# Dragons in the stacks: an introduction to role-playing games and their value to libraries

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to introduce the genre of tabletop fantasy role-playing games and provide guidance in building an initial collection.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The first part of the paper is designed to present the development of tabletop fantasy role-playing games in a historiographic model, tracing the history of these games from the 1970s to 2006. The second portion is a bibliographic essay and critique of several noteworthy fantasy role-playing games, including analysis of the settings and systems of each game.

**Findings** – The paper provides a history of the development of fantasy role-playing games and provides guidance on how to start a collection. The study recognizes a lack of academic research on the topic and seeks to provide a brief introduction.

**Practical implications** – The paper provides a clear concise history of role-playing game development and balanced advice for librarians who wish to begin collecting role-playing games.

**Originality/value** – This paper begins to fill the need for academic study of the subject and provides practical advice for collection development librarians.

**Keywords** Indoor games, Role play, Collection management, Popular culture

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

This article discusses tabletop (pen and paper) role-playing games (RPGs) contrasting them with live action role-playing games (LARPs) and massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). The first section traces the development of tabletop RPGs from their beginnings as a spin-off from miniatures war games in the 1970s to much broader mainstream acceptance in the twenty-first century, and will look at the reasons why collecting these games is important to libraries and users. Historically these games spurred the design and growth of the massive multiplayer online RPGs. In addition, the games are played in social groups, are inclusive and provide a rich environment for learning and developing team skill and personal leadership. In a world of increasing social interaction and globalization these skills are very important. The last section develops a core list of RPGs to collect, limited by the availability – if it is not in print, it will not be on this list.

## What are RPGs?

Tabletop RPGs are a set of rules of varying complexity where a group of people (the players) assume roles (characters, the protagonists) and cooperatively seek to overcome obstacles and resolve conflicts placed before them by the game master (the GM). The action in the game is narrated by both the players (for their characters) and the GM (for all other inhabitants) for the purpose of collaboratively crafting a kind of ongoing narrative. There will be occasional mention of non-fantasy RPGs in this history, but this will only be to introduce new concepts of styles in game design and social contracts[1].

## The history of fantasy RPGs

### 1974-1989: days of wine and roses

The history of RPGs[2] begins in 1974 when Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) published the first edition of *Dungeons and Dragons*. This rules set was derived from the *Chainmail* tabletop miniatures war game rules developed by Gary Gygax, at the University of Minnesota, in 1971. Concurrently, David Arneson developed a proto LARP based on his experiences at the University of Minnesota participating in David Wesley's Napoleonic wargame *Braunstein* where players played various individuals in the fictional town of Braunstein; *Braunstein* focused on individual characters who could establish their own goals in addition to goals generated by the GM. Arneson's game was called *Blackmoor* and introduced the concepts of hit points[3], class levels[4], experience points[5], armor class[6] and dungeons as adventure settings (Fannon, 1999, p. 124). These concepts were derived from tabletop miniature war games, which were abstracted to represent large units, and applied to single characters. Gygax and Arneson collaborated and, taking elements from *Chainmail* and *Blackmoor*, created *Dungeons and Dragons*. In 1975, due to the success and growing fan base for *Dungeons and Dragons*, Gygax decided to publish a setting for the game. He

coauthored a setting with M.A.R. Barker and produced *Empire of the Petal Throne*. The world of Tékumel was dramatically different from the generic medieval setting of *Dungeons and Dragons*, "socially and culturally, Tékumel is as complex – and as alien to modern thinking – as Byzantium, ancient Egypt, Tenochtitlan, or the India of the Mughals" (Barker, 1983, p. 1).

Seeing the success of *Dungeons and Dragons*, other small companies produced fantasy RPGs. In 1977 *Chivalry and Sorcery* was published by Fantasy Games Unlimited. *Chivalry and Sorcery* was adapted directly from the Dungeons and Dragons system but chose to focus on medieval society, with a strong emphasis on nobility, and keep magic and monsters in a more mythical role (Livingstone, 1983, p. 110). The setting in *Dungeons and Dragons* was based on the characters rising up from humble beginnings and eventually attaining great power. *Dungeons and Dragons* had no social rules system in place and was much more concerned with combat, using highly visible spells, and facing hordes of non-human monsters.

