

Morrus Dancing!

Russell Morrissey

Welcome to the first issue of *The RPG Monthly* from EN World, the world's largest D&D news and reviews website.

This short magazine compiles the best content, news, and reviews from the last month of EN World. It's available as an alternative option for those who wish to digest their content in less micro-sized chunks. It's also an ideal way to distribute EN World's content amongst your friends or your gaming group.

This magazine is something of an experiment, and we hope you find it useful. This may well be the only issue! It will likely evolve as the months progress and as we learn a bit more about how to present content in a non web-based format.

The magazine will feature columns from our columnists, such as Erik Mona, Matt James, and Ari Marmell; it will include reviews from our staff reviewers; and it will include some of the latest news. Not every tiny bit of news, of course, but the big interesting stuff.

We might even manage to include some pretty pictures, a comic strip, and perhaps some exclusive game content from time to time.

The magazine's focus, in case you haven't figured it out, is role-playing games. Mainly D&D, but we'll include a liberal smattering of other stuff as well.

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Cartoons by Marcus Lake

The DM FILTER

Ari Marmell

Some couple of months ago, there was a large discussion thread on whether *The Temple of Elemental Evil* was a good adventure or not. I've sort of had these thoughts kicking around ever since then, but I'm still not sure I've got them in any sort of real order, or that I've come to any conclusions. So if this is a little more rambling than usual, I'll beg your indulgence.

There was, of course, no true consensus in that thread--because there never is, with such a subjective issue, especially when dealing with a classic of the game--but there was a recognizable pattern. Essentially, a majority of the people who really enjoyed the module--not all, by any means, but most--either had DMs who deliberately embellished on the written material, or were DMs who did so. More specifically, the module, as written, talks a great deal about various competing factions in the Temple, but it doesn't go into much on how to involve that competition. The DMs in question built on that concept to include lots of specifics, events, and plot points that weren't in the adventure as written.

And that, of course, is just fine. It's what good DMs do. But it got me thinking about something.

RPGs are the only hobby--or at least the only one I can think of--where a hobbyist's level of enjoyment, or his feelings on whether a particular

product is good or bad can be entirely dependent on the skill or opinions of another hobbyist, rather than the product itself.

If I read a novel, I judge for myself whether that novel is good or bad. Same for a movie, or a comic book, or a TV show. Sure, if I hear a lot of positive or negative opinions about it, it might change my perspective, but the interaction is still directly between me and the movie/book/episode/whatever. I am forming my opinions based on a direct experience.

RPGs? If I'm a player as opposed to a DM--and let's keep in mind that a majority of gamers are, indeed, players and not DMs--then that's no longer true. I'm no longer experiencing most of the game directly, but through a filter. A filter with its own opinions, its own preferences, and--perhaps most importantly--its own skill level (or lack thereof).

Let's go back to *Temple of Elemental Evil* as an example. Lots of the people I referred to above--the ones whose DMs expanded heavily on the factions, the ones who had a great gaming experience--really, really loved the module. But that doesn't necessarily mean it was a good module; it means they had a good DM. To be a good adventure, to really do its job, a module has to be good when played directly as written. Otherwise, it's failed in its primary objective. A module cannot assume a skilled DM to succeed.

(Personally, I fall into the group of people who feels ToEE wasn't all that great--but whether it "really" was or wasn't isn't the point of this column. I'm just using it as a convenient example.)

The same, of course, is true in reverse. A lousy DM can turn even the best adventure ever written into a mind-numbing bore-fest or a power-tripping railroad. That doesn't make the published adventure bad--but my point is, the players will never know that the published adventure wasn't bad. Unless they choose to purchase it and read it themselves, the only experience they will ever have of that adventure is the one that is filtered, colored, and changed--for good or ill--by the DM. Somebody who has played through a module that they've never read cannot honestly say whether it's a good product or a bad one; they can only say whether their DM was able to use it create a good or bad experience.

"A lousy DM can turn even the best adventure ever written into a mind-numbing bore-fest or a powertripping railroad."

This is not a side-effect. This is a core, fundamental aspect of the very nature of most RPGs: the DM is the "GUI" between the players and the game/world/adventure. And this is, in the hypothetical, a good thing. It allows for all sorts of creative

collaboration, tailor-made stories, and more or less complete freedom of choice that no other form of entertainment can provide.

But it also means that a majority of the gamers out there are judging products--be they individual adventures or entire game-systems--that they have never directly experienced. It would be like judging, for example, *The Hobbit* based not on my own reading, but by listening to someone read it to me--and who was changing the story to suit his tastes as he went along. Sure, I might like it better that way, or I might not. But in either case, my experience would not be with *The Hobbit*. It'd be with this individual's interpretation of *The Hobbit* and his skill as a storyteller/voice-actor.

Think about that. Think about all the differences of taste and opinion you have with even your close friends, let alone people with whom you share nothing in common but a few genre interests. Think about the wide differences in the skill levels of the various DMs you've ever gamed with, or heard about.

Then consider the fact that the bulk of the RPG market relies on you enjoying most of its products, not on their own, but filtered through that maze of potential conflicting opinions and skill levels.

How many people have quit role-playing because of one bad experience with a truly horrendous DM? There's no way of knowing, but I'm guessing it's high. It's certainly a much higher

percentage of the potential audience than have ever been lost to other hobbies, because other hobbies don't have that "one bad fan can spoil the experience of five potential fans" factor. (Sure, jerks can turn people off of trying a movie or a book or whatever--but it's not the same thing as those jerks actually changing someone's experience of said book.)

Then again, how many products have gotten a free pass by portions of the audience because they happened to be run by a truly skilled DM who was able to make up for the adventure's shortcomings? This, obviously, doesn't have the same detrimental impact on the hobby as driving people away--but it's still emblematic of the fact that the players' experience, and therefore their judgment, is not based on the books as written.

