

FROM *HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE*

This essay originally appeared in a charity jam book entitled *Horsemen of the Apocalypse* along with pieces from Gary Gygax, Marc Miller, Greg Stafford, Greg Costikyan, Rick Loomis, and the editor, Jim Dietz. All proceeds go to the Cancer Memorial Endowment in Effingham, IL, so if you like this bit and might want to see what the other essays are like, stop by <http://jollyrogergames.hypermart.net/> and place your order.

INTRODUCTION BY JIM DIETZ

Of the writers who have contributed to this book, Monsieur Forbeck would have to be called the “Young Turk” of the group. The works I was aware of such as *Deadlands* and *Brave New World* are original in theme, content, and mechanics. It was only after he turned his essay in that I found out he has worked on other projects and games that reside in my “game shrine.” Some of these are mentioned below in his essay. If you are ever at a game con such as GenCon or Origins, take the time to speak with Matt. At the least, you will have an entertaining five or ten minutes—at the best, you’ll come away impressed with one of the better game designers and professional writers around.

WHAT WAS I THINKING?

By Matt Forbeck

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That’s the question that keeps me up nights, laying awake, my brain racing over what I’ve done and—maybe—what I could have done differently. It’s the same question my dad used to ask me after I’d done something particularly stupid like playing chicken with a moving station wagon, and me without the benefit of a car on my side. Those days, the answer was usually pretty simple.

What was I thinking? Well, honestly, I wasn’t.

These days, I'm a bit older and supposedly wiser. Most of the time, I give some consideration to what I'm doing. On the rare occasion that I don't, well, these days it's my problem.

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

Let me explain.

My name is Matt, and I'm a game designer. I used to fight that title when I first started out, but these days, I'm proud of it. There are lots of writers and editors out there, but not nearly so many game designers.

Of course, when I tell someone I'm a game designer, their response is usually, "You mean computers?" It's a natural enough response if you think about it. After all, just about everyone has heard of computer games. They're even advertised on TV these days, and they always get a bit of press anytime some demented whacko goes off the deep-end. Honestly, it's hard to avoid them.

Then I have to explain that I work in "paper" games: roleplaying games, card games, miniatures games, board games, and so on. This usually gets a confused look until I say, "Like *Dungeons & Dragons*."

After that, the listener usually nods enthusiastically. This is a brand that they recognize, even if they rarely think of it. They often have fond memories of playing *D&D* when they were younger, or they have a sibling or friend that they know who used to play the game.

These days, I sometimes skip right past the whole roleplaying thing and head straight to collectible card games. I tell them I've done a few of these things, "Like *Pokémon*." That really gets them.

The next question is usually, "Can you get me some of those cards for my kid?"

Then I have to explain that there are lots of collectible card games out there, and I didn't in fact work on *Pokémon*. I've put a lot of sweat into a few others instead.

That's about all most people need or even care to know.

They've got me pigeonholed into the "wacky job" category somewhere in their head, and that's all that's important at the moment.

Then there's the rare chance that I run into a person that actually plays these kinds of games. If you're bothering to read this, I'll bet you're someone like that.

IN A NUTSHELL

I've been designing games for over 10 years now. I got my start when I was in my second year at the University of Michigan. I was working as a sales rep for Will Niebling and Associates (I was one of the only associates), and Will and John Danovich had designed a game called *Myth Fortunes* for Mayfair Games. This was based on Robert Lynn Asprin's *Myth Adventures* series of funny fantasy novels.

It was a good game, but Will and John didn't have any illusions about their writing abilities, so they corralled me into helping. Will sat me down and explained the game to me. I took notes and then cobbled them into something resembling a rulebook. A few revisions later and we were ready to go. Some time later, I got my first check from Mayfair, and I was hooked.

I mean, how easy could it be?

I was so young.

I did some more freelancing while I was in college, but when I got out in 1989, I had the itch to do some traveling. I'd always wanted to go to Europe, but I couldn't afford it. My parents had done a wonderful job getting me through school, but on graduation day, my dad sat me down and gave me the infamous "You're on your own now, son," talk.

I was pretty determined though, so I got myself a temporary work visa for the UK on a student work exchange program. (I was still eligible for it as a recent graduate.) I worked some odd jobs over the summer, and then in September, I got myself a one-way ticket to London, packed up most of what I owned in a couple old duffel bags, and left town.

APPLYING TO THE EVIL EMPIRE

Within a few hours of arriving in England, I phoned up the Games Workshop Design Studio and asked for an interview, pretty much out of the blue. They set me up with one that Friday, and I hopped the bus to Nottingham.

This was back in the day when everyone in the adventure gaming industry considered Games Workshop the Evil Empire of gaming. The fear was that the GW guys were going to stride into America and set up a shop in every major metropolitan area, eventually driving every other game manufacturer out of business. This wasn't entirely unfounded, since that's exactly what Workshop had done in the UK, and they pretty obviously wanted to follow the same pattern in the US, but as time has since proved, it just wasn't going to happen.

In fact, Will actually warned me that if I went to work for Workshop, I might find it hard to get work in the American gaming community when I got back. Thankfully, it didn't work out nearly that bad.

The interview went pretty well, although I embarrassed myself a bit by wearing a suit. I hadn't been to too many game company offices by that point, and I hadn't realized how lax the dress code was. As I walked through the offices filled with people in black T-shirts and paint-stained blue-jeans, I realized I'd made a mistake.

At the end of the day, the managing editor—a man named Simon Forrest who coincidentally lived in a suburb of Nottingham known as Sherwood—gave me some unedited text to take with me as a test. I was to bring it back all marked up for a second interview on Monday.

"Of course," Simon said, "you're familiar with proper editing marks."

I didn't have a clue what he was talking about, but I knew what the proper answer was. "Of course," I said. "But the American versions are just a bit different. I'll pick up the British ones in no time."

As soon as I got back to London, I hit a bookstore and

picked up a copy of a proper English dictionary, complete with a list of editing marks in an appendix. I got out my red pen, and I mauled that text.

When I returned on Monday—the test text looking like someone had bled all over it—I stepped into the studio in a T-shirt and blue jeans. I also had everything I owned in the world in a pair of bags on my back. I'd gotten in contact with the daughter of the employer of one of my father's best friends, and she'd offered to put me up in Cambridge for a bit while I found myself a job. I told Phil Gallagher, who was making the final decision, that if he didn't hire me, I was leaving town that night to tend bar in Cambridge.