In 1978, Chaosium published *Runequest*. This game featured the first use of a system for character skills beyond combat, such as Lore, Speak Language, or Courtesan. Other games did not have a skill system at all, or the skills were tied directly to level advancement at fixed rates. *Runequest* was also the first "tie-in" game produced; a "tie-in" game being a game based on and designed to emulate an existing intellectual property. In the case of *Runequest*, it was made to be played in the world of Glorantha, a fantasy world using the Roman Empire and Germanic tribes as inspiration rather than medieval Western Europe (Livingstone, 1983, p. 81). Glorantha was originally depicted in several board games produced by Chaosium.

In 1977 TSR moved from a small saddle-stitched booklet format to an $8.5 \times 11$ hard cover book to launch their *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* (*AD&D*) game. This game expanded the rules from the original 1974 release, including random treasure tables and interaction tables (used to randomly determine how non player characters (NPCs) react to characters). TSR continued to produce books for the *AD&D* line and began to expand the influences on the game to wider mythological and literary fantasy sources. This development was a mixed blessing to the company as it did draw new players, but it also involved TSR in legal battles due to copyright infringement with the inclusion of characters from Michael Moorcock's *Elric* saga and H.P. Lovecraft's (1980) Cthulhu mythos in the *Deities and Demigods* book[7].

In parallel with the release of AD&D, TSR released a boxed set called *Basic Dungeons and Dragons* that included two saddle stitched books (Livingstone, 1983, p. 71). This set was intended as a bridge game between the original *Dungeons and Dragons* and *AD&D*. This basic game only supported play from levels 1-3 and used a five-category alignment system (an early personality mechanic) as opposed to the three categories in the original and nine in the advanced game. The *Basic Set* underwent a major rewrite in 1981; it was released in conjunction with the *Expert Set*, which was a continuation of the rules from the *Basic Set* but covered play from levels 4-14. By 1985 three more boxed sets were released: *Companion Rules* (levels 15-25), *Master Rules* (levels 26-36)**,** and *Immortal Rules* (levels beyond 36).

Between 1980 and 1982 Iron Crown Enterprises (ICE) introduced a four-book RPG entitled *Rolemaster*. Unlike all other games to date, *Rolemaster* books were meant to be used as supplemental rules for other role-playing games, aiming specifically at *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*. With the publication of *Character Law,* ICE included rules that allowed *Rolemaster* to be played as a stand-alone game. While charts for random determination of events were present in RPGs before the release of *Rolemaster*, this game took the use of charts to a new level incorporating charts for nearly all events.

In 1985 Chaosium released an RPG based on the stories written by Thomas Mallory entitled, *King Arthur Pendragon*. *Pendragon* introduced rules for character personality which, until this point, had simply been a space on the character sheet to record a general demeanor. In *Pendragon* characters had scores in an array of personality traits and derived in-game mechanical effects from these scores. The concept of the game continuing beyond a character's death was a new concept also introduced with *Pendragon*. Campaigns in *Pendragon* could span generations and included rules governing the aging of characters and what their descendents could inherit.

The year 1986 saw the publication of Columbia Games's *HârnMaster* RPG. *HârnMaster* was a set of rules used to simulate a medieval setting in a fictional world. The Hârn setting, unlike *Dungeons and Dragons* or *Chivalry and Sorcery*, was not set during the late medieval period, but was established in an earlier period, closer to the eleventh century. The major innovation was not in the rules of *HârnMaster* but in the setting and how the setting was produced. *HârnWorld* was published without any rules for *HârnMaster* so the setting could be run with any rules set the GM desired. *HârnMaster*'s level of detail and simulation of historical culture (with the almost obligatory addition of magic and non-human races) created a devoted fan base that developed a massive amount of unofficial materials for the game and maintains a very active online presence today.

In 1987, Bard Games introduced *Talislanta*. The main thing *Talislanta* instituted was the influence from sources other than medieval Europe, Norse and Celtic mythology and culture, which had been the major source for RPG inspiration for many years before. Stephen Michael Sechi, the creator of *Talislanta*, drew heavily from pulp era fantasy fiction, especially Jack Vance's *Dying Earth*.

