This poisoned a lot of the early discussion of the newest version of our industry's top game, and unfortunately caused some loss of faith in the 5E design team<sup>15</sup>. Some fans may well have abandoned 5E because of the controversy, but beyond that it now seems to have blown over.

Meanwhile, problems with misogyny that have been bubbling up across the hobbyist industries for years reappeared in the video game field in 2014 as part of a

rather grotesquely woman-hating movement called "GamerGate" (and on Twitter as #GamerGate), which extensively harassed and threatened female video game designers. It detoured into the tabletop field when James Desborough got involved. Desborough has had troubles with being called a misogynist in the past, as I detailed back in 2012. He revisited this problem in 2014 by strongly backing the GamerGate movement. As part and parcel of this, he created a GamerGate card game and uploaded it to DriveThruRPG. For the first time in 13 years, DriveThru banned a title, removing the game entirely from its catalog.




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*Actually, it's about ethics in games journalism.*

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15 Uncredited. 2014. "How Dungeons and Dragons is Embracing the Darkest Parts of the RPG Community." *Fail Forward*. [failforward.co.uk/post/93348768153/how-dungeons-and-dragons-is-endorsing-the-darkest](http://failforward.co.uk/post/93348768153/how-dungeons-and-dragons-is-endorsing-the-darkest).



Though the consultant and GamerGate controversies both suggest some darkness underlying the roleplaying community on the internet, I actually think the GamerGate problems point toward a long-term positive. In my opinion, we're seeing so much adolescent sociopathy about women because of that fact that women are becoming an increasingly important part of the gaming community. It's an action-reaction that I believe to be the last dying gasp of a culture that most of us will happily see gone. Meanwhile, publishers and websites are becoming increasingly opposed to misogyny — such as when Posthuman Studios fired its MRA (men's rights activism) fans<sup>16</sup>.

I think an increasing acceptance of sexual identity is going hand-in-hand with this, and it also saw notable growth in 2014, when Wizards of the Coast made a strong statement about accepting different gender and sexual identities in *D&D SE*. Mind you, that's been part of a long process, with Paizo already doing so for several years now.

***Crowdfunding Settles in for the Long Haul.*** For several years now, I've written each January 1 about how crowdfunding has become even more important. As of 2014, I think it's officially arrived, and that it's settled in as a crucial, ongoing part of our industry.

Mind you, there are still problems and growing pains. Kickstarter was forced to update their TOS this year to better account for failure<sup>17</sup>. Meanwhile, a few roleplaying companies learned that delayed campaigns can do serious damage to their reputations. Palladium got some real flak when they announced that they'd be releasing their 8-month overdue *Robotech Tactics* (2014) game at Gen Con unless a majority of backers (*not* a majority of voting backers) asked otherwise; fans were very unsupportive, and in the end Palladium burned bridges for no good reason, as their game still wasn't available by August. However, it was probably Adamant Entertainment's *Far West* that became the 2014 poster child for late Kickstarters. Over three years after the book's funding, author Gareth Skarka is making daily posts chronicling the project's trials and tribulations.

Looking at the top line, the big RPG Kickstarters did just as well in 2014 as 2013. This year saw 15 Kickstarters top \$100,000, compared to 16 in 2013, and the top funding amount at \$600,000+ was almost exactly the same.

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16 Boyle, Rob. May 2014. "Regarding MRAs."  
[eclipsephase.com/regarding-mras](http://eclipsephase.com/regarding-mras).

17 Strickler, Yancey. September 2014. "An Update to Our Terms of Use."  
[www.kickstarter.com/blog/an-update-to-our-terms-of-use](http://www.kickstarter.com/blog/an-update-to-our-terms-of-use).

Here's a look at those releases:

Product	Publisher	Raised
Mage: the Ascension 20th	Onyx Path	\$672,899
Paranoia RPG	Mongoose	£217,517
Numenéra Boxed Set Edition	Monte Cook	\$286,565
V20: The Dark Ages	Onyx Path	\$281,392
Mutant Chronicles 3E	Modiphius	£151,072
Wraith: The Oblivion 20th	Onyx Path	\$224,036+
Feng Shui 2	Atlas Games	\$185,137
Shadows of Esteren IV: Tuath	Agate Editions	\$137,602
The Dracula Dossier	Pelgrane	£87,935
13 <sup>th</sup> Age in Glorantha	Moon Design	\$116,150
Designers & Dragons	Evil Hat	\$115,348
Earthdawn 4E	FASA Games	\$109,596
Lone Wolf Adventure Game	Cubicle 7	£68,005
TimeWatch	Pelgrane	\$105,881
W20: Book of the Wyrms	Onyx Path	\$103,135

I'm of course very proud that *Designers & Dragons* is eleventh in that count-down. More generally, I find it interesting that so many of the top Kickstarters are historical releases. *Mage*, *Paranoia*, *Dark Ages*, *Mutant Chronicles*, *Wraith*, *Feng Shui*, *Earthdawn*, *Lone Wolf*, and *Book of the Wyrms* are all nostalgic releases to various extents. If you add in *Designers & Dragons* and (maybe) *13<sup>th</sup> Age in Glorantha*, that's about 70% of the new Kickstarters. Though I love me some history (clearly), I'm happy that Agate Editions, Monte Cook Games, and Pelgrane Press are putting out new products as well — perhaps creating the nostalgic releases for the '30s!