To my great amazement, he gave me the job.

HUMBLE PIE, COMING RIGHT UP

My first assignment was to write some color text for an ad promoting Games Workshop's new league-play system for its *Warhammer 40,000* game. I typed it up and printed it out and handed it to Simon, my direct boss.

Simon looked at it for a moment, then got out his red pen and set to work. He crossed out the first sentence entirely. He left the second sentence alone. Then he crossed out the third and the fourth.

After that, he stopped with the pen and read for a minute. Then he crossed out the entire thing with a large, red X, crumpled the paper up, and tossed it into the nearest bin.

Stunned, I asked, "Didn't you like anything about it?"

He looked up at me with a smile and said, "Well, for a bit I thought the second sentence wasn't so bad, but then I thought: nah!"

I rewrote that piece over and over again all day long. It wasn't more than about two hundred and fifty words, so I had a lot of chances at it in the course of that eight-hour work day.

Soon, I was frustrated, mostly by the glee with which Simon tore through my work. The problem wasn't really with the fact that what I was writing was rotten. It just

wasn't exactly what Simon wanted.

I kept at it. Eventually, I asked, "Wouldn't it be simpler for you to just write it yourself?"

The answer, of course, was yes, but that wasn't the point. If Simon did the work for me, what good was I to him? He needed to show me how to write the way he needed it, and that's what he did.

Eventually I got it right.

Of course, then it was on to the next thing.

LOOSENING UP

A few weeks later, after I'd had the chance to beat my head against the brick wall of Simon's way of doing things, I started to see a few cracks form. Whether they were in my skull or that wall was hard to say.

"What I don't understand," Simon said to me, "is how you can be one of the most easy-going persons I know and write like such a tight-ass."

Call it an epiphany, call it a sign from above, call it what you will. Those words rang true.

In college, I had majored in creative writing after an abortive attempt at electrical engineering, which I ran screaming from after realizing what kind of career an engineering degree could lead to. I knew how to write properly, and I knew how to set up characters and how to pace a plot and so on. The problem was I was writing for Workshop like I was writing a U.S. Army manual on how to repair an M-1 tank. My writing was dry and dull—boring. I was making the cardinal mistake many American game designers have been guilty of in the past. I hadn't realized that people weren't reading these long rulebooks to learn complex rules systems. Okay, true, that was one function, but at the heart of it all they wanted to be entertained.

Games are all about entertainment, and every interaction with them should fit that function. From some reports, many people who buy gaming products—especially role-playing games—never actually play them or ever intend to.

What Was I Thinking?

They buy them to read. If you bore these people silly with your writing, they're never coming back.

In those days, most American games were as dry as unbuttered toast. This began with Gary Gygax himself. Gary was a real pioneer when it came to the roleplaying game—and for that, every gamer has a lot to thank him for—but his style of writing was stilted and dry, as you might expect from the first effort in a whole new category of gaming. The same went for the then-current editions of *Rolemaster*, *Traveler*, and just about everything else. Sometimes they read more like they'd been written by engineers or lawyers rather than writers.

At Workshop, they knew what they were doing. They made reading their stuff fun. Once I figured that out, I was on my way.

BACK IN THE USA

Eventually my student work visa expired. Phil Gallagher made me a nice offer to stay on in Nottingham, but I turned him down. I was aching to get back to the girlfriend I'd left behind. I even took off a few weeks early so I could get back in time for Valentine's Day.

That was the smartest thing I ever did. That woman, Ann Kolinsky, is now my wife and the mother of our child. That's one time in my life that I knew exactly what I was thinking and I did the exact right thing. I followed my heart, and I've never regretted it.

Once I settled back into life in Ann Arbor, I started my life as a freelancer. Never let anyone tell you differently: This is a long row to hoe.

My first year, I made about \$4,000. Ann ended up paying my portion of the rent in the place we were living in for both my birthday and Christmas presents. The next year, I made about double that, and the year after that, it doubled again.

The trick as a freelancer is that when you're starting out you get paid little and you get paid late. Even when the companies pay you on time—which doesn't always hap-

pen—it's often on publication, which can be many months after you actually turn the work in. Worse yet, when the checks come in, they're often for not all that much. You're on the bottom rung of the ladder, and there's a long climb towering over you.

The best thing you can do is try to get as much work as you can and hope that the payments all roll together into something you can live on. While you're writing your current project, you're living on a check you just got for a project you did six months ago.

It's a hell of a way to live, and it's really only something you can get away with if you're single and have no serious obligations. Or if you're independently wealthy. Or if you can find someone to support you while you're starting out. In any case, it's not all that easy.

Despite all of that, I stuck with it. One year, I worked as a course assistant at the University of Michigan, grading papers for Eric Rabkin's fantasy and science fiction classes. Other than that, though, all my income came from the gaming industry.

As time wore on, I made a reputation for myself as a good game designer who could turn things in on deadline and who rarely if ever needed a second draft. Take it from me, game designers like this are rarer than gold. Eventually, I got offers to work from larger and larger companies, and soon I actually had to turn away assignments.

BEAT THAT DEADLINE

Flat-out the most important thing you can do as a freelancer is beat your deadlines. I saw Douglas Adams give a talk at the University of Michigan once. He said, "I love deadlines. They make such a lovely whizzing noise as they pass by." Everyone laughed.

Until you're selling enough copies of your books for your publisher to be able to afford to lock you into a hotel room until you're done with them—as has happened to

What Was I Thinking?

Adams more than once, I'm told—don't even think about it. There are few game designers who are truly irreplaceable—I can't actually think of any off the top of my head—and when you're starting out, you're not any of them.

If you blow a deadline, the book is likely going to be late. When that happens, the publisher's tightly strung cash-flow budget goes right out the window. Suddenly, people up and down the line aren't getting paid, including—and this is most important—you.

Worse, your chances of getting more work out of that publisher have just gone down to somewhere around zero.

I've only seriously blown one freelance deadline in my career. I was writing a scenario for *GURPS Cyberpunk Adventures* for Steve Jackson Games. The deadline was approaching, and I was confident that I could beat it.

Then the University of Michigan's men's basketball team made it to the Final Four. I managed to get my hands on a set of tickets, but the games were being held the weekend before the piece was due.

I talked to the managing editor at GAMA that year, just over a week before the deadline. I explained that I'd be about a week late since I was going to the Final Four. He told me that it would be fine. He had booked an extra adventure anyhow, just in case something like this happened. He let me out of my contract and said I shouldn't worry about it.