In 1989 TSR released the second edition of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* (*AD&D* 2e). This edition took the numerous volumes of the first edition and condensed them into three "core" books, the *Player's Handbook*, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and *Monstrous Compendium*. This model of three core books followed by supplements to expand rules would become the standard publishing model for TSR, and later Wizards of the Coast and other game companies. The second edition introduced major changes to the rules, altering the game further from its war game origins. For example, in the first edition the ranges of weapons and spells were measured in varying units (feet indoors and yards outdoors) because different war games used different scales depending on location. *AD&D* 2e used feet as a standard measurement. Another major change was TSR's adoption of a self-imposed publishing code, similar to the "Comics Code" used by Marvel and DC Comics, that arose from pressure placed on TSR by parental and Christian groups who believed that role playing, and *Dungeons and Dragons* in particular, led to teen suicide and "Satanism." This code limited the portrayal of evil characters to the purview of the GM and stressed the teamwork aspects of the game.

In 1986, the British company Games Workshop released *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (*WFRP*). *WFRP* was another "tie in" game which was spun off of the *Warhammer Fantasy Battles* tabletop war game. Games Workshop chose to refocus their business on the sale of miniatures and support their tabletop war games and created Flame Publications to continue publishing products for *WFRP*. Flame Publications went out of business in 1992 and *WFRP* entered a publication void until 1995 when a small English company, Hogshead Publishing, reprinted the rulebook and some supplements while producing new ones. In 2002 Hogshead went out of business and *WFRP* went out of print until 2004 when Black Industries, a division of Games Workshop (much like Flame Publications), began developing and publishing a new edition in conjunction with Green Ronin Publishing.

In 1988 *Ars Magica* was published by Lion Rampant Games (Fannon, 1999, p. 147). This game was set in medieval Europe in the year 1200 and focused on characters called magi and their interactions with the people of Europe. The major innovation in this game was the emphasis on the construction of a narrative and strong characterization over combat resolution. The other innovation was the concept of troupe style play, in which each player created a magus, a companion (skilled non-magi) and a group of grogs (skilled peasants), and used whichever character was most appropriate for that scenario.

## 1990-2000: dark days

In 1991 a fairly new company, White Wolf, sprang into the market with their first RPG offering: *Vampire: The Masquerade* (*VtM*). *VtM* set in motion a new direction in RPGs that took players and GMs away from the adversarial war game-based design of previous games. In *VtM* and later RPGs produced by White Wolf, storytelling was the main focus of the game, where the GM and players cooperate to tell a story. This idea of cooperative storytelling was a continuation from Lion Rampant's *Ars Magica*. WW continued this idea in their own edition of *Ars Magica* (1992) (Fannon, 1999, p. 150).

In 1995 TSR released a revised second edition of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*, along with a series of optional core rule books. These optional core books expanded and introduced new rules for character design, combat and magic (Fannon, 1999, 155). By this time TSR was beginning to struggle financially due to lagging sales and overextending itself in producing products for their myriad settings. In 1997, Seattle-based company Wizards of the Coast (WotC) purchased TSR, staving off the latter company's bankruptcy. WotC performed a major rewrite of the *Dungeons and Dragons* rules and released *Dungeons and Dragons* third edition (*D&D* 3e) in 2000. *D&D* 3e followed the same business model as *AD&D* 2e, releasing three core books (the *Player's Handbook*, the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and the *Monster Manual*), and WotC streamlined the cumbersome rules of both the first and second editions produced by TSR. A strong emphasis on customization of a character was introduced, as opposed to the earlier rigid class and race system of previous boxed sets of *Dungeons and Dragons*, enabled by the introduction of feats, representing special abilities and advantages that are used in-game[8]. The skill system was overhauled and the skill list from *AD&D* 2e was consolidated. Another major change was the stronger emphasis on and reversion to a war game-style combat system using a square grid map and miniatures.

Insofar as the RPG industry was concerned, the most important change in the third edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* was the introduction of the Open Game License (OGL). This license allowed creators besides WotC to use the mechanics designated "open game content," which includes the vast majority of the third edition core books, to create their own games and sell them. The actual document used in the OGL is available online as the "System Reference Document" (SRD). This opened a floodgate of companies who were now able to release settings and not create systems for them. Additionally, these companies could brand their products with the d20 (see below) logo and indirectly tie their games to *Dungeons and Dragons*. WotC released a revision of the third edition *Dungeons and Dragons*, called 3.5, in 2003; it repaired major design problems with the third edition and is considered the current edition.

## 2001-2007 the Indie revolution

The first decade of the twenty-first century also saw the revival of many older games as publishers renewed interest in, and released new editions of, classic RPGs. These revived games included: *Runequest* by Mongoose Publishing (an update of *Heroquest*); *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, second edition by Black Industries and Green Ronin; *Chivalry and Sorcery* fourth edition by Britannia Games Design; and *King Arthur Pendragon* fifth edition by ArtHaus, which is owned by White Wolf.

