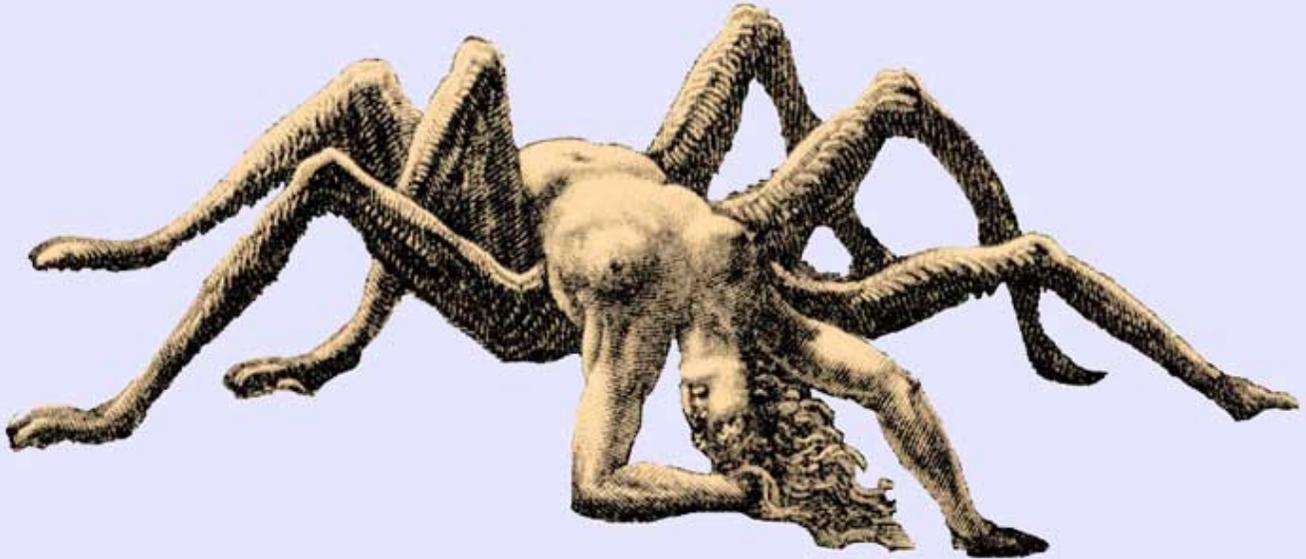


# ***RPG REVIEW***

***Issue #1, September 2008***



***D&D 4th edition ... AD&D/D&D 3.5  
Scenario... RuneQuest Demiurgy ...  
Call of Cthulhu Tcho Tcho ...  
Cannibal Contagion ... Mythweaver  
... DragonQuest Retrospective ...  
The Dark Knight Review ... Fatal  
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News***

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## ADMINISTRIVIA

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## EDITORIAL

There comes a time, probably around midlife, when you realise that if you've been engaging in the same hobby since your very early 'teens, started clubs during your university years and beyond, that you're probably not going to give up on the hobby anytime soon. Further, if you fancy yourself a bit of a writer, a publisher and a collector of friends who are also competent in these areas, you may very well end up starting an online RPG magazine.

So welcome to the first edition of *RPG Review*, a gaming 'zine which is both a fan-publication in one sense (that is, the production and commercial sense), but takes itself sufficiently seriously in others, looking at predecessors such as *Different Worlds* and *Interactive Fantasy*; and perhaps even more so *Alarums & Excursions*.

A common theme within the magazine is a sense of balance. There is a balance between contemporary games and those of the past and each issue will feature a retrospective; in this issue it's *DragonQuest*. There is a balance between 'indie games' and mainstream publications. Between critical pieces and practical pieces; and between tabletop gaming and other related activity, such a computer games and inspirational films.

I have many people to thank for this first issue, but most of all I wish to thank Erica Hoehn for her work in proofreading and Victoria Jankowski for her advice on art and layout. I am overjoyed, of course, with the quality of the contributions. Minsghi makes a glorious spy with her industry gossip and her English classes are going just fine. Nathanael Cole and Michael Dessing have both provided excellent articles on their design projects. James Haughten's talent is exceptional and the imagination positively glows in his *RuneQuest* and *Cthulhu* contributions. One of the industry greats, Steve Perrin has offered his words of wisdom to the publication. Erica Hoehn shows that not all fairy stories are simple in her *DragonQuest* scenario, and the "collective response" by the Seagate Adventurer's Guild of Auckland was astounding! Andrew Moshos provides a delightful and readable review of the Dark Knight and Lauren Leigh enthusiastically presents the long-awaited fourth episode of one of the best console games ever produced. Finally, Paul Cardwell informs us on the activities of the CAR-PGa, our main protection against the anti-gaming lobby and, in a case of justified juxtaposition, Steve Saunders channels the spirit of Lord Orcus in an irreverent and necessary manner.

Being the first issue of a 'zine that I've pretty much put together it is perhaps not surprising that there's far too much of my own material here; from the review of *D&D* fourth edition, the Tragedy of Arachne scenario to *Via Negativia: The Virtues of Bad Game Design*. I pray you will accept my indulgence in this first issue, although I will confess some pride in seeing this first issue being distributed.

These are, despite some naysayers, excellent times for traditional tabletop roleplaying. To be sure, as a commercial enterprise there are new difficulties, and especially for the Friendly Local Games Store. RPG Retailing is very difficult these days, but that is a sign of the changes in the industry. Electronic documents, independent press, and computer-assisted systems have led to a situation where there is more diversity and, I dare say, quality publications from an enormous variety of sources. This little publication is itself a contribution to these new circumstances.

Onwards,

Lev Lafayette; lev@rpgreview.net

## LETTERS

### *From Swordbearing Bunnies of Olympus...*

*As a longtime game designer and player, I'm happy to see the inauguration of RPG Review, and I look forward to your coverage of the still vibrant and expanding world of role-playing games. Best of luck in your new venture.*

*B. Dennis Sustare  
Austin, Texas, USA*

### *... To Runic Feng Shui HeroQuesters...*

*Best of luck to Lev and company as they embark on their webzine journey. In namechecking *Different Worlds* and *Interactive Fantasy* as among their inspirations, they've set a high bar for themselves -- one I look forward to seeing them leap over.*

*Robin D. Laws  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

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***With the Art of Dungeons Ever Over The Edge***

*Lev & Company:*

*Good luck on your worthy endeavor. As an old-time gamer with a scad of Different Worlds and the complete run of Interactive Fantasy in my basement office, I'm heartened to see someone picking up the banner and carrying it forward.*

*Jonathan Tweet  
Seattle, Washington, United States*

***Here's A Good Tip!***

*I just got a peek at the table of contents of the first issue of the RPG Review zine, and it looks like a winner! I have known Lev for several years virtually, through RoleplayingTips.com, and RPG Review should be a great new addition to the RPG community. I just subscribed via the online form and can't wait for my first issue. Best of luck to you and your team, Lev.*

*Johnn Four  
Edmonton, Canada*

***The Shaman Speaketh...***

*Dear Lev,*

*Great to read that you guys are starting a new game magazine! We need more of this, and I'm glad you guys have risen to the occasion. I want to extend my wishes for scads of good luck, contributors and success on the venture.*

*Greg Stafford  
President, Issaries Inc.  
Arcata, California, USA*

***From the Mentor 'Zine: And We Did So!***

*Dear Lev*

*Greetings from San Francisco!*

*Good luck with your online magazine. Gigi has been asked before to write for other periodicals, but has always declined. She says she only wants to write to Dear Tadashi. You will have to find Gigi D'Arn Jr. yourself.*

*I look forward to magazine.*

*Happy gaming!*

*Tadashi Ehara  
Different Worlds Publications*

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# HOT GOSSIP: INDUSTRY NEWS

by Wu Mingshi

La, so you finally get around to publishing this magazine, hey? Good for you, about time, good list of endorsements you have too. I've been waiting for months to write this article, my fingers start to grow spider webs at the keyboard waiting. Maybe Arachne go crawling all over them, eh? Hey, you remember Gigi D'Arn from *Different Worlds*? Yes, well I'm her long-lost daughter. No, don't you look at me like that. It was the 'seventies. It was complicated, you know? I'm still not allowed to know who father was. Some people think it was Tadashi, but that's getting pretty wild rumour.

OK, so I am being very surprised to find out that the West End games have close up the shop. They almost made it to twenty-five years, old as me! Over the years we remember the company fondly, very fondly. Made such good games! *Paranoia* was one of my special favourites, and *Torg* too. *Star Wars* was the very big seller for long time and I even like Ewoks, they funny and almost human, but most of all like *The World of Tank Girl*. Oh! And there was the *Junta* as well - I remember smacking the bottom of one player as the executing scene, she thought it very funny. Anyway, *D6* system not sell so well, even though some people seem to like it. So Eric Gibson now selling off all properties and website say they have no licenses anymore! Maybe the name will survive or we'll see new surfacing somewhere.

Funny thing licenses and intellectual property, people getting very strange sometime about them. The White Wolf recently publish new legal notices for official fan sites and some fans not so happy, wah! Some say they cannot comply with the White Wolf rules and their country rules. So country rules win, or no fan site? Then the rules say site must say "owned and operated" by the White Wolf and they can shut it down at anytime with no reason. Maybe rules need be written a second time.

More funny things about intellectual property? OK, funny the "queer, peculiar", not the funny "Ha! Ha!". Little online magazine called *Knowledge Arcana* does stuff for WoTC games and even have some people inside the building (that the idiom?) but then someone trademark the name and people not like that decision and say they want to start a new online magazine. It all look very messy from here and Mingshi no like the messing.

Hey, don't go, I too have the good news. John Wick who write most excellent *Legend of the Five Rings* has new game, *Houses of the Blooded*, and he go crazy, selling PDF for only \$5 'cause he want everyone playing the game. Game has lots of politics, revenging, ambition and lusting and if you don't review it next issue of RPG 'zine, there be plenty of trouble! I might have to do another executing scene.

My spies keep telling me that a new edition of *HeroQuest* is coming out very soon. Moon Design have very special edition of rules at Continuum. No art, lots of typing mistakes, but all these getting the iron quick on them. Fast augments and extended contests seen as a good thing, and all sorts of new contests, look out for Death Spiral and Risky Gambit and possible expansion of game system to other genres and settings.

Before I go must give big kisses to everyone who make win at GenCon Indy! Jason Morningstar really make big win with *Grey Ranks*, with game of the year and most innovative game, all about Polish teenagers fighting Nazi occupation and being teenagers at same time. Mingshi think scary and interesting! Now you have two game to do reviewing, unless you talk to authors and get them to write something like Michael and Nathaneal. And Greg Stolze get best production and runner up best game with *REIGN*. So many games! These are good days if you like life spice, yes?

OK, that's all from me for this quartering! Love,

**Mingshi! xxx**  
**mingshi@rpgreview.net**

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# D&D 4<sup>th</sup> EDITION REVIEW

by *Lev Lafayette*

## A Bit of Background

Dungeons & Dragons has always been a standard by which all other roleplaying systems are compared. By virtue of being the first product and by market dominance it has become to outsiders almost synonymous with the hobby as a whole. Despite this it has been subject to widespread criticism within the hobby and with some justification. Often the game appeared to provide a confused fantastic setting that is a quasi-medieval-Conan-Tolkien-Vancian swamp that have led to glorious mockery such as Head Injury's "Thirty Years of Stupid Monsters". The rules, it is oft-stated, are arbitrary, unrealistic, convoluted and sometimes just downright confusing.

Much of this has to do with the peculiar evolution of the game. It started, as explicitly stated on the grubby-brown A5 booklets from 1975, as a fantasy miniatures wargame, dealing with single units. In the immediate years that following the game transformed from a wargame to a roleplaying game, but it still held a great number of the wargaming elements; not the least being high levels of abstraction that did not scale particularly well into the single unit. It was at this time the game split into the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons line and the Dungeons & Dragons line. Both continued independently with somewhat similar rules throughout the 1980s and 1990s with a second edition of the former being produced and the latter developing the Basic, Expert, Companion, Masters and eventually Immortal sets before most was compiled into the Rules Companion. To give an extremely brief summary, the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons line provided more support material and greater flexibility, whereas the Dungeons & Dragons line provided a cleaner and more plausible system.

In 2000 Wizards of the Coast, the new owners of Dungeons & Dragons, released third edition until the skilled craftsmanship of the Skip Williams, a long-time worker on the D&D line, Monte Cook, the former editor for ICE's *Rolemaster* and Johnathan Tweet, responsible for innovative game systems such as *Over The Edge* and *Everyway*. The two game lines were merged into a single, more cohesive product. The worst elements of implausibility were taken out of the system - whilst retaining those that kept the sense of "heroic fantasy" - and the plethora of different ways of doing similar things was radically reduced. Despite the fact it was the biggest change that the game system had seen, it was quite easy to port characters from any of the previous systems to the new game. To be sure, it was pretty crunchy, as with all such systems it was prone to abuses leading to a revised edition in 2005. But one thing can be stated with some conviction; each edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* has been an improvement to the previous and that has certainly helped retain its market dominance and loyalty of supporters. My own exposure to *Dungeons & Dragons* dates back from about 1981 with the "purple" and "blue" box sets of the Moldvay editions. I have since played scores, if not hundreds, of games of original D&D, BECMI D&D, Advanced D&D, Advanced D&D (second edition), third edition D&D and, following many sessions at GenCon Oz, fourth edition D&D.

## Introduction to Fourth Edition

With a mere three years passing, somewhat fast in the world of new D&D editions, a fourth edition of the classic game has been released this year. Reviews have largely been leaning towards the positive, although this is far from universal and it has been noted this a substantially different game with poor backwards compatibility. As with all other editions of Dungeons & Dragons the quality of production is very high. The solid, hardback books with stitched binding, gloss paper and artwork displaying good technique are quite notable; as is the 800-plus pages of material, continuing the tradition of massive rulebooks.

The three books follow the classics as outlined by the original Advanced Dungeons & Dragons and followed through to third edition; Player's Handbook, Dungeon Master's Guide (James Wyatt) and Monster Manual (Mike Mearls, Stephen Schubert, James Wyatt). The cover art for each of the books is somewhat indicative of the contents within; the cover of the Player's Handbook does show a fighter, albeit something that looks like a lizard-man (more on that later) and a

female wizard. The cover of the Monster Manual does indeed feature a monster, albeit humanoid. The best image however is that of the Dungeon Master's Guide which shows a red dragon looking into a crystal ball featuring the characters of the player's handbook which old school gamers will recognise as thematically reminiscent of the covers of Erol Otus on the early Moldvay editions of Basic and Expert Dungeons & Dragons. The internal art likewise indicates high skill in technique, but not so much in creativity.

The books are mostly written in two-column, ragged-right alignment with a serif font for most of the text. Each book has a good one page table of contents. The organisation of the chapters in the Player's Handbook could have been better, but is just fine in the other books. The Player's Handbook and Dungeon Master's Guide also comes with an index, whereas the Monster Manual has an alphabetical listing of creatures, their level and combat role. The Player's Handbook also comes with a character sheet, whereas the Dungeon Master's Guide also includes a PC and Monster "Combat Card" and stone-floor style grid pages. The writing style isn't particularly special and indeed some criticism can be levelled at the consistent use of the second-person throughout. Whilst this is explicitly stated in the first paragraphs of character generation in the Player's Handbook it does read like it's aimed at the slightly dim of mind, which is confirmed by numerous explanations, perhaps the worst being the explanation that a bonus is always a positive modifier and penalty is always negative (PH, p25).

### **Player's Handbook**

The Player's Handbook begins with a several pages of "what is roleplaying" and includes the simple core mechanic; roll d20, add modifiers and beat the target number ("Difficulty Class") along with three conventions; simple rules, many exceptions - specific beats general (the same thing really) - always round down. It then moves in character generation, a fairly standard process of pick race, class, generate ability scores, choose feats, skills, powers and equipment, and finally select roleplaying elements.

The races are standard fantasy fare, Dwarves, Elves, Half-Elves, Halflings, the ubiquitous humans, plus a couple of new additions including the Dragonborn ("proud, honor-bound draconic humanoids"), the Eladrin ("graceful, magical race born of the Feywild"), and Tieflings ("descended from ancient humans who bargained with infernal powers"). The different races gain different ability bonuses, skill bonuses and racial powers all of which are positive (there is no negative modifiers for Halfling strength, for example). Whilst reasonably balanced in their powers, and lengthy in their description, the races seemed more about what they could do that what they are.

Available character classes include Cleric, Fighter, Paladin, Ranger, Rogue, Warlock, Warlord and Wizard. In addition these classes have combat roles namely Controller (e.g., wizard), Defender (e.g., fighter), Leader (e.g., Cleric) and Striker (e.g., Rogue). Ability scores are the standard D&D version consisting of Strength, Constitution, Dexterity, Intelligence, Wisdom and Charisma with a + or - 1 modifier for every two points above or below 10-11. They are generated from a standard array (16, 14, 13, 12, 11, 10), or on a point-buy method, or the good-ol' fashioned 4d6 drop lowest.

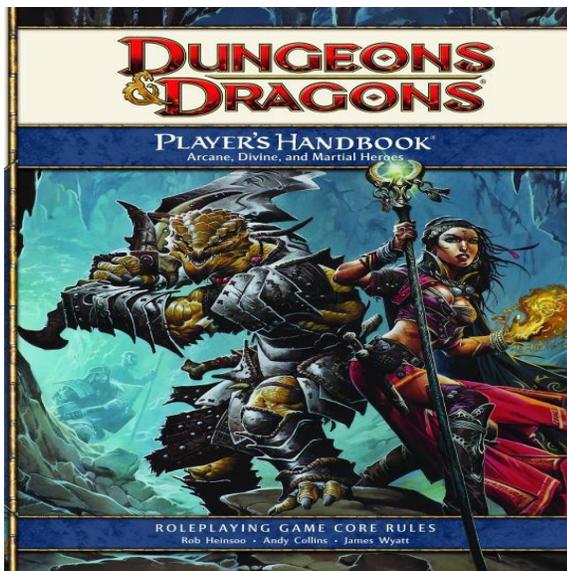
Whilst the Player's Handbook describes D&D as "first and foremost, a roleplaying game", the roleplaying aspects are largely colour with no systematic meaning in the game. Alignment has been cut down from the lawful-chaotic and good-evil axis of nine alignments to a mere five; Lawful Good, Good, Unaligned, Evil, Chaotic Evil. The changes to alignment to be a step are backwards in design, let alone developmental psychology which D&D did surprisingly well at in previous editions. A few notes and suggestions are made for personality dichotomies. Again it is emphasised that these have no systematic value.

Every power, skill or special ability in the game is keyed to an ability score which all use the core mechanic. Usually the Difficulty Class is against a static number (e.g., a Strength attack check against an opponent's AC), however the can be based against the opponents check (an opposed check). Attack rolls, skill checks and ability checks all include half the level of the character as a bonus, a net result meaning that differentiation between the classes is significantly lessened.

Dungeons & Dragons has always been a level-based system and this edition is no exception. All classes require the same number of experience points per level and gain the same number of feats, powers and other bonuses. Levels are gained by experience points and provide improvements in ability scores (at levels 4, 8, 11, 14, 18, 21, 24 and 28), bonuses to checks every two levels, additional hit points, additional feats and additional powers (retraining an "at will" power, gaining encounter attack powers and daily attack powers). Retraining of any one feat, power or skill selection can be made at each level. A new level is gained every ten encounters, on average, and every encounter or quest provides experience point (XP) rewards. At 11th or 21st levels characters must choose between taking a Paragon path or an Epic destiny as appropriate and eventually immortality at 30<sup>th</sup> level and the completion of the campaign's final Destiny Quest. These levels are considered break-points in character capacity and the benefits they accrue adds to this claim.

Powers are extremely important to the new edition, to the extent that it is not unfair to say the game is almost all about the "kewl powers" one's character can gain from a particular race/class/level combination. One of the widespread of these powers is "healing surges". Characters start with significantly more hit points than previously editions of the game (for example, a first level human fighter with 13 CON with begin with 28 hit points and gain an additional 6 per level . In addition a character may spend a "healing surge", one quarter of a character's maximum hit points, as a standard action, once per encounter, plus a number per day depending on the class; a fighter received 9 + CON modifier.

It is true that Dungeons & Dragons needed a means to make the life expectancy of first level character's at least plausible (remember rolling 1 for hit points?), but this extreme level is probably not what most people had in mind. As a counterbalance of sorts, attacks are potentially more powerful as well, although the number of powers that do significantly extra damage are limited, meaning that D&D 4<sup>th</sup> edition combats are longer in real time. As a whole, Powers take up an enormous section of the *Player's Handbook*, with a small selection per class, per level and distinguished between "at will", "per encounter" and "daily". But despite claims to the contrary, their variation is fairly minor, usually of a damage times level over area x variety. Most of the powers are combat abilities with a modicum of "utility powers". With a modest evaluation they do appear to be somewhat balanced in respect to each other, however because they are not based on a transparent system of construction (like powers in the *Hero System* are) it is reasonably certain that imbalances will be found in coming months. In many ways, the powers make a combat encounter somewhat of a resource-based card game with opponents trying to trump each other with a power. On the other hand, by providing all classes "at will" powers it ensures that the "one trick pony" problem of low-level wizards is not an issue anymore.



Skills have been reduced to a mere 17 in number and the 5% increments of third edition and earlier has been abolished in favour of a "trained" or "untrained" status, the former giving characters a +5 bonus to any skill checks. The list of skills is, as can be expected, far from comprehensive but represents at most of an "adventuring" party would do, although even a single generic Craft skill perhaps would have made a world of difference for numerous situations that have occurred in actual play. This said, the actual descriptions of the skills are quite good with each being described with example applications and on occasion, some clever design (e.g., using Bluff in combat to represent a feint maneuver) .

Characters gain a Feats at 1<sup>st</sup> level (two if human) and one every even numbered level as well as 11<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>. These usually provide bonuses to some skill or ability. The stacking

rules are a little unusual; if the Feat applies in all contexts, then only the highest applies, if however they have a limited context or they are of different 'types', then they do stack. The types are Class Feats, Divinity Feats, Multiclass Feats and Racial Feats. The example given is if the character has Alertness (+2 bonus to Perception checks) and has Dragonborn Senses (+1 bonus to Perception), only the +2 bonus applies. It would be surprising if this doesn't lead to "full and frank discussions" at the actual gaming table. There are roughly one hundred and fifty Feats, differentiated by Heroic, Paragon and Epic tiers, are described with a few lines each with over 90% having a strong combat orientation. In addition to this there is a handful of Multiclass Feats allow character to "dabble in the class features and powers" of another class. On an oddly related manner, the Equipment chapter is largely magic items, and these two are arranged in Power/Feat like descriptions, a couple of evocative lines of colour, a price and level chart, and the various bonuses they provide; again they are mostly combat orientated. This said, there is a few pages dedicated to mundane equipment, although not surprisingly it's mainly weapons and armour – even the list of "adventuring gear" is quite slim.

