



The History and Resurrection of RuneQuest!

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The History of RuneQuest

Way back in 1978 the most serious challenge to the market dominance of Dungeons and Dragons raised its head. It was called RuneQuest. RuneQuest included several innovative ideas and rules which quite literally stunned and transformed the roleplaying world. It had a clearly theme and object, as the name described. You went on quests to get runes, mystical symbols of power. If you found enough runes you could become a Hero and go on god-like hero quests instead.

Instead of character classes it had skills, equally available to all, and all represented by a percentile system. It was a truly magical game - almost every sapient creature had at least one or two spells, which used a simple magic point system for the basic magic or actually required the sacrifice of one's soul for the powerful rune magic. It had an integrated game world which gave awe and wonder: Glorantha, a flat plane on the eternal ocean, a bronze world (bronze was the blood of gods, crystals - always magic - their bones), deep history, the omnipresent threat of Chaos, and truly exotic interpretations of mainstream fantasy creatures (e.g., Elves were walking sentient plants). "Monsters" were not described merely as a set of combat statistics, but with full characterisation and individuality. The physical conflict system was derived from author experiences in the Society for Creative Anachronisms and was therefore far more realistic than that presented in The Other Game (TM) - armor absorbed damage for starters!

Whilst there was only a small print run of the first edition, there was some supporting supplements such as the previously published wargames "White Bear and Red Moon", "Nomad Gods" and "Dragon Pass". The new game proved to be popular and in 1980, RuneQuest 2nd edition was published along with a great number of supplements including "Cults of Prax" and "Cults of Terror" (mainstream and "evil" religions), "Griffin Mountain", a campaign pack, scenario packs such as "Apple Lane" and "Snakepipe Hollow", the city campaign set "Pavis" and the nearby ruins companion set "Big Rubble", "Borderlands", another huge campaign set, "TrollPak", all about trolls (of course), and supplements such as "RuneMasters" (major NPCs), "Plunder" (magic and exotic items) and the "RuneQuest Companion".

Along with support from Judges Guild such as "Broken Tree Inn" and the legendary "Duck Tower" and "Duck Pond", the magazine "Different Worlds" and regular articles in "White Dwarf", there were some serious questions being raised

in the industry whether RuneQuest was really going to take over.

A Sample of RuneQuest: From the Daka Fal description in "Cults of Prax".

Keep in mind this was written in 1979, when most Dungeons and Dragons supplements consisted of 20th century characters in a generic fantasy world engaging in a dungeon crawl killing Orcs.

Three days out of Pimper's Block, the head of my baboon escort came to me and asked if he and his followers might retire to a ruin nearby to celebrate an ancient ritual of theirs. I said that I did not hire them to do rituals but to protect my mules. He replied that I could watch if I wished, since he trusted me, and that they would work for me for a week for free if I allowed them to celebrate.

They began by making a huge fire from rubble wood. One of them, whom I had thought to be a bearer, proved himself a shaman and threw something into the fire. The flames answered by spitting out a burst of green coals which burrowed into the ground where they hit. No one paid attention to them. By nightfall the flames had died, leaving only a heap of ashes and embers.

The baboons growled and snarled in their beast speech, and set unlit torches about as wards. The leader asked if I would bless the ground, and I did. Some drank strong drink from gourds while others were sober. All of them smeared their fur with ashes. They began a twirling dance, clashing weapons and falling to the ground to wail like babies.

Then two masked baboons appeared on the far side of the ash pile from me. One mask was red, and its wearer held a snake-tail rattle. The other was yellow, and held a staff surmounted by animal horns.

These two acted out the ritual of the baboons' survival during the Great Darkness. They claim that Daka Fal went to them first in that awful period, and that all human worship was learned from baboons in the Dark. Their yowling dance reenacted that god's teachings to the Initiates who were present. I could not tell which was supposed to be Daka Fal and which was the baboon Founder.

As it progressed, I noticed with surprise that the number of baboons had grown, and I realized that many spirits now were among the group, greedily looking upon the world they had left, mixing like friends among those still alive. Lust for a body was in them. Suddenly I saw the red-masked baboon seized and torn to shreds! The others, the living, panicked and fled behind the other masked creature.

Yellow Mask screamed words of power, and all the spirits were forced to hover where the green stones had buried themselves earlier. Yellow Mask chattered to the baboons behind him, then went to the dead Red Mask and touched him in several places. Red Mask, whom I had seen torn limb from limb, sprang up alive again, screaming in triumph. All the others yelled too, and beat their chests in ragged victory until the sun came up. Two of them dug up something and ate it.

The shaman, who had been wearing the red mask, dug also, and brought me a nut of a type I never had seen. He indicated I must eat it to get one use of the cult spell Summon Ancestor. Such was the magic of the baboons which I saw.