Obviously, this is most notable when it comes to adventures, which are entirely DM-side products. But it holds true, to an extent, to all RPG products. The DM is also the player's filter to, say, the campaign settings. More to the point, the DM defines the player's overall experience. Even if I'm interacting directly with the *Player's Handbook* by reading it myself, my experience of the game--of the hobby--is still coming to me through someone else, rather than directly.

To put it plainly, a large portion of the RPG population is, in fact, a secondary audience. Oh, they're buying some of the books so they can participate, but in an experiential

sense, they aren't an audience or customers of the RPG companies; they're an audience/customer of the DM, who is in turn the audience/customer of the RPG companies. (And no, I don't mean that they're paying the DM money--at least, I assume most of you aren't, and if you are, please come join my group--I just mean this in terms of who is providing, and defining their experience.)

What conclusions can we draw from all this? Uh, honestly, I'm not sure. (As I said, this is just something I've been pondering.) It's just a quirk of our hobby, not a "problem" to be solved--but it is something that's worth considering. It means that a vast majority of gamers actually aren't in a position to judge the quality--good or bad--of a great many of the products that are available. And it means that DM skill factors far more heavily into the survival of the hobby than almost anything else.

Again, I have no conclusions. I just find it fascinating to contemplate the possible repercussions of the fact that the hobby is so utterly reliant on a relative minority of its participants; that lots of people make the (perhaps understandable) mistake of either blaming or crediting a product for a quality that they don't actually know it possesses; and that so many of its hobbyists actually never experience--not in any direct way--the bulk of the products that the hobby companies produce.

So what do you think? Are there any

other hobbies that have this "dual-layer" interaction? Any other market that doesn't directly experience the products the hobby companies create, or where a hobbyist's experience is so heavily dependent on another hobbyist, rather than the product itself? And for that matter, do you feel that it makes any fundamental difference? Are the repercussions I've touched on even meaningful beyond Internet discussion of whether X is a good or bad adventure? Or does none of this matter except in the minds of people (like myself, obviously) who are prone to overthinking the industry?

(And only after I've finished writing this does it occur to me that, today being HP Lovecraft's 120th birthday, I probably should have written something about the influence of his writing on gaming, and its appearance even in games that might not seem, on the surface, particularly Lovecraftian. Ah, well. Maybe I'll do that next month, if Erik hasn't beaten me to it by then.)

Ari Marmell is a novelist and freelance RPG writer who would be even more productive if he could stop writing multi-hundred-word replies to threads on EN World. A gamer since 1983 (the Red Box, of course), he studied creative writing at the University of Houston and began writing professionally in early 2001. He's written RPG materials for numerous companies, including Paizo, Green Ronin, Necromancer, EN Publishing, White Wolf, and Wizards

of the Coast. His fiction credits include, among others, Agents of Artifice for the Magic: The Gathering line, and The Conqueror's Shadow (forthcoming from Spectra).

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Review: Dark Sun Campaign Setting



There is nothing quite so inevitable as change! When the original *Dark Sun* was released back in 1991, I recall that I was not terribly interested in a new campaign setting. My players and I were still trying to get a handle on how 2nd Edition was going to mess with our AD&D *Greyhawk* game, and I was thoroughly absorbed with trying to implement stuff from that new cool *City of Greyhawk* boxed set into my already ongoing campaign. Some of the other guys in our college gaming club had picked up this strange new desert world setting called *Dark Sun*, and were bragging about how powerful their new characters were,

and how they used psionics (oooooh!) instead of magic.

I pretty much rolled my eyes at the whole mess once I heard the p-word mentioned. After all, psionically active characters and wild talents had screwed up more than a few of my AD&D campaigns, and the thought of an entire world full of psionic blasts and id insinuations sounded like over-powered munchkin play at its finest. So, no thank you, I'll stick with my tried and true *World of Greyhawk*, where Iuz the Old and Mordenkainen's Circle of Eight were gearing up for a big brawl!

But times have changed, and nowadays, given our own ecological crises on good old planet Earth, there is something perversely appealing about a fantasy campaign world which is set on a dangerous post-apocalyptic planet. Rising social awareness for the dangers of pollution and deforestation, of green house gases, and toxic oil spills (Thanks BP!) have even lead Hollywood to produce films reflecting the current mind-set. Movies like *Pandorum*, *The Book of Eli*, and *Avatar* reflect concerns about our own abilities to cause catastrophic damage to planet Earth – or even other worlds as well. Even Pixar's family movie, *WALL-E*, carries a serious warning about the fate of those who show poor planetary stewardship.

And so now we have Wizards of the Coast's new and revised *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* for *Dungeons & Dragons* 4th Edition. But just how good is this newly revised setting

which revisits Troy Dennings' original violent and savage world of Athas?

Dark Sun Campaign Setting

Authors: Richard Baker, Robert J. Schwalb, Rodney Thompson

Cover Illustrator: Wayne Reynolds (front), William O'Connor (back)

Publisher: Wizards of the Coast

Year: 2010

Media: Hardbound (224 pages)

Retail Cost: \$39.95 (\$26.37 from Amazon)

Dark Sun Campaign Setting is role-playing game supplement detailing information for both playing and DMing a *Dark Sun* campaign on the world of Athas. The book is divided into six broad chapters covering everything from Character creation and equipment to geography and adventure design. There is also a two-sided poster-sized map in the back of the book, depicting the world of Athas on one side and the city of Tyr on the reverse.

The Production Quality of the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* is exceptional. It is superbly written and really a pleasure to read, with material presented in a logical fashion for both Players and Dungeon Masters. And there are numerous sidebars containing useful information, such as the pronunciation of the word "mul" or the dreadful secret of the Sorcerer-King Dregoth, which contain both flavor and useful information for the reader. However, there are a couple

sections where the lines become blurred between Player and DM information (see Chapter 5), which might be cause for some concern if you are DMing and want to play down Character knowledge.