This is followed by the Adventuring chapter, which defines the goal of all adventures to be the quest with a particular narrative that provides XP, action points, and treasure. Fairly useful information is provided here concerning travelling distances, illumination and the like, although it is a far cry from that provided in classics like the *Dungeoneers Survival Guide* and the *Wilderness Survival Guide*. Taking up more pages however is the chapter that accounts for combat; which follows a familiar account of determine surprise, roll for initiative in the six-second round (1d20+DEX bonus+ half level), take turns. Attacks are roll high, achieve Armour Class (or other defense as appropriate) plus as a target number and apply damage. A lot of effort is spent in establishing standard actions, figure-based movement, line of sight and scale issues and to the extent that the game concentrates heavily on these matters (indeed, one could argue it has "returned to its roots", in this respect) there is evidence of excellent craftsmanship. Further, a lot of what is described as combat effects can also be applied to more "mundane" activities (e.g., falling, pushing and shoving etc). One of the more interesting new elements is the status of "bloodied", when a character is at half or less hit points certain powers work differently.

Finally, very strangely, at the end of the book, is a chapter on Rituals. The chapter explains how to acquire these complex magical ceremonies, how to perform them, and gives some examples. This is perhaps the most interesting chapter in the book, insofar it describes almost entirely non-combat utility magics of which almost thirty are described, such as summoning animal messengers, discern lies, creating magic feasts, curing disease, raising the dead, water walk, breathe water and so forth. The key difference between Rituals and other kewl powers, is these take substantially longer than a combat round to cast. Somewhat unexpected, Rituals are not class-specific, although they do require the Ritual Caster Feat, which Clerics and Wizards acquire at first level. It is almost as if at the end of the book the authors suddenly realised there was a whole non-combat orientated magic tradition within *Dungeons & Dragons* that could not be effectively represented by the kewl powers, feats and equipment that took up so many pages.

### **Dungeon Master's Guide**

After the detailed run of rules and tables in the *Player's Handbook*, one can be forgiven in wondering what could possibly be in the two hundred and fifty plus pages of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Well, the book starts in exactly the right direction; how to be a DM, making some fairly distinctions between the gaming group, the players, the dungeon master and formation of table rules before launching into how to run the game itself. This second chapter details a linear approach to the game, such as preparation and time expectations, along with providing tips on narration, pacing, and improvisation, and ending the game along the use game tools such as props, and in-game tools such as passive skill tests. Most of these two chapters provide fairly useful information, and although it is fairly obvious advice to seasoned GMs, a number of different angles have been explored and it is certainly worth a read and recognition. On the other hand, the material dedicated to what is perhaps one most important tasks of the DM – teaching the game – is woefully inadequate.

The next three chapters deal with encounters, specifically combat encounters, building encounters, and non-combat encounters. Here the DMG defines the game as "Stripped to the very basics, the D&D game is a series of encounters", which is not necessarily an agreeable statement, but perhaps does represent the outlook of the new order. Given the

emphasis of the new edition on combat, it is perhaps not surprising to see the level of descriptive detail in running and building (challenging but balanced) combat encounters not to mention some of the strange inclusions of what constitutes a combat encounter – like disease? Like the previous edition's Challenge Rating, D&D 4<sup>th</sup> edition has well-defined target XP totals to distribute to each encounter with a number of sample templates for DM's lacking in time, imagination or both. The “Building Encounters” chapter also has some odd inclusions; apparently this is now where 'dungeon dressing' such as the famed difficulty classes for bashing down doors and raising portcullises is located. Finally, non-combat encounters are defined as skill challenges, puzzles, and traps and hazards. Skill challenges are defined the number of success required – anything less than four does not constitute a challenge. This chapter does include a very modest recognition of the importance of roleplaying and social interaction between PCs and NPCs, but it is certainly one of the least in any contemporary RPG.

The next four chapters deal with Adventures, Rewards, Campaigns, and The World. An Adventure is defined “just a series of encounters”, which again is perhaps not entirely accurate. Nevertheless, the chapter does provide some handy advice for incorporating published adventures into a wider campaign story, and how to modify said adventures as appropriate. As with much of the text, the material is moderately useful but the substance per page count is fairly low, although the section on good and poor structure stands in contrast to this general statement, which is exemplified by the vague commentary which is applied to the immediately following section on adventure settings. Rewards are defined as experience points, treasure, action points and “intangibles”. Again this is largely obvious, and at times a repetition of material already provided, and the provision of level-based “treasure parcels” seems a little childish – it's almost like an easter egg hunt.

Campaigns are described as a series of adventures, which does bring in the question of how exactly these encounters are supposed to become a story. Although the chapter does begin with an emphasis on the published variety and the adaption thereof, a better effort is made here to develop what is incorrectly described as “themes”, how to start with narrative scale, providing backstory, linking adventures and so forth, along with expected roles in the wider campaign world at particular broad levels of character advancement. Apparently campaigns are meant to “end with a bang”, and there is no discussion of denouement, which is a little surprising given its obvious prevalence in fantasy literature. Equal to this somewhat truncated discussion of narrative is the chapter for setting with advice for managing civilised, wild regions, and other planes of existence and their inhabitants. The information is extremely rudimentary, although again the page-count is hefty, and certainly not to be taken as even a beginners guide to the basics of geography, let alone cosmology. Somewhat amusingly, it is here that the authors actually give some thematic elements in the “core assumptions” of the D&D world. In addition to these marginal notes, the chapter also includes a number of artifacts.

The final two chapters are “The DM's toolbox” and a sample scenario “Fallcrest”. The toolbox is simply rules for modifications to creatures, equipment and so forth. Again the information is of modest utility, with poor substance per page-count, with the single largest sections taken up with templates, “a recipe for changing a monster” and the random generation of dungeons and encounters. In contrast the same scenario, Fallcrest, is quite good. It is well described, it makes sense, and it is well positioned for a story. Major locations are appropriately described, and a couple of colourful NPCs are mentioned along with stats for the one the PCs are most likely to have a physical disagreement, two they may very well take along on an adventure into the wilds and one whom they'll may have some social (and eventual physical) conflict with. The wilds are presented with a simple but well-designed regional map, with several locations of adventuring potential all of which receive some description. Significant notes are given on how to involved the players in the region (a little lengthy and out of place), before moving into the meaty section of Kobold Hall which, apart from being a community of kobolds, has a number of other adventure hooks. The dungeon itself is classic D&D with all the design improbabilities that causes those with architectural knowledge to groan at, but is otherwise interesting and challenging and the story does come with a special surprise at the end as well.

## **Monster Manual**

The Monster Manual is perhaps the easiest of the three core books to review. It is simply, like its predecessors, a almost three-hundred page compendium of monsters arranged alphabetically (almost 150 in total) with a few pages for racial

traits, a glossary and monsters by level. As far as lists of monsters go, it's not a particularly bad one with the requisite attachment to the more carnivorous breeds and the plethora of humanoid sapient species. All the old favourites from decades of *Dungeons & Dragons* are there of course, the Beholder, the Carrion Crawler, the Otyugh, the Githyanki and Githzerai, the Shambling Mound and so on, as well as those derived from myth and legend such as Ogres, Chimera, Dryad, Fomorian and from Tolkienesque inspiration, the Elves, Halflings, Orcs, Dwarves, and Treants. There's even a few natural creatures which perform the usual roles of beast of burden (horse) or standard opponent (e.g., bear, wolf).

The descriptions themselves however, are mostly stat blocs and descriptions of how the creatures engage in fighting, along with an assigned combat-orientated 'role', although credit is given for continuing the tradition started in third edition of giving monsters a full range of characteristics, skills, alignment and powers. Quite a number of the creatures are given multiple stat-blocs to represent the different 'roles'. For example, there is a stat-bloc for the sample cyclops, one for a cyclops warrior (a level 16 minion), one for a cyclops impaler (a level 14 artillery), one for a cyclops rambler (a level 14 skirmisher), one for a cyclops hewer (a level 16 soldier), one for a cyclops battleweaver (a level 17 skirmisher) and finally, one for a cyclops storm shaman (a level 17 artillery).

Sometimes there is a little bit of ecological or historical data, but nothing like what the *Monstrous Compendium of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, second edition, was famous for. One notable difference is the lack of a standard treasure type - as mentioned this is now derived from the level of the player characters, not the monster itself. One of the more useful and interesting components of the descriptions however is the inclusion of information derived from successful lore checks, although these are often represented with only one break point. Finally, mention must also be made of the quality of the artwork in the *Monster Manual*. It is superior to the other core books and, as one would hope, always contextually appropriate.

## Overall

Fourth edition *Dungeons & Dragons* is the most radical departure from previous editions of the game to date, although the lineage remains clear. In terms of substance, the game remains as ponderous as ever, with a very poor substance to page-count, an element which remains a continuing Achilles Heel from a design perspective but may translate well into income and sales - we all like hefty rulebooks on our shelves, don't we? The scope of the text is also extremely narrow, being almost entirely about combat which is very surprising given the new directions the game was heading in second edition AD&D, the *D&D Rules Compendium* and third edition D&D. For players who like the incremental improvements to a variety of skills, the internal and social conflicts of a two-dimensional alignment schema and such elements there will not be much joy in this new edition of the game. In contrast, for those who prefer more martial-orientated gaming, there is a plentiful, indeed almost excessive, supply of opportunities and pathways. However given that most players fall somewhere in between these extremes, the 'fun' element of this over-emphasis is likely to be of a modest duration.

Stylistically, some complaints can be made about the organisation of the book, the indexing and so forth, but in general this is above average. The artwork, as mentioned, is of very high quality although somewhat lacking in creativity and internal narrative. The game *is* readable, albeit a bit simplistic, but the combination of the art quality, the physical presentation of the product and the opportunity to accumulate kewl powers will appeal to many.

Overall however, recommendation for the new edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* is limited only to those who will fit in the narrow scope which the game is orientated towards. In this regard it has incorporated the design considerations from various collectible card games, unit-based fantasy board-games and, as often mentioned, online fantasy combat roleplaying games. If this does not appeal then there is little opportunity for other styles of play in a systematic sense. It may come to pass that this truncated approach to design will mean that a large section of the D&D market will remain with the previous edition or, if they do well in their design, move to the 3.5-derived *Pathfinder* system.

# THE TRAGEDY OF ARACHNE: A HIGH LEVEL D&D SCENARIO

*by Lev Lafayette with Sean Doyle, Peter Mitchell, Michael Cole and Jay Patterson*

## **Background**

The Tragedy of Arachne is a high-level (10-14) multi-session scenario for AD&D/D&D3.x characters that involves travel through space and time to prevent an minor evil goddess engaging in enormous destruction. It is meant as a conclusion to the classic D&D series, the Giants and the Drow, and as a replacement for *Q1: The Queen of the Demonweb Pits*, which was seriously lacking as a conclusion to what was otherwise a good series. In *The Tragedy of Arachne* the PCs must travel across space and time to defeat a revenge-motivated spider goddess. In the original G-D-Q series, each scenario maps out a conspiracy being led by a higher power; thus one discover that the hill giant raids are actually being organised by the frost giants, who are in turn being organised by the fire giants. The fire giants themselves are being organised by the Drow, the subterranean dark elves, and in particular a faction dedicated to the worship of Lolth, the Demon Queen of Spiders.

In our particular version of this narrative we used a historical fantasy setting starting in the late 11-century in Britain, several years after the Norman conquest. We started with the U series of first edition AD&D modules and based these in the Cornwell region, the temptation of making good use of The Lizard peninsula being too much. After connecting the smugglers from the U-series to the slavers in the A-series the game shifted from southwards to the conflicts in Spain that were occurring at the time, and eventually to the Baleric Islands where the slavelords were based.

Returning to the Norman Kingdom, the actions of the PCs had by now come to the attention of the King (after all, improving the safety of sea-borne trade between the Norman Kingdoms of England and Sicily was no small feat) and significant lordships were granted, perhaps the best going to Sir Duc Sean of the Innocent, the party's Paladin, who received the somewhat independent (county-palantine) Welsh-marches of Shropshire. It was through this connection that the characters were introduced to the problem of raiding giants; first the hill giants of north-west Wales, then the frost giants of the far north of Scotland (in hindsight Norway would have been a better fit for the glacial environment) and finally the fire giants of volcanic Iceland.

From there the party travelled in lands beneath the seabed and went to the city of the "dark elves", in this case not following the racist trope of being 'dark of skin, evil of disposition', but rather more like the Svartálfar of Nordic mythology and the Daoi-Sith of their Celtic counterparts. Within the city of the Svartálfar, the party steps through an inter-dimensional gateway to the realm of the Queen of the Demonweb Pits.

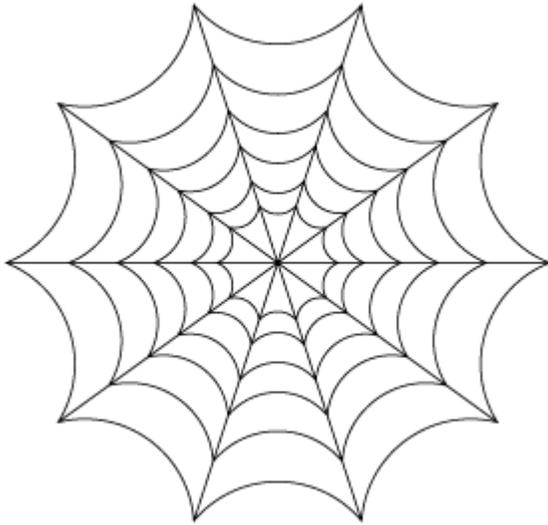
Specific statistics are left out of this scenario so that the DM may apply the particular standards necessary for the party engaging in the quest. In general each major combative encounter opponent group should be equal in power to that of the PCs, except of course Arachne's lair herself, who *should* make short work of the intruders if the players are insufficiently clever – and in which case how did they get to such a level?

## **Arachne's Web**

The party starts at the outer edges of a giant spiderweb which stretches far into the distance. The web itself takes the form of a slightly sticky, silver-white and semi-translucent material that is thirty yards wide on each strand and ten yards thick and has the strength greater than stone and the capacity to regenerate damage at an alarming rate. The web glows slightly, providing a weak light source. Off the edge of the web is simply darkness, the void. Any character falling off the web will simply fall for eternity, a fact which the resident demons are well aware of. The connecting points to each "level" of the web is five leagues, thus the entire web is 60 leagues in diameter.

The web is main thoroughfare in this realm, providing both connections to the prime material plane and between the 'levels' of closeness to the centre of the web. "Wandering monsters" are appropriate, but should be skewed to the characters are on the web. On the outer sections, characters are likely to encounter humans and humanoid supporters (including Drow and Giants) of Arachne along with particularly greedy merchant parties with a monopolistic bent. The mid-region is Arachne's military forces, so whilst Drow, Giants and Drider will make up the mainstay of forces, the occasional demon or arachnid is also appropriate. In the inner regions the forces are made up almost exclusively of demons and spiders.

The outer level of the web consists exclusively to gateways to Arachne's ten most temples on the Prime Material Plane. Where - or even when - these are exactly is entirely up to the GM and at least one (obviously) is from where the PCs come from. Others will take the PCs to locations which combine the features of spider-worship, poisons, the weaving arts, and unpleasant moral alignments. For one extreme example, a gateway could lead to a temple in Angkor Wat of esoteric nominal supporters of Pol Pot's Khmer Rogue, as the Cambodians consider spiders a delicacy. The gateways themselves invariably take the form of a hollowed out tube of the web which must be crawled into. At an undefined point, the character will be gated to a similar exit in the connecting Temple of Arachne.



The second level of the web has merchant waypoints at the connections. These bring in offerings and items trade from the prime material plane. Arachne's forces make good sum from selling textiles, poisons and receiving religious offerings, including slaves. The merchant centres take the form of a large "building" made of webbing with four entrances, as per the directions the web travels. Each will have goods and personell appropriate to the location to a prime material plane connection point.

The third level of the web is similar to the second except in this case the waypoint building acts as a production centre for textiles and poisons. These are better guarded, usually with giants, than the merchant centres as each has a number of slaves to carry out the necessary labour for Arachne's domain. Like the merchant centres, they take the form of a large hall with four exits corresponding to the web-path.

The fourth and fifth levels have military waypoints for Arachne. On the fourth level the web-building takes the form of a barracks-style arrangement with assorted Drow, Giants and Driders. The fifth level is far more chaotic in design and population. Here, the web-building takes the form of a giant tanglewebs, irregular and seemingly messy in design (but providing plenty of opportunities for sneak attacks). This level is inhabited almost exclusively by numerous types of giant spiders and various demons.

The sixth level are gateways to other locations of space and time on the prime material plane. They appear as massive, almost transparent, disks where the ten setting can be seen. Each of these settings has a component of a loom which is required to weave a cloth key. Only a cloth key made from this loom can open the door to Arachne's abode without her will. The ten locations are: prehistoric Australia (for narrative purposes, this should be the first location), ancient Egypt, Aztec Mesoamerica, Seleucid Persia, Industrial England, Ming/Manchu Dynasty China, medieval Japan, ancient Oklahoma, and pre-European western Africa, and early twentieth century Switzerland.

#### **The Ten Locations**

#### *Uluru Australia:*

When the characters are step through the gate they will appear by a small pool next in a dry landscape close to evening with a large red sandstone rock formation some several hundred feet in the distance, about 1,000 feet high and almost six miles in circumference. On the journey to the rock the PCs will encounter numerous springs, and Australian indigenous fauna. During the attempt to climb the rock, the party will be attacked by a number of poisonous large spiders led by Drow.

Upon reaching the summit it will be nightfall. The PCs will, after some searching, find a dark-skinned man seated by the campfire. Although he detects evil he shows no aggressiveness to the party. If the party approaches him they will notice he has eight red eyes which glow in the dark. He will reveal that he was a servant of Arachne, but now fears her intentions, the destruction of the entire universe. After asking some questions concerning their intention, he hands the players some flax yarn as the first item they require and tells them to return to the pool, where they will be transported back to Arachne's lair.

#### *Ancient Egypt:*

Stepping through this gateway the characters find themselves in the the Theban Necropolis on the west bank of the Nile in the middle of the day. Standing in clear view from them is the imposing Colossi of Memnon and beyond that the Mortuary Temple of Amenhotep III. At this juncture the opponents are giant scorpions led by fire giants. Beyond that, and inside the temple the party encounters a crocodile-headed and a cat-headed sphinx who are preparing bodies of the dead. These necromancers are not evil per se, but will reveal that the characters will need to the Loom of Arachne to enter her domain. The sphinxes shall provide a shuttle if the characters succeed in the riddle; "Isis and Osiris lay dead in the temple. They died from lack of water. A shattered glass is found on the dais floor. Why did they die?". The correct answer of course is that Osiris and Isis are fish.

#### *Aztec Mesoamerica:*

The gateway to the Mesoamerican environment leads to the mountainous jungle in mid-afternoon. Travel should be a hot and sticky environment and particularly uncomfortable for those wearing any armour. Following a low flat brown river upstream will eventually lead the characters to the ruined city of Palenque and specifically the Temple of the Cross. On top of the temple, a bound Phoenix is being eaten alive by a enormous bird-eating spider. The base of the temple is protected by a score of Drow Clerics and Fighters. If the player-characters defeat the Drow and spider, they will arrive just in time to save the Phoenix, who will reveal itself as the incarnation of the second ruler of the city. It will also reveal that within the temple is a hidden scroll of Spiritwrack directed against the spider queen.

#### *Seleucid Persia:*

This next gateway takes the PCs to an isolated grove in the mountains of Persia, where a Hellenic Temple is in view. As the PCs approach the grove they will be attacked by evil drow dryads, who have both dryad clerical spell abilities and dryad powers. Inside the temple is a sleeping Titan, bound by golden cords and a tapestry showing, in graphic detail, the infidelities of the Hellenic Gods. Cutting the cords will awake the Titan who has been trapped here for centuries. The Titan will explain the story of Arachne, a skilled weaver who boasted her skill was as great as Athena. Athena, in disguise, challenged Arachne to a weaving competition and Arachne produced a the explicit tapestry. Athena admitted the work was flawless but disrespectful and Arachne was transformed from a mortal woman into an immortal half-spider, half-woman. The temple also holds the warp beam from Arachne's shuttle, which the Titan will give to the party.

#### *Pre-European western Africa:*

In yet another warm environment for armoured player characters, this setting is the Wagadou Empire on the edge of the Sahara and specifically the two-city court of Koumbi Saleh. Here they will find a King well disposed to listening to their tales and if they answer truthfully, he will tell them the legend of how the Anansi (were-spider, great spirit, demigod) keeps the bobbin or Arachne in a calabash, or gourd and that he will have to be tricked out of it.

As the PCs travel to see Anansi who lives deep in the jungle they will be attacked by fire giants who have heard of their presence. Assuming their success, Anansi will profess he is a hungry spider and play a simple game, placing three gourds on the ground. The characters must guess where the bobbin is hidden or lose one of their number to the spider's appetite. This is a simple shell game and the correct answer is something along the lines of "not under the gourds" or similar; Anansi actually has it hidden in his home.

*Ming/Manchu Dynasty China:*

In this location the PCs find themselves in the middle of a two-story silk factory in medieval Chinese city. This time, the PCs will encounter intelligent cellar spiders who actually run the factory and hold the heddles of Arachne's loom which is aiding the spiders in turning over a good profit. On multiple occasions the factory has been attacked by a force of drow and hill giants who are seeking this prize and the cellar spiders are frankly getting a little tired of the entire affair. If the PCs can arrange the defense of the factory for the next attack, the spiders will cut their profits in favour of stability and hand over the heddles.

*Medieval Japan:*

In the medieval Japan setting the PCs will find themselves on the middle of a village far in the Noto province peninsula, where they will encounter a Buddhist temple. If the PCs reveal their quest to the inhabitants, they will be told they must rescue a dragon (Orochi) from a bondage entrapped by a fort held by goblins (Drow ninja). The Dragon is the sacred master of the temple, and the monks will be most gracious in the success of the PCs as their attempts have failed on three occasions. They say that the goblins want a warping board once given to them by a were-spider, Minamoto no Yorimitsu. Why the goblins want this is beyond them, but they fathom that they are up to no good "because they are so earnest in their desire and so prepared to do wicked things to achieve it". The monks will make much ado about characters who show their wealth and suggest a life of simplicity is much better for their alignment – along with a donation to the temple for providing this wisdom. If the PCs rescue the dragon but do not insist on the warping board they will receive it. If they are insistent on it, they will be asked to mediate on their desires; for months, if need be.

*Ancient Oklahoma:*

At the hot and dry Spiro Mounds (yet another encounter odious to armour-wearing characters), the PCs encounter an ancient civilisation who are thoughtful and enlightened, growing great quantities of maize with minimal pastoral activity. The people are aware of the spider spirits which inhabit the land and that occupy the colourful desert environs and which they give tribute to. Once again the PCs are given the opportunity to present their case to the leaders of the community who declare they they must learn of the spider within them before they may receive what they seek. In this instance, the activity consists of eating several live spiders which will poison the PCs (paralysis) and cause them extreme visions of a future where the people of the land are destroyed by invaders. If any PCs in their dream-state attempt to combat the invaders, they will be fighting the equivalent of giants with staffs which fire magic missiles. If the giants are defeated the PCs eventually awaken and will be given a bobbin winder.