In recognition of the game's growing popularity, the small but popular publisher, Chaosium, entered into an agreement with Avalon Hill, the biggest wargame company at the time, in 1984. As part of the agreement, Greg Stafford retained rights to the world of Glorantha which he designed and Avalon Hill would publish RuneQuest, 3rd edition. The logic seemed obvious. Chaosium was a small company and one which was in some financial difficulty. However they had at least two great products ("Call of Cthulhu" being the other). By selling RuneQuest to Avalon Hill but keeping Glorantha, it was felt they could at least keep artistic control. So Chaosium staff designed RuneQuest third edition for

Avalon Hill, the most ambitious product yet - some 270 pages of text in five books in a boxed set - and with a price tag to match.

There were several major changes in RuneQuest III, as it became known. The percentile scale became "true" rather than the 5% increment system that had previously existed. Character cultural backgrounds were expanded to include "Primitive", "Barbarian", "Nomad" and "Civilized". Background parental professions, such as "Hunter", "Farmer", "Priest" and "Noble" were added. Glorantha was radically de-emphasized, indeed, almost obliterated, in favour of the new "Fantasy Earth". The magic system was radically changed with the old "Battle Magic" being redefined as "Spirit Magic", "Rune Magic" becoming "Divine Magic" and a whole new school, "Sorcery" added.

Whilst many of the changes were indeed necessary, others felt that in many ways the system was "broken". The elegant simplicity of RuneQuest II had been lost in an elaborated and expanded game, of which some was good and some was bad. Avalon Hill did not endear fans with their first three supplements (Monster Coliseum, and two packs of pre-printed character sheets), or by reprinting old RuneQuest II supplements with minimal updates. Gloranthan classics such as "Griffin Mountain" was rewritten as "Griffin Island" with the Glorantha references removed and new Glorantha material was not released for many years. Some of the new gateway supplements were thoroughly lacking in imagination, and that's being kind. On the other hand, supplements like "Gods of Glorantha", "Genertela, Crucible of the Hero Wars" and "Elder Secrets" were very well received, as were the two supplements produced for the "Fantasy Earth" setting; "Vikings" and "Land of Ninja". The quality of art in all the products was universally recognised as simply terrible. In general, the experience with Avalon Hill shows that even if you have a good idea and get a big player to implement it, they can still ruin it for you.

In the early 1990s, thanks to the Internet (yes, the Internet did exist in the early 1990s, honest) and online mailing lists. A new editor at Avalon Hill, Ken Rolsten, a respected writer from the RQ II days, gathered the best minds to work on a new edition. However attempting to reach agreement proved to be difficult. Some wanted to re-emphasize Glorantha, which had become increasingly difficult due to Greg Stafford revising the history of his world (a process known as "Gregging"). Others wanted to build a simpler game, or at least a simpler setting as Glorantha was getting quite complex. Eventually the two groups parted company. A complete product, RuneQuest IV: Adventures in Glorantha, was published in pdf form but never made it to print. It is, of course, not allowed to be circulated.

Despite this enthusiasm in the early 1990s, in 1995 things seriously fell apart. First was a bitter break up between Chaosium and Avalon Hill, with Chaosium announcing they would publish "systemless" supplements for Glorantha, and Avalon Hill saying they'd find a new world for RuneQuest. For a while it was proposed that they use Jack Vance's "Lyonesse" however the plan became moribund as one of the chief editors of RuneQuest IV was incarcerated on an morals charge. He was later released and the convictions quashed, but not before Avalon Hill shelved the idea. They were a respectable company, known for their simulation of the slaughter of thousands, and they didn't want to be mixed up with anything to do with sex. Ewww.

Several years later, Avalon Hill decided to turn the knife and publish something called RuneQuest: Slayers, which had nothing to do with RuneQuest except the name. Matters became even more confused as AH, the giant of the industry, collapsed and was taken over by mega-games company Hasbro (ahh, see the laws of capital accumulation in force), which led Wizards of the Coast in charge of RuneQuest. That's right, the company who's main roleplaying product was Dungeons and Dragons now owned RuneQuest. Not surprisingly it seemed to many that was the end of the line.

Since then, Greg Stafford's company Issaries Inc., has produced a new game, HeroQuest. Whilst the first edition (Hero Wars) was plagued with typographical and layout errors, the second edition was printed and distributed by Steve Jackson Games, and is much, much better. The game is Glorantha, and includes all the old Gloranthan-magic as far as setting goes. However, the mechanics are not to everyone's appeal. Whilst simple and scalable, they almost completely dispense with simulationism and adopt a narrative, free-form, resolution system. Meanwhile, on the other side of the coin, the survivors in Chaosium are planning on releasing a new version of the classic from which RuneQuest is derived entitled "Deluxe Basic Role Playing", which will bring together many of the mechanics of RuneQuest along with favourites such as Stormbringer and Call of Cthulhu. Finally, Steve Perrin, one of the chief designers behind the

original RuneQuest I and II, has produced an game entitled SPQR (Steve Perrin's Quest Rules).