I thought that was the end of it.

Years later, a good friend of mine was working for Steve Jackson Games, and when she heard they were looking for new writers, she brought up my name. The managing editor shot that idea down though, telling her that they wouldn't use me because I'd "flaked out" that one time.

When I heard about this, I was pretty shocked. I'd been under the impression there'd been no hard feelings, but apparently I'd been wrong. I had never tried to work for Steve Jackson Games after that incident anyhow, but apparently if I'd tried I would have been fighting an uphill battle.

REACHING THE "PINNACLE"

There aren't all that many freelancers out there who make game designing a full-time gig. Those of us who are freelancers know each other pretty well, by reputation if nothing else. We hang out at game conventions together, drinking beer and swapping war stories. We join e-mail lists so we can chat with each other and break up the grind of pumping out piece after piece. We become friends.

One of my best freelancer buddies came up with an idea for a game in 1995. His name was (and still is) Shane Hensley, and the game was *Deadlands: The Weird West*.

Shane had published a couple of other games with Chameleon Eclectic under an imprint he'd developed: Pinnacle Entertainment Group. Both *Fields of Honor* and *The Last Crusade* had gone on to critical acclaim, although they were far from best-sellers. With *Deadlands*, though, Shane was finally ready to try his hand at forming a company and becoming a publisher in his own right.

Shane was ready to put his money where his mouth was. He flew both Greg Gorden and myself out to his home in Blacksburg, VA, to give us his pitch. He wanted Greg and me to sign on to write, edit, and develop books for *Deadlands*, as well as to help him with developing the rules for the game.

Greg was excited about it, but he was about to go through a divorce, which pretty much tied up most of his resources, both financially and emotionally. He helped develop some of the game's concepts, but in the end, he had to go his own way.

As for myself, one of the reasons Shane had asked me to join him is that I'd developed an extensive network of contacts in the industry over the years. I knew artists, writers, printers, distributors, and so on. He believed that kind of knowledge would be key to the company's success, and he wanted me to get behind Pinnacle 100%.

This was one of those big turning points in my life. I thought about it long and hard, and I came to the conclusion

that if I was going to dedicate myself to helping get Pinnacle off the ground, it wasn't something I could do halfway. And if that was the case, I wanted a piece of the pie.

I talked to Shane about it, and after doing some soul-searching of his own, he agreed.

What were we thinking?

REALITY HITS

I don't care what anyone tells you, producing a roleplaying game from scratch is hard work. In this case, matters were complicated by the fact that we were basically starting a company from scratch as well.

I'll spare you the gory details about the long nights slaving over a hot keyboard. All that really matters is what happened in the end.

The game was a hit.

No, seriously. By modern roleplaying game standards, it was an unqualified success. In fact, it's arguably the last big hit from a brand-new company that the roleplaying game industry has seen.

We printed 1,000 hardcovers and 5,000 softcovers in our first run. The hardcovers sold out in two weeks, and the softcovers were gone in less than three months. After that, we went exclusively to hardcovers for our main rulebooks.

As I write this, *Deadlands: The Weird West* has sold over 25,000 copies in just over three years. Sure, by Stephen King standards this is a drop in the bucket, but stacked up next to most roleplaying games released in the past five years, and it looks mighty good.

Over the next two years, Shane and the rest of the Pinnacle crew and I spend most of our time trying to wrestle with our fantastic growth. We had an abortive attempt at producing a computer game that sucked a lot of money out of our corporate pockets, and we struggled to keep to a production schedule that always seemed to have just one more spanner in the works.

ENTER AEG

Remember how I said that freelancers in the adventure game industry are a close-knit bunch? It's even more true of the people running the companies. We talk with each other at conventions, blowing off steam at the bars and comparing notes about how we're doing, which distributors and freelancers we should steer clear of, and so on. Even more gets done by e-mail these days.

E-mail is the modern-day equivalent of the water cooler, that place in the big office around which people gather to chew the fat and ruminate about the state of the industry in which they work. If that's so, then the big gaming conventions are like summer camp.

Gen Con and Origins are the two weeks out of the year at which you get to see all your old friends and have a blast. For those of us in the industry, it's also a chance to play games with gamers from around the country and meet the fans that make creating these things worthwhile.

Just as Shane and I first met over beers at the San Jose Origins, Pinnacle met Alderac Entertainment Group (AEG) at Gen Con 1996, the year we debuted *Deadlands: The Weird West*.

At that show, John Zinser—the president of AEG and also an officer of Five Rings Publishing, a holding company AEG and Isomedia had set up to publish the *Legend of the Five Rings* collectible card game—came up to Shane and me and made us an offer. He wanted Five Rings to publish a *Deadlands* collectible card game and have AEG produce it.

Honestly, we were flattered. The game had been for sale for all of about 24 hours by the time John approached us, which meant he was either off his rocker or he really liked the property.

Shane and I took a long, hard look at the offer. Our usual policy was that if we could do it ourselves, we should. Why just take in a small percentage when you could have it all?

The flip side of that was we had to believe in the project enough that we'd want to do it ourselves. Having people go

bust trying to sell things with our logo on it wasn't going to do them or us any good in the long run.

In this case, we knew we didn't have the capital to publish a collectible card game right then. Another point in Five Rings' favor was that they'd already done a great job publishing a collectible card game, so we knew they'd do right by us.

By the end of the weekend, we had a handshake agreement to give Five Rings the license.

ENTER WIZARDS

As with most deals, it took us a while to get everything in place. To make things more interesting soon after we had the deal signed, Wizards of the Coast bought Five Rings. This meant that they now had the rights to do the *Deadlands* collectible card game which, by this time, had been titled *Doomtown*.

Having the top company in the adventure game industry suddenly wind up with the license to do a collectible card game based on your roleplaying game can be a mixed blessing. After all, just because Wizards had the license didn't mean they had to do anything with it. They could have been happy to just sit on the license for the duration of the contract, sticking us with nothing more than our advance.

Fortunately, they decided to go ahead with the game, and *Doomtown* became a reality. We had the good fortune to have Luke Peterschmidt of *Guardians* fame assigned as the *Doomtown* brand manager from Wizards/Five Rings. Better yet, the people at AEG put together a fantastic game that did us all proud.

Later, Luke left *Doomtown* for other (possibly greener) pastures, and we lucked out a second time when Ed Bolme was assigned to the brand.

