



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Administrivia, Editorial, Letters</i>	<i>many contributors</i>	<i>p1-2</i>
<i>Hot Gossip : Industry News</i>	<i>by Mingshi Wu</i>	<i>p3</i>
<i>Lewis Pulsipher Interview</i>	<i>with Lewis Pulsipher</i>	<i>p4-8</i>
<i>A History of Dungeons &amp; Dragons</i>	<i>by Lev Lafayette</i>	<i>p9-21</i>
<i>D&amp;D 4th Edition Future</i>	<i>by Nicholas William Moll</i>	<i>p22-23</i>
<i>D&amp;D 5th Edition Review</i>	<i>by Karl Brown</i>	<i>p24-33</i>
<i>D&amp;D 5th Edition Unusual Races</i>	<i>by Karl Brown</i>	<i>p34-44</i>
<i>Treasuring the Dungeon</i>	<i>by Da'vane</i>	<i>p45-47</i>
<i>Review : Islands of Purple-Haunted Putrescence</i>	<i>by Lev Lafayette</i>	<i>p48-50</i>
<i>A RPGaDay Trio</i>	<i>by three contributors</i>	<i>p51-60</i>
<i>Moview Review: The Boxtrols</i>	<i>by Andrew Moshos</i>	<i>p61-63</i>
<i>Next Issue : Pirates!</i>	<i>by many people</i>	<i>p64</i>

## ADMINISTRIVIA

RPG Review is a quarterly online magazine which will be available in print version at some stage. All material remains copyright to the authors except for the reprinting as noted in the first sentence. Various trademarks and images have been used in this magazine of review and criticism. This includes Dungeons & Dragons, originally by TSR and then by Wizards of the Coast. The Boxtrols is distributed through Focus Features. Any use of images, material etc, is not to be construed as a challenge to any intellectual property and is under "fair use" as review. Any use of images, material etc, is not to be construed as a challenge to any intellectual property and is used under "fair use". Text is in Nimbus Roman, headings in Nimbus Sans, front page in Utopia. Any errors or omissions are unintentional.

Cover image is a collection of original edition Dungeons & Dragons, Holmes edition Dungeons & Dragons, 1<sup>st</sup> edition Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, Moldvay, Cook, and Marsh edition Dungeons & Dragons, Mentzer edition Basic, Espert, Companion, Masters and Immortal edition Dungeons & Dragons, Allston's Wrath of the Immortals, 3.5 edition Dungeons & Dragons, 4<sup>th</sup> edition Dungeons and Dragons . The photographer apologises for forgetting to include 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Advanced Dungeons & Dragons. But you get the idea.

## EDITORIAL

This is an unusual issue of RPG Review, insofar that it has substantially less articles than other editions and, respectively, several of the articles are particularly long. My own major piece in this issue, A History of Dungeons & Dragons, covering the history of the various companies and reviewing every edition up to fourth inclusive, is over 10,000 words long in its own right. I am almost tempted to keep going, add proper literary analysis and submit it as a Master's degree in fine arts criticism. In addition to this there are the two articles by Karl Brown, in reviewing and elaborating the new edition of Dungeons & Dragons, are also of a similar size. The issue also will conclude with three regular contributors providing their own RPGaDay answers, which initially ran in August.

We are very lucky to have one of the great critics of RPGs, Dr. Lew Pulsipher as our interview subject for this issue. From the early days of White Dwarf through to leading contemporary game design, Lew has been an attentive and thoughtful contributor to the hobby and to D&D in particular. It is also very pleasing to have Nicholas Moll, a relatively local (to fellow Melbourne gamers and writers) providing his own contribution on the future of D&D 4<sup>th</sup> edition especially in the context of the release of this new edition. Da'vane provides an interesting retrospective on the dungeon crawl, and regulars Andrew Moshos and Mingshi provide their film reviews and industry news respectively.

In the interests of brevity, given the frightening shortage of space in this issue, I'll leave it at that. The issue has a straightforward consideration. Alas, it does mean I have to leave it to next issue for my rant about diversity and especially sexism in gaming given some recent events. But that will have to stay all bottled up until then. Until then, enjoy the adventure...

*Lev Lafayette (lev@rpgreview.net)*

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**2 RPG REVIEW ISSUE 25 September 2014**

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# HOT GOSSIP: INDUSTRY NEWS

by Wu Mingshi

Hosei bo Mr. Lev,

Surprise me not, see you late *again*, lah? Like the sound of deadlines flying past? \*whoosh\* \*whoosh\* go they? You know I give you sayang.. Every issue, Mr. Lev write to me, "Oh Mingshi you can have a few more days, I haven't quite finished writing everything yet". You ever on time, I will run on Orchard Road and scream "What the fish?! What the fish?!"

New report from Internal Correspondence explain Top Five games for what they say Summer 2014. Very hemiscentric, Minshi say (like you my new word?) Always summer here, just dry summer and wet summer. I think mean they May-June-July 2014, lah? Number 1 is still Pathfinder, Number 2 is now Dungeons & Dragons, Number 3 now Star Wars, drop 1 place, Number 4 Shadowrun, drop one place, Number 5 Dark Heresy back in again. Fata and Numenara no longer in top 5 this quartering. Mingshi say pay attention to Dungeons & Dragons. It have two release but Pathfinder still number 1. Mingshi thin this very strange, maybe D&D take top place in autumn (OK, ma si sa ko). Paizo Publishing not giving up with new edition, lah? Already plan for new setting guide for Andoran and Pathfinder Pawns: Iron Gods Adventure Path Pawn Collection and six month Iron Gods Adventure Path organized play campaign which runs August through January. Meanwhile, Dungeons and Dragons: The Rise of Tiamat will come out at the end of October. Tiamat? This not low-level adventure!



Very exciting to hear new version of Paranoia come next year because Kickstarter will raise lots of red envelopes. New game written by clever team with Eric Goldberg, Greg Costikyan, Grant Howitt and Paul Dean. Still have communists, but new trouble are terrorists who cause all kachau everywhere in Alpha Complex home. Sometime I think my home like big Alpha Complex. Special street, special pass, computer watch everywhere, computer say "I am friend". Sometime Minshi think she troubleshooter mutant traitor.

Not RPG but interesting to watch, Wizards of the Coast sue Cryptozoic Entertainment and Hex Entertainment over Hex: Shards of Fate.

Wizards say Hex infringes copyrights, patents, and trade dress of WotC Mage The Gathering

products. Cryptozoic have \$2.3 million Kickstarter to fund Hex. Mingshi not so close to card game but remember Cryptozoic do World of Warcraft card game, and just short time ago World of Warcraft card game finish. Maybe Wizards stay top with cabut?

That's all for me this quartering!

*Mingshi!* ([mingshi@rpgreview.net](mailto:mingshi@rpgreview.net))

# LEWIS PULSIPHER INTERVIEW

*with Lewis Pulsipher*



*Welcome to RPG Review, Lewis. The first question is a bit of standard one, but slightly different for yourself. You've been involved in roleplaying games since the earliest edition of Dungeons & Dragons. Can you tell us how you came to be involved, and what it was like in those nascent years?*

Glad to be "here." I played wargames from the time I was about 10 years old, first games like American Heritage BroadSides and then Avalon Hill games. I was active in play by mail and corresponded with Gary Gygax about the "International Federation of wargamers" club as early as 1966. (He said something like "don't call me sir, I'm not old enough.")

But D&D was another matter. Someone in my Michigan village had a copy but all I saw was a dice game, and at the time I usually said "I hate dice games". (By this time Diplomacy - no dice - was my favorite game.) But I was a founder of the "Michigan Organized Wargamers" club and went to a game convention in Detroit in 1975. There I had the opportunity to play D&D more or less through

the night (in a pickup camper!), and was hooked. At this point the game was the original three booklets plus the Grayhawk supplement.

What was it like? There was no World Wide Web then, no email, no video/video games to speak of, no computers practically speaking. In fact the first computer game I ever saw, sometime in the late 60s, was not a video game. It was played on a minicomputer that printed out the board for each turn because there were no monitors associated with most computers at that point, it was still the punch-card era. It was a lot harder to find other people of like mind, and of course somewhat later we had people who blamed D&D for problems in the world the same way people now blame video games. Conventions were small, not 50,000+ people. Magazines could actually make money then because they didn't have to compete with the Web. Piracy of the written word was very uncommon. I lived in England from 1976 to 1979 researching my doctoral dissertation, and might often travel quite long distances to small gatherings to play D&D until I found a regular group by teaching some university students how to play.

Magazines and fanzines were a primary form of communication amongst fans. I actually published a science fiction and fantasy game fanzine, Supernova, in the late 70s, and somewhere I have a letter from Dave Arneson describing his miniatures campaign with extraordinary individuals added, that was the basis of D&D, as later revealed in the Chainmail rules. I also published Diplomacy fanzines but never a specifically D&D fanzine.

*Your period of active commentary and design in roleplaying games seems to be broken up into two distinct periods; firstly from the mid-70s to the early-80s where you were writing for various magazines, contributing to modules (such as the princes in The Temple of Elemental Evil), and the Fiend Folio, engaging in various board game design. Then there's the period from the mid-2000s, where you've ventured into gaming education for video and tabletop games. What happened during the big gap?*

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**4 RPG REVIEW ISSUE 25 September 2014**

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In the early 80s I had several boardgames published. But in 1984 or thereabouts it appeared to me that RPGs on the one hand and computers on the other hand would crush boardgames - they have crushed board wargames - and at about this time TSR decided that they had to buy all rights to Dragon articles (before they bought first world serial rights) and White Dwarf/Games Workshop veered away from D&D because they lost the license to represent TSR in the UK. Also, I had to make a living. So I left the hobby and seriously taught myself computers, and in various ways computers are how I made my living until I retired.

What did I do during the hiatus? I played and reffed AD&D 1e, and played video games. I devised lots of additional rules and adventures, and those additional rules will probably be published in a couple of PDF books I'm working on that will include reprints of virtually all the articles I wrote in the late 70s and early 80s.

Britannia was first published in the UK in 1986. When I received a copy of the game I looked in the box, said "that's nice", and closed it up without reading the rules. I must have set some kind of record because I never saw anyone play a published version of Britannia until 2004 at PrezCon, 18 years after it was published. (And what did I say? "No way!" Because I saw the Jutes hanging out in the sea a couple centuries after they had disappeared. This was not possible in the game I designed but it was possible in the game Gibsons published owing to misunderstanding, so I fixed it in the FFG version.)

Then in about 2003 I was teaching computer networking in college and I had the choice of writing textbooks about computer networking or designing games. I discovered that Avalon Hill had disappeared in 1997, but I also discovered a Yahoo group of people who were still playing the game by email ("Eurobrit"). And I realized that probably the most effective thing I had done in my life to make people's lives a little happier was design Britannia. So I decided to go back into designing games.

*Your material in early issues White Dwarf magazines for original Dungeons & Dragons established you as a practical theorist of roleplaying games. In those early articles you criticised "silly/escapist" styles of games and games which were based around GM domination of a narrative, and argued for significant player control in the*



***game and story development, an internally consistent setting, and an emphasis on player skill. How much criticism did you receive at the time for these positions, and how do you think RPG game design has changed over time?***

I suppose you could say my views occasioned controversy at times, though no more than now. I've learned to sometimes ignore idiots and trolls these days, where I'd have engaged them decades ago. I follow an amusing twitter handle "Don't Read the Comments" - but I usually read them. Sigh.

In addition, there will always be the occasional person you never heard of, who inexplicably has it in for you - I've even been called an "elitist" lately, which is something I'd never have seen 30 years ago, I think. I am both blunt and not politically correct, and have a fairly thick skin. I despise the rampant egalitarianism - that everyone must be the same, instead of everyone must have the same opportunity - that's dragging down the country. It's impossible to avoid offending someone or other if you actually do anything useful. Owing to the influence of video games, especially MMOs, and a general change in game player attitudes, we've moved into an era of reward-based rather than consequence-based gaming. RPGs, being the bridge between video and tabletop games, are affected perhaps more than board and card games. Designers adjust to the audience, if they want a large clientele. Lots more on that with the next question.

***As an observer and critic of Dungeons & Dragons since the beginning, could you comment on your thoughts of the games' development, from the original to 5th edition? I note that recently you expressed some criticism of 4th edition, for example suggesting that its focus on combat was an area that computers do well, whereas the role-playing freedom aspects were diminished. Could you elaborate on this comments, and do you have a favourite edition?***

1st edition is my favorite, a fairly simple, cooperative "combined arms" game. 2e was not much different than 1e, why switch?

3e is a game for showoffs, for one-man-armies, a game where people do their best to gain unearned advantages by finding beneficial rules amongst the great mass of rules that have been produced. And the zeitgeist of the time was that referees were supposed to accept all those rules, though I never accepted anything beyond the base books when I reffed 3e. And it was much too "crunchy". It takes too long to generate a character, and the monsters with their stat blocks are a big headache even to experienced editors. D&D is about having cooperative adventures, not about one-upmanship, as far as I'm concerned.

As many have observed, 4e is "WOWified", made to be much more like the World of Warcraft MMO. 4e isn't really D&D, though it is a cooperative game (which 3e isn't). But 4e practically eliminates all the spells for exploration and interaction with NPCs and focuses almost entirely on combat, yet combat is what computers do best and human referees do worst. I suppose there was a strong effort to make the game easier to referee so that there could be more campaigns and more players. The parts that human referees are much better at than the computer, the exploration ("go anywhere") and the interaction with NPCs, are also the hard parts of refereeing.

I haven't read all of the 5e rules yet, but a reading of the spells, character classes, and the healing rules shows that it has become "infected" by computer games. Leveling up (quickly) rather than enjoying the adventure has become the focus. When I started playing, and going up from, say, 8th to 9th level might take more than a year of real time, you enjoyed the adventures because leveling up was so rare. And now you don't enjoy the game by earning your awards, you expect to be given rewards for participation. This isn't much different than what's happening in society as a whole, so I'm not blaming D&D in particular or any edition in particular. It's just following the crowd, which is more or less necessary if you want to sell to a very broad market. But I always played D&D as a kind of cooperative wargame with human opposition provided by the referee (though the referee is not trying to win, he or she is trying to scare the snot out of the players without killing them).

I don't much appreciate D&D as the new playground ideal. It was pretty hard to get killed in 4e (which I've played a fair bit but never reffed) and it looks like it's even harder to get killed in 5e, even though (I read) they retained that absolutely atrocious surprise rule that's going to get high level characters killed sooner or later. D&D breaks down when characters become really powerful, because so much depends on getting the drop on the enemy, on striking first.

When a die roll can get you at least a turn behind, You are Going to Die.

I heard second hand that Mearls and company thought about capping the game at 10th level. That would have been progress.

*Of course, it's not just roleplaying games that you've been involved in. You're possibly even more well-known for your boardgames, Swords and Wizardry, Valley of the Four Winds, Dragon Rage, Britannia. Of these games the latter two have been republished, and Britannia has seen several international editions and expansions, and even spinoff designs (e.g., Maharaja). There are persistent rumours of an expansion to the core rules you include Ireland and the Isle of Man as well. Is there any grounding to these rumours, and why do you think this game in particular, with it's epic time-scale and multinational player system, has been so successful?*

There are new editions of Britannia on the way. There was a variant of the first edition (Gibsons/AH) that included Ireland and Isle of Man, and "Ultimate Britannia," which is a variant of Epic Britannia, also includes Ireland and Man. Epic Britannia is a development of FFG Britannia that is a better teaching tool, more "realistic" if you will. For example, "starvation suicide" is not possible, and scurrying into the highlands when you know there will be a big invasion next round is not possible. Raiding on land is as much part of the game now, as it was historically. And the Romano-British are much stronger.

Rule Britannia (which also includes Ireland) is a shorter, diceless version using battle cards. Conquer Britannia is the shortest version, having been playtested in as little as 84 minutes. The new editions should be published over the next couple years if I'm still around.

Why has Britannia been so successful? Sometimes the designer isn't the best person to ask that question. It's very much a planner's game, and quite a bit a psychological game though there is a system to master. Planner's games are less and less popular as time passes - in society we don't plan as much anymore because we have satellite navigators, cell phones, DVRs, etc. - but part of the reason that Avalon Hill's wargames were so popular was that they were planner's games. Now even wargames have moved quite a bit toward the adapter or even improviser (card-driven games), which take less effort in an age when few people seem to have time and fewer are willing to expend effort on their entertainment. Multi-player (more than two) games have become more and more popular as time has passed.

Another reason Britannia has succeeded is, it's really pretty difficult to turn warfare into something for more than two sides, and still maintain a strong grip on reality. (Risk has more than two sides but Risk has very little to do with actual warfare.)

Finally, the methods I devised for Britannia are adaptable to most pre-gunpowder situations, and I've seen people try to use it for gunpowder and even modern era where the mechanics don't make much sense, but people like to play games with those mechanics.

*What can you tell us of some of the more recent planned and upcoming games like Barbaria and Germania? And Sea Kings, which I believe has recently been published? What other gaming endeavours is planned from the mind of Lewis Pulsipher? And whilst on that topic, why is it we've never seen an RPG from you? Do you think RPGs have a future?*

Sea Kings is on a Worthington Publications Kickstarter until 1 November, and the Kickstarter says it will be published in December (although I'm a little skeptical). My "Game Design" channel on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/user/LewGameDesign>) has at least one video about the game.

As you know I wrote a book titled Game Design (McFarland 2012) and I have several other books in mind, but the return on my time spent, in an era when fewer and fewer people read nonfiction, is quite discouraging. I'll be self-publishing three reprint books RPG material and Diplomacy variants as well as some books deriving from my online audiovisual courses.

The online game design courses - latest news at Pulsiphergames.com - provide a much better return on my time spent, and more and more people would rather listen than read. Also there's no competition, the only other online game design courses that don't cost an arm and a leg because they are for degrees, are text rather than video. (Brief titles of my

courses are: "Learning Game Design", "Brief Introduction to Game Design", "How to Design Levels and Adventures", "How to Write Clear Rules", "Get a Job in the Video Game Industry". Many more coming.)

I am still on track to have at least five games published next year including Sea Kings, Germania, Seas of Gold, Pacific Convoy, and a zombie game. (Haven't placed Barbaria yet.) I say "on track" because lots of things can go wrong. But the traditional wargame publishers are desperate to get out of what I call the "wargame ghetto," and many of the games I've been designing are in between wargames and peace games: games where everyone would like to be at peace so that they can prosper but most likely someone's going to start a war when they see someone else doing better. They are definitely games of maneuver and geospatial relationships, which is not true of many Euros. That's probably because most of my games are meant to be models of some reality, and most Euros are abstract (with a story tacked-on afterward).

Why no RPG from me? Well at one point I was writing a supplement (in those days before the hardcover Advanced D&D) that Games Workshop was going to publish as TSRs representative in the UK (I was living in the UK at the time). But that didn't work out and ultimately Games Workshop lost their representation of TSR. And I was getting boardgames published, so I worked on boardgames.

AD&D was my favorite game for decades and I could make it do whatever I wanted with my own house rules and additions, so I didn't feel the need to design another RPG. Even now, if I designed an RPG it would be intended to be and remain simple, and that doesn't fit what's left of the market. So until a few years ago I didn't even think about designing an RPG, and when I started it was to be used in conjunction with a boardgame, not in the traditional sense.

Another way to look at it might be this: the composer Sir William Walton, when he finally wrote an opera, said something like "never write an opera - too many notes." So I could say about RPGs "too many words." More important, I'm not a fiction writer, I'm too literal-minded, and I think most people who design RPGs are really frustrated fiction writers, not game designers per se. Game design is about problem solving and critical thinking within constraints, RPG design is (especially now, when gamers in general are much more story-oriented) about storytelling with few constraints.

My favorite game nowadays is the game of designing board and card games.

The future? RPGs will be played as long as the real world holds itself together, though I think gradually computers will overtake tabletop RPGs, not because they're better but because they're easier. Being a good referee of a tabletop RPG is difficult, and for most people it's a form of work, work they're accepting to entertain their friends. (In fact I've always said I don't trust people who would rather referee than play!) As computers become more powerful and computer programming gets better a computer can take on more and more of the work required of a really good RPG referee. Perhaps computer assistance is the wave of the future but I suspect in most cases it will be "let's play this cooperative RPG or this MMO" on computers, rather than "let's use computer assistance for tabletop games."

Tabletop RPGs have the social aspect in their favor that you can't get with computer RPGs, even MMOs. Many of my friends are D&D players. I met my wife through D&D in 1977, and in that group of five, two others (who were not in a relationship when we started playing D&D) married one another, and the last one married my wife's best friend! And we're all still married. You can't beat that!

Unfortunately, RPGs tend to be "prisoners of capitalism" (see my video about this on my YouTube channel: <http://youtu.be/fZy6Lvc7kxY>), so we more or less inevitably get more and more rules until the game gets so complex that it starts to collapse under its own weight, and we go on to a new edition. At the same time in other forms of gaming we see games getting simpler and shorter, not more complex. The RPG market collapsed several years ago, and between capitalism, crowdsourcing, and saturation of the market we're not going to see it recover. The biggest companies can prosper in that climate but it's extremely hard for little companies to make a living. Yes, a little company can sell 500 or even 1000 copies of something, but that's not enough to make a living. People can do these kinds of things as a hobby but having to earn a living another way takes an enormous amount of time and energy.



# A HISTORY OF DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

*with Lev Lafayette*

The story of the role playing game hobby, from tabletop, to computer, to networked massive multiplayer online RPGs, all comes down to Dungeons & Dragons (and arguably before that Braunstein, but that's a story for a different article). The core structure of player-controlled characters, in a crossover between wargame and "improvised radio theatre" (RuneQuest, 1978), remains consistent and has its origins with D&D. Whilst there are many examples of colourful episodes in the history of the game and the various companies that have been involved in its publishing, finding a summary single article which covers the story is often difficult. This is an attempt to bring together some of the major features of the various game editions and the changes in publishers over the years.

## **Original Edition and Tactical Studies Rules**

The origins of Dungeons & Dragons are under some dispute. Co-author Dave Arneson claims that there is little in the original fantasy supplement to the medieval Chainmail wargame rules that are directly transposed to Dungeons & Dragons. Instead he emphasises his own single-unit variant in the Blackmoor campaign as having greater influence [3], along with levels for each of these units. Gary Gygax, claims that whilst Arneson's variant on Chainmail was important, nevertheless says "The D&D game draws from its rules, and that is indisputable. Chainmail was the progenitor of D&D.." It should be mentioned however that Chainmail did have single-unit counters for heroes and superheroes and, by the second edition, fantasy rules as well. The difference of the relative importance of the two designers would eventually lead to a legal dispute over royalties.

Whilst the original Chainmail was published by the small-press Guidon Games by 1973 it has closed down. Gygax sought an publisher for his news single-unit fantasy adventure game called Dungeons & Dragons. However, as no publisher was forthcoming, Gygax and Don Kaye formed Tactical Studies Rules in October 1973 to self-publish their products, with \$2,400 in startup capital - at the time median family income \$12,051. In 1974, using Kaye's basement as the operations base of the new company, they published 1,000 copies of D&D, and selling them for \$10 a box (dice were an extra \$3.50). Towards the end of the year, Brian Blume was introduced to the capital with a further \$2,000. Kaye served as President of the partnership, Blume as Vice President, while Gygax held the title of Editor. In January 1975, a second print run of 1,000 was published. Don Kaye died suddenly at the end of January 1975 and his wife Donna Kaye, looked after the administrative and accounting tasks for a brief period of time.

With Don's passing and Donna's disinterest in gaming, a new corporate structure was developed, TSR Hobbies, and then incorporation as TSR, Inc, purchasing Donna's share. The original TSR Hobbies stock agreement, executed by Gygax and Blume on August 1, 1975, awarded Gygax 150 shares of stock and Blume 100; however subsequent investments from the Blume family - some \$34,000 immediately after establishment - included 200 shares to Melvin Blume, and another 140 to Brian Blume. TSR and Dungeons & Dragons began to expand; another 2,000 item print run of D&D in October 1975, and an increasing stock of games (including Dungeon! and Empire of the Petal Throne, and Boot Hill. In 1976 the supplements Greyhawk, Blackmoor, Eldritch Wizardry, and Gods, and Demi-gods & Heroes, and began hosting GenCon, all contributing to \$300,000 in revenue. The company also hosted the first GenCon in 1976 which included the first D&D open tournament.

The original Dungeons & Dragons came in a small brown box, three A5 books with a cardstock cover, saddle-stapled, with a single-column justified text and sans-serif text, plus a handy booklet of reference sheets. The brief table of contents is marked in each book as "Index". The artwork throughout is thoroughly amateur in technique, creatively simplistic (the Amazon adventuring in her briefs apparently appeals to simple interests), and typically without context with the text. The books describe the scope of the work; "Men & Magic" (32p), "Monsters & Treasure" (40p), "The Underworld & Wilderness Adventures" (36p) and also indicates quite a reasonable organisation of the text's structure (and makes up for some pretty bad organisation within these structures), and come with the subtitle "Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures" - the notion of roleplaying games had not yet been invented. This is a single-unit fantasy wargame. The writing is quite informal with moments of Gygax's classic style and humour, but is mostly terse.

The opening book makes an interesting inclusion of Avalon Hill's "Outdoor Survival" as recommended equipment, along with dice, "Chainmail", D&D itself, along with the usual paper, pencils, etc, and of course imagination and "1 Patient Referee". The latter is certainly understandable given it is also recommended that there be one referee per twenty players. Three classes of character and racial advantages and restrictions are described; Fighting Men (Men, Elves, Dwarves, "and even Hobbits"), Magic Users (Men and Elves), and Clerics (Men only). Character class restrictions are noted at this point as well; Fighters have access to all weapons and armour, Magic-Users have no armour and a dagger only, and Clerics cannot use edged weapons. Dwarves are limited to 6th level, but have advantages in dungeoneering and magic resistance. Elves can be limited to 4th level fighters or 8th level magic-users and can switch between the two between adventures. Hobbits are limited to 4th level, have magic resistance, and "will have deadly accuracy with missiles as detailed in CHAINMAIL". A two-page equipment list is provided along with a coin-grained encumbrance system.

Abilities are Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, Constitution, Dexterity, and Charisma, rolled in 3d6 in order, with some transfers allowed at varying values once the character class is selected. Ability bonuses provide bonus experience, add hit points, provide bonuses to missile attacks. Common is specified as the universal language along with alignment tongues, along the Law-Neutrality-Chaos range. Gold-piece based experience points are introduced, with modifications based on the dungeon level of the monster. There is also the fascinating implication by example that total hit points are rolled each level gain. Different combat matrixes are provided for Men and Monsters with a d20-roll high versus target number based on armour class; it's a wonky progression so the tables are necessary. All attacks do 1-6 points of damage, regardless of weapon. Also provided is a Cleric vs Undead table with the classic chance, turn, or destroy results. However the majority of the first book is taken up with spells and spell descriptions for Magic-Users and Clerics. Some 92 spells are provided for spell levels 1-6 each with a few lines apiece. The classics are there of course; the relatively over-powered Sleep spell, the d6 per level Fireball, and so forth. Of note is the short range of the Lightning Bolt, Reincarnation based on the alignment table, Raise Dead doesn't work on Hobbits, and with spells limited to sixth level, there is no Wish etc.

