

The Fashan Phenomenon

Modern legend has it that since 1982, as their fingers cramped to the bone from repeatedly tossing 20-sided die, campaign-weary role-players would sheath their magic swords, retire to the stained oak tables of their adopted "Hall of Fire" and match egos in verbal battle to claim the night's most enthralling tale. And with the dawn, their tankards drained more times than any could remember, their stories more exhausted than their minds, increasingly these stalwart comrades would turn their debating tongues to the one unanswered question in all the gaming universe:

Is *The Spawn of Fashan* a parody, or is it just incredibly bad?

Amazingly, the one person with the answer didn't know anyone cared. But that changed in January 1998 with a cold phone call, just as I was herding my kids out the door to visit their grandparents. I almost didn't answer the annoying ring, but something spurred me to act.

"Are you Kirby Davis?" the hesitant caller asked. "*The Kirby Davis? The one who designed *The Spawn of Fashan*?"*

Dead and gone Marley didn't stagger Scrooge as much as that did me. Yes, I sluggishly admitted, I had concocted the *Spawn* role-playing game – a fact I had filed away and forgotten for more than a decade. But the caller from Florida sounded overjoyed. Quickly he asked if I might be interested in reprinting and distributing the game at his expense.

"Why on earth for?" I said (excuse the paraphrase), since that's how I felt. And so I learned of the debate that has apparently raged ever since the 1982 April (Fools) edition of the *Dragon* magazine unleashed upon the world one of history's most scathingly playful pannings.

Though tickled at the whole concept of my game lying at the center of an Internet debate, I dismissed it as some little quirk of life. One of God's mysteries. But roughly six months later came a second call with an almost identical opening, this time from a man in North Carolina. Interested in buying a copy, he too quickly cut to the key question – was *Spawn* truly serious, or a parody?

When I explained it was indeed serious, this caller – just like the guy from Florida – seemed stunned. And that stunned me. *What was going on, that people halfway across the nation would track down the author of a game last sold almost two decades ago to only a handful of people?*

Being unplugged myself, I had a friend (take a bow, Travis Clark) tap the Net to catch a glimpse of the debate. Within a minute he found more than 20 chat board discussions of something I had created and shelved. On the Web itself, the game appeared again and again as the favorite choice of loonies, while a group of northern gamers had once discussed having a *tournament* in *Spawn*.

Amazing. Ludicrous. Unbelievable.
The Fashan Phenomenon.

Serious?" both callers had scoffed, amazed that anyone would admit to releasing a game of such legendary poor quality (to some eyes, anyway).

But to be honest, all of us behind *Spawn* had been quite serious – seventeen years ago.

The whole experience proved a defining moment in my life. Exposed by Kevin Breazile (take a bow, Kevin) to role-playing at (what in the 1978 could rightfully be considered) the University of Football in Norman, Oklahoma, I quickly realized how the logic behind such a game could help me maintain continuity in a series of fantasy novels I had started writing in high school. By mid-1979, I had designed a system to substantiate Fashan, the planet at the heart of my *War and Peace* saga. Within a year, its evergrowing band of players considered the evolving game quite fun – so much so that a lustful entrepreneurial spirit took root. "This is just

so much better than everything else out there," players often said, though we actually knew little about what else was out there.

But we knew what we had – a game where each character was truly unique, with influencing factors ranging from acne to schizophrenia; where not only levels but attributes and statistics grew with experience; where combat was both strategic and tactical, with a multitude of attack choices and simultaneous defensive responses keying results determined by comparing individual abilities and skills, guile, fate and the craftsmanship of the weapons and armor; where the storyline was told with such zeal that it commanded the game. Most of all, in the spirit of *Cosmic Encounter* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, the game was made to be fun. Serious, but fun.

That is where our troubles began.

Entering my junior year as a student in the OU journalism college's professional writing sequence, I plotted traveling to the 1981 world science fiction convention in Denver to work on my honors program thesis on – what else? – writing *The Great American Fantasy Novel*. Somewhere along the way playful discussions started on how the Mile High City offered a great platform for revealing our glorious masterwork to a deprived world. It didn't take long for those discussions to grow beyond the playful stage or for complications to surface.

