cards you could clip a business card to or write on, allowing you to keep track of valuable contact information. Unless you lost the entire Rolodex, which happened more often than you might think.) I wrote for *Marvel Age* for a few years (from 1984 to 1987), eventually becoming "The Mutant Reporter" and churning out a monthly column that covered all the *X-Men* titles in publication at the time.

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

By May of 1980, I was wrapping up my freshman year of college, but I couldn't wait to experience another *Star Wars* movie. *The Empire Strikes Back* revealed itself to be *Episode V* during the opening crawl. I knew this from articles I read in *Starlog* and other places, but actually seeing it up there on the big screen made it all too real. Even as I was trying to absorb the details about Hoth and Dagobah and Cloud City, and the revelations concerning the true relationship between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader, part of my mind was imagining what might possibly happen in the as-yet-unmade Episodes I, II, and III. (Spoiler alert: Mr. Lucas's version didn't even come close to what I had conjured in my imagination.)

But what about *The Empire Strikes Back*? Did it live up to the promise of the original film? I can answer that with an unequivocal "yes." Sure, I understand the arguments that claim *Episode V* isn't a complete movie. That it leaves you hanging for three years to see what happens to Han Solo. And I know that nothing can beat the first film for originality, tension (the Death Star emerging from orbit to attack Yavin IV as the super laser heats up provides a countdown and an intensity that makes that climax a real nail-biter!), and for how it established the conflict between the Rebels and the Empire. But I love *The Empire Strikes Back*. It's a darker, more layered story that still manages to provide laughs at the appropriate moments. And the script explodes with quips and one-liners that fans have been gleefully quoting for almost forty years. Letting a new director and new screenwriters take charge of the project brought new insights and a fresh perspective to the film. And the emergence of new characters such as Yoda, Lando, and Boba Fett helped push *Episode V* to the top of my Best *Star Wars* Movies list.

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What stands out in my memory about seeing *The Empire Strikes Back* for the first time? Let's go to the bulleted list!

- The creepy and sinister probe droid, skulking across the snowy landscape as it searches for the Rebels.
- Tauntauns! (And you thought they smelled bad on the outside!)
- Imperial Walkers!
- The *Millennium Falcon*'s race through the asteroid field! (Never tell me the odds!)
- Darth Vader and the bounty hunters! (No disintegrations!)
- Dagobah and Yoda! (Do or do not, there is no try.)
- Cloud City!
- Lando Calrissian!
- Han frozen in carbonite!
- "I love you." "I know."
- "Apology accepted, Captain Needa."
- The lightsaber duel between Luke and Darth.
- Luke loses his hand!
- "I am your father!"
- Luke gets a cybernetic hand.

I could watch that movie over and over. (And I have.)

Yoda. Who would have thought that a puppet could be an ancient Jedi master? To make Yoda more alien, they made him speak in anastrophe, where the normal order of the subject, object, and verb in a sentence are changed. A simple thing that went lightyears toward defining the character and making him unique. The way he talked made Yoda instantly interesting and made you remember the words of wisdom he uttered to Luke on Dagobah.

After the release of *The Empire Strikes Back*, the marketing machine really got going. Toys and other merchandise exploded onto the scene, and this time it was all ready to release with the movie. *Empire* was a rare sequel for the time, one that was as

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good as the original film and may have even managed to surpass it (I certainly think so). Action figures and accessories, more comic books, a trilogy of novels featuring Lando Calrissian, bedsheets, t-shirts, drinking glasses, and more filled the aisles at stores and fast-food franchises from New York to California as *Star Wars* became even more popular than it had been three years earlier. They even re-released the original film the following year, adding *Episode IV: A New Hope* to the opening crawl so that it matched *Empire's* opening.

RETURN OF THE JEDI

This inundation of *Star Wars* as a cultural phenomenon continued to the release of *Return of the Jedi* in 1983. *Episode VI* premiered to larger crowds and made more at the box office than its predecessor, but I consider it to be the weakest of the three original films. Don't get me wrong. I enjoy *Return* and think it deserves to be looked upon favorably as part of the original trilogy. I don't think it comes close to the originality of the first film or the brilliance of the sequel though. First off, even though the stakes appear higher, the use of a second Death Star feels been-there, done-that. I would have preferred to see something new and different instead of just a bigger version of what the Rebels defeated in the first movie. I also dislike the way they decided to deal with Boba Fett, turning the bad-ass bounty hunter into a bumbling joke taken out accidently by a half-blind Han Solo.