The second book, "Monsters and Treasure" is just that. It starts with an statistical table of the Monsters in creature type order, followed by an alphabetical listing of some fifty Monsters, typically a paragraph of description, followed by magic/maps determination, descriptions of magic items, their saving throws, and treasure tables. Monster statistics are simple the number appearing, movement rate, armor class, hit dice, treasure type and the amusing spelling error, "% in liar" (medusae are typically liars, nixies are compulsive about it, but lycanthropes can be trusted by their word). The monsters are the classic types with the game's own contributions, such as the Purple Worm, and with innovative features (e.g., wights removing experience levels). Dragons, as the namesake of the game, get a few pages of description, are distinguished by six types and have variation in breath weapon attack and hit-dice by age. The magic items table initiates the enormous bias towards magic swords, along with their alignment and intelligence. Although making up only 5% of magic items, the miscellaneous magic items are the most interesting; including the ring of three wishes.

The third book initiates discussion of the idea of "mazy dungeons", with various tricks and traps described. The concept of dungeon level having a rough equivalence of monster strength and rewards becomes apparent by the various tables. For the wilderness encounters translation notes are provided for use of Outdoor Survival (e.g., catch basins are castles, buildings are towns etc). Castle inhabitants are determined randomly with a rather exotic array of creatures commonly as guards and retainers. Wilderness adventures and encounters convert feet to yards for distance, and use hexagon maps rather than grids. Encounters are based on random determination based from terrain type. Several pages are offered on castle construction and upkeep and seaborne combat and encounters. Finally, there were supplements for Greyhawk, Blackmoor, Eldritch Wizardry, and Gods, Demigods, and Heroes. These added the thief class, the paladin sub-class of fighter, druids incorporated HD type by class, asymmetric ability bonuses, damage by weapon type instead of all doing 1d6,

### **Growth and Bifurcation: Dungeons & Dragons and Advanced Dungeons & Dragons**

In 1977, Dungeons & Dragons effectively split. Initially the idea was that there would be an introductory Basic Set Dungeons & Dragons game that could lead players to Advanced Dungeons & Dragons. In this year the Advanced

Dungeons Dragons Monster Manual was released, to be followed with the Players Handbook in 1978, and the Dungeon Masters Guide in 1979, all by Gary Gygax. However, rather than remaining an introduction to Advanced Dungeons & Dragons a new edition of Basic D&D was released in 1981 by Tom Moldvay, followed by an Expert set in the same year by Dave Cook. These became a completely new game in its own right, eventually becoming what would be known among fans as BECMI (Basic, Expert, Companion, Masters, Immortals) Dungeons & Dragons.

The 1977 Basic Set Dungeons & Dragons is a strange creature in many ways. Written by outsider and fan, John Eric Holmes, M.D., a need was identified to provide an introductory version of the original D&D in a way that would be accessible to younger players and to expand the market; the Introduction read: "Dungeons & Dragons is a fantastic, exciting and imaginative game of roleplaying for adults 12 years and up." The book is described attributed to Gygax and Arneson, with Holmes listed as the editor. There is an interesting change of emphasis here, with the subtitle of the game being "Rules for Fantastic Medieval Role Playing Adventure Game Campaigns". Note the explicit difference from original Dungeons & Dragons. Designed only for characters of levels 1 to 3, the Preface explicitly states "Players who desire to go beyond the basic game are directed the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons books".

The colourful box cover of a red dragon on a pile of treasure is reprinted in blue tone on the 48 page rulebook; the uncredited artist is David Sutherland III. Other internal art is by Donald Trampier and the whimsical Tom Wham. It's of average technique and above average creativity, and usually more of non-contextual filler, rather than being associated with the text. The writing style itself is semi-formal, whilst the structure is somewhat chaotic. The table of contents is comprehensive, and needs to be and whilst there is no index, there is two pages of charts and tables at the back of the book. Apart from that the rules are very similar, albeit in a reduced version, to the somewhat confused collection of pamphlets that ultimately constituted original Dungeons & Dragons.

Each of the standard characteristics are determined by a 3d6 roll, with a reduced range of effects for high and low scores (e.g., there are no strength bonuses for hit or damage), and some abilities for characters to move their ability scores around depending on class. The classes available for play are Fighting Men, Magic-Users, Clerics, and Thieves, with the non-human races of Dwarves, Elves, and Halflings also available. They are also classes of sorts, with all Dwarves and Halflings being Fighting Men, except if they opt to be thieves, in which case see the rules in Advanced Dungeons & Dragons. Elves also have this option, but the 'average Elf' is a combination Fighting Man and Magic-User. The various races have the sort of bonuses as mentioned in original Dungeons & Dragons, this time with the Halfling attack bonus with missile weapons included! The rules also mention that Advanced Dungeons & Dragons will include new sub-classes including paladins and rangers (fighting men) monks and druids (clerics), illusionists and witches (magic-users), and assassins (thieves). Whatever happened to witches? Alignment is now a two-dimensional axes of Lawful-Neutral-Chaos and Good-Neutral-Evil, and a brief equipment chart oddly does not correlate or even remotely assist with the encumbrance rules.

As previously established, dungeon level roughly equates with monster level. Experience points are based on monster hit dice plus bonuses with a division from character level. The game provides for experience levels one to three with charts for the aforementioned classes; interesting the elf (being a magic-user/fighter with 1d6 hit points doesn't quite match with the charts which would be  $(1d8+1d4)/2$ . The smaller halfling receives a 1d6 rather than a 1d8 for hits. Magic-users have a maximum number of spells depending on their intelligence and saving throws against from magic spells to dragon breath depend on class, with particular bonuses for the lucky dwarves and halflings.

A few pages are spent on describing the spells available to magic-users and clerics with clearly stated range and duration according to spell level. Third level magic-user and second-level cleric spells are listed, but not described. The combat system follows, very briefly, with different tables for monsters and character classes cross-referenced to armour class providing a threshold 'to hit' number from a d20. Brief notes are provided for special weapons, such as fire, poisoned weapons, and holy water, along with variant ranges for missile weapons. All weapons do 1d6 damage, initiative is determined by the dexterity ability, and the parry provides a -2 attack penalty, but cancels the defender's attack roll.

At twelve-and-a-half pages, the monster descriptions take up the largest portion of the rulebook. These are described briefly, typically with a short paragraph constituting description and tactics. Most of the text is the stat block of movement, hit dice, armor class, treasure type, alignment, attacks, and damage. The namesake of the game, Dragons,

receive a page in their own right with their variant size, age, hit points, breath weapon, and colour. A great number of the creatures listed (dragons, giants, purple worms, vampires) are far more powerful than most 3rd-level parties could hope to achieve so the utility of mentioning them in the basic set is questionable. The rest of the book consists of a description of the treasure types, the resultant magic items and an impressive little scenario which, whilst in the style of an somewhat inexplicable old-school dungeon crawl with relatively random populations, does have some plot development potential as well.

Alongside the production of Basic set Dungeons & Dragons was the famous series of hardback books that would serve as the canonical standard of roleplaying games for many years to come; the AD&D Monster Manual, Players Handbook, and Dungeon Masters guide. The first two, of 112 pages and 128 pages respectively, had absolutely superb binding, designed to last for decades, if not centuries. The Dungeon Masters Guide is less well-bound at 240 pages, but still reasonably well even compared to contemporary products. Whilst the monster menagerie of the Monster Manual is a fair piece of work, the famous temple plundering of the Players Handbook and the efreet of the DMG stand as iconic images of the roleplaying hobby as a whole. In each publication the the quality of interior art was fairly good (although the boundaries of acceptable technique was pushed on occasion in the Monster Manual), but usually without context. On occasion they told quite a story on their own right. Both the Players Handbook and the Dungeon Masters Guide suffer from the combination of sheer size and sub-optimal internal organisation (e.g., lack of chapters). Notably these are authored by Gary Gygax and not Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson.

The Monster Manual was an alphabetical list of over two hundred creatures. There is a heavy bias towards the mythic fantasy of medieval European or Ancient Hellenic origin, although this is not exclusively so by any stretch of the imagination and some (e.g., Doppelganger) are quite inaccurate. Approximately 1/2 of the text consists of the most inane creature statistics and military organisation, which establishes their role in the game as an object to kill and with treasure to steal. One receives a full complement of combat abilities, but only a modicum, if any, information on where the creature actually lives, how it interacts with members of its own kind and different species, what it eats, and how it reproduces. Some of the more useful rules and tables (e.g. a summary of creatures, encounter tables etc) are found in the DMG instead.

As for the Players Handbook, the game system is expressed as a modified version of previous additions. All ability scores now have actual influence on the game system. Various minimums and maximums are applicable for character race and class (e.g., maximum strength for a female elf is 16). Some ability scores affect specific activities in a class-based manner, and Strength, of all abilities has the potential of "exceptional strength" is expressed on a percentile on scores of 18, but only for Fighters and their subclasses. Racial stock limits classes and levels. Only humans may be unlimited in level across all classes, but almost all classes can be unlimited in the Thief class, except Half-Orcs, who can be unlimited in the Assassin subclass. To say the least, some of the race and level restrictions make very little sense; Elves, the archetypal woodland sentient species, cannot be rangers or druids, but their half-elven cousins can. Races also affect ability scores, but one must confess even the greatest modifications (+1 or -1) are very mild. The two axes alignment system is included.

The equipment lists has a surprising emphasis on somewhat obscure pole arms with weapons having penalties and bonuses against particular armour classes, although some combinations are equivalent. Weapons also vary in damage against whether the opponent is small-medium or large. Approximately half the book is taken up with spell descriptions. These are arranged by class (Cleric, Druid, Magic User, Illusionist) and level of power. Each spell must be memorised on a daily basis with the total distribution determined by class and rank. Each spell is differentiated by range, duration, area of effect, components (verbal, somatic and/or material), casting time and saving throw modifications. There is also a Psionics system, which is notable for amusing modes of attack and defense remotely based on the Freudian trichotomy ("Id Insinuation", "Ego Whip"), and a rather unplayable "psychic strength point" system. The final section of the book includes an alignment graph and the planes of existence, including the rather evocative assignment of Earthly polytheistic pantheons within the AD&D alignment system.

In the DMG, AD&D states itself as belonging to the game-school as opposed to the realism-simulation school. As a whole it is a collection of almost random tables and rulings on the running of the game for the numerous cases that could be encountered. From a character perspective, there's variable generation of ability scores, rulings on spell

effects, an extremely deadly disease and infection table, secondary skills, numerous hirelings and men-at-arms, lycanthropy, pricing, and clerical spell acquisition. There are extensive encounter tables differentiated by terrain, movement, and perceptual abilities, followed by combat tables (the one minute round). "Realistic combat", with reduced lengths of rounds, individual attacks and parries, hit locations, specific wounds and critical hits are rejected as "not the stuff of heroic fantasy", a very dubious literary statement, and looking quite odd alongside issues such as weapon speed factors (which sometimes allow multiple attacks on tied initiative) or the cumbersome unarmed combat rules. There is, of course, a very fairly hefty magical research and items section, along with extensive appendices on random dungeon generation and the like. What is most telling in the DMG is the exploration of Gygax's thoughts on game design and play which a strange combination of the insightful, the unsystematic, and the arbitrary.

In addition to these core books there were numerous supplements, including *Unearthed Arcana* which included new races, classes, and other material to expand the rules in the *Dungeon Masters Guide* and *Players Handbook*. The *Dungeoneers Survival Guide* and *Wilderness Survival Guide* provided both mundane setting information for players and DMs alike in such environments and provided a non-weapon proficiency system that would form the foundation for future skill systems. There was also the first edition of *Deities and Demigods*, which was mostly gods as monster stat-blocs, and *Manual of the Planes* which expanded on the Appendix of the *Players Handbook* into the difficult planar environments.

In 1981 a new edition of *Basic Rules Dungeons & Dragons* was released with Tom Moldvay as editor. In a boxed set with the famous module, B2 *The Keep on the Borderlands* and with striking cover art by Erol Otus, it was clearly written, and well organised with an extensive table of contents and index. Whilst covering levels 1-3 (like the Holmes edition), it was followed up by an Expert rules published in the same month by Dave Cook and Steve Marsh, and with a clever supplementary cover again by Otus. These would be replaced by the Frank Mentzer editions of the rules with artwork by Larry Elmore. A new Basic and Expert edition would be released in 1983, an *Companion* set in 1984 (character levels 15-25), a *Masters* set in 1985 (levels 26-36), and an *Immortals* set in 1986. A compiled and impressively bound hardback was released in 1991, edited by Aaron Allston, who also revised the immortals rules with *Wrath of the Immortals* in 1992. An often overlooked but as a matter of apparently deliberate design, there was a gradual increase in the recommended minimum age from Basic D&D upwards; aged 10 for Basic, Expert, and *Companion*, 12 for *Masters*, 14 for *Immortals*.

The differences between the Moldvay/Cook-Marsh editions and the Mentzer editions are entirely stylistic. Effectively they are both graduated and introductory versions of the *Dungeons & Dragons* game, but with an impressive degree of clarity and internal consistency that was lacking in the allegedly "advanced" counterpart. Ability bonuses and penalties had consistent values across all characteristics. Character classes were the human Clerics, Fighters, Magic-Users, and Thieves, and the demi-human Elves, Dwarves, and Halflings. The clarity and consistency does not necessarily imply flexibility. Ability scores were still determined by a 3d6 roll with limited options for modifications. Level limits applied for to demi-humans; 8th level for Halflings, 10th level for the Elves (with fighting and magic-use abilities), and Twelfth level for Dwarves. Nor does it necessarily imply a greater sense of 'realism', although the 10-second structured combat round did seem more plausible than the one minute version in AD&D. As with previous editions of the game, the majority of text was taken up with spell and monster descriptions. Apart from formatting differences the most significant change between the two releases of the Basic and Expert sets is how the former in particular was written and organised for a younger audience.

The differentiation between the different boxed sets wasn't just the character levels, or the recommended minimum age. It was also the subject matter. Basic D&D was very much about adventures in dungeons. The DMs advice is explicitly about setting a up an underground scenario, using dungeon level encounter tables, ensuring that dungeon plans are made, and stocking the various locations within. In the Expert set, aided by the classic scenario module, X1 *The Isle of Dread*, the DM advice is orientated towards wilderness adventures, with like encounter tables, mapping overland lands, and with additional information on waterbourne adventures and weather. In the *Companion* set, the characters are becoming extremely famous either as rulers of lands, or as travelling adventurers - a defining choice which the characters must make. Domain administration, political intrigues, and mass combat rules are introduced at this point, along with the exotic otherworldly planes of existence. New character classes are introduced (e.g., the *Druid*), and the scope of the wilderness extends to the continental.

In the Masters set, the characters have reached the stage of being world famous and as a result the scope of the campaign world is extended to the entire world. Interplanar travel is introduced as being more common, along with quests for immortality. As can be expected, the two Immortals sets deal with the power and politics of the gods among the spheres (time, matter, energy, entropy etc). In addition to subject matter, there was additional complexity and development in the rules. In higher levels the demi-human races no longer gained levels, but did acquire improvements in combat and saving throws; they tend to retreat into their clans and protect their artifacts. A variety of skills are introduced in the Companion set, and training and weapon mastery in the Masters set.

In this period the growth of Dungeons & Dragons and TSR was nothing short of phenomenal, having revenues of \$12.9 million in 1981, a payroll of 130, and breaking twenty million in sales by 1982 (Wall Street Journal, Jan 7, 1983). Games Workshop initially gained exclusive rights to distribute TSR products in the UK, which included some local productions, eventually with a TSR UK branch established in 1980. The community engaged in some community outreach with the the Role Playing Game Association also established in 1980. Additional roleplaying games were introduced to the market, such as Top Secret, Gangbusters, Star Frontiers, and the Endless Quest choose-your-own-adventure book series, and later Marvel Super Heroes, Indiana Jones, and Conan. The game was translated into foreign languages, including Danish, Finnish, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Norwegian, and Swedish.

The company structure underwent some changes as well. Melvin Blume's shares were transferred to Kevin Blume, leading to a board of directors consisting of Kevin (president of operations) and Brian Blume (president of creative affairs), and Gyax (company president and CEO). Product diversification increased, including some unexpected ventures - the Greenfield Needlewomen business perhaps being the most unusual. There were some impressive acquisitions (SPI, Amazing Stories). With the release of the Dragonlance books in 1984, TSR became the number one published of science fiction and fantasy in the U.S. Just the company had split their chief product into multiple version, the company itself split in 1983, the company was split into four companies, TSR, Inc. (the primary successor), TSR International, TSR Ventures and TSR Entertainment. The latter, headed by Gyax, became Dungeons & Dragons Entertainment Corporation, and attempted to license D&D products to television and film.

### **The End of the Gyax Era, 2nd ed AD&D, and Eventual Collapse**

The diversification, reorganisation, and expansion of TSR would prove to be a poor decision. Actual revenues were well below forecasted values and the company continued to take on more staff. In need of additional liquidity, TSR took out a \$4 million loan from the American National Bank in Chicago. With Gyax concentrating on the hopeful acquisition of media rights, Mentzer took up more of the game development role. There was one particularly notable success in Gyax's attempt in media licensing, and that was the 1983 Marvel entertainment production of the Dungeons & Dragons CBS Saturday morning cartoon, which apart from licensing also increased exposure of the game to a target audience. Nevertheless, it was insufficient. As the D&D fad-market disappeared TSR's creditors became more aggressive insisting on the addition of three outside directors to the board in 1984 (James Huber, Robert Kidon, and Wesley Sommers) with Richard Koenings becoming acting President and CEO, replacing Blume. This change however was short-lived; in March the following year Gyax and his son Ernie (who had a tiny percentage of the company), secured a controlling interest, and Gyax became President and Chief Executive Officer of TSR, Inc. During this tumultuous period, the company recorded a net loss of around \$1.5 million and some 75% of the staff were laid off, some of whom joined other game companies such as Pacesetter or Mayfair, or moved into the greener fields of video game development.

The day of October 22nd, 1985 was a special day for TSR Hobbies. The official business was to review the negotiations with the American National Bank and then to discuss royalty payments to authors. Brian Blume had, however, exercised his option for seven hundred shares, and as a result Gyax no longer had a controlling share of the company. When Gyax refused to resign, the TSR board terminated his role as President, CEO, and chair of TSR Inc, with the recently introduced Vice-President Lorraine Williams voted in as his replacement of President and CEO. Williams had previously agreed to purchase the entire Blume family stock in TSR, close to \$600 000, effectively making her the largest and controlling shareholder in the company. Williams was related to the Dille family who owned the rights to the original Buck Rogers comics and as a result, came with some notable financial backing. Gyax, who had always insisted that TSR should not be controlled by non-gamers, opposed Williams' new appointments, but to no

avail. Whilst attempting legal action into 1986, the courts declared that the changes were all legal. In October 1986, Gygax resigned from all positions within the company selling his remaining stock to Williams to form New Infinity Productions.

Success brings attention, and when success is based around historical pagan religions of the past with a hint of simulated medieval occultism with an evident popularity among teenagers, some elements of society of going to raise unfounded fears and others whilst sections of the media are going to see opportunity for sensationalist coverage. Thus Dungeons & Dragons was targetted by some fundamentalist Christian groups for the promotion of paganism or devil worship, for nudity in images (e.g., the succubi), and a panic with the highly fictionalised novel and movie 'Mazes and Monsters' surrounding the disappearance of one player, James Dallas Egbert III. Whilst such controversies brought the game increasingly to the public eye, rather than engage in a strident defense the new regime at TSR choose instead to give them implicit acceptance of these criticisms in the production of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2nd edition. Devils and Demons were dropped in the Monster Manual, the half-orc was dropped a character race in the Players Handbook (not that it ever was particularly advantageous to select one), and assassins and monks were dropped as classes.

Whilst Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2nd edition was not released until 1989, over two years from Gygax's departure, a team of developers started work on the game in 1987, the same year that the enduring Forgotten Realms setting was released. The following year saw a strange combination of releases with the Bullwinkle and Rocky RPG (complete with hand puppets) and the serious wargame, The Hunt for the Red October, based on the Tom Clancy novel. When AD&D 2e was released it came with a small avalanche of products; the Player's Handbook, the Dungeon Master's Guide, three volumes of the Monstrous Compendium, now in three-ring binder folders, two additional Complete Handbooks (Fighters and Thieves) and the Spelljammer campaign setting.

With Dave Cook responsible for design, the Players Handbook and Dungeon Masters Guide both came in three column justified sans-serif text with an excellent table of contents and index. There is very clear chapter notation on each page both in terms of title and with a special symbol. The artwork, with Jeff Easley and Larry Elmore being particularly notable contributors, was excellent in terms of technique, but lacked creativity and indeed, often reflected late 20th century styles in a fantasy context (especially with female characters). Indeed, this is a running theme throughout the second edition books; in terms of dull substance they were quite good, but they lack flair. Another matter which stood out is that whilst there was a very high level of backwards compatibility with first edition AD&D, the numerous insights to RPG game design that came from numerous competitors over the previous decade was overwhelmingly ignored.

What was different between the two issues was relatively minimal. Documented ability scores went up to 25, like the Deities & Demigods of 1st edition. Major class groups and subclasses were more explicit, with the interesting albeit somewhat complex specialist wizards with the major school of magic and opposition schools, and bards established as a subclass of thief. A skill system of sorts with non-weapon proficiencies makes an appearance, derived from the Dungeoneer and Wilderness Survival Guides. There is very useful expansions to the time, movement, and perception sections, but the spell chapters engage in an impressive level of bloat, expanding to over one hundred pages in their own right, in a 256 page book. The second edition Players Handbook moves a great deal of useful player information from what was previously in the DMG to the PH, including ability generation, combat matrices, cleric turning tables, and saving throws.

Conversely, the Dungeon Masters Guide was a somewhat reduced tome. Level limits by race could now be found here, with optional rules for unlimited or at least expanded limits for non-humans. Some of these were still a little strange; Elves could advance further than Dwarves as Clerics, but still could not be Druids, for example. Another optional rule for generating new character classes is particularly prone to exploitation, and requires a particularly careful and firm DM. Significant attention is dedicated to alignment as a societal expression, worldview, and as a tool to aid roleplaying, although the treatment of Chaotic Neutral as a type of insanity was never popular. Experience is expanded beyond "killing monsters and taking their stuff" to include class-based experience and individual gains through ideas and roleplaying.

The repackaged Monster Manual was first released as MC1 Monstrous Compendium, consisting of 144 loose-leaf

pages with 8 colour cardstock dividers and a three-hole binder. Each monster had a description and illustration on its own page, and each page was separate. The content consisted of a stat-block, descriptive content and a quarter page for each illustration, typically of fair competence but also usually lacking in creativity (an exception with humour being the Invisible Stalker). In comparison to the first edition Monster Manual, the new production included some extremely positive features. The game mentioned the typical climate and terrain that the creatures will be encountered in, in addition to their frequency (it was weird to include the latter, but not the former), the general form of social organisation, activity cycle, diet, and morale. These are all quite handy, recognising a greater elaboration in the treatment of monsters in the AD&D game and providing "at a glance" information of the societal and ecological information. This does not suggest that the AD&D engages in "monster equality" in terms of classes and abilities of course, at least not at this stage of its development, and nor does it suggest that the game wasn't still heavily biased towards treating "monsters" as primarily martial opponents to kill and take their stuff.

No less than fifteen different Monstrous Compendiums were released both of a general nature for AD&D campaigns, but also for specific campaign worlds, including Forgotten Realms, Dragonlance, Greyhawk, Kara-Tur, Spelljammer, Outer Planes, Ravenloft, and Al-Qadim along with four Annuals. The final result was well over a thousand different monsters and some of which really were of questionable quality. with an awful lot of creatures which fall into the "rare" or "very rare" frequency category. The Monstrous Manual was a hardback compilation of the first two Compendiums, containing over six hundred monsters in almost four hundred pages of text. Dragons receive some twenty pages worth. As per prior versions of this text, dragons are effectively colour-coded with the good metallic dragons, evil chromatic dragons, and the newly introduced neutral gem dragons. They're also become significantly tougher from 1st edition, with 11 plus hit dice now being typical, with commensurate improvements in other combat abilities.

A variety of additional supplements and a revision of the core rules were to follow. The Player's Options (Skills and Powers, Combat and Tactics, Spells and Magic, High Level Campaigns) along with the numerous kits available in the Complete Handbooks allowed for a significantly higher degree of customisation. A character point system was made available which would allow players to design their own subrace by purchasing abilities from other core races, or to develop their own classes in a similar fashion. Abilities scores were further differentiated allowing for more specific relations with tasks. Even the combat system was changed with 15 seconds melee rounds.

Another well-recognised feature of 2nd edition AD&D was the numerous supported campaign worlds from TSR. Original D&D had both Blackmoor and Greyhawk supplements, BECMI D&D had Mystara, and 1st edition AD&D saw Greyhawk in the new expanded edition, along with a Forgotten Realms from an original series of articles in The Dragon, and a supplement for Lankhmar. Most importantly it had Dragonlance, with its significant collection of sequential scenarios and novels. However, the new edition of AD&D saw an expansion of the Forgotten Realms campaign setting, novels, computer games, and a number of sub-setting campaign sets including Kara-Tur, The Horde, and Maztica Campaign Set. In addition to these was an exceptional and strange elaboration of the planes of existence in the Planescape campaign setting and its numerous supplements. There was also the very well supported deadly and corrupting demi-plane campaign setting of Ravenloft, along with a further spinoff with the 19th century style Gothic Earth supplements, the connecting fantasy setting of Spelljammer, the harsh desert world of the Dark Sun setting, and the dragon PC-based setting of Council of Wyrms, and very late in the piece, the geopolitical and bloodline-based dynasties of the Birthright setting.

The phrase "late in the piece" is quite deliberate. By the end of 1995 TSR had fallen behind Games Workshop and Wizards of the Coast in sales revenue, who had respectively developed expensive table-top miniatures games and a popular collectible card game. Attempting to catch up, the company decided on a collectible dice game and to engage in a major expansion of their hardback novel production. It was also around this time that the company was also engaging in more aggressive demands on Internet usage, demanding the use of disclaimers, use of specific sites, and a policy statement that refused consumers publishing fan material with D&D statistics, in D&D gameworlds etc. The company was disparaging by the RPG community as "T\$R".