*Industrial England:*

The encounter in Industrial England should be thoroughly perplexing to any medieval-fantasy style character, even those that come from nominally the same country. At a Manchester factory, Arachne's drow agents are at their work making ample use of child labour, acting as foreman to the task and as thief/assasins in D&D. If any attempt to free the children, chained to machines, they will be set upon by the drow assasins. If defeated and the children freed one will remain offering their services, for she (or he) knows how to build a loom and to weave (which the PCs invariably do not). Clerics and magic-users will have their spells effectively reduced by 2 levels in this environment.

*Twentieth-Century Switzerland:*

In the final encounter area, the PCs start within a terrace building of in early twentieth century Switzerland. Investigating the building will eventually led them to a room where a gentlemen is pouring over books studying. This is Albert Einstein, writing the *Annus Mirabilis*. He will explain how space-time is a fabric woven through light and engage in other such metaphors. He will be fascinated but not surprised by his visitors (remember this is a historical

fantasy). Clerics and magic-users will have their spells effectively reduced by 4 levels in this environment.

### **Arachne's Chamber**

Returning to the demonweb, the PCs have the opportunity to build a loom and make a cloth key which can open the doors to Arachne's chamber. If you really insist it can be a spaceship like in the original module, but that is far from necessary by any stretch of the imagination.

Arachne will be protected in here by her haidmaidens (gaseous creatures which cause Stinking Cloud in a 30' radius, a gas of Slow within a 20' radius and Cloudkill within a 10' radius. Furthermore there will be all her supporters, namely hill, frost and fire giants, large numbers of Drow, various giant spiders and scorpions, and her two lovers – a maximum strength Type II and Type III demon. Finally of course there is Arachne herself – with all the capabilities of a minor lesser goddess, as well as having 16<sup>th</sup> level Cleric and 14<sup>th</sup> level Mage and fighting as a 16<sup>th</sup> level Fighter. She's pretty tough.



*Inside cover artwork by Erol Otus from the original Q1: The Queen of the Demonweb Pits. A pity this scene didn't appear in the original!*

At some stage, whether it is when Arachne is gloating in probable victory or pleading for mercy, it is incumbent that the villain reveal her plan. Arachne, feeling very slighted by Athena's curse, has spent the last twenty centuries slowly building her powers and magics until she understands the entire fabric of time and space itself. Being the greatest weaver of mortal history, and equal to the gods in this ability (she still insists), she has both the right to weave and to unweave. It is her intention to unravel the fabric of space and time, perhaps not destroying the universe in the process, but certainly making it an extremely confused place where her abilities will finally be recognised and her power will be greatened. It was through that reason that the PCs originally encountered giants causing trouble, as their aim was merely to disrupt competitive trade as Arachne's agents sought to establish a monopoly in fabrics.

If the PCs somehow are prevented in defeating Arachne and somehow manage to escape her clutches, her threat will come good. How a GM manages that story is beyond this scenario.

# CANNIBAL CONTAGION DESIGNER'S NOTES

by Nathanael Phillip Cole

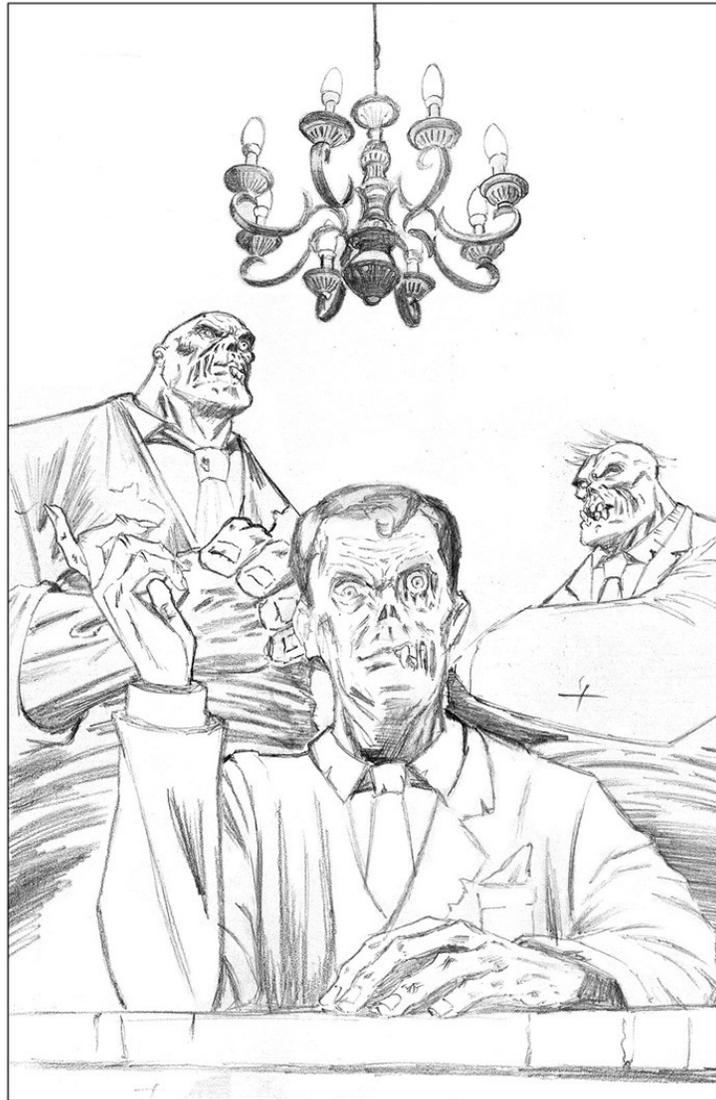
Cannibal Contagion actually started as an idea I had for a LARP event. Back in 2001, some buddies and I created a rather, ahem, "non-traditional" LARP called "Streetwise" and ran it at Dragoncon that year. It became something of an unexpected hit, running for four straight years. One year I thought it would be cool to have that year's game focus be "Ghetto Zombies" and arrange some zombie-attack crossover events with one of the World of DarknessLARPs we had befriended at the con. The name "Cannibal Contagion" popped into my head immediately, but sadly, that specific game never came to be (there were police involved and an "adult-themed" auction, but that's another story for another time). Four years and 3000 miles later, the name popped into my head again during a morning commute, and within hours became a new tabletop role-playing game idea that was taking a form of its own.

Anyway, all that build-up above is just to establish a weird design habit of mine, which is that I tend to develop the name first almost 90% of the time in all role-playing-related endeavors I enjoy. Be it characters, campaigns, settings, or brand new games or systems, I usually have a name pop into my head first, and the rest just flows downhill from there. Such was the case with my old crew's very first LARP, and again it happened with Cannibal Contagion. Names have a lot of importance for me, obviously. I feel the name of a game should establish exactly what the game is about, and I'm pretty sure I've done that with Cannibal Contagion.

When I started designing this game, I knew exactly what I wanted to make: a gruesomely comedic high-tension game which could effectively emulate the action of movies such as *Versus*, *Wild Zero*, and the 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead*. I was also playing through the video game *Dead Rising* at the time, and it obviously influenced a lot of my choices in mechanics and themes. But as I started writing the mechanics, I quickly realized the greater possibilities that lied in expanding the game's targeted genre. After all, how much difference is there really between the zombies of *Dawn of the Dead* and the xenomorphs in *Aliens*, the Reavers from *Serenity*, the Infected from *28 Days Later*, or the Cybermen from *Doctor Who*? I knew then that I wanted to create a game where all of those premises could be explored. Sure, Cannibal Contagion is a zombie game at its core, but there are plenty of options allowing players to easily adapt the situation to different threats.

From the get-go, one big question had been hanging front and center in my brain: what makes this game different from other zombie-centric games? That's easy. Cannibal Contagion is *all about* the zombie survival, right down to the core mechanics, which were designed to focus exactly upon the necessary needs of the genre. It's a high-octane, narrative-driven, psychobilly role-playing game in which the driving mechanics focus on fighting and surviving against an invasive and corrupting enemy. But even better, the game features an in-depth "Contagion" system which allows you to design custom infections from the ground up. Using this framework you can create shambling corpses, infected rage monsters, head-exploding alien parasites, maddening death spirits, and just about any kind of corrupting infection you can imagine.

At its core, Cannibal Contagion is a "Survival Comedy" role-playing game. It's possible to play sessions with a more serious focus, but I think the game works best when player characters are knee-deep in the bloody entrails of a mass of infected cannibals, hacking away for their lives. Narrative mechanics, colorfully-named terms, and a fast-paced card-based conflict resolution system add to the feel, and so far I'm extremely excited with the game's progress. If you want to check out the playtest rules, they're currently free for download on my website (<http://nathanaelcole.com/ag/cannibal/>) until the game's slated print publication of sometime this December. I love feedback, so if you like it, dislike it, or just have questions or comments, please drop me a line.



*Cannibal Contagion Art by Vero and Leo Freites*

# GHOSTS OF THE RED BOX: MYTHWEAVER 2<sup>nd</sup> EDITION DESIGNER'S NOTES AND MINI-SCENARIO

*By Michael Desing*

In working on a second edition of the fantasy RPG *Mythweaver: the Splintered Realm* over the last several months, I've gone back to the beginning, rethinking the game from the ground up. The goal throughout has been to transcend from 'fantasy heartbreaker' or 'indie game' into the realm of fully-developed system.

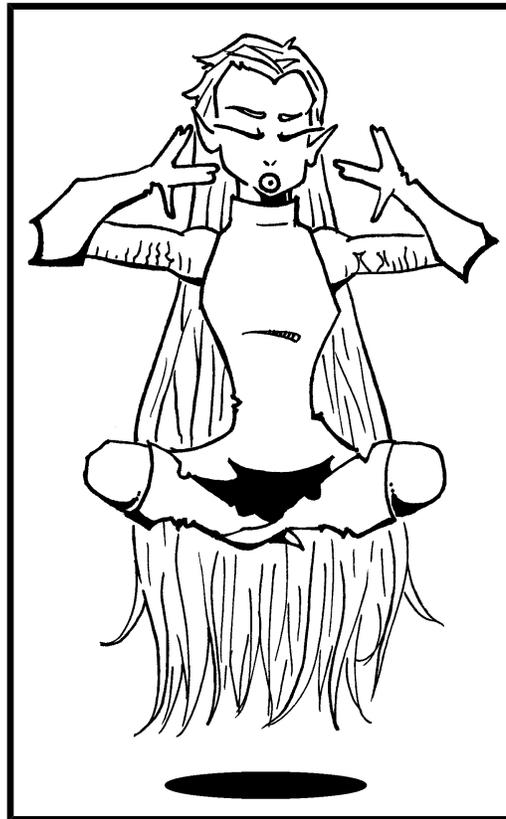
A decade ago, the game that would become *Mythweaver* was, like hundreds of other indie fantasy games, a deliberate answer to *Dungeons and Dragons*. It was my take on how to do things 'right' - to try and keep what *Dungeons and Dragons* (specifically the red box Basic Set from 1983) did, correcting what I felt could be better, stronger or more intuitive. I'm sure I'm not the only upstart designer to think he can make D&D 'better'.

With this new edition, I've tried to put my view on D&D into its proper perspective. My previous overriding design goal was to write a game that 'can do anything D&D can do.' I've since outgrown that need. In fact, this edition has ended up the least like D&D of any previous version. Throughout the design process, I've tried to keep D&D as far away from shaping decisions as possible. While it was important that I didn't put something into the game just because it's in D&D, it was also important that I didn't exclude something just because it's in D&D. Let me give you three examples of things that are different about *Mythweaver*:

1. For a long time, drafts of *Mythweaver* had an alignment system based on that of D&D's 9-alignments (which they surprisingly dropped from the most recent edition). When I came up with a trait system that measures good and evil, and which has direct implications in play, I knew I was onto a winning concept. I liked this solution better than how D&D solved the same design problem- making good and evil important forces in the game.
2. I struggled for a long time with resists and how to avoid attacks. I always liked D&D's armor class system that sets the target number to hit your foe. However, each time I worked up a method based on this concept, I ended up with a single killer stat that every character would need, and which could be exploited easily. If dexterity is used to defend against all physical attacks, then every character is going to have high dexterity. I toyed briefly with have two sets of traits: one active and a linked defensive trait. Finally, it occurred to me that I was creating more work this way. I ended up with two physical traits used for attacks and resists (dexterity for missile weapons, prowess for melee or thrown weapons) and four mental traits for magic (aspect, intuition, reason and willpower). This turned out to be a very balanced and intuitive solution. If you are a caster with high reason who uses arcane magic, you are going to be naturally resistant to the same magic. As an archer, you are going to be naturally better at defending against other archers.
3. The magic system also underwent a number of transformations before its current incarnation, and is the biggest change from the previous edition of the game. I always loved D&D's specific spells with unique names, effects and predetermined limitations. While play testing a superhero system I was writing, I was struck by how cool powers could be when you created a framework for resolving their use but allowed players to use them creatively. This seemed a hallmark of superhero comics: the hero finds some inventive way to use his powers to save the day. I wanted this to work in the magic system, but had to find a balance so that magic didn't become a completely unlimited way to manipulate any situation. The solution has been to give each spell line a baseline attack (a single direct-damage effect) and a baseline buff (a bonus given to a single ability or trait). In addition, each spell line gives spontaneous spells (from 1 to 5 each combat sequence, depending on the caster's training) that allow for unique or improvised effects. Each spell listing includes dozens of potential

uses for these spontaneous spells, but casters are free to develop new ideas on the fly. I love this system because it gives each caster a basic way to fight, a basic way to help the team, and the versatility to use magic to create wondrous and unique effects. Magic has moved further and further from D&D the whole time. The most recent change is scaling back spell damage as the speed has gone up. In D&D, you throw a fireball into a room and go in to pick through the carcasses and take their loot (at least, that's how we always did it...). In *Mythweaver*, you hit your foes with a barrage of spells. In fact, the whole combat system works that way: you wear down opponents over time with a variety of abilities rather than simply going for the kill with one big attack. This has made combat more interesting and versatile, making *Mythweaver* a better game.

While I'd love to say that I'm done designing *Mythweaver's* core system, I understand that RPGs are never done, and this is something that I'll probably be tinkering with forever. I'm very happy with where it is today. Maybe this will help me exorcise my ghosts of the red box at last...



*A mentalist from Mythweaver*

# ALL ABOUT THE TCHO TCHO: CALL OF CTHULHU

*by James Haughten*

## **A report from the ICE CAVE, Project DANCER**

Executive Summary, Subject 312

The subject is a female. On arrival at this facility she appeared to be a human aged ~25 years, of Eurasian appearance. According to accompanying documentation, she was captured during a random population medical sampling sweep searching for unauthorised and/or non-terrestrial deployment of COOKBOOK technologies in the wider populace (cf. *Groversville Incident Report Vol.3*). According to the report of the apprehending officer (*Appendix A*), subject has English language skills commensurate with a non-native resident of the United States but has refused to communicate since capture. During questioning the subject displayed a remarkable resistance to pain, sedatives, and pharmaceutical adjuncts to interrogation, leading the apprehending team to hypothesise extensive modification to the nervous system and sequester her for further study.

Initial medical investigation (*Appendix B*) revealed no signs of surgical or other invasive medical procedures having been carried out upon the subject, nor was “protomatter” contamination present (*Groversville, op.cit*). Indeed, the subject was described by the examining physician as “supernaturally” healthy, being without any apparent scars, blemishes, etc. X-ray examination revealed an absence of the normally expected microfractures, tissue damage, etc caused by everyday living. Further examination of X-rays revealed a number of subtle but startling inconsistencies with human anatomy – e.g. the spine appeared to slightly differ from the human norm, having better load-bearing efficiency at the point of interaction with the pelvis. To put it colloquially, the subject would never suffer from lower back pain.

At this point, investigators hypothesised that the subject was the result of a foreign or non-terrestrial “super-soldier” research and development program equivalent to Sub-Project CATALYST. However, several circumstances mitigated against the “foreign power” hypothesis:

4. The absence of any signs of surgical procedures (though Dr Creswell maintains that this may be a result of the accelerated healing presumably responsible for the absence of “wear and tear”) suggested that any alteration must have taken place at the genetic level. Such procedures are far more likely to succeed if performed in pre-fertilisation or embryonic stages of the life cycle.
5. The apparent age of the subject. To be 25 years old and have been modified in vitro suggests possession by the altering power of COOKBOOK level technologies before 1980. Although I am not privy to intelligence files on the biosciences of our rivals, this strikes me as unlikely. Dr Creswell suggests that the subject may be the product of cloned, artificially forced growth a la CATALYST. However, none of the “telltales” of cloning techniques could be found (*Appendix C*).
6. All known examples of non-terrestrial enhancement have made use of “protomatter” as a basic material/tool of alteration, but no trace of protomatter could be found.

Genetic samples were taken from the subject for analysis. These samples showed a variety of unusual characteristics (see *Appendix D-1* for full details).

- 1) What was initially assumed to be the “active” part of the genome was identical in most respects to the human genome. Several sections were similar in nature to the improved genomics pioneered by CATALYST and RECOIL, granting greater-than-human speed, healing ability and night vision. However, there were no traces of the retroviral implantation methods usually used by CATALYST or the broader scientific community. It appears that the subject was born with these capabilities as a natural attribute.

- 2) The introns or “junk DNA” of the subject showed an extremely large difference from the human norm, both in content and C-value (size). When the genetic coding data was compared with libraries, positive correlations were obtained with the genomes of a wide variety of terrestrial but non-human life forms. Dr Jenkins made the startling observation that all of these forms are found in two habitats: upland South-East Asia and Antarctica.
- 3) Other parts of the introns showed no resemblance to any catalogued terrestrial organism. When cultured and implanted in cells via somatic transfer, the resultant proteins showed extremely unusual self-altering characteristics, including the ability to create RNA with the capacity to alter the cell’s own DNA, in defiance of the “Central Dogma” of molecular biology. While retrotransposons, as these are technically called, are not unknown in biology, this is the first known example of a functioning retrotransposon being assembled from a (possibly) human genome. Attending technician Johnson made the observation that easily manipulable retrotransposons are one of the requirements of a (hypothetical) “biocomputer”.

As the reader will appreciate, the analysis of DNA with such unusual characteristics took a considerable amount of time. It was during this time that the incident occurred resulting in the subject’s posthumous transfer to deep storage at the YY-II facility. According to attending security (*Appendix E*), the subject refused to eat or drink and made repeated attempts to escape. Sedation was only effective at extremely high doses and only for a short time. Indeed as captivity continued the subject seemed to develop immunity to the sedative. Therefore, the subject was placed under constant physical restraint and guard. While thus confined during the extensive testing process, the subject began to show signs of dehydration and malnourishment (some time after such signs would have been expected in a normal human). I therefore authorised forced feeding of the subject as the subject’s repeated resistance made the administration of a drip feed impossible. The subject was tested for allergies (negative) and then a normal diet (pre-processed to allow for the lack of chewing involved in force feeding), approved by the attending physician, of chicken, vegetables and rice was given (see list of meals, *Appendix F*).

After approximately 72 hours, during which the subject had been forcefed six times without apparent ill effects, the subject lapsed into a coma. After approximately an hour, during which repeated attempts were made to rouse the subject, pronounced discoloration of the skin and signs of internal bleeding were observed. 20 minutes later the subject showed an extreme anaphylactic reaction causing a sudden heart-lung failure. Further attempts to revive the subject failed and she was declared dead after another 15 minutes.

The autopsy report (*Appendix G*) showed no signs of poisoning or toxicity in the food recovered from the subject’s digestive tract. However, previously unobserved pre-cancerous growths were found throughout the subject’s digestive and lymph system. The ultimate cause of death remained a puzzle until DNA samples that had been taken *after* death were analysed (*Appendix D-2*). These were found to be significantly different from those taken before death. Found in both the “active” and “junk” DNA were telltale signs of reverse transcriptase activity and the “genetic codes” of chicken, vegetables and rice. It appears that the subject’s genome attempted to “assimilate” its diet into its own genome but was unable to complete the process without giving rise to lethal mutagenic side-effects. Further analysis of the subject’s faeces and urine samples taken during captivity found traces of human proteins.

Some unpleasant implications suggest themselves. Logically speaking, if the subject (which appeared human) takes on the DNA of the things it eats, but is prevented by mutagenic disaster from assimilating things too different from itself, then its native diet must consist largely of humans (although there is the puzzle of the non-human DNA present in the introns – perhaps a relic from an earlier evolutionary phase when the “assimilation” was not so specialised?). Dr Jenkins has made some rather wild speculations about the subject having some form of predator-prey relationship with humanity and taking on human appearance merely as camouflage, referring to such folkloric concepts as “Vampires”, “Werewolves” and the like. However, the apprehending officer’s report (*Appendix A*) suggests that the subject not only spoke and understood English but possessed valid ID materials, suggesting that the subject was successfully living and acting as a human. Nor did tissue samples, tested at Dr Jenkin’s request, show any adverse reactions to garlic, wolfsbane, silver or sunlight. I have requested a BLUE FLY team be dispatched to capture any family members of the subject from her recorded address, but am informed that there is currently a considerable backlog of BLUE FLY cases demanding attention. Until more subjects are procured, we are working on reproducing some of the capacities of the

subject in vitro for subsequent use in CATALYST enhancements.

### **A Tcho Tcho Origin myth**

Found in a letter to the *L'Ecole Francais d'Extreme Orient*, Saigon. Dated April 17, 1921. Believed to be the last communication from the ethnographic student Reynald Blois prior to his disappearance in the Lao-Vietnamese highlands. It is thought he may have been captured and killed by Hmong rebels under Chao Batchay.

*...As you will no doubt perceive, the myth recorded herein incorporates many elements from other local groups, especially the Kha Khamu. However, the Tcho Tcho myth grants a much more extensive "charter", in Prof Malinowski's phrase, of dominion over other beings than does that of the Khamu. Perhaps, like the Meo, the Tcho Tcho were at one time gathered in a kingdom before being displaced and scattered by invaders, hence their mytho-historical claim to rulership reflects their previous social structure as Prof Durkheim would have it. The frequent references to the face may reflect a tradition of mask-wearing shamans as found among the Phu Tai, but my informants are as yet reluctant to discuss this. Certain elements are suggestive of the Judeo-Christian creation, but I have not found any record or memory of missionary activity in the area.*

In the beginning, the Star Father (Chauga Faukan) and the Earth Mother (Xup Nikhurad) came together. From their mating sprang a great vine, on which grew a gourd. It was so big it took up all the space between earth and sky. Star father took his burning spear to pierce the gourd and let the world out. Inside the gourd was the first Tcho Tcho. He was so eager to look upon his father's face that he was pressed against the skin of the gourd. When Star Father pierced the gourd with his burning spear, he struck Tcho Tcho and burned his face. Tcho Tcho climbed through the hole in the gourd, but could not see his father anymore, because there was no light and his eyes were burned. Star Father took pity on Tcho Tcho and said "I will give you all the faces of the world as your own". Star Father took up his spear again and pierced the gourd a second time. Out came all the people, animals, fish, birds and plants of the world. Then Star Father threw his burning spear into the sky and it became the sun. Tcho Tcho could see all the creatures and knew that he could wear their faces. Tcho Tcho took the face of his little brother, Man, who was most like him, and took Man's sister as his wife.