The artwork is quite beautiful, with many new pieces done by artists daring to tread gently in the footsteps of the legendary Brom. Also included in the book is a poster sized map of Athas and the City of Tyr, which are fantastically rendered, particularly the city map, which shows the wide variety of structures and homes in "The Free City".

As mentioned, the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* is divided into six Chapters, with the first four dealing with Character creation and outfitting, and comprises a bit more than half of the book. The remainder of the book is broken into two chapters, the largest of which details the geographical areas of Athas and its city-states, while the smaller final chapter discusses Dungeon Mastering a *Dark Sun* campaign, and includes a short adventure.

This new setup, offering both the Player and Dungeon Master content in the same book is quite a change from how the *Forgotten Realms* and *Eberron* Campaign Settings were released, where the Player and Dungeon Master information was divided into two separate books. From my own experiences of running two *Realms* campaigns, I often find tidbits of information in the *Player's Guide* that I wished would have been in the

Campaign Guide, necessitating that I had to purchase both books. However, while more costly, splitting information into two books meant considerably greater page count about the setting – over 450 pages in fact. So despite some overlap and cost, having two books offered more overall content than a single supplement would provide.



The First Chapter of the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, entitled “The World of Athas”, is a short and concise description of general facts about the setting, including history, cosmology, and social structure. The information is broad enough so as not to give too many secrets away to Players, and gives a decent primer as to several facets of the campaign setting. Admittedly, some of the information in the “Cosmology” of Athas seemed more appropriate to Dungeon Masters, but not overly so, and Players should be able to decide how much knowledge of the planes their Character might know without feeling too overburdened. Examples of the information provided in this chapter

were previewed on the Wizards of the Coasts official site.

The Second Chapter details the *Races of the Dark Sun Campaign Setting* and introduces two new playable races: the hulking half-dwarf Mul and the insectoid Thri-kreen. Each new race is given the same treatment as other races in the various Player’s Handbooks, including sample names and racial backgrounds to help more fully form a Character.

Nine other races, previously developed in various sourcebooks, have been re-envisioned for the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, and are very different than how they would normally appear in high fantasy worlds like the *Forgotten Realms* or the Core D&D (Nentir Vale) setting. For instance, Dragonborn on Athas are duplicitous sorcerers and slave-traders, while Goliaths fill the role of the brutal thugs called Half-Giants. In fact, an excerpt of the Half-Giant from this chapter was offered in this preview from the official WotC site. Each race’s new dispositions are discussed in detail, as well as how they fit into the social structure of the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*. New Background options of an Athasian nature have been provided for each race, to assist in Character creation and development.

Chapter Three of the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* explains all about the new game mechanic, Character Themes. There are ten themes in all, and each theme starts by offering a single encounter attack power which is

added to the Characters normal compliment of 1st Level powers.

[Author's Note: As Rich Baker pointed out during the Dark Sun is Here Seminar at GenCon a few weeks ago, adding a theme basically gives a first level Athasian Character the same number of attack powers as a third level Character would normally have. Incidentally, D&D gamers who played the original Dark Sun Setting will recall that 3rd Level was the recommended starting level for a campaign on Athas!]

Subsequently, a theme provides a set of Heroic Tier encounter powers, utilities, and daily powers which can be substituted for standard Character Class powers. The amount of substitution is entirely up to the Player, allowing for greater variety of builds. And most of a theme's powers have scaled-up versions written into the effect text (at initial level +10 and +20), allowing these powers to be swapped with appropriate level Paragon and Epic Tier powers as well.

By the way, an example of one of the themes, the Athasian Minstrel, was previewed on the WotC official site in July and can be viewed [here](#). The other themes include: Dune Trader, Elemental Priest, Gladiator, Noble Adept, Primal Guardian, Templar, Veiled Alliance, Wasteland Nomad, and Wilder. In addition, each Theme is accompanied by two Paragon Paths, most of which requires a particular theme in order to qualify for the

abilities.

What I find most innovative about the design of the Theme Mechanic is how they can be applied to almost any Character Class. For instance, the Templar theme is used to represent a Character which is one of the official servants of a Sorcerer-King. But it could be applied to a Fighter to represent an elite guard, a Rogue to represent a spy or secret policeman, or a Warlord who would be a commander or administrator. In order to provide maximum adaptability, theme powers are written using the term "Primary ability" to determine the Hit and Effect modifiers, which means that even a Wizard could wield a weapon like a Gladiator, or a Warlock unleash a few psionic powers as a Wilder, without needing to have high off-stats.



I personally feel that Character Themes is one of the most brilliant new Character mechanics which has been created for D&D 4E. At the moment, however, the only traditional 4E Characters which can have themes are for *Dark Sun* Characters. Hopefully, we can expect to see themes released in *Dragon Magazine* for non-*Dark Sun* PCs as we get closer

to the release date of *Player's Handbook: Champions of the Heroic Tier*, scheduled for late 2011. It should be noted that a new *Dark Sun* Theme, Escaped Slave, has already appeared in *Dragon* #390 last week, so who knows what else might be in store for Character Themes in the coming months.

A wide variety of Character Options are discussed in Chapter Four of the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, including some psionic Wild Talents, as well as powers for new builds of the Battlemind (Wild Battlemind), Fighter (Arena Fighter), Shaman (Animist Shaman), and Warlock (Sorcerer-King Pact). The Wild Talents are minor psionic powers (i.e. cantrips), which any Character can take at the Dungeon Master's discretion. These are non-attack powers, like the ability to move small objects (Telekinetic Grip) or to create a tool-shaped force to perform a skill (Mental Tools), and represent the wide-spread psionic endowment in the native Athasian population. The new builds provide a new set of powers and class features which is more in tune with the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, and WotC published an example of this, the Sorcerer-King Pact for Warlocks on the official site a few weeks ago.

And assuming that a Player-Character manages to somehow survive the brutality and savagery of the harsh world of Athas, there are five new Epic Destinies for use with the *Dark Sun*. These new Epic Destinies seem very appropriate to the

setting, and most possess frightening abilities, such as the Dragon King and Hordemaster.