If only they were so fortunate. In a famous article by Ryan S. Dancy, then VP of Wizards of the Coast and Brand Manager, Dungeons & Dragons a telling description of TSR was provided. Sales of Dragon Dice started well, but did not catch on. The company was left with few cash reserves when a large number of returns of novels and dice, leading



to a financial crisis. As the logistics company refused shipping without payment, the situation worsened. Dancey, visiting TSR comments "Inside the building, I found a dead company. In the halls that had produced the stuff of my childhood fantasies, and had fired my imagination and become unalterably intertwined with my own sense of self, I found echoes, empty desks, and the terrible depression of lost purpose." With the possible purpose of buying the company, Dancey was given access to the company records which showed a company that was "rotten at the core" in its "desparate arrangements" and "severance agreements between the company and departed executives which paid them extraordinary sums for their silence". Lorraine Williams sold the company to Wizards of the Coast in 1997 and the corporate offices in Lake Geneva were closed.

### **The Great Revival: WotC, 3rd edition, and OGL**

For new owners, Wizards of the Coast, the most extraordinary aspect of TSR is that they had survived for so long with not just Byzantine management processes but with a dearth of market research. For most of its life, it had succeeded through a brilliant idea, latched a harness on the tiger and had gone on the ride. WotC promised to do things differently. As great as Planescape was, their market research said that it was too complex for most gamers. As great as Ravenloft was, it wasn't really in a position to compete against the White Wolf games which did supernatural themes with much more success. In a more generic sense, the customer base told WotC that the games that were being produced were "substandard, irrelevant, and broken ... boring or out of date, or simply uninteresting."

The strategic move of WotC transformed of D&D and indeed, the roleplaying hobby as a whole with a two-pronged strategy based on design and marketing. On the one hand, the game took up an extensive revision of the AD&D system, merging the disparate lines, and assembling an expert team of divergent design backgrounds (Skip Williams, Monte Cook, Jonathan Tweet). On the other side of the strategy was the publication of most of the material as a System Reference Document (SRD) and making that document available for use under a Open Game License (OGL) allowing commercial and non-commercial publishers supplements an intellectual property fee. Release of these products occurred shortly after the acquisition of WotC by the much larger toy and game company, Hasbro.

As with previous editions of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, the new third edition Dungeons & Dragons rules (the "Advanced" prefix being dropped, as the BECMI D&D line had long been discontinued) consisted of a Players Handbook, Dungeon Masters Guide, and Monster Manual, all fairly lengthy hardback tomes, published on gloss paper with full-colour artwork throughout. Whilst the cover art of these new editions were raised to new levels of abstract boredom, the context-bound internal artwork showed good technique if even a further loss in imagination. More positively however was a general layout which showed good chapter titles clearly shown on each page, a good table of contents, and an excellent index. The faux grid lines on the text are more annoying than helpful and whilst the provision of a character generator CD was a nice idea, it was rather clunky and operating system specific.

Many of the design decisions were specifically orientated towards consistency, flexibility, and player enjoyment. The core character abilities remained in place, but with a consistent modifier across all and without a cap at 25. The unpopular restrictions of race and class combinations were removed, although a "favoured class" mechanic was introduced for the various races. All classes had the same experience level scale, with saving throws based only on Fortitude, Will, or Reflexes. Multiclassing was allowed with minimal restrictions at best. The class and subclass system was removed with all classes considered relatively independent of each other; Sorcerer, Wizard, Bard, Rogue, Cleric, Druid, Monk, Ranger, Fighter, Paladin, and Barbarian. The new Sorcerer class was a Charisma-based spell-caster, and the Thief was renamed as a Rogue. Alignment remained in the dual-axes approach and Chaotic Neutral lost the taint of representing madness. Most importantly however, for the first time, an almost entirely consistent core mechanic was introduced, built on a d20 high roll, against a target number. Used in both abilities, skills, basic attacks, and saving throws, this would become a system that would have it's own namesake (the d20 system) and a mechanic that would remain in place in future editions.

With roughly fifty skills and specialisations, there was a definite shift in the focus of the game. The game was still very much a combat and spells engine, but at least now it was not the entire possible focus. Skills were acquired through points which varied according to class and were limited through a distinction between class and cross-class skill levels. Each were tied to a key ability, and were defined whether they could be used in an untrained state. Sample difficulty challenges (DCs) were provided along with skill-specific modifications. As a tangent to the skills, Feats, provided

various yes/no abilities, such as general proficiencies in various weapon types, skill group bonuses, the ability to create various magic items, etc. To further enhance character ability, a more extensive equipment list was provided in the Players Handbook with variation on weapon damage based on the size of the character rather than their target.

Armour now added as a component to a high Armour Class target number, rather than the old THAC0 system, and importantly varies against attack types. For example, a "touch" based attack would not be affected by a character's armour contribution to Armour Class, whereas if an opponent is caught "flat footed" any Dexterity bonuses will not apply. Characters that move into a threatened square (the system speaks in terms as if a combat grid is assumed, but it not entirely necessary) generate an attack of opportunity that can occur outside of the normal initiative sequence which, incidentally, is based on a d20 individual roll and remains in place for the length of an encounter. Actions are generally defined as Standard, Move, Full-Round, and Free.

Finally, for the Players Handbook, there is an extensive spell system with characters still limited to a number of spell per day, including so-called "0 level spells". Priest spell spheres were removed from the game, however domain spells were introduced allowing clerics bonus spells based on their deity's domain influences, as well as the ability to swap out prepared spells for curative spells. In other respects the classic use of a level-based differences with verbal, somatic, and material components remains, as does variable spell casting times, duration, and distance, and availability of saving throws.

Whilst extensive in size, the new Dungeon Masters Guide was more oriented towards supplementary and advisory material, such as the helpful notes on game session preparation and conduct, pacing, adjudication of the rules and, in places (e.g., combat, campaign power settings and events, planar adventures) expansions. Experience points have a direct relationship between the challenge being faced (typically a monster, but also traps) and the level of the character with treasure too being based on "Encounter Level". For wilderness adventures, terrain types are provided alongside appropriate encounter tables, with notes and random tables provided for dungeon and urban adventures as well.

The treatment of NPCs in the third edition DMG was particularly impressive. The usual collection of hirelings was, of course, available at varying rates. But also introduced were special non-adventuring NPC classes, the Adept (a semi-spell caster), the Aristocrat, the Commoner, the Expert, and the Warrior. Whilst hardly the sort of classes that the deeply simulationist fantasy-medieval gamer would be over-awed with it was certainly the first tentative steps in providing more than just adventurers in a character class system. An extensive list of sample adventurer class characters according from levels 1st to 20th along with assumed ability scores and expected equipment was also provided which proved very handy in various random encounters.

Prestige classes are also included in the DMG. These are typically more powerful than the standard classes on a level-by-level basis with specialist abilities but also with prerequisites. For example the assassin makes a return with the requirements of an evil alignment, 4 ranks in Disguise, 8 ranks in Move Silently, 8 ranks in Hide, and a 'first assassination'. Significant notes are also provided on familiars and other animal companions, before a very large section on magic items which notably have a greater degree of variation and significantly more sensible construction rules than what existed in previous editions.

The changes in the Monster Manual were no less significant. Finally, D&D had "monster equality" with each creature no longer represented as a set of combat-only characteristics, but provided with a full set of statistics, along with their environment, social organisation, and a level enhancement procedure. Certainly combat statistics were a big feature; this is after all, both D&D and a Monster Manual, but sufficient attention was provided to other creature characteristics. In many ways, it was not dissimilar to the 2nd edition treatment of "monsters" but with statistically elaboration. Shorter chapters and descriptions were also provided for mundane animals, various giant insectoid vermin, and finally an extensive content on creating new monsters.

It can be stated quite fairly that the 3rd edition Dungeons & Dragons was an absolutely necessity for the game. It simply wasn't possible to continue with the creaky and inconsistent system as competitors moved onwards and upwards with more innovative and consistent designs. This was a problem from even the earliest days of AD&D, and certainly there were high hopes that the second edition would at least cover some of these issues, but it was not to be. Co-designer in the third edition, Jonathon Tweet, has mentioned how critically important RuneQuest was to many of the

design decisions and certainly in many ways the sense of consistency in that game carried over with the style that is associated with D&D.

Nevertheless, the rules are quite crunchy with crunch comes the increased possibility of error. A few years later (2003), WotC saw the need to released a revised edition of the game, as D&D3.5. Most of these were sensible tweaks that evened out the game a bit and an update booklet was also made available (although many chose to purchase another set of hardbacks). Barbarians received improved class features, Bards more skill points and music abilities, Druids were given nature's ally spells in place of prepared spells. Rangers were given more skill points and were given the option of being dual-weapon specialists or archery specialists. The most significant change was to the Monk which had numerous class features altered. There was new feats and spells and a range of changes to existing feats spells, a merging or renaming of some skills, and modification to the acquisition of feats and skills for monsters.

In addition to the new rules, the marketing strategy of WotC was based on the use of a System Reference Document (SRD) and an Open Game License (OGL). The SRD was licensed under the OGL and included the core rules and mechanics for a range of games that came under the d20 heading and was distributed freely as a set of Rich Text Format documents. This included *Dungeons & Dragons* of course, but also the d20 System, d20 Modern, and d20 Future. It was also the basis for games outside of WotC such as *Mutants & Masterminds*. Various setting elements however (such as Greyhawk references) were taken out of the SRD. Complementing the SRD, the OGL copyright allows game developers to grant permission to modify, copy, and redistribute some of the content with share-alike features. The OGL distinguishes between material which is open content, and that which is product identity, which is content kept under normal copyright.

Whilst the SRD and OGL combination led to an explosion of new products by various companies of varying quality. An additional license, the d20 System Trademark License (D20STL) was also introduced which required a clear statement that that required the core books from Wizards of the Coast for use. It also required "community standards of decency" following the attempted publication of the d20 Book of Erotic Fantasy by The Valar Project; it was subsequently published without the d20 System trademark under the OGL. All D20STL products also had to use the OGL to make use of d20 System open content, but use of the OGL did not require the D20STL. Unlike the OGL, D20STL was revocable and indeed, this happened with the release of 4th edition D&D which had its own and much more limited SRD in terms of Open Content. Fourth edition D&D effectively killed the D20 product range, but the OGL producers continued on.

### **A New Game? Fourth Edition**

In August 2007, a relatively brief time later in the world of D&D editions, an announcement was made that a new edition was in the works, which was released the following year. Of note was the new Game System License (GSL), significantly more restrictive than the OGL, and with a much reduced SRD. The 3.x SRD provided complete information about races, classes, mechanics, spells, etc, the 4th edition SRD provided only concepts and tables, making it very difficult to design a game from the SRD alone. The license also includes the clauses that state that it can be updated by Wizards of the Coast and updates affect all licensees and in case of litigation the licensees must pay the legal costs of Wizards of the Coast. The combination of these two components is perhaps indicative of the dearth of material published under 4th Edition. Certainly, WotC and Hasbro had a serious reconsideration of the idea of releasing most of the mechanics of their games as effectively a free and open-source document.

As with other editions the production quality of production of 4th edition was very high; hardback books with stitched binding, gloss paper and artwork displaying good technique (and Moldvay/Cook reminiscent cover art) are quite notable with 800 pages of material across the three books, written by James Wyatt primarily with Mike Mearls and Stephen Schubert also contributing. Each book comes with a solid table of contents and index. In terms of content, the new edition was much more than a substantial revision as third was from second. Indeed many argued that it was in fact a new game entirely. Whilst this is perhaps over-stating the case it did seem to have problems with backwards compatibility.

The core mechanic remained the same; roll d20, add modifiers and beat the target number ("Difficulty Class"). Conventions of simple rules with many exceptions, specific beats general, and always round down were established.

Standard races were offered (Dwarves, Elves, Half-Elves, Halflings, 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 Halving strength, for example).

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. Alignment was been cut down from the dual axes to a mere five; Lawful Good, Good, Unaligned, Evil, Chaotic Evil. 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. 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.

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. Attack rolls, skill checks and ability checks all include half the level of the character as a bonus. All classes require the same number of experience points per level and gain the same number of feats, powers and other bonuses. 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 30th 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. 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. 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". Most of the powers are combat abilities with a modicum of "utility powers".

The combat system follows a familiar account of determine surprise, roll for initiative take turns. Attacks are roll high, achieve Armour Class (or other defense as appropriate) plus as a target number and apply damage with a fair bit on what is described as combat effects (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, at the end of the book, is a chapter on Rituals which explains complex magical ceremonies, almost entirely non-combat utility magics such as summoning animal messengers, discern lies, creating magic feasts, curing disease, raising the dead, water walk, breathe water and so forth.

The Dungeon Master's Guide launches right in with sensible "how to be a DM and run a game" advice, with tips on preparation and time expectations, 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. In 4th edition style, the DMG defines the game as "Stripped to the very basics, the D&D game is a series of encounters" and an adventure is defined "just a series of encounters". There is significant descriptive detail in running and building (challenging but balanced) combat encounters, which apparently includes disease. Like the previous edition's Challenge Rating, D&D 4th edition has well-defined target XP totals to distribute to each encounter with a number of sample templates Skill challenges are defined the number of success required - anything less than four does not constitute a challenge.

The notable final chapter is the sample scenario "Fallcrest", which 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 involve 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.

Finally, the 4th edition Monster Manual is simply 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. 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. 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.

Fourth edition Dungeons & Dragons is the most significant departure from previous editions of the game to date, although the lineage remains clear. The scope of the text is also narrow, being almost entirely about combat which is 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. The new edition has incorporated the design considerations from various collectable card games, unit-based fantasy board-games and, as often mentioned, online fantasy combat roleplaying games.

### **Concluding Remarks**

For many gamers the changes between 3rd and 4th editions of Dungeons & Dragons were far too great and a great number followed the path (see what I did there?) to Pazio's publication which stayed more closely connected to the 3.x series and the Open Gaming License. Their own game, Pathfinder, for many months has been more popular than Dungeons & Dragons 4th edition. As should be clear, the new edition of the game is very much an attempt to bring a number of these strays (indeed, perhaps a majority-sized flock) back into the fold. Interestingly whilst 5th edition has released a basic set as a free (as in price) downloadable document, "there does not exist a public license that grants you the right to create contents based on D&D 5e, whether commercial or not". How this translates in competition with the open gaming movement is yet to be seen. In concluding, mention must also be made of the Old School Revival movement which takes up interest in older editions of Dungeons & Dragons and the publication of derived works from those games.

Dungeons & Dragons has gone a strange journey and yet has survived and in doing so provided the foundations of an entire hobby. Whilst it has had its share of corporate shenanigans, and a history out of wargaming which provided significant design continuity challenges, it has nevertheless sparked the imaginations of millions whilst at the same time often stumbling through obstacles. It remains with us, and in the eye of the general public, remains synonymous with table-top roleplaying games in general. It has profoundly influenced the development of computer adventure games as well with canonical notions such as "level" being common in a gamist creative agenda. There can be no doubt that the game will continue far into the future with a many more editions and through generations to come.

*Special mention goes to Lawrence Schick's "Heroic Worlds", Prometheus Books, 1991 and Jon Peterson's, "Playing at the World", Unreason Press, 2012 in the construction of this article.*

## **FOURTH EDITION DUNGEONS & DRAGONS:**

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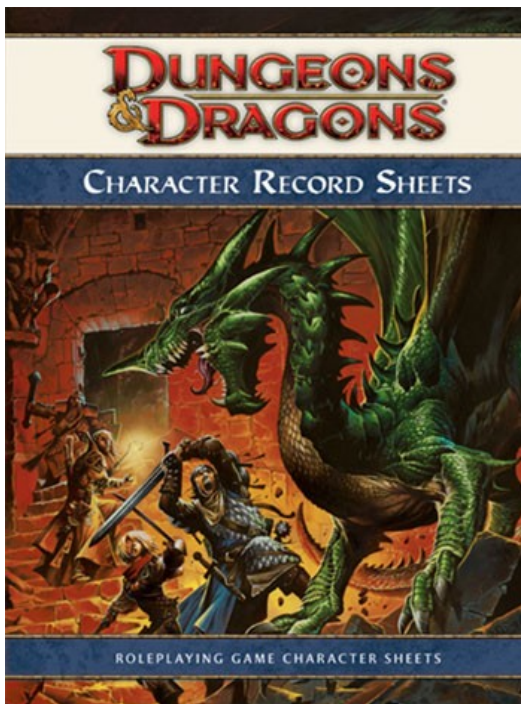
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# WHAT I ENJOYED AND THE FUTURE I WISH FOR

*with Nicholas William Moll*

I've been playing Fourth Edition Dungeons and Dragons for a number of years now. My book shelf is overflowing with a collection of books spanning most of the edition. And I don't have any plans to purchase Fifth Edition. Not because I think Fourth Edition is the best role-playing game ever made. Or that I believe Fifth Edition is somehow inferior to Fourth Edition (it's really far too early to tell what Fifth Edition is, let alone its strengths and weaknesses – play testing is one thing, but let's see how far the global sum of Dungeons and Dragons players can really push its systems). It is because I think that Fourth Edition Dungeons and Dragons does Dungeons and Dragons well in its own style and right.

Thinking of things enjoyable about Fourth Edition, combat in particular comes to mind. Over a game of Marvel Heroic Role-playing just a few nights ago, a friend of mine turned to me and said “gee, Nic, all this characterization is great but I really just want to roll some dice and hit stuff. Can you make me a Fourth Edition dungeon for my birthday?” Naturally I said yes. And in that moment my friend had aptly summed up what most people think about when they look at Fourth Edition: miniature combat, a role-playing game with a heavy dose of war-gaming in its action. And that's true. Fourth Edition, for a good many games, was heavily based around miniature based combat sequences. And there is nothing wrong with that. Fourth Edition did miniature based combat very well and the combination of miniatures and



battle maps made the experience of role-playing game combat – often one of the more complicated or time consuming aspects of any role-playing game session – as smooth as any good war-game. And also as equally characterful with all players – from Wizard to Fighter and Dungeon Master (so often forgotten as also a player in the game, and there to have fun albeit in a slightly different role) too – presented with a range of curious abilities for use in battle.

The smoothness, clarity and character of the combat system were some of the strengths of Fourth Edition. But in terms of narrative, Fourth Edition was certainly a curious beast. The Powers were admittedly rigid and required a bit of imagination from the player and the Dungeon Master to be anything other than combat-orientated. And the Class system was quite unyielding. Chances are a Paladin would always be quite similar to every other Paladin within their type, even with a Multi-Class Feat (Hybrid Classes also proved to produce less in the way of variations between classes than a whole new Class of the player's own design – something I both adored and applauded). There was also little point in sending low level monsters against high level characters, and vice versa. It didn't matter how many Goblins, for instance, there were or how clever the Heroic Tier heroes plot against that ancient Dragon or hoary Storm Titan

was. In either case, the higher level would lead a massacre! That being said, the clear and deliberate pacing of the level system in Fourth Edition gave progression a certain structure. And I found as a Dungeon Master, a world builder and a storyteller there is a certain neatness and symmetry about Fourth Edition with the steady and absolute mathematical experience system along with the ridged classes and levelling. Plotting the campaign, once mastered, became easy, with certain regions, monsters villains and problems foreshadowed in the mechanics of the game. The whole system – with its triune division of Tiers – has the feeling about it of an epic fantasy trilogy. It was a structure that was, in short,

archetypical and ultimately evocative of Joseph Campbell's mythic cycles that presented players and the Dungeon Master with a clear journey of the hero from humble beginnings to immortality.

Over the past few years those are the two things I've come to love about Fourth Edition, war-game style combat and narrative structure built into the mechanics. And with a Fifth Edition of Dungeons and Dragons now available it is the prudent time to discuss the future of Fourth Edition. It seems unlikely that Fourth Edition will be reincarnated through rebranding in the manner that Third Edition did as Pathfinder. It never quite achieved the same following that Third Edition did. Perhaps it was just how different it was from previous editions. Perhaps it was just a difference of timing. Advanced Second Edition came out in 1989, with Third Edition released eleven years later in 2000. Compared to its predecessor, Third Edition looked and played new, shiny, sleek and modern. The Open Game Licence created a huge investment of activity, money and business from players turned publishers along with the gaming industry as a whole – literally reshaping the face of role-playing. Third Edition made a mark and it was certainly a tough act to follow for Fourth Edition, a mere few years shy of a decade later. It never achieved the same popularity and I don't think I want Fourth Edition to have the same lasting appeal of Third.

Fourth Edition needs to become niche and cultish, played by a small but vibrant fan community of players who genuinely love this edition of Dungeons and Dragons for all it is and who continue to play and develop it out of that enjoyment. Future editions – Fourth Edition-point-five or whatever – should be released as living, fan-written rulebooks living, written and maintained by players, on internet fan sites. This attitude might seem insular and restraining. And to a certain degree it is. But one of the things I have seen and continue to see with Third Edition and Pathfinder is its multiplicity through applications to games and genres other than Dungeon and Dragon's particular brand of High Fantasy. It is like Gurps or Savage Worlds or Cortex a generic role-playing system. Fourth Edition took the trope of the High Fantasy narrative trilogy and translated it into a role-playing game in manner that was not simply evocative of the setting (or general idea of a High Fantasy world) but mechanically the progression of the narrative as well. And I want Fourth Edition continued by people who understand that.



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# FIFTH EDITION D&D : IS THIS YOUR NEXT FANTASY RPG?

*by Karl Brown with contributions from Lev Lafayette*

A review with a difference about Dungeon & Dragons 5th Edition and about choosing your next fantasy role playing game. Since a new D&D edition has enough media impact to draw new people into our hobby I've attempted to write this review in a way that will be useful to new people and to veterans. If this means I explain what many consider assumed knowledge so be it. Dungeon & Dragons 5th Edition is produced by Wizards of the Coast (WOTC). This review was produced when only the free basic rules, Player's Handbook, and Monster Manual was available.

D&D 5th Edition Lead Designers: Mike Merls, Jeremy Crawford.

Monster Manual (2014) Lead: Christopher Perkins.

Players Handbook (2014) Lead: Jeremy Crawford.

At this point there have been a lot of reviews of Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition (D&D 5e) so I'm going to try to offer a different angle. This review is mostly going to be about the kinds of worlds, styles of play, and adventures the new rules are suited too. In the process I have discarded the usual chapter-by-chapter formula of reviews and instead will discuss three themes that run through the breadth of the game. Here's the thing, the best game is the one that supports the stories you want tell at that time and suits your group at the table. I'll discuss the kinds of games the new rules support then you can decide for yourself if D&D 5th is the right tool for the job you want to do. Along the way I'll be comparing it to other games past and present for the benefit of those who are here because they are in the market for a fantasy game.

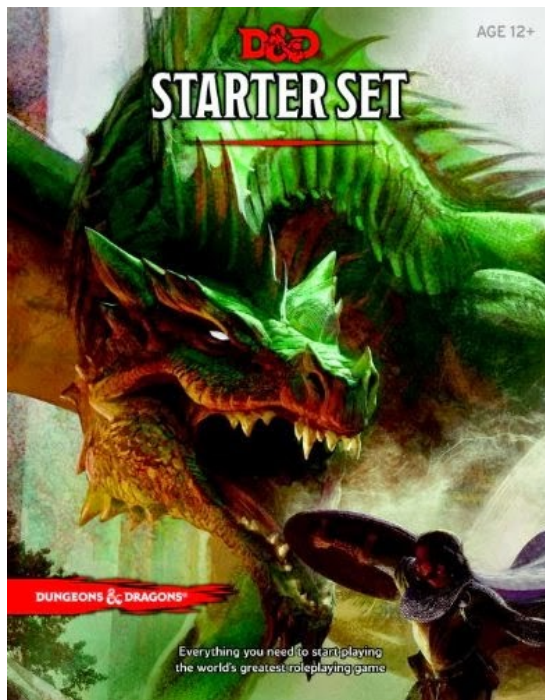
## **The last word, first**

If you are like me you have tendency to skip to the end of reviews for the final assessment. To save you scrolling here it is. D&D 5th Edition is an excellent game if you want to play in a world where typical high fantasy assumptions hold true. It is a streamlined game suitable for busy referees and those new to the hobby but at the same time has sufficient hidden depth to satisfy most veterans. It supports heroic through to deadly gameplay with a mix of action and social roleplaying. The game is likely to be well supported and attract a large population of gamers so you are likely to be able to find players or a game to join for decades to come. On the downside the game is relatively expensive for anything but the most casual player (who could use the free basic rules) and places boundries around creative freedom when creating characters and settings.

## **The Physical Books**

Both books are are hardbacks with gloss paper with and full-colour artwork throughout. The Player's Handbook (PHB) is 317 pages; the Monster Manual (MM) weighs in at some 352 pages. The covers of both books feature dynamic scenes of adventurers encountering monsters. The Monster Manual cover by Raymond Swanland features a very impressive piece of action art involving an encounter with a beholder. The Player's Handbook cover by Tyler Jacobson depicts characters' despirate attempts to strike a huge fire giant. The internal art is of a high quality in terms of technique and somewhat less so in terms of creativity, sometimes extremely so. The Players handbook has a good balance of illustrations to text. The PHB really does contain everything you need, even the monsters you might use as familiars, created undead, or animal shapes. The Monster Manual is more profusely illustrated. Indeed, in what is the most unusual criticisms to be levelled at such a product, in the Monster Manual there's actually too much art - and not enough content. There is a good use of white-space throughout the text, and a thorough table of contents and index (as would be hoped!). Creature statistics are in off-set text-boxes for easy reference, although page numbers are a little on the pale side. The physical books are glue-bound rather than stitched; at first blush it seems that the glue is fairly strong, but overall these are not books made to last. At the time of this review the Dungeon Master's Guide (DMG) had not been released.





No pdf of these books is available at this time and no release date for pdfs have been given. There are free pdfs of very cut down versions of the rules. I can understand why this is the case in our piracy rife society but not having a version I can read on my phone on the train to work and having to lug heavy books around is a pain. Virtually, all other games on the market are available as pdf.

One issue with most editions of D&D the game requires three core books for play at a substantial financial outlay for at least one member of your group. Many other games on the market give you everything you'll ever need, not just a skeleton of rules I mean everything, in one book at a fraction of the price. Fantasy Craft, Savage Worlds Deluxe, and Mongoose's Conan spring to mind. Technically, a player could just use the PHB but someone has to be the referee. To be fair WOTC has given you a cut down version of rules on the net for free. I'd suggest checking this out before committing to D&D 5e. However, when doing so bare in mind that most of the 'cool stuff' has been cut out of the free versions. This is nowhere near as generous as the SRD for WOTC's D&D 3rd Edition.