### **What's really going on**

The Tcho Tcho owe their peculiar characteristics to their origins. They are direct descendants of the stock of proto-humanity taken by the Elder Things from Africa and bred by them as servants, and as potential replacements for the rebellious shoggoths. The germ plasm of the pre-Tcho Tcho was altered in a manner similar to that of the shoggoths, both to increase their intelligence and to increase their biological flexibility and receptiveness to further modifications. It is this trait that accounts for the automutagenic effects of Tcho Tcho diets.

During the upheavals caused by the shoggoth revolts and the decline of the elder things' civilisation, some of the proto-Tcho Tcho escaped Antarctica through portals to the dreamlands (always a menace in antarctica due to the time/space/logic warping effects of Kadath and the God Trap). They passed through to the cognate location of the Plateau of Leng, where exposure to the hyperdimensional energies of the place and crossbreeding with the Mani Nigri caused their Elder Thing-altered genome to assume its diet-assimilating structure. Some then made their way to the other real-world cognate area of Tibet, where they mingled with the Tibeto-Burman language speaking groups and spread across South-East Asia. Though they rapidly became feared and reviled by the humans surrounding them, their ability to assimilate genetic structures from other groups means that within a generation, any group of Tcho-Tcho will have many members who look identical to, and have probably infiltrated, the surrounding groups, making them very difficult to exterminate. As well as appearance, Tcho Tcho assimilate the genetic "strong points" of their victims - thus Tcho Tcho are immune to a wide variety of diseases and poisons, and may well be stronger, faster, and more attractive

than average.

Some Tcho Tcho are able to employ mythos energies to go beyond genetic assimilation and assimilate knowledge from the structure of their victims' brains. Powerful Tcho Tcho may also be able to assimilate genetic characteristics from wildly different (insects, plants) or even non-terrestrial (eg Mi Go) biologies. Tcho Tcho without command of the powers of the Mythos are more likely to face an agonising, cancerous death if they attempt such a feat as their body tries to incorporate radically different DNA. However, once a Tcho Tcho sorcerer has successfully incorporated such characteristics he may pass them to his descendants - thus there are several reports of Tcho Tcho with insectile (Tcho Tcho Queens) or reptile based biological and social systems.

A common punishment for criminal or deviant behaviour among Tcho Tcho groups is to force the miscreant to live on the meat of some useful lower animal (eg a dog). The resultant pathetic half-human, half-dog can then be used as a guard, warrior, or back-up lunch.

It would be possible for a Tcho Tcho to safely live on a diet not containing human meat, but only if it contained very little DNA in an intact state - in other words, boiled to a soggy paste to thoroughly denature the proteins. Since Tcho Tcho rarely have degrees in molecular biology or the opportunity to leave their cannibalistic societies, this solution is unlikely to be arrived at by many. Tcho Tcho living "in the wild" prefer a diet of human, then other primates, then mammalian predators with characteristics admired by the Tcho Tcho (e.g. tigers) then vegetables which experience has shown are unlikely to be inadvertently assimilated. Herbivore and non-mammalian meat is only eaten by the lowest members of the tribe.

Tribes which have assimilated non-mammalian characteristics, eg hive-queen Tcho Tcho, will eat large quantities of the relevant animal (eg ants, bees, wasps) to reinforce their genetic matrix. Tcho Tcho sorcerers fearing death by old age have been known to take up vegetarian diets and self-mutate into tree-like beings, spending the rest of their virtually immortal lives anchored to the earth in a dream-like state. They may be contacted through spiritual or dreamlands procedures, or woken by means of magic, if their tribe needs advice or faces a crisis.

## **Epilogue**

*Reynald waited curiously in the clearing. The young anthropologist noted with pride that he already sweated less than he had when he had arrived in Indochine. The tribe he had come to study had been most accommodating, and his doctoral research would undoubtedly be crowned by this, admission to a shamanic initiation ceremony. He hoped that the mysterious elder would not demand tattoos, circumcision or other such grisly procedures be carried out on him, though – there were limits to what one would endure in the name of science!*

*A sudden movement caught his eye, but it was just the crown of the clearing's chief tree swaying in a seemingly nonexistent breeze. The tree stood alone, and Reynald could see why primitives might consider it the domain of spirit beings – although tall, it bore a startling resemblance to a withered man, toes becoming roots curled deep into the earth – those knots there could be eyes and a mouth – even a phallic stump with a garland over it, thrust out! and the trunk forked off into lined boughs upholding its green canopy, just in the position where arms would be found...*

*Shaking off his reverie – the heat had almost had him thinking the tree was looking at him! – the scholar turned on his heel to survey the only track into the clearing. Where was the elder? The tribesmen had assured him he would not have long to wait.*

*Reynald managed one scream before the thick, fleshy green leaf sealed itself over his mouth and nose. Choking in panic, he thrashed helplessly as the branch which had swooped upon him dragged him relentlessly to the main trunk. The earth seethed and bubbled as pale root-tips emerged – there was a stab of pain, like stepping on a caltrop, from*

*each foot as the roots pierced his shoes and then started growing up around his legs, **under his skin mon Dieu!**, then more ripping stabbing tearing pain as the phallus was forcing in violating him and then the root threads pulsed under his skin grew over his chest and the world was an explosion of red as they plunged into his eyes*

*Down the trail, his guide grinned as he heard the muffled screams. The old man got hungry every few years – and the knowledge he ate would help them avoid any more intrusions by the French.*

### **OBDG Plot Hooks and Shotgun Shells**

The first two documents might be found by anyone investigating the Tcho Tcho from a scientific perspective (Doc 1) or an occult perspective (Doc 2).

Agents primed to shoot pudding-bowl haircut short Asians on sight will be completely blindsided by whitebread 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Tcho Tcho, who have eaten enough of The Other White Meat to be physically indistinguishable from their Anglo-Saxon food. Not to mention beware the dog. Oh yeah, beware that dog.

Sigma Delta Tcho: Rumours that a Frat house is involved in the disappearance of students lead a team to a university fraternity run by white Tcho Tcho, busily chewing their way through the student population. If captured rather than killed outright, unless fed humans or thoroughly boiled food they dissolve into cancerous goop.

CSI Tcho Tcho: A police investigation into a serial rapist isn't getting anywhere. The MO is the same but the assailant's description seems to subtly change each time, as does the sperm sample, making a mockery of forensic science. And every time they have a potential suspect, he seems to have disappeared before the crime was committed, or turns up dead and dismembered after it. It's a Tcho Tcho who is eating fresh male victims between rapes (he hopes to spread the Tcho Tcho genes) so his genetic signature and appearance keep changing to partially match his previous meal(s). As the suspects (the previous meals) keep disappearing or being found dead, people start to believe that a vigilante is bringing rapists who the police can't catch to justice and he becomes a folk hero (insert Batman theme here).

Piggy in the Middle: A Tcho-Tcho child is seized and placed in care by the state. After a few months he mutates into a half-pig (pork sausages for dinner every night), attacks the carers with his new tusks and escapes.

Blood Will Out: Due to a genocidal clash in Cambodia, a Tcho Tcho infant is abandoned and found by an NGO, who pass her on to an adoption agency. She is adopted by an American couple who are strict vegetarians, and their cooking techniques mean that her mutational capabilities are never triggered. When she hits puberty her pheromones are detected by some other Tcho Tcho who kidnap her. Can the investigators rescue her before her innate hunger for human is awakened (probably not)?

Rules of Engagement: Delta Green investigates rumours that MJ 12 is subjecting everyone of mixed-Asian appearance in a district to medical testing (a follow on from Doc 1).

Meat from the Deep Freeze: Agents investigating Point 103 ("An Item of Mutual Interest") discover that a Tcho-Tcho sorcerer investigating the past of his race has beaten them to it.

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# DEMIURGY AND THE TEMPLE OF HELIOS

## SCENARIO FOR RUNEQUEST

*by James Haughten*

### **Demiurgy: Remaking the world.**

*“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic” – Arthur C. Clarke*

A new way of looking at the world has arisen. Led by Daedalus, the Demiurges or Prometheans believe that the world is made up of substances and forces that are natural, not determined by the will of Gods or spirits; and in fact Gods and spirits are merely natural concentrations of these forces (like runes), that have acquired intelligence, just as man is an animal that has acquired intelligence. Their belief strips away the enchantment of the world, and thus they are referred to as the Disenchanted.

Demiurgy is treated as a skill which complements Engineering and other Craft skills (Alchemy, Metallurgy, etc) and is added to those skills in relevant rolls. Demiurgy starts at 0 and can only initially be learned willingly from a teacher, after which it can be advanced as normal. Once a character has even 1% in Demiurgy, they can never call for Divine Intervention again. In addition, only the Cults of Hephaestus, Athene and Prometheus (or other Gods of smiths, cunning, technology, etc as appropriate for your campaign) will consider teaching a Demiurge Divine Magic (Rune Magic in the MRQ sense is fine, as it merely manipulates the naturally occurring concentrations of power found in runes; Spirit magic, in the Chaosium RQ sense, may be taught or not at the whim of the shaman or priest, but spirits tend to dislike Demiurges).

However, Demiurges have great belief in their own ability to shape fate, as opposed to fate being in the hands of the Gods. From this heretical self-confidence, they gain the ability to exert great force of will. Demiurges can spend Magic Points at will on any task. Each MP spent grants +10% to the relevant skill, for one roll only. MPs are recovered according to the usual rules.

Demiurges seek to control the forces of nature that others worship out of ignorance and fear (as they see it). A Demiurge who observes a supernatural phenomenon (i.e. a spell) can make a Demiurgy roll to intuit the natural principle at work. If this roll is successful, the Demiurge can then seek to build a Device or Wonder that mimics that spell in technological form. No cult restrictions, etc, apply.

Experimenting to build the Device is hazardous. Building a Device will cause the Demiurge to lose a number of STR, DEX or CON points equal to the cost in POW or MPs of the spell being mimicked, or acquire some other physical defect, e.g. blindness (This loss should occur as part of the story of the device creation: for example, the character Dactylos Goldeneyes Silverhand from Pratchett's *The Colour of Magic* was mutilated by his patrons to prevent him duplicating his work for any other). Alternatively, the Demiurge will cause the loss of life of an apprentice, friend or family member (for example, Daedalus' loss of Icarus or murder of Polycaste).

*The Lament for Icarus Herbert Draper, 1898*



This loss of body or life is, whether the Demiurge realises it or not, the price demanded by the God whose secrets the Demiurge steals. This reduction also applies to the maximum possible score of the attribute (e.g. once two points are lost from STR, it can only ever go up to 19). This can only be overcome by crafting another Device to make up the lack (for example, a silver hand). However, if the Demiurge has integrated the rune that would normally grant the spell in question, the cost of building a Device is halved (minimum 1). The GM is also free to reduce the cost if the player invents a particularly ingenious Rube Goldberg or da Vinci-like mechanism!

The Device may be less flexible than the original spell - it might be immobile, for example, as was Archimedes' use of an array of mirrors and lenses to mimic Sun Spear - but it carries with it two advantages. One is that the Demiurge can use it at no cost to evoke the effect as often as they desire (subject to material conditions). The second is that

it acts as a counter-magical talisman against the spell it was built to mimic (since the Demiurge has "proved" the non-magical nature of these forces with their Device). Attempts to use the relevant spell against, or even in the presence of, a Demiurge in the possession of a matching Device must overcome the Demiurge's Demiurgy skill with their spellcasting (runecasting, theology, sorcery, etc) skill on the resistance table, otherwise the spell fails. This effect applies as long as the Demiurge has magic points, even if they are asleep (but not comatose), and applies to both allies and enemies.

Graded Spells (e.g. Bladesharp I, II, III, IV): If the spell mimicked by the device is equal to or greater than the spell cast by the antagonist, failing the resistance roll causes the spell to fail. If the spell is greater than the device and fails the roll, it is reduced in magnitude by a corresponding amount.

Non-Demiurges who attempt to use the Device still have to pay an MP or POW cost, representing the mental strain of comprehending and operating the fiendishly elaborate mechanism that trespasses on the domain of Gods and spirits. Other Demiurges, on the other hand, can use the device without cost at all, which may explain why these world-shapers jealously guard their secrets from each other.

Worked example: Polycaste the Demiurge is attacked by barbarians, who cast Bladesharp II on their swords. Successfully rolling against his Demiurgy of 45%, he notices that their weaponry seem superior. Surviving the fight, he sets out to duplicate the feat using his Metallurgy + Demiurgy to create a sharper, more balanced sword. While testing his new sword, he inadvertently slices off two fingers (losing 2 DEX); such is the price of science.

Polycaste has created a new alloy and a sword balanced to the characteristics of the new alloy. The sword is treated as if it has Bladesharp II cast permanently upon it. In addition, if Polycaste were to enter a fight with his new sword, his opponents would have to overcome Polycaste's Demiurgy skill with their Runecasting skill before they could use Bladesharp I or II on their own weapons. Bladesharp III or IV would be reduced to Bladesharp I or II by a failed roll. Hokey religions and ancient weapons are no match for a good steel alloy blade at your side!

## **The Temple of Helios Scenario**

Three days from the sacred Cult festival of high summer, the priests of the Solar God in Helios' city of Memphis have offered a large reward for adventurers prepared to swear an oath of secrecy (or commanded any rune lords, priests or acolytes owing service) to undertake a mysterious mission. Report to the Son of the Sun, High Priest, for further details.

### **Background**

Archimedes the Wise, Demiurge, has been patronised for many years by the Temple of Helios. He created a Wondrous Mechanism for them: a large lens set upon the temple tower at such a point, that on the highest day of summer (one of the cult's holiest days) a lance of sunlight kindles a fire from fuel placed upon the altar, which then (through an elaborate system of pneumatic pipes) causes the temple doors to open spontaneously to admit the faithful. Awestruck stories of this event, first occurring at the previous high summer festival, have been promoted by the priests of Helios as a sign of their Cult's and God's power. Unfortunately, experimenting with lenses in powerful sunlight has also cost Archimedes all sight in one eye and much of the other, and so he is unable to accompany the adventurers.

Last night, the temple was broken into, a guard slain and the lens stolen. It is imperative that the lens be retrieved from the thieves before the festival and that its existence be kept secret, lest the Sun God's power be exposed to mockery or ridiculed as artifice (The cult will, if pressed, pay a ¼ reward for the lens' return after the festival). If the adventurers will swear appropriate oaths of secrecy and faithfulness, the cult may also grant ¼ of the reward or equivalent in advance as spell-teaching, healing, equipment, etc for the group.

The cult will not explain the lens' technological purpose unless pressed (e.g. an impale on a debate or fast talk roll, or similar) as they do not wish their use of Archimedes' talents to become widely known – they will simply say that it is a holy artefact and vital to the success of the festival.

### **Investigating**

Tracks in the temple grounds reveal a small group (2 or 3) of Trolls (or other Darkness race) and a human wearing different footwear to that worn by the priests and guards. A good success on a tracking roll reveals that the human limped. An impale or critical reveals that the human seems to have had some kind of metal brace or harness on his feet.

The local Troll community know nothing about the theft, and will not cooperate with a mission sponsored by the Sun temple in any case.

If the Sun of the Son is told about the limping tracks, he will refer the investigators to Archimedes (or the investigators may go to him independently if they go seeking an expert on lenses).

Archimedes house contains many wonders (e.g. statues that talk and move, complex model projectile weapons, etc) that should be used to overawe the adventurers. He will reveal (as a certainty if the investigators tell him about the brace, as likelihood if they tell him about the limp, as a suspicion otherwise) that he suspects Heraclitus, a former apprentice of his who fell out with him after injuring himself in Archimedes' workshop. (If pressed, he will specify that Heraclitus' legs were crushed by a new design of battering ram which Archimedes was creating for the king/local lord. There are no public rumours of war in the offing, yet the ram, from Archimedes' description, is designed to attack a well-defended fort or city). Archimedes claims that Heraclitus stole designs from him, which he offers to reward the adventurers for returning, although he is vague about the details of these designs. He will also warn that Heraclitus is embittered and ingenious, and give directions to the former apprentice's house.

Heraclitus' house is boarded up. Housebreakers will be met with an assortment of lethal mechanical traps (for example, poisoned crossbows triggered by tripwires) and discover a house emptied of all but low-value furniture. Some mud

tracked in indicates the recent presence of a troll. Heraclitus took great care to remove any physical traces (e.g. notes) of his destination, but took less care with his words to others. His neighbours and the beggars and vendors of the street disliked him and were disliked in turn, and can reveal (from various hints he dropped) that he believed war was coming and would not be sorry to see the city fall to Sarquomand, a rival city-state some two weeks journey away by foot (the two city governments currently dislike each other, but there is still regular trade between them). They can also reveal that he paid his rent and left for good on the day of the robbery, accompanied by a two beasts of burden and two trolls. If asked about Heraclitus' crippled status, they will say that he wore some form of metal harness around his legs that let him get around almost as well as a whole man.

Astute adventurers will be aware that horses and other riding animals dislike trolls, and therefore Heraclitus' party is probably on foot. If the adventurers take mounts they can be caught up with, and the lens returned before the 3 day deadline.

The road to Sarquomand is well trafficked, and therefore adventurers will have to get quite close to Heraclitus' party to assure themselves that it is him and the trolls and not a group of merchants, pilgrims, other adventurers, etc. They are about 1 ½ foot days travel out from the city, therefore about 4 hours hard riding (the horses will need resting before returning) or 6 hours at a standard pace.

Unless the adventurers attack without warning, Heraclitus, though an ill-willed and hot-tempered young man, will attempt to bargain rather than fight (unless the adventurers are obviously rune-level worshippers of Helios, in which case he and the trolls will attack as soon as they are confronted). He will tell them that the King of Memphis plots war on Sarquomand, using Archimedes' devices to guarantee victory. Sarquomand is unaware of this and will reward richly any who bring news of the impending attack. In addition, the demoralisation of the populace resulting from the failure of the festival of High Summer will ensure Sarquomand's victory if they strike first. He will also accuse Archimedes of having crippled him through his carelessness and then discarding him on the street (basically true, although Archimedes did offer him a small pension). He angrily denies any theft and claims that Archimedes is trying get the adventurers to steal his own designs.

If it comes to a fight, Heraclitus has several inventions of his own to deploy. He possesses a repeater crossbow that mimics Multimissile, and a sticky, flammable oil that can be poured on a melee weapon to mimic Fireblade (so attackers using these spells will have to beat Heraclitus' Demiurgy of 55% in order to succeed). His walking harness, in addition, contains powerful wound springs that Heraclitus can use once, to briefly increase his speed and bound like a jackrabbit for several minutes, which he will use to escape from melee range if the fight is going badly before opening up with the crossbow from a distance. (MRQ: Heraclitus has integrated the Fire and Movement runes, which are set in his walking harness).

The trolls are mercenaries. As well as being paid by Heraclitus, they are not sorry to do an ill turn to the solar temple and expect to be paid well by Sarquomand, so are not susceptible to bribery. They have a standard assortment of weapons, spells, etc (MRQ: One has a Darkness and the other a Metal rune integrated, which they wear around their necks).

A GM may also wish to tailor the PCs opponents so that they have access to technological devices that counter the favourite spells of the PCs, emphasising the theme of technology trumping magic.

In addition to the reward for returning the lens, Archimedes will pay well for the crossbow, oil and harness, which he will claim were his inventions. Alternatively, Sarquomand will indeed pay well for news of the impending attack and the disarray of Memphis following the solar festival's flop, though Heraclitus and his trolls will claim the lion's share of the reward.

*James would like to thank basicroleplaying.com's forum for inspiration for this article, especially the Warlords of Alexander supplement.*

# INTERVIEW WITH STEVE PERRIN

It is easy to under-estimate the contribution of Steve Perrin to roleplaying games; most know that he is one of the original authors of *RuneQuest* and perhaps a smaller number are aware of his related publications such as *Worlds of Wonder*, *Stormbringer*, *ElfQuest* and *Superworld* along with co-authorship of a number of supplements from Chaosium, such as *Big Rubble*, *Pavis*, *Borderlands*, *Cults of Prax*, *Gods of Glorantha*, and *Thieves World*. *Superworld* has been cited as the game that inspired the famous *Wild Cards* series, edited by George R.R. Martin, and Perrin was the creator of three of the characters in that series. Others may recognise his name from contributions to *Dungeons & Dragons*, such as a number of Forgotten Realms supplements (*The Magister*, *Dreams of the Red Wizards*, *Hall of Heroes*, *Under Illefarn*), the off-beat *Castle Greyhawk*, the *Elves of Alheim* Gazetteer for the Known World, and Planescape's *Fires of Dis*. Then there's the supplements for other games, like the Hero System (*Robot Warriors*, *Enemies II*), *Shadowrun (California Free State)*, and finally the popular "Perrin Conventions" for original *Dungeons & Dragons* from mid-1970s.

To emphasise the point – this is not by any means a comprehensive list.