Chapter Four also has an extensive list new Feats to match up with the new Themes, and also has another selection of Feats to more fully develop the new Builds introduced in this chapter as well. There are also many new General Feats which apply to the new Races, and Weapon Expertise Feats for the new Athasian weapons. There are about a dozen new weapons native to Athas, as well as all manner of other equipment for the setting, such as armor, magic items, adventuring gear, rituals, and bizarre new mounts. Thankfully, the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* does provide a nifty illustration of these new weapons and armor, so Players can now envision what a chatkcha and alhulak look like. But on the other hand, I was disappointed that we were not provided with illustrations of the new riding beasts, such as the crodlu, erdlu, and kank. So beyond a brief description and a stat block, I really am not sure if I would want my Athasian Character sitting on a crodlu or not.

There are also some very important sidebars presented in the Character Options chapter which are worth a note. There is a full page description on Arcane Magic and the difference between Defiling and Preserving, which are key elements to the story of the world of Athas, and important for Characters to understand. There are also Optional Rules which discuss

wearing metal armor (and overheating) in the desert sun - in the profoundly rare circumstance one would find a suit of intact metal armor – as well as rules for weapon breakage, since many weapons are made from stone, obsidian, and chitin. As many of the new Athasian weapons are double weapons, special notes are provided for handling these attacks and how the weapons are utilized.

Chapter Five of *the Dark Sun Campaign Setting* offers detailed information about the geography and society of the world. Entitled the Atlas of Athas, it offers detailed information about the various city-states, such as Draji (City of Moons), as well as descriptions of large regions like the Southern Wastes. The official Wizards of the Coast site provided excerpts from this chapter, highlighting the city of Tyr and the region called the Sea of Silt. In addition to descriptions of the regions, additional Backgrounds were provided, to help further the development of a Character who may have come from the particular area.

Personally, I found this chapter of the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* to be an absolutely fascinating read, learning a great deal about what makes this campaign setting so unique from the other high fantasy settings offered by WotC. The descriptions of the various cities and regions were evocative and, in many cases, both stunning and a little frightening, although I have no idea how much this new Atlas of Athas bears a resemblance to the original geography presented by Troy

Denning. However, I did have a big problem with this chapter, in how there was no clear demarcation between Player content and Dungeon Master content. For instance, the local Character Backgrounds were tossed in with descriptions of the geography and the social structure. As a Dungeon Master, some of the information in those geographical descriptions I would want to reveal to my Player-Characters in-game as a surprise or as an adventure hook. There is simply some facts in the Atlas of Athas I would not want my Players to read before I began to DM for them, and there is no spoiler warning to avert a reader from learning too much about the setting.

The final chapter, Chapter Six, of the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* is called "Running a *Dark Sun* Game", and it seems pretty clear that this section is meant for Dungeon Master eyes only. In this last section, the elements of Adventure Creation and how to build various Athasian Encounters (Arena, Wilderness, and Skill) are discussed, as well as how to impose the harshness of the native environment upon the Characters. Athas is a harsh and desolate world, and the "points of light" are clearly spread much farther apart. Further, the environments in the lands between the "points" are considerably more brutal than other typical fantasy worlds, and so special rules governing sun sickness, night travel, and a new gear mechanic called survival days are provided for DMs. There is a disappointingly short

sidebar describing what is called the Secret History of Athas, and I have a feeling that more detailed information regarding the horrible events which nearly destroyed the world will be forthcoming in a product release in the future.

However, the discussion on Treasure and Rewards offers Dungeon Masters new rules for creating fixed enhancement bonuses for items as an alternative to having to hand out magic items in a world where magic is both scarce and harmful to the environment. These bonuses also explain why it is so hard to cleave that Barbarian Gladiator in her chitin bikini, by giving increased defensive bonuses with advancing levels without having to hand out ensorcelled D-cups. The section on Alternative Rewards was discussed, in part, on the WotC site here, and include a variety of interesting new boons, favors, and re-skinned potions to better match the magic poor campaign setting of *Dark Sun*.

Finally, Chapter Six offers a three-encounter 1st Level Adventure, complete with maps, monsters, and treasure, to help introduce *Dark Sun* to a new audience of Players. The adventure is nicely written, with interesting encounters, and the maps utilize various dungeon tiles, including the new tiles from the *Dark Sun* Tileset. However, there are no pictures of any *Dark Sun* critters, and only a stat block and a vague description are offered to suggest how horrible the Athasian monsters are. I assume that

illustrations of the monsters in this starter adventure, as well as for the mounts of Athas will be found in the Creature Catalog, but I think it would have been awfully nice to print them here. While I appreciate Wizards of the Coast hoping to sell the *Dark Sun Creature Catalog* along with the main campaign book, would it have really destroyed the sales of that monster manual to include a couple monster pictures, not to mention images of the crodlu, erdlu, or kank from the previous section?

Overall Grade: B+

I definitely can say that having read the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, I have become a real fan, and look forward to finding a group of Players willing to face the challenges and terrors that is the world of Athas. The sourcebook contains solid writing, and is a pleasure to read (and even re-read in many parts). And the new game mechanic introduced, Themes, is strikingly innovative and offers a whole new set of Character building options to D&D 4E. Add to that some amazing art and a great map, and you have a book with a lot going for it.

But as much as I like the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, I cannot say that I love the sourcebook, because I cannot get over the way the book was executed. Two years ago, the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Guide* was released, with nearly 300 pages of content, for the same prices as the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*. A

Player's Guide for Forgotten Realms was also released that month for just ten bucks less than the DM version, and contained another 160 pages of Realms lore, Character races and classes, and setting information geared specifically for Players to read. Flash-forward to 2010, and now we are being offered a campaign setting combining Player information and Dungeon Master information mixed together and packaged in a measly 224 pages of content. I just cannot get over the "page shrinkage" factor we are seeing in recent sourcebooks, and it feels like there could have been so much more Athas released if WotC had adopted the previous methods of having a Campaign (DM) book PLUS a Player book. Faced with the mixing of content information in Chapter 5, coupled with the lack of key illustrations (like that of Athasian monsters or mounts), and the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* just feels a tad incomplete. It is a solid campaign setting, with a whole lot to offer, but I will always wonder how much content was edited out to make it fit in the smaller package.

