

# Chaosium: 1975–Present

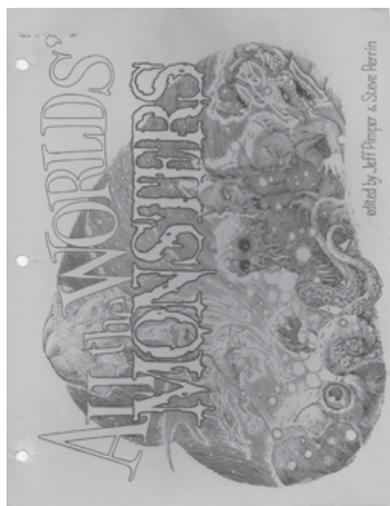
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*Chaosium is one of the oldest RPG publishers still alive, but like other old-time survivors such as Flying Buffalo and Columbia Games, today they're a small operation mainly publishing a few old-time hits.*

## Board Game Beginnings: 1975–1981

As with many early game designers, Greg Stafford — soon to be the founder of Chaosium — came into the industry through wargaming. He picked up a copy of Avalon Hill's *U-Boat* (1960) in — of all places — a hardware store, and a lifelong interest in games was born.

However, Stafford would also bring a second hobby into the young company he was creating. In 1966 — during freshman days at Beloit College in southern Wisconsin — he started writing about the fantasy world of Glorantha, beginning with the story of a Prince named Snodal. At first Stafford thought that writing could be a career in itself, but when he attempted to publish his



**1977: All the Worlds' Monsters**

Glorantha stories he found himself on the receiving end of a rude rejection letter that stated “all S&S [Sword & Sorcery] is the same hackwork.”

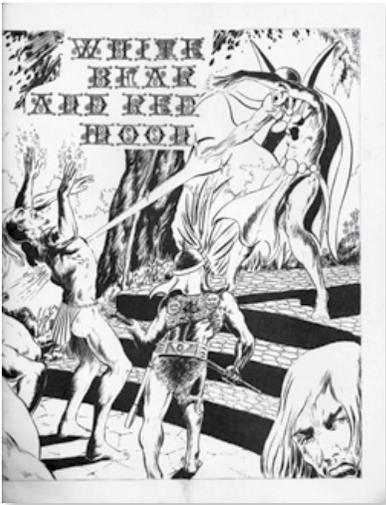
*“At first I began writing because I’d run out of material to read and I just let my imagination run for my own entertainment and a few friends that I told stories to.”*

– Greg Stafford, Interview, *White Dwarf* #17 (February/March 1980)

That’s when Stafford decided to combine his interests in fantasy writing and gaming by creating a “do-it-yourself” novel set in the world of Glorantha — which is to say a wargame full of thematic details that highlighted the magical creativity of the setting itself. He called it *White Bear and Red Moon*.

Stafford hadn’t intended to publish *White Bear and Red Moon* himself, but after he sold it to three different companies — each of which went out of business or failed to get off the ground — he finally decided that he had to do so himself, a decision guided by an auspicious reading of Tarot cards. And thus “The” Chaosium was born — the name derived partly from Stafford’s then-home, which was near the Oakland Coliseum in California. Combining “coliseum” and “chaos” resulted in the name “Chaosium.”

Stafford funded Chaosium with \$10,000 saved away from a year’s work in surgery at Providence Hospital in Oakland. Greg Stafford’s *White Bear and Red Moon* (1975)



was Chaosium’s first game. Steve Swenston and William Church — who had worked with Stafford on a fiction fanzine called *Wyrld* — provided the art while Bill Johnson offered editing. The rules were run off on a mimeograph machine in Stafford’s basement; it would be the source of many of Chaosium’s early publications.

Stafford sold the first copies of *White Bear and Red Moon* at a science-fiction convention in Los Angeles. He’d been invited as a guest thanks to his work with *Wyrld*, but quickly went to work finding distributors for his game. When distributor Tony Pierro ordered the first few dozen copies of *White Bear and Red Moon*, he asked what Chaosium’s terms were — and Stafford had no idea what he was talking about. Fortunately, Pierro was able to help out and things improved from there.

*White Bear and Red Moon* was a success, probably primarily due to its vivid setting and its unique and colorful units. When *The Space Gamer* began featuring it in their game polls, it regularly appeared as the #1 fantasy board game, beating out releases like TSR's *War of Wizards* (1975) and *Dungeon!* (1975). It also led to Chaosium's first license when Neville Stocken of Archive Miniatures — located in nearby Burlingame, California — agreed to make Gloranthan miniatures related to *White Bear and Red Moon*. Soon some of the counters from *White Bear and Red Moon* such as the darkness witch Cragspider and the centaur Ironhoof were represented in lead. Some of Archive's existing miniatures also got incorporated into the Gloranthan series, so that Stocken would have more licensed miniatures to sell immediately. Most notably, Archive's existing "Pumpkinhead" figure became the infamous Gloranthan Jack O' Bear.