What do I like about *Return of the Jedi*? Back to the bulleted list!

- The opening sequence, from C-3PO and R2-D2 approaching Jabba's Palace to the rescue of Han and our heroes flying away from the exploding sail barge (the Boba Fett situation notwithstanding).
- Leia as Boush and the thermal detonator ploy.
- Luke in the Rancor pit.
- Leia dispatching Jabba the Hutt.
- The speeder bike chase through the trees of Endor's forest moon.
- Ewoks!
- C-3PO as a golden god!

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- C-3PO as a masterful storyteller, again proving that he's either a liar or a great exaggerator of the truth. (Remember that in *A New Hope* he tells Luke that he's "not much more than an interpreter and not very good at telling stories.")
- The Emperor. He throws Force lightning!
- Luke's confrontation with Darth Vader.
- The *Millennium Falcon* (with Lando at the controls) racing through the narrow confines of the half-completed Death Star.

In the end, Luke redeems his father, the Emperor is defeated, and another Death Star is destroyed. The heroes celebrate alongside their Ewok allies with a party—yub yub!—where Leia tells Han that Luke is her brother as she expresses her true feelings for the scruffy-looking scoundrel. Even though there's still a lot of Empire out there in the galaxy, the film ends with the suggestion that the Rebel Alliance has achieved victory and the New Republic will rise shortly.

But that was that. With the release of *Episode VI*, it appeared that George Lucas had had enough of that far, far away galaxy. At least for a little while. At the moment of its greatest triumph, Mr. Lucas turned his attention to other projects. Darkness was about to descend upon the franchise, but it was a darkness that would set the stage for West End Games.

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Chapter Three:

A DARK TIME FOR THE FRANCHISE

Between Trilogy and Hobby Game, Oblivion

By the end of 1983, the *Star Wars* trilogy was complete. From the looks of things, Han and Leia were going to live happily ever after, Luke was going to restore the Jedi Order, and the Rebel Alliance was well on its way to defeating the Empire and forming a New Republic. All was well in that galaxy far, far away.

But here in the real world, the arrival of the mid 1980s saw a decline in all things *Star Wars*. Even though the films were now labeled as *Episodes IV, V*, and *VI*, George Lucas let the world know that *Episodes I, II*, and *III* were a long way off, and the once-discussed *Episodes VII, VIII*, and *IX* might never happen. Fans were devastated. Well, at least I was devastated. I had imagined how those potential films might play out, and I wanted to see them on the big screen. I wanted to discover which of my guesses would turn out to be correct, which hunches would pay off when the next movie lit up the silver screen. Unfortunately, more *Star Wars* films didn't seem to be on the horizon.

I think Berkeley Breathed summed it up best in his *Bloom County* comic strip in 1983. Binkley chops off George Lucas's head with a lightsaber as he proclaims, "Jedi Knights don't wait 15 years for a sequel." It turned out to be more like sixteen years, and we got a prequel instead of a sequel. But that was later. Let's talk about the Dark Times.

GAME EDITOR FOR HIRE

1985 was drawing to a close and *Star Wars* was fading from the public consciousness. Sure, we had the VHS tapes, and we played them until the tapes snapped and we had to buy new copies, but that didn't do anything to make good on the promise of an entire galaxy filled with action and adventure. Fans were promised lightsabers and repulsorlifts and lightspeed jumps, damn it! Instead we got a whole lot of nothing and our attention began—reluctantly—to turn to other things.

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For me, that meant finding a real job. After college, I spent a little over a year working as a reporter and editor for the *Queens Chronicle*, a weekly tabloid that served the borough of Queens with local news and provided coupons and ads for local businesses. It was a great learning experience, but after that first year the news cycle began to repeat itself and I started to get bored. I needed a new challenge. I began scouring the want ads, looking for something that would make use of the Communications (with a concentration on Journalism and Print Media) degree I earned at St. John's University and would hopefully advance my eventual goal of becoming a Writer (whatever that meant).

I sent my resume to a lot of places that fall and winter, and I went on a lot of interviews. I was far along in the process of becoming an editor for the *Vending Machine Times* when a blind ad that I responded to finally paid off. The ad had been placed in the *New York Times* and gave no indication what company it pertained to or what I would actually do for them if they hired me, but it intrigued me nevertheless. I don't recall the exact wording, but it went something like this: "WANTED: GAME EDITOR." There was a short paragraph that followed, but it didn't reveal very much. It just asked for a resume and provided a Post Office box address to send it to.