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*This Platinum Appendix is our thanks for your Kickstarter support of Designers & Dragons!*

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And finally, no history of 2014 would be complete without mentioning Patreon. Kickstarters are hard, with each one requiring a new business plan and a lot of hard work, so it's terrific to see a different model, where fans can crowd-fund ongoing projects via a subscription. Evil Hat Productions has made the most successful use of Patreon with its "Adventures & Worlds for Fate Core." They're currently netting about \$3,300 per product created<sup>18</sup>, which isn't on the scale with

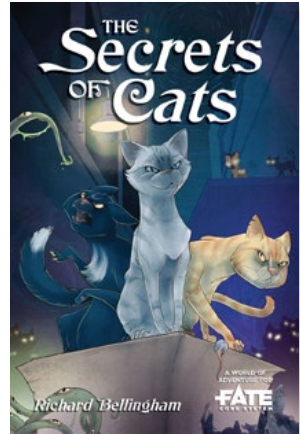
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18 Evil Hat. December 2014. "Patreon: Year One." [www.patreon.com/creation?hid=1396304](http://www.patreon.com/creation?hid=1396304).

a successful Kickstarter, but is apparently just enough to pay the costs for a PDF-only product.

**What's to Come?** With a strong foundation in 5E, *D&D* should quickly return to its place as the best-selling game in the roleplaying industry (something that I've actually been saying for a couple of years), provided that Wizards is willing to continue supporting it. I'm also pretty sure that means we're going to see a dozen or more official *D&D* releases in 2015, something that we've been missing for almost half a decade (!). I also dearly hope that newcomers like Monte Cook Games and Modiphius will reveal themselves as new movers-and-shakers, so that I can write about them someday in *Designers & Dragons: The '10s*.

As for me? Based on the interest in the *Designers & Dragons* Kickstarter, I plan to get back to work on *Designers & Dragons*, after taking a couple of months off this fall. I've got ideas for at least three more books that would further expand the history of the industry, with a plan to work on them in the next 2–3 years. Thanks for your support over the years and Happy 2015!



### What to Read Next ☒☒☒☒

- For more about Aaron Allston, read **Hero Games** ['80s] and **ICE** ['80s].
- For more about Jean Black, read **TSR** ['70s] and **Women in the Roleplaying Industry** [PA].
- For more on the Encounters program and the path to 5E, read **Wizards of the Coast** ['90s].
- For more on its constant reinvention, read **Paizo Publishing** ['00s].
- For more on ups and downs in the UK, read **Cubicle 7 Entertainment** ['00s] and **Mongoose Publishing** ['00s].
- For some discussion of Monte Cook's previous publishing house, read about Malhavoc Press in **White Wolf** ['90s] and **Necromancer Games** ['00s].
- For corporate purchases of RPG properties, read **Hero Games** ['80s], **Mongoose Publishing** ['00s], **White Wolf** ['90s], and **Wizards of the Coast** ['90s]. And for the newest entrant to the field, read **Fantasy Flight Games** ['90s].
- For the company that fired its MRA fans, read **Posthuman Studios** ['00s].
- For more on its constant innovations, read **Evil Hat Productions** ['00s].

# Appendix II: Bibliography & Thanks

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## I. Women in the Roleplaying Industry

*This article was the result of my existing experience with the history of the roleplaying industry, combined with new research and some especially helpful resources from Emily Care Boss.*

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Janelle Cooper, Jacq Jones, the Women & Gaming Forum of BGG

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## Fact Checkers

Emily Care Boss, Janelle Cooper, Ann Dupuis, Jeff Grubb, Jennell Jaquays, Jacq Jones, Michelle Nephew, Jean Rabe, Jen Seiden, Barbara Young

## Scanners

Emily Care Boss, Theron Bretz, Julia Ellingboe, Alex Fradera, James "Rindis" Lowry, Cynthia Celeste Miller, Cat Ramen, William H Stoddard

# II. The Aurania Gang

*This article was drawn from a few online sources, some discussion in Playing at the World, and personal Q&A with Daniel Wagner and Noah Dudley.*

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zenopusarchives.blogspot.com/2013/09/the-manual-of-aurania-1977.html.

## Fact Checkers

Noah Dudley, Daniel Wagner

## Scanners

Tim McDuffie

# III. Hero Auxiliary Corps

*This article would have been impossible without the internet, which put me in touch with Sue Grau and Mike Malony, who kindly answered considered Q&A to allow me to produce this article. Ray Greer also helped with some discussion of the Hero Games connection.*

## Patron

Carl Rigney

## Published Sources

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## Fact Checkers

Sue Grau, Ray Greer, Mike Malony

## Scanners & Artwork Providers

Ray Greer, Carl Rigney

# IV. The RuneQuest Mafia

*This article is largely based on my own recollections, bolstered by discussions with members of my gaming group, past and present.*

## Patrons

Members of the 2014 RQ Mafia: Dave Woo, Dave Pickering, Kevin Wong, Donald and Mary Kubasak, Dave Sweet, Christopher and Corina Wong

## Published Sources

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## Fact Checkers

Bill Filios, Matt Harris, Donald Kubasak, Dave Pickering, Eric Rowe, Dave Sweet, Christopher Wong, Kevin Wong, Dave Woo

## V. Yearly Chronicles

*These articles were all written with help from RPGnet, both in reporting news and in suggesting yearly trends. Individual articles contain some footnotes, which were hyperlinks in the original articles. Special thanks to Sleeper & others at RPGnet for helping with my 2012 Kickstarter lists and to Sethra007 for my 2012 misogynistic links.*

## Patrons

All of the *Designers & Dragons* Kickstarters

## Scanners & Artwork Providers

Keaver Bronson, Bob Cram, Andy Kitkowski, Matt Palmer, Michael Pureka

#GamerGate

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