Presentation: A-

- Design: A-
- Illustrations: B+

Content: A-

- Crunch: A+
- Fluff: B+

Value: B-

of Dungeon Masters, and dwells in a hidden realm with his two evil cat-familiars, deep within the Vale of Wolverines, called by some "Michigan". He has been esoterically conjuring D&D Campaigns for nearly a Third of a Century, and has been known to cast ritual blogs concerning Dungeons & Dragons every few days with some regularity.

Michael is an Adept of a Secret Order

Carrying Capacity

Erik Mona

Somewhere between Book Expo America in New York City, a trip to Washington D.C., publishing two hardcover Pathfinder books (and lots of other stuff), and crashing the front of my Mitsubishi Eclipse on the way to work, I managed to fit moving my apartment across town into last month's agenda. As you might imagine, that has not left a tremendous amount of time for actual gaming, but getting up close and personal with my entire multi-shelf RPG collection has solidified a few things for me on the gaming front.

A couple of weeks ago, caught in the whirlwind of packing up my two-bedroom apartment over the course of about three days, I made a happy little post to my Facebook exclaiming how proud I was to have finished packing without getting rid of a single RPG book. Today, as I survey the piles and piles of still-sealed book boxes littering the floor of the second bedroom of my new place and as I continue to weep over the bill I had to pay professional movers, I'm in a decidedly less sunny mood about the lifetime of accumulated gaming detritus that hangs like a first-edition lodestone around my aging, over-weary neck.

I've got several huge boxes filled with D&D Third Edition hardcovers that I barely even used the first time,

and will almost certainly never use again now that I've switched wholeheartedly to *Pathfinder*. I have more than a complete set of those brown "Complete" books from second edition. Do I really need three copies of "*The Complete Thief*"? Do I even need ONE? Somehow I managed to pick these up when friends left them at my house. Scratch that. Not MY house, my parents' house, back in Minnesota, in the early 1990s. Some of those books have traveled from Minnesota to college in Boston back to Minnesota to another apartment in Minneapolis to Renton, Washington to Seattle and to Seattle again. That's SIX moves for *The Complete Thief*. I just hopped over the eBay and note that two of those puppies are currently available for the princely sum of \$.99 apiece, with no bids in either case. I think all those moves have cost me considerably more than ninety-nine cents (plus shipping). Complete Thief indeed!

"Do I really need three copies of 'The Complete Thief'? Do I even need ONE?"

But back in the day I used the HELL out of that book, so even if I were to light it on fire tomorrow I don't feel like it's been too big a burden.

Which brings us to *Birthright*.

Somehow along the way I managed to collect a more or less complete set of TSR's *Birthright* setting. Hey, it was the 90s, and the *Forgotten Realms*

wasn't exactly at the height of its creative power. *Greyhawk* was taking one of its every-decade dirt-naps, and I was hungry for some humanocentric sword and sorcery. As TSR editor Doug Stewart once said to me at Twin Con after I talked his ear off about how badly the company had mismanaged the *Greyhawk* brand, "just get *Birthright*. It's basically the new *Greyhawk*."

It wasn't.

I read the boxed set and a few selected supplements, but most of my stuff is still in its original shrinkwrap or otherwise in cherry mint condition. It wasn't a bad setting, per se, just an overproduced once with an unwanted (by me) political element and not enough focus on adventures, which have always been my favorite type of RPG products. But none of that mattered much. I picked up pretty much everything for *Birthright* in discount bins at Gen Con, as RPGA tournament prizes, and even off "the free shelf" at Wizards of the Coast when I was editing *Polyhedron*. I had absolutely NO use for any of the stuff, but the completist impulse is one I find almost impossible to resist, and you never know when some of that stuff might come in handy.

Except now, 10–15 years later, I'm fairly certain I'm never going to run a *Birthright* campaign. Should I develop an unlikely interest in the setting late in life, I'm reasonably certain that picking up key volumes via online auctions (or hell, just borrowing them from one of my similarly afflicted

colleagues) will be cheaper than lugging my "*Birthright* shelf" from state to state as I make my merry way across this wonderful country of ours.

So *Birthright* is not long for this world.

Likewise destined for eBay are my early *Vampire: The Masquerade* books, my first edition *Shadowrun* stuff, one-off RPGs like *Renegade Legionnaire* and *Dark Conspiracy*, and a whole host of other stuff I always meant to get around to playing, and now am fairly certain I never will.

Somewhat more tricky are sentimental favorites like some of my early *Dragonlance* and *Spelljammer* stuff. I ran a huge multi-year campaign using material from both settings when I was in high school, so the shelf they until recently shared in my library produced a lot of warm fuzzy feelings, even if nothing on it had been used since Bill Clinton's first term. There's almost no chance that I'll get rid of my old *Heroes of the Lance* boxed set, stuffed as it is with ragged green second edition character sheets, but why should I let my fondness for that product bleed over onto the terrible trilogy of adventures that supported the *Time of the Lance Taladas* boxed set? How about that one softcover adventure with rules for zero-level characters (that I never used), or the *Otherlands* product that I never even busted out of shrink? My sickness is such that I probably will wait until the next Great Purge before forcing myself to get rid of any of that stuff, but ought this "love by

association” illness carry over to stuff like *Spelljammer’s Astromundi Cluster*?

I once took the characters in that campaign on a fun jaunt into the mist-shrouded lands of *Ravenloft*, but must our ultimately aborted dalliance with the original boxed set and the *Feast of Goblyns* module forever protect the likes of *Adam’s Wrath* or *Van Richten’s Guide to the Created*?

