



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?

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.

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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 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> [1]) 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> [2]), 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.

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