A&P

During this period, Pinnacle was growing at a phenomenal rate, and eventually it got to be more than Shane or I

cared to handle. Both of us were game designers first and foremost, and handling Pinnacle's daily operations was taking up more and more of our time, driving us away from the things we really liked doing: creating games.

In October of 1998, our friends at AEG came to us with an offer. The principles in that company had made a nice chunk of change when they'd sold Five Rings to Wizards of the Coast, and they were looking to team up with a company that they had a lot of respect for, namely us.

This was one of those deals that really seemed to make a lot of sense. AEG had a crack sales and management team in place, and like it or not, Pinnacle's strengths lay elsewhere. After a proper amount of dancing around with each other, we finally closed the deal. Soon after, AEG took over as Pinnacle's business manager.

AEG bought one third of the company, leaving Shane and me with a third each.

When I say AEG, I really mean John Zinser. Sure, AEG has more owners than just John (Dave Seay as well as John's parents), but at the end of the day, John was running it all, along with the capable assistance of his office manager, Maureen Yates.

NORTH AND SOUTH

With the daily business details well in hand, Shane and I turned our attention back to making great games.

Before I go further, I should make a clarification. Shane and I may have been the people who led Pinnacle, but we were a long way from being the whole kit and kaboodle.

We were fortunate enough to find a number of really talented people in the sleepy little town of Blacksburg, nestled high in the Appalachians of southwestern Virginia. The real reason this was even possible was Virginia Tech, the university that also called Blacksburg its home. Tech attracted all sorts of brilliant people who we were able to tap. With few exceptions, almost all of our employees had either gone to Tech or were associated with it in some way.

What Was I Thinking?

I went to the University of Michigan myself. Which made me a Yankee born and bred.

While my friends at Pinnacle—usually Shane—would often tell me that I was a long way from the South in Blacksburg, I still have to disagree with them. It may not have been the Mississippi Delta Deep South, but it was a far cry from the upper Midwest where I'd spent most of my life.

For one, a lot of people in that part of Virginia care deeply about the Civil War. It makes sense. Many of the worst battles in that war were fought on Virginian land, and lots of the people who live there are descended directly from those who survived that conflict.

Wisconsin, on the other hand, is a long way from the Civil War. Besides Camp Randall, we don't really have obvious Civil War monuments or memorials. I've never seen a reenactment. No one drives around with an American flag painted on the hood of his car, much less a Confederate one—which I did regularly see on an old Trans Am in Blacksburg.

You're a lot more likely to see Green Bay Packer pride around these parts, which is its own kind of fanaticism. The waiting list for season tickets is now longer than 35 years.

Anyhow, I digress.

THE TEAM

Pinnacle was blessed with a top-notch team. Our first employee—after Shane and myself—was John Hopler, designer of *The Last Crusade* collectible card game. John was also Shane's college roommate, and I'd had the pleasure to contract him for some work for ICE while I was working for them as the *Silent Death* line editor. John is currently the *Deadlands: Hell on Earth* brand manager.

Then there was Michelle Hensley, our office manager. Shane and Michelle had been sweethearts since grade school, and they had their first son, Caden, soon after *Deadlands* made its debut. Caden was something like an office mascot, often toddling around from desk to desk,

bringing us each a smile to brighten our day and remind us that, whatever it was we were working on, it was just a game.

Hal Mangold came to us after a stint at Chameleon Eclectic. Did I mention that Blacksburg seems to have had more game companies founded in it than any other city in America? I count four in a town of about 35,000 people: Pinnacle, Chameleon Eclectic, Wireframe Productions, and Blacksburg Tactical Research Center (BTRC). Of these, only Pinnacle is still around and in town, but it speaks to the thriving gaming community in this fairly small, isolated town.

Anyhow, Hal became our resident Photoshop guru and eventually ended up as the *Deadlands: The Weird West* brand manager. He recently left the company to follow his heart—in the form of the lovely Audrey Ann—to DC, a decision I'm sure he'll never regret.

Barry Doyle, Zeke Sparkes, and Matt Tice made up our production department. Nicer guys you'll never meet, and they did a bang-up job of making our books look their best. Matt even colored the *Deadlands: One Shot* comic we published in the fall of '99 through Image Comics, making the whole thing shine. Zeke created the cover to *Brave New World* entirely in Photoshop, which dropped my jaw.

Ashe Marler was our art director and resident artists. He spent hours on the phone, making sure our artwork was the best it could be and—just as importantly—that it was coming in on time. He's also a crack artist, and he spent many days filling in the holes in our art requirements with his own able pen.

There were others that came and went. The most notable was Charles Ryan, the former president of Chameleon Eclectic. Charles is one of the best graphic designers in the industry, and we were fortunate enough to have him with us long enough to sharpen the look of every one of our game lines.

BRAVE NEW BEGINNINGS

Once we had everything up and running, I turned my mind to the reason why I'd joined Pinnacle in the first place. On that fateful weekend in Blacksburg back in the fall of 1995, I had told Shane that I loved *Deadlands* and I would throw myself behind it, but eventually I was going to want to do my own game too.

Shane just looked at me with a knowing smile and said, "Of course." He was a game designer too. He had the itch himself. My turn would come soon enough.

In early 1998, I realized that my turn was coming up soon. When we released *Deadlands: The Weird West*, it was with a plan to do a sequel game two years later: *Deadlands: Hell on Earth*. Then *Deadlands: Lost Colony* would follow two years after that.

I knew that our company could only handle launching one major game property a year. If 1998 was *Hell on Earth* and 2000 was *Lost Colony*, the only open slot in the near future was in 1999, and if I wanted to have a game ready for that, I had to get moving.

Unlike many game designers, I rarely play in a regular roleplaying campaign, although that's certainly how I got started. After working on games for eight to 12 hours a day, I find that I'd rather spend my free time with my wife and son.

Gaming isn't my life. It's my job.

This meant that I didn't have some homebrew game system sitting around that I'd been "playtesting" for the better part of a decade in anticipation of finally getting my big shot at having my own game published. No, I had to come up with the thing from whole cloth.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not against people publishing the game that they've been working on for the better part of their adult lives. But I've been doing this professionally for over 10 years. This isn't a labor of love for me. It's how I make my living.

I was looking forward to the challenge more than any-

thing else. I'd written a lot of gaming material over the years, designed more than a few game mechanics—systems, even—but I'd never actually written an entire roleplaying game on my own before. Now I finally had the opportunity.