### Introducing D&D

The first book is the Players' Handbook (PHB). This book begins with a preface and introduction that veteran gamers

might be tempted to skip over, don't. As well as the usual 1 page description of what an rpg is, a story told by a conversation between friends where most are players controlling characters and one is the Dungeon Master (referee) who describes the world. These two short sections set the tone and describe the kind of game the designers were trying to create. The preface and introduction emphasise social fun and creativity. The message down-plays the importance of 'canon', actively encourages groups to create worlds, and explicitly thrusts creative control back onto the referee's and players. However, this is not a universal system all worlds will start at a foundation of 'Medieval fantasy' and are envisioned as being part of a D&D 'multiverse'. Adventures are intended to be built around the 'three pillars' of adventures "exploration, social interaction, and combat".

The second chapter provides a step-by-step guide to creating characters. I have tried following this to the letter and despite the counter-intuitive feature of generating ability scores last should guide new players through the process competently.

### The 'Other Three Pillars'.

The rest of this review will be written around three themes that pervade the new edition of the game:

1. Legacy Code
2. Defined Limits
3. Bounded Diversity

### Play Style

The outcome of the 'other three pillars' is a game that offers an even balance of combat and roleplay and is easier to learn than 3e and many other games. There are simpler games for beginners to learn rpg with but being a beginner in a 5th edition group will not be a huge disadvantage.

Combat can be played entirely with verbal description or you can use a grid, hexes, or mud-map. Whatever suits your group's style. Character generation can be fast and resource management is back, so olde school deadly games like

those of early 1e and original 'white box' D&D could be run. Players who spend less time generating characters and who are warned of the danger mind less when their character dies. Even if you don't go olde school D&D favours an 'adventurous' almost Hollywood approach to storytelling. This is not a simulation of reality in any way.

There is advice on handling social encounters that boils down to use Inspiration and use whatever mix of dice rolls and roleplaying that your group is comfortable with. There are sufficient rules for downtime, travel, and environment to handle most situations but at the moment items like extreme weather, extra-planar physics, the effects of vacuum on PCs, governing a holdfast and other situations that occur in some adventure types and settings are given little to no treatment in the rules. This may change with the release of the DMG.

## **Legacy Code**

D&D has always had particular features and a new edition of the game without them might be shunned by fans. This really limits what changes the designers can make and the kind of game D&D 5th edition can be. This is not the best rpg they could have produced, it is the best version of D&D from that team. Let's look at some of these holy cows and in doing so outline the game to newcomers.

## **Six Ability Scores**

From the beginning D&D has defined a character's raw potential by six ability scores: Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, Charisma. When Gygax chose these back in the 70's he set limits on what D&D can do well. Notice there is no obvious score for the senses? In AD&D Intelligence (Int) was used for senses, in later editions Wisdom (Wis) was adopted as the sensory score. Either way animals, non-humans, and rash barbarians with keen senses are not handled well. Another example is how Dexterity covers bodily agility and manual dexterity. There are no fat safe crackers in D&D. Again Dexterity makes D&D handle non-humanoids poorly. As written D&D is a game about humans and humanoids.

## **Races**

First off, race. I really wish they had finally dumped the provocative and inaccurate 'R' word. These are not races they are species. A more 'fantasy' term could be used such a 'kindred' as used in Tunnels & Trolls (T&T). However, I suspect for many even the word 'race' is a holy cow of D&D.

The races are presented as core races (Elf, Dwarf, Human, Halfling) present on a given world as default and Uncommon (Drow, Gnome, Dragonborn, Half Orc) that might not be present in a setting at the referee's discretion. This division is based partially on assumed D&D cultural norms and partially on how unusual/magical the races traits are. Being largely arbitrary it's tempting to mix this up to taste. You could easily create a world where scaly Dragonborn and gnomes are common and humans savages on the verge of extinction.

Unlike previous editions no races have negative ability score adjustments. Half-orcs don't tend to be stupid and gnomes are not weak. This seems kind of weird but is in line with bounded diversity. I'm not sure I personally like this; it's neither realistic, nor character-building, and smacks heavily of munchkinism.

Races also give expected ages for characters but the game does not have aging rules. This implies that, like comic book heroes, PCs will hover around their starting age unaffected by the ravages of time. In the Monster Manual creatures that in earlier editions caused PC's to age now do flavourless 'necrotic' damage instead. This system does not support simulationist multi-generational epics, try Pendragon for that.

## **Class/level**

D&D 5e is a class/level system. This means most of a character's traits (skills, powers etc) come from their class (vocation). Between adventures characters gain levels. Each level improves the traits they have and gives them more traits as determined by their class. There are unending debates over whether this or a more free-form point based approach is better. A class-level system done well should help players create useful characters and ensure characters are on par with their peers. It should guide new players. The a-la-carte Class-level systems necessarily restrict creative freedom compared to the buffet approach of point systems. If you like unusual PCs then a point based system, such as

GURPS, might be better.

Class/level systems also are in trouble if the designers did not do a good job of ensuring the classes are equal at all levels and if the classes fail to capture the imagination. In all previous editions wizards started play too weak and at high levels were so powerful they barely needed the other PC's help. Compared to previous editions of the game, D&D5e looks like the imbalance of the wizard has been reduced if not solved. Previous editions also often suffered from 'dead levels' where a class gained very little on attaining some levels. In 5e there are no dead levels, every level you get something of note even if it is 'just' access to a more potent spells.

The PHB also makes explicit the concept of tiers of play. There are 20 levels. At low levels characters are effectively 'trainee' adventurers dealing with local problems, at mid levels they might save kingdoms, and at high levels they might save the world or travel to Hell. There is no provision to go beyond level 20 as there was in some earlier editions of the game. In previous editions so-called 'epic' levels, 21 and over, were poorly handled as the designers struggled to overcome some of the inherent limits of the system. The absence of 'Epic' levels is not missed by this reviewer.

## **New to D&D?**

In this edition the character with the simplest rules is the human barbarian, try this first. Barbarians are the tanks of the D&D party which means you can get into the thick of a fight and that your character might survive any 'dumb moves' you might make as a new player.

## **Defined Limits**

Everywhere you look the designers have set limits. These limits are designed to do two things. Firstly, they stop the power-bloat of previous editions. Secondly, every additional feature you get is 'worth' more in play in this constrained environment. Powerful characters have fewer powers but each has a significant effect on play. Also characters are no longer festooned with a large number of magic items. Powerful monsters like dragons no longer need endless spells and powers to challenge PCs, a monster can have just a few iconic powers and be a challenge.

## **Ability Scores**

PC base ability scores are usually not higher than 15 and PC ability scores never exceed 20 (except very high level Barbarians). Monsters range from 1-30. This is not a simulation. Many games are to a greater or lesser degrees simulations of the real world. The simulation approach has advantages including the ability to directly translate real-world facts into the game. D&D does not work like this. We are told in the PHB a character can carry 15x her Strength (Str), this indicates the strongest monster possible is about as strong as a real chimp. Obviously, the DMG should include numerous 'fudge' factors for size, number of legs or whatever to determine how much horses and dragons can carry. Problem is the same applies to all ability scores. D&D is about heroic action packed adventures where humans can fight multi-ton fire breathing monsters and win. It's not about anything resembling reality. This foundation feeds into the kinds of worlds and adventures the game will do well, see Bounded Diversity below.

## **Modifiers to the roll**

The ability scores are the core of this new edition. It is hard to overstate their importance. From each ability score you are given a modifier to dice rolls related to that ability score. Nearly all dice rolls use a twenty sided dice (d20). You also have 'proficiency' in some things such as skills, particular weapons, tools of a trade, etc. Proficiency provides another bonus determined by your level. Want to lift a heavy portcullis? Roll 1d20 add your strength modifier, if you have proficiency in the Athletics skill and your proficiency bonus as well. Try to roll over a target number, say 17 to lift the gate. Done. For almost all rolls ability score modifier and proficiency are the only modifiers you'll ever add. The math is primary school grade 2 level.

This is a big change compared to previous versions of D&D and to most games on the market. In most games there are numerous and ever increasing modifiers to dice rolls creating strings of additions and subtractions that slow play. Worse still power-bloat can occur in some games as the characters modifiers make the random dice roll less and less of a factor or forces the foes to become increasingly overblown. D&D 3e in particular was a major offender here. 3e and its

spawn Pathfinder have scores of modifiers and even categories of modifiers and rules about how those categories interacted. Pathfinder combat was so slow at our table we only had time for one fight per game session (5 hours). By limiting bonuses to your rolls to two modifiers (in almost all cases) 5e stops power-bloat and speeds gameplay.

## **Advantage/Disadvantage**

If 5th edition has scrapped most modifiers to the dice roll how does it handle all the situations those modifiers handled in earlier editions? The advantage/disadvantage mechanic. If you have advantage, perhaps you leap onto a table in a bar fight and gain higher ground, you roll two d20 and use the highest roll of the two. If you have disadvantage, say your target is at long range for your crossbow, you roll two d20 and use the lowest roll of the two. Note how in both cases the highest roll is always 20. A modifier instead of an advantage die raises the maximum possible roll; the source of power bloat. If you have both advantage and disadvantage they cancel each other out, to climb a cliff with climbing spikes in the rain roll 1d20. As written advantage and disadvantage yes/no propositions you can't have multiple advantage die. This is an issue with this system, it can't handle the effects of situations in a nuanced manner.

However, in a bit of slight of hand the referee could account for baseline conditions (only) by setting a higher or lower target to roll over; is it a cliff of rough stone with plenty of handholds or a wall of ice? There is a site that discusses the probability effects of the advantage/disadvantage system and suggests variations extreme advantage, extreme disadvantage, and mediocrity. It's roughly the equivalent of plus or minus 5.

<http://tabletopterrors.com/2014/10/16/advantage-disadvantage-and-beyond-...>  
<http://onlinedungeonmaster.com/2012/05/24/advantage-and-disadvantage-in-...>

The advantage/disadvantage die is a big bonus, and big even relative to previous editions of D&D. So it's a big change to the game. In earlier editions a situational bonus provided a +2 advantage as a generic bonus, +5? That's the sort of thing of dreams. It was the bonus of the most powerful non-artifact magic item (the Paladin's Holy Avenger). In 3.x, 4, and 5th it is the equivalent of having an ability score of 21.

## **Skills**

A skill proficiency provides a flat bonus based on level, no micromanaging skill points. The skill list seems kinda small and focused on adventuring activities but this is a little slight of hand on the designers part many 'background skills' are still in the game hidden as proficiencies in various tools and equipment. In 3e you could focus on a few skills or spread skill points around. In reality though newcomers could 'waste' points on skills that were rarely if ever used, while those who 'mastered' the system realised the best choice was to focus on a few 'adventuring' type skills. In 5th new players are automatically guided to an equivalent to the later outcome. You can still get 'background' type 'skills' its just now they are called tool proficiencies and come out of a separate pool.

On the downside, all your proficiencies are at the same level varying only by the ability score modifier used. If you learn a new skill you suddenly go from baseline or nothing to the same level of competence as your other skills, this does seem kinda weird from the character's point of view. It is also worth noting that all characters can attempt most skill rolls even if not proficient, this includes what were a thieves 'stealth powers' of earlier editions.

## **Inspiration**

To reward players for playing the role D&D5e has players describe the Ideals, Bonds, and Flaws for their character as short sentences. When you have your character react based on these personality traits, especially if your choices are detrimental or self sacrificing, you might be rewarded by the DM or another player with Inspiration. This is basically an Advantage die you can use whenever you want once. This rule reflects something most rpg systems have been doing for a long while, rewarding roleplaying in a way linked to task resolution. This is not something previous editions of D&D have done and is a welcome addition. That the rule is linked to the key Advantage/Disadvantage mechanic and not another disparate mechanic make the addition feel like a natural part of the system and not 'tacked on' to be fashionable. I would have preferred if the designers had ditched the antiqued alignment system now that we have Ideals, Bonds, and Flaws but realistically hard-core D&D fans would never have forgiven WOTC if alignment had been tossed out.

The other obvious thing about the Inspiration system is that you could apply it to any disadvantage. The designers could have gone a step further and made a version of Inspiration that worked like Mutants & Masterminds' Hero Points. Say you want to play a dwarf smith whose time at the forge has left him hard of hearing. Whenever you or the referee decide this significantly penalises your character you are awarded inspiration. This method 'balances' a disadvantages by compensation where and when it actually affects play, no more no less. Going a step further might help houserule stranger races. I've played in an Mutants & Masterminds game where a PC was a small talking dog, whenever his lack of hands or whatever stopped him in his tracks he got a Hero Point. For more on this see my Unusual Races article.

### **Action allowance and Resource Management**

When a fight or other dangerous scene starts time is split into round of 6 seconds and characters can take specific number and kinds of actions each round. 3e had move, standard, free, full-round, Attacks of Opportunity, etc. and where conceptually difficult for newcomers to keep track of. Often characters in 3e had multiples of some action types in a round and that could get out of hand. In 5th edition you get one action, a move, one free handle object, and you might get one bonus action and one reaction. That is all never more. OK, at high levels some characters get 'multi-attack' as an action but compared to earlier editions these are much less common. The action allowance is another way 5th edition reins in characters to stop power-bloat while at the same time making any gains significant.

Another feature that sets defined limits on characters is the extensive use of the short and long rest. Most previous editions of D&D had per day powers. For example a wizard could cast so many spells per day.. As the game matured we started seeing explanations and caveats. Characters needed to get sleep and perhaps prepare to regain their per day powers. The long and short rest are a concise encoding of a rule that in reality has been around for many editions. Other than 4th edition, D&D has always had a resource management aspect to game play. If you cast you lightning bolt spell now you wont have it for the boss fight unless you find a place to hole up and rest. I really like this aspect of the game. Others have different tastes and prefer die roll to use or per scene or per fight powers. If you are one of these people then D&D is not for you.

### **Pseudo-Vancian Magic**

Another 'holy cow' that makes D&D D&D is a tradition of Vancian magic. Inspired by the works of Jack Vance this is magic that works by the preparing a number of specific spells each day that casting them without any chance of failure later. Each time you can a spell you loose it until the next day. Vancian systems feature pages and pages describing the spells you can choose from. Gamers have huge arguments about Vancian magic vs other kinds. However, if you hate Vancian magic don't write off D&D 5th straight away. The designers have made a hybrid system that combines features of a pure Vancian approach with a spell-point approach. The result is a unique system that hold to tradition while streamling and improving the magic system. You have so many slots at each spell power level. You also prepare spells in advance. However you don't assign specific spells to specific slots until the instant you cast the spell. You can also cast some spells using higher level slots. Gone are the long lists of cure wounds spells, now there is one that can you can decide to cast at greater power or not.

The new PHB describes preparing a spell as having the spell "firmly fixed in mind". I prefer to imagine that spell preparation is a ritual to gather and pre-shape magical potential that is later released when the caster takes a sinlge action and word to complete the ritual and release the magic.

### **Bounded Diversity**

Unlike 3e and 4e, 5th edition's text actively encourages you to build your own setting or modify one of the company's to taste. Additionally, they have carefully combed through the rules and removed arbitrary restrictions and penalties from previous editions that might hamper creativty when designing characters. Want to be a half-orc genius paladin, no problem. They want you to be able to build your own worlds and create unique characters.

On the other hand the rules have a lot of assumptions built into them which restrict your freedom to create the world and characters you want. Magic works in a particular way, there are probably elves and those elves have the features described etc. No more restrictive than previous editions of D&D when they were at the three book only stage. This is

much less restrictive than many games that come with a default setting and rules sets tailored to to reflect the reality of that setting, Mongoose Conan and EarthDawn for example. However D&D 5th much more restrictive than other generic fantasy games such as Fantasy Hero, Legends of Anglerre (despite this game's title), and to a lesser extent Fantasy Craft or Savage Worlds with the Fantasy Companion.

I'm calling this curious mix of encouraged creativity but somewhat inflexible tools 'Bounded Diversity'. It is a reoccurring theme in D&D 5e.

## **Magical Worlds**

In contrast to 3e, the new PHB indicates that magic is uncommon and that adventuring class people make up a tiny fraction of the population. This logically supports a pseudo-medieval world. That said apparently 1st and 2nd level spells can be bought in towns for money, but NOT higher level spells and magic items. This is a real departure from 3e.

In D&D 5e magic works a particular way and is baked right into the systems in a great multitude of places. Most player characters will have use some magic in this edition, there is even a sub-class of fighter that learns spells. If you want to run a low magic world or have a specific idea for how magic works D&D 5e is not for your project. Before I hear the howls of protest, yes like any game you can go in and cut out the magic or fiddle with it, but doing this in D&D 5e will be hard work and will make the game deadly if you are not very careful. Other games allow for no magic worlds or variant concepts of magic better. D&D 5e will be good for magical high fantasy worlds.

## **Characters**

D&D 5th like its predecessors uses a combinatorial approach to defining characters. Characters are defined by Race (species really), sub-race, Class (vocation), Background (further defining vocation or how you grew up). Shortly after creation you'll also have to choose an Archetype (a sub-type of your class). Each choice comes with a number of game traits. The advantages of this kind of systems are that new characters ideas can be readily conceived by combining choices, it makes creating character ideas easier for new players, and speeds character creation by removing the need to choose traits one by one. I really enjoy this kind of combinatorial character generation and if one only considers the core player's book this is a very good version of this type of generation process.

When comparing to previous editions of D&D and other games with combinatorial character generation there are two other factors to discuss, granularity of choice and party roles. In D&D party roles are largely determined by class and I'll come back to these in a while. By 'granularity of choice' I mean how much of your character is defined each time you have to make a choice. In original D&D (not first, original) you rolled your attributes (no choice) choose a class and a race, then bought your equipment. Most of your character in game terms was defined by two choices, race and class. While you could make a great diversity of characters, if your fighter was a knight or a stone-age hunter it didn't really have much representation in the game numbers. Fast forward to 3rd Edition (and the large number of games modelled after it such as Pathfinder and Fantasy Craft).

To create a character you have to make choices on ability scores, race, class, feat, what skills and how many points on each, and what equipment. There were tens or even hundreds of options at each choice. To make matters worse to qualify for future choices as your character progressed you had to plan your choices at every level to qualify for the items you wanted. This micromanagement approach allowed for better backing of character concepts with game traits, and lots of choice but disadvantaged new players, even rpg veterans new to the game, who did not have in depth knowledge of the choices and how early choices affected later ones.

So what about 5th? In D&D 5e you choose attributes, race, class, and background. You don't get much choice in your skills.. Usually you just name a few from a short list given with your class. Equipment is generally a series of three either/or questions but there is an optional coin and shopping rule (still using the historically inaccurate gold coin). Around third level you choose an archetype from those given as part of your class, most classes have three. You might get feats at later levels but these are optional and you will only ever have a few if any. Each choice provides a greater chunk of the characters traits than the choices in 3rd edition did and the amount of forward planning massively reduced. Even restrictions at first level such as dwarves can't be wizards and all paladins are Lawful Good have been removed. This is one of several ways that classes are able to cover a broader range of concepts compared to previous editions.

The result is faster character creation and a more intuitive transparent system that supports a diversity of character concepts. I really like this.

## **Fantasy Species**

However, the downsides are that having defined races, classes etc in the game limits your protagonists to characters that fit within the available combinations. You can define your setting by removing choices, an all human world could work. D&D 5e does provide a huge number of combinations but cannot recreate everyone seen in the great diversity of fantasy fiction. Even some core fantasy archetypes, like a giant race, are not available.. I hope future release will add more combinations to the menu to reduce this issue. What you can't do easily is create new races and classes because at this point no guidelines for race and class creation are included. There has been no indication from WOTC that they will be providing these design systems. Sure you can make your own anyway but without good guidance this can be a real game-breaker. If you want the freedom to create the cultures, intelligent species, and professions of your world then a point based system like GURPS, Mutants & Master Minds, or Hero might be better for your project. Point based systems give you a allotment of points used to buy traits and features individually. The downsides of point systems are that with so many choices character generation can take a long time and the number of options is bewildering.

Races and sub-races cover more cultures than in previous editions. For example Grey Elves are now a culture of High Elves with no difference in game terms. This approach makes sense when you consider humans and could be taken as a cue (among many) to invent cultures for your world. While there are a lot of Races and subraces in this PHB compared to previous PHBs, at this point the great number of races we had when other editions were out for a few years in missing (but see my house rules!).

As an aside if you use the variant rule that grants humans a feat I'd ban Tough as a choice. My own investigations into the math indicates Tough is overpowered before 4th level.

## **Classes and party role**

In previous editions of D&D, especially early editions, adventuring parties were comprised of four complementary roles. You had a tough front-line warrior, a sneaky spy, a healer, and a wizard. The rules and adventures assumed these roles would be present and a party with a 'slot' missing would have a hard time, especially if the healer was missing. The four roles had good points, they gave every character a niche and fostered cooperation. D&D 5e dilutes the importance of these roles. On the down side this means that a key cooperation ensuring feature of D&D has been lost. On the up side players need not feel constrained by the four roles, any party of three or more characters that is diverse will bring enough options to the scene to overcome obstacles, take down the villain and save the day. Even if everyone is the same class, all fighters say, differing choices of race, subrace, background, and archetype is enough. I really like this. This is not unique the Mongooses Conan and Fantasy Craft are class systems that do this and careful character design in point based games like GURPS and Hero can acheive this also. Still I think more could have been done to foster cooperation now that the four roles are gone. The way that classes in Fantasy Craft all grant abilities that help or boost other player characters is an example of what else could have been done within a class system.

## **Backgrounds**

5e introduces Backgrounds. These represent where your character grew up or your cultural niche and provide a few minor benefits. Say you want to be an Imperial War Wizard, well the soldier background makes sense. A fighter who grew up in the mean streets of the begger's quarter? Take Urchin. In many ways Backgrounds remind me of the early days of the AD&D 2e kits.

## **Magical Healing**

Magical healing while not strictly a 'must have' for an adventuring party in this edition of D&D is very recommended. Fortunately, a number of classes have access to magical healing (Bard, Cleric, Druid and paladin have some kind of healing at first level, ranger at second). Veterans of previous editions note, the days of absolutely needing a cleric for survival are over. There are feats but they are optional and the complex interconnected 'feat trees' of 3e are gone. In most cases a single 5e feat gives you everything you need for a niche role such as 'crossbow sniper'..

## **Multiclassing, a vestigial limb**

When a character gains a level they can choose to add a level in a new class provided they have 13 in an ability score related to the new class. Traditionally, this was used to support concepts like a burglar who knows a few useful spells. In D&D 3e and the large number of games modelled after it such as Pathfinder and Fantasy Craft the best option for some character concepts was a prestige class requiring careful planning at low level to meet the requirements for entry at high level.

Like most previous editions of the game D&D5e has multiclassing. However, in 5e I feel multiclassing should be a last resort. Most classes support more character types now and feats and background really broaden the range of concepts covered. My advice come up with your concept, pick a class that covers the most important parts of the concept, use background, archetype, and feats to get the rest of the features of your concept if you can. For example, why be a fighter/wizard when Fighter (Eldritch Knight) with Sage Background and perhaps the Magic Initiate feat does most of the same stuff? Alternatively, maybe a Warlock (Great Old One) with Soldier background and Moderately Armored feat could cover your concept. Since Classes are broad and Backgrounds and feats further broaden the options all those niche classes and prestige classes of previous editions are not really necessary. Multiclassing used to be your go-to option for a lot of concepts in earlier editions. In 5e multiclassing is best regarded as a last resort.

## **Monsters**

There are some creatures a player is likely to need in the PHB but most creatures are described in the Monster Manual (MM). With the release of the Monster Manual there is a huge number of monsters ready to thwart the characters. This amounts to a feature of the game. D&D 5e is a good choice for settings and adventures where a great diversity of monsters exist. Many of the monsters have hooks for building regions of your world or adventures including notes regarding regional effects of the monsters presence or ideas for nations populated by monsters or ruled by them.

The MM text starts with several pages of introductory material (p4-11) which, like previous editions, provides a description of the statistical references and especially the features available to such creatures. After this there is over 150 monster descriptions (p12-316), followed by statistic for about 100 normal and dire animals (some which should be considered monsters, really) described as "Miscellaneous Creatures" (p317-341), then over twenty humanoid non-player character descriptions (p342-350). All these are provided in alphabetical order and with some group categorisations (e.g., dragons, giants etc).

The monsters are all derived from previous editions of the game, including previous editions of the Monster Manual, various supplements and scenario packs and so forth. As a result there is a number of classics that have made their way into this core book which are a delight to see. For example, the Flumph finally makes it way to a core book (last seen in a major publication in 1995, *Monstrous Compendium Annual Volume Two*), and the various Modrons take their place in the sun (last major publication being *Planescape Campaign Setting*, 1994, they appeared in *Dragon* magazine 354).

There is of course, the normal range of expected creatures as well, including classic and D&D unique creatures such as Beholder, Demilich, Mindflayer, Otyugh, Rust Monster etc, as well as the standard creatures inspired by myth and legend (e.g. dragons, giants, goblins, orcs, vampires, zombies etc). There are some which one wishes were cast into the depths and never seen again (e.g., Chuul, Cloaker, Helmed Horror, Piercer). As in previous editions the Monster Manual plays fast and loose with mythology and folklore. This is not a resource if you are interested in mythology or creatures suitable for a historical fantasy. For games that reproduce historical monster beliefs the *Ars Magica Medieval Bestiary*, and GURP's 3rd edition's *Bestiary* and *Faerie* supplements are recommended.

In general the monsters of this edition have fewer features and will be earlier to use in play. Due to the Defined Limits applied throughout the game creatures do not need to be festooned with long lists of powers to challenge high level PCs, instead most creatures need only their iconic powers. One result of the new game system is that creature statistical information takes up less space. As an average page is dedicated to each creatures (more for collected groups), one would expect that this would be filled with more information about each monster. Alas, it is not the case, at least not for most cases, as art takes over. An example is the poor Cockatrice, one of the more interesting creatures in a fantasy environ, receiving but a quarter of a page of text, including statistics. Unlike (for example) the Monster Manuals of 2nd



edition AD&D which gave considerable standard information on the ecological information of each creature, the Monster Manual 5th edition largely lacks these, providing instead keyword sections providing a major characteristic of the creature which could be used as adventure seeds (e.g., the Bullywug has "Foul Aristocracy", "Unruly Diplomacy", "Amphibian Allies").

Another very notable absence is that a list of monsters by Challenge Rating is not provided in the book, although apparently it will be included in the DMG. There's not much to say about the Miscellaneous Creatures and Non-Player Character 'chapters' as they are extremely abbreviated at best. As mentioned some of the decisions to put various creatures under "Miscellaneous" rather than the Monster chapter seem quite strange. The poor Blink Dog, has been relegated to having to share a page with Bats and Black Bears, where its arch-rival the Displacer Beast thumbs its nose with a page of its own in the Monster chapter. Contrariwise, the Monster chapter includes two pages of Dinosaurs, when surely one would think these belonged in the Miscellaneous chapter, along with a collection of other dire and prehistoric creatures.