I don't remember if I got a letter or received a phone call (this was before cell phones, but we did have one of those fancy answering machines at my house, so I probably got a recorded message after the beep). The blind ad was placed by a company called West End Games and they wanted to interview me. They asked that I bring along a writing sample, something very specific. They asked me to write a review of a hobby game, describing what I liked or didn't like about it and why. In hindsight, I suppose they wanted to see how I thought about games as a way to determine if I had the skills to become a game developer as well as an editor. Game development as a distinct step in the game design process was a hallmark of the West End Games method of game design, and they liked their creative staff to be able to switch roles as the project or schedule demanded.

I dressed in my best (and only) interview suit, braved the cold December wind, and took the bus to the subway, and then the

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subway into Manhattan. There, in the shadow of Madison Square Garden, on the upper floor of a decrepit office building just up the block from a women's homeless shelter, I first set foot inside the offices of West End Games.

To tell you the truth, I had never heard of the company before this. Sure, I was a long-time game player and Dungeon Master, and I owned most everything TSR, Inc. had published up to that point for *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Star Frontiers* and *Boot Hill*. My gaming group had even tried to play GDW's *Traveller*, although we never quite made it out of character creation. But I never noticed *Paranoia* in the hobby shop and I wasn't into the heavy-duty war games such as *Killer Angels* that had thus far been West End Game's claim to fame. (Some think the name for the company came from the location of the office on the west side of Manhattan. In an interview with original owner Scott Palter, it was revealed that the name came from the bar where the company was formally created and the legal papers were signed—the West End Bar near Columbia University.)

With portfolio in hand, freshly printed copies of my resume on gray parchment, and my review of a hobby game—I chose *Wabbit Wampage*, a recently released board game from Pacesetter that played as an homage to wacky Warner Bros. cartoons—I stepped inside and rode the rickety elevator to the 11th floor. The interview went by in a blur. I spent a lot of time with Paul Murphy and Jeff Briggs, West End's editorial team at the time, discussing my background, the games I played, what kind of books I read, and topics along those lines. I briefly met Greg Costikyan, West End Game's lead designer. And I remember answering some questions for Eric Goldberg, who ran the studio back in those days. They all told me that if I got the job, I was never ever to wear a suit to the office again, even though Eric was decked out in a suit and wore one regularly. I also got the grand tour of the facilities, which occupied the entire floor of the building and was built around the central elevator shaft. The editorial pit was on the same side of the building as the art room, and a huge playtest area was set up just off the corridor from reception.

I left the interview process feeling pretty good, but you can never tell about these sorts of things. The waiting was the worst.

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More than a week went by without a word. Then the *Vending Machine Times* called and offered me a job. Not sure what to do, I said "Thank you, I'll take it!" I immediately began to regret my decision. Writing about vending machines didn't seem like something that was going to hold my interest for more than a couple of hours at most. The coins go in, the product comes out. What else was there to say? Making sure I was gainfully employed and adding to my resume, however, was more important than keeping me professionally excited. Besides, everyone needs a first (or second, in my case) job, if only to succeed at something and move on. At least, that's what I told myself at the time. I had a starting date when, finally, Paul Murphy contacted me and offered me a job as a games editor at West End Games.

Of course, I said "Thank you, I'll take it!" It was only after the call ended that I had to deal with the situation I had gotten myself into. I had a starting date at two different companies. Since there was no way I could be in two places at the same time, I had to decide which job offer I was going to renege on. I agonized over it, not because the choice wasn't clear cut, but I hate going back on my word. I felt guilty about having already accepted a job that I didn't really want in the first place. I took a few deep breaths, compared the positive and negative aspects of both potential employers, and made the call. I let the guy over at the *Vending Machine Times* down as gently as I could, then started making plans for my first day at West End Games.

It was suddenly a very exciting holiday season for this soon-to-be game editor.

WHO YA GONNA CALL?

About this time, *Star Wars* wasn't at the forefront of my mind. It wasn't at the forefront of anybody's mind. Episodes of the animated *Droids* and *Ewoks* shows were keeping young kids engaged, even as Kenner released its last wave of *Star Wars* action figures and Marvel Comics was winding down its long-running *Star Wars* comic book. Sure, fans popped in the VHS tapes and watched the trilogy every few months or so, but that wasn't the same as waiting with baited breath for the next installment in the series and having endless discussions with likeminded friends as to what was

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definitely going to happen (or not happen) in the next movie. As 1986 dawned and *Star Wars* drifted into the background of popular culture, I began working at West End Games (affectionately called WEG by gamers and people in the industry).