In 2000 Ron Edwards published a PDF of his independently produced RPG, *Sorcerer*. This game was wholly created and published by him and roughly marks the beginning of the "indie" game movement. This game was developed from discussion on a web site, "Hephaestus' Forge" created by Edwards and Ed Healy in the 1990s. Hephastus' Forge began to promote independent ownership and publication of games, as opposed to corporate ownership. The web site went inactive for years and was renamed and relaunched by Edwards and Clinton R. Nixon as simply "The Forge" (*Flames Rising*, 2004). This site continues to be very active in the promotion of independent games design and publication.

In 2001 Ron Edwards published *Sorcerer* in print format; it was the second independent RPG published in book format, the first being Apophis Consortium's *Obsidian: Age of Judgment*. While neither of these games are traditional fantasy RPGs, they opened the door to independent game designers to publish their own games (*Flames Rising*, 2004).

The year 2001 also saw the publication of *Exalted* by White Wolf Game Studio (White Wolf). *Exalted* uses the Storytelling system, a modified version of the Storyteller system, that White Wolf has used since the company's first offering, *Vampire: the Masquerade* in 1991[9]. The setting for *Exalted* distinguished it from other RPGs – the creators chose to use as few traditional fantasy influences (i.e. "Tolkienesque" elements) as possible. They drew their influences from Classical Greek and Roman, Mesopotamian, Asian mythologies, and pulp fantasy stories. *Exalted* also featured elements of modern media that quickly emerged into mainstream awareness, namely anime, manga and wuxia films, as well as popular video games namely the *Final Fantasy* series.

In 2007 Greg Stolze published *Reign*, a game that "expands the frontiers of fantasy gaming by elevating the action to an international stage. Monarchs, mercenaries and merchant

princes gamble armies and fortunes to win nations in a rich and vibrant fantasy setting. *Reign*'s simple but complete rules model the triumphs and disasters of societies as small as a village or as large as a realm-spanning religion" (Stolze, 2007).

Other innovations came from Clinton R. Nixon with his games: *Donjon* and *The Shadows of Yesterday*. *Donjon* permits players to essentially take control of the narration to an extent, depending on their degree of success. *The Shadows of Yesterday* incorporates the use of keys, goals the character has come up with that pay off in experience points when resolved.

## Tailoring the collection

An in-depth discussion of the most popular theoretical framework of RPGs is beyond the scope of this article, but a brief overview can be essential for assessing RPGs and tailoring them to a library's collection based on patron use and feedback. As early as 1992 there were discussions on Usenet about the theoretical nature of RPGs, the first attempt was made to establish a coherent theory by dividing games into "Dice vs Diceless" (Kim, 2003). It was generally recognized that this dichotomy was insufficient and debate continued until 1995, when Kevin Hardwick proposed the "narrative stance" which defines four stances a player takes during play. In addition to this proto narrativism, a basic definition of "simulationism" was established as well by Mary Kusher. In discussions of simulationism the third component of current RPG theory was formed. Jim Henley, in 1997, posited the idea of "gamism." Henley focused heavily on the negative aspect of gamism, where players concentrate on the "self contained nature of the rules system"[10]. In 2001, Ron Edwards posited a theoretical framework to discuss RPGs and to help game designers improve future games. This theory is called Gameism, Narrativism, Simulationism (GNS).

Edwards sought to unify the terminology of the previous threefold theory so that all RPGs could be evaluated along three continuums: gamism, narrativism and simulationism. Gamism is expressed by competition among participants (the real people); it includes victory and loss conditions for characters, both short-term and long-term, that reflect on the people's actual play strategies (Edwards, n.d.a). Narrativism is expressed by the creation, via role-playing, of a story with a recognizable theme. The characters are formal protagonists in the classic Lit 101 sense, and the players are often considered co-authors. The listed elements provide the material for narrative conflict (again, in the specialized sense of literary analysis) (Edwards, n.d.b). "Simulationist role-playing has a great deal of power and potential … Simulationism heightens and focuses Exploration as the priority of play. The players may be greatly concerned with the internal logic and experiential consistency of that Exploration" (Edwards, n.d.c). The other important aspect of simulationism is that the game simulates a given genre, not necessarily the real world. For example, *Weapons of the Gods* by Eos Press is specifically designed to simulate a high action wuxia comic book series and includes rules for over the top action and mystical martial arts. At the other extreme, but still simulationist, is *Phoenix Command*, by Leading Edge Games. This game was "designed to be truly realistic; not complex, or deadly, but simply a representation of what really happens to people" in armed conflict. The simulation of near-future modern combat went so far as to divide combat into 1/10,000 of a second rounds (where typical fantasy RPGs average at 6 seconds) in order to simulate bullet flight times.