In many ways the new Monster Manual is a great disappointment; there is less information, there is unimaginative albeit skilled artwork, the physical production is questionable. The only redeeming feature is the keyword information, and whilst that is a very significant positive that is hardly sufficient in its own right to give the product a recommended status. Given that the monsters have appeared in previous editions one is tempted to suggest instead that the descriptive text (not the game statistics) of early editions of Monster Manuals and other old D&D materials may be more useful for placing various creatures in plausible settings and scenarios.

### Other stuff

Having discussed the 'other three pillars' there are a few items worth mentioning that didn't fit. For example, there is no official rule for firing into melee. Was this left out on purpose to give archers more utility? All shields are the same. There are no rules for scaling equipment to different sizes. Indeed, while creature range from tiny to gargantuan in size the Monster Manual and PHB do not reveal how size affects carrying capacity, feed requirements and other common issues. One can only hope the DMG will address these issues.



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Finally, sometimes it's not about you. Sometimes the game you play is more about being able to find others to play with than your own preference regarding rules and settings. Promotion by WOTC's marketing machine and the brand recognition of D&D means that 5th edition already has a large player base. As pointed out by Lev in RPG Review issue 22, games survive "as long as there is a core group involved in promoting, producing, and distributing a game system with regular updates, supplements etc, its survival is ensured." It is likely that like AD&D and D&D 3e, D&D 5e will enjoy this level of ongoing support. Therefore if you decide to invest in the rather expensive three core books you are likely to be able to find other players to enjoy them with them for years to come, even after the glue gives way and the pages come loose.

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## 33 RPG REVIEW ISSUE 25 September 2014

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# FIFTH EDITION D&D UNUSUAL RACES

by Karl Brown

5<sup>th</sup> Edition is bringing many veterans back to D&D. Some of these have been enthusiastic about playing unusual creatures since the days of 1<sup>st</sup> edition. First edition had tens of magazine articles offering new races, 2e had the *The Complete Book of Humanoids* as well as new races specific to campaign settings, and 3.5 had *Savage Species*. Fans from all these editions are looking to get into the new 5<sup>th</sup> edition but there is no official way to convert oddball races. Until an official solution is released this article provides a fair way to create PCs of many monstrous races utilising evidence from canon rules.

## What is this?

Most of this article describes a process to convert monsters to PC races but I have included some examples of new races at the end. Some creatures start at level one, just like PCs of the core races. Others have a Level Adjustment (LA) representing how many class levels the race is equivalent to. Creatures also have a Joining Level (JL), usually LA+1. A monster PC can't join a party until the other characters are at this level. When a monster joins the party his LA+Class levels should be equal to the JL and therefore the career level of the party.

I have not provided 3.5 style race-classes. Playing an immature creature always felt like killing time until you got to play the character you really wanted to play. Not doing so also ensures these unusual characters have the same access to the class-based roleplaying hooks provided in 5<sup>th</sup> edition core classes.

## How was this done?

Modern games are built around (often hidden) frameworks. Inevitably clues about these hidden design systems end up in the game. Put together enough of these clues and you can reveal portions of the design systems and put them to work. I'm a 30+ year veteran of the hobby and a compulsive tinkerer with a good grasp of algebra so these house rules have a little expertise behind them. However, nobody but our friends at WOTC can claim to be expert in the 5<sup>th</sup> edition yet. This article was written when only the free Basic Rules and the PHB were available.

**I'm confident most of the races produced by this process will be balanced.** However the best test is the table. 5<sup>th</sup> edition is too new for my group to have properly playtested these rules. That said, I have calculated numerous example races, generated characters, and done preliminary testing. The aim here is to get this to you sooner rather than later to facilitate the switch to 5<sup>th</sup>. Players and DMs should treat these rules like a play-test beginning with what is presented here, proceeding with good-faith at the table, and accepting that some tweaking may be necessary. I have provided method to seamlessly adjust over-powered characters during a campaign.

## Limits and overcoming them

The Player's Handbook (PHB) assumes PCs are going to be roughly like humans; PCs are going to be about human-sized, have hands, be able to speak, and not be able to fly or swim like a fish. The PHB only gives rules for Medium sized equipment. To open up more options I have provided ways to deal with larger, Tiny, mute, powerful, and non-humanoid creatures that are fair to the other players. Just bear in mind that the **more strange and powerful your choice the more experimental your character will be.**

## Roleplay

Monsters are rated by combat effectiveness and these rules use that fact to produce PC versions of the creatures that can make an contribution in combat equal to a typical PC of the same level. This approach may lead some to question the roleplaying aspects of these new races and their utility out of combat. The PHB PC races have descriptions full of roleplaying hooks. I could not provide this detail for the races here. Reading the detailed monster entries and other materials from earlier editions, particularly 2<sup>nd</sup> editions detailed Monster Manual entries and the old Ecology of... articles in Dragon issues of that era, will give more background on the race if you have access to those. However PC monsters will have a core class and background providing roleplaying hooks and non-combat powers. In short, characters of these new races should have the nearly same degree of utility out of combat as regular races and fleshed out personalities for roleplaying.

## Process for converting monsters to PC races

### Effective Level (EL)

Determining the Effective Level (EL) of the *monster* is the first step towards calculating the race's Level Adjustment (LA). EL is the level where a party of the monsters (3-6) is a deadly encounter for a party of PCs. To determine this multiple the xp for one creature x2. Now consult the Deadly column of the table on p57 of the Basic Rules.

If **xp x2** is less than **100xp (ie. 1<sup>st</sup> level)** use **xp/50**. Record to two decimal places (round up). Eg. 0.12321 rounds to 0.13.

If xp is exactly on the amount listed for a level record that level.

If between levels you will need to interpolate as follows:

- Subtract the xp for the lower level from the xp for a party of creatures. This is 'A'.
- Next subtract the xp for the lower level from the xp for higher level. This is 'B'
- Divide. A/B. The result is 'C'.
- Add C to the lower level.
- Record to two decimal places (round up). The result is your EL.

*For example an Ogre is 450xp. So for a party of ogres double this (900xp) and consult the Deadly column of the table. 900xp falls between 4<sup>th</sup> (500xp) and 5<sup>th</sup> (1100xp). Therefore A=900-500=400. B=1100-500=600.*

*C=A/B=400/600=0.6666667. The EL for an ogre is 4.67*

### How was the EL procedure determined?

Three pieces of evidence were used:

- 1) Adventurers venture forth in diverse parties. Measuring one monster against one PC of a particular class does not reflect this. The EL then is the level of a party of core race PCs when a party of that breed of monster has a 50% chance of winning; i.e. when the two parties are of equal power in a fight.
- 2) Since editions 3.0 and above D&D squews the odds in favour of the PCs. A fair fight with the monsters having a 50% chance of winning would probably be called Hard or Deadly encounter by the designers (Basic Rules p57). Alternatively, I considered the recommended xp per day (Basic Rules p58).
- 3) The Mage NPC is effectively a 9<sup>th</sup> level wizard with d8s for HD instead of D6s. The Mage's EL must therefore be more than 9. How much more? Having determined the value of a HD (see below) I determined how many levels this difference in HD was worth, 4, and added it to 9, the answer was 13. Checking our three alternatives from step 1, a party of NPC Mages is a a Deadly Encounter at level 13.

### Level Adjustment and points

EL can be a value between levels but LA is always an integer or zero. To account for this we use a point system to reduce the race's power and thereby remove the fractions of a level. If EL has digits after the decimal then subtract the integer; any remainder is multiplied by x-8 (round down) to give you points (pt). Remember rounding a negative down increases the magnitude. In later steps the goal is to reduce points to zero.

*For example our ogre has EL4.67.*

*So LA is 4 and there is 0.67 left over.  $0.67 \times -8 = -5.33333$ , rounds to -6pt (negative six points).*

**LA must be 19 or less or the race cannot be used as a PC.**

### Awakened Animals

Awakened animals are beasts raised to human-like intelligence by magic. For these creatures subtract the usual animal intelligence from 10 and **subtract** this from the point total. This will make the total more negative.

### Racial HD

Monster versions of creatures have HD not gained through a class. In 5<sup>th</sup> edition monsters have more HP than PCs of the same EL because monsters generally don't act in teams of complimentary individuals like PCs do, nor do they often have magical healing etc. Our new PC race will be part of a diverse adventuring party so we need to adjust the racial HD.

1. Multiply the monster HD by  $x2/3$ . Record to two decimal places (round up).
2. You have a number of HD of the same type as the monster equal to the integer.
3. Removing the integer you'll often have a remainder. Multiply this by a factor 'H' and round up to an integer to give pts (round down). What's 'H'? That depends of the HD: d4=2, d6=3, d8=4, d10=5pt d12=6, d20=10.
4. Add these points from your point total.

*Example Ogre: a monster ogre has 7d10HD.  $7 \times 2/3 = 4.67$ . A pc ogre at this point has 4d10hp.  $0.67 \times 5pt = 3.333$  rounds to 3pt Add these to the point total  $-6+3 = -3pt$  left.*

**So what about the point costs?** We set 1pt to be 1 in an Ability Score. We know from the human that a race is 6pt and the variant rule for humans gives us the means to price a few other items. A Background has to be worth more than 4. We also know from the Barbarian at 4<sup>th</sup> level that the value of a level has to be whatever a d12 HD is worth +2.

**HDx2/3** is derived from comparing the Mage NPC to a PC 9th level wizard. Mage NPC has 1.5x more hp (about 4 levels worth, caster level+4=13=EL). But not all HD are equal. Points equal to half the number of sides on a die gave sensible results.

### Racial ability score adjustments

The starting point for racial ability score adjustments is the monster stat block attribute-8 except Strength which is -9. Unlike core races these can be negatives.

**In the next steps the ability score adjustments will be modified by points to approach zero.**

**Never change the Str modifier.**

If the point total is negative reduce ability scores. When subtracting start at the highest modifier, other than Str, and reduce each by one stepwise. If at any point two ability scores are equal use the order of preference Con, Dex, Wis, Int, Cha. Never reduce below zero.

If the point score is positive increase negative ability score adjustments towards zero. When adding start at the lowest (most negative) modifier, other than Str, and increase each by one stepwise towards zero. If at any point two ability scores are equal use the order of preference Con, Dex, Wis, Int, Cha. Never raise above zero.

*Example ogre: Str+10, Dex+0, Con+8, Int-3, Wis -1, Cha-1. We need to add -3pt (i.e. subtract 3). So we reduce positively adjusted ability scores proceeding stepwise:*

*Str+10, Dex+0, Con+7, Int-3, Wis -1, Cha-1. The highest non-Str score is Con.*

*Str+10, Dex+0, Con+6, Int-3, Wis -1, Cha-1. Checking again, it's still Con.*

*Str+10, Dex+0, Con+5, Int-3, Wis -1, Cha-1. No points left.*

**For PCs the maximum for ability scores is 20 and the minimum is 3 after these adjustments.**

### Why 8?

Why are the ability score adjustments not based around 10? Firstly, because the Commoner NPC is little more than a HD and ability scores. The sum of his ability score adjustments should be almost the same as the human PC, who also has no race powers, i.e. +6 total. Run this method with all base ability scores -10 instead of -8 and the Commoner has -5 total attribute modifiers, a shortfall of 11. Proceeding from -8 to most and -9 to Str recreates the human race as described in the PHB.

Secondly, Monsters are built around a base of 10, again look at the Commoner, on ability scores but the average raw ability score for a PC is 12.

Monsters with few race powers will have higher ability scores as compensation, just like a human, this is especially true for high LA creatures.

### Remaining points

Still have points left? If you have a positive number of points first buy skill slots costing 2pt each. Use the following phase in the new race's description: "*Your unusual past that has driven you away from the usual life of your kind is represented by (number) skill proficiencies of your choice.*". If after buying skill slots you still have 1pt left raise the highest non-Str ability score adjustment by +1. If two or more ability score adjustments are tied use the order of

preference Con, Dex, Wis, Int, Cha.

If points are negative first reduce any racial HD using the costs above, eg. -7pt, 3d6HD becomes -1pt and 1d6HD. Next, further reduce ability scores. Apply a -1 to the lowest ability score adjustment (other than Str) stepwise. If at any point two ability scores are equal use the order of preference Con, Dex, Wis, Int, Cha.

### Checking LA

Some monsters have features that throw out this system. For example merfolk are worth low xp and have low EL because they have poor AC. A PC merman can wear armour or assign a high roll to Dex. To catch these outliers we perform one last check. First sum the ability score adjustments then add points for any racial hit die (d4=2pt, d6=3pt, d8=4pt, d10=5pt, d20=10pt). The race's total should be less than  $6+LA \times 8$  (see the table below). If not, raise LA.

*Example Ogre ability score adjustments plus 4x5 for HD makes 25. At LA4 the ogre is allow up to 38pt. Since the total is below that allowed we leave the ogre at LA4. We do NOT reduce the LA.*

*Example: Merfolk are LA0 with Str+1, Dex+3, Con+3, Int+3, Wis+3 Cha+4 and 1d8 racial HD. This is 21pt. At LA0 only 6pt are allowed. LA is therefore raised to LA2.*

### Joining Level (JL)

Joining level is the level of PHB race characters when your weird character can join them. Generally,  $JL=LA+1$ . However PCs usually don't have a substantial access to some forms of movement until later levels (evidence in parenthesis). Therefore these and other kinds of enhanced mobility set minimum joining levels of 4 if swim speed (Druid Circle Forms) or if they can levitate (vertically only, the level where Wizards gain three uses of the spell), also 4 if they can walk up smooth walls and across ceilings (the level where the wizard gets three uses of the Spider Climb spell), 6 if the race has limited teleport like a blink dog (Benign Transposition), 8 for flying speed (Druid Circle Forms), 12 if able to teleport self, and 14 if able to teleport and take others with them, planeshift, or go ethereal. These are the only abilities that do this, I'm assuming all others are covered by the LA. You'll note that what counts as 'substantial access' varies, this is because some modes of movement are likely to be more useful more often than others. Flight will be used a lot while planeshift is likely to see use once or twice an adventure.

**Option:** Ignore the movement type JL limits and accept that some obstacles and challenges will be easier for the party to overcome at low levels.

**Option:** Allow races with unusual movement to join at LA+1 but they don't get their special movement powers until the JL indicated above. This could be explained by lingering wing or tail injuries, clipped feathers, young wyrmlings, etc.

**JL must be 20 or less or the creature cannot be used as a PC.**

*Example: The ogre joining level is 5. An ogre PC joins a 5<sup>th</sup> level party with one level in a class.*

### Low xp monsters patch rule

After doing some examples I noticed that 10xp and 0xp monsters when converted seemed under-powered. As a work around try this final tweak. **If the monster version is worth less than 20xp** then total up the ability score adjustments. If less than 3 (the total for most PHB races) add points to bring the total to three, ie.  $pt=3-(\text{sum of adjustments})$ , remember subtracting a negative adds. Restore the bonus to the monster version's (non-Str) highest score (up to the monster ability score-8). If there are points left to spend, repeat for the second highest score of the monster version and so on. Never alter Str. Don't forget the monster version of awakened animals are Int10 and therefore Int+2. If there are still points left over use these points to reset negative modifiers towards zero (never higher than zero) starting from the

least penalised. Again, don't alter Str. If there are points left over, tough these are lost.

*Example: An awakened frog has 0xp. Base Int for a frog is 1 so 1-10=-9xp, then the frog is given +1pt for loosing it's one monster HD. This makes -8pt! After adjusting ability scores and remaining points as described in early sections the frog is left with Str-9, Dex+0, Con+0, Int+0, Wis+0, Cha-6. The sum of these is -14pt. So we apply the patch, 3-(-14)=17pt to spend. Monster frog highest score is Dex13, so we spend 5pt to get Dex+5. Next highest score for a monster awakened frog is Int10, so we spend 2pt on this. We still have 7pt left so we look for negative modifiers. Str is -8 but you never change Str. Resetting to Cha+0 uses 6pt. 1pt left but there is nothing legal to spend it on so its lost. Final frog ability scores are: Str-9, Dex+5, Con+0, Int+2, Wis+0, Cha+0.*

### What you get

A PC of a monster race gets most of the monster's features: size, type, tags, natural armour, speed, skills (but recalculate the bonus these are assumed to be cultural or instinctive), vulnerabilities, resistances, immunities, senses, languages, innate spellcasting, spellcasting (again cultural), proficiency in all the armour, weapons, and natural weapons listed (again cultural or instinctive), any natural weapons (but not the attack bonuses or ability score derived damage bonuses), multiattack, any magic powers, any special reactions, legendary actions, and lair actions. You gain any natural armour (minus the monster Dex bonus), if you wear armour use the highest of the natural armour and the worn, they do not stack (like the barkskin spell). If the creature does not speak Common add Common to the list of languages for the PC version. You also gain any save proficiencies the monster has, if any.

PCs do not get: alignment, any equipment including armour, creatures attribute mods including Dex modifier to AC and bonus on saving throws, hit points and hit dice, ability scores, challenge, and xp.

### Ogre

*LA4, JL5, Racial HD: 4d10. Str+10, Dex+0, Con+5, Int-3, Wis -1, Cha-1. Remember PC ability scores are limited to the 3-20 range. The ogre gets: Large Size, Giant type, Speed 40, darkvision 60ft, Languages: Giant and Common, Proficiencies: Great club, javelin, both scaled to Large users.*

### How does the ogre compare?

Let's compare an ogre in a class he is good at, Barbarian, to the most similar core race, the half orc. Both are at the ogre's joining level of 5<sup>th</sup>. Both created with the standard array 15, 14, 13, 12, 10, 8

Urg the Ogre	Ront the Half Orc
<b>Str20, Dex14, Con20, Int9, Wis12, Cha7 Total 82)</b> The ogre has to use the 10 on Str to stay within the 3-20 allowed range.	Str19, Dex13, Con15, <b>Int10</b> , Wis12, <b>Cha8</b> (Total 77) <b>The half orc can arrange the array in the optimal way for his class.</b> His 4 <sup>th</sup> class level raised his Str by 2
<b>AC 17, HP: 56</b> HD: 4d10+1d12 Size Large (more opponants can attack you, you have to squeeze often, etc), Speed 40, Darkvision 60, Languages Common, Giant and Orc.	AC 13 (plus any magic items), HP: 45, <b>HD5d12</b> <b>Size Medium</b> , Speed 40, Darkvision 60, Languages Common, Orc and Giant.
No race powers, rage, unarmoured defense, wanderer.	<b>Menacing, relentless endurance, savage attacks</b> , rage, unarmoured defence, <b>relentless attack, danger sense, primal path (berserker frenzy), extra attack</b> , fast movement, wanderer.
5 <sup>th</sup> level with +3 proficiency bonus	5 <sup>th</sup> level with +3 proficiency bonus

Starting gear only. **Large great axe\* (2d12+5), Large great club\* (2d8+5), four Large javelins (2d6+2)**, explorer's pack, staff, hunting trap, wolf skin, traveller's clothes, pouch 10gp.

The ogre lacks the extra attacks and other damage enhancing features of the half orc's 2<sup>nd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> level barbarian features.

Great axe\* (1d12+4), Great club\* (1d8+4), four javelins (1d6+1), explorer's pack, staff, hunting trap, wolf skin, traveller's clothes, pouch 10gp.

**Plus all the gains from adventuring possibly including magic items and weapons.**

**\*Note how extra attack, savage attacks, relentless attack, and frenzy increase the half orcs damage dealing capability somewhat.**

In summary there isn't much in it. The ogre is tough and hits harder but the half orc has more attacks, a greater selection of race and class benefits, and probably magic items from adventuring.

### Overcoming the limits

The PHB is designed to support humanoids of Small or Medium size as PCs. Fortunately, we are given general tools for players who play within the limitations of a role, Disadvantage, and Inspiration.

- Use Disadvantage when the race can do something but with difficulty.
- When a race can't do something say 'no' but *if* this prevents the character from taking an action critical to survival or achieving important goals award Inspiration. Inspiration is explained as the character trying harder to prove themselves useful.

The Inspiration awards are important. Awarding Inspiration when the handicap becomes critical compensates the player in proportion to how often the handicap is actually important during play. Specific examples follow in the sections below on Size and Beasts.

### Size

For smaller than Small and bigger than Medium characters whenever the limitations of your Size place you in danger or prevents you from doing something critical your referee might award Inspiration (PHB p125). For example a giant might be rewarded Inspiration for not being able to enter a room where the rest of the party was losing a fight but not if the door went into an inn on a warm summer night. If your Size makes something more difficult but not impossible apply Disadvantage, for example a hill giant trying to pick a human built lock.

The other issue is equipment of the right size. For scaled armour we learn from the barding rule, the armour does not differ in AC from Medium scale, cost is x4 per scale up and x1/4 per scale down, weight is x2 per scale up and x1/2 per scale down. In the PHB Small armour costs and weighs the same as Medium you may wish to change this. These rules could be used for any worn equipment including packs.

For scaled weapons there are three ways to handle the issue.

1. If the weapon is in the monster's description use the damage listed (minus the monster version's Str mod).
2. Alternatively, based on the Enlarge/Reduce spell is to add 1d4 per Size increase and -1d4 per Size decrease. However, this spell has worked this way for several editions and never reflected scaled weapons seen in monster descriptions.
3. Each increase in size adds another die in the monster examples we have. Ok what about smaller? Well sprite tells us 1d8 at Medium goes to 1pt at Tiny but we currently don't really have any other data points for smaller than medium scaled weapons. While we wait on further evidence I suggest subtracting 2 from the number of sides of the dice used per reduction in scale below Medium (for example a 2d8 becomes 2d6, a d2 becomes 1pt). At Tiny any slashing or piercing weapon can be built with the finesse quality if damage is reduced to 1pt.

Weapon cost probably increases in proportion to the average damage of the weapon compared to the Medium version.

Weight increases by x8 per size increase or x1/8 per size decrease in the real world.

For other non-worn gear my best guess is cost x2 per increase in scale, x1/2 per scale down. The exception is items with value based on their materials such as gold jewellery those increase in cost as per weight. Weight increases by x8 per size increase or x1/8 per size decrease in the real world.

### **Beasts and other oddities**

There are issues if you cannot speak or wield tools. Whenever the limitations of your race place you in danger or prevent you from doing something critical your referee might award Inspiration (PHB p125). For example an awakened panther might be rewarded Inspiration for not being able to open a door to a room where the rest of the party was losing a fight but not if the door went into an Inn on a warm summer night.

Not being able to talk can cause communication issues that could occasionally be worth Inspiration. You might understand languages without being able to speak or write them. If you can speak humanoid languages then you use words for somatic components. If you are polymorphed or shape-changed into a form that cannot sound out words you can't cast spells with somatic components until the effect ends. If you can't speak humanoid languages then spells with verbal components assume you are able to translate the words into noises you can make. If shape-changed into a form that cannot make your natural range of sounds you cannot cast spells with verbal components until the effect ends even if your temporary form can speak humanoid languages. If you can't vocalise at all then you can't cast spells with a verbal component and spellcasting classes are not recommended.

Armour is usually no problem, exotic barding can exist in D&D, oozes, trees, or gas monsters would be exceptions. You may need help to get in or out of armour (see below).

You cannot begin play with equipment you cannot use, nor proficiencies in weapons, shields, or tools you cannot use. This also applies to any class benefits you cannot physically do. You are not directly compensated for this you just lose these benefits. However, the more often this comes up the more limited your character is and the more likely they are to earn Inspiration during play.

For those without hands a spell focus can replace most material components and can be simply grasped or worn. I would assume you can interpret somatic components into complex sets of movements you can perform in your natural form (if you are polymorphed or otherwise shape-changed into a body substantially different to your usual form you can't use somatic components. Just as a human transformed into a handless parrot can't cast spells with somatic components a parrot transformed into a human cannot use somatic components even though the new form has hands. If you can't write you cannot write into a spellbook and cannot be a wizard.

**Option:** Based on the polymorph spell and the exact wording of the spellcasting rules only creatures with good hands (Tool Use 5 below) can cast spells with somatic components and only creatures that can speak words can use spells with verbal components. This however is very limiting for non-humanoids and is not recommended if they are to be PCs.

For weapon and tool use rate the creature into one of the below categories:

**1** Paws or similar. Unable to use any weapons, shields, or tools. Cannot don or remove armour without help. Cannot apply the bonus for Dexterity to thrown or missile weapons except objects dropped from above. Cannot open locks, disable traps, pick pockets, open a doorknob, or write. Cannot be a wizard. Spells requiring specific material components with a gp value cannot be cast. Can cast spells where a focus can substitute. Cannot use a component pouch. Somatic components require your whole body to be free to move. (dolphin, giant eagle, slithering tracker, worg).

**2** Grasping paws or similar. Able to grasp items and point wands but due to weak grip, lack of coordination, or limited



range of movement cannot wield weapons, use shields, or perform fine manipulation such as writing. Cannot don or remove armour without help. Cannot apply the bonus for dexterity to thrown or missile weapons except objects dropped from above. Cannot open locks, disable traps. Can pick pockets with a Disadvantage. Requires a DC10 Dex check to open a doorknob though if the door was intended for people two or more Sizes larger you are at a Disadvantage. Cannot be a wizard. Able to cast most spells requiring material components. Spells requiring specific material components with a gp value cannot be cast if fine manipulation is described in the spell description. Can cast spells where a focus can substitute. Can use a component pouch. Somatic components require your whole body to be free to move. (dragon, raven, parrot, otter, otyugh, raccoon, possum).

**3** Basic hands or tentacles or similar. Able to wield Simple Bludgeoning weapons such as clubs and maces. Can use shields. Cannot apply the bonus for dexterity to thrown or missile weapons except objects dropped from above. Can remove armour without help but cannot don armour without help. Cannot perform fine manipulation such as writing. Cannot open locks. Can disable simple traps but with a Disadvantage. Can pick pockets and open doorknobs normally. Cannot be a wizard. Able to cast most spells requiring material components. Spells requiring specific material components with a gp value cannot be cast if a fine manipulation is described in the spell description. Can cast spells where a focus can substitute. Can use a component pouch. As for humanoids, somatic components require *two* free manipulators (hands, tentacles, or whatever) rather than one. (baboon, carnivorous ape, kraken, shambling mound, summoned monster).

**4** Able to 'pinch' using something like fingers but still not as good as human hands. Able to wield Simple Bludgeoning weapons such as clubs and maces. Can use a shield. Cannot apply the bonus for Dexterity to thrown or missile weapons except objects dropped from above. Can perform fine manipulation such as writing and manipulating lock picks. Able to disarm traps, pick pockets, and open doorknobs. Can don and remove armour unaided. Can be a wizard. Spell casting unaffected. (elephant, orangutan, homonculous, muck dweller, obliviax).