When I started on that cold January morning, West End was just beginning to transition from a company that primarily produced hobby board games to a company that primarily produced roleplaying games. What's the difference? A board game is a tabletop activity that covers a fixed topic with components and rules that define the set-up, play, and victory conditions of the game. Board games often fell into three broad groups: mass-market board games (such as *Monopoly, Risk*, and *Stratego*), hobby board games (such as *Junta, Kings & Things*, and *Cosmic Encounter*), and historic board games or wargames (such as *Air & Armor, The Battle of Shiloh*, and *Eastern Front Tank Leader*, for example). At the time, hobby board games primarily utilized poster-sized paper maps, cardstock counters, and often dice of some sort to resolve game mechanics. In contrast, mass-market board games like the ones produced by Milton Bradley at the time, provided solid, card-stock game boards and plastic pieces. A few of my favorites from the latter category include *Fortress America, Shogun*, and *Axis & Allies*. Board games set limits based on their rules set and components. While the way a board game develops over the course of play depends on the strategies and moves made by the players, a board game always plays more or less along the same lines. The rules and play space are fixed and usually unchangeable.

A roleplaying game, meanwhile, is basically an advanced version of "Make-Believe" or "Cops-and-Robbers." You know, those fanciful games of the imagination we played when we were kids. Only an RPG (as we like to refer to them) has structure and rules so that the game never devolves into a shouting match of "I got you!" "No you didn't!" "Yes I did!" "That's it, I'm going home to play with my action figures!" A roleplaying game serves as a vehicle for group storytelling. One player, called the gamemaster, adjudicates the rules, narrates the adventures, and plays all the roles not filled by the primary characters in the story (the other players). This includes helpful or not-so-helpful

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supporting characters, extras, and the villains that oppose the player characters. So, where a board game is limited in play to the scope of its topic and the components provided in the box, an RPG has relatively few components (usually a character sheet and some dice, the rules, and maybe miniatures and a play surface, though those aren't strictly necessary for play).

It's the presence of the gamemaster, in fact, that makes tabletop RPGs uniquely different. Because the cooperative story that we're telling when we play an RPG isn't restricted by anything other than the imagination of the gamemaster and the players, you can literally go anywhere and do anything in a tabletop RPG. The gamemaster has the ability to add or subtract from the rules of the game as necessary, whether to advance and serve the story the group is telling, or to account for whatever amazing or foolhardy (or both!) action the players may attempt over the course of the game.

The gamemaster uses the rules to help determine the results of actions taken by the player characters. Exactly how the GM (short for gamemaster) does this depends on the play style of the GM's group. Some groups focus on the story and character interplay, improvising and acting in character as the GM narrates their tale. For other groups, the game mechanics are the big attraction, and players can't wait to optimize their characters and show off their skills in battle against the enemy. Most groups I've observed over the years tend to mix and match these two extremes to play games where the interplay of game mechanics and story are balanced, getting the most out of the experience.

Players create and play a single character in any given roleplaying game. They put all their time and effort into making their characters unique and fun to play. Whereas the gamemaster has a solid grasp of the rules and knows the secrets of the current story (usually referred to as an adventure), the players in a group might range from experienced rules lawyers who know the rules like the backs of their hands to complete novices that need to be reminded which dice to roll and when. A player needs to know the basics of the rules and how to read a character sheet, at the very least. The rest is just deciding what to do after the GM describes the situation and asks the most important question in the game: "What does your character want to do now?"

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It's important to note that while the GM knows the secrets of a gaming group's current adventure (whether the GM created the scenario or uses a published adventure module), that scenario consists primarily of an outline that features locations, scenes, and opponents, as well as an overall plot and goal for the villains. The players bring the protagonists to the table in the form of their characters, and through their actions they determine the course of the story and the outcome of events. The group—gamemaster and players together—tells the story through their interplay, their imaginations, and the results of their die rolls. The GM might have an order of events and a finale in mind, but the narrative and the ending aren't predetermined. They're the result of what happens when the players take action and interact with the situations described by the gamemaster.