**Q: There are still a large number of people playing early editions of RuneQuest and the new edition of Basic Role Playing and the Mongoose edition of RuneQuest is heavily derived from your work. What do you think are the key elements that have contributed to this long-running success of what is, effectively, the RuneQuest system c1978?**

*Steve Perrin: I think one of the big attractions of the system is that everything you need to know about the character you are playing is on the character sheet. There is no need to refer to off-sheet tables, or compare the stat you have against that of another before knowing what number you need to roll. You roll your percentile or less, and thus succeed or don't.*

*Another attraction for many is the use of D100 to resolve actions. People understand that they are 75% capable of hitting someone with a sword. Having a rank or target number is an extra level of abstraction that many people are uncomfortable with.*

*And I think one of the final attractions is that there is a level of realism in play that a lot of games get away from. No matter how good you get, it takes the same amount of damage to put you down. The goblin with the bow is just as much a danger to a 100% and higher PC as he is to a 30 percenter. Similarly, getting hit in a different hit location has different effects.*

**Q: Something that many tabletop gamers are unaware of is your work in the computer game industry; design, playtesting and manual writing for a variety of games including SimCity 2000 and Star Trek: Starfleet Academy. Could you talk about your experiences in that field? How does this experience compare with the tabletop RPG industry?**

*Steve Perrin: Like working for any large company, working on computer games takes away a lot of the personal creative satisfaction. You have to take satisfaction from a clever interaction or trap or situation, because the game as a whole is entirely out of your hands. As it was, I always seemed to get assigned to games I was not that interested in, though actually putting words into the mouths of people like William Shatner and George Takei was fun. BTW, I wrote for SimFarm, doing farming background material for the manual. I just playtested SimCity 2000.*

*On the other hand, I could make a living wage (barely in Orange County, California) in the computer game biz. That*

*was always a chancy situation in the paper game business.*

**Q: There's been a lot of activity in the development of the Steve Perrin Quest Rules (SPQR) including a development mailing list, after a period of some quiet - indeed, when announcing this to the runequest mailing list on RPG Review you claimed that it was "a sign of the apocalypse". Could you give a description of what the main developments in SPQR that make it different from a RuneQuest-like system? Is there a planned publication date for the complete product?**

*Steve Perrin: The main similarity to RuneQuest is that SPQR uses a percentile system and everything you need to play is on the character sheet. Similarity to previous answer is entirely intentional. I have discarded Strike Ranks and the Resistance Table. One just cluttered up combat and the other really wasn't a percentile system, and the game does not need two separate systems for resolving situations. The combat damage system still starts with limited Hit Points (or Health, or perhaps another term like Body) but Hit Locations are a bit more robust. Everything, including POW vs POW conflict, is resolved with percentile vs percentile rolls.*

*To keep combats and such from going on forever, I have added a system of number of successes which is still under development. What you roll tells you whether you succeeded at all, and how well by number of successes. Highest number of successes wins the conflict.*

*Right now, publication is strictly by subscription and in bits and pieces from my website, [www.perrinworlds.com](http://www.perrinworlds.com). I had one publisher interested, but they wanted to take over the project, and this one is mine. When I have the rules formalized, I'll move on to various gameworlds to play them in that I have been playtesting.*

**Q: Many years ago in Different Worlds (Issue #3, 1979) you said "My Life Is Roleplaying", explaining how you took delight in assuming other personalities from childhood, to games (stating that even chess is a roleplaying game of sorts) and through membership to the Society of Creative Anachronisms. Do you still hold to this perspective? Is rules writing and world building still the creative outlet that you wrote about almost thirty years ago?**

*Steve Perrin: I wouldn't be doing it if it wasn't. I've actually learned a lot about role playing since I wrote that article, and I love applying what I know to what I do. Right now I've been running games in three different worlds that I've created (two superhero game campaigns using M&M and a series of SPQR playtests), and I have another one in mind for an upcoming campaign.*

***A Recent Photo Contributed by Steve Perrin***



# HOW RUNEQUEST WAS DESIGNED

*by Steve Perrin*

Some friends of mine like to refer to RQ as a very well "researched" game. When I started working on the game, Ray Turney was working with his brother Art and a gentleman named Henrik Pfeiffer on the game. It was still very D&D-oriented. Combat was rolled with D20s, Skills rolled with D100s. Characters were either fighters, mages, or thieves. Since it was supposed to be "the Glorantha Game," it was assumed that fighters would become Heroes (like the characters in the White Bear & Red Moon board game set in Dragon Pass in Glorantha), mages would become Priests, and thieves would become - become - er, Merchants?

One step forward (it took D&D until D&D 3.0 to catch up) was the idea that characters of one class could purchase the abilities of another class - at a premium price. Also, money gained was at least one of the measures of Experience, and a character had to spend both money and experience points to advance. Just who he spent them with was still fairly nebulous.

Fortunately, my friend Jerry Jacks (RIP) and I had been working on a new class for *Alarums & Excursions* - the still ongoing RPG APA. It was a Sage class and the innovation was that one did not get experience as a Sage, one earned money and spent it for training. Taking that concept and turning it into no Experience Points, just Training, was a fairly quick jump. And as long as we were buying training, just why did anyone have to be in a class? You want the skill, you pay for it. Somewhere around here, the idea of making everything D100 took hold. Also around here Art and Henrick decided that I had taken over the project, and bowed out.

Strike Ranks were a concept I had kit-bashed for D&D play. I shoehorned them into the game which I had tentatively named *RuneQuest*, based on an article in *Wyrm's Footnotes* in which Greg Stafford had explained the significance of the runes on the pieces in WB&RM.

Lacking a couple of co-authors, I recruited fellow SCAers Steve Henderson (Sir Steven MacEanruig) and Warren James (Warren the Strange). Steve had introduced me to wargaming in college. We had been roommates in college and best friends for most of our lives. We kept that status until Steve died in 2006. Warren dropped out of sight several years ago and was last heard from in Texas. It's a long story.

Meanwhile, Ray T. had always been in charge of the magic and most of the spells in the early editions were his creation. The Rune Magic was his concept, but mostly created by all the authors. Initially a character received a very restricted amount of mana for spells, based on the POW. Seeing how little mana was available for any kind of extended game, we expanded the mana to match the POW. And then we started trying to figure out ways to beef up the amount of POW/mana available.

Somewhere around here I met Sven Lugar at an SCA event (where a lot of my playtesters came from) and he suggested the Resistance Table and may have suggested the term Rune Lord. Of course, neither is part of my version of the game any more, but Sven has been a very valuable tester and critic ever since.

Also somewhere in here I researched something from Dennis Sustare's *Bunnies & Burrows* game. I cannot think now what it was - I believe it had to do with skills, but thanks, Dennis. I also got some concepts, particularly the idea of armor as absorbing damage, from Ken St. Andre's *Tunnels and Trolls*. As I said before, very well researched. I think the idea of set hit points may have been one of the original concepts from the Turney brothers and Henrik. Hit Locations were mine, if I recall correctly. They appeared very early in the process.

This all started on the July 4th Weekend, 1976. By 1978 we were selling the first edition at Origins. How that edition got put together is another long story.

# RETROSPECTIVE: DRAGONQUEST REVIEW

by *Lev Lafayette*

*DragonQuest* is a game with a long history. It was originally released by SPI in 1980 and later revised in a 2nd edition for 1981 which also saw a Bantam edition the following year. After TSR bought SPI, they released a 3rd edition in 1989. The trademark initially prevented the Dragon Quest video game series from being published in North America with that title. However it was apparently abandoned by Wizards of the Coast and in 2003, Square Enix finally registered the *Dragon Quest* trademark in the US. The game has nothing to do with the computer game or Anne McCaffrey's novels of the same name.

As a game there are still a good number of loyal supporters of the game. There is a group in New Zealand who have been running perhaps the longest recorded RPG campaign known (and are interviewed in this edition of RPG Review) and there are two active mailing lists on Yahoo! groups. In addition to this there are a number of fan sites of which the most-well known is "Snafaru" (<http://www.igs.net/~eric/dq/>). Some of these include significant expansions to the rules, such as the unpublished fourth book, *Arcane Wisdom*, and the inclusion of more detailed general skills such as *Poor Brendan's Almanac*.

The biggest changes between first and second edition were modifications to the combat system. The first edition combat system is also available as the SPI game *Arena of Death* which was also published in *Ares* in issue #4. The biggest change between the second and third was the removal of the College of Black Magics and College of Greater Summonings, as TSR were on a public relations campaign at the time to distance association between RPGs and the occult. At the same time in the third edition the College of Summonings, Rune Magics and Herbal Lore was added (mostly from the aforementioned *Book of Arcane Wisdom*).

The first two editions featured a scantily clad barbarian with a dragon's head and the third a dragon versus warrior confrontation. Neither the cover art nor the interior art was ever anything particularly special but nor was it bad either. Layout is in three column style (two for the monsters chapter) and with serif font. The rules were divided into three books (Character Generation and Combat; Magic; Skills, Monsters and Adventure), and organised in the standard SPI-wargame style, which is very formal with specific rules following general descriptions. All editions come without a page-numbered table of contents or an index, although they did manage to squeeze in all the rules in 156 pages.

Primary characteristics are Physical Strength (PS), Manual Dexterity (MD), Agility (AG), Endurance (EN), Magical Aptitude (MA), Willower (WP) and, optionally, Physical Beauty (PB) which are determined from a randomly determined pool and with human ratings from 5-25. The size of the original pool determines the maximum amount that can be allocated to a single attribute. In addition there are derived characteristics including Fatigue (from Endurance) and, Action Points (AP 1st ed) and TMR (Tactical Movement Rate 2nd ed onwards). Note the lack of a general "Intelligence" characteristic; players provide their own intelligence of their characters and the GM provides the intelligence of all NPCs. Further, there is also a Perception (PC) characteristic, starting at 5 or 8 for humans, depending on the edition. Characteristic tests are based on a multiple of a characteristic.

Character 'races' include: human, dwarf, elf, halfling, giant, shape changer (lycanthrope) and orc. If a non-human is chosen, the players have a variable percentage chance of playing that character, modifications to characteristics, plus they will have a experience point multiplier. As all other creatures are provided ability ranges it would be a modest task to include additional player-character species. An optional rule is the inclusion of astrological-like "aspects", influences that the time and circumstances of birth have on the characters abilities at equivalent times during the campaign. Characters also determine their social class which effects both their starting wealth and experience.



*Three editions of DragonQuest (first edition, left hand side, second edition top right, third edition bottom right)*

The combat system, which follows character generation, is fought in pulses (5 seconds, 2nd and 3rd ed, 10 seconds 1st ed) with initiative varying for engaged and non-engaged figures. The system assumes the use of hex maps, with a variety of maneuvers. Attacks are resolved on d100 with modifiers due to the weapon's base chance, the character's skill, minus defense and the usual modifiers. Missing means the target may have performed a Parry and Riposte.

Damage is resolved on a d10+weapon bonus and PS, and differentiated between Fatigue damage (the norm, absorbed by armour), Endurance damage (a critical, not absorbed) and Grievous Injury (a special critical, varies by weapon type, no rules on scaling). Characters can fight on until their END is 3 or less at which point they fall unconscious and a 0 or less they're dead. There are also some particularly nasty infection rules, especially if the wounds are from teeth and claws. Shields provide minimal bonuses to defense (large shield, unranked, 4% bonus) and armour isn't that great either (chainmail 6 points protection, broadsword d10+4 damage). Different weapons have different maximum ranks; a main gauche can be learned all the way up to rank 10, whereas a war club is limited to rank 5.

The magic system is based around "mana" as a "magical energy" which can be depleted through use and recovered by opening gates to other planes. Magic is learned in colleges, with exclusive knowledge - one cannot know spells from the College of Fire Magics and Earth Magics at the same time which is a little restrictive, given that there are some 12-13 colleges of magic, depending on edition, conceptually separated into colleges of "thaumaturgies", "elementals" and "entities". Particularly interesting colleges are the Naming Incantations, Black Magics (curses and the like) and Greater Summonings, which famously included individual and evocative descriptions of the demons from the *Ars Goetica*. Like weapons, each spell is a skill its own right and spell chances and effects usually vary by rank knowledge. Spellcasting costs FAT and the chance of backfire is quite high with serious effects.

Whilst weapons and spells are individually learned other abilities are learned as "skills", the DragonQuest name for

character classes. These include Alchemist, Assassin, Astrologer, Beast Master, Courtesan/Courtier (the seduction ability was removed from 3rd ed), Healer, Mechanician, Merchant, Military Scientist, Ranger, Spy and Thief, and Troubadour. This is not meant as a comprehensive list, representing only those likely to be taken up by adventurers. Each of these skills has a list of abilities whose success is usually dependent on the rank in the skill. Skills have variable experience point costs and are limited to rank 10. In addition to these "class-skills" there is also Stealth, Horsemanship and Language skills. Some of the abilities have some neat meta-game influences, for example, the Military Scientist can stop play in a combat situation to make an evaluation, whereas an astrologer's abilities to predict the future has some nice narrative considerations.

The Monsters book describes each creature separated by phenotype (common land mammals, avians, aquatics etc). The detail is short but impressive; full characteristics are provided along with weapon abilities, habitat, descriptions, skills and talents and additional comments. Some of the values are a little askew; a bear, for example, seems particularly weak. There's also a couple of funny errors that have made it through all the editions of the game; one suggesting that a rat (singular) is stronger than a housecat, and another suggesting that a weasel's bite does as much damage a broadsword!

This is also the chapter where the title creature of the game makes an appearance, although there isn't much of a quest reason as such. Dragons are certainly the most dangerous creature in the book and, according to described as greedy, intelligent, with excellent magical powers. They also have a transfixing gaze, corrosive blood, and a very dangerous breath weapon, embedded gems in their underbelly for armour, top scales which protect twice as well as the best plate, claws like broadswords and a bite like a giant axe; they're pretty tough to say the least.

The final chapter, *Adventure*, provides some pretty basic GM advice, party organisation notes (including a standard "Adventurer's Guild" contract for division of spoils), notes on fatigue loss and recovery, lifestyle expenses and experience points; increases in skills requires both time and the expenditure of ep. Characters also gain ep whilst not engaging in gameplay. In the second and third editions the game also came with the sample adventure "The Camp of Alla Akabar", where the PCs are hired, by different parties, as entertainers for a bedouin band and as investigators into the same band for two missing women. It is quite an acceptable subterfuge adventure with a number of notable NPCs.

Free copies of *DragonQuest* readily available online, and there's a reasonable amount of support material as well, including three published scenarios (*Blade of Alectus*, *The Palace Ontocle*, *The Enchanted Wood*) from SPI along with the *Frontiers of Alusia* campaign setting, one scenario from TSR (DQ1 *The Shattered Stone*) plus several articles in *Dragon* magazine, and some supplements from Judges Guild (*Starsilver Trek*, *Magebird Quest* scenarios and *Heroes and Villains* NPC booklet). Whilst coming with a strong simulation agenda and with detailed and specific rules, *DragonQuest* was certainly excellent for its time and is still quite workable now.

*This review is partially derived from the DragonQuest review published by the author on rpg.net on March 9, 2007*

# INTERVIEW WITH THE SEAGATE ADVENTURER'S GUILD

*An RPG Review interview with Stephen Martin, Clare Baldock, Helen Siggers, Martin Dickson, Michael Parkinson, and Jeff Leddra*

The Seagate Guild of Adventurers are a multi-GM roleplaying group, based in Auckland, New Zealand. The name is based on a Guild in the fantasy campaign world, Alusia, which was the default gameworld for SPI's 1980 roleplaying game, *DragonQuest*. They've been running a *DragonQuest* for about *twenty five years* and they've published fifty-nine issues of *The Seagate Times*, a journal of the events in the Guild (which is written largely from a gameworld perspective), have built a wiki (hosted at: <http://www.dragonquest.org.nz/>), developed the *DragonQuest* rules system and engaged in massive elaborations of the game world.

**Q: How was the Guild formed? Who have been the main drivers of the game and the organisation?**

The campaign started in 1981 with Robert Leyland using first edition rules; there are still two players from the original campaign who play. Robert went off overseas and never came back. Eventually we raided his father's place for the DQ maps and materials. Jeff Ledra carried on the GMing (we had moved to the second edition rules in 1982 or 1983). There were also two other groups playing or who had started playing. One converted their D&D characters to DQ characters (the Jackson family; Gary, Brent, Derek and Kyn). The other group were the University/Ex-university club people, Mike Young, Kevin Meekan, Peter Simunovich etc. The games/players crossed over and the multi-GM universe was born. A number of GMs met regularly to guide this – the start of the Gods meetings. Initial expansion maps were drawn up, Jeff wrote up the NPC guild council characters – many who later turned bad as aids to plots or to clean out the old guard.

The main drivers of the Guild are its players, after all, all gods play even if not all players choose to be gods. The strength of the Guild is it's a Multi GM campaign, where after a time GM burn out and Real life issues tend to break up RPG groups; in the Guild, Gods can take a break and just play or players take time off for real life issues and return to the campaign months or even years later.

**Q: How many people have participated in games run through the Guild of Adventurer's over the years? How many GMs and players do you currently have?**

The total number of players who have participated is over two hundred, of which fifty are active. Between them they've role played more than five hundred characters, of which more than one hundred and fifty are active, most players having more than one character in current play. Every quarter we have six to seven games running. At a guess some seven hundred games have been played. About 40% of players have GM'd at least once. Who they are has varied over the years but there are usually 10-15 active and semi-active GMs. There are about half a dozen hard-core GMs who have run over 20 games each.

**Q: Could you explain how the Guild (the real world one) operates? Do you have a committee of management or similar? A regular meeting location?**

The guild is run by "The Gods". In the past that was the group of GMs (and the very occasional player) who would bother to turn up to monthly Gods' meetings where rule changes and campaign events were discussed. I only attended a very few of these. Now-a-days rules changes are discussed on the Wiki and this email list and voted on at Gods' meetings held directly before the quarterly Guild meeting. Once a quarter on the second Sunday of March, June,

September and December the whole Guild meets at a community hall (which one changes from time to time depending on what can be booked). Adventures are announced for the next quarter (in character usually by the GM involved) and people sign up according to level of adventure/day of the week/GM they want to play with/etc. These days adventures are often pre-announced and pre-booked on the Wiki. Pre-booked adventures aren't new, but they used to be arranged less publicly. There are a few committees whose membership is decided by the Gods and is usually only changed when someone wishes to step down or leaves the game. There is a Membership Tribunal which certainly used to sign new character forms to say they were properly rolled up. I am not sure how often that is done these days. There is a Grievance Tribunal to handle disputes. The Guild meetings are run by a God, and who this is changes fairly regularly on an ad hoc basis. People who attend the Guild meeting make a donation to pay for the Seagate Times and the hall hire.

The Guild is basically a democracy. Gods get to vote although all members get to discuss issues through the list and the wiki and there is some stuff that gets taken to the whole guild meeting for a vote. Becoming a god is as simple as GMing a game (and not being ruled a loony) and the requirement of having an experienced GM on that first game is usually easy to meet. The Guilds multi-GM system revolves around a 3 month playing period and the common campaign rules regulating character progression, players show their records to each GM they play with who checks any advancements since the last game are within the rules and signs it off for play. During the Play period each smaller group is governed only by the campaign rules and the God, GMing that game. Then we have a guild meeting, swap stories, arrange games for the next three months (players find new GMs or vs.) and the gods vote on any issues that need voting on.

The key aspects of the guild are:

- \* The quarterly structure. Games run for the quarter between guild meetings. This equates to 13 weeks of in-game time as well. For GMs it means the commitment to run an adventure is finite, 13 weeks of your time and energy (plus prep and tidy-up). Players sign-up with a GM for an adventure for one quarter. If it doesn't work out because of player or character clashes it is only for one quarter and then you can change the dynamics.

- \* Players have a lot of control of their characters fate. They choose what adventures they go on, what skills and abilities they develop at what rate, which GMs they play with, which players and other characters they play with. If you get sick of a character, start a new one and give then old one a break for a while. Have multiple characters with different interests and abilities so you can choose the most appropriate to play on an adventure that interests you.

**Q: I notice that the Guild's rulebook is based on first and second edition DragonQuest with numerous revisions. Could you explain the choice of game system and edition, especially in reference to third edition DragonQuest. Also, what are the major rules changes have you made and how have you gone about making (and enforcing) these changes?**

We played the First Edition rules in 1981 or so with Robert Leyland, before the multi-GM universe began. The Action points were very painful to keep track of (especially when the computer program tracking them went wrong, combats were endless). Moving to second edition, we approached TSR to enquire whether the licence to DQ might be available, and while they declined, they were kind enough to send us a printout of the material they had on file for the never published Arcane Wisdom expansion, with the Rune, Lesser Summoning, and Shaper colleges.

In 1989 TSR published 3rd edition, making few changes, none of them really positive. The experience multiples for non-humans were substantially increased, and while they introduced colleges from Arcane Wisdom, they dropped the colleges of Greater Summoning and Black Magics, and recommended that Necromancy only be available to NPCs. The college removals appear to have been made as part of a general policy (at the time) to get demons and "evil" out of TSRs games (this was at the time they were replacing "devil" and "demon" in Dungeons & Dragons with "baatezu" and "tanar'ri" in order to placate critics, mostly fundamentalist Christians).

By the time 3rd edition came out we had already stopped using Greater Summoning (as it proved unplayable), changed Black Magics into Witchcraft, significantly revised Necromancy to add... well Necromancy... something that was rather lacking in the original version, and adopted the Rune college and Shapers-lite (in the form of Binders), so there really wasn't anything much we wanted from 3rd edition and its changes were largely incompatible with what we had already decided.

From our own rules character generation has changed, many colleges have been changed and some added and many Skills have been changed. At one time a whole new ruleset was proposed and a lot of work was put into "Adventurer", but it failed to find popular acclaim and so the many changes were melded into the DQ2 ruleset and we set about publishing our own version. This means that most players actually have their own copy of the rules now.

As for making and enforcing changes, we talk, we make proposals, we discuss, we amend, some things get complex and go to committee and when we think we have the change right we vote to play test it and then after that either more fixes are made and more testing or we vote it to rules... or not. True Democracy at work.

**Q: You've made some extensive expansions to the Frontiers of Alusia map to the extent that it is now a fully developed gameworld, with a map vaguely related to Earth (although I note that Australia doesn't exist anymore and Aotearoa has moved to off the coast of "Africa") but also with some input from other game worlds (e.g., the Lunar Republic, with Dragonewts, a Moon Goddess and Glowline is reminiscent of the relevant part of Glorantha). Tell us how the world was put together, how long it took and who were the main contributors?**

To quote Tom Lehrer: "Plagiarize, Let no one else's work evade your eyes... Only be sure always to call it please 'research'".

While the Alusia we play on is a product of the guild campaign, many parts of it have been integrated in from other game systems, with GMs using commercial RPG materials from TSR, Chaosium, and others. The first of these was probably the Thieves' World Sanctuary Adventure Pack that Chaosium published in 1981; the much reviled city of Sanctuary sits some 300 miles north of the Guild's home in Seagate and has been the setting for many adventures. The world of Glorantha is the source of the Lunar Empire in the east, and the Dark Sun world of Arthas is the basis of the deserts in the northern part of the uttermost west. Once you look off Alusia, to other "planes", GMs have run games based in Greyhawk, Faerûn, the Cthulhu Mythos, Torg... you name it... as well as a host of areas and worlds of their own devising.

Alusia has been an ongoing project since the early days of the campaign, and a truly collaborative effort. Hand-drawn paper maps were made and circulated amongst the GMs and more recently the wiki has provided a very useful means for storing and communicating the pieces. Our Alusia is vaguely Earth-ish (in part so that we can use real world information on climate, sunrise, etc) but some odd changes have happened; Pasifika sits in the Atlantic ocean analogue, and Australia is missing (although the little-explored giant island of Delph with its dangerous reptiles could perhaps stand in for it). :-)

The 21st century and the creation of the wiki have made it easy for Gods to be swapping information and high lighted areas that are 'blank; for new GMs to fill in.