I’m in no danger of divesting completely. Even were I to initiate the most aggressive culling I could possibly imagine, I’m still going to be left with more than a full IKEA shelf full of gaming books I will never use. There’s no way I’ll get rid of even a single AD&D module, for example, and I’ll probably be buried with my 1983 *World of Greyhawk* boxed set. Even as I contemplate getting rid of all this D&D stuff my *Pathfinder* shelf is growing heavier and heavier, and I don’t plan to stop buying RPGs any time soon.

The move has also unearthed my (out of control) metal miniatures collection, and even though I often talk about getting rid of some of that stuff, it’s going to take some kind of major catastrophe (like, say, a fire) for me to act on that impulse. I just love the things far too much to seriously consider getting rid of them.

But I am forced to admit that I have a hoarding problem when it comes to game stuff, and it’s a problem I need to start addressing. Just a moment ago I received an email from my *Pathfinder* GM, who is running a

game this Thursday. Starved of gaming for more than a month, I’m more excited than ever to play. My enthusiasm for RPGs and gaming has not taken a hit in the slightest, but I confess my enthusiasm for collecting—or at least carting my collection from place to place—has never been in greater danger.

“My name is Erik Mona, and I am an RPG hoarder.”

Still, putting stuff up on eBay is a lot of work, and the temptation to box this stuff up and put it in my new apartment’s storage unit (instead of the trash, or Half-Price Books, or whatever) is enormous. Unfortunately, that storage unit is ALREADY filled with extraneous gaming material, so there’s no room at the inn.

Some of this stuff has got to go.

My name is Erik Mona, and I am an RPG hoarder. I admit that I have a problem. I know that I alone have the power to make a change, and to finally get rid of some of this junk I will never read and never use.

Only I can’t bring myself to actually do it.

At least not yet.

But soon, very soon, I will get started thinning things down.

Maybe.

Erik Mona is the publisher of Paizo Publishing, LLC, creators of the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game and the Planet Stories line of pulp fantasy

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novels. Mona has won more than a dozen major game industry awards and his writing has been published by Paizo, Wizards of the Coast, Green Ronin Publishing, and The MIT Press. An avid collector of pulp magazines and old science fiction paperbacks, Mona spends most of his scant free time reading old fiction and posting about it online.



E N N i e W i n n e r s 2 0 1 0

Congratulations to the 2010 winners of the Gen Con EN World RPG Awards, presented live at Gen Con this year!

Best Cover Art

Silver: Eclipse Phase

Gold: Pathfinder Bestiary

Best Interior Art

Silver: Shadowrun 20th

Gold: Pathfinder Core Rulebook

Best Cartography

Silver: Aces & Eights: Judas Crossing

Gold: Pathfinder City Map Folio

Best Writing

Silver: Victoriana

Gold: Eclipse Phase

Best Production Values

Silver: Shadowrun

Gold: Pathfinder

Best Rules

Silver: Hero 6th Edition

Gold: Diaspora

Best Adventure

Silver: Trail of Cthulhu: Armitage Files

Gold: Pathfinder #31: Stolen Land



Best Monster or Adversary

Silver: Pathfinder: Classic Horrors Revisited

Gold: Pathfinder Bestiary

Best Setting

Silver: Rome: Life and Death of the Republic

Gold: Day After Ragnarok

Best Supplement

Silver: Players Handbook 3

Gold: Mysteries of the Hollow Earth

Best Aid or Accessory

Silver: Gaming Paper

Gold: Pathfinder GM Screen

Best Miniatures Product

Silver: Gaming Paper

Gold: D&D Minis

Best Regalia

Silver: Battletech

Gold: Cthulhu 101

Best Electronic Book

Silver: The Devil We Know

Gold: The Great City Player's Guide

Best Free Product

Silver: Lady Blackbird

*Gold: Advanced Players Guide
Playtest*

Best Website

Silver: d20PFSRD.com

Gold: Obsidian Portal

Best Podcast

Silver: All Games Considered

Gold: Atomic Array

Best Blog

Silver: Gnome Stew

Gold: Kobold Quarterly

Best Game

Silver: Shadowrun

Gold: Pathfinder

Product of the Year

Silver: Eclipse Phase

Gold: Pathfinder

Fan Award for Best Publisher

Silver: Fantasy Flight Games

Gold: Paizo Publishing

Congratulations also go to our elected judges for 2011!

Tracey Michienzi

Mark Green

James Surano

C.W. Richeson

Wil Upchurch

What are the ENnies?

The Gen Con EN World RPG Awards (the “ENnies”) are an annual fan-based celebration of excellence in tabletop roleplaying gaming. The ENnies give game designers, writers and artists the recognition they deserve. It is a peoples’ choice award, and the final winners are voted upon online by the gaming public.

The ENnies were created in 2001 as an annual award ceremony, hosted by the leading D&D/d20 system fan site, EN World in partnership with Eric Noah’s Unofficial D&D 3rd Edition News. Since they were originally conceived the ENnies have expanded from an Internet-based awards selection to an annual award ceremony at Gen Con Indy. The ENnies have also branched out from their roots as an award ceremony focused upon d20 system publishers and products to celebrate the achievements of all tabletop RPGs and the publishers and products that support them.

With award categories recognizing the components that make a game great to the types of products fans have come to love, categories for fan-based websites and much more, the ENnies are the best way for fans to acknowledge outstanding effort from and to say “thank you” to the publishers, designers and artists who make this hobby great.

COMING SOON

Check out the exciting new products coming to a game store near you!

D&D Gamma World Roleplaying Game

A D&D Roleplaying Game

A wacky, wily roleplaying game of post apocalyptic peril.

October 19, 2010.



Dungeon Tiles Master Set: The City

An Essential D&D Game Accessory

Illustrated urban terrain tiles for use with the Dungeons & Dragons Fantasy Roleplaying Game.

