Script – Even More Editions of D&D

by Justin Alexander – June 25th, 2021

Last month I did a video called *Every Edition of D&D*, which was a quick history of the world’s first roleplaying game from 1970 until today, through the lens of every single version of the game which has ever been published.

Or so I thought.

Since the video came out, a number of people have told me that I forgot to include a bunch of different versions of D&D.

Some of them were right. Most them were wrong.

But I thought it would be fun to take a look at some of these games and the place they have in the history of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

First up, a lot of people mentioned the **board games**.

None of these are actually editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Even if they have the D&D trademark on the cover, they are NOT roleplaying games. They don’t count.

But, just like the 1980’s cartoon, many of these board games are, in fact, the way that new players got introduced to the fantasy worlds and adventure of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and from there it was a short hop, skip, and a jump to discovering the wild world of roleplaying games.

I’m not going to list all of the licensed and tie-in D&D board games that have ever been published – that’s probably a whole video by itself – but let’s take a peek at a couple of notable examples.

First up is the original *Dungeon!*

Designed by David Megarry, it’s notable because it actually predates D&D.

Megarry was a player in Dave Arneson’s original Blackmoor campaign, and in 1972, two years before D&D was published (and before Gygax had even played the game!), he put together a prototype boardgame that attempted to capture everything awesome about the world’s first roleplaying game but without the Dungeon Master. *Dungeon!* was published by TSR just a few months after D&D itself. It features four character classes – Elves, Heroes, Superheroes, and Wizards – who, of course, seek treasure in the dungeon.

*Dungeon!* has been revamped several times, with new editions in 1989, 1992, 2012, and 2014.

*Dungeon!*, however,was not TSR’s only attempt to capture D&D on a board.

In 1993, *DragonStrike* – the logo for which notably featured the same red dragon as the contemporary black box Basic Set – included a VHS cassette tape depicting a cheesy, live action D&D adventure.

[INSERT VIDEO]

The video bizarrely has very little to do with the board game, although it did include some DM tips.

Much later, during D&D’s 4th Edition, Wizards of the Coast released a very successful line of cooperative D&D board games: *Castle Ravenloft*, *Wrath of Ashardalon*, *The Legend of Drizzt*, *Temple of Elemental Evil*, and *Tomb of Annihilation*.

These games are all cross-compatible (allowing you to mix-and-match characters, equipment, missions, and the like). They are sometimes described as actually using the rules for D&D 4th Edition, but that’s not really accurate. Although the games used some 4th Edition terminology – much like *Dungeon!* used the term “hit points” for example – the mechanics, which are known as the D&D Adventure System, are not remotely the same. And if you try to play these games – as some people do – the same way you’d play 4th Edition, you will quickly become frustrated and lose.

Just last year, Wizards also released *Dungeons & Dragons: Adventure Begins*, a different adventure board game draped in D&D terminology and lore.

Like I said, this barely scratches the surface of D&D board games. There are even games – like *Three-Dragon Ante* – which are ostensibly part of D&D game worlds, but also available for sale at your friendly local gaming store so that you can play them just like your characters do.

Let’s talk about another game that isn’t D&D, but close: **Dragonlance: Fifth Age**.

Dragonlance was huge in the ’80s.

It was arguably the first true adventure path, although the term “adventure path” wouldn’t be coined until 2000 to describe the first slate of 3rd Edition modules and, by some definitions, it was preceded by the GDQ series of modules.

It’s sometimes referred to as D&D’s second official campaign setting after Greyhawk – although Blackmoor, Mystara, and the Forgotten Realms all have different arguments for usurping that title.

But its real claim to fame are the bestselling fantasy novels by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman. These weren’t the first D&D tie-in novel (that’s Andre Norton’s Quag Keep from 1978). But the success of the Chronicles and Legends trilogies launched TSR’s novel division and the hundreds of books which followed.

In 1996, TSR decided to spin-off *Dragonlance* into a completely new RPG: The SAGA System was a diceless roleplaying game, using cards for character creation and action resolution. In 1998, the SAGA System would be used again for a new version of the *Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game*.

Because Dragonlance is (and remains) so closely related to *Dungeons & Dragons*, it’s unsurprising that *Dragonlance: Fifth Age* is also often associated with D&D. But it’s not D&D.

So was there anything I missed in the original video which WAS D&D?

Yes.

First, there is the **Games Workshop Basic Set**.

In 1977, when the Holmes Basic Set was published, Games Workshop was officially licensing D&D in the United Kingdom. They produced their own version of the Basic Set, featuring unique art by John Blanche on the cover and new interior art by Chris Baker.

The *Every Edition of D&D* video didn’t include foreign translations and other licensed versions of the game, but the Games Workshop Basic Set definitely straddles the line. It’s technically an official, English-language version of the game, even if it wasn’t produced by TSR.