TOPICAL SOLUTIONS

At first, I thought about doing a hard-boiled detective game with a fantastic twist, kind of giving the *Deadlands* twist to the Roaring '20s. I'm a longtime fan of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James Ellroy. Nothing gets me going like a good Humphrey Bogart film in that black and white so sharp you could shave with it. That kind of stuff is right up my alley.

But Shane counseled me against it. After I thought about it for a while, I realized he was right. A game like that would be just a little too close to *Deadlands* thematically, and I wanted something that would be its own animal, not just *Deadlands* set in a different era.

Back when we had started Pinnacle, I'd been doing a lot of freelance work for WildStorm Productions, Jim Lee's portion of Image Comics. I co-designed the *WildStorms* collectible card game, and I even wrote a *WildC.A.T.s* inventory story. In late 1996, we were negotiating to get a license for a *WildStorm* roleplaying game. The plan was to start there and hopefully wrangle in the rest of the Image creators.

Unfortunately, the deal fell through, and I'd shelved the preliminary work I'd done on the game. Shane reminded me of that while I was searching for topic for my new game, telling me he'd always seen me doing a superhero game.

I'm an even bigger comic book fan than I am of film noir. I still blow way too much of my paycheck on the things, and I've got about 15 long boxes stored in my basement. The size of my collection grows just about every week. So doing a superhero game made a lot of sense.

THE CROWD AND STANDING OUT FROM IT

I've played a lot of different superhero games in my life. In fact, the first large roleplaying game book I wrote was *Western Hero*, the genre book that showed you how to use the rules engine behind *Champions* to create a historical western game.

I even wrote a short paragraph or two in it about the possibilities of a western horror game, five years before *Deadlands: The Weird West* saw print. I wish I could claim credit for firing Shane's imagination here, but it's actually just another example of how much we were—often coincidentally—on the same page about these things.

When I was in high school, I'd go to Gen Con and run games for the RPGA. Just about every year, I ran both *Boot Hill* and *Marvel Super-Heroes*. Later, between my second and third years of college, I ran around Chicago running games of *DC Heroes* at stores for Mayfair Games. Believe it or not, they actually paid me \$25 per game, plus expenses, so I ran as many games as I could.

When I started work on *Brave New World*, the first thing I came up with was a cover concept and a title. We actually had Kevin Sharpe do an illustration for the cover, which Hal then colored in Photoshop and slapped a makeshift logo on so I would have something to present to my partners in AEG when we met them at the GAMA (Game Manufacturers of America) trade show that March.

Honestly, the cover was pretty generic. It could have been the cover to just about any new superhero team comic. The heroes all wore pretty standard costumes, and the villains were nothing special. This was my fault, not Kevin's. He gave me what I asked for. It just wasn't what I was looking for.

The one thing I had that I really liked was the title: *Brave New World*.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

This comes from a quote from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Prospero the magician has been isolated on an island with his daughter Miranda and a slave named Caliban since Miranda was an infant. When a near-dead man washes up on the shore of the island, Miranda discovers him. As she looks down at him, she realizes there's a lot more to the world than this little island on which she's spent her entire life, and she says, "O brave new world, that has such people in't."

I thought this was dead on for a game about people with superpowers. It had exactly that sense of wonder I wanted for the game about it.

Unfortunately, Aldous Huxley liked the quote as well. He named his dystopian novel after it, using the exact same title as I used for my game.

The fact is that you can't copyright a title enough to keep people from using it, especially if it's based on a quote from a work that's long been in the public domain. So I felt free to use the name for my game. A quick trademark search and we were ready to go.

DARKNESS FALLS

When I started out on *Brave New World*, I was planning on writing a really upbeat, optimistic game. Lots of pundits in the gaming industry have been calling for a return to that kind of theme for years. They always seem to be predicting a backlash against the kind of darkness that seems to have crept over the game settings in the past decade, something that ostensibly began with *Vampire: The Masquerade*.

The fact is that I'm just not that cheery of a guy.

Honestly. When I was a kid, I loved reading those noble, heroic kind of comics like *Captain America* and *Superman*. I've still got a soft spot in my heart for *Spider-man*. But these days, that's just not the kind of stuff that feeds my demons.

I like stuff that many people call "dark." Things like *The*

Dark Knight Returns, Watchmen, and The Killing Joke. Even Kingdom Come.

But I don't like these things because they're dark. I'm not into darkness simply for darkness's sake, No, I like them because they have more solid plots, more complex characterizations, a more realistic viewpoint of the world.

Brave New World came out two days after my 30th birthday. I'm not a kid anymore, and I haven't been for a long time. As I've grown older, my tastes have matured—even if I may not have done so myself.

I find myself unable to go back to that stuff I enjoyed so much as a kid. That's not to say that I couldn't if I tried. But that Wonder-bread version of reality that those comics presented to me as a kid, it doesn't sing to me the way the darker stuff does, the parmesan cracked-peppercorn bread of the genre. I've developed a taste for the finer things, and once that happens, there's really no going back.

MY NEW WORLD GETS BRAVE

When I pitched the game to John Zinser and Dave Seay at the '98 GAMA trade show, they had one real complaint. They didn't see how this was so different from any of the other superhero roleplaying games that had already been developed. At the point I was at then, I had to agree with them.

Still, they gave me a vote of confidence. John confessed that he didn't really like superheroes all that much, but he told me that he had faith that, if anyone could do something with them, it was me.

While that wasn't really the resounding stamp of approval I'd been hoping for, it was exactly what I needed to hear. I don't know for sure if John even meant those words as he said them. Maybe he was just trying to get me motivated to innovate. Either way, it worked.

Later that spring, I was driving back from the Chessex Midwest Open House in Fort Wayne, Indiana, with Charles and Ashe. We had a long trip ahead of us, so they started

prodding me about *Brave New World*. I was just starting to try to verbalize what I wanted the world to be then, and talking to someone about it really helped that process along.

I told them I wanted to see a world in which people with superpowers were treated in a realistic way. I thought that the first thing that would happen is that the law would hop all over them, forcing them to register with the government. After all, we don't let people walk around without permits for handguns. I couldn't see how a society would let people just wander around who could walk straight through a metal detector without any problem and kill whoever they liked with plasma blasts from their fists.

Then Charles said something that really got me going. He said that he liked the title a lot, but to him it had come to have a connotation of fascism.