## Rules intensive vs rules non-intensive

A newer discussion concerning RPGs is the debate between rules intensive and rules non-intensive (as opposed to "rules light") games[11]. Rules intensive games have a large number of rules for many situations and can have multiple resolution systems for different tasks. A raw measure of the rules intensity is the size of the rule book(s) needed to play the game, e.g. *Dungeons and Dragons* currently requires three books containing 960 pages of rules. While only 320 pages are necessary, or less if the player is simply concerned with their character's abilities, a GM needs to be familiar with 640 pages of this game, none of which includes setting information. Size alone, however, is not a sufficient measure; *Exalted* weighs in at 400 pages and has 48 pages of the book devoted solely to the setting. The amount of rules in RPGs is nearly impossible to memorize and reference to the books is an inevitable part of playing these games.

Rules non-intensive games are, usually, short in length and have minimal and streamlined rules for conflict resolution; indeed, often the rules for conflict resolution are the same regardless of the type of in-game conflict. Examples of rules non-intensive games are: *Donjon*, *Trollbabe* and *Questers of the Middle Realms*. Rules non-intensive games have an implicit trust between the GM and the players, a sense of cooperation that was, and often still is, missing from earlier games. Players have the ability to dramatically edit the situations by adding elements and even taking narrative control over the scene. Within these games there is a blurred line between GM and player as the entire group cooperates to tell a story. Rules non-intensive games are also more focused in the stories able to be portrayed, with an extreme example being *The Mountain Witch*, by Timothy Kleinert, a game designed to tell only one basic story structure. The challenge for the players and GM lies in how the players create their characters and how they interact to change elements along the overarching narrative framework (Kleinert, 2004, p. 3).

These games have a high level of GM-player trust built into the social contract[12]. Chad Underkoffler writes in his game *Truth and Justice* about high trust:

> The most important part of *T&J* is that it's high trust. Players have to be convinced that the GM isn't going to try and screw them over, and GMs have to believe that the players will have some faith in the game, setting, campaign tone, gaming group, and his or her fairness. One way that this trust can be built is by having the GM and players cooperate in generating characters, as well as some of the details of the setting.

Another facet to consider when selecting games is that some games are made to have no setting or a very vaguely implied one. At one end of the spectrum are two excellent examples: *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Burning Wheel*. In *Dungeons and Dragons* there is minimal reference to an established setting discussed directly; primarily the only setting is found in the pantheon used for clerics, which was borrowed directly from the old *Grayhawk* setting, first produced by TSR. For *Dungeons and Dragons*, both TSR and WotC produced additional settings that can be used with the core rules, two of the most popular being the magic-punk *Eberron Campaign Setting* and the high fantasy *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*. *Burning Wheel* has an implied setting in that the game's creator, Luke Crane, sought to emulate Tolkien and

establishes a setting within the character generation system using lifepaths, a set of careers which determine the previous experience of each character (Crane, 2004, 2005a, b).

At the other end of the spectrum are settings made without accompanying rules. The most well known example of this is *HârnWorld*. This setting is produced without any reference to the accompanying system, *HârnMaster*. This allows a group to utilize whichever system suits them to play in this setting. With no rules to accompany the setting, this category is the most detailed as no room in a book is taken up by rules, unlike settings designed for specific systems, e.g. *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* which has to dedicate some space in each book for game statistics.

## Collecting RPGs

RPGs have been a part of the popular culture for over 30 years and in the past ten they have moved further into mainstream popular culture. Having RPGs in the collection and sponsoring programming around RPGs are ways to build social networks and circles of camaraderie. Another advantage of having RPGs in the collection is that they will spur further use of the collection. Many RPGs today draw inspiration from our own popular culture as well as myths and cultures of various peoples, and once players' imaginations have been captured by these games they will want to find out more about the sources for these games. Additionally there are a growing number of games designed to emulate certain genres of popular culture, e.g. anime, manga, Western comic books, television programs, etc. These games could be used to highlight or enhance specific aspects of the library's collection.