**Q: One of the more challenging aspects of a multi-gm game is the possibility of conflicts in narrative direction, characters and even events occurring synchronously. How have you dealt with this?**

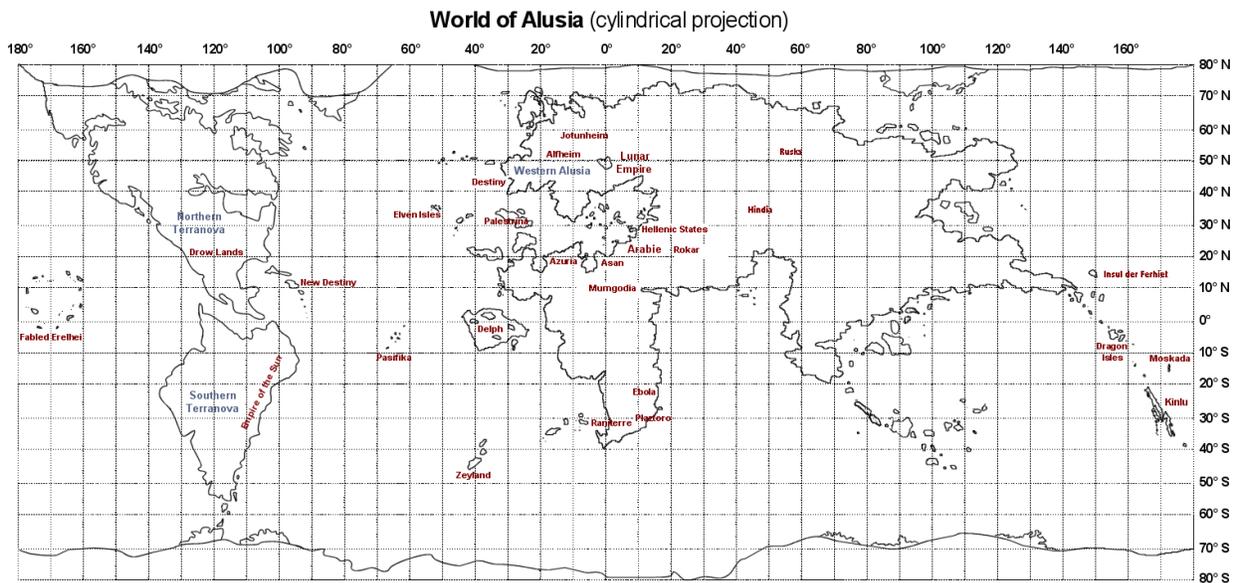
This used to happen reasonably often but usually only in geographic and geo-political details, it created some amusing situations. GMs know who else if GMing in the same quarter and talk to each other to resolve important conflicts. It

requires that each GM respects what the other GMs do and have done and work with it rather than rewriting history and undoing or trivialising events from others games.

You can't play the same character twice in the same quarter. Generally you can't interact with another character if they are out on a different adventure. Characters not currently adventuring will coincidentally happen to be elsewhere if trouble rumbles through. But can be interacted with if the GM and the other player allow it.

Most GMs have their own patch, for stuff that spills over we let other GMs know when and where. As only a few GMs are running adventures at any one time there are very few continuity conflicts. And we have the campaign committee to help work the multiple visions of what could be into one whole. The three month timing between Guild meetings both in the real world and the game world helps keep characters from being in two places at once, each new adventure starts for both the player and their character with that meeting. All the games are synchronized diverge during play and are resynchronized at the next meeting.

Many GMs have their own areas of Alusia where they rule supreme, or run adventures on other planes. When GMs wish to run games in shared areas such as Carsala, and they will affect the course of history they consult with other GMs and the Campaign Committee which exists to try and manage world wide events.



*The Alusia World Map from the Seagate Wiki*

**Q: A campaign that has been running for this long must have seen some major changes to the gameworld and some extremely memorable moments. Could you share some of these events?**

Well the Seagate bridge has seen a lot of strife over the years. It's been destroyed on numerous occasions, once by an undead whale I believe. There has been a long story arc concerning the Dark Circle.

There have been a lot of changes over the years, but most of them have been a gradual evolution as the world (and rules) expand to cope characters who continue to grow more powerful. Various multi-GM world affecting events have been run over the years, with varying degrees of success. They require a lot more work and co-ordination than running

a more discrete adventure. What the best and most memorable events have been will vary from player to player - we all get something different out of the games and enjoy different aspects of them. Every character and player has their own stories.

**Q: How would a gaming group become an official part of the Guild's campaign? What if the group is "geographically challenged" living in, for example, the West Island of New Zealand?**

Anyone is welcome to be inspired by (or just plagiarise) what we have created and done, but co-ordinating with GMs in another location who have never been part of the game sounds like a recipe for conflict and disaster. There are too many unwritten rules, assumptions, checks and balances that we all take for granted that keep the campaign rolling along.

Generally those groups away from Auckland that are part of the Guild are formed by ex-Guild members. As a general rule a new GM has a process where their first game or so as a player who is an experienced GM is in the party to help them out and check that they aren't a total loony. While I would think gaming groups in those places would be welcome to use our ruleset and world, I am not sure how we would decide to integrate them into our campaign.

*The Guild took first and second edition DragonQuest a system that was perhaps more flexible than some of the RPG systems available here in NZ at the time and over time adapted it to its current form. It took the seed of the Frontiers of Alusia map and grew it into a game world. In a world of on line gaming, of computers generated worlds, of TV and DVD we of the Guild still get together once a week as some of us have done for the past 10, 15 or more years to play together in person. We still give up our Sunday afternoons 4 time a year for the guildmeetings, and its not for the rules system, its not for the game world, its for the people that bring it all to life. That something that makes our Campaign work is the people in the Guild past and present. Its been a fun 15 yrs guys, here's to the next 15 being even better.*

# DRAGONQUEST SCENARIO: THE ABDUCTION

*by Erica Hoehn and Lev Lafayette*

## **Background: On Old Tale**

Every edition of DragonQuest referred to a sample adventure: The fate of a princess held by an evil wizard, deep in a forest. The King offers a considerable reward for the return of the princess, however the wizard has been feeding her a love potion, making her unwilling to return. This is an implementation of the story, immediately recognisable to any who have read the DragonQuest rules, but with a couple of twists. It is designed for 4 -6 mercenary level characters; if the characters used are stronger, feel free to scale up the ranks of opponents and their number. Also, under such circumstances, scale up the political importance of the abduction (the King becomes an Emperor, the Lord becomes a Duke, the village becomes a town in a rebel province etc).

## **Scene 1: Lord Rufus' Audience Chamber**

Lord Rufus hires the PCs to find his daughter, the young Lady Miryam. She has been betrothed to the king's son, Prince Wyly, and the wedding is due in just a few weeks away and she's been abducted by the Lord's elder astrologer, Arkwright The Counsellor, who has been in the Lord's employ for decades. If she isn't returned in that time the wedding will not go ahead and that would be very bad, politically, for Lord Rufus. Arkwright has probably fed her one of his 'love potions' and has taken her to the rebel village of Maplewood, which is three day's ride away. Rufus has a portrait of his daughter which the PCs may study. She has light brown hair, green eyes and a smooth facial features, like her father. He offers 1,000 gold shillings for her return and the execution of the Astrologer.

If the PCs enquire about Arkwright they will find that he originally comes from the village of Maplewood and has been a court for several years. If they inquire about Lady Miryam and Prince Wyly, it is revealed that they've never actually met. She's a daughter, and the purpose of daughters is to establish ties between courts. Any other suggestion is treated with some surprise.

## **Scene 2: The Road To Maplewood**

There is a simple forest road that travels through Maplewood to Maplewood Village and then beyond, through though the woods again, and eventually to a neighbouring kingdom. Maplewood forest is, not surprisingly, full of maples which look particularly lovely in the autumn. However it is a very dense forest and rebel held territory. Three months ago a number of the more rougher elements of town objected to the Lord's taxes (which were pretty normal) and took the opportunity to kill Lord Rufus' knight and ten garrisoned soldiers. They have since ruled the village through a council and have made an agreement with the local elves; the village does not expand in size and the elves protect the village.

The Elves will notice the PCs on their way and, unless precautions have been made, the PCs will meet with a militia force from the village of six individuals asking for their leave. The militia are just peasants, with no armour except cloth and carrying nothing more dangerous than a quarterstaff and knife but are particularly questioning of PCs who arrived in heavy armour and carrying significant weapons and shields. If the PCs attack, the militia will flee and the party will be ambushed by elven archers.

## **Scene 3: Maplewood Village**

Maplwood village houses some four hundred individuals, roughly one hundred men, women, adolescents and children. Most of the people are craftspeople, hunters, furriers and the like and the village is large enough to support an inn, the only two-story building in the area. Due to their association with the elves what little farming occurs is immediately

within a mile of the village. If a PC goes to the outskirts of the farming land they'll find various marker posts of a tree painted on a rock which tell the farmers that they may not clear beyond this point. The Elves have agreed to protect the village as long as the numbers remain stable. During any day there will be at two score individuals selling their various wares along the main street. If the PCs ask for Miryam or Arkwright they will be directed to their stall which offers soothsaying, predictions, potions and the like.

Arkwright and Miryam screen anyone who wishes to purchase their potions, especially strangers, as they do not wish the items to be put to ill-use. They sell a white potion which cures 1 point of Endurance, a blue potion which cures 4 points of Fatigue and a Red Potion which they usually for couples in "relationship difficulties" to add a little spice to their life. A character who makes a 3\*PC roll will notice that the ruby red potion bottle is very similar to one on a shelf in Lord Rufus' audience chamber. Each potion bottle costs 1 sp.

If the PCs attempt to take Miryam by force at this stage, the militia will be roused and ultimately the Elves if they attempt to leave the village region. Arkwright will cast spells from the College of Celestial Magics (along with the penalty because it is daylight) but will avoid combat (Walking Unseen, Darkness etc).

Through judicious questioning of the population, the PCs are more likely to find out where Miryam and Arkwright live; a single story abode surrounded by a hedge on the outskirts of the town.

#### **Scene 4: Arkwright and Miryam's Cottage**

Arkwright and Miryam live in a cottage on the far outskirts of the town, with their house backing on to the woodlands. It's a single story abode with two rooms, two windows (shuttered at night) and a front and back door (also latched at night). They have a small garden surrounded by a hedge which is full of herbs which they use to make their potions. A small stable is attached to the side of the house, where their mule is housed in the night. Their house is protected by a Brownie who acts as a alarm and by a centaur who stays with the mule in the stables. They are both proactive characters; if anyone intends harm on the Arkwright and Miryam, the Brownie will cast its various minor magics to annoy and delay them whereas the centaur will either charge with its lance, release the PCs horses etc.

If the PCs gain entrance to the cottage Arkwright and Miryam will attempt to hide and possibly escape into the woods. The house has modest furnishings, however there is a fair amount of silverware, pilfered from Lord Rufus' court. In total there is approximately 1,000 silver pennies in coin and 2,000 silver pennies in goods. A fine bottle of wine with two silver goblets is on the table. If anyone drinks of the wine they will discover they have consumed some Love Potion.

#### **Scene 5: Escaping Maplewood**

Escaping Maplewood is no trivial task. Through the woods is likely to see an encounter with Elves (twice if taking a daytime escape, once if taking a nighttime route) and is likely to end up with the party lost, unless they have a Ranger present. The difficulty of having Lady Miryam present should not be underestimated. She will scream at every opportunity, attempt to escape at every opportunity and so forth.

#### **Scene 6: Wedding Bells Toll**

Assuming all goes "well", the party has killed Arkwright, escaped from Maplewood and has returned to Lord Rufus' castle with Lady Miryam. Rufus' is very pleased with the work of the PCs. He pays them their reward and invites them to the wedding.

In a few days King Vidurun The Remarkable will arrive with his wife Queen Malvina. The PCs will not have much of an opportunity to see, let alone speak to, King Vidrun as he is constantly holding court, signing edicts and so forth. His wife is more accessible. Although restrained, a Healer or character with similar empathic abilities will realise that she

seems upset. Prince Wyly, for what is worth, seems to the model of a Prince, albeit quite immature and somewhat naive. Observant characters (make Perception rolls) will notice there is a familial resemblance between Wyly, Malvina, Rufus and Miryam. The marriage will occur with the standard regal splendour that can be expected. Miryam finds herself attracted, at least in body, to the youthful Wyly and will resign herself to the fate.

### **The Unravelling**

Depending on their investigations, some of the following may become known to the player-characters which may significantly change the plot.

Queen Malvina is actually not of noble birth, but rather a handmaiden of the woman destined to marry King Vidurun. The royal carriage travelling from foreign lands was attacked by bandits most bloodthirsty and the only person who escaped was Isobel who recreated herself as Queen Malvina. Some seventeen years ago, with the aid of a Love Potion, she was taken advantage of by Lord Rufus who fathered Prince Wyly. At the same time Rufus' own wife, Leonie, gave birth to their daughter, Miryam. Unfortunately she was killed in a hunting accident six years later.

Rufus is a middling noble who seeks greater power and authority over the Kingdom. He is profoundly untroubled by the idea of marrying Miryam to her half-brother and indeed the two will feel a natural attraction to each other. He has Queen Malvina in a bind for she feels she cannot reveal the true parentage of Prince Wyly.

For his part Arkwright is a genuinely good and gentle man who would much prefer to retire as a hedge-wizard in a small village rather than working as the Lord's Astrologer. It was Lady Miryam who suggested, and indeed, insisted, that they run away together. Miryam herself is an extremely bored young lady who became enamoured by Arkwright's earthy tales of village life. Having spent an entire lifetime engaging in nothing better than polite conversation and making doilies the chance to live in a real village near the woods and meet Elves is thoroughly exciting to her. She also prefers the simple goodness of Arkwright to the political machinations that she has been brought up with.

### **The Potion**

A particularly cheeky GM may arrange for one or more of the player characters to consume Arkwright's Love Potion. This potent brew will have some rather unusual effects on an adventurer-type. To begin with they will feel slightly disorientated in their spatial and temporal perspective. At this stage make a END+WP characteristic roll. If this is failed, they will feel a strong, overwhelming sense of empathy towards their fellow sapient creatures. It is not possible for them to cause any harm to them and, indeed, they would much prefer to be rather intimate with them. This may be as simple as being cuddly and friendly, but if more amorous proposals are suggested, they will be more than willing.

### **Statistics**

Use standard statistics for the Centaur and the Brownie. The Centaur, Godfrey, is a Rank 6 Ranger (specialised Woodlands) and has Rank 5 in Lance and Shortbow. He is a practitioner of the College of Earth Magics and has Rank 4 in all Talents and General Knowledge spells and Rank 2 in all Special Knowledge spells. The Brownie, Chops, is also a Rank 5 Ranger (woodland), has rank 3 in Shortsword, and is a practitioner of the College of Illusions with Rank 4 in all Talents and General Knowledge spells but cannot combine.

Arkwright has low physical characteristics, but a high MA and MD. He is a Rank 7 Astrologer, a Rank 6 Alchemist and a practitioner of the Celestial Magics (star mage). He has Rank 6 in all Talents and General Knowledge spells and rank 4 in all Special Knowledge spells. Miryam has middling characteristics, but a high PB and AG. She is a Rank 3 Courtesan and a Rank 1 Healer. She has just become a practitioner of Celestial Magics but only knows the Talents and General Knowledge spells at Rank 1. The Elves come in groups of five, use standard characteristics. They will be Rank 4 in Ranger, Shortbow and Rapier. One will also be a practitioner of Earth magics and will also have all Talents and General Knowledge spells at Rank 4 and Special Knowledge spells at Rank 2.

# MOVIE REVIEW : THE DARK KNIGHT

by *Andrew Moshos*

We don't really have 'event' movies anymore because of the sheer quantity of flicks that come out, and the quantity of other potential things a person can do instead of going to the theatre. The days of something completely massive in its level of public interest are pretty much gone. The last such flick, one that almost everyone worldwide went to see at the cinema, everyone talked about whether they saw it or not, and everyone just knew of its very existence was *Titanic*. What's really lost is the unifying effect or power that movies can have. Everyone saw and had an opinion on *Star Wars*. Everyone knows the theme from *Jaws*.

I didn't really like *Batman Begins* that much, despite loving both Christian Bale and Christopher Nolan, and despite appreciating what they were trying to do. Mostly, the over-editing irritated me, and the mindless action sequences, and the mockworthy pretentious seriousness made me feel very 'eh' about the whole experience. But that didn't sour me going in to *The Dark Knight*. I was willing to believe again. Seeing that bank robbery prologue seven months ago whet my appetite enough before everything else happened so that I was excited about where this film could go.



*So, help me out here: which is the crazy one again?*

So, considering what the film is actually like, I have to say that I am deeply, deeply satisfied with what I saw. The film is two and a half hours long, and crams about five hours of film into that running time. So much happens, and so quickly, that it is sometimes hard to keep track. But regardless of that, the film never lets up, never shies away from its grim premise and never gives you time enough to wonder how it is that it all works so well, for what it is.

Despite being as serious, if not more serious than *Batman Begins*, thankfully, no time is spent on Batman sulking over the death of his parents again. That's not to say that the flick avoids getting into psychologically murky waters. Oh, it gets very murky. Several years have past since Batman's (Christian Bale) self-appointment as the dark guardian of Gotham City. The criminal organisations of the city are in retreat, and the citizens and law enforcement personnel almost feel like they can beat back the tide of corruption that threatened to engulf them. A highly organised and disfigured maniac who dresses like a clown, wears smeared and cracked makeup and who calls himself the Joker (Heath Ledger) steals millions of dollars from a mob-run bank, capturing the attention of the city's crime lords. He offers to take out their nemesis, the Man in Black, at a hefty price. The Joker's mission, though, has

nothing to do with being a gun for hire. What he craves is causing chaos, and forcing the good citizens of Gotham to turn on each other.

When an idealistic and forthright District Attorney, in the form of Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), finally seems to be making headway against both the criminal underworld and corruption within the city's police and official ranks, the Joker's intention becomes to show the world how no-one can ever be effective against the forces of chaos, and, in fact, can in turn easily be compelled to become agents of destruction themselves, no matter how high-minded they see themselves to be. Naturally, this pisses off Batman, and his buffoonish billionaire playboy alter ego Bruce Wayne no end. In Harvey Dent, Wayne sees hope for the city; that finally there is a legitimate, legal personage who can do the things that Batman cannot, within the confines of the law. In fact, in Dent he sees someone who could literally replace him, and it brings him hope that maybe one day soon he could pursue some semblance of a normal life. It only serves to complicate matters that Wayne's childhood friend and love of his life Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal) is now Dent's girlfriend and co-worker as his Assistant DA.

Dent is the shining white light, in contrast to the unrelenting darkness and misery that is Batman, but there are hints that there are limits to his goodwill. That there are aspects to his personality which potentially could compel him to cross the line, into adopting a more ends justifying the means mentality. Knowing the importance of what Dent and the other city's leaders, such as the police commissioner, his replacement Commissioner Gordon (Gary Oldman) and the mayor represent, Batman is compelled to protect them at all costs, and the Joker intends to kill them in the most heinous ways possible. He seems to be a step ahead of anyone and everyone at all times only because he is so out there mentally that he can think up scenarios and plan out escapades that even super-genius Batman can't get ahead of, most of the time.

The greatest advantage the Joker possesses is that he is bound by no stricture, rule, concept of decency or morality, and that he delights in killing. Anyone and everyone. After a gruelling and frankly exhausting action sequence involving trucks, police vans, the Batmobile and rocket launchers, the Joker awaits the arrival of his nemesis standing in the middle of the street. As the hero rushes towards him, the Joker shoots and kills random people in cars purely out of impatience, because he just wants to be causing carnage in the ten or so seconds it would take for Batman to reach him. Malevolence for malevolence's sake is a standard in comic book fare, but it is hard to make it a compelling part of a dramatically told story. Ledger, for all the baggage surrounding his performance, is superb as the Joker. He is a fully realised, compelling, and quite frightening character. He is more scarily intelligent than his opposition, and fears nothing and desires little more beyond chaos for chaos's sake.

Of course it's a part that lends itself to painful overacting, as Jack Nicholson showed when he assayed the character in Tim Burton's *Batman* back in 1989. Ledger far surpasses any other depiction of the character, but does it without resorting to Al Pacino-style screaming excesses or Hannibal Lecter-style scenery and face-chewing. The character is always the most compelling when he is speaking quietly to people, compulsively licking his lips, and saying a whole heap of stuff that has his victims and potential victims equal parts terrified and wondering what the fuck he's talking about. But the character is still bigger than big. The appearance and physicality, totally in-line with the comic book origins, always remain strange but never camp. As ridiculous as he might be, is he any more ridiculous than a guy who dresses up as a bat and barks at people in a voice that sounds like Tom Waits after a whisky and Drano binge?

This Joker sets up events that force Batman, and eventually, the people of Gotham, to make choices. Hard choices. The kinds of choices that represent a zero-sum game. I remember way back when I watched the first *Spider-Man* flick at the cinema, which, whilst enjoyable, seems like a Saturday morning cartoon compared to this stuff. Towards the end of the flick the villain, played by Willem Dafoe, created a situation where he held a cable car of innocents in peril on the one hand, and Spidey's beloved Mary Jane screaming in the other. He strove to create a situation where the hero had to choose who to save. One or the other. In that flick, of course, the hero saves the day for everyone concerned with no repercussions. In stark contrast to the world in this Batman's Gotham, choices have consequences. Grave consequences with no easy solutions.

That element alone elevates the material beyond the other comic book fare that has graced our screens this year, but it's not even the only element. The action sequences have also been planned, carried out and executed to the nth degree, and also edited to within a microsecond of their lives. The editing, which ended up irritating the hell out of me in *Batman Begins*, just stays on the right side of the divide between getting the adrenalin pumping, and sending your audience members into epileptic shock. The editing for such a construction has to be tight, since there's so much to cram in into those two and a half hours, and you get the feeling that they didn't want the audience to feel safe for even a few seconds. Everything, everything that happens in this flick is meant to keep us on edge and almost screaming with frustration with what's going to happen next.

Bale is strong both as Bruce Wayne and as the dark avenger, but he isn't entirely a sympathetic character. He is distant and monstrous as the Batman, and much of his time out of costume involves the film's brief moments of levity as he either plays up to his image as a vapid socialite, or exchanges knowing moments of self-deprecation with his butler Alfred (Michael Caine, solid as always), the CEO of his company and armourer Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), or complicated, messy moments with Rachel. He is, and should be, a conflicted character. But the beauty of this story, having as it does its origins in decades of the comic, is how much of a mirror Batman and the Joker are for each other; how intertwined their personas and their agendas. At one point, when the Joker informs Batman that their conflict will never end, and that they will be fighting it out for eternity, I actually felt a certain amount of Batman's dread. You can look at it as a meta moment, referring as it does to their conflict across the pages of thousands of comic books and the various media incarnations of the story, but it points most strongly to the fact that the Joker is Batman's primary nemesis for a host of good reasons. They're both insane. Ledger captures this beautifully throughout the whole film, and it is certain that without him the flick wouldn't be remotely as powerful.