**5** Able to use all weapon types and tools. Able to be a wizard. Spell casting unaffected. Can apply the bonus for dexterity to thrown or missile weapons. Combines strong grip and precise manipulation. Normal rules apply. (gnome, human, thri-kreen, tako, yeti).

### Awakened animals and plants

These are products of the awaken spell. As *monsters* awakened plants have Int10, Wis10. I'd rate trees and shrubs as tool use 3. PC awakened plants speak Common and any one other language. We assume they learned one of these some time after being awakened.

Awakened animals are exactly the same as the monster stat block would indicate except the *monster's* Int ability score is 10. They also gain the ability to understand and speak one language. PC awakened animals speak Common and any one other language. They understand ordinary non-intelligent creatures of their kind and similar creatures. They also look like normal animals which can be useful.

### First level characters

Monsters in 5<sup>th</sup> edition are generally tougher than in previous editions therefore very few have a JL1. The following list is of all monsters in the PHB and Basic Rules with less than 50xp and therefore *likely* to be LA+0, merfolk for example are not. Those **bolded** have hands or tentacles as good as human hands. Those with a ~~line through~~ have movement types that raise JL unless you choose to ignore this rule. Where an animal is listed the awakened version is assumed.

awakened shrub, baboon, badger, **bat**, blood hawk, camel, cat, ~~crab~~, deer, eagle, flying snake, **frog**, ~~giant crab~~, giant fire beetle, giant rat, giant weasel, goat, ~~hawk~~, hyena, jackel, **kobold**, lizard, mastiff, **merfolk**, mule, **octopus**, ~~owl~~, ~~poisonous snake~~, pony, ~~pteranodon~~, ~~pseudodragon~~, ~~quipper~~, rat, ~~raven~~, scorpion, ~~seahorse~~, spider, **stirge**, **twig blight**, ~~vulture~~, and weasel. A twig blight can't vocalise.

### Creating characters

When rolling ability scores you may not be able to adhere to the 3-20 caps on ability scores. If so assign your rolls to get as close as possible then raise to 3 or lower to 20. You still get the usual first level HP for your first class even if you have race HD and HP. Proficiency bonus is determined as if your level was LA+class level. There are no limits on

Background. The Outlander is good for marauding humanoids and wild creatures. The Urchin Background would be good for rats and other city creatures who are awakened. Equipment is as given by Class and Background or purchase. If you go with the Class and Background options weapons and armour are scaled to your size representing a significant saving in the cost of scaled goods for large races.

Some races that we traditionally visualise as brutal and non-charismatic, like the orc, have positive Cha adjustments. Perhaps this represents a forceful personality, domineering will, or a savage animal magnetism? Alternatively, if this really bothers you assign your lowest roll (or the 8 on the standard array) to Charisma.

### **Unusual characters in play**

The more human-like the character is, the easier it will be to include them in D&D's traditional types of adventures. Creatures of any Size could be adventurers. If your campaign features a lot of dungeons then Large is probably the maximum Size for PCs. If however your campaign consists mostly of outdoor travel and battlefields, arguably more realistic premises than the traditional D&D dungeon, then Huge PCs should play just fine. Tiny PCs can be useful in any type of adventure.

Unusual shape is actually less of an issue than size if the character is part of a party. Compare a giant eagle and awakened raven, who can easily perch on another PC's shoulder. A solitary awakened panther is going to stuck when faced with their first doorknob but as part of a party they can get past the door and do their fair share to overcome whatever is on the other side. PCs with more LA than HD should find ways to do more damage to take down foes fast, or use special abilities to aid others while staying out of reach.

### **What if the unusual PC seems too powerful?**

The process tries to determine an LA and adjust ability scores so the new race will be equal to the PHB races in power when they join. If during play the unusual character seems too powerful the table should negotiate a solution. One option is freeze the unusual PC's class level and then when the character advances a level add an LA instead (only add HD and HP of the race type, except on LA's divisible by 3 (3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> etc.) these are dead levels you get no HD or HP for these). Keep doing this until the unusual PC seems to be equal to other PCs in play. This solution should work fine if everyone is there to have fun and acts in good faith.

### **Example Races**

Here is a small collection of races chosen because either they have a history of use as PCs or because they are low power and therefore more likely to be of use for a new edition and newly started campaigns. Of the races presented here two can join a first level party: awakened rat and kobold. Of these the kobold is the least experimental as kobolds have hands, are not Large or Tiny, and can speak.

If an entry is missing from one of these race descriptions then it does not apply. Multiattack, when it occurs, applies only to attacks listed in the creature's multiattack description. You can't switch out weapons unless the description has that leeway in it.

### **Awakened Frog**

*Kiss me!*

Tiny Beast

Str-8, Dex+5, Con+0, Int+2, Wis +0, Cha+0

LA0, JL4. Speed 20ft, swim 20ft. Senses: darkvision 30ft. Tool Use 2

Languages: Common and any one other. Able to communicate with non-intelligent frogs and toads.

Proficiencies: Perception, stealth. No attacks!

Powers: amphibious, standing leap (see PHB p305). Looks like an ordinary frog.

Even after the 'patch' rule for low xp creatures the frog is still probably under-powered. This could be a great tool for a 'magic gone wrong' adventure where transformed PCs must go on a short quest to be returned to human(oid) form.

### **Awakened Rat**

*I ate Unseen U's garbage*

Tiny Beast

Str-7, Dex+3, Con +1, Int +2, Wis +2, Cha +0

LA0, JL1. Speed 20ft. Senses: darkvision 30ft. Tool use: 2

Languages: Common, any one other language. The ability to communicate with rats.

Proficiencies: Bite (1pt piercing finesse).

Powers: Keen Smell (see Basic Rules p41). Looks like an ordinary rat.

### **Awakened Raven**

*Roïc sent us*

Tiny Beast

Str -7, Dex+6, Con +0, Int +2, Wis +4, Cha -2

LA0, JL8. Speed 10ft, Fly 50ft. Tool use: 2

Languages: Common, any one other language. The ability to communicate with ordinary crows and ravens.

Proficiencies: Perception, Beak attack (1pt piercing finesse).

Powers: Mimicry see p309 of the PHB. Looks like an ordinary raven.

Notes: Most of a raven's survivability is in her power of flight. The best character options are those that enable the raven to attack or aid at a distance. The Sage Background is suggested for ravens attracted to "*many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore*".

### **Centaur**

*Have you read the Centaur Papers?*

Large Monstrosity

Str+9, Dex+4, Con+3, Int+1, Wis+4, Cha+3

LA 5, JL6. Racial HD: 4d10. Speed 50ft

Languages: Common, Elvish, and Sylvan.

Proficiencies: Athletics, Perception, Survival, Pike, Hooves (2d6 bludgeoning), Longbow.

Powers: Charge and Multiattack (Pike and hooves or two longbow attacks).

A centaur's unusual body shape means she uses medium sized weapons, shirts, etc for the upper torso but requires Large sized armour.

### **Goblin**

Small Humanoid (goblinoid)

Str-1, Dex+6, Con+2, Int+2, Wis+1, Cha+0

LA 1, JL 2, Racial HD1d6. Speed 30ft. Senses: darkvision 60 ft

Languages: Common and Goblin

Proficiencies: Scimitar, shortbow

Powers: nimble escape (see Basic Rules p30).

### **Kobold**

Small Humanoid (kobold)

Str-2, Dex+4, Con+1, Int+0, Wis+1, Cha+0

LA 0, JL 1. Speed 30ft. Senses: darkvision 60ft

Languages: Common, Draconic

Proficiencies: Dagger, sling.

Powers: Pack tactics, sunlight sensitivity

Note: The pack tactics ability is well suited to being a cooperative member of an adventuring party.

### **Lizardfolk**

*Return to Quag Keep anyone?*

Medium Humanoid (Lizardfolk)

Str+6, Dex+2, Con+6, Int+0, Wis+4, Cha+0.

LA3 JL4 Racial HD: 2d8. Natural Armour 13. Speed 30ft Swim 30ft

Languages: Draconic, Common

Proficiencies: Perception, stealth, survival, bite (1d6 piercing), heavy club, spiked shield

Powers: Hold breath for 15 minutes, multiattack (two melee attacks each with a different weapon).

### **Merfolk**

Medium Humanoid (Merfolk)

Str+1, Dex+3, Con+3, Int+3, Wis+3 Cha+4

LA 2, JL 4, Racial HD1d8. Speed 10ft, swim 40ft

Languages: Aquan, Common

Proficiencies: Perception, Spear.

Powers: Amphibious (breathes air and water).

Notes: Best for maritime or undersea campaigns. If in an undersea campaign where everyone has a swim speed change to JL3. You should discuss how you and the referee imagine issues like thirst, dehydration, and jumping and how Disadvantage and Inspiration will be used to make sure you are on the same page.

### **Ogre**

*The Whole Half-Ogre*

See above.

### **Orc**

Medium Humanoid (Orc)

Str+7, Dex+4, Con+8, Int+0, Wis+2, Cha+2

LA4, JL3, Racial HD 1d8. Speed 30ft. Senses: darvision 60ft

Languages: Common, Orc

Proficiencies: Intimidation, great axe, javelin

Powers: Aggressive (see Basic Rules p39)

### **Young Green Dragon**

Large Dragon

Str+10, Dex+4, Con+9, Int+8, Wis+5, Cha+7

LA11, JL12, Racial HD 10d10, Natural Armour AC17, Speed 40ft, fly 80ft, swim 40ft, Senses blindsight 30 ft., darkvision 120 ft

Proficiencies: Deception, perception, stealth, claw (2d6 slashing), poisonous bite (see Basic Rules p52), Dex saves, Con saves, Wis saves, Cha saves.

Damage Immunities: poison. Condition Immunities: poisoned.

Languages: Common, Draconic

Powers: Amphibious, Poison Breath (see Basic Rules p52).

Notes: I would have preferred a gold dragon as suggested by the 1<sup>st</sup> edition DMG or even metallic wyrmlings as seen in *Dragon 320* for 3.5.

# TREASURING THE DUNGEON : BASIC DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS REVISITED

*by Da'Vane*

With over 40 years of development, including six different versions of the rules and a multitude of settings, there is a lot of information within the Dungeons and Dragons franchise for the gamer to digest. Although the current numbering of D&D runs from the AD&D line, with the latest version known as Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition (aka D&D Next), the original D&D line is still popular, with its iconic Known World setting, and is still ripe with inspiration for the modern gamer.

## **History of Basic D&D**

In 1974, Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax released the first version of the iconic Dungeons and Dragons game through their new company Tactical Studies Rules, Inc. (TSR Inc.). In 1977, the decision was made to split Dungeons and Dragons into two separate product lines – Dungeons and Dragons (OD&D) and Advanced Dungeons and Dragons (AD&D). Of these two lines, OD&D would continue until 1991, while AD&D would continue until 2000. Following this time, AD&D would return once again to the name Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), and continues to this day in 2014.

In the OD&D line, two rulebooks were published in 1981 - a Basic Rulebook and an Expert rulebook. Developed by Tom Moldvay, this would become known as the (B/X) edition of D&D. In 1983, OD&D was released once again in a format developed by Frank Mentzer, that would become known as the BECMI edition following the release of the Companion, Master, and Immortals rules for D&D. This idea would also inform the labelling of OD&D products, with modules released for these various levels of OD&D being referred to as the B (Basic) series, X (Expert) series, C (Companion) series, M (Master) series, and I (Immortals) series.

The Basic version of OD&D, in both the B/X and BECMI editions of the game, would focus on the early levels of the game. They would feature everything needed to play levels 1-3, and would largely revolve around dungeoneering. The focus was on getting players accustomed to the principles of the game, from which they could head towards either AD&D or the the Expert OD&D rules.

This principle of expanding the focus of the game to include new types of adventures was fairly unique to OD&D, although the general principles of such progression can be seen in a range of different types of modules and supplements. This allowed starting GMs to begin playing with minimal fuss, and slowly expand the scope of their games as the players and their PCs gained experience.

## **Dungeons**

The core theme of the Basic version of OD&D was that of dungeon exploration. This has always been the simplest concept for players who are starting out with D&D, since the dungeon has always been considered a safe environment for the players to learn the fundamental concepts of the game.

The main reason for this is because the dungeon represents a clear defining line for adventuring, with most games starting as the PCs approach the entrance to the dungeon. When the PCs leave the dungeon, it is easy to assume they make their way back to town, a typically safe haven where they can recover and prepare for their next foray into the darkness.

In addition, dungeon environments have always been easy to control, particularly with the limited capabilities of the party at lower levels of the game. The GM could therefore direct the party through careful dungeon design and planning, without forcing the players to feel like they are being railroaded into taking certain actions. This allows for an easy control of pace, and gives the players a degree of freedom to direct their adventures as they explore the dungeon.

Basic OD&D also contained a number of tools for the GM still useful in today's game. They included a method of stocking a dungeon using a randomised approach, and allowing for a variety of encounters and challenges to be created fast. These tools could fill even a large dungeon in little time. They could also be used to provide inspiration for the

GM, who wasn't tied to the randomised rolls in any way, should they come up with something more fitting. Even then, the GM could get away with results that didn't seem to fit, and leave it to the players to come up with theories about why things the way they were. A canny GM could listen to the speculation of their players, and even adapt some of these ideas into further adventures.

### **Dungeon Levels**

In contrast to today's balance-heavy rules, basic OD&D followed a more status quo approach to encounter design that gave the PCs more freedom to choose what they felt they could handle. Dungeons were assigned a level, which determined roughly how strong the encounters and challenges would be. As a rule of thumb, the level of a creature was typically equal to their Hit Die, but special abilities could make creatures higher level. Each creature would also be defined to have a number appearing, and it was possible to see these creatures in higher or lower levels, in either increased or decreased amounts, respectively. This principle is still seen in today's D&D.

The difference comes down to the fact that little or no regard was given to the size of the dungeons or the number of encounters within. Changes in dungeon level were fairly obvious - typically a set of steps or a barrier of some kind would highlight such a change. This allowed the PCs the opportunity to choose whether or not they felt they could take on the challenges ahead. If they didn't think they could survive, they could always stay on the same dungeon level and explore some more, gaining experience until they felt ready to move on.

This approach represented a different style of pace to what we see in D&D now. The current trend for adventure design is to use a planned story or adventure site designed with the idea the characters will gain a level after so many encounters of that level. This tends to make for tighter, and shorter, adventures but this is often at the expense of player freedom.

One of the more common ways the GM could control transfer between dungeon levels was to place obstacles that would prevent the party from entering the level if they either hadn't faced enough encounters or reached the requisite level. These barriers could be as simple as a magically locked door that requires a key, so a pit that can only be safely descended using levitation. By using such methods, the GM could ensure the party had access to a particular ability and thus had a reasonable chance to survive the dangers within.

### **Treasure Hunting**

One major difference we see between the Dungeons and Dragons game today and that of basic OD&D is the importance given to finding treasure. In OD&D, PCs gained the majority of their experience by finding treasure and getting it out of the dungeon. Although combat was common, only a minority share of experience actually came from fighting creatures, encouraging alternative methods of dealing with encounters.

Because of how dangerous combat was, combat was largely seen as a failure state or a method of last resort to get at the creatures' loot. Bribery, diplomacy, deception, intimidation, and stealth were all possible ways for the party to bypass creatures, and possibly divest them of their wealth. It also meant there was an incentive for the party to let creatures live, as they could typically buy their surrender by giving up their treasure.

This focus on treasure hunting had another major impact on the game: encouraging GMs to be sneaky when designing their adventures. Treasure could be hidden in all sorts of places, and could often be used as bait for traps. Treasure could also take a number of forms, and the party might have to come up with creative solutions to get the treasure out of the dungeon. Small furnishings might be easy to carry - silver cutlery or a valuable tome of lore might be stuffed in a backpack with little fuss. Yet, there could be fine tapestries, giant marble statues, and even natural gold veins that would take a lot more effort to exploit.

This also made another type of treasure important - the treasure map. A map to a cache of 50,000 gold pieces worth of treasure could easily lead to an adventure where the PCs could gain enough experience to advance an entire level. It was up to the GM to make the PCs work for this, whether it was requiring a cunning plan to extract the treasure, or providing traps and creatures to be thwarted to reach it. In OD&D, a simple treasure hunt was enough of a motivation to get the players involved, and this is an idea easily adapted for today's games.

## Summary

Looking back, we can take the following key points of inspiration from Basic OD&D:

- \* Dungeons - Dungeons are easy to design and control, and they are the perfect sandbox adventuring environment for low level characters and new players to explore while learning how to play. What happens in the dungeon, stays in the dungeon.
- \* Dungeon Levels - For a change of pace, try swapping the encounter-based approach with a more exploration-focused method, using obstacles and barriers to give the players a meaningful impact on how the adventure progresses. Interesting obstacles can provide unique challenges for the party to overcome.
- \* Treasure Hunting - Consider using a treasure hunt as a basis for an adventure, including treasure maps leading to hidden loot, and an experience reward for successfully retrieving the treasure. Be creative when designing treasure and where it is hidden.

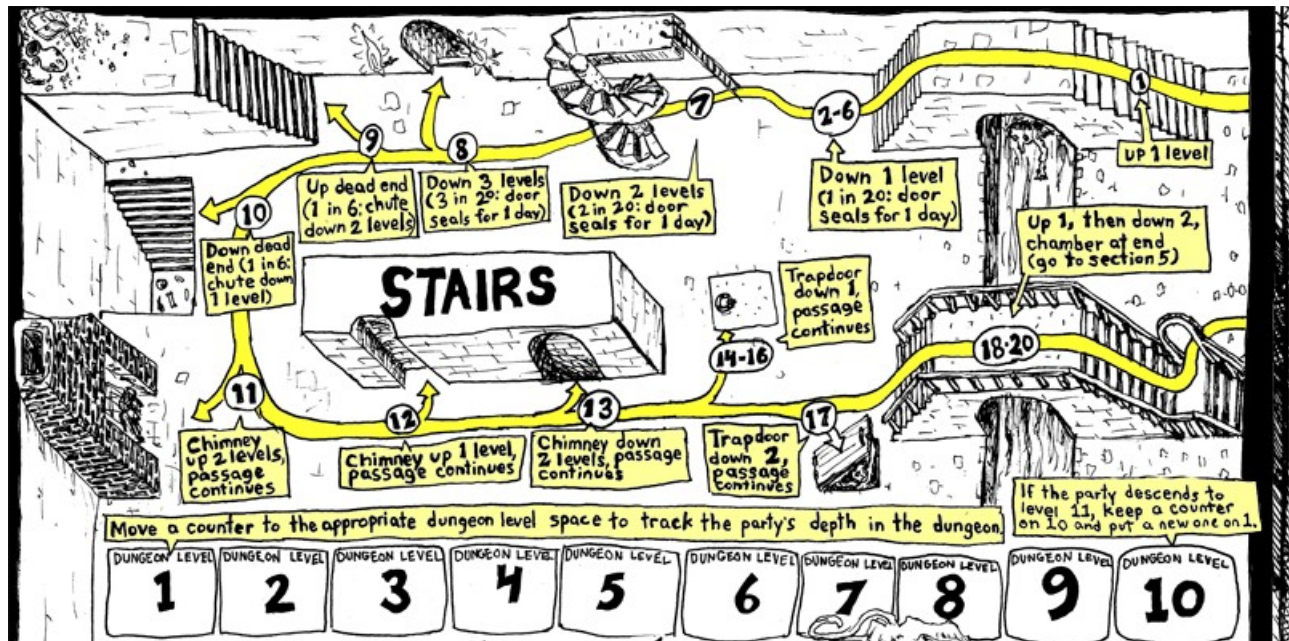
It might seem unlikely to find inspiration from earlier products, especially ones just a rulebook to a previous edition of Dungeons and Dragons. But there are still great ideas here you can use for inspiration.

Using the inspirations behind dungeon design and treasure hunting as the primary features of Basic OD&D, you can generate ideas for your adventures that are much more than simple monster fests we often see in the current iteration of the game.

You might not be able to teach an old dog new tricks, but you can certainly teach a new dog some old ones!

## Looking for More?

This is the first article of an on-going series



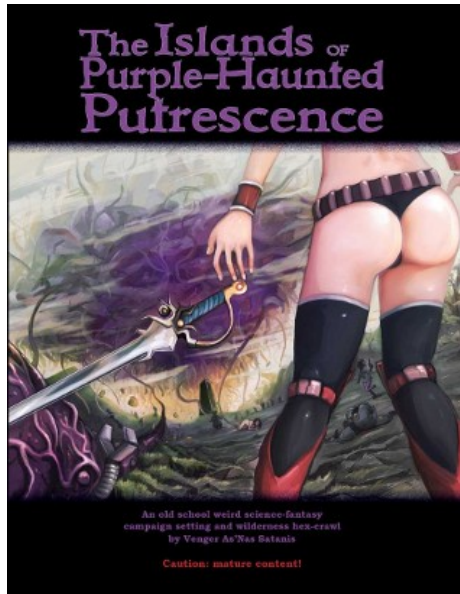
Selection from Random Dungeon Generator as a Dungeon Map Kickstart project  
(<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/2040314005/random-dungeon-generator-as-a-dungeon-map>)

# REVIEW : ISLANDS OF PURPLE-HAUNTED PUTRESCENCE

by Lev Lafayette

## Product and Overall Description

Cover art is meant to be striking or memorable and *The Islands of Purple* certainly achieve that. Prominent in the foreground is exposed buttocks, being worn by one of those improbable young female adventurers who decides that if she's going to go out into the world of danger she needs to put on some thigh-high boots, some short vambraces, a belt, and a skimpy pair of knickers. In the background is the reason that she's dropping her sword; a giant purple tentacled blob that seems to have captured one of her comrades who decided on even less clothing, but also with a comrade in a short-dress carrying a pistol. To be fair the work by Faustie it is fairly well well-executed; it is just largely devoid of creativity.



In many cases you *can* judge a book by its cover, and this is one of those cases. *Islands of Purple Haunted Putrescence* by Venger As'Nas Satanis describes itself as "An old school weird science-fantasy campaign setting and wilderness hex-crawl... an old school campaign guide and sandbox hex crawl created for use with virtually every fantasy paper & pencil tabletop roleplaying game", by which the author means *Dungeons & Dragons* and immediate derivatives. It comes with an solid table of contents (the disorganised text needs it), a two-column justified serif presentation with a good sense of content to whitespace. The inside back cover has a colour map of the three islands (Korus, Kelis, and Krevian). Despite a hex-grid there is no scale offered, but deep in the text its mentioned that the larger (Korus) is about 1,000 square miles; it is also the island that seems to have a water supply. Most of the internal line drawings are context-based and show some skill and creativity along the general style of Lovecraftian horror, which is not surprising given the author's activities. The writing style is informal, chatty, and verbose.

## Setting, System, and Characters

An opening description establishes the islands as "a land of jungle and stone bordered by eldritch beaches of violet-black sand. Ruins of cities, temples, and statues litter the landscape". There is reference to "the Great Ones", "Snake-Men", and crystals that power pylons that open gateways to other dimensions which, inevitably, means that the islands are populated with a fun-house of beings and technologies. The sands give off a purple mist after rain, which is a nice aesthetic touch.

So just as one is getting a good sense of the surroundings and perhaps wanting to know how this all comes about... we jump to the author's own mini-game system, V6D6, which is essentially roll a variable dice-pool (1d6 standard) and count the highest with 6s high (successes) and 1s low (failures). Players can reserve dice for future actions. It's nothing particularly exciting and the reserve system is prone to enormous abuse. This is then following by the author's opinion on some combat options, and finally a rather impressive description for scenario development. The latter is certainly one of the best parts of the book, although the same structure several times in a row would become rather formula rather quickly.

The material then jumps to some random tables for character background. The twenty examples from the *Darker Secrets* table ranges from being near-sighted (not a particularly dark secret one would think), allergic to "exotic foods", having a slimy green tentacle with suckers, being a product of incest, a serial killer, or a rapist. This is followed by twenty example flashback scenes that afflict a character, almost all with the sex, death, and monsters motif.

Jump-cut now to a table about magic use on the Purple Isles, which is "unstable, radioactive, and addictive". Every time a spell is cast, roll a d6; on a roll of 6 it doubles in some effect, one a roll of 1 it fails spectacularly (unless the wizard decided to align themselves with Chaos and become gradually mutated instead), on a 3, roll on "The Magic User Rolled



A Three" table - yes that's what it's called, which can summon a purple worm (who eats someone before disappearing), converts a nearby tree into a "beautiful, voluptuous woman with magenta skin tone" etc. Magic items also fail on a roll of 1 on d6 when used, and finally, of course, there's a table for various dimension gateways which pop up with alarming regularity. Where do they lead? Jungles full of cannibals! Derelict spaceships! Earth in the 21st century!

The text then leaps to an underdeveloped version of the monk character class, a short (d12) random table for critical hits, personality traits for magical swords which includes "likes to quote Nietzsche" (all magical swords on the Purple Islands have personality and ego), and an origins table, followed by a scarring table for when characters are brought to zero hit points or less (including "effectively castrated", "spinal injury - can't walk" etc).

Finally the author deems us worthy to learn about the twenty-thousand year history of the Islands, which mysteriously appeared as one, was split apart by magical forces, and has had its share of rulers, plagues, wars and the like. Interesting the Isles are sapient albeit of a single personality, and they are given six personality traits, some of which are contradictory : "The islands are as psychotic and broken as a computer with multiple conflicting personalities. Every day it's something different and frequently a handful of divergent goals will try processing themselves at once".

We are then offered a random chart of fairly scenario seeds with some pretty uninteresting thematic content, and a random chart of equally uninteresting personal connections to the islands, followed by a random chart of rumours, a random chart of nocturnal events (e.g., forget all your spells, go sleep walking, wake up with a strange woman with a 1 in 6 chance she's dead, etc).

### **The Islands Want Slave Women**

The Islands don't have a government apart from local rulers and as such don't have currency, but apparently knowledge, shelter, magic/high tech items can serve for barter.. and women. Yes, apparently a universal medium of exchange among the humanoid inhabitants "attractive and fit young adult females would fetch [the equivalent of] about 1,000 gold pieces", which each item of this unit of currency provided the owner a +1 CON bonus. The Island has interventionist deities as well, blasphemy and defilement against the Dark Gods will result in punishments and there is a 13% chance per day that a cleric can engage in Divine Intervention.

Then there's the Purple Putrescence itself, the result of "a blasphemous union between Ancient Wyrm and Great Old One. Although, more than one sorcerer has reason to believe the unholy abomination was spawned betwixt Yogsoggoth and the mother of all purple jellies", which oozes and consumes that which it encounters. It's sort of a deity in its own right, one supposes, described as being a mile long, two miles wide and "a semi-sentient being of dribbling, putrid, gelatinous filth". Also crystals of various shades can be found on the islands, formed from the decayed bodies of ancient wyrms. Although non-magical and do not detect as such, they provide magical effects. They have a glimmer, equivalent to a wand's charges.