A library has several options for acquiring RPGs. The first option is to purchase them from a local gaming store. This option is generally seen as the "best option," as these stores keep the industry afloat and can serve as places to hold gaming sessions and to get information on upcoming releases. Another benefit is that one can examine the game in person before purchasing it for the collection. Locating a local gaming store can be challenging as many of them are run on small profit margins and can close or move location unexpectedly. Good resources for location stores would be to look in the local phone directory under headings like Gaming, Games, and Game Supplies Retail. If there are no dedicated gaming stores in the area, comic book shops can be helpful in acquiring games.

The second best option is purchasing the books directly from the publishers. This is the most direct way to support the publishers. Another benefit to going to the publisher is that the web site has a forum available for people to discuss the game and ask questions.

A third option is large online booksellers. These web sites do well in stocking books from the larger gaming companies, namely Wizards of the Coast and White Wolf, but can be fairly unreliable in acquiring games from smaller companies.

## Core list of RPGs

### *Dungeons and Dragons*, 3.5 edition, www.wizards.com/ default.asp?x = dnd/welcome

To run a game of *Dungeons and Dragons* a group must have three books, the *Player's Handbook*, the *Dungeonmaster's Guide* and the *Monster Manual*. Within these books are all of the rules necessary to play a full game. The *Player's Handbook*

contains the rules for character creation, combat and spell casting. The *Dungeonmaster's Guide* contains the rules for rewards, experience points and treasure, adventure design and campaign management. The *Monster Manual* contains statistics for numerous creatures for the characters to confront. Many supplemental books exist, published both by Wizards of the Coast and other third party companies, adding more character classes (professions), spells, monsters, feats and settings, but all of them are optional.

Character creation is a class and level system. Creation begins with randomly rolling the character's six abilities and chooses a class based on his ability scores. The character then earns experience points over the course of their career and these points accumulate; at certain thresholds the character advances a level and gains additional abilities, some predetermined and some chosen by the player.

Conflict resolution is accomplished in *Dungeons and Dragons* in two different ways. The simpler system is by using skill checks. A die is rolled; the outcome is added to the character's skill rating and then compared to a difficulty number established by the GM. If the total is higher than the difficulty, then the character succeeds. The second method of conflict resolution is through combat.

Combat resolution is still determined by the roll of a die with the inclusion of modifiers. Where it differs from non-combat resolution is that there are miniatures and maps involved much like a miniatures war game. There are extensive rules for movement, types of actions allowed and how to resolve these actions. Combat in this game is divided into 6-second rounds where each character acts in an order determined by a dice roll at the beginning of combat.

### *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, 2nd edition, www. blackindustries.com/default.asp?template = WH

To run a game of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* a group needs the core book. Additonal books have been published filling out the setting and adding more detail and depth to various elements of the game. The core book contains rules for character creation, setting and GM advice and opponents.

Character creation in *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* uses a career system. Like a class and level system, the careers grant predetermined abilities to the character. The primary difference between a class system and a career system is that, in the former, the character can stay (and is mechanically encouraged to stay) in the chosen class; whereas, the latter system is designed for multiple career changes during the course of play. In *Warhammer* the player earns experience points and then spends them to gain points in attributes and skills. The skill and attribute advances coupled with the acquisition of trappings (equipment pertinent to the career) allow the character to exit a career and start a new one. These careers also build one upon another, reinforcing choices based on play rather than making the "best" character through sheer numbers manipulation.

Conflict resolution in *Warhammer* uses a die roll and target number system.

### *Burning Wheel*, Revised, www.burningwheel.org/

*Burning Wheel* requires two books to run the game, the *Burning Wheel Fantasy Roleplaying System* and the *Character Burner*. The *Monster Burner* is a third book, which includes a bestiary and rules for creating additional life paths and monsters. The system and character books are sold as a bundle with the

monster book sold separately. The system did not change significantly with the revision, however, and the monster book can be used with minimal changes, all of which are listed on the game's wiki

Character creation in *Burning Wheel* is a career system (though in the game it is called a life path system). The life path system was first introduced in *Cyberpunk* and consists of choices made by the player at character creation on a flowchart to determine character history and in game bonuses and penalties. In *Burning Wheel* each race has their own life paths to choose from and rules for creating new life paths are included in the *Monster Burner*. Most RPGs attempt to maintain a balance between different characters, but in *Burning Wheel* no attempt at game balance has been made. This is a conscious decision made by the game's creator to simulate the different races as seen in Tolkien's works and other fantasy worlds.

