

Jonathan Tweet Interview

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*Jonathan Tweet is a significant figure in the game design industry. With the first publication as co-author with Mark Rein*Hagen for the award-winning *Ars Magica* in 1987, Tweet is also the designer of the surreal *Over The Edge* (1992) and *Everway* (1995), two rules-simple narrative-heavy games, the designer of *Talisanta Guidebook* (3rd edition) also in 1992, and most notably the core rule books for third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*. With more than twenty-five other supplements and scenarios there can be no doubt that an indelible mark has been left by Tweet on the industry. A long supporter of this publication, we are very pleased to have an the opportunity to interview Jonathan Tweet.*

Question: Welcome to RPG Review Jonathan and thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. We'll start with what is a standard question; how did you get involved in roleplaying games and what are some of the most memorable moments from your early participation?

I started playing D&D in 1977, when I was 12. My dad was a professor, he learned about D&D from his students, and he got me a beginner set. I lived in hot spot that had a lot of roleplaying going on even in the early years.

One memorable event from the early years was the time that the players conspired to kill off the highest-level character (4th) by turning on him in the dungeon. There was some thin in-world explanation for why our characters would turn on our most powerful brother-in-arms, but really it was about the oldest kid in the pack getting the pack to turn on the bottom kid. We betrayed and killed our friend's character, and the player naturally ran off crying. It was ironic, such a brutal and primal act carried out through the disembodied medium of roleplaying.

And here's an old-timer story. Old-fashioned 20-sided dice were printed with the numbers 1 to 0, each number appearing twice. We would roll a six-sider along with the 20-sider: if the six-sider was 1, 2, or 3, then the 20-sider was read as 1 - 10; if the six-sider was 4, 5, or 6, then the 20-sider was read as 11 - 20. When I first ran across a 20-sider that was marked 1 to 20, I actually had trouble reading it.

In my circle of friends, I was the stingiest gamemaster, but also the one the other players liked best.

*Question: *Ars Magica* is recognised as a milestone in roleplaying with a highly thematic and adaptive spell system, strong setting, the use of troupes of characters and strong social ties with the covenants. What were the influences on *Ars Magica*'s design and how do you think they have contributed to other RPGs? Why weren't *Lion Rampant*'s earlier production, whimsy cards, included as a core part of the game?*

Ars Magica has dozens of influences because I played a lot of different RPGs as a teenager. For example, the concept of a covenant for the characters' home base was inspired by the headquarters rules in *Champions*. The main influence for *Ars Magica* was *RuneQuest*, especially its official game world, Greg Stafford's inimitable *Glorantha*. *RuneQuest* grounded its characters in the game world, making both the characters and the world richer. *Ars Magica* does much of the same. The different Houses that the wizards belong to were pretty much directly ripped off of *RuneQuest*'s *Cults of Prax*, and those wizard houses later became the vampire clans and similar organizations of many other games.

Ars Magica really seems to have advanced a more story-oriented approach to roleplaying, especially through its

influence on Vampire: the Masquerade.

Originally we planned to sell Whimsy Cards as part of Ars Magica, but when our schedule slipped we could no longer release Ars Magica for Gen Con. Rather than sell nothing, we published Whimsy Cards as our first product.

Question: There is an apocryphal story that Lion Rampant spent their first proceeds of sales from Ars Magica on a keg of beer. Is there is any truth to this scurrilous rumour? And if so, may I offer my hearty congratulations for such a fine decision!

We were a bunch of young people hanging out and making games, and you can bet we drank a good bit of our revenue. For that matter, I don't know if I've ever designed a game 100% sober. Game writing is an art, and alcohol has been known to lubricate the artistic process. Not that I would go to work drunk, but I always find time to work on my games while I'm a little buzzed. I guess it shows.

*Question: From Ars Magica, Mark Rein*Hagen went on to work on the White Wolf line; Vampire, Werewolf, Mage etc., using similar mechanics and especially the idea of mutual organisations in conflict. In contrast you went on to have to develop the surreal conspiratorial game of Over The Edge and the variant fantasy RPG, Talislanta, and then mythic and subjective Everway. These are very diverse games. Was there a common thread in your design philosophy at this point, or were you engaging in a high level of experimentation?*

With every RPG I've ever done, I've been trying to do something new and different with it. I suppose if I'd made a ton of money with one sort of game I'd have repeated myself. Instead, it's been one new strategy after another.