I actually studied some utopian literature in college. I even took a mini-course that studied utopian novels from their earliest start right up to the modern day. Again, this was right up my alley.

Oddly enough, to this day I still haven't read Huxley's *Brave New World*. I have a copy of it on my bookshelf, and I keep promising myself I'm going to get to it, but it just hasn't happened yet.

In fact, Huxley's *Brave New World* was even on the reading list for that course I took in college, but I had skipped over it. As a creative writing major, I had a lot of lit courses I needed to take, and some of these required me to read a book a week. One term, I had to read over 30 books in 13 weeks, and honestly, some of them just didn't get read.

Anyhow, Charles's comment on fascism sparked my imagination, and I soon had visions of an American under martial law running through my head. Still, I needed a reason for all of this to be happening. What would have been bad enough for the nation to basically be permanently under martial law?

Before we'd gotten too much further along the road back to Blacksburg, it hit me: the Kennedy assassination.

THAT FATEFUL DAY IN '63

For those of you not familiar with *Brave New World*—and if you're not, shame on you—there a number of points at which the history of the game's setting diverges from our own. Superpowered people started turning up during World War I, for one. A superpowered alpha—the *Brave New World* equivalent of Superman—put an early end to World War II. And JFK survived an attempt by a band of supervillains to assassinate him—although his wife did not.

With his wife barely in the ground, Kennedy pushes forward a piece of legislation called the Delta Registration Act. This basically says that if you're a delta—a person with powers—then you must register with the US government. When you do, you are thereafter considered a national resource, and you're immediately and permanently drafted into the service of your government.

If you fail the register—say, for instance, you don't feel like spending the rest of your life as a tool of an oppressive state—then you're hunted down and tossed in jail for life. This is not a good position to be in.

As a hero in the game, your character has chosen Option C: Join the Defiance—the superhero rebellion group—and do what you can to fight injustice in America in preparation for an eventual return of democracy to the land of its birth.

There's a lot more to the game than that, of course, and there are a lot of different roles that players can take on in the game outside of the Defiance. But that's the basic hook of the game—at least as far as the main rulebook is concerned.

PEELING THE ONION

Before I came up with the whole fascism in America angle, I had done a lot of thinking about the world that I was about to create. I wanted to know exactly where delta powers came from.

I had determined that just about everyone on the planet has the capability of manifesting delta powers. However, to

begin doing so, the character has to undergo a near-death experience. Since 99 times out of 100, these experiences actually prove fatal, most people aren't in any hurry to try to become a delta.

I also figured out why people had started to develop delta powers during World War I and why the incidence of this happening had been accelerating ever since. I knew why the city of Chicago had to disappear in 1976.

And I knew where all of this was headed.

Of course, I can't tell you that yet.

One of the things we'd done with *Deadlands*—which a number of other successful games had done before us—is that we not only provided the players with a setting. We had an ongoing story arc developing as well.

To me, it only makes sense. If you're going to come up with this elaborate backstory for what has gone before, then it only seems natural to continue to develop that story as you move the game along.

This means that the publisher has secrets that he can't tell anyone outside of the company. The biggest side-effect of this, of course, is that even the game master doesn't know everything about what's going on. This makes the development of the game a journey of discovery for the game master as well as the players.

After all, a roleplaying game is a form of entertainment twice over. First, it entertains the person reading the material. Then, the game master uses it to entertain her players. As a publisher, you can't forget to keep the game entertaining for those people reading it. They're the ones you're getting excited about the material enough to drag their friends into playing the game. If you bore them silly, they'll never come back.

For that reason, many gaming books these days read more like novels than dry tomes of rules. This goes back to that lesson Simon Forrest taught me at Games Workshop so long ago. You have to be entertaining. Without that, you've got nothing.

Brave New World's setting is like an onion. There are many different layers to it, and as I develop the game further, I peel off more and more layers of the onion. As I go, it may seem like it might never end, but believe me, there's a point to all of this. We'll get to it in the course of the game's development soon enough. Trust me.

PUT IT ON PAUSE

Just because I finally had a firm idea about what I wanted to do with the game didn't mean I could suddenly set everything else aside to work on it though. *Deadlands: Hell on Earth* was in the final stages of development for its release that summer, and there were literally dozens of other products we had to bring to market before I could really sink my teeth into the game.

I was going to start work on the game in earnest in November of that year, but a writer flaked badly on a *Deadlands* book. I ended up taking up the slack, which cost me a full month. By the time I was done with that book, we were full on into the holidays.

When we got back from the two-week break over Christmas and New Years—we always figured no one was going to work all that hard over that period anyhow, so we made it an official, two-week company holiday—there were lots of other fires that needed putting out. In the end, I didn't actually sit down to start work on *Brave New World* until early February 1999.

Now follow me here. We wanted a Gen Con release for the book. Since it was a hardcover, that meant we needed at least four weeks to have the book printed, and that was even with a truck shipping books to us directly at the show.

For those who are unaware, Gen Con is the largest gaming convention in North America. Every year, 25,000 or so gamers descend on Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to learn, play, and buy games. Remember before when I said that these conventions are like summer camp?

To me, Gen Con is Christmas in August.

Pinnacle always puts on a big show at Gen Con to promote our new book. In 1998, we marched a procession of radiation priests through the hall until they ended up chanting responsorial psalms in our booth, with hundreds of onlookers joining in. Then many of these people lined up all the way around the booth and down the aisle to be the first on their block to get their hands on the new game.

This means we make a lot of sales at Gen Con, and for each of these, we get the full retail price of the book. In the case of *Brave New World*, that's \$30 each. Normally, when we sell the game to a distributor, which then turns around and sells it to a store, we only get 40% of the retail price or, in this case, \$12. So it makes a big difference.

Some retailers complain about us selling books at Gen Con before they can get them in their own stores. They do have a point, but the fact is that we reach all sorts of new customers at Gen Con and get them interested in buying our product. We hold events like the procession of the Doomsayers. We run game demonstrations and tournaments. We do everything we can to get the people at the show to try and buy our games.

And then, hopefully, they go home and buy more of them from their local game stores. Roleplaying games companies live by the number of supplements they sell, and the more copies of the main rulebook of a game you sell, the more follow-on products you're going to sell later. So while the money we're taking out of a retailer's pocket may sting in the short term, in the long term we're doing both them and us a great service by promoting the game the best we can.