Conflict resolution uses a hybrid dice pool/scripted system. In a dice pool system a player rolls a determined number of dice and compares each die separately against a target number, creating successes to determine how well the character does. Prior to the conflict the desired outcome is stated. The players then write down three actions the characters are going to take as provided on a list in the game. Dice pools are rolled to determine success and the victors get to have their outcomes prevail.

### *Legend of Five Rings*, 3rd edition, http://l5r.alderac. com/

*Legend of Five Rings* has all of the rules contained in one core book. There are supplements made for the game which expand certain aspects of the game, e.g. one supplement being released will detail duels between samurai. *Legend of Five Rings* has a line of supplements that should be considered essential expansions to the core book. These supplements, starting with *The Four Winds*, detail the "metaplot" of the setting (Alderac, "Legend")[13]. *Legend of Five Rings* is not unique in using a metaplot; the *Forgotten Realms* setting by Wizards of the Coast, uses the same concept, as did many of the White Wolf games in the 1990s.

Character creation is a template and "point buy" system, where in the player has an allotment of points to purchase all of the traits for their character with different traits having different values. The player chooses a base template and then adds advantages and disadvantages to further flesh out the character. These attributes are limited by the scores in the character's rings, all of which are raised by spending experience points. A unique addition to this game is the Heritage system where the character gains minor advantages and disadvantages before starting play. The Heritage system is not unique in granting small bonuses; these systems are seen in other games under different names (feats, merits, advantages). Where Heritage is unique is that these bonuses are determined by the group with which the character is affiliated.

In *Legend of Five Rings* the modification to the dice pool system is that it is a "roll and keep" system. A player is allowed to roll a certain number of dice but can only keep a portion of those dice, thereby limiting the margin of success.

### *Ars Magica*, 5th edition, www.atlas-games.com/ arsmagica/

*Ars Magica* is a self contained core rulebook supported by supplements expanding setting and rules elements. The

supplements cover various geographic territories important to the setting including important people, places and adventure ideas. Much like *Legend of Five Rings*, the system for *Ars Magica* has not changed radically and supplements from older editions can be used with a minimum of conversion work.

Character creation in *Ars Magica* is a straight "point buy" system, with the players spending different amounts of points depending on what type of character is being created. In this game not only are physical and mental abilities given scores, but *Ars Magica* also includes statistics for personality traits.

Conflict resolution is a single die roll versus a target number plus modifiers.

### *Heroquest*, www.glorantha.com/

This game is contained in one rulebook supported by various supplements detailing elements of the setting, e.g. regions, monsters and adventures. The setting is the world of Glorantha, which draws its inspiration from the early medieval period, the Roman Empire and the tribal peoples of pre-Christian Europe.

Character creation is based primarily on keywords. These keywords describe a character and the various skills they would have. Keywords not only cover descriptive elements, they also detail the homeland, the character's occupation, magic known to the character, etc. There are three different methods of character creation. In the first method, players write a 100-word description of their character, and then identify keywords from the description. In the second method, the player makes a simple list with three keywords and ten skills. The third method involves choosing keywords and skills as the game progresses, allowing players to define their characters as they play and become familiar with the game and setting. Additionally in *HeroQuest*, unlike many other RPGs, the characters begin with strong ties to a homeland. These homelands provide support for the characters and frameworks for Hero Questing. Hero Questing is when the characters ascend to another plane and reenact legends of their cultures' heroes, thereby gaining some of those heroes' powers. Characters improve their skills through spending hero points (experience points.)

Conflict resolution is a single die roll against the target number of the skill being used. There are masteries, which influence the die roll, and hero points can be used as well.

### *Exalted*, 2nd edition, www.white-wolf.com/exalted/ index.php

*Exalted* can be played with the setting as written with the core rulebook. This book focuses on the rules for playing Solar Exalted. There are four other types of Exalted in the game; to play the others additional rulebooks must be used[14]. A line of supplements fills out the setting and adds more intricate rules for various aspects of the game.

Character creation in *Exalted* is a "point buy" system, with different types of Exalted allotted different amounts of points to spend. Within each type of Exalted the points are equal though the different types of Exalted are not mechanically balanced against each other. This was a conscious choice made by the designers as the setting has an established hierarchy of power and the rules reflect this. Experience points are spent to buy higher ratings and additional powers.