I first designed Over the Edge strictly for personal use. It's sort of like the first of the indie games, though it was in turn inspired by an unknown indie game that someone taught me at a con. I wrote Over the Edge when I thought I'd left the game industry, so I wasn't afraid to defy conventions. The goal with that game was that anyone could start playing right away, so it has a flexible, modern setting and minimalist rules.

The Talislanta project sort of fell in my lap. It was an exceptional opportunity to make a colorful setting more accessible, through better presentation and improved rules. It was something of an ideal project, interesting enough to be fun to work on, and simple enough to be straightforward. I had good times playtesting that game.

Everway was sort of an attempt to do Over the Edge but with a bigger budget. Again, it had a flexible setting and minimalist rules. The big idea was to use images and symbols to inspire players' creativity. Over the Edge was so open-ended that inexperienced players often had trouble coming up with good character concepts. Everway addressed that problem by giving people images to inspire character concepts. It was a really interesting idea that should have gotten a lot more usability testing.

On the plus side, a good number of male gamers have told me that Everway is the only game that their girlfriends and wives are interested in playing. It's the only RPG that my late wife ever played. The joke is that the game sold to all the gamers with girlfriends and was cancelled for lack of sales. More seriously, the art represents a serious attempt to expand the imagery of fantasy characters beyond the standard white male options. A black gamer once told me that the black characters in the Everway art really made him feel empowered to play characters who looked like him, and I'm proud of whatever the game accomplished in terms of promoting a more global and less male-centered esthetic.

Question: More on the topic of these three games: Firstly, the third edition of Talislanta is still under some debate among fans of that gameworld for introducing various orders to the magic system, advancing the gameworld date and adding some contentious detail to the background - although the orders were in fact elaborated in later editions. Could you elaborate on why Talislanta needed these developments?

A lot of strange material had been published for Talislanta, including many sourcebooks that Stephen Michael Sechi hadn't written. Most of this material wasn't up to Sechi's standards, and he wanted to get back to the basics with the world. Changing the year, revising the magic systems, and enacting other changes were part of the effort to re-establish

a version of Talislanta that Sechi liked.

Working on the 3rd edition of Talislanta was sort of like working on the 3rd edition of D&D, which was also returning to its basics after its support material had taken it far from its origins.

Question: Secondly, Everway was big, expensive, colourful ... but not a smashing success in terms of sales. It still has an active fan base, and there is no doubt about the quality of the game or its influence, and the cards are still considered highly collectable. But what went wrong?

First of all, we never really tested Everway to see if it would get the reaction I hoped it would get. Second, Everway is sort of like the RPG you might imagine people in some sort of utopia playing, or maybe Finland. Its appeal is more artsy than dramatic. It doesn't even support the basic reward mechanism of watching your numbers go up; it has no rules for experience or treasure. Finally, the internal processes at Wizards was so chaotic at that time that the game had a number of strikes against it just in terms of production and expenses.

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Question: Thirdly, in comparison Over The Edge was much more successful- a second edition, a number of supplements and scenarios. What went right? And Al Amarja is a surreal parallel reality version of Lampedusa isn't it?

Over the Edge has the considerable advantage of being originally designed for personal use. It could be radical because I wasn't trying to please a market, and it was highly functional because it was designed to be played, not sold.

You're pretty clever to suggest Lampedusa as the real-world Al Amarja, but the truth is more little embarrassing than that. As an American creating a game for other Americans, I was able to invent an island in the Mediterranean with no reference to actual reality. I could rely on American players not to know geography or to really care.

Al Amarja was based on Interzone and other exotic locales in books by William S. Burroughs. Robin Laws turned me onto Burroughs, and I'll be forever grateful.

Question: You also contributed to RuneQuest's Strangers in Prax, Creative Campaigning for AD&D, Black Spine (AD&D's Dark Sun), the Sorceror's Crusade for Mage, the system design of Star Wars (2000 edition), Unknown Armies, HeroQuest... This is quite a range of of games, on top of the ones that you've been a major designer yourself. Just how much gaming do you do? (Or have done?)

