

What I Think of the d20 System

By Matt Forbeck

It rocks.

And I hate it.

The d20 System—a.k.a. *Dungeons & Dragons* dragged kicking and screaming into the 21st century—is easily one of the most rigorously designed roleplaying games ever made. How many other games require over 960 pages of densely packed material just to get started? And that's even without much more than a passing nod to a true setting. Add in the *Forgotten Realms* hardcover, and you're up to 1,280 pages and just getting warmed up.

You have to appreciate the amount of hard work and dedication that went into even generating that amount of text and art, not to mention the countless hours spent playtesting the results to death. At Wizards' standard rate of 750 words per page, that comes out to 720,000 words just for the three core rulebooks. That's far more than the whole *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. You could even toss in *The Hobbit* and still have room to spare.

In short, the d20 System is about everything that most people could want in a fantasy roleplaying game. Sure, it may not run to your particular tastes, but admire it for the rigor of its design. It seems as if the Wizards' design team took everything they'd learned from years of designing rules for *Magic: The Gathering*—likely the most rules-lawyered game in history—and applied it to the most popular roleplaying game of all time.

Of course, this is exactly what I hate about it too. It is so thorough that it's easy to drown in all of the rules. The game feels like it was built for a player, someone who only has to know a limited subset of the rules to get going—how to play a 1st-level fighter, for instance—and can learn the rest as she goes along. The Dungeon Master, on the other hand, has to swallow and digest most of those several hundred thousand words and use them to run a coherent game. That's a lot to ask of someone.

It's even more to ask of a designer. I've written hundreds of thousands of words for d20 products—with more to come, no doubt—and I still find that I'm constantly learning more about the system and how it really works.

Shed no tears for me here, but writing for the d20 System—whether for official *Dungeons & Dragons* material or for any of the coattail publishers—is hard work. Not only do you have to know the rules as well as any Dungeon Master, you need to be able to pull them apart to see what makes them tick. Then you have to take those building blocks and use them to build something new and magnificent that meshes—to one extent or another—with the original rules.

Jonathan, Monte, and Skip did a bang-up job with the *Dungeons & Dragons* core rules, but they built a fairly rigid framework on which to hang their creation's flesh. Because of this, you can't get away with many of the standard game master or designer cheats. You can't just thumbnail a villain's stats and say, "That looks about right." There actually is a single, proper way to figure those numbers out, and it's your obligation to get it right.

I have a lot of respect for the effort that went into the d20 System, and the results. But sometimes I miss the old days when it was a bit easier to fudge things to get them the way you wanted.

That whining out of the way, I have one more thing to say:

“Bless you, Open Gaming License!”

The brainchild of Ryan Dancey—now of OrganizedPlay (www.organizedplay.com)—the Open Gaming License officially opened the d20 System to the world. This put a lot of money in the pockets of just about everyone who leapt onto the d20 coattails. Those who did it right made more than those who happened to be clue-free, and rightly so.

On a personal level, this has allowed me to make a decent living writing mostly for the d20 System over the past year. Companies that normally couldn't have afforded to hire me have waved sweet deals under my nose instead, and it's all because they sell more copies of a d20 product than they do of anything else. This means they can share the wealth, and I can feed my family.

So, despite what I said before, on a professional level, there's nothing but love here. I might have to spend a little more time making sure I get my rules right when writing a d20 book, but that's more than made up for by the rise in my paychecks.

Better yet, if you read the Open Gaming License closely, you'll see that the d20 System—whether you call it that or not—is permanently open to outside development. Even if the license is modified later, you can still publish materials under any earlier version of the license. In effect, it ensures that no matter who may get their hands on *Dungeons & Dragons* in the future—or should someone even decide to shelve the brand—the game will always live on.

If the d20 System did nothing else for any of us, that one accomplishment stands head and shoulders above all else. Think about it. Until the end of time, people can make and publish their own material for *Dungeons & Dragons*. So Peter, Ryan, Bill, Ed, Rich, Keith, Cindi, Jim, Jonathan, Monte, Skip, and the cast of thousands at Wizards of the Coast who made the new *Dungeons & Dragons* a reality: Thanks for the cool toys!