Chaosium quickly followed up on *White Bear and Red Moon*'s success with *Wyrms' Footnotes #1* (1976) — the first issue of a small press magazine that offered not only variant rules for the game, but also histories of the setting itself. As we'll see, this Gloranthan magazine would run for a total of seven years. *White Bear and Red Moon* also got a reprint (1976) and a larger revamp and expansion as *Dragon Pass* (1980) during those years.

More notably, Stafford continued work with what was to be a trilogy of Gloranthan board games. The second was *Nomad Gods* (1977), set on Gloranthan's Praxian plains — which would soon become the best-described locale in the game. There was to be a third game in the trilogy, called "Masters of Luck & Death," but it never appeared.

Chaosium published several more board games and a couple of miniatures rules in the next years. For the most part these games exist outside of our history of roleplaying, with a few exceptions:

- *Elric* (1977), by Greg Stafford, was a wargame based upon a license from Michael Moorcock. As we'll see, it was a license that later helped Chaosium expand their gaming lines.
- Greg Stafford's *King Arthur's Knights* (1978) was part of the second wave of adventure games that combined roleplaying and board gaming sensibilities in the wake of Dave Megarry's *Dungeon!* (1975). We'll meet the genre again in 1984 when Chaosium released their (perhaps) most notable board game. The Arthurian setting would also be important to Chaosium's roleplaying future.
- Although *Lords of the Middle Sea* (1978) was a wargaming design without any direct influence on the RPG industry, the same can't be said of its designer, Lynn Willis. He had previously published board

games with Metagaming Concepts, but they weren't interested in this post-apocalyptic offering. Thus he'd approached Stafford about the game. Though *Lords of the Middle Sea* would be Willis' only solo board game published by Chaosium, he'd soon become critical to their roleplaying games.

- *Stomp!* (1978) and *Panzer Pranks* (1980) were both humorous “minigames,” probably influenced by Metagaming's *MicroGames* — as so many others were in that era.

The rest of Chaosium's early strategic releases were mostly wargames — some light and others heavy — following the trend of early pioneers like Avalon Hill and SPI. They came to a halt in 1981 because of a new force that had by then been building at Chaosium for four years.

Roleplaying.

## Roleplaying Beginnings: 1977—1980

Years earlier, by strange chance, Greg Stafford received what may have been the first copy of the original *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) ever sold. Jeff Platt, an ex-partner of Stafford's who lived in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin was picking up catalogues from a printer and there he ran into a young man named Gary Gygax who was himself picking up the first printing of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Stafford's ex-partner knew that Stafford was working on a fantasy game too, and so he purchased a copy of *Dungeons & Dragons* from Gygax — straight off the press — and mailed it to California.

Despite that early introduction, Chaosium didn't start publishing RPGs until 1977 and even then it only came about through the intervention of two other roleplayers: Steve Perrin and Jeff Pimper. Perrin was an influential gamer in California: in 1966 he had been a founding member of the SCA — a live-action medieval combat group — and more recently he had compiled *The Perrin Conventions* (1976), a set of alternative rules for *D&D* combat. Now he was interested in getting more involved with the RPG industry.

Perrin would eventually fulfill that dream by becoming a staff member at Chaosium and working on many of their major projects, but for now he and Pimper talked with Chaosium about just one publication, a *D&D*-based monster manual that they called *All the Worlds' Monsters* (1977). They'd once hoped that TSR would publish it, but instead got the obligatory nasty lawyer's letter, so they went looking for other publishers instead. Three years after the publication of *D&D*, putting out unofficial third-party supplements for the game was all the

rage, so Stafford intelligently agreed to give the book a shot. It beat TSR's *Monster Manual* (1977) to market and put Chaosium on the map as a publisher of RPGs.

Chaosium would publish two more volumes of *Monsters* (1977, 1980). *All the Worlds' Monsters II* notably contained a reprint of *The Perrin Conventions*, which had previously only been released in small numbers at the first DunDraCon convention (1976).

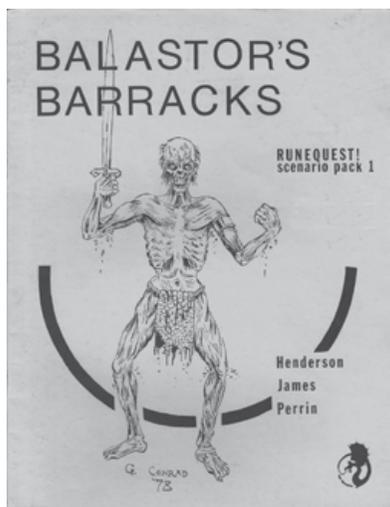
## The Birth of *RuneQuest*: 1977–1983

Though Chaosium got its RPG start with those *D&D*-oriented *Monsters* volumes, they were also looking for a game of their own. Their first RPG could easily have been *The Arduin Grimoire*, submitted by Dave Hargrave to Chaosium around 1976. However Stafford ultimately found it too derivative of *D&D* and too complex and rejected it. Dave Hargrave would go on to self-publish (1977, 1978). Afterward *Arduin* was published by a variety of small presses, as is documented more completely in the history of Grimoire Games.