RuneQuest IV: The Resurrection

However, very recently, Mongoose Publishing have received the nod from Greg Stafford to produce RuneQuest IV, planning a 100p Players Book in 2006. Issaries Inc. snapped up the trademark when Hasbro foolishly allowed it to lapse. However 2006 also happens to be the same year that Chaosium is supposed to releasing Deluxe Basic Role Playing. Clearly you can see that there is not much negotiation between the two companies! Already a very rough set of rules has been published which are under intense scrutiny on a new RuneQuest rules mailing list. This is a very sneaky preview of what has been published to date.

Characters can be either Ducks, Dwarves, Elves, Humans, Halflings or Ogres, which are called "races", a name which irks me greatly. A "race" is a subspecies. A walking, sapient plant is not a subspecies of humans. They are a separate species. RQ III seemed to understand this and there is no reason why it should be forgotten in RQ IV. The inclusion of Halflings is not particular Glorantha-friendly, or a fantasy staple, except in Tolkien. Ogres are a real surprise because they are Chaos-tainted. Trolls are a surprising exclusion, because RuneQuest trolls are typically "noble savages", and are often used as player characters.

Characteristics are Strength, Constitution, Size, Intelligence, Power, Dexterity, and Charisma. There is consideration of including Perception, which would make a lot of sense. Standard range is 3d6, except for INT and SIZ which is 2d6+6. Attributes, generated from Characteristics, are Magic Points, Hit Points, Fatigue Points, Damage Modifier. None of this is terribly different from what was published in RuneQuest III, except "total hit points" has been removed in favour of just "sectional hit points". The Damage Modifier still jumps too quickly. In addition to these, new Attributes include Initiative and Combat Actions.

Characters have the option of some 17 basic skills plus some 16 of close combat and weapon skills. The basic skill chance is 10% plus one or more Characteristics, again making RuneQuest IV a skill-heavy, rather than stat-heavy game. There is also a number of advanced skills were characters have no base chance and must be trained. Finally, characters have Traits depending on their "race" (read: species) which are inbuilt abilities (e.g., Ducks are good at swimming) and Hero Points, which allow them to do extraordinary things. Characters has a small range of previous experience backgrounds (peasant, barbarian, townsman, noble) which is derived from RQ II rather than the detailed and varied RQ III.

As per previous editions, skills are percentile based with a successful result in rolling under a skill percentage. Characteristics (x3) can be used where there is no applicable skill, which has never been particularly well defined in my opinion and this lack of definition continues. Advanced skills are introduced in the section covering skill resolution and include a further eight skills in areas such as crafts, additional languages, specialised lores, martial arts etc. The chapter on non-combat skills is separated from combat resolution. This consists of three second rounds, in order of initiative and with a number of combat actions (usually one). Hit locations are determined by the now familiar system of simple reversal of the number rolled (e.g., a 19 becomes a 91). In general combat is simpler than RQ II and III, but with the same principles embedded.

Finally, there is a collection of chapters relating to Adventuring (i.e., the effects of the elements), the staple fare of Monsters and normal animals and Equipment, which is almost entirely combat-based. Notably missing in this first draft is anything to do with the proposed magic system so one can expect that big changes are due there. Also, the Glorantha material is only mentioned in passing. It is the firm suggestion of the people heading the project that this new edition of RuneQuest IV will have a lot of Glorantha material in it, so work obviously needs to be done here.

First impressions are not entirely positive. The game is too much based in the early 1980s and is far too heavily orientated towards combat (with 17 basic skills and 16 combat skills, the emphasis should be obvious - and it's not roleplaying). The lack of even a proposed magic system or detail for Glorantha, let alone those time-honoured things called "runes", doesn't make it seem special in any way to anything else on the market. The proposal to release a 100

page book seems far too slim to what RuneQuest deserves. Sure, RuneQuest II managed to pack everything in to 112pp, but it was a real tight fit. Also, one cannot help but grimace at the competition between Chaosium and Mongoose in this affair.

However, final judgement should still be reserved until the playtesters and rules-lawyers have had a chance to thrash it out and see what the new game is actually like. In all probability there will be substantial changes between now and the actual release copy. Despite some well-meaning enthusiasm by many on the playtesters list this history and review is tempered with some sadness. The confusion over RuneQuest over the years which is all documented in the mists of time, which meant that this truly legendary game became its own tragedy. The simple reality is that a new edition of RuneQuest will not be able to challenge Dungeons and Dragons in the way that it did in the early 80s and provide innovations to the entire industry. At best one could hope for is finally, after twenty years since the last true edition, a product which can bring honour to the name representing this game.

Lev Lafayette

(RuneQuest was the first roleplaying game I played, at the Newman College Middle High school library in 1981).

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