The soundtrack varies from pulse-pounding, headache-inducing martial percussion and orchestral themes whose purpose is to force you never to forget that bad shit is about to happen. But it's a testament to the attention to detail in this whole production that the Joker's signature theme involves a single, jagged cello note played like a nail across a blackboard or a dagger scraped along a bone. It is as unsettling as the character, and works beautifully, as the music does throughout. I guess. I mean it was pretty over the top, but the phrase 'over the top' seems superfluous in describing any aspect of this flick.

The most amazing sequences, in a flick filled with amazing sequences, include the robbery at the start, a drug deal crashed by Batman and people who wish they were Batman, the Joker introducing himself to the underworld with a pencil, Harvey Dent wondering how far he can take something (before and after, coin-toss or no coin-toss), the whole protecting-the-DA sequence, seeing as it places the Batman on a motorbike, the destruction of a hospital, the race to save two people at opposite ends of the city, the Joker's interrogation, the burning of a billion dollars, the Joker relating multiple versions of the origin of his hideous scarring, Harvey Dent's changing his mind, the words of the tall jailbird before his fateful decision on a ferry and and and...

The movie shifts whilst on its seemingly unending roll, and the Joker moves from using insane henchmen from Arkham Asylum, to forcing the good citizens of Gotham to do his dirty work in order to prove his point; that, to quote the Nick Cave song, *People They Ain't No Good*. Even then there is a ray of hope provided to us the viewers, and it comes from the unlikeliest source, being a prisoner trapped in one of the Joker's malicious plans. Batman can only keep fighting the good fight as long as there are enough of the regular people of Gotham who choose not to give in to the more selfish part of their nature, no matter the incentives. Even when it's the criminals making the moral choices.

I'm not even going to get started on the terrorism, torture and other contemporary subtexts within the flick, because there's just too much, too much going on. It's probably a flick, despite its running length, that needs to be seen a couple of times, preferably on the big screen, and at least one of those times at an IMAX cinema, since several of the action sequences were filmed specifically for the ginormous format. Visually, dialogue-wise, acting-wise, action-wise, dramatically and intellectually, *The Dark Knight* delivers on its promises, and is a stunner. It is probably one of the best films of the year, and definitely insofar as big-budget extravaganzas are concerned.

It has flaws, in that technology is introduced and abused in a manner that stretches believability, and perhaps too much is crammed in, with everyone having too much to do, and much of it is unclear, to the point where you wonder 'so what happened to so-and-so?' and the ending, though satisfying, was somewhat anti-climactic. But I'd rather that than the alternative, which is people having nothing to do but repeat hackneyed phrases and collect paycheques they don't deserve, and a stupid ending requiring a last second recovery and a villain's headquarters or just some random building blowing up for no valid reason.

Good work everyone, especially you, Christopher Nolan. A meticulously crafted action masterpiece, and one of the few that transcends its comic book origins to become something greater, mythic and powerful. Keep up the good work.

*An expanded version of this review is also available on the author's site, <http://movie-reviews.com.au>*

# VIA NEGATIVA: BAD GAME DESIGN

by *Lev Lafayette*

Criticism is an unwelcome guest, pointing to unfortunate truths that some others would prefer were not said at all. By itself it is often used as a by-line for a negative attitude. But by pulling apart what is terribly wrong about a subject, the opportunity arises through to suggest a more correct path to take. Theologians call this "*via negativa*", or "apophasis". Their idea was to try to understand a rather ineffable concept of "God", by describing what God is not. So rather than describe what is good game design, the purpose here is to show some of elements of what is bad game design for the purpose of future avoidance.

## **This Is About System**

Appalling mistakes in RPGs are fairly easy to point out, including some of the worst artwork seen in print (e.g., the interior art for RuneQuest's *Elder Secrets* and *Daughters of Darkness*), the most unreadable fonts (e.g., first edition *Chivalry & Sorcery*), poor layout (e.g., *Hero Wars*) and rules editing (e.g., *Lord of the Rings*), some of the most obtuse writing (*Aria*), and unnecessary jargon (e.g., *Mythus*, *Immortal*), and some of the worst rules glitches both in terms of entire systems and individual instances, with the latter marvelously compiled from in *Murphy's Rules* over the decades.

Initially research for this article consisted of straw polls on those on-line bastions of role players, namely RPG.net and Livejournal . The question was relatively simple: 'What Is The Worst Role playing Game Of All Time'. The definition of "worst" here was deliberately ambiguous and subjective. But with almost five hundred responses it confirmed a few things that various articles on game design theory had previously suggested. Over fifty percent voted in favour of *F.A.T.A.L.* ('From Another Time, Another Land') as the worst role playing game ever. This nine-hundred page game, written by Bryon Hall, was published in 2002 notorious publication included an extremely cumbersome rules system, a ridiculed claim of being the "most realistic and historically/mythically accurate role playing game available", and an unpleasant attention to sexual violence.

Coming a distant second, with a mere quarter of the overall vote, was 'Racial Holy War' a free and "rules-light" RPG written by a "Rev. Kenneth Molyneaux" and previously hosted at the "World Church of the Creator", a neo-Nazi organisation whose members have engaged in a number of racially-motivated assaults and murders. Beyond those two leaders, the only games to receive over 5% were *Wraethu*, derived from the hermaphroditic species in a fantasy series by novelist Storm Constatine (which was also considered to be in questionable taste and with a poor rules system), and 'Hybrid', a free RPG, which nominally which unifies various superhero RPGs, but is largely considered to be an incomprehensible rant.

These results confirm claims of the primacy of the social contract in roleplaying games, the shared agreement of good behaviour. Comments on the polls overwhelming criticised the worst games not primarily for their impoverished game system, although this was remarked upon, but rather that the content of the games themselves were abhorrent to common moral standards. One can suspect that even if the two games in question had an even middling game systems, their approach and content would still cause them to rate very poorly.

In roleplaying people must come first (social contract, behaviour expectations), exploration second (immersion, richness of setting, genre), system a modest third. This article however is not about extreme breaches of moral norms in role playing games, or "how to be a decent human being in your gaming group" or even "how to create a sense of genre immersion in your game sessions". It is not even about necessities like a decent index, table of contents, use of white space in layout, and organisation of the texts. This article is about bad game system design and how bad design can cause real problems around the gaming table.

## **Character Generation**

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Character generation is often the first opportunity for bad system design to present itself. A common first step is to make character generation as time-consuming as possible. Indeed, spending the entire first game session or possibly two, is ideal for bad design. Having a multitude of attribute scores is certainly a well known method; especially when a rolled score does not equal the actual score to be used in the game, and even more so when "attributes", conventionally innate abilities, are actually used to represent generic skill levels. *Space Opera* engages in all three of these actions in character generation and *Rolemaster* does particularly well for being time-consuming. If attribute bonuses are derived from values, bad system design can make the scope of the value dependent on the specific attribute so that it must be recorded for each instance and has include upper and lower bounds. *Palladium/Rifts* is particularly good at this; variant attribute bonuses are introduced at a value of 17 and peaked at 30; having a value of 3 was usually often just as effective as having a value of 16, or 31 compared to 99.

Drowning the player in racial and class options can also help the process in bad design and especially time consumption. There are numerous game systems out there which take the approach of "more always better". *Harnmaster* (1st ed.) required rolling d1000 on a parental occupation table which, from almost 100 selections, provided "family skills", and was followed by a d100 roll for apprenticeship occupational skills from approximately 65 selections. One can also cite *Imagine* which insisted on providing not only four flavours of Elf, but also three of Dwarf and Midfolk, two avian races, Centaurs, Ogres and Goblins. A real game-breaker however is when certain races and professions are given or develop game-breaking "prestige" values, or, when provided, are given limiting factors in such a ham-fisted manner that any sense of genre-realism or system transparency is thrown out in favour of the designer's fiat in an attempt to re-enforce game balance.

*World of Synnibarr* provides a notorious example of this type. Six attributes are rolled on a seven d20, with anything below 8 re-rolled and the two lowest discarded and re-rolled again until they are higher than the discard values. If you roll five natural 20s your character gets to be "immortal born", which provides an array of incredible increases in strength, resistance and so forth. Lesser examples of the same imbalance include the powerful Wizard-Warriors of *Tunnels & Trolls*, who can be acquired if all primary attributes are above average, or power-creep of the Force-Mage in *Rolemaster* (2nd ed). In reverse, the poor old Monk in *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (1st ed) was woefully underpowered but was almost impossible to qualify for.

Whilst on the topic of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, there is probably no other game system whose attempt to enforce game balance via fiat has caused more frustration and debates among players. Absolute race and class level-limits more often represented an limit on system design where the integrity of the game required artificial limits. Never was it successfully argued exactly why Elves, the most magical of woodland beings, could not be Rangers or Druids and were limited to 11th level as Magic Users except in terms that it was necessary for 'game balance'.

One other awesome method to drag out the process of character generation which is sure to annoy player is to provide a per-game life path of prior experience, especially if the character can be killed in the process, thus necessitating that the character generation is started all over again. *Traveller*, and its successor *Megatraveller*, are particularly famous for this with the death rates for Scouts peaking at just under 50% per four-year term of service. *Space Opera* was also a time killer with skill points for each two-year term of service (average of 8 such terms) requiring re-enlistment checks, ranks, promotions, pay and skill point allocation. *Pendragon*, an otherwise excellent game, requires characters to randomly generate the lengthy heroic history of their father and grandfather. However this hardly compares with *Nephilim* where the age of beginning characters is  $3d6*5$  years (yes, there are characteristic losses causes by aging) and can have between 0 and 10 past lives, each with skill points which have to be distributed to the current simulacrum.

Whilst on the matter of choice, it is imperative for a bad game system that any sort of player input to the character creation process is explicitly rejected in favour of random determination. According to the argument, characters should just accept the roles allocated to them by The Fates. The same applies to for the Gamemaster, whose analogous role of the producer and director's relationship means that both must submit to the will of the (die) casting agency. Early editions of *D&D* required players to accept attributes in the order they were rolled, a particularly cruel method given

class and race minimum requirements. Other games, such as *Chivalry & Sorcery* and *DragonQuest* required percentile checks if a player desired a non-human races. *Harnmaster*, along with random determination of parental and apprenticeship occupation, also had random determination of species, along with random determination of character eye colour, hair colour and pigmentation. *Swordbearer* required characters to determine highly variant age and experience randomly; it was like rolling 1d12 for your character's starting level. The phrase "simulationist to a fault" springs to the lips.

### **Skill and Ability Resolution**

Partially as a result of historical lineage from wargames, and partially from the dramatic emphasis on tactical life and death situations, combat resolution is considered in nearly all RPGs as a distinct resolution system. Whilst this at times simply be a matter of detail, in other cases the difference between the non-combat resolution mechanics and the combat resolution mechanics is so great that one may as well be playing completely different games.

*AD&D* (1st ed) set the path in the days before object-orientated programming with a skill resolution where every case is a special case. Some abilities were checked on low percentile die rolls (e.g., thief skills, spying attempts, assassination, detection of invisibility), others on high percentile rolls (unarmed combat checks) others were checked on a low d20 roll (listening at doors), some required high d20 rolls (saving rolls, armed attack rolls), and others were normally automatically successful (e.g., casting magical spells). As a variation that was almost using a unified mechanic, *Rolemaster* is notorious as 'Chartmaster', where skill ranks or dice rolls are cross-referenced to a plethora of charts and tables for various moving maneuvers, various static maneuvers, languages, spell casting, weapon usage etc.

Unified or near-unified resolution mechanics however are no immediate path to avoiding bad game system design; they are a necessary but not sufficient condition. For example, the independent press game *Dogs in the Vineyard* has only one resolution system regardless of the relative importance of the scene; which either means rolling vast handfuls of dice and engaging in a dramatic to-and-fro often over the most trivial scenes or, more commonly, the resolution system is ignored altogether, effectively making the system not too different to the "bidding and bullying" approach common in *Amber: The Diceless role playing Game*. In a similar manner, in the "roll and keep" method of *Legend of the Five Rings* and *Seventh Sea*, would roll a number of d10s equal to their stat + skill and total the best limited by the former number, which on the surface seems to be a great system (at least for physical skills), but in practise required selecting from a rolled pool of several dice, finding the best three to five and adding those up - a somewhat time-consuming process. *Torg* has a unified game system, but getting back to an earlier issue on character generation, the value rolled on the dice is not the value used in the system; the former has to be cross-referenced on a table to determine the latter, and that's assuming the obtuse 'drama deck' wasn't in use.

Whilst the difficulties of lengthy resolution mechanics are fairly obvious from even the most mundane actual play, systematic failures in plausibility of results is often largely hidden until the failure occurs, which often enough either results in players arguing over attempts to either house-rule on the spot, or interpret the result in a result which is at least remotely plausible, both of which are usually forgotten - until the problem arises again. Such errors usually arrive from designers not engaging in a standard error-testing method used in computer programming that can be carried out in the mind; test a variable for the middle of the normal range, test it for the extreme bounds of the normal range and test it outside the bounds. If the results don't make sense, remodel the system until it does. Failure to engage in such tests usually means that at least some rules will produce improbable results and if that lack of application is endemic, the resolution system as a whole will reflect this.

A minor example of this was the implementation of the 'botch' system in the early versions of the Storyteller system, used in the *Vampire: The Masquerade*, and other games from the World of Darkness line. With a resolution system based on a skill plus stat pool of d10s against a target number, each '1' on the dice subtracted from the number of successes, with a "botch" occurring if the number of ones were greater than the number of successes. This meant at the highest difficulty levels the chance of success or '1' was equal, and the possibility of a botch increased if the character had a bigger dice pool. A more serious issue however was that the maximum difficulty target number for any action

was limited to the d10 range. So regardless of whether a Vampire had a poor 1 dice in an attribute or was a third-generation beast with an attribute of 10, they both have the same overall capacity to say, leap over a gap between two buildings, only their chance of success would differ.

A more serious example of systematically-induced improbable results problem occurred when an 11th-hour decision was made to drop characteristic rolls in the latest edition of *RuneQuest* and shoehorn all activity into skill rolls. This means that a slightly below average character with a STR and DEX of 10 and a modest +40% training in Athletics, will be equal in a running race to a character who is untrained, but has the superhuman attribute values of 30 in STR and DEX. The oft-overlooked reality is that some actions are more likely to be affected by skill and others more by ability. Game systems that do not consider this issue will consistently generate extremely improbable results.

Scaling mechanics are another cause for generating improbable results. In the *DC Heroes* game, each point in an Attribute Point represents a doubling in value. This is fair enough for a game that has to deal with everything from normal people to Superman. The problem is whilst the Attribute Points double in scale for each increase in value, the effects table treats the opposing values as if they were different on a linear scale; thus a weakling character with an Strength Attribute Value of 2, normally barely enough to lift 100 lbs, has a minor chance (18 or more on 2d10) of defeating an Elephant (Strength Value 8) in a test between the two characteristics.

### **Combat Resolution**

The historical bread-and-butter of single unit wargames, which from which all role playing games certainly descended from, is fertile plains for those who wish to implement game rules which are obtuse, disunified, time-consuming, and generate results that are contrary to even the most trivial expectations of reality. Again the first edition of *AD&D* was a true leader in this regard. From the notorious one-minute combat rounds, the armour class system, a surprise mechanism that broke with the addition of racial and class modifiers, weird initiative rules for multiple attacks, weapon speed factor modifiers, and spell-casting, the cross-referencing of weapon 'to hit' modifications versus armour types, inflationary hit points, the pathetic protection offered by shields, and an incredibly and divergent convoluted unarmed combat system.

For even more unnecessary complexity the fantasy-medieval RPG *K.A.B.A.L.* ("Knights and Berserkers and Legerdemain") from the early 80s, used both square roots and long division to generate the most basic to-hit chances. Attributes are expressed in percentile range and modifiers are square roots of the stat. This is pretty weird to begin with, but the real pain comes from the fact that any situational modifiers (even having a magic weapon) is not applied to the attribute modifier, but to the raw attribute itself, meaning that a square root of the attribute has to be calculated every time the circumstances change at all. After the same is done with the opponent's attributes, the two total results are compared as a ration to generate a percentile chance to hit. So, for example if Hiro has a modified combat skill of 67%, his modifier is 8.185 and his opponent Antoine has a modified combat skill of 71%, his modifier is 8.426 and Hiro has a modulus  $((8.185/8.426)-50)*100 = 47\%$  chance to hit. Imagine doing that calculation *everytime* there was a situational change.

For a sheer quantity of dice rolls and calculation a more recent game, *Fantasy Imperium* wins a special prize. Combat is fought in two second rounds, with an initiative die roll (1d10) modified on weapon use or surprise. There's a percentile attack roll with a parry or dodge roll in response. If a hit is scored, roll for general location (e.g., head) if missile or choose if melee and then roll for specific location (e.g., nose) then roll for damage, subtract armour and roll extra damage if the blow gets through by cross-referencing the location with the attack type. After this determine the severity level of the wound, multiply damage by the trauma level, determining the total number of hit points lost. The person hit must roll under their stun value and check for critical and disabling wounds and bloodloss. Also check for weapon breakage; wood weapons will break 50% of the time and iron weapons 25% (also, wooden weapons cost the same as iron ones).

In some ways it seems to harken back to the days of the post-holocaust game, *Aftermath!* which was complete with a

two-page combat flow-chart and some thirty hit locations, or the *Ysgarth* rules system where hit location was rolled on d1000. In the *Hero System* superheroes often do up to 15d6 of normal damage; when more than one of such characters lands a blow take the opportunity to make a coffee whilst the pips are counted. Now there's nothing wrong as such with superheroes doing 15d6 damage as it gives an idea of how impressive they are; but in a game where superheroes are the default power level the principle of knowing the result quickly after the dice hit the table is clearly lost.

Again testing against boundary conditions for plausible results is a necessity. In *Twilight 2000* a character who fires a revolver into their head is unlikely to even fall unconscious. Due to the requirement that Death Saves need to be taken for any damage to a limb greater than 8 points, a character in *Cyberpunk 20.20* is much more likely to be killed by a shot to their arm than one to their torso. In *Cyberpunk* (1st edition aka 2013) it was not unknown for character's with a high REF stat and Athletics skills to be virtually unhittable, even at point blank range. In *Paranoia* (1st ed) a starting character's macho bonus could be sufficient that a direct hit from a tac-nuke would only wound them, whilst those with access to mutant powers could have this damage reduced to 'stun'. Due to the scaling effects of the BODY characteristic in the *Hero System* a slightly above average character (BOD 14) can on average receive a direct hit from a recoilless rifle or even a Light Anti-tank Weapon and probably still be standing. A special knockback with a slashing or smashing weapon in *RuneQuest* (3rd edition) will automatically cause knockback regardless of the SIZ of an opponent, and if they fail a DEX\*5 characteristic roll they will fall down; a halfling with a shortsword has an average chance of both knocking back an elephant and causing it to fall over.

Whilst on the topic of the *Hero System* one of its time-honoured components has been distinguishing between 'normal' and 'killing' damage. It seems a little odd at first, but at least it meant that there was a difference between a character being battered in a fist fight and the life-threatening damage caused by guns, swords and the like. Some editions of the *Storyteller* system adopted this method by using a 'Soak' characteristic against non-lethal attacks, but in other editions it is dropped without comparative changes to damage of various weapons; thus a boxer is knocked unconscious after a few blows from an opponent, and when confronted by a monstrosity with a baseball bat, a claymore or a revolver in reach, the best weapon to choose is probably the bat. Check the changes between editions.

As a massive system killer, armour in *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (1st edition) was either rated as 1 point (metal armour) or 0/1 (leather armour). A character's innate Toughness, which reduced damage by the same value, was d3+1 for humans - in other words, far more important than armour itself. The naked dwarf (starting toughness of up to 5) could charge their enemies safe in the knowledge that most blows would simply bounce off their tough hide. As an example of complexity, in *Megatraveller* after a successful hit is determined, actual damage is compared by referencing the penetration value against the target armour. High penetration and full damage results from a penetration value twice as great as the armour value; fifty percent damage results from a penetration value at least equal to the armour value, and ten percent damage is caused if the penetration value is below the armour value and the target is not fully enclosed. *Megatraveller* also requires two different damage values (normal damage points and damage to characteristics). *Imagine* provides varying penetration values for the five different types of normal damage in the game; for example, cutting/thrusting a piercing damage do 1/4 of the rolled damage if the damage value is between 1/2 and 1 of the armour value, but smashing weapons do half. Confusing? Just as well there's a table to reference.

### **Magic, Powers and Equipment**

The various benefits accrued by magic and other forms of innate powers or high-tech equipment is easily overlooked when looking for frustration in a game system, as it is erroneously assumed that the character generation and various resolution systems already include all the problems that could occur. The opportunity for systematic failure is perhaps even greater than in other elements as they can seriously introduce problems in not only in character generation and resolution mechanics, but perhaps most interestingly, in the field of genre exploration itself.

As an example of this, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Kult* and *Middle-Earth Role Playing* may be cited. *Call of Cthulhu* is a game of usually bookish characters confronting elder horrors of exceptional power with excellent genre-integration with the

Sanity rules. Given these thematic considerations, one wonders what the point was of including special 'impaling' and variable malfunction numbers for specific firearms and two pages of weapon statistics? You simply do not need almost statistics for fifty different types of firearms in a horror game. In a similar vein, *Kult* offers almost 100 weapons and 18 weapon accessories, and 36 cars and motorcycles with only a modest collection of "other equipment", which is largely spy and espionage related. What, you may ask, is this game actually about? Or, in the case of *M.E.R.P.*, where are we actually supposed to be? Tolkien's Middle-Earth is a world of subtle and implied magics which nearly always take the form of psychological effects or are like hallucinations. Not so in *M.E.R.P.*; deriving directly from *Rolemaster*, the magic is of the obvious "flash-bang!" variety in complete contradiction to the setting.

Some games systems have gearhead supplements for those who believe that vehicles need to have their own lengthy and detailed design rules. *GURPS* and *Corps* are two cases in point, both of which released an entire supplement (*GURPS Vehicles*, *Corps VDS: Vehicle Design System*) both over 150 pages to satisfy such desires. Propulsion and life systems, accessories, armaments, instruments, power systems, maneuverability, chassis design, surface treatments, volume, capacity and subsystems are described in the sort of loving detail that a systems administrator has about their favourite server. Is this a problem? It is when the central premise of the game isn't about vehicles. In both cases more attention is provided to vehicle design than character design and indeed, I am yet to see a science fiction game system spend as much detail or complexity on entire planets than these two supplements do with vehicles.

In a more prosaic manner, powers and equipment can be provided that have serious unbalancing effects on play to the point of becoming standard "min-max" applications. The first level spells "Sleep", "Magic Missile" are cases in point across multiple editions of (*Advanced*) *Dungeons & Dragons*, the former being incredibly powerful at the lowest levels and the latter requisite at high levels as opponent armour classes improve and the quantity of missiles per casting increases. Some games, in their humour, could be quite self-deprecating about such flaws. In *Champions/Hero System* (4th edition) examples are given of characters who use relatively cheap Shrinking and End Reserves to use massive objects as missiles, or others who with a handful of points could purchase the entire planet as a base and everyone on it as followers. The fact that the examples are funny to read doesn't make the systematic problem any less.