The roleplaying game category debuted in 1974 when *Dungeons & Dragons* first hit the scene. By 1986, a number of companies were producing a variety of RPGs that served different genres, including TSR, Chaosium, GDW, FASA, and Pacesetter. More would enter the field later, but in 1986, it was WEG's turn. The company had dabbled with RPGs before, releasing the original edition of *Paranoia* in 1984 and following that up with a few adventure modules, but at this point they were still considered to be primarily a board game company along the lines of the old Simulation Publications, Inc. (or SPI) and Victory Games.

My initial role in the company, the job I was hired to do, was as a game editor and typesetter. My experience operating typesetting machines on my college paper and at the *Queens Chronicle* helped get me the WEG job, since they desperately needed someone to backstop their dedicated typesetter. For most of my first year with the company, I spent part of each day editing and the other part typesetting the latest product in the production queue.

The designers, developers, and editors worked on Apple IIe computers back then. When files reached the editors, we had to insert codes to turn on and off special font functions (such as **bold face** or *italics*), to create headers, and to relay other type-related requests before running the file through a program called Apple Turnover, which would convert the file into something the dedicated typesetting machine could utilize via an oversized

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floppy disk. Once the file was converted to typesetting, we would do a quick proof on screen and make any corrections we noticed (usually involving those special font functions that either failed to turn on or off somewhere in the translation process). Then we'd print the galleys—long strips of typeset photography paper—and hang them on bulletin boards to dry until the editors were ready to proofread them.

Proofing was accomplished by reading through the galleys and marking corrections with a non-repro blue pen using copyeditor symbols. These marked up strips, in turn, would then go back to the typesetters to input the corrections and run out fresh versions. When the galleys were finally declared "ready for publication," they'd go to the art department where, through the wonders of paste-up boards (basically heavy cardstock), straight edges, and waxing machines, the graphic artists would assemble all the parts into pages we could send to the printer. For the time, the WEG system was practically state of the art!

Compare that process to how RPG products are created today. When I first entered the field, companies employed teams of trained professionals to design, write, edit, layout, and produce publishable products using equipment that was large, expensive, and often required specialized training. The first adventure I wrote started on a desktop computer, traveled by floppy disk to the translation station and then to the large typesetting machine, emerged as galleys that were carried to the art department, where they were run through hot wax machines and trimmed with X-Acto knives, and meticulously pasted to layout pages before being physically carried to the printer. Today, most of the steps can be accomplished using your smart phone, so anybody with an idea and a little time can create an RPG product. The process I described now takes place completely inside a single computing device before being sent to the printer with the press of a single button. And then you have the option of turning a manuscript into a bound book or a digital file that can be read on the electronic reader of your choice. Living in the future is amazing.

When I started at WEG, I was given a desk in the large, open room that served as the editorial pit. A wall of windows to my left looked down upon the roof of Madison Square Garden. The

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lead editor and my boss Paul Murphy, who had previously worked at Victory Games, occupied the first desk. The middle desk was filled by Jeff Briggs who, in addition to being a game editor and developer, was a music composer and Civil War expert. I got the last desk, the one next to the small antechamber that housed the typesetting machine and served as headquarters for the typesetter-in-residence, Carl Skutsch.

As my first editing assignment, I got to proof the galleys for a new roleplaying game that was about to go to the printer. *Ghostbusters: A Frightfully Cheerful Roleplaying Game* had been designed by the team responsible for *The Call of Cthulhu* game (from Chaosium). While they would end up with cover credit for *Ghostbusters*, much of what WEG published was heavily redesigned and developed by Greg Costikyan and Ken Rolston. (At least, that's the story I heard during my first few days at the company.)

Greg Costikyan started out at the legendary board game company, SPI. He designed *Bug-Eyed Monsters* (published by WEG in 1983) and *Toon* (published by Steve Jackson Games in 1984), before licensing *Paranoia* (a game he co-designed) to WEG in 1984, which eventually led him to take on the role of lead designer at the company. Greg could be brusque, but he was a brilliant designer who taught me a lot. It could be daunting to venture into his office, where he'd carry on a conversation with you while continuing to type a mile a minute on whatever design he was currently engaged in. Working with Greg Costikyan and Paul Murphy laid the foundation for the designer, developer, and editor I would grow into. Neither Greg nor Paul set out to formally teach me while we worked together. But listening to their insights during playtests, taking their feedback when they provided it, and studying the way each of them approached the tasks at hand showed me how to grow as a creative game producer. They provided an education and hands on experience that forged my developer skills, strengthened my editing skills, and gave me the courage to leap into design work when the opportunity presented itself.