There are six major factions on the island; Purple Worshipers, Overlords, Koshi, Children of Light, Snake-Men, and Disciples of Zygak-Xith. There is, of course, a random table for encountering members of such groups and a random table for determining "Changing State of Affairs" within these factions. An extended period of time on the Islands results in a test against the "Adventurer/Native Relations Table" and maybe even the "How Do We Feel About Our Neighbours? Table". Disappointment is expressed that there isn't a Table for describing tables (and perhaps a subtable for chairs).

Each major faction receives a short write up, according to their appearance (clothing etc), numbers (around a few hundred each), nature, agenda, tech-level, and currency (cf., previous comments). Unsurprisingly there's a wandering monster table full of random beasts that want to eat you and the like, with each hex-area also containing requiring a check on the random trap table.

### **Keyed Encounters Without Rhyme or Reason**

A very large section of the text is dedicated to keyed encounter areas, effectively frozen in time until perceived by the GMs adventuring party. These have no relationship to each other and can be derived from various points in space and time. For example, there's Giant Spiders of Thaar whose treasure includes "an Arnold-autographed DVD of Pumping Iron and a hardcover book (full color) on making Asian cuisine". Other encounters include cybermen under the control

of a supercomputer, a huge carnivorous maggot, green-skinned slave girls conditioned to accept their slavery, purple harlequins of madness, skeletal undead pterodactyls, ape-men who worship a radioactive copy of the Necrominicon, an insane clown posse, half-demon concumbines for the Emperor Strigoia, a 1970s scifi porno casting couch complete with actress ("Samantha has a legitimate passion for scifi and uninhibited sex"), and so forth.

Each of these dozens of encounters usually is provided a few paragraphs of description. Some of the potentially more interesting ones are provide next to nothing. For example, key 028 and 071 "Crashed starship" - that's it! In addition to this there are two large unkeyed old-school (i.e., utterly improbable) dungeons maps. The author excuses himself: "I didn't have the time, energy, or creative juices left over to fill the dungeons and dungeon-like areas contained in the book. Rather than half-ass it, the maps are present for GMs to use and populate as they see fit".

Overall the encounters are a combination of Lovecraft without the actual mythos or themes, *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* without the sense of wonder and plot coupons, the fun-house of *White Plume Mountain* minus the fun (let alone the puzzles), and a lot of beautiful-women-are-objects thrown in. The encounters have a poor sense of game balance as well; some encounter locations have monsters as trivial to defeat as the zombie rednecks (1 HD each, albeit with an infectious bite), others range to Zathra, the giant prehistoric psionic reptile-bird (HD 15) and Satan's Little Helper (13 HD, 4 attacks per round, extremely fast).

### Spells and Items

There's a number of new spells and magic items that come with Islands, starting off with an over-powered second-level "This Night I Shall Purple Your Soul", which drives the afflicted to a suicidal urge or teleporting everyone to Italy, c1817. Another is "Napalm Shower", a fourth-level spell that covers an area 30' x 40' with a sticky burning jelly that does 3d6 damage per round for six rounds with no saving throw. Several others are described in the most minimal terms, and with no reference whatsoever to typically important issues such as components, range, or duration.

Several pages are spent on new magical items, including a heavily described but essentially trivial hologram staff, a sword which gives variable bonuses depending on alignment, a brooch of bad wishes (1 cursed wish per day), a sword that sunders opponent weapons, shields, or magic items, and a necklace of ears which grants the wearer a bonus to hearing perception. With the possible exception of the last example, the spells and magic items are generally uninteresting.

### Evaluation

The Islands of Purple-Haunted Putrescence was successfully funded via Kickstarter at the beginning of 2014 and is the follow-up to Liberation of the Demon Slayer. Over a hundred and fifty people backed the project with one brave individual putting in \$165 for a full collection of goodies. It can only help that the backers don't feel so badly about what they received, because I felt like I had precious minutes of my life stolen off me by reading this.

Whilst the author offered a the Kickstarter "a level of weirdness, science-fantasy, gonzo (without getting too silly), and horror/exploitation that you've rarely seen...", I've seen a *lot* of more of all of those in other products. In particular I want to emphasise that it's not weird at all; rather it's boring, and misogynistic. Nor is it gonzo, because that requires first-person experience. There is a central motif (y'know, *purple*) which is fine, but there isn't much else to go on. The Purple Islands could totally disappear from *any* campaign world and the inhabitants could breathe a collective sigh of relief and get on with their lives.

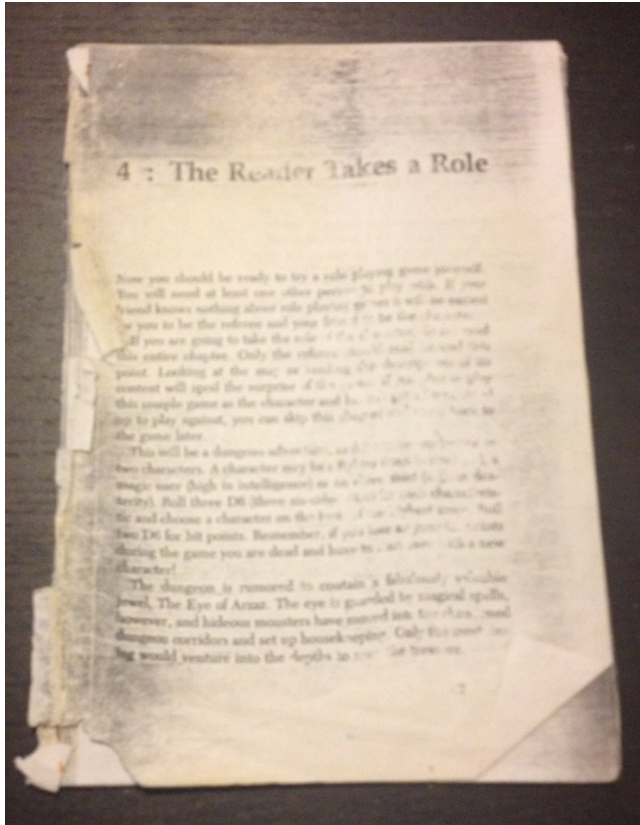
The thing is, there are wasted opportunities here. A dynamic struggle between six major factions scattered over three islands could account for something. The potential of a single, if mentally disturbed, consciousness between the three island masses could really be made into an interesting character. The use of Lovecraftian horrors such as Mi-Go could have been given a purpose, or even the namesake of the product itself.

Further, despite the rambling text and terrible organisation, the general layout is fair with good breakdown of headings and spacing. The artwork is typically quite good as well, and one hopes that the artists continue and hone their craft. But overall, this is a terrible product that has absolutely no reason for existence. **Substance 1/5, Style 2/5**

# THREE-PERSON RPGADAY

by Lev Lafayette, Karl Brown, and Michael Cole

Through the month of August David F. Chapman, designer of 'Doctor Who: Adventures in Time and Space', initiated an #rpgaday meme derived from a #bookaday meme from The Borough Press a month beforehand [1]. The following is a contribution and conversation on the the meme questions by three major contributors to RPG Review.



## #RPGaDay #1 - First RPG

LL: My first rpg experience was RuneQuest, 2nd edition in 1981 at junior high school. I was 13 at the time and some students a year above me were playing it in the school library during lunchtimes. I hung around for a couple of sessions and displayed enough interest until they let me join in, but in a limited role. At the time I didn't even realise it was RuneQuest, I just knew about the existence of roleplaying games and I think one of them may have mentioned it was "like Dungeons & Dragons". I recall an epic conflict with giant mantises with forelegs like swords who, like the smaller version of the same, engage in ambush predatory attacks.

KB: I grew up in a smaller town a couple of hundred kilometers from what was then the most isolated city in the world. 1983, I was twelve, and I was in the local library. I can't remember if I had heard of rpg and was looking specifically for a book on it or if I discovered the little hardcover unimaginatively called "Fantasy Role Playing Games" (1981) by John Holmes during my random wanderings. In any case, the book was a review of the hobby containing descriptions of fabulous sounding games from the 1970's many of which I did not actually see until decades later if ever. I was enthralled. I remember thinking it curious that the author was a

medical doctor, these games must be special indeed to hold the attention of someone my twelve year old self regarded as a godlike intellectual. Within that book was a slim chapter "The Reader Takes a Role". In 15 pages were a rudimentary system with character generation and an adventure. I played with my brother and a couple of friends. We were hooked. I fondly remember sessions by gaslight on camping weekends among the forests of giant trees. I photocopied the chapter and still have it to this day. We couldn't even see any other games in our town but the book gave me the insight that rather than just Fighter and Magician other games had elves, gnomes, and well lots of options. I started adding new rules, looking back they where mostly obvious simple additions to the math in those slim 15 pages that where the only rpg rules in my world for a couple of years, but they got me started and I have never stopped.

MC: D&D, 1977 Box Set. Came with the blue book, and Keep on the Borderlands. Would have been from a '79 edition, because it had the chits instead of dice. It was bought for me as a present from my eldest brother, who was into miniature wargaming at that time; he had a full set of the Persian Immortals, and I used to go and watch him have wars against various others. I would have been 10. Shit, that's a long time ago.

## #RPGaDay #2 - First RPG GameMastered

LL: The first game I actually ran was a couple of days after Christmas of 1981; Dungeons & Dragons Molvay Basic

Set, The Keep on the Borderlands. One GM and one player, a schoolmate who I coaxed into playing. As our group expanded with a few more players, we played through those Basic and Expert scenarios for the better part of eighteen months afterwards. Those were heady days, discovering Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (great product, but I thought B&E D&D were better games), Traveller, Swordbearer, and eventually rediscovering RuneQuest.

KB: Fortunately, given my lengthy reminiscence above the answer to this question is 'see above'. I will add though that games mastering when you had never seen it done and only had a couple of paragraphs telling you how was very daunting for a twelve year old.

MC: Would have been the above set, first with my brother, who played with me to be nice. First time with others would have been at school (Dandenong Tech) in the library which was an unmitigated disaster. Six players, five were dwarven fighters and one druid, going through the initial adventure from the blue book. Only lasted a couple of sessions - Dandy Tech wasn't known for its cerebral pursuits...

### **#RPGaDay #3 - First RPG purchased**

LL: Now this one is funny; because I of previous games (c.f., question #1), I considered myself an 'expert' in Dungeons & Dragons, and therefore I didn't need the Basic set. So ignoring the warnings on the back of the box, D&D Expert was the first RPG purchased. Within a few hours after purchase I realised I couldn't play it without the Basic set, so that was purchased a day or so later. In the immediate years that followed I picked up the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons core three books, Swordbearer, RuneQuest ("Wait a minute! This looks familiar!"), Traveller, DragonQuest, the Palladium Roleplaying Game, and the original modular box-sets for Rolemaster.

KB: 15pages photocopied, 2 pages to the sheet at 5 cents per sheet, a bargain.

MC: Would have been AD&D - TSR stuff was all I had for a long time. As for the first item, probably Players Handbook.

### **#RPGaDay #4 - Most Recent RPG purchase**

LL: Would you eat a soul-destroying psychic cockroach dedicated to destroying all of humanity? No? What if it gave you tenure? 'The Shabal-Hiri Roach' was my most recent purchase, and I can't wait to try it out as a side game for the regular Call of Cthulhu group. I buy an awful lot of RPGs, second-hand and new, and about 1/10th have made into the RPG Review store (if I'm going to run a free gaming 'zine over several years at least I can use it as a sales boost).

KB: The Book of Lost Spells, pre-ordered. What promises to be a weighty tome of arcane lore for the 5th edition of 'that other game' Necromancer Games cannot name. I had drifted away from D&D when 3.0 was released. I had pretty much ignored the 5th Edition until my partner who lives in the internet pointed me at a couple of articles outside of the usual gamer areas. Intrigued, I read a few reviews and decided to tentatively check it out. Reading the new PHB has convinced me that I like the new edition enough to play it and even hunger for a few more options. The Book of Lost Spells and associated volumes has an all-star line-up including AD&D favourites Skip Williams, Ed Greenwood, and James Ward.

MC: Most probably would have been old MERP ICE stuff off ebay. I'm trying to get a complete collection. ICE is still the best version of Middle Earth campaigning...

### **#RPGaDay #5 - Most Old-School RPG owned**

LL: In terms of publication time, I have the white box edition of original Dungeons & Dragons [FP 1974], including the Greyhawk, Blackmoor, Eldritch Wizardry and Gods, Demi-Gods and Heroes supplements. Other contenders include the first science fiction RPG Metamorphosis Alpha [1976], and a first edition of Bunnies & Burrows [1976]. In the past few years I've even had the opportunity to play OD&D and run B&B.

KB: An original Empire of Petal Throne. A friend of mine saw it at a garage sale and thought it looked like 'those strange games' I play. He haggled the guy down to 20 cents and gave it to me as a present. The box is a little rough but

the contents are immaculate. I've always imagined I'll use it as a sealed prime material crystal sphere in the AD&D Planescape cosmology. Dumping a bunch of cynical back-talking cutters with no idea of the local culture into Tekumel could be a fun adventure. Anyway, garage sales can be a great source of cheap stuff especially fantasy novels.

MC: I do also have a copy of the original D&D books. I also have images of the Dalluhn manuscript on hard-disk - I think that that is about as old as you can get.

#### **#RPGaDay #6 - Favourite RPG I Never Get To Play**

LL: This could be a very long list as there's a small mountain of games I've like to play but I don't seem to get the chance to; Empire of the Petal Throne, Earthdawn, and Talislana are all contenders in this regard. However at the top of this list must be Skyrealms of Jorune. I have the game, I have the scenarios, I even have a group of people who are chomping at the bit to give this a go. It's just a matter of finishing off some existing games to give it a run.

KB: Empire of Petal Throne you say? We should talk. Well while the other grandpa's here are showing off their bone fides I'm going to go with Legends of Anglerre published way back in 2010CE. I have the two books I love how they use the FATE system to cover all the fantasy tropes, want to be a dragon or a goat-herder no problem we can do that and be fair to both of you. Most of all though I love that despite the book's name it is really a kit for co-operative fantasy world building with a thin chapter on Anglerre at the back where it is easily ignored. Great stuff, but there is currently no slot in my group's schedule and there is no online fan-based to speak off.

MC: Don't really have one. For me, I've never been a "system" person. I don't really care which rules system, so long as the system doesn't take over the game. In terms of environments, again, nothing really jumps out at me. I generally prefer reasonably stock-standard semi-realistic fantasy. Dark ages to medieval. I'm pretty boring. Other environments I would like to game in would be, in no particular order, are early China/Japan/Korea, Wild West (either America or Australia), French revolution or Age of Sail. The problem with some of those is that for semi-realistic gaming, firearms are a distinct danger for player characters, and I prefer to run with a single character for a full game.

#### **#RPGaDay #7 - Most 'Intellectual' RPG Owned.**

LL: I'm interpreting this question as the one that encourages me to think deeply about the game in some way, whether it is setting or system. Certainly there is the classic cosmology of AD&D which encourages me in this direction (if only to suggest 'no, do it this way instead!'), or any Glorantha-based game on how to portray mythic thinking. But at the top of the list is Eclipse Phase, a near-future transhumanist game which really encourages thought in the combination of transformative technologies and social possibilities related to those technologies.

KB: GURPS 3rd Edition Vehicles, no wait that's most computational. Anyway, I love the flexibility of designing vehicles unique to your setting with logical well-defined technological capabilities consistent with the rest of the technology for that culture. Inconsistent tech capabilities are an issue with most SF games. Say you want to a jet bike for an uplifted raven in a 'realistic' 2050? How big is it? How fast can it go? What electronics are onboard? What if it's a sail powered airship built with Renaissance level technology by the 30ton squid-like inhabitants of Saturn? GURPS Vehicles is truly generic.

MC: I do have several of the FGU games, Bushido and Aftermath, which do have rather convoluted rules. I also have some supplemental systems for generating realistic firearms combat. Aside from that, probably Ars Magica would be the most "intellectual" that I have a lot of and would like to play.

#### **#RPGaDay #8 - Favourite Character**

LL: Like most long-term gamers I imagine that they have at least a dozen favourite characters who count among their favourites. In my own case, a medieval Korean daewi on a diplomatic mission to China serves as a favourite. Unlike other characters I usually play, this one was a nasty piece of work, but with a high level of tactical and personal military competence and the ability to pull the troops into line. It was GURPS, and he had military rank, meglomaniac, bully, and bloodlust. He was also falling for princess who was beginning to show some competence as well - and was seeking to change his heart.

KB: I'm with Lev choosing one favourite is hard. Two recent favourites are my uplifted raven for our table's GURPS

time-travel campaign, Weoxgyld a lightning giant with his faithful middle aged ex-pirate manservant, Paiter. Weoxgild was played in the Fantasy Craft forums. I won't bore you with details but if you want to know more about Weoxgyld use Google. Play-by-post is an interesting medium. There are things you can do in play-by-post that would be hard to impossible at a live table. Weoxgyld for example had a highly formal mode of speech and very foreign cultural norms that would have been near impossible to do consistently at a table. The pace of play-by-post enables careful consideration of every action and composition of every word 'spoken'. If you haven't tried play-by-post give it a spin.

MC: Ah, here we go. I seem to have become known for the playing of a particular stereotype of character; the angsty teenage girl, preferably with psionics, martial arts and mental issues. Started almost as an accident, but it is still what I generally look for when creating a new character, regardless of the system or environment. I can provide a list of those characters of mine who fit this bill, but it would be rather long...

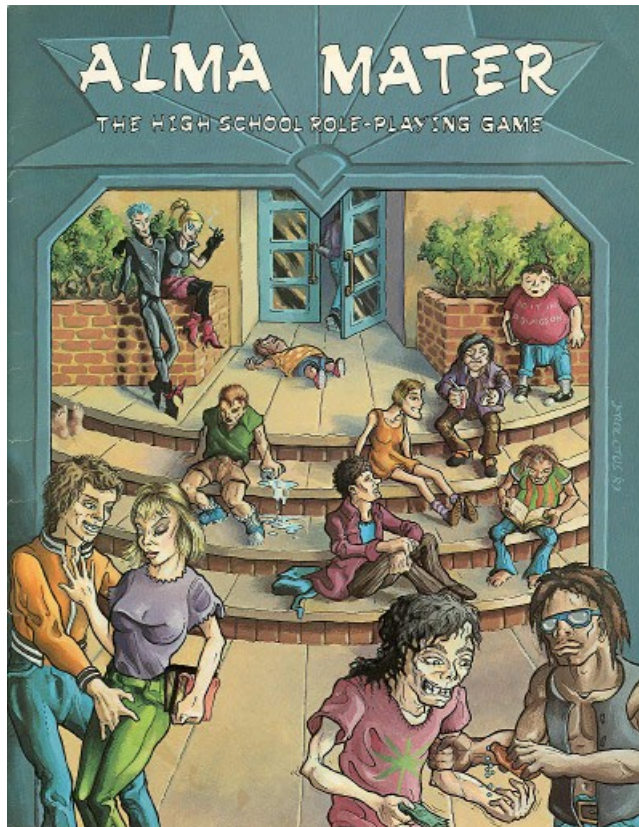
### #RPGaDay #9 - Favourite Dice Set

LL: For someone who has so many dice it may seem surprising that I'm pretty indifferent to them. My favourites would have to be my Hero System-branded D6s. They have nice contrasting colours (the deep green and black background), the Hero System logo stands out for the "1s" and they're oversized giving a satisfying 'clunk' as they land on the table. I tend to use them for games like GURPS and Pendragon which typically have up to 6d6 for effects; I don't know how anyone would cope with 15d6 worth which is standard for Champions, though. I also have an desire to one day to have a set of dice made from precious stones because.. well, aesthetic reasons really.

KB: Before the advent of a smart phone and dice app I carried a travelling set of miniature dice that fit into a little tube about the size of a pen. They are kinda fiddly because they are so small but over the years they were often handy.

MC: I still have my original dice from when I first bought them. I honestly don't care that much about dice. No favourites and no superstitions.

### #RPGaDay #10 - Favourite Game Fiction



LL: Assuming that this is fiction from games, rather than the other way around I'll readily admit being quite unfamiliar with such books, despite having a small collection which I will get around to reading "one day". One exception which I've thoroughly enjoyed is Oliver Dickson, "The Complete Griselda", a series of short stories based in the Glorantha desert city of Pavis. Written in the style of detective noir, these come with a great deal of charm and evocative humour.

KB: The Dritz origin story trilogy I suppose. Never really read many others. I have a copy of "The Man of Gold" Tekumel novel I'll get to one day.

MC: I can't think of any fiction that I have that originated from a game. Generally, that sort of stuff doesn't appeal to me. As for games that came from fiction, well I am a huge Tolkien fan, and this fandom massively predates the movies.

### #RPGaDay #11 - Weirdest RPG Owned

LL: Arguably my copy of Alma Mater, the rather graphic sex-and-drugs high-school RPG from the early 80s, although the first edition of Bunnies & Burrows must come pretty close in terms of weirdness, or even first edition Metamorphosis Alpha, but only because I don't

own something like Realm of Yolmi. I don't really think I can count a pirated PDF copy of the notorious Spawn of Fashan, once thought of as a hilarious parody of RPGs when reviewed by Dragon magazine. Turns out it wasn't although having gone through it, it really makes more sense that way. All this said, Alma Mater was actually quite well done in many ways, and was particularly good in its representation of social skills.

KB: Now days with the net lowering the barriers to publishing there are a lot of strange games around and I love these little internet oddities but will likely never play any of these PDFs. Anyway, big shout out to all the internet authors of oddities, love your work. I have a couple of long-term projects that are pretty odd but whether these will ever be played is debatable. For strange that I will or have played I'd say it's a tie between "Wonderland No More" a Savage Worlds Alice in Wonderland setting and my own "Gulliver's Trading Company".

MC: Toon? Anything by Kevin Siembieda? Not really into weirdness.

#### **#RPGaDay #12 - Old RPG Still Played**

LL: Well, Call of Cthulhu came out in 1981 and I'm currently running that. I readily admit that we're defaulting to 5th edition rules, rather than 1st edition but to be fair, there really isn't that much difference between different editions of CoC - although I have heard that 7th edition is going to be substantially different, which will be quite a change; CoC was often considered the game which just added new material and new scenarios rather than a revision of the game system.

KB: Space 1889. Though, not with the original rules. Our group just played this for many months and the setting remains more entertaining and intriguing than more recent over-the-top steam-punk settings that have frequently forgotten to use any of the real society and history of the British Empire at its height. My draft conversion notes for using Ubiquity to run old 1889 materials are online if you are interested.

MC: GURPS 3rd Ed is my standard goto nowadays for GMing; as stated, the actual system is not something that I give much thought to. As for playing in, I'll play in whatever.

#### **#RPGaDay #13 - Most memorable character death**

LL: Assuming one is just limited to their own PCs, I will have to give this to Zoltan, a Magyar noble played by our good friend Stean in a fantasy Europe Dungeons & Dragons third edition game. Being D&D it was fortunate that Stean could find new and interesting ways to kill his characters as we could raise them with relative ease. In this particular case he managed to stumble into an obvious trap, get killed by wraiths and, in new wraith form, killed again the following round as the party decided to fireball the undead collection. Zoltan also managed to poison himself once with his own poisoned blade and, having mucked up a "three questions" offer, was burnt to a cinder from the flaming skull of Thanatos. It really was quite an art form.

KB: I can't remember if my character died but I should have. Trapped inside a rubber cage inside a small room at the top of a tower that was rapidly filling with a blue whale extruding from the end of a 1000 effect wand of wonder.

MC: In terms of my own characters, nothing really jumps out. In my MERP campaign there is the case of a half-orc NPC who was supposed to have a romance role and turn out to be a hero of the story, however a succession of rolls - 100, 100, 98 for the hit, and then 100 for the critical. So a character that I had worked out a big backstory and had planned a big future was lost to a fleeting arrow shot from retreating forces. I blame MERP for it.

In terms of other's characters, the current CoC campaign of Orient Express and Masks has produced many memorable goings insane and deaths, as is the want of CoC, but my character is still original. The only one who survived sane through all or Orient Express and currently still going strong in Masks. He needs to make it to the end, and then he can either heroically sacrifice himself, or be the only survivor again. Either way, he needs to make it through.

#### **#RPGaDay #14 - Best Convention Purchase**

LL: A local gaming convention, I think it was Arcanacon around 2008, where there was an auction for an absolutely crazy collection of B-grade fantasy and science fiction films that I'm still working through years later. Some are utterly terrible (e.g., Deathstalker), some have some good moments (Doomwatch, From Beyond The Grave, Wolfshead - The

Legend of Robin Hood), and many just seriously strange (e.g., Carnosaur, Empire of the Ants).

KB: A dusty box in the bargain miniatures bin containing a large metal armoured dragon. \$5. Those neglected boxes of junk are often worth a rummage. Unexpectedly, the miniature has seen the most use in play-by-post as an image representing my drake character Vandarzryx. I try to use what I have as much as I can, where I can.

MC: Have only attended a couple of conventions, and didn't really purchase that much. Got an el cheapo set of Tolkien calendars from one, that I still haven't done anything with.

#### **#RPGaDay #15 - Favourite Convention Game**

LL: It was around 2010 when I was in Wellington attending Linux Conference AU, when I discovered that KapCon, the local gaming convention, was also being held. I participated in several games, a "Five Go Mad in Dorset" one being particularly amusing. However one which really stands out, I could only be an observer as it was booked out: "In A Wicked Age". I had been interested in this for some time, and the opportunity to see the game in actual play and read through the rules was too much of an offer to ignore. Some months afterwards managed to run several sessions of the game on a "Blood & Sex" theme which was greatly enjoyable.

KB: Only ever played once at a convention and it was a rather ordinary dungeon crawl. Why? Well most of my life I've been variously small town, broke, or time poor so I haven't been to many conventions.

MC: Easy. A CoC adventure set around a reinterpreting of Hotel California by The Eagles at Dwarfcon in 2006. It was absolutely brilliant - so impressed by those that designed and ran it. The game could have been remade as a movie, it was that good. It set a benchmark that I am still trying to reach in my own game sessions.

#### **#RPGaDay #16 Game You Wish You Owned**

LL: Whether the Pharos Press or Hogshead Publishing edition, I would love to have a copy of Nobilis. I think I've seen one copy in a FLGS many years ago and of course it was selling for a small fortune. It is not just the courage of designing a game of very powerful mythological beings which impresses me, because it is always very easy to do it completely wrong, but the sheer substance of the material - at least according to the reviews I've read - and the very high production qualities. Alas, these days it appears rarely on ebay and for even more of a small fortune than the original price I saw at the FLGS.