I have done a ton of gaming. I've run lots of different RPGs, and played many more. My high-school D&D campaign featured thoroughly rewritten rules, and I designed a few amateur RPGs before Ars Magica. I've been extraordinarily fortunate to have a career in which I can put all this experience to use. Twenty years ago, it seemed like too many games were invented by people who hadn't learned and played enough different games. The designers were really bad at anticipating what sort of rules and support someone needed to learn and enjoy a new RPG. The whole art of designing RPGs has really advanced since I've been in the field.

Question: And of course, the 800-lb gorilla.. Third edition D&D; one of the most important contributions in the history of gaming, bringing back a classic system from the brink, revitalising it with more consistent and contemporary mechanics (albeit with plenty of exception cases). What was that process like? How did you, Monte Cook, and Skip Williams work together?

There really isn't much better in life than to undertake a large, important task and to be given the tools, resources, time, and team mates you need to succeed. That was my experience with 3rd Edition. D&D really needed help, and we designers had marching orders to be bold. We had outstanding support from Peter Adkison, the president, and from Ryan Dancey, the brand manager. Monte and Skip were good guys to work with. We all contributed different things to the overall process. There were rocky spots, but all along we could tell that we were making progress and improving the game.

You can imagine that there were some individuals who bitterly opposed changes we were making to their beloved game, but overall we got the support we needed to move the game forward.

The 3rd Edition project also had a special meaning for me because it allowed me to return to the game of my early years and run one of my most remarkable campaigns ever. When the game rules were done, I started a campaign to see if D&D had become the sort of game I could play for fun, and the new system really delivered for me and my friends. The notes for this campaign are on my personal web site, jonathantweet.com.

Question: But you're not involved in fourth edition D&D? What do you think of that edition? What gameplans are there for you?

Fourth Edition solves a major problem that all previous editions of D&D have, which is that the per-day powers of a spellcaster don't function according to the same economy as the fighter's at-will attacks. For good and ill, too much rides on how fast the spellcaster burns through resources. Obviously, players regularly have fun playing the game despite this mismatch, but the mismatch causes needless problems with the pacing of adventures or with balance between character classes. After playing the hell out of 3rd Ed, I really can't run that system any more. The mismatch between spellcasters and non-spellcasters is too much for me.

Fourth Edition also has the virtue of getting rid of corner case rules that messed up play, usually by being too complicated. I can take the blame for some of the more complicated 3rd Ed rules.

That said, Fourth Edition has made the game too predictable. The designers have successfully prevented players from making all sorts of mistakes, but they've also vastly narrowed the range of character options. Characters are too much the same, and combat is too long and predictable.

I do have plans for a game project or two, but none of them are public at this time. Check with me at GenCon. In the mean time, I have campaign notes from past campaigns and a mixed bag of game topics on my vanity web site, if people want to see some of the stuff I've been up to over the years.

Question: Finally for a non-rpg related question - and you saw this one coming - on many occasions you've indicated a strong preference towards evolutionary psychology, the argument that psychological traits follow the principles of biological evolution. How do you respond to claims that evolutionary psychology is insufficient to explain the development of shared symbolic values and prone to over-emphasising the role of biological inclinations in human behaviour?

My father was a professor of English, and he taught me a keen appreciation of culture. I read modern poetry for fun, especially Wallace Stevens and Mary Oliver. I'm also interested in historical problems, such as who the historical Jesus really was and what effect he really had on Western civilization. Evolutionary psychology makes sense of my cultural interests. In my view, Stevens, Oliver, Jesus, Shakespeare, Caesar, and most everyone else in history was contending with a real human nature. By understanding their efforts, I think I gain a better appreciation of real things: human nature and the cultures we have built out of it. I don't see humanity's struggle with itself as an arbitrary social construct, the way I did when I studied sociology and psychology in college.

When I was younger, I believed that social roles, even gender roles, were socially constructed. I was taught that culture was fundamentally autonomous from our genes. In those days, I didn't read much poetry because I thought that art was merely an arbitrary product of culture. In the 80s, most of the evidence seemed to support my social constructionist view. Over the last twenty years, however, a lot of new evidence has come out. To me, the evidence now seems to strongly favor the idea that we have both powerful social instincts and powerful cultural norms.

That said, there is a nasty brand of sexist, racist, genetically deterministic evolutionary psychology out there. I'm against that kind of evolutionary psychology myself. I'm a feminist, an egalitarian, and a liberal.

For more information visit Jonathan's website: <http://www.jonathantweet.com/>[1]

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