Ken Rolston started out writing for Chaosium, working on the *Basic Role-Playing, Stormbringer*, and *Superworld* RPG lines. He joined the WEG staff in the early 1980s, first lending his unique and humorous style to the first edition of *Paranoia* and then to

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Ghostbusters. When I came aboard, Ken had already abandoned his staff position for the life of a freelancer and was serving as a consultant/knight errant for the company. He'd appear in the office every so often, lighting the place up with his infectious good humor and amazing sense of design and story. If you've never met Ken, he's an extremely funny guy. And if you ever get a chance to play *Paranoia* with him, I highly recommend it!

Ghostbusters, a boxed roleplaying game, included a rulebook, character sheets, an adventure, and the beloved ghost die (a six-sided die with the *Ghostbusters* logo on one face). It featured an easy-to-play game mechanic that was the precursor to the D6 System that would power the *Star Wars RPG*. What WEG did with *Ghostbusters* set the stage for what was to come with *Star Wars*. *Ghostbusters* was also one of the first products to introduce the WEG style that would serve the company so well during my tenure there. That style was categorized by fun, easy-to-read material, a cinematic approach to roleplaying, and a deep and abiding respect for the source material. Anecdotally, many of our customers commented that they bought WEG products to read them rather than to play them. (That was a common occurrence among RPG fans in those days; many of them didn't have a gaming group to play with, but they still bought the material to read.) In general, the WEG products made for very good reads.

The *Ghostbusters* game reviewed well, won numerous industry awards, and was a financial success for WEG. It demonstrated the company's ability to work within the framework of a cherished license, expand the story of the license, and create new material that joined seamlessly with what was seen at the movies. Moreover, it showed a respect for the property and the fans who loved it. All these qualities would help during the negotiations for the *Star Wars* license. In my mind, WEG's *Ghostbusters* line served as an audition of sorts for acquiring the *Star Wars* license.

Why do companies pursue licenses, as opposed to creating their own material? The reasons typically revolve around the fact that the holder of the license (the licensor) is usually a much bigger player with the marketing clout to promote the property far beyond what the licensee (the smaller company that paid to utilize the property within a limited category as defined by the license contract) could

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accomplish with its more limited resources. For the cost of the license, the licensee gets to produce products within its defined category, and use the trademarks, copyrighted material, logos, and art associated with the property to the exclusion of other parties. In theory, a good license has a much broader appeal and greater user recognition than anything a small company could create on its own. It isn't impossible to produce a hit product line with a brand-new creation, but a license—especially of a major media property—is often a safer bet.

When all was said and done, *Ghostbusters* propelled WEG from a board game company that dabbled in RPGs to a roleplaying game company that dabbled in board games. It provided a new style and approach to product design that would develop more fully with the launch of *Paranoia* 2nd Edition and set the stage for the next big thing—*The Star War Roleplaying Game*.

BOARD GAMES

In 1986, though, West End Games was still a contender in the board game arena. I cut my developmental and design teeth, as it were, on a few board games during my inaugural year at the company. The first product I got to edit on my own (not just help one of the other editors by proofing galleys) was a solitaire board game called *RAF: August 1940, The Battle of Britain*. It was designed by one of the premier freelance war game designers of the day, John H. Butterfield. As my first full-on editing task, I played it safe. All the development work had already happened, so my job was to make sure that the rulebook was complete, clear, and easy to use during play. I had to play the game numerous times to accomplish this, and the design gave me a deep and abiding appreciation for designing a solitaire game that I would draw upon later in my career, whether to create a solo adventure for the *Alternity RPG* or to make sure that the *Castle Ravenloft* board game could be played by a single player as well as with a group.

That year, WEG had a joint publishing arrangement with Games Workshop, a game company based in Great Britain. This arrangement included at least two board games that I wound up working on, *Cosmic Encounter* and *Kings & Things*. Under the agreement, WEG handled the design, development, and editing,

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as well as produced the version of the game to be sold in the United States, while Games Workshop took our files, upgraded the components (they used plastic pieces instead of just cardstock counters!), and released their own version in Europe.