KB: Over the last three years I've pretty much collected the small library of games I ever wanted. The only things left are books that don't exist yet like Fantasy Craft's much delayed Spellbound and the DMG for 5th Edition D&D.

MC: Chivalry and Sorcery is one I would like to get, more as reference material than anything else. One of these days, I may lash out and get Harn, Dragon Age and/or Pathfinder.

#### **#RPGaDay #17 Funniest Game You've Played**

LL: Over several years our local gaming group would run Bunnies & Burrows, either the original or the GURPS version. Sometimes it would cross over with our existing games too, so we once had a Bunnies & Burrows game based in Glorantha at Rabbit Hat Farm. But on the challenge of one of the players, I organised a scenario of Bunnies & Burrows, that is, Bunnies & Burrows meets William S. Burroughs. The most appropriate game system was Over The Edge. The session by-line was "homosexual junkie rabbits against the Rock Apes of Gibraltar" and included favourites like Dr. Benway.

KB: See most memorable death (above) and most memorable encounter (below).

MC: That would have to be Polaris : Chivalric Tragedy at Utmost North, one of my first encounters with a strongly "narrativist" based game where the various players through a series of comic incidents managed to create a complex web of relationships which I then mapped out as a rather unusual family tree.

#### **#RPGaDay #18: Favourite Game System**

LL: Narrowing down to specifically the system, rather the completeness and supporting material, this would have to go to Wordplay. Whilst it includes free-form assignment, which I am fairly ambivalent towards, Wordplay does require



that these are incorporated to the categories of Body, Mind, and Soul a providing a d6 dice pool, and also requires character Concepts, Goals. The resolution system is determined by either a no-roll method (compare value against assigned difficulty), one-roll challenge, or a multi-roll challenges for drawn-out conflicts. The degree of success and failure may result in damage to a category trait, with a specified period required for natural healing or a difficulty challenge. The type of damage received leads to some variation in description and healing time. It needs elaboration, but it is really on the right track.

KB: I'm a compulsive world builder. So I love generic systems that help you build worlds. GURPS would be most peoples pick for that but most of the flexibility is in sourcebooks and add-ons to the rules. Also at its very core are three attributes centered on the human range not a great foundation for a truly generic game. Still it's my go-to for hard SF. In the end I'll have to go with FATE specifically the version in the late "Legends of Anglerre" which despite being named after an obscure world is actually a complete build a world kit in a single book.

MC: Again, easy. Gurps 3rd Ed, revised. My standard goto for any adventure. Handles everything simply and realistically. Never had any need to look at anything else.

#### **#RPGaDay #19 - Favourite Published Adventure**

LL: Classic Cthulhu games like Horror On The Orient Express and Masks of Nyarlathotep obviously would rate very highly among many, or even Delta Green's Countdown. But ultimately I'm going for a relatively unknown mainline fantasy product, Rolemaster's Cloudlords of Tanara. This is a superb example of a sandboxed scenario done perfectly; a somewhat isolated region with four cultures having reached a point of high tension that just requires the PCs to come stumbling in an set everything in motion. Add to this a fanatical religious cult, an ancient evil demon, an ancient weapons (lost, obviously) to defeat the demon.

KB: Don't have one. Virtually every game I've run has been with adventures I've penned myself. The one exception is the recent Space 1889 campaign and the adventures for that need serious tweaking before use.

MC: In terms of very early ones that changed the way I saw adventures, U1 - The Secret of Saltmarsh. Where everything up to that point had been wargaming-inspired, this had characterisation and gaming requirements. Unfortunately that was shortlived when U2 - Danger at Dunwater came out, but Saltmarsh is still a benchmark.

#### **#RPGaDay #20 - Game I Will Still Play in 20 Years' Time**

LL: For years now I've been tinkering on a home-brew historical fantasy RPG, Mimesis. There's even a woefully underdeveloped website for it where I occasionally do a brain-dump of ideas. In various incarnations it's been a set of house-rules for Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, a heavily modified RuneQuest, and has seen influences from HeroQuest, GURPS, FATE, Wordplay, and even Over The Edge. If I'm not still tinkering with it in twenty years time I would be disappointed with myself because that would mean that I've ceased to think about RPGs.

KB: Realistically the games I'll be playing 20 years from now will not be my favourites. I in a couple of decades I'll be even more busy than I am now and my players will be a mix of bored retiree newbies and busy RPG veterans. Not the kind of situation for games that are a lot of work to write adventures for, nor for complex rules. It will be something of low to moderate complexity and probably something that a lot of people have played. Realistically it's going to be something like Savage Worlds or maybe D&D 5th and probably something that does not exist yet.

MC: Gurps 3rd Ed. 'Nuff said.

#### **#RPGaDay #21 - Favourite Licensed RPG**

LL: Whilst I am not overly enamoured by the system or even the setting, it is the sheer volume of work that has gone into West End Games's Star Wars products that I find particularly impressive, even more so than ICE's Middle Earth supplements which would come a close second. West End games came out with 140 sourcebook and adventure supplements, and fifteen issues of a digest magazine, the Star Wars Adventure Journal. Unlike MERP, the expanded

universe presented in Star Wars has received acceptance and endorsement from the license holder (Lucasfilm).

KB: Ringworld. A short lived BRP game set on the huge artificial world dreamed up by Larry Niven. Thousands of different human species, lost civilizations of both low and high technology, alien life, and a surface area equal to about 3 million Earth-sized planets for the referee to create in. That's the real attraction, the central premise is not politics, violence, or personal power, but the joy of exploration. I've run many campaigns where this is the central theme in a number of game systems. Exploration makes a great change from yet another dungeon bash or quest to save the world by the use of extreme violence.

MC: ICE, MERP. My goto environment for gaming. Never beaten.

#### **#RPGaDay #22 - Best Secondhand RPG Purchase**

LL: A massive collection of almost one hundred and fifty old RPG books - Traveller, (A)D&D, Tunnels & Trolls, Champions, early Ars Magica - a real late 70s to late 80s horde, from a bookshop in on the suburban fringe. I had a some twenty books on hold, and the shop owners wanting to get rid of stock that had sat there for too long, offered at around the same price that I had paid for the twenty, all the others. The problem was that I now had to travel about thirty kilometres via public transport with several heavy boxes of books.

KB: See most Old School above.

MC: Local FLGS (Mind Games) had some single index White Dwarf magazines which I picked up for a bargain.

#### **#RPGaDay #23 - Coolest Looking RPG Owned**

LL: This would have to go to Everyway, with a nod in the direction of Warhammer 3rd edition's impressive boxed set. It's mainly the large stack of cards with some rather beautiful artwork and the character sheets in Everway that win out for this one. The oversized box stands out as well, although the rather muted cover hardly screams out as impressive (best cover art probably goes to the FGU game Lands of Adventure). The three rule booklets themselves are not so impressive.



KB: Any of the Planescape boxed sets. The Lady of Pain with her swords for hair on the boxes, the cool illustrations, and those mind-bending maps of the impossible multiverse.

MC: In terms of artwork I'd say that the recent Changeling : The Lost for the New World of Darkness is fairly good, as is some of the artwork in Eclipse Phase. The earliest single of pieces of artwork which stick in mine is from the original Deities and Demigods with Thor fighting the serpent and Glasya from Monster Manual II.

#### **#RPGaDAY 23: Coolest looking RPG product**

LL: This one's pretty easy for me because I don't really get many secondary products; one special exception is the Legend of the Five Rings Way of the Ratling drink holder. Because it's insulated it's much bigger than the impressive 1 litre that it holds.

KB: My beat up old leather dice box with the gold leaf border.

MC: Some "artistic" dice I purchased I thought would be good at the time, but now I think they're more annoying than anything else. The numbers can be hard to read.

Going old school there was the sets of Endless Floor Plans, they were quite a good idea and unfortunately largely forgotten.

#### **#RPGaDay #24 - Most Complicated RPG Owned**

LL: There's quite a few contenders here; the Aliens RPG and Phoenix Command come to mind as certainly falling into the complicated category (at least one designer, Barry Nakazono, is a rocket scientist), although it's doubtful whether one can call Phoenix Command a roleplaying game because really, it's just a combat system. But for all the complexity in the actual combat system - and I have run an Aliens campaign using it - the character generation and other activity systems are remarkably easier. In comparison, first edition Chivalry & Sorcery takes the prize. Now it doesn't have a complicated system as such, because it doesn't really have a system at all. Each rule is pretty much a separate case and the magic rules are frustratingly scattered throughout the rulebook. Whilst C&S does have many redeeming features (good content and portrayal of a feudal society) the game rules aren't one of them.

KB: A supplement really, GURPS Vehicles, but I've already talked about this. I love to tinker with complexity during set-up but prefer moderate to low complexity at the table so I don't have too many complex games.

MC: In terms of an RPG, I think that first edition Twilight 2000 is pretty difficult, and a lot harder than some people think if you're not winging it. For an actual supplement, Greg Porter's 3G3, also known as "Guns! Guns! Guns!". It allowed you to develop any sort of weapon for any system - it really did everything. But you wouldn't want to try using it without a spreadsheet.

#### **#RPGaDay #25 - Favourite RPG That No-One Else Wants to Play**

LL: Ahh, this one's easy; Megatraveller. In my considered opinion the most interesting setting of the various incarnations of the Traveller universe and with some innovative aspects in the rules system, the game is alas let down by some particular clunkiness in the combat system. Megatraveller posited a setting of an assassination conspiracy, factional conflicts, localised rebellions, and alien incursions. There is plenty of opportunities for all sorts of mercenaries, vagabonds, and rebels (take your pick) but alas I've never managed to get a long-term group together to elaborate the story.

KB: Megatraveller you say? I am very interested. The above response is therefore invalid. A Time of War (Battletech). I'd love to run a campaign starting in the period of relative peace at the height of FedCom's power and encourage civilian PC concepts. Show off the prosperity and peace, explore a really nicely detailed setting without too much focus on the big walking tanks, do some aid missions to the periphery and then... wham the FedCom Civil War. It all goes to hell, civilians get sucked into war and its horrors, and the bright future is lost. An analogue of the Second World War. Problem is I just discovered the great setting hidden behind the distracting giant robots but my current group already played Battletech to death years ago before I was on the scene.

MC: Not strictly an RPG, but I've been hanging on to a How to Host a Murder game, Hoo Hung Hu for about fifteen years but have never gotten around to running it. Then there's Advanced Squad Leader, it's hard to find people who want to play a lengthy and realistic small unit combat game with chits.

#### **#RPGaDay? #26- Coolest character sheet**

LL: "Cool" is not the sort of adjective that I normally give to character sheets, being far more interested in the more functional aspects. GURPS does particularly well in this regard, as does HeroQuest. But if it's a combination of form and function, then Mouse Guard does very well indeed. It contains all the character information on one side and all the conflict resolution material on the other. It's well-laid out with a good mix of white-space to text and includes a few graphics to break things up a bit.

KB: Either The Wonderland No More sheet with Tenniel illustrations or the sheet for Infernum a RPG set in Hell with spaces for items like 'Handle Spawn', 'Groveling', and 'Chain of Crawling Flesh'.

MC: This is a bit of weird one, but I found the the coolest character sheet to be Best Friends if only for the fact that the other players are the ones who determine your stats on the grounds of how much your 'best friends' really hate you

for particular characteristics.

### **#RPGaDay? #27 Game I'd Like To See Receive A New / Improved Edition**

LL: I wouldn't mind seeing a new version of Rolemaster that takes up the game's original simulationist agenda with a thorough inclusion of more efficient mechanics, even though there are now four or more editions, depending on how you count them. However, more than this, I would like to see another edition of Dennis Sustare's *Swordbearer* from the early-mid 80s. A classless system it had 'spheres of influence' instead, social status instead of money, a gritty yet fast combat system, and a magic system based around capturing pure elements or psychic humours. All this and an excellent content-to-page-count ratio.

KB: Ringworld. With more people thinking that they want more from RPG than beating up things and taking their stuff making this game more available would be nice. Maybe I could find someone online to play with. Additionally though the BRP mechanics are very robust some more modern thinking on rules for roleplaying encounters with new cultures and for alien personalities would be nice.

MC: I'd like to Palladium Fantasy or Rifts done by anyone but Kevin Siembieda. More seriously, Torg had some really good concepts but had a few parts that were not so good, some power creep issues in supplements, and could really do with a rewrite. The general concept of typically storybook environments and could be extended.

### **#RPGaDay #28 Scariest Game you've played**

LL: It was the late 80s in Perth in the Q-club where the Gamers Guild used to meet. It was my first exposure of Call of Cthulhu. There was a scenario in the third edition of that book called "The Mad Man" who, as the title suggests, involved a crazy chap spending far too much time in the woods getting down with various Lovecraftian entities, specifically Mi-Go which are horrific as far as things go themselves. Anyway, the party of investigators worked out that that the Mad Man was working with the Mi-Go to summon Ithaqua and, due to a series of conflicts and misadventures, my character became separated from the main party and found himself lost in the woods on the night that Ithaqua was going to be summoned. The Keeper handled the suspense wonderfully. In desperation my character decided to bury himself in a shallow grave with an airhole in the hope of remaining hidden.

KB: A Wraith (oWOD) game set in Perth and about teens. Wraith's Pathos mechanic keeps you focused on your character's fears and regrets making a good base for horror roleplaying. We players were all in our 20's at the time so our own teen years were still fresh in our minds and some of the stuff was a little close to home. I think the key to horror is ensuring the players really relate to their characters and keeping those character's vulnerable.

MC: The current Call of Cthulhu game is pretty scary for the characters. Players don't necessarily get scared of course, but for the characters the experiences in Horror on the Orient Express and Masks of Nyarlathotep are terrifying.

### **#RPGaDay #29 Most memorable encounter**

LL: Picking from the dozens of memorable encounters is difficult. There was, for example, a great set piece in a Call of Cthulhu Horror on the Orient Express which involved beating up a vampire with the leg of a simulcrum on a roof-top of the train ride. Then there was the time where, in an early fantasy Europe AD&D game, we fought Satan inside the mind of Lucifer on what would be Mont St. Michel (it was currently known as "The Temple of Elemental Evil"). We ended up driving the devil out of his own mind. However, I think the most epic encounter was the appearance of the Crimson Bat, that major demon from Glorantha, in a HeroQuest game, specifically the Battle of Iceland in that setting's history. The slow moving demonic bat was defeated by an intelligent rubble runner who was dropped on the back of the bat by a Wind Child (both whom had difficulty flying due the lack of Orlanth). The runner, armed with a Mostal hand grenade (and whispered instructions on how to use it) scampered into the bat's ear, pulled the pin, leapt to safety, and blew its brains out.

KB: Easy, the European PCs versus the Empire of Lilliput during play-test of Gulliver's Trading Company. From the Lilliputians' point of view an enormous ship (a longboat) of crazy 60 foot tall giants shows up and starts trading lumps of gemstones (dust from a Brobdingragian Gemcutter's floor) for bed-sheets utterly upsetting the economy of the Empire. The giants then foment a civil uprising in the major port, and rout the Imperial Army before rowing away

leaving a nation in chaos to its fate. I particularly liked the Scottish Presbyterian panicking a cavalry charge by running at them and shooing the horses with his handkerchief.

MC: A GURPS time travel campaign, Krononaughts, were went back into the Ice Age landing on Doggerland and trying to rescue a Woolly Mammoth. Then there was the RuneQuest Prax campaign where one character summoned Lodril the God of Volcanoes and wasted a major troll city. Of course after that we went on the Hill of Gold HeroQuest which saw Zorak Zoran felled in a single blow.

### **#RPGaDay #30 Rarest RPG Owned**

LL: There's not too many of these about - 1st edition RuneQuest. The first one I picked up the previous owner discounted it with the warning that "it has writing on the inside cover". The writing was Steve Perrin's signature. Since then I've had the bizarre fortune to find another as well. I don't need two, so it's up for sale on the RPG Review store on Quicksales, he plugs subtly.

KB: Original Empire of Petal Throne.

MC: In terms of supplements I have some interesting Judges Guild material, such as Dark Tower, and many of their earliest publications such as The Dungeoneer and the Judges Guild Journal. There's also early issues of Ares which I have a pretty good run off as well. But I do have a collection of original D&D supplements. To my regret as a youngster I cut one to pieces for the various pages and filed them in folders.

### **#RPGaDay #31 Favourite RPG of all time**

LL: This an interesting one; it is not a personal assessment of the best RPG of all time, whether by setting, style, or system, but a favourite of all time. For this category, I am choosing a game which does have an excellent system, multiple excellent settings, and is pretty stylish in its own right. It's probably not the best in my opinion of any of the individual categories (system, setting, style), but it has the advantage of being a game that I've had many years of experience with and have noted its influence in numerous contemporary games; RuneQuest (3rd edition) will take the position for my favourite game of all time.

KB: Easy, my personal favourite is Gulliver's Trading Company for purely personal reasons. Creating that game was a labour of love for me. Is it the best RPG? No. Is it for everyone? No again. Does it portray a neglected masterpiece of world-building by one of the most misunderstood greats of the English language? Yes. There is much more to Gulliver's Travels and Swift than most people realize. I hope my game opens that world up for a few people and that they have fun in the process.

MC: In case one hasn't guessed, it'll be GURPS 3rd edition.

[1] <http://autocratik.blogspot.co.uk/2014/07/rpgaday-in-august.html>

# “BOX TROLLS” MOVIE REVIEW

by *Andrew Moshos*

dir: Graham Annabele and Anthony Stacchi, 2014

*The Boxtrolls* is another of those somewhat anachronistic animated movies that uses a lot of actual, physical, stop-motion animation to tell a story. As such it possesses a physicality missing from most of the purely computer generated animation we see these days, and that’s its curse and part of its charm.

In and of itself, that doesn’t guarantee a blissful experience. This mob, calling themselves Laika, have put together a decent animated film before (*Coraline*) and an okay one (*ParaNorman*) as well, so it’s reasonable to believe that they know what they’re doing.

*The Boxtrolls* is better than *ParaNorman*, and perhaps almost on a par with *Coraline*, though not as thematically rich or inventive. Despite what some might call a grotesque and macabre aesthetic, this one, from a kids’ perspective, is not as personal and frightening as *Coraline*, or as horrific as *ParaNorman* (which had, as its Big Bad, the vengeful spirit of a murdered child, if you can believe that, and sadly you probably can).

And yet it manages to create an odd, solid, squalid but entertaining world, one which delivers an amusing and garish take on the weird hierarchies that govern the functioning of human endeavours. The town in question is Cheesebridge. It is an impressively rendered place that would be hell for people, like me, who hate walking uphill. Every street and lane rises steeply from the last, to give the impression that it is more like a place meant to recall a stack of boxes, rather than a believably realistic town built on a hill just to make life difficult.

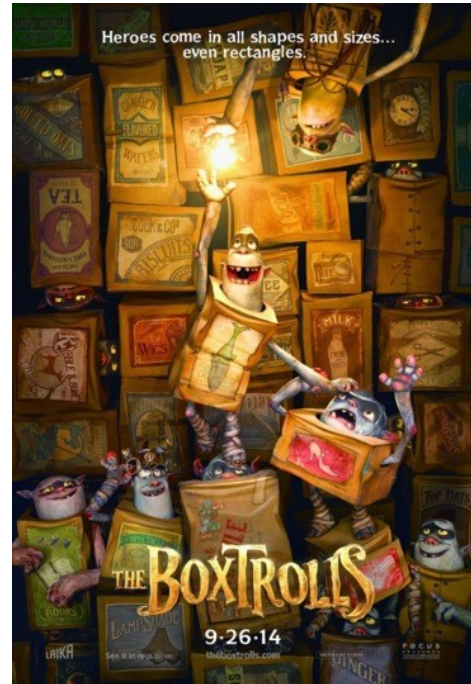
The economy of the town, as you might guess, is cheese based. The elites who rule the town control the cheese. They wear white hats, and they sit around in the Tasting Room, tasting the finest cheeses that their corrupt and negligent efforts can supply. The head of these cheese-derived despots is Lord Portley-Rind (Jarred Harris), who speaks with the affected aristocratic archness of someone to whom the daily lives, hopes and dreams of the peasants of Cheesebridge are of less consequence to him than the angsts and troubles of various ants. Long as he gets his cheese, the rest can all hang or burn.

The White Hats are a closed club. Nil entry unless you’ve got the cheese to get in, and no-one else has got the cheese. Archibald Snatcher (Sir Ben Kingsley), a phenomenally grotesque creature that Charles Dickens and William Shakespeare wish they’d thought up, is a man with a plan. He doesn’t want to just be let in. Oh no. He wants to earn his way in, with intense, passionate focus and endless hard work. He may look like someone who should be running the stage at a freak show, or in the freak show himself, or underneath a swamp, but he aspires to be a great man.

Problem is, the White Hat / Cheesy aristocracy do not allow upjumping, or the transcending of one’s caste. People can go ‘down’, surely, but never up. Thus is Archibald Snatcher, the Great Archibald Snatcher, compelled to come up with an elaborate, all-encompassing plan that will force them to let him in. By the end of it, they’ll be begging him to accept a hat. And more.

With all exclusive clubs, there has to be an entire array of underclasses in order to support them. Sure, the town has its cobblers, fishmongers and butter churners, but the true underclass is comprised of the lowliest of the low, the Boxtrolls of the title who live under the town’s streets. They are harmless, sifting through the town’s refuse for their discarded crap in order to beautify their underground hovel. And they occasionally steal stuff even when it’s bolted or nailed down. They’re resourceful, and they don’t respect property rights, clearly. The shiftless bastards: something should be done about them. These passive, cowardly, harmless, slightly gross and boring creatures might have a movie named after them, but the story is never about them, not really. They’re probably the weakest part of the story, because they exist just to be there and to be odd. They serve an important function in the story, of course of course, but there’s nothing central about their existence. They could just have easily been jar goblins, lamp leprechauns or underpants gnomes.

They do wear boxes, though, that’s true. They don’t talk, except in these inchoate gruntings as if they’re both deaf and dumb, and we



only find out what they're saying when it's translated by a character, a human character, who understands their ramblings. They call themselves whatever the box they're wearing is called. So a boxtroll wearing a box with a fish on it would be called Potato, obviously. Nah, he's called Fish, isn't he. And a certain box troll who's much taller than the other trolls, and doesn't really look like them, wears a box with eggs on it, so naturally he's called Christopher Pyne. No, he's called Eggs, because, what else would he be called.

This human baby, and eventual boy, fulfils a mythic, fundamental role in Cheesebridge's culture. You see, as Eggs ages, the numbers of his friends and protectors dwindles, not, as with my co-workers, through what's known as 'natural attrition', but through the tender ministrations of the magnificent bastard known as Archibald Snatcher. He has convinced the town that the trolls are murderous beings, dead set on killing and eating all of the town's children. Even worse, they're going to steal all the town's cheese if Archibald and his henchmen don't eradicate them all.

Yes, like any great villain, Archibald Snatcher has henchmen. But, as far as they are concerned, and as far as they keep telling themselves and us, aren't they the heroes, and the boxtrolls the villains? Two of the three henchmen engage in philosophical dissections of their actions and motivations, wondering aloud as to how their actions can be righteous if they seem to be doing the opposite of such, ethically speaking. Mr Trout and Mr Pickles, the Vladimir and Estragon of the piece, the Jay and Silent Bob, the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are almost worth the price of admission alone, just to hear the despairing way in which they realise their own existential place in the universe, and in the story.

It perhaps helped, for me, that they were voiced by Nick Frost and Richard Ayoade. Frost's voice I didn't hear that clearly, but Ayoade's distinctive whiny voice is unmistakable, and much welcome. Whether he's voicing henchpeople, playing Moss on *IT Crowd* or directing interesting movies, I can barely get enough of him.

The plot doesn't really matter. I don't really need to tell you about it anyway. There are countless places splayed across the tubes of the internets that'll give you plot synopses and even screenplay printouts. What I can tell you, about the only worthwhile thing I can tell you, is how wonderful I thought the bits with the villains were.

I thought Sir Lord Ben Kingsley's voice work as the villain was sublime, truly phenomenal. And it's not like Kingsley isn't crap a lot of the time. I've seen him be terrible in more things than I've seen or heard him be great, despite his status as a peer of the realm (at least in title if not in land). I've even seen him play terrible, horrible unwatchable and unlistenable villains in movies you might remember him from such as *Prince of Persia* or *BloodRayne* or *Schindler's List*. Well, maybe not the last one.

Look, I'll admit, he ladles the Cockney accent on a tad thick, so thick it drips off every over-enunciated word. I thought it was a masterful performance. As villains go, for me, this one was memorable, not only for his villainy, but for the levels of his villainy as well. And, thoughtful and articulate as he may be, he's not above going balls out crazy when it suits his purposes either. Not only does he fabricate the myth of the evil trolls in order to subordinate the town through a curfew and consolidate his power, he creates an alternate identity as a cabaret singer called Madame Frou Frou whom the stuffy White Hats disgrace themselves over, though 'her' real purpose is just to keep reinforcing the myth of the troll's babysnatching ways.

All of this for some cheese. All of this because he just wants the cheese, and what it represents. And in the final irony, Archibald P. Snatcher might actually be lactose intolerant. I loved the town, the villainy, the elaborate social / evil structure that allows it to happen, the fun along the way, and the ridiculously appropriate way it all ends. There are elements that maybe didn't work so well for me, but the bits that work fine worked well enough to overcome the other shortcomings. I laughed a fair few times, but, in a cinema packed with kids and their dubious parents, I was pretty much the only one.

When I'd initially seen the trailer for this months ago, I was sure my daughter wouldn't want to see it, because I thought it looked like crap, and I thought "that's \$50 saved right there." But she wanted to, and school holidays rolled around, and I was pleasantly surprised with the outcome. You see, I forgot how much fun it is sometimes to side with the villain.

As an added 'bonus', there's a post-credit sequence, with Mr Pickles wondering about his every action being manipulated by some unseen operator, as footage of an animator painstakingly (but sped up) moving the figures around, and we see how many days of work it took just to animate that relatively simple sequence. Breathtaking in its intricacy, and in the sheer amount of trouble it is to put together, it's a reminder (if not a bit of a humblebrag) of what an amazing art form it still is in this era where dodgy and comparatively lazy computer animation reigns supreme.

**The Boxtrolls.** I didn't mind it too much! 8 times cheese is pretty great as a form of food, but not worth killing an entire species over out of 10

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# **NEXT ISSUE OF RPG REVIEW**

## **SEA DOGS AND SPACE DOGS!**

**Pirates and Plunder, Privateers and Gentlemen,  
GURPS Swashbucklers, 7th Sea, Traveller, Rune, Dark  
Heresy and More...**



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**64 RPG REVIEW ISSUE 25 September 2014**

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