A sheer quantity of options can also be a serious drag both especially during character generation. Any game which gives an extensive equipment list and keeps track of character finances down to the last copper piece (or even less) is going to suffer somewhat in this regard. Distributing starting character points the fifteen techniques and forms of *Ars Magica* is trouble enough; purchasing formulaic spell in addition this virtually ensures that any first session will be spent in character generation. Sometimes this can work in reverse; *AD&D* includes 21 items of livestock, most of which have marginal utility in the game (although I do remember one character using their share of the treasure haul to purchase thousands of chickens - because they could). In the otherwise excellent *Swordbearer* where magic is often acquired by animal sacrifice the Social Status (*Swordbearer*, sensibly, doesn't use coins) is not included, despite a good number of animals described. Still, this was somewhat better than *Timemaster* which didn't really have an equipment list at all apart from various weapons. On a related note, a sheer quantity of equipment bookkeeping can also frustrate actual play; the original leader in this regard was *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* Psionics system.

Some examples of combat equipment that seriously fail "reality checks" have been provided in the preceding section. Others similar examples include the relative deadliness of the broadsword in *Traveller* compared to weapons like laser carbines, submachine guns, assault rifles and pistols, or in the *Star Trek* role playing game where the common bow has a range well in excess of any phaser, disruptor, or blaster and almost the same as laser rifle. Odd examples of non-combat equipment often includes computer equipment when game designers simply do not pay attention to either the technologies currently available or engage in probabilistic prediction of future circumstances. Again using *Traveller* as example, 8-CPU capacity computers are considered the peak of above average Imperium technology. Once again, the cause of such problems is invariably identical; the failure to be attentive to boundary tests, and the desire to shoehorn reality into the dictates of the game system.

### Concluding Remarks

Whilst the examples given in this essay are individual, they often reflect serious systematic design issues. These can be surmised as three general principles of bad game design. The first element is engaging in an attention to detail to the point when character generation, action or combat resolution and power or equipment acquisition is unnecessarily time-consuming; a general rule of thumb being that more time is spent on system issues rather than character role playing or story development. A second element is to make the system as cumbersome as possible through either complexity in the mechanics, by having highly divergent generation and resolution systems, or by sheer weight of detail or choices. The third element is systematically inducing results which generate a sense of incredulity among any who experience them.

All this said, it must be emphasised that the general principle of having systematic game design is nevertheless preferred. There is a tendency among many, especially with narrativist orientations, towards extreme rules-light games. As a result, not only are most narrativist games woefully underdeveloped even for their own creative agenda, many such games suffer the problems of inconsistency, increased potential for GM bias, and a lack of satisfaction among players for their character development. In other words, whilst the illustrative cases given in this discussion may indicate serious problems in systematic game design, the answer according to this author is not to remove systematic design but to improve it. Or, if one likes, better role playing systems *via negativa*, rather than *via negation*.

# FATAL FRAME/PROJECT ZERO IV REVIEW

by *Laurean Leigh*

Lost in the darkness; completely alone...save for the mumbling dead spirits that slip past you in long thin hallways. Trapped in an old building with only a flashlight and an old bellows camera...you're only defense against the violence antagonistic spirits. Your only way out, find out what happened in hopes of rescuing your friend or loved one before the dead claim you as one of their own.

This is the world of *Project Zero*, also known as *Fatal Frame* in the states. The series, which takes its influences from Japanese history, folklore, and good old fashion ghost stories, has been considered as one of the top three survival horror game series around today. The games, released by Tecmo, normally focus on a female protagonist, who has been separated from a sibling or loved on. In hopes of a reunion, the protagonist goes headfirst into the realm of the Spirit world, where they and the player must solve an old mystery, surrounding a failed ritual...and hopefully find a way to correct it.

What sets *Project Zero* apart from other survival horrors is its unique weapon system. The only weapon is the Camera Obscura, a special camera used to exorcise ghosts and see the unseen. The concept at first sounds rather ridiculous, especially if you're used to killing massive hoards of zombies with a chainsaw, or bludgeoning an indescribably monster to death with a crowbar, but how DO you expect to fight a ghost if the 'normal' survival horror weapons can't destroy something that isn't corporal? The camera system is unique because it forces players into unique first person perspective, causing players to literally face their fears. The closer a ghost gets, the higher amount of damage is dealt from the camera. Combining this with an intensely creepy atmosphere and frightening sound effects, the games do a marvelous job of keeping the player at the edge of their seats.

*Zero: Mask of the Lunar Eclipse*, is the fourth and most recent addition to the Project Zero series. Unlike its predecessors, the game was released to the Nintendo Wii console (previous games were released on the PS2 & Xbox). Without spoiling too much, the storyline for this game is not a prequel or sequel to previous games. So players won't need to play them to understand what is going on here. As expected, the storyline does follow a failed ritual and vengeful spirits, but there are a number of unique twists and turns in the story, making the story very enjoyable. The only common link between this game and the others is the Camera Obscura and Dr. Kuniyuki Asou (its occultist creator). The main characters are Ruka Minazuki, Madoka Tsukimori, Misaki Asou, and Choushiro Kirishima. 10 years ago, Ruka, Madoka, and Misaki were three of five girls kidnapped and brought to Rougetsu Island. Their experiences there caused all five girls to lose all memory of what happened there. Now present time, Misaki & Madoka have headed off to the island, with Ruka in pursuit, in search of regaining their missing memories. Ruka's mother asks Choushiro, the detective that discovered the girls all those years before, to go back to the island and return her daughter and friends safely.

**Graphics & Environment:** The game goes beyond the graphics of the 3rd game, atmosphere is spooky as always, with an array of ghostly character designs. Also, unlike previous installments, all item graphics (including normal standards such as herbal medicine) have been updated/redrawn for this installment. A more western style environment adds vertical perspective to gameplay adding an extra challenge of height, as some items are placed on varying levels making them harder to find or collect.



*Fatal Frame/Project Zero IV: Not everyone is friendly in this game*

**Game play:** The basic concept behind game play hasn't varied much from other games, but the wiimote adds a different perspective and is helpful in navigating this new world. The game utilizes both the wiimote (for direction) and the nunchuck (for your flashlight). The wiimote may offer a challenge particularly when loading up a charge when battling ghostly enemies (get ready to learn how to keep your hand steady!), but players should be able to pick this up very quickly. The wiimote also makes turning 180 or 360 degrees much easier, although as a trade picking up items is more of a task. The camera system also gives players a sensor system right off the bat, which is extremely helpful given the game's 360 environments. Ghost attacks are more focused on teleportation this time around, which makes this feature incredibly helpful. Puzzles have been greatly improved upon, showing more variety and creativity. You will play four different characters in this game, luckily, for the most part, the characters are evenly dispersed amongst chapters. One extremely helpful feature added to gameplay is that players are now alerted to their next destination which is marked on their map.

Save for a few minor bugs in gameplay, this latest game seems to continue the Project Zero legacy of intense creepiness. Hopefully Nintendo won't make players in Europe, Australia, and the US wait long to play the game!

# CAR-Pga

## AN INTERNATIONAL ROLEPLAYING ASSOCIATION

*by Paul Cardwell*

Many years ago, a terror was sweeping the nation. Children were killing their parents or themselves. Crime was rampant. The juvenile suicide rate, previously half that of adults, had risen to almost equal. Citizens public interest groups were organized to combat this terrorist threat - role-playing games!

Two gamers, one from Indiana, the other from Ontario, had met at Gen-Con and kept in touch. They decided that the only solution was to make a scholarly investigation of these games, find what the variable was that caused these problems, eliminate that, and then RPG would be a safe activity. Soon other gamers joined them, as well as non-gamers with an interest in the subject.

That was in 1987. The Committee for the Advancement of Role-Playing Games (CAR-PGa) is still investigating. They have yet to find a court-admissible or peer-review committee-acceptable cause and effect connection for any of those cases claimed by those early "public interest groups". Peer-reviewed studies showed gamers had a lower tendency to crime compared to the public as a whole. Government public health agencies could find nothing dangerous in the games and the gamer suicide rate (as claimed by the attackers) was about 1/500 that of the age-group as a whole.

The leader of one such organization died from cancer, still unable to face the fact that there were numerous causes of her son's suicide than that he played a few games in his school's talented and gifted education program. The leader of the other major group lost his medical license over multiple complaints of rape under color of therapy but is still practicing in another state, but no longer seeking headlines. Yet we still have the occasional game defense task - the most recent being July 2008. In that one, it was quickly determined he did not play D&D as the newspapers claimed, but some online adventure game, which had no more connection to his charges than if he had. However, for the most part, we are spending most of our time in the far more enjoyable work of exploring how these games can be used in curriculum and therapy, as well as improving the state of the art in recreation.

Over these two decades, we have seen the majority RPG demographics go from college, to high school, back to college, to "20-something, to middle aged. Three of our members are in their seventies. Our youngest member just graduated with his bachelors degree and is starting graduate school. Half have graduate degrees and almost a quarter have doctorates. Yet some of our most important work has been done by the younger members - even back when we had high schoolers.

Our projects advance by the amount of member interest, with some lying dormant for years, then suddenly coming to life again, while others relentlessly move on year after year. Those of the past and present are:

- Monitor the mass media for game coverage. An ongoing paragraph by paragraph media bias study shows an increase in neutral paragraphs, but an unchanging bias against RPG in anti versus pro game paragraphs and articles.
- Collect material to get RPG accepted as a proper Contemporary Culture study, equal to film, TV, comic books, etc. We have had the most success there although the fact that this acceptance first occurred in Brazil, France, Australia, and other countries calls into question just how much we had to do with it, even though we have members in those countries, which is how we found out about the studies.
- Explore ways to increase female and ethnic minority participation in what has too often been considered a white male

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geek recreation. Progress is being made, but too slowly. "Geek" no longer has a stigma and many, particularly in the computer occupations, openly claim the title. Female participation is no longer just accompanying a boy friend to his hobby, but increasingly comes from mothers wanting a suitable recreation for their kids, if not actively including it in a home-school curriculum. Most of our statistics for this project comes from a paragraph in a game convention review for our newsletter and monitoring specific online gamer discussion lists.

- Continue archival research into peer-reviewed studies and appellate case law. Several of these studies are by our members, and our archives currently fill 15 filing cabinet drawers and some 15 feet of bookshelf space.
- Continue a refutation of the "Trophy List", the anecdotal "case studies" by the anti-gamers from back in the 1980-90s period plus the media accounts which they would have included if they were still as well-organized as they once were. We currently have almost 180 such cases, but lack the outcome of many. The media is all too ready to front-page quote anyone mentioning RPG (generally D&D) in such tragedies, but by the time it gets to trial, games are rarely mentioned, and the whole thing is an interior few paragraphs or totally dropped from the paper by verdict time.

Where specific cases were claimed by the anti-game groups, most were disproved, none proved, and the rest lacked enough information to investigate - often missing such essential information as name, date, and/or place. Citations would be some obscure newspaper across the country from where the tragedy occurred, and they stopped providing citations at all around 1985.

- Find more material on the use of recreational RPG in psycho- and sociotherapy. This use of role playing predates the recreational applications, but so far we have found only a few instances of using commercial games for the purpose.
- At one time (late 1980s) game bashing was a popular activity at police in-service training sessions, drawing heavily on Pat Pulling's B.A.D.D. manuals written for the purpose. In the mid 1990s, these were largely banned by the state accrediting agencies, but still exist "underground" in at least the US and (apparently, judging by the media coverage) Brazil. We have only one of these manuals (mid-1990s, from Texas) and a few fragments from other sources. We need copies and information on the current extent of these.
- Improve the state of the art in game design and playing techniques. Most game publications (both print and online) are doing this to some extent. Specifically, we have studied ways to use anthropology to develop more realistic characters and settings, studied the ethics of gaming, dealt with the problems of violence in the games, and are open to other suggestions in this category.
- Produce a bibliography on RPG for use by gamers, scholars, and the general public. Currently it is seven pages in 10-point type. Many of these have been written by CAR-PGa members or are in-progress works from our ongoing projects. We have far more in our archives than are listed on our Literature List, and can be provided upon specific request. Unfortunately, we have had to increase our copying charge to 25¢ per page; since we started this service, toner price has doubled and stamps have increased by a third. Still, we do give sufficient description that one can find most of the list from any academic library, either in their collection or on Interlibrary Loan. Since this is not a money-making service for CAR-PGa, we encourage people to try the library first.
- Work to get RPG recognized as a performing art. The March-April 1995 Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil festival presented theater, film, TV, opera, and RPG performances and panel discussions on RPG & Art, the Epic Hero, World Construction, World of Tolkien, and folk story traditions. So far this is the only major example of such multimedia exhibitions we have found, but we hear rumors, but no details, that others have occurred.
- Assist as *amicus curiae* or witnesses in suits against banning RPG in prisons, lest this almost automatically granted restriction be used as a precedent to ban the games elsewhere. This is an area of frequent requests, but the nearest we have come was being qualified as a witness in a case that was dismissed on demand of the prison just before the trial was to start, and an amicus brief which disappeared without a trace (the court is not bound to accept these, but generally

will at least notify the author about the rejection). The rules are stacked against the plaintiff and we are generally asked for help after the apparently secret time limit has expired.

- And we are open to other suggestions for the expansion of this work.

Membership dues in CAR-PG are simply documented work for the cause, not monetary. No one gets any money from it. We expect something of use at least annually and those not current in those dues are dropped after a year. This makes CAR-PG a small, but very efficient, network. Our monthly Newsletter costs \$5.00 per year by e-mail, \$15.00 US and \$20.00 elsewhere if you want a printed copy by snail mail. The group's working language is English, but we welcome documents in any language (and are overjoyed if an English translation accompanies it). Our archives currently contain 11 languages - not separately counting four English and two French variants!

Our main needs at the moment are for more members to get better geographic coverage, and someone with access to the Lexis and Nexis databases to cover court cases and mass media coverage of the games. Google helps once we know about a case, but these are useful for finding out about them in the first place.

Further information can be found at [car-pga.org](http://car-pga.org) or by e-mailing questions to [carpgachair@yahoo.com](mailto:carpgachair@yahoo.com)

# LORD ORCUS LISTENS

## A GAMING ADVICE COLUMN

*by Steve Saunders*

Hello there mortals and non-mortals alike! I'm Lord Orcus, and I want to answer your questions. I would like to thank Lev for giving me the chance to do this, because listening to others and their concerns is something I do best, I think. It comes with the territory when you're a god of Evil and the Undead, as well as having centuries of killing adventurers accumulated and running heaps of games! Being a GM is tough work, but somebody has to do it, you know? That someone is usually me— and do you know why? I'll tell you: Because I listen.

Every part of me listens. And in this case, my eyes listen! I really care about these matters, you see.

What? How do you know my eyes can't listen?? I heard what you said right now! And how do you think I did that? With my horns? Ha!

Right. Let's get started and unHoly Dive right in, shall we?

First, we have Erica, who wrote in to me and asked this...

*"Why won't men shut up for a moment during gaming so that us women can get a comment in? Is that why there's so few female gamers?"*

*Signed, Erica"*

Excellent question, Erica! Well, it should come as no surprise that my pal Velia can dominate a conversation, but this is usually in response to Vis or Demogorgon going on and on about something. She normally just sits by and waits while everyone tangent-talks until she gets fed up and clears her throat. Truth be told, that physical action is really, really terrifying.

But I don't know if being unable to get a word in edgewise is the true reason why there aren't more females in gaming.

Except in the 414<sup>th</sup> layer of the Abyss (also known as D'troyt)! There, women of all species and daemonic persuasion completely overrun games with their vociferous chatter! It is absolutely nerve shattering to all but the hardiest of souls. Anyways, not many people go to that layer, save for the fans of their Decapo-Hockey team, The Bloody Wing Membranes.

Where was I? Oh, yes! Erica, I think you aren't bringing enough large bludgeoning instruments with you to your game sessions. You'd be surprised at how a simple cudgel can make someone shut the heck up. Why, just the other week Velia whacked Nergal with a near-by Lucerne Hammer and though it was messy, it was effective. Or, should using blunt objects prove to be something you're not into, I recommend summoning 6-10 undead minions (ghouls are great for this sort of thing) and have them slap their dirty mitts over the mouths of those dastardly man-boys whenever you need to be heard.

[Editor: Hey, Lord Orcus... You do know that a lucerne hammer is actually a spiky pole arm, not a blunt hammer?]

As for the lack of female gamers in general? I feel this may be related to the lack of undead gamers, and I will look more into this important matter post haste!

Next up, we have a LARPer... Hi LARPer! I'd want to pet you, but I don't pet LARPer. Furry cosplayers? That's

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another story. Here's what he had to say...

*“Orcus, I know you're not much of a LARP fan, but I'm desperate for help- my BFF's Noun: The Descriptive Adjective game is coming up in just a few short days, and I'm short on both time and money- what should I wear for the game?”*

*Signed, **Suitless Loser Under the Table**”*

Suitless (great name!), you need to think outside the lightning damaged box a little. Have you considered going to your LARP naked? Just think of how you will have the drop on the other players! There will be no discussion of mana pools, spunk stores, or character pip points when they see you there in all of your spectacular glory. As their jaws drop and they try to come up with something to say— HIT THEM WITH ALL YE GOT. And then you'll win.

Because, dear friends, winning is what Live Action RolePlaying games are all about. I've seen Darkon. I'm good friends with Vis, who's a Certified LARP Overlord.

I know.

And here is a man who is a trans-dimensional doctor in the slaying industry, as well as being a blazer of stars— whatever that means.

*“DOES CTHULHU HAVE A WILLY?”*

*Signed, **Angus Abranson of Cubicle 7 Entertainment***

Hmmm... Good question! The various names of the Old Ones and Elder Gods are myriad indeed. And the servants of Cthulhu are VAST! Not just in number; but in size, too. There's this one guy, who's a mayor or senator or something in one of the Terran realms who begged Cuth (that's what his pals call him) for a gold and death-laden lichdom, Cuth then transformed him into a 700 ft. tall being which only the truly insane could see his true size and gave him the stipulation that he share power with an older succubus of the highest of low order.

What? Oh. Right. Like I was saying, VAST! And he's quite a jokester-- This doesn't answer you question, does it Angus?

The fact is Cuth knows a few Willies. Now, a couple of them swear fealty to him and take on the nickname “Slick”, usually; but there is one Willy in particular that Cooth owns. I am going to assume you mean this fellow. Willy is really into the discothèque scene along with Zoth-Ommog, and he pretty much lives it up until his Master needs him. Cthulhu says he needs him around four times a day, and especially when he is alone, with no one watching.

I'm to understand that Cuth most regularly needs Willy for writing supplemental story material for games. I don't know what else a “fluffer” would be for. Do you?



And here we go again...

*“So... Lord Orcus... Do you watch a lot of gladiator movies?”*

*Signed, YOUR FACE”*

Yes.

Speaking of movies, I enjoy anything starring Flan Moulter, Queen of the Mind-Flayers. I’ve always thought they should make a Dark Sun flick, but Pee Wee’s Big Adventure suffices for now.

“YOUR FACE”. Is that Scarrokese?? If it is, give Hadrathus a big hug from me!!

Speaking of gladiators, I want to recommend the 1PG game

Pax Gladius. Man, that game is a hoot! Easy, too! And cheap. I need to save my money lately because I’m working on a new undead army to overwhelm and destroy various suburban shopping centers.

Why?

Because I’m cheap. It’s less expensive to create any army of rotting and ravenous minions than to try to fool around with my credit cards and their constantly changing interest rates.

Here’s one of my absolute favorite questions...

*“Lord Orcus, do we really need another version of D&D? I mean, what was wrong with the first one?”*

*Signed, Red Box Fan”*

My first reaction is to say “All Nine Hells NAW!! You should be playing Tunnels & Trolls *anyway*.” But, upon further consideration, I quite liked 3.5 Edition D&D. Without the OGL, there might not be Necromancer Games, which launched my modelling career. I’m also a great big winged fan of AD&D. I suppose it’s okay to enjoy these new editions, though 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. seems a bit... not D&D to me. I don’t know how to explain it, but I can tell you a 1<sup>st</sup> level fighter should be able to slaughter more than 20 goblins. Poor buggers! I’ll also tell you that I have no idea what an Eladrin is; and I don’t want to. Some things are best kept within the minds of others. Gnomes as monsters? Look I know a few Gnomes with a shady past and such, but is it fair to judge that whole noble race? Pah, I tell you. Pah!

I do love the “retro-clone” movement. I can only hope by your name that you are acquainted with Red Box Hack. If not, check it out, it’s free!

This next question came straight to me via Armored Attack Badger post...

*“Dear Lord Orcus,*

*I’m looking for an 80 page, British, black and white comics anthology that includes at least one amusing strip inspired by the author’s D&D experiences. What could you recommend?*

*Signed, Shameless Self-Promoter”*

You have no shame, you know that? It certainly earns my respect, promoter creature, but this doesn’t mean you’re safe from being burned alive or anything.

I suppose this would be a good time to point out the *Eleventh Hour* (link: <http://www.orangutancomics.co.uk/eleventhhour.html>) comic anthology tome, which contains the painfully amusing story *Danick and the Dragon*. There are some great tales in there and is worth every copper you spend on it. I demand you go forth and procure it immediately. I’ll kill you with rabid untrained nuclear-powered weevils if you don’t.

Let’s wrap up the mail with this final question...

*“Dear Lord Orcus,*

*Do you believe in ‘Man-Scaping’ or is this just another passing fad?*

*Signed, Hip 2 B Squared”*

Well, Hip, I thought that herpes would be a passing fad, and look what happened there. You can imagine me placing a Paris Hilton or Britney Spears joke in here, like right now. But I don’t think Man-Scaping is a passing fad, and I can see it catching on with geeks the world over. Men need scaping, too; not just goats and proud kerpca.

If you mortals have any Man-Scaping questions, I would like to direct you to Jess Blackshear who has a geek advice column over at Comics Waiting Room. In fact, go here (link: <http://www.comicswaitingroom.com/jess8.html>) to see her talk to me! It was quite fun. And informative.

That’s this inaugural edition of Lord Orcus Listens for you, snivelling toads. I am pleased you have stopped by to read this. Why wouldn’t you? Everyone wants to know what’s on my mind.

(Usually the best recipes on cooking sentient beings, but I digress.)

Thank you for reading this and the rest of RPG Review. Remember, I’m listening; so send any email correspondence to [orcus@orcsville.com](mailto:orcus@orcsville.com).

My adventures, trials, travails and triumphs are documented at Orcusville.com in the form of illustrative hilarity. I like to think my creative vassals are well handled, as well as paid in the finest salt available.

Until next time, keep those dice rolling and stay really goddamned evil.

**You know, for science.**

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# ***IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF RPG REVIEW***

*Pathfinder Beta Edition ... The Shadow of  
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Ranks ... Houses of the Blooded ... The Spirit of  
Middle Earth ... Rolemaster Retrospective ...  
and more!!*