October 19, 2010.



Dungeon Master's Kit

An Essential D&D Game Supplement

Awesome tools, rules, and adventure content for every Dungeon Master.

October 19, 2010.



D&D Gamma World Expansion Kit: Famine in Far-go

A D&D Gamma World Roleplaying Game Expansion

A new adventure and more monstrous mutants for your D&D Gamma World game!

November 16, 2010.



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Monster Vault

An Essential D&D Game Supplement
Iconic Dungeons & Dragons monsters that are easy to run and fun to fight.
November 16, 2010.



Player Essentials: Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms

An Essential D&D Game Supplement
Exciting new builds and character options for the druid, paladin, ranger, and warlock classes.
November 16, 2010.



Dungeon Tiles Master Set: The Wilderness

An Essential D&D Game Accessory
Illustrated urban terrain tiles for use with the Dungeons & Dragons Fantasy Roleplaying Game
December 21, 2010.



Mobile Applications for your RPG

This month we'll take a look at D&D 4E specific iPhone applications for your gaming needs. Keep your eyes peeled for iPad, Android, and Blackberry installments in future issues, along with apps for other game systems!

This is a collection of applications from various developers which are directly useful to a role-player. Some enable you to reference rules or materials, others roll dice, track initiative, generate random names, and more.

This list is divided into *Applications* (download from iTunes/app store), *Dice Rollers* (also downloaded from the app store), and *Web Applications* (which are simply interactive web pages formatted for use with the iPhone and iPod).



CHARACTER STATUS

This program is meant as an addition to the character sheet at the gaming table of D&D 4e. Its possible to manage HP, damage, action points, milestones, healing surges, xp, conditions and foremost usage and availability of powers. Characters can be entered manually but can also be loaded from Character Builder files. \$0.99.

INITIATIVE TRACKER

This program is meant to organize an initiative order for a pen & paper roleplaying game. The program was written with Dungeons & Dragons 4e in mind but can be used for any roleplaying game where the initiative is based on descending numbers. It's possible to add new combatants, remove combatants and -if wanted- keep track of the number of elapsed rounds since combat began. \$0.99.

DM's TRACKER

An initiative tracker. Focused on 4E. Tracks Name, Hit Points, Move, Initiative, Perception, Insight, Armor Class, Reflexes, Fortitude, Will, Notes, and Effects. \$2.99.

i4E

A character sheet replacement application. Tracks your character's ability scores, hit points, powers, skills, feats, weapons, armor, action points, milestones and magic item use. \$4.99.

CHARACTER4GE REDUX

Character4ge ("character forge") Redux allows you to store your D&D 4E characters on your iPhone or iPod touch and keeps track of your characters' ability scores, defenses, skills, feats, powers, rituals, and equipment. \$4.99. The original Character4ge is also still available for \$0.99.

DM TOOLS

Encounter tracker showing monster defenses, bloodied/dead monsters and drag re-ordering of initiative order. Simple to apply damage to multiple monsters for burst/blast attacks and allows you to add notes and other effects for various monsters. Import/Export data as xml data. Also allows the DM to prepare and keep track of adventure notes. \$0.99.

DRUMS OF WAR

4E "pocket assistant" for DMs and players. For a player, it provides you with a way of tracking your characters in an out of combat. Key stats, including powers, are stored in the Character Vault. The combat pane lets you keep track of conditions and modifiers. For a GM, it allows you to prepare encounters before you get to the game table, so you can spend more time rolling dice and less time flipping through books. \$1.99.

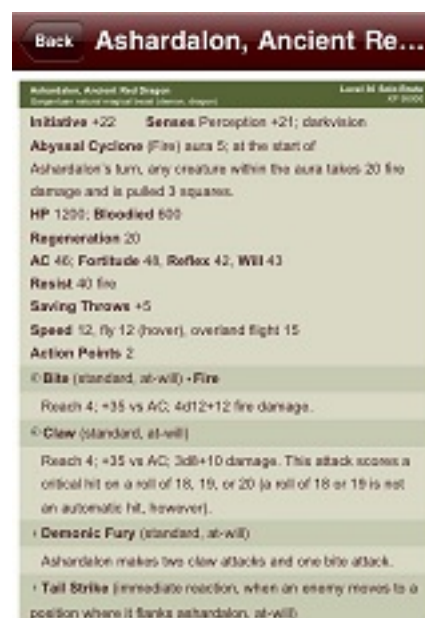
TABLETOP INITIATIVE TRACKER

Another initiative tracker - HP, statuses etc. You can color-code

similar monsters; statuses are a few toggled icons - you decide what they mean. Free.

DM TOOLKIT

Various tools, including dice, initiative tracker, data for traps, treasure etc. Comes loaded with D&D 4E templates, but you can download addons for various other systems (3.5, HARP, Nobilis, Runequest, MEGS, M&M, Savage Worlds and "many more"). \$12.99.



Review: Magical Memories from Beyond: Forgotten Rituals



Rituals tends to polarize 4E gamers into two camps: Players love them or they hate them. I know of some campaigns out there which do not bother to use rituals at all. But I think Rituals were an elegant solution to keep a lot of the great utility spells in 4E.

And while there are plenty of Rituals released from “official” sources, there is always room for more. And Taurus XII has introduced a new supplement of rituals called *Magical Memories From Beyond: Forgotten Rituals* – or *Forgotten Rituals*, for short.

Magical Memories From Beyond: Forgotten Rituals

Designer: Jarrod Camiré

Cover Illustrator: Pinfoldphotos

Publisher: Taurus XII

Year: 2010

Media: PDF (31 pages)

Cost: \$2.95

Magical Memories From Beyond: Forgotten Rituals is a D&D 4E supplement containing nine new Rituals usable in almost any campaign setting. The rituals range in power from Level 1 to Level 25, although the majority of the rituals in this book are designed for the Heroic Tier. There are a total of three Creation Rituals, five Exploration Rituals, and one Divination Ritual, so there is considerable variety among the ritual types.