Few of the game's rules were strictly defined, so I set about detailing the superstructure for how *Spawn* would be played within the confines of my novels. An outline was established to deliver both a simple rulebook and a player's guide in what I hoped would be an easy-to-use format.

But as my work progressed, our sales booth was secured and our funding established, I gradually realized that I didn't want to deliver a game based on Fashan. That storyline was my baby, after all, and releasing its elements in anything outside of my prose seemed wrong. Therefore the whole scope of the project changed halfway through, evolving almost daily into a system that tried to advise prospective players on how to design their own unique role-playing games (as I had). And yet I didn't have time to effectively accomplish that, for the task of simply producing the game required several weeks of all-nighters at my hometown newspaper – first to pound out the ever-changing manuscript on a primitive word processor (Spell checker? Editor? Proofreader? Only in your dreams!), then to actually get it pasted down and ready for the printer.

The scope of the effort drained and confounded me. Often I found myself at deadline reconsidering some rule to add or table to adapt for this orphaned game. Several vital elements I ran out of energy and time to complete, such as the index and reference guide (thus the blank inside covers). Other elements, like the map and example of play, I had to create on the spur of the moment – which in my increasingly exhausted state opened the door for my (sometimes questionable) wit to emerge in full force. Indeed, many elements of the book ended up being played up for comic effect, such as the spoof of our future products – although some of those games I wrote up were real (and more loved by some players than *Spawn*). If *Spawn* had found a public of buying loonies, we might have produced some of my other designs (if you're interested, give me a call).

Back to the past. At key moments in our game production, I lost access to the typesetter and the paste-up tables, which spurred further rush jobs. And as the stack of completed pages slowly grew, my general weariness (and small-town newspaper film/wax/glue woes) led to a multitude of last-minute corrections that ultimately fell far short of what was needed (but for artist Bruce Anderson's help, the finished product would have looked far worse than it did – take a huge bow, Bruce).

Despite all that, *Spawn* still fills me with pride. Not because of what it says (ouch!) or offers (double ouch!), but because of what it represents. It was a herculean accomplishment, putting the

game together through my 16-hour spring semester at OU and a summer of love that ended in marriage, all the while maintaining three jobs and my "A" average. But more importantly, the game stands out as a time when nine of my friends (cash-poor students all) had enough faith in me to invest \$50 each (which back then was a lot of money) to pay for a convention sales table, printing costs, stationery and traveling expenses. I may have done the lion's share of the work, but my friends made it possible.

After all that, the convention proved a letdown. A small band of us left for Denver hoping the game would fly off the table, allowing us to rework and polish the product. And even if it didn't sell, we told ourselves we would be satisfied, for we had nice printed copies of our own. Such was our mindset as we crossed the Great Plains and set up camp at a KOA just east of the Rockies (you see, we couldn't afford to stay at a hotel... but that's another story).

Very quickly reality set in. While we went to Denver to hock the game (which increasingly competed for my attention with my scholastic goals), we remained fans who wanted to participate in the goings on. Yet it's hard to enjoy a science fiction convention when you're spending most of your time behind a vendor's table, surrounded by professionals who are far more prepared to do business than you are. To make matters worse, nearly every vendor we spoke with considered *Denvention II* a dud (for business, at least). After the opening day, few customers walked the aisles, and even fewer spent any money. So for us, the convention was a disappointment. I got my scholarly interviews completed (thank you Stephen Donaldson, C.L. Moore and C.J. Cherryh), but by the end of the week, only a dozen browsers bought a 96-page *Spawn* booklet, with 10 of those copies "certified" (notarized) as the first ones produced.

While the *Spawn* demonstration went well despite having only a handful of players (it was scheduled opposite the Hugos, naturally), and participating in the panel discussion on game design boosted my ego, we decided to close up shop early, caught some *Star Blazers* and went on home. Such was our naivete that we were one of the few vendors to actually buckle under the heavy-handed Denver officials and pay sales tax (some \$10, I believe; the other vendors thought we were silly for doing it).

It all would have ended there had I not, in my arrogance, cast out a few seeds for review among the role-playing press. That allowed the sloppiness of my work to draw national attention.