Twenty years later, Wizards of the Coast produced a **Fast-Play version of AD&D** in 1998, which included introductory rules, pregenerated characters, and a short adventure all designed by Jeff Grubb.

The initial booklet was followed in 1999 by *Wrath of the Minotaur* and *Eye of the Wyvern*, which bundled the original 1998 material with additional adventures that could be played separately or together to form a mini-campaign.

These were kind of introductions to the introductions, pointing people towards either the *Introduction to the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* boxed set or the 1999 Adventure Game.

Without character creation or advancement rules, some would argue that these Fast-Play games aren’t really complete roleplaying games. But they’re definitely complete experiences and I think they count as distinct versions of the game, although not a unique edition.

In the transition between AD&D and 3rd Edition, two new fast-play games were released: *Crypt of Smoke* and a *Diablo II* tie-in. These weren’t compatible with the previous fast-play games, but the *Diablo II* tie-in was also put in a box with dice and sold as the *Dungeons & Dragons Adventure Game* – *Diablo II Edition*.

With the actual release of 3rd Edition, these were followed by the *Caves of Shadow* and a D&D Movie Fast Play Game. Which, as far as I know, ended Wizards’ experiment with fast-play D&D products.

As I mentioned in the original video, Wizards’ release of 3rd Edition also saw the release of the Open Game License or OGL.

What I didn’t mention were the **System Reference Documents**.

Wizards didn’t want to make D&D itself open content. So what they did was release a document that contained just the rules of the game and placed THAT under the OGL. This document was known as the System Reference Document.

System Reference Documents – or SRDs – were released for 3rd Edition, 3.5, 4th Edition (which didn’t use the OGL, but had an SRD for use with a different licensing scheme), and 5th Edition. These aren’t really distinct versions of the game and they often lack key components in an effort to require the use of the original D&D core rulebooks, but they’re official releases that many people use extensively when playing D&D.

Something I thought of as being in a similar category were the **D&D Basic Rules** – a PDF released by Wizards of the Coast which contains a stripped down version of the 5th Edition rules without any fancy formatting.

I have been firmly informed that this was a mistake: The Basic Rules may be a subset of the 5th Edition rulebooks, but they are a complete ruleset that many consider definitive, preferring to use the Basic Rules as their core D&D rulebook.

As someone who designed *Legends & Labyrinths* to fulfill the exact same function for 3rd Edition, I stand corrected. The Basic Rules deserve recognition alongside the Starter Set and Essential Set as a distinct version of the 5th Edition of D&D.

Something else we talked about in the original video was the concept of “half editions.” 3.5 and D&D 4th Edition Essentials were both published with full sets of new rulebooks to replace the old ones, but 2nd Edition just published MORE core rulebooks in the form of the Players’ Options. And, by extension, some people refer to the *Unearthed Arcana* supplement for 1st Edition as being AD&D 1.5.

This led a number of people to suggest **other “half editions” of the game**.

The three most popular suggestions were OD&D plus *Supplement I: Greyhawk*; 3.5 plus *The Book of Nine Swords*; and 5th Edition plus *Xanathar’s Guide to Everything* and/or *Tasha’s Cauldron of Everything*.

*Supplement I: Greyhawk* was released in 1975, the year after the game originally released, and notably added Thieves and Paladins to the game, along with a gaggle of new rules and tweaks to existing rules (particularly the awarding of experience points).

*The Book of Nine Swords* was kind of an early test flight for D&D 4th Edition, introducing a bunch of new fighter-type classes which were designed to work more like the caster classes.

*Xanathar’s* and *Tasha’s* are both goulash supplements, packed full with an eclectic mixture of new options and a few tweaks to existing sub-systems.

Are these distinct editions of the game?

Well, the thing is is that EVERY supplement adds stuff to the game. And many of them add new rules or tweak the existing rules in new ways. That’s basically the whole purpose of a supplement. You could argue that a 2nd Edition game using the Complete Handbooks, which added kits to classes, was a different game than 2nd Edition using just the core rulebooks. Or that a 3rd Edition campaign using the alternative spellcasting systems in the *Tome of Magic* supplement was a different game than core-only 3.5.

And you’d be right.

As I mentioned before, I don’t even think *Unearthed Arcana* really counts as a distinct edition. So I don’t think these other proposed “half-editions” count, either.

But I do think that everyone’s version of D&D is at least a little bit unique: What rules are you using? What house rules have you created? What classes are people playing? Every table charts its own course, and D&D is not so much a point of a light, as it is a limitless cascade of constellations glittering across the sky.

And I think that’s cool.

Am I still missing anything? Let me know in the comments below! And if this is your first time in the wild wilderness of the Alexandrian, make a Wisdom (Survival) check to find that Subscribe button!

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I hope to see you at the table!