Meanwhile, Stafford already decided that Glorantha should be introduced to the roleplaying world. Hendrik Jan Pfeiffer, Art Turney, and Ray Turney made the first attempt. Using *White Bear and Red Moon* as a basis, they created a very *D&D*-like game. However Stafford wanted something more

original, resulting in the failure of this design. Steve Perrin was introduced to the gang on July 4, 1976 — possibly at one of Paul Zimmer's Greyhaven parties — and he immediately started coming up with more far-flung ideas like omitting character classes. Under this revamped mandate, the members of the original team began to fade away until only Ray Turney remained, while Perrin's friend Steve Henderson and his housemate Warren James joined up. Shortly thereafter an original gaming system for Glorantha began to gel.

The next year Chaosium's two core businesses — roleplaying games and Gloranthan board games — naturally merged when Chaosium published Perrin's *RuneQuest* (1978), set in the world of Glorantha. *RuneQuest* followed on the heels of the first wave of fantasy RPG designs — including TSR's *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), TSR's *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975), Flying Buffalo's *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975), Metagaming's *Melee* (1977), and FGU's *Chivalry & Sorcery*



(1977). In turn it would be quite influential to second-wave FRP designs like SPI's *DragonQuest* (1980) and ICE's *Rolemaster* system (1980).

*"Without Greg Stafford hovering over us and saying, 'gonna be ready for Origins?'; we'd still be sorting through mounds of paper and trying new slants on things."*

– Steve Perrin, "My Life is Role Playing," *Different Worlds* #3 (June/July 1979)

*RuneQuest's* contributions to the industry included:

- It was the first game to introduce a fully skill-based character system. *Traveller* (1977) previously introduced skills to the roleplaying mainstream, but with two major caveats. First, initial skills were limited to what was available in a character's class ("career"). Second, there was no experience system. *RuneQuest* resolved both of these issues.
- It offered up one of the earliest deeply detailed fantasy worlds. This was an emerging trend in roleplaying, with other early contenders including M.A.R. Barker's *Tékumel* (1975), Judges Guild's *City State of the Invincible Overlord* (1976), GDW's *Imperium* (1979), and Midkemia Press' *Midkemia* (1980).
- It was the earliest serious look at religion in RPGs. Before that, clerics had been present, but their religion was mostly glossed over. Even *Gods, Demi-Gods, and Heroes* (1976) treated deities more as monsters than as important cultural forces.

With board games, *RuneQuest*, and *All the Worlds' Monsters* all taking up Chaosium's time, it was natural that the company started to expand. Tadashi Ehara, the buyer for San Francisco game store Gambit, became Chaosium's second employee. Lynn Willis, author of *Lords of the Middle Sea*, was hired shortly thereafter to lay out his own wargame's rules, but would stay long beyond that. A young Charlie Krank, also a Gambit employee, started volunteering to help Chaosium playtest in 1978 and became a paid employee two years later. Around the same time — on February 7, 1980 — Chaosium officially incorporated, with The Chaosium becoming Chaosium Inc.

Many, many other staff members would move through Chaosium's offices in the years afterward (including, in the late '90s, the author of these histories). The company would average five to seven employees during some of its good times and would have no one officially on its payroll during some of the bad.

For now, the increases in manpower at Chaosium helped to ensure that *RuneQuest* was a well-supplemented game. It got immediate support from

Chaosium's Gloranthan magazine, *Wyrms' Footnotes*, which ended up running 14 issues total (1976–1982); the later issues were focused on *RuneQuest* rather than the Gloranthan board games. Chaosium also published a second edition of the *RuneQuest* rules (1979) and almost two-dozen supplements over the next six years.

Though some of *RuneQuest's* first supplements were simple dungeon crawls and stat books, many others were groundbreaking. *Cults of Prax* (1979) and *Cults of Terror* (1981) gave precise details on the worship of a few dozen gods within the world of Glorantha, further delving into the depths of *RuneQuest's* sophisticated religions. *Griffin Mountain* (1981) provided 200 pages of background on a single realm in Glorantha; it would remain one of the best-detailed RPG lands for many years. *Pavis* (1983) and *Big Rubble* (1983) provided even more detail on a single city and the ruins it was built upon. Though the *Cults* books were arguably two of the earliest splatbooks — providing detail on a variety of character organizations — *Trollpak* (1983) came even closer to the model that would be used by White Wolf and others in the '90s by offering an extensive look at a single culture.

*"At that point Chaosium's growth was about 100 percent per year. It seemed like we could do no wrong. Even though we were talking very small numbers."*

– Charlie Krank, 40 Years of Gen Con (2007)

All said, there was considerable innovation in the *RuneQuest* line during the years it was published by Chaosium — but it was far from the company's only interest during those years.

## Other Supplemental RPGs: 1979–1987

When Chaosium published *RuneQuest* in 1978, Greg Stafford didn't know that it — and its successors — would become the cornerstone of Chaosium's business. Thus, he continued with business as usual. We've already seen that he published board games through 1981. In addition, he kept producing generalist supplements for the roleplaying industry, building on the interest in the *Worlds' Monsters* books.

Chaosium's next venture in this vein was a generalist roleplaying magazine called *Different Worlds* (1979–1987), which was overseen by Tadashi Ehara.