Conflict resolution is a straight dice pool system which can grow rather large (in numbers of dice) compared to other dice pool systems. There are three different types of conflict in

*Exalted*; two of the three, physical and social combat, use the same rules and the third, the Mandate of Heaven rules, large scale social combat, uses a variation on them.

## Sites relevant to fantasy RPGs

The sites listed below are a small sample of sites focused on RPGs in general. Many of the publishers of RPGs also have forums for fans to post comments on, get suggestions and ideas from, and establish FAQs and errata on the RPGs published by the company.

### www.rpg.net
This is an excellent site to get information about a wide array of RPGs. The focus is on non-WotC games and indie games. This web site includes sections on tabletop games, video games and war games. It also has sections for posting "actual play" threads where groups describe their sessions for others to read and comment on.

In addition to the forums there are columns written on various gaming topics ranging from world design to advice on building characters and how to be "better" players and GMs.

### www.indie-rpgs.com/forum/index.php
This site is for the discussion of indie games. The primary focus of this site is on the development of these games.

### www.enworld.org/
This is the most comprehensive d20 site. It includes sections discussing D&D, other d20 games, settings, character design, etc.

### www.gamingreport.com
This site is a large news site for the gaming industry.

## Conclusion

This article has provided a necessarily brief introduction to the genre of tabletop fantasy RPGs and their importance and usefulness in a library. These games can be used to enhance the use of the collection by tying in the RPGs acquired to strengths within the collection. These games lead to enhanced socialization, leadership building and can be used to explore serious social issues. Additionally some RPGs have enormous longevity with some games having been played since the 1970s when the RPG hobby began.

## Notes

1 Some games do have rules for physically acting out the actions of the characters. These games are called live action role-playing games (LARPs) and range from the boxed "murder mystery" dinner games to full contact combative war games.

2 There is little written of the history or development of RPGs, and what little we have primarily covers the time from 1974 to 1990. An excellent and more comprehensive accounting of all RPG genres can be found in Schick's (1991) *Heroic Worlds*. This book has established a brief look at the different genres of RPGs and has an extensive bibliography for each genre. The main limitation to this work is that it was published in 1991 and has not had an updated edition published. A second book that follows a similar format and attempts to

explain more about the hobby is Fannon's (1999) *The Fantasy Roleplaying Gamer's Bible*. Unfortunately, this book also suffers from the same limitation as *Heroic Worlds*, as the most recent edition was published in 1999. Fannon's book is also less scholarly in nature, as it is targeted at people new to the hobby or people who want to know more about the hobby in general terms.

3 An abstracted system of measuring health, when a character's hit points equal zero they are out of action. Hit points are reduced by damage from various sources.

4 Class levels are a measure of overall character effectiveness.

5 Experience points are points given to players to be used in improving their characters modeling the character's learning of skills and abilities.

6 Armor class is an abstracted rating of how effective the character's armor (or other defense) is. In some games armor class makes a character harder to hit, in others the armor class (or rating) reduces damage.

7 Apparently there was no challenge from Fritz Leiber over the inclusion of his Fafhrd and Grey Mouser characters as they remained in later printings, which had Moorcock's and Lovecraft's characters removed.

8 In the boxed sets of *Dungeons and Dragons* the non-human races were classes in their own right, while humans could play different classes. In *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* non-human races were treated like humans in that they could take the same classes, but suffered from level limits. In the third edition all of these limits were removed.

9 Which is now the standard system used for White Wolf's products.

10 An excellent summary of the development of RPG theory can be found here: www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold/origin.html

11 A "rules light" game is a game in which there are few rules for character creation or conflict resolution. Most of the conflict resolution is left to the GM and players to narrate and agree upon. Some gamers do not care for this kind of system as it can rely too much on GM fiat. This lead to the division of "rules light" games into "rules non intensive" games and "rules light" games, where there are established rules, based usually on dice rolls, but the rules are minimal in length and do not break up the narrative flow of the game when used. Unlike "rules intensive" games where a combat lasting one minute in game time, would consume two hours in real time.

12 The social contract is the set of rules, either implicit or explicit, that the players and GM agree to before character creation and the game begins. This contract covers all in character and out of character interactions. An excellent overview of the social contract can be found on Rich Burlew's site: www.treasuretables.org/2006/07/rich-burlew-on-social-contracts.

13 A metaplot is a storyline generated by the company driving the game forward through time having events occur in the setting beyond the character's powers to influence.

14 This line of books has the collective title of *The Manual of Exalted Power*.

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