The Space Gamer in March 1982 gave us an honest going-over with a few good words. "There's far greater simulation of melee than most games, with less complication than those games which try to be as realistic, and there are some fascinating new ideas such as a 6th sense capability.... *Spawn* could have been superb, but it is ruined by abominable writing and proofreading. It took four readings to figure out the combat rules and I'm still hazy on one or two points. Sections of the rules are mislabeled or left out, and you're referred to tables ostensibly vital to play - which you're then told you are supposed to create yourself.... *The Spawn of Fashan* is a fascinating set of fantasy combat rules which are trying to become a full role-playing game. Future planned supplements may allow *Spawn* to become the excellent FRPG which the author's enthusiasm and inventiveness have tried to create. However, its current value seems limited to experienced FRPG players who want something novel. Beginners will be baffled, and games happy with their current rules will find little reason to journey to the far planet of Fashan."

Notice *The Space Gamer* made no references to the "humorous" elements in *Spawn*, such as map directions referring to where Melvin is standing now (or then, I guess). No, that fell to the *Dragon*.

And so, at last, we get to what secured my place in the Hall of Fame for Role-playing Loonies. Ahh, the infamy that results from a two-page panning in TSR's flagship magazine!

The *Dragon* review is simply a fun read, filled with zingers that make you want to see this thing for yourself. Here are a few:

- "By the time I reached the rules quagmire entitled 'Combat,' I could only wonder in amazement that any set of rules could be this bad. Then the light started to dawn. Plowing through the monstrous 'Tables and Charts' section, I began to grin, and by the end of the book, I was laughing loudly."

- "The rules themselves are just plain amazing: a nearly impenetrable jungle of modifiers, special cases, tertiary statistics and references to references. But don't despair; hidden deep in this jungle is a treasure of fun for the whole family!"

- "The monsters are also a million laughs, especially their names. Another party game: try to read the monster list aloud and keep a straight face."

In a nutshell, the *Dragon* first dismissed *Spawn* for its many faults, only to praise it as a role-playing parody. "*The Spawn of Fashan* is a gold mine of humor for the discerning gaming fan," it closed, "and should be required reading for all prospective role-playing game designers."

As God would have it (and the inner workings of this still remain a mystery to me), those who read with amused disbelief that wracking accounting have tried ever since to find a copy in their favorite game shop, just to see if it was really that bad (or good). That spurred store managers to try to order the game, without success. And eventually (probably by rolling several successive 20s) these searchers encountered some of the 12 who actually paid good money for their copies at the Mile High City. "Hey, we met these guys," the 12 might have said, "and they seemed serious."

For myself, the game soon lost its interest. As marriage took over my life, I found shorter, more interactive contests better fit my time. More important, I became increasingly dissatisfied with the role-playing experience. As a Christian, it troubled me to watch players use *Spawn* as a way to pillage, rob and murder (inspiring the boring sample in the rulebook - a "dreaded chore," as the *Dragon* suggested). I wanted players to immerse themselves in the righteous battles of the Fashan storyline. When they chose instead to simply cause mayhem, the game became an avenue for players to do things I considered morally wrong. It didn't take long before I couldn't motivate myself to participate.

I have to admit, the attacks on my writing hurt, however justified they were. They also taught a valuable lesson: my natural skills, which had allowed me to cut corners in high school and college, would not guarantee success in the real world.

After all, before we ever left for Denver, I had already identified most of the problems that *The Space Gamer* and *Dragon* brought out in print. Had I been wiser, I would have held the game for further corrections or cancelled the whole project - or at least not submitted it to the press. But in all three cases, my arrogance and blind confidence had spurred me to move on - thus exposing not only myself, but my friends to ridicule. I felt I let them all down.

But time went on, and an incredible chapter in my life came to an end - or so I thought. Other aggravating twists awaited me, like escaping the Oklahoma City bombing by having my nose stuck in Tom Clancy's *Red Storm Rising*, or enduring a Secret Service probe of my life simply because a car wash broke off a side mirror on my Geo Metro. But through it all, nothing amazes me more than this surviving interest in *Spawn* - apparently global, since we've had inquiries not just from California to Massachusetts, or Washington to Florida, but also from Germany, France, Australia and England.

Truly, God works in mysterious ways.

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