Cosmic Encounter, a beloved board game originally published in 1977, had a loyal and devoted fan base. WEG wound up with the rights to the game and other properties created by Eon Games. I owned the original and had played the hell out of it with my gaming group over the years, so I jumped at the chance to work on the WEG version. It was a game of alien powers, shifting alliances, and deal making with relatively simple and straightforward rules that were then modified or even changed by other elements in the game. For me, the original game worked great. My job as the developer and editor of the new edition was to clarify the rules and make sure the text on each power card was as clear and succinct as possible.

Kings & Things, on the other hand, started out as a mini-game by Tom Wham called *King of the Tabletop* that originally appeared in issue #77 of TSR's *Dragon Magazine*. WEG entered into an arrangement with designer Tom Wham, and although at least two of his game designs were actively worked on during my time at the company, WEG published only *Kings & Things*. As with most of Wham's designs, *K&T* was a fast, light-hearted game. It involved exploration and kingdom building, and included a wide variety of wacky creatures and bizarre items. The game board consisted of hex tiles that changed configuration every time you played, making every game different. Between the art style and the tone of the game, I knew I wanted to play up the humor as I started my developmental editing pass. That required expanding the story inherent in the background and creating an in-game mythology that merged the rules and game play with the story elements.

My first draft of the rulebook was hysterical. The tone of the game came to life as I explained "The Order of Things" and described how to set up, play, and eventually win the game. It was a masterpiece! Also, it was completely wrong. Greg Costikyan reviewed my work and taught me a lesson that helped refine my burgeoning design and development talents. Greg told me that the humor was all well and good, even necessary, but it was getting

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in the way of the rules. "People need to open the rulebook and find the rule they're looking for quickly," he explained. "They don't want to have to figure out what's flavor and what's game mechanics." And Greg was one hundred percent correct. So I separated the humorous flavor from the rules, setting the funny bits in italic type to make it clearly different from the rules material. That worked much better. Now the rulebook read well and set the tone for the game, but the rules were clear and easy to find, making for a winning combination.

Kings & Things won the Origins Award for Best Board Game in 1986—which marks that as the first product I contributed substantial work to that went on to win an industry award.

I learned another valuable lesson in that first year at WEG: Not everything that gets designed and edited winds up being published. I worked on at least three board games during 1986 and 1987 that never saw the light of day. They were good games, each in their own way, but for whatever reason the company decided not to bring them to market. These were *War Starz, Amber*, and *Extreme Paranoia*.

War Starz was another Tom Wham game. Doug Kaufman, who helped bring *Kings & Things* to completion, was the in-house designer/developer on this one, and I was assigned to the project as his editor. That meant I got to playtest the game over and over, give my opinions, and help steer the development as the iteration process continued. This humorous game revolved around aliens and space battles, where the most-powerful ships in your fleet were the dreaded War Starz. I remember liking this game a lot, but we weren't able to make all the elements click in the same way they had for *K&T*. Eventually the project was abandoned and the rights reverted back to Tom Wham.

Amber, a board game based on *The Chronicles of Amber* novel series by the famed science fiction and fantasy author Roger Zelazny, also never made it out of design. WEG had acquired the rights to produce games based on the property, and Doug Kaufman was hard at work putting a game together when I volunteered to help playtest the work in progress. It was an intriguing game, all about building pathways through shadow as you tried to take control of the Courts of Chaos. Unfortunately, the design never really came together and WEG eventually shuttered the project.

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Interestingly, a couple of years later when I was running the WEG studio as Creative and Editorial Director, game designer Erick Wujcik reached out to me because we still held the *Amber* license. Erick set up a meeting at GenCon to show me a game concept he was working on and wanted to sell to WEG. It was a roleplaying game set in the world of *Amber*. The unique element was that the RPG didn't use dice—it was diceless! I sat in on a game session that Erick ran with his group of dedicated playtesters as an audition and proof of concept. I observed a remarkable session that demonstrated the skill of both the gamemaster and his players. Unfortunately, I wasn't sure how the play pattern was going to translate into a printed RPG manual. Erick promised me it would, but even after numerous requests on my part, he never did turn over a manuscript so that I could see how he was going to teach people the intricacies of this complex narrative exercise. I told him I couldn't commit to a project like this without seeing at least a version of how he planned to present the rules. He never got around to providing that sample and WEG's license eventually expired. Erick found a home for the game with a different publisher a few years later, and his *Amber* product marks a significant milestone in RPG history. It just wasn't the right fit at the time for me or for West End Games.