WRITING AS A BLOOD SPORT

To get the game ready for Gen Con, I had to have the book off to the printer before I left for Origins, the other big summer show, which was being held over the Fourth of July weekend. That meant I had about six months to develop the game from pretty much a dead stop.

This might seem like a lot of time, but it's not. Coming up

with a whole new rules system takes a while, and then you've got to playtest it to make sure that it's working. And then you have to send it to other people to have them playtest it without you leaning over their shoulder.

Honestly, I don't know that you can properly test a role-playing game. The only thing that really matters in the game is that the players have fun, and you can't make a rule for that. The person that has the most effect on this is the game master. A good game master can make the worst game sing, while a rotten game master can ruin a masterpiece of a game in minutes.

Still, you always want to do the best you can, and feedback always helps, so you send the game out and wait for the comments to pour in.

Beyond coming up with the rules, I still had to write the game. *Brave New World* weighs in at 224 pages, which is no walk in the park to come up with. To make matters more interesting, about three months into the project, John and Shane came to me and said that they really thought that having the game's first sourcebook and the game master's screen ready to go at the same time as the main rulebook would really help sales.

Unfortunately, I had to agree with them. There's nothing more frustrating than picking up a game you're excited about and then realizing you have to wait for a couple of months or more before you can get any more material for it beyond the main rulebook. The upshot of this is that I now had another 160-page sourcebook to write—this became *Ravaged Planet*—and a screen to design.

Thankfully Shane agreed to handle the 48-page adventure that came with the screen. He wrote it from a three-page outline I had for one of the playtest adventures he played in with me, and I polished it to a gleaming shine.

Still, I now had 384 pages to write, so I was really under the gun.

MOVING RIGHT ALONG

To complicate matters, I decided to leave Virginia and move back to Wisconsin at the beginning of May. My wife had given birth to our first (and currently only) child the previous November—which was yet another reason I hadn't gotten around to starting *Brave New World* until the following February.

Ann and I decided that we wanted to be back in the Midwest, close to most of our relatives and to all of Marty's cousins. Right now, he has five cousins, all three years old or younger, so we knew that if we didn't get back he was going to miss out on a real opportunity to grow up with family his own age.

We had our hearts set on Milwaukee, and Ann went out to scout out places for us a couple weeks before Easter. She found us half of a duplex which was less than a mile away from my sister's place. It needed some work, but the landlord assured us that everything would be in order by the time we were to move in.

Unfortunately, that's not what happened. When we got to the place, the landlord said he was going to need a day or two to get the place painted and cleaned. We agreed to stay at my father's house in southern Wisconsin in the meantime. On May 3, we drove our big yellow rental truck up to the place only to find it still a disaster area.

In fact, it was worse than it had been. The floors were filthy. There was six inches of water standing in a clogged sink. Windowpanes were missing.

This was not a place we wanted to move our infant son into.

After some fruitless talks with the landlord, we informed him that he had broken our lease by not having the place ready in time, and we demanded our security deposit back. It took us nearly a year and two trips to small claims court, but now we have double our deposit back, plus costs and our attorney's fees.

Did I mention my father is an attorney? There are times

when this can come in really handy.

In the meantime, we were literally homeless. We drove back down to my hometown, dumped most of what we owned into a self-storage unit, and moved into a spare bedroom of my father and stepmother's house.

It took us almost three months to find a house, set up a loan, close the deal, and move in. It's a great place, right back here in my hometown, close to most of my relatives, and the cost of living is fantastically low. In the end, it all worked out.

While this was all going on, of course, I still had to finish those books. I set my computer up on a small desk tucked into another room in my dad and stepmother's house, and I got to work. In between house hunting and dealing with realtors, house inspectors, and loan officers, I managed to get the whole thing done. But just barely. Deadlines wait for no man.

THE ART FIASCO

When I say I wrote *Brave New World* and *Ravaged Planet*, I didn't just write them. I was involved in every step of the project. I worked on the graphic design with Charles and Zeke. I laid the entire book out in Pagemaker on my trusty Mac. I wrote all of the art orders and commissioned all of the art, including getting colorist lined up for the color sections. I even lettered the comic book pages in the front of the book. And at the end, I popped the artwork into the layout, printed the whole thing out, burned a file to CD, and sent it off to get printed.

That's not to say I did this all alone. Zeke was there with me at the end, coloring pages, scanning artwork, and doing all the kinds of things that never get put on a credits page. Plus there were all the artists and colorists who pitched in to help out at the last minute, each of whom earned my undying thanks.

While I was working on these books, I was also writing a trilogy of short stories for the trilogy of *Deadlands: The Weird*

West fiction anthologies that Shane was editing. Plus I was writing, editing, and even lettering the *Deadlands: One Shot* graphic novel we published through Image Comics that summer.

Still, in the end, it all worked out. I lost a lot of sleep, and I put on about 10 pounds, but it got done. But it nearly didn't happen and let me tell you why.

The one thing I really can't do for a roleplaying game is draw—at least not if you want anything more than a step or two above a stick figure. For that, I rely on freelance artists to give me a hand.

Most artists are great people to work with. Some are not. I had a number of artists flake out on me on this project. I'd tell you about all of them, but it would just make you and me both sick by the end of it. Instead, I'm going to concentrate on the worst offender by far.

Names are not important, so I will just call the person "FA"—Flaky Artist—for now.

FA had been on a regular retainer with Pinnacle, which meant we were basically paying him a salary to work out of house for us. In return for all this work and the regular paycheck, he was to work for a bit less than the normal page rate. It was a good deal, and we were all happy with it while it lasted.

I thought FA's stuff was great, and we were going to use him throughout *Brave New World* and *Ravaged Planet*. We commissioned over 20 pages of work from him for the books, the lion's share of the artwork, much of which was going to be colored in Photoshop for the color sections of the book.

As the deadline for the artwork approached, I tried to give FA a call. For the first day or so, no one answered the phone. Then it turned out that the phone had been "temporarily disconnected" for lack of payment.

Soon, I started to panic. I sent FA a next-day air letter stating that I was going to recommission all of the artwork if I didn't hear from him by noon the next day. The deadline

came and went, so I got on the phone and started calling in favors.

At seven o' clock that night, the phone rang. It was FA. He apologized over and over again for the troubles. He told me he had most of the artwork done, and he'd have the rest of it done by the end of the week, Monday at the latest.

I asked him where he'd been. The answer: jail.