The production quality of *Forgotten Rituals* is a mixed bag. It has some solid writing and illustrations, but because this ebook has quite a few other issues, it makes it hard to rate the quality higher than fair. The ebook is displayed with a rather striking “negative” print (white letters on black background), but this effect also makes *Forgotten Rituals* nearly impossible to print without obliterating a black ink cartridge, and the publisher does not offer a “printer-friendly” version with the purchase. *Forgotten Rituals* also does not include bookmarks, which is troublesome for a book this size, but does have a table of content - however

this is of little help when the order of how the rituals fall in the ebook is somewhat counter-intuitive. The rituals are mainly organized by type (Creation, Exploration, Divination, etc.), and then alphabetically, with no consideration for the ritual's level in the ordering process. This means that rituals appear in a jumbled order by level, and there is no delineation page or header to tell a reader they have moved from Creation Rituals to Exploration Rituals, and overall it just tends to be quite confusing.

However, the illustrations and artwork are quite good, and are drawn from various royalty-free photographs by various photographers, as well as some public domain art pieces. The Cover Art by Pinfoldphotos is really quite stunning, and is perfectly suited for a book such as this.

The author introduces *Forgotten Rituals* with a short story, a tale of a disembodied spirit locked in a strange skull, and brimming with knowledge about lost rituals. Clearly, the Author was inspired by Pinfoldphotos' picture, and it makes a charming way to introduce the ebook:

"I am but a disembodied spirit, a collection of old memories. I was a powerful mage once, a renowned sage, but this was so long ago. Of this former body only a strange skull remains now, though a knowledgeable one; a talking repository that has changed hand so often in fact that the old thing that I am today has utterly lost count of all those who have

sought to learn from me, to know about the magic of old, about the novelties that I have created or learned firsthand, or gained later in the dens and sanctuaries of many a promising magician, and also beside some of the mightiest archimages from all around the known world and beyond!

But as charming as the reader might find the introduction, there are some fundamental problems with the rituals our spirit-skull wishes to teach. While many of the nine rituals in the book are certainly interesting and often downright inventive, there are some serious issues with their execution and balance.

Glass from the Sand is fairly self-explanatory, and allows the ritualist to create glass objects on the fly, given enough time and sand. As the cost in ritual materials is equivalent to the market value of the glass objects produced, it is one of the most balanced rituals in the book. Although I do have to question if a ritualist can make up to 4 gargantuan glass structures, would their market value really be only 500 gold pieces?

Light the Way creates small objects which can accept a Wizard's Light cantrip, and double its duration when cast on the object. Sadly, it costs 10 gold to get six 10-minute light "rocks" - or one could simply buy six 4 hour-duration sunrods for 12 gold. Clearly, this ritual is an emergency measure when you are out of lamp oil and sunrods, and only have some residuum

left to try and light your way out of a dungeon.

Marilith's Arms gives you extra arms and the chance to use several of the attack forms of this she-demon, for an hour or more (dependent upon ritual success). But at 6000 gold and 4 healing surges per casting, it seems a little pricey for what one gets out of the deal – although the results undoubtedly look really impressive!

Phantasmal Miner summons a dwarf shaped force for 75 gold worth of residuum, and upon casting it “sets to work at your command, excavating earth and rock at a wild pace.” Sadly, it digs at a rate of 10 cubic feet of dirt per hour – which is only a 2’x2’x2’ hole. This dwarven spirit must be taking a whole lot of “ale breaks” when the foreman’s back is turned.

The Spirit of the Letter creates a scribe to assist a ritual caster in creating books and other writings, including ones in foreign languages. It can also read to you, which makes it sort of like a medieval fantasy book on tape.

Snow Glass starts out pretty nifty, allowing a burglar to break glass silently and then transform the shards into a cloud of obscuring glass-mist which grants him concealment. But sadly, the spell does not stop there, and goes on to provide a substantial damage shield against anyone who tries to attack the thief. And further, the thief can hurl the clouds of shards as bolts, doing damage and causing combat effects such as possibly rendering foes unconscious on a hit! I

think that is a bit too much power from a mere 4th level ritual.

Time Arrow is a nifty ritual which allows a missile weapon to be fired, and then held in stasis, waiting to complete its attack when certain criteria are met. Great for creating traps around, say, a campsite, but not too practical to use as a rear-guard deterrent, since it takes an hour to cast. Timeless Reflection is really a very inventive ritual, although it will have Dungeon Masters who favor whodunits grinding their teeth in frustration. Capable of allowing a reflective surface to show what transpired in its presence, it can show a wizard, for example, the scene of the local lord being assassinated, assuming that the event transpired recently and there was enough light to reflect the scene where the crime took place. But at a cost of 25000 gold per casting, this 25th Level ritual will only be used in extreme situations – and I imagine when there is a major reward to be had.

Wild Jester is a fun ritual, summoning a harlequin automaton to do the bidding of its creator. The jester is a 6th level monster with a number of interesting and amusing abilities, including the ability to cast cantrips “taught” by its master. But it probably will not be much more than a minor distraction against a level appropriate encounter for the ritual caster that created it (Level 12).

Overall Grade: B

There are certainly a lot of interesting and creative ideas in *Forgotten Rituals*, but sadly, there are also some real problems with execution and balance. Certainly, some adventuring groups and Dungeon Masters might enjoy adding some of these rituals to their campaigns, but most will require at least some serious editing before they can be used freely. However, the ebook is modestly priced, and might be worth considering for adding some fun new rituals to a campaign - despite some unfortunate flaws.

So until next review... I wish you Happy Gaming!

Editor's Note: This Author received a complimentary copy of the product in PDF format from which the review was written.

Grade Card

Presentation: B

- Design: B-

- Illustrations: A-

Content: B

- Crunch: C+

- Fluff: A-

Value: B+