Extreme Paranoia, a board game based on WEG's *Paranoia* RPG, should have made it to the game store shelves. Unfortunately, board game sales numbers at WEG had been dropping steadily. By the time this one was ready for publication, the company had decided to spend its dollars on more practical investments. Doug Kaufman was the lead designer for the game. I served as his co-designer, developer, and editor. The board game detailed a darkly humorous competition between clones trying to survive in Alpha Complex and advance to the lofty level of Ultraviolet. It was the first game design I worked on where the game itself competed against the players. In this case, the all-powerful but paranoid Computer controlled the board and could win the game—and often did!—if the players weren't careful. We took this all the way to the final stages of production, producing box art, plastic Troubleshooter clone pieces in all the *Paranoia* colors (ROY G BIV: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, and white

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for ultraviolet), an illustrated game board, decks of cards and dice, and even an introductory comic book illustrated by fan-favorite artist Jim Holloway. I still have a copy, which may be the last existing prototype. But alas, WEG never saw fit to publish the finished product. And that's too bad. I think it was a perfect addition to the *Paranoia* universe. It captured the tone of the RPG, as players sent their Troubleshooters on missions to uncover commies, mutants, and traitors, all the while trying to survive the ever-changing whims of the mad Computer that controlled Alpha Complex. I wish you could have played it.

ROLEPLAYING GAMES

In 1986, when I started at the company, West End Games had two roleplaying game lines in its catalog: *Paranoia* and *Ghostbusters* (which was published shortly after I joined the company) . The first edition of *Paranoia*, released in 1984 and billed as a darkly humorous RPG with the infamous tag line, "Stay alert, trust no one, keep your laser handy," featured a relatively complex rules set and a dark, dystopian and humorous setting. Ken Rolston developed and edited the game, then helped churn out adventures and supplements that helped establish the mix of slapstick, satire, and backstabbing that become the hallmark of the property.

I proofread the galleys for *Acute Paranoia*, which was my first real dive into the setting inhabited by clones, commies, mutants, and the all-powerful, totally insane Computer. This grab-bag-style RPG book boasted "New rules to ignore, new secret societies, bots as player characters, and psychological tests to evaluate the suitability of your clones." It also packed a bunch of mini-adventures into its overloaded pages, including Steve Gilbert's stand-out, "Me and My Shadow, Mark IV."

Next, I edited Ken Rolston's *Orcbusters* adventure, which was a *Paranoia*-themed send up of the classic *D&D* dungeon crawl. When a dimensional rift brings a fantasy world into Alpha Complex, the Troubleshooters have to investigate DND Sector in this parody of a typical *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure.

Finally, I edited Ken Rolston's *HIL Sector Blues* campaign pack, in which I also received my first design credit. I wrote one

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of the three mini-adventures included in the product—"One of Our Petbots is Missing," in which a DNA cloning experiment goes awry and unleashes a reborn Tyrannosaurus Rex upon the Computer's Alpha Complex (and this was a couple of years before Michael Creighton published his novel with a similar theme, *Jurassic Park*). Of special note, this is the product that first introduced *Cardstock Commies*, cardboard cutouts that could be used in place of miniatures for RPG tactical scenarios. I don't know if anyone ever played *Paranoia* as a tactical game, but the players really loved the *Cardstock Commies*!

All in all, my first year at WEG was a whirlwind of on-the-job training in a variety of disciplines. I had learned about deadlines working on a weekly newspaper all through college and in my first professional job after college at *The Queens Chronicle*, but wrangling the components of a board game or roleplaying game and getting them ready for publication made me even faster as a writer and editor. As the year progressed, I began to transition from game editor to game developer and designer, ultimately combining the three distinct roles and switching hats and functions as the product-of-the-moment required. I learned a ton working with Paul Murphy, Jeff Briggs, Greg Costikyan, Ken Rolston, and Doug Kaufman, as well as with the other developers and artists on the staff. With the year drawing to a close, I realized my education was just getting started.

THERE WASN'T SO MUCH AS A PEEP IN THE FORCE

1986 gave way to 1987, and *Star Wars* continued to fade from the public consciousness. Toy and merchandise revenue was in a steep decline, the *Star Wars* comics ended publication, and there weren't any new novels or movies on the horizon. The future looked dark and empty as far as that galaxy far, far away was concerned. As the tenth anniversary of the original film approached, other than a new ride at Disneyland, it appeared that *Star Wars* was going to sink into obscurity.

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