FA was driving through Alabama when he was pulled over for speeding. Unfortunately, the same thing had happened to him in that state two years ago, and he hadn't ever bothered to pay that ticket, so the trooper hauled him off to the county jail.

FA used his one phone call to contact his wife and ask her to make bail. Sadly, they'd been fighting recently, and this was the last straw. She refused to pay his fine, so he rotted there for 10 days.

Now, I've heard a lot of excuses from freelancers in my day, but this was the best yet. After I stopped laughing—he told it as a pretty funny tale—I told him that Monday would be fine. I spent the next hour calling up all the other artists I'd lined up and telling them to forget it for now.

About six pages worth of artwork showed up in Zeke's hands the next day, so a bit of my faith in FA was restored. I went back to work on finishing up the books, thinking I had just dodged a bullet.

Monday came and went without the rest of the artwork—a full 18 pages still—showing up, and FA's phone, which had worked the previous week, was now "temporarily disconnected" again. I knew another artist who lived near FA, so I called him up and begged him to do whatever he could to get FA to contact me. He gave up FA's wife's cell phone number, which I began to call every hour on the hour until I got a response.

FA actually picked up the phone himself on the fourth or fifth try. He said that he had sent the material out by UPS. He'd have to check the tracking number and get back to me. Believe it or not, this is now as common as "The check is in

the mail," but I still clung to my slim hope. Of course, he never got back to me.

The next day, I went through the routine again, and after another five or six tries, I got FA on the phone. He gave me a tracking number which UPS had no record of, so I tried calling him back again.

I sent him another letter by UPS, demanding the artwork. By now, this was the Wednesday of the week before Origins. I had to leave exactly one week later for the convention, and for the book to have any chance of making it to Gen Con, it had to be out of my hands before I left.

Meanwhile, I had another artist on my hands whose package actually did get lost by FedEx, which I can confirm because they found it, resent it, and lost it again. Fortunately, he'd made photocopies of the artwork, which he was able to scan and post to a private website, 10 pieces or so at a time, for me to download.

Of course, we're talking 40 or 50 pieces here, so it took a while.

The next day, I got a call from Zeke back in Blacksburg. He had good news and bad news. The good news was the package from FA had finally arrived. The bad news was that of the 18 pages that were supposed to be in there, there were only three.

Follow me here. This is Thursday afternoon when I find this out. I now have six days to commission and get in 18 pages of artwork, about six of which have to be colored by computer first before they can make it into the book.

Most professional artists can pump out one page a day, and the same goes for colorists. If you do the math, you can see I was a dead man.

I called up just about every artist I knew and asked them what they were doing that weekend. I found five, including two guys I'd never even heard of before, willing to pitch in. Some of them worked throughout the night and into Friday to get the six to-be-colored pieces overnighted to Blacksburg to be there on Saturday morning so that Zeke could corral

everyone he knew with a computer to pitch in on the coloring.

I want to publicly thank these guys: Richard Pollard, Mike Chen, Nick Napolitano, Mike Sellers, and Kim DeMulder handled the emergency art chores, while Zeke Sparkes, Matt Tice, Chuck Croft, and Chris Impink worked the magic colors.

Anyhow, at this point, overnight mail is too slow, so I spent most of my time downloading artwork from where Zeke left it in the Pinnacle FTP site. I pulled an all-nighter the night before I had to leave for Origins, downloading artwork until after the crack of dawn. I popped it all into the manuscript and printed out the pages for the printer's proofs as I went.

I grabbed a couple hours of sleep while the printer churned away at the proofs. Then I bundled the whole thing up, hit a UPS drop box at 5 PM on my way out of town, and drove off to Columbus, Ohio, to attend Origins, which began the next day.

THE DEBUT

Thankfully, everything went smoothly with the printer, and we were able to debut *Brave New World* right on schedule, Friday, August 6, 1999, right smack in the middle of Gen Con. It was so close, though, that I actually had to drive back down to my home, just over an hour away from Milwaukee, on Thursday night so I could meet the delivery truck there on Friday morning and haul the books back up to Milwaukee myself.

Debuting the game at Gen Con was a real kick. We had a volunteer by the name of David Ross dress up as Patriot, the captured leader of the Defiants who had been sentenced to death. We had a couple of guards parade him throughout the hall in shackles until they reached our booth. Then we lined him up against the wall and had him say a few last words. And the guards shot him dead.

Well, that's what we had originally planned. We had Blaze

Miskulin—a friend of mine with a degree in set design and a lot of behind-the-scenes stage experience—set us up with rifles and blanks and bloods packs—the whole nine yards. We even had written permission from Wizards of the Coast, which owns and operates Gen Con.

Then that day trader went nuts and shot a lot of innocent people in Atlanta the week before the show. The Wizards people suddenly changed their minds, believing that firing off a few rounds of bullets—even blanks—in a crowded hall was the equivalent of shouting “Fire!” in a crowded theater.

After talking to us about it, we agreed to change the production. In the new version, the guards turned out to be part of the Defiants, and Patriot got away.

In the end, it actually worked out for the best. I ended up changing the plotline of the game’s story arc just a bit, but I think it makes for an even stronger story than before. For all the gory details, pick up a copy of *Defiants* to see what I mean.

During the “execution,” we had people stacked up six or eight deep, craning their necks to see what was going on. Afterward, we got a rousing ovation, and many of the people lined up with cash in hand to pick up the books and get them signed by Zeke, Ashe, and myself.

I autographed over 200 books in less than two hours. Whenever I signed a book for someone, I had him sign my personal copy of *Brave New World* as well. This was a bit I had picked up from Shane who had done it last year. When all’s said and done, that book is one of the things I treasure most from that show.

Still, the greatest moment of that day wasn’t the “execution” or the autograph session or seeing people lined up around the booth and down the aisle. No, it was a moment I had all to myself that morning.

After I had helped the trucker move all the books from his truck into mine, I sat down on top of those boxes of books, and I cracked one open. Finally holding that book in my hand was something else. All the hard work had finally paid

What Was I Thinking?

off.

I just sat there in the early morning sun and savored that moment for as long as I could before I had to kiss my wife and son good-bye, jump back in the driver's seat, and head off to the big show in Milwaukee. The streets were quiet but for the occasional car passing by on a nearby crossroad. The air was warm and humid. And the pages of that book were as beautiful as a single cloud floating by on a sunny, spring day.

So that's what I was thinking.