



SELECTED BY MONTE COOK

Uses the Third Edition rules, including updated material from the v.3.5 revision.

ADDITIONAL CREDITS

Featuring Selections From: *Aasimar & Tiefling: A Guidebook to the Planetouched*, *Advanced Bestiary*, *Advanced Player's Guide*, *Ancient Kingdoms: Mesopotamia*, *The Complete Guide to Rakshasa*, *Avizens of Avadnu*, *Libem Liborium: Complete Guide to d20 Books*, *Love and War*, *Metablades (Expanded Edition)*, *Modern Magic*, *The Pantheon and Pagan Faiths*, *Player's Guide to Monks and Paladins*, *Poisoncraft: The Dark Art, Relics & Rituals*, *Excalibur, Relics & Rituals: Olympus*, *Strange Lands: Lost Tribes of the Scarred Lands*, *The Tome of Horrors II*, and *Unearthed Arcana*

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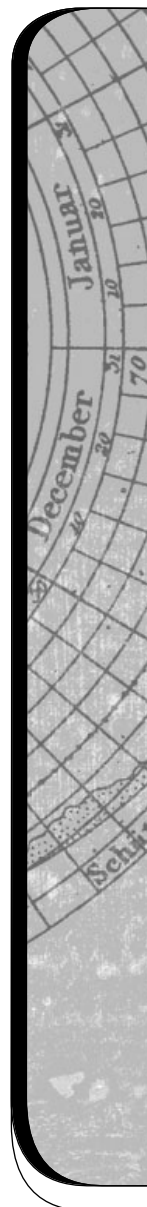
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d20 in 2004

Monte Cook looks back at the year 2004 for the d20 System, covering the highlights, the lowlights, and the direction the industry's heading. This introduction discusses the factors that shaped the products you bought—and didn't buy.



In 2000, Wizards of the Coast released 3rd Edition *Dungeons & Dragons*®, designed primarily by Jonathan Tweet, Skip Williams and myself, with additional design by Rich Baker, Peter Adkison, and a host of others. Along with the release of this new edition of D&D, Wizards did something rather unprecedented: They made the majority of the new rules system “open content.” This suddenly allowed so-called “third-party” developers to use the new rules—dubbed the d20 System—to create adventures and products. The d20 System license, spearheaded by Ryan Dancey, was nothing short of genius, allowing smaller companies to create products that would make them money but whose profit margins would be inadequate for the much larger Wizards of the Coast, which in turn supported Wizards and helped drive the sales of their core books and major releases.

The d20 System was a phenomenon right out of the gate. Those early products, some coming out just as the 3rd Edition *Player's Handbook* was released at the Gen Con game fair in 2000, sold extremely well. It became clear to many in the industry that d20 was where it was at. And it stayed that way for quite a while.

Fast forward to 2004. By the beginning of that year, I myself had been earning my living for three years because of the d20 System license, creating products mainly through my own design house, Malhavoc Press, a partner under White Wolf Publishing's *Sword & Sorcery* label. (And one could base a good argument for d20's overall success solely on the fact that even a major player like White Wolf stood up and took notice when d20 was released, producing some of the earliest d20 System products.) By 2004, hundreds of d20 products were on the market, and a small handful of factors had set up the “d20 industry” for a downturn in sales.

A ROCKY START

To be frank, when d20 products started coming out in 2000 and into 2001, many of them—most of them—were absolutely terrible. Sadly, the low quality of these initial products burned many of the early adapter consumers, and gave the impression that “d20” meant “crap.” It took years, the involvement of some of the industry's major players and recognized name designers, and the release of a lot of good products to undo this stigma. And, truth be told, in many players' eyes, it was never undone.

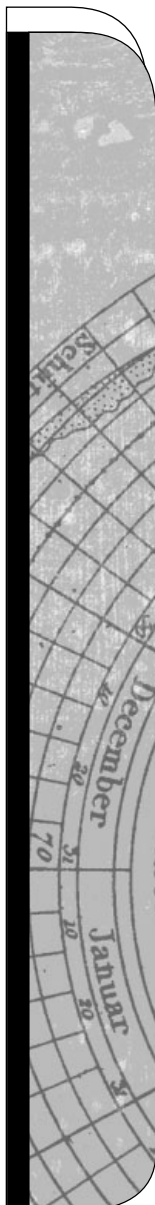
SOURCEBOOKS . . . AND LOTS OF THEM

While the first entries into the d20 field were adventures, by 2004 this was no longer true. Sourcebooks and campaign settings were the main releases that year, with only a small handful of adventures. By this time most publishers had come to the same conclusions that Wizards had long ago—that the bestselling products were the ones that appealed to all players. Better to put out a sourcebook about fighters than an adventure or something else that only DMs would buy.

Arguably, this probably wasn't the best result for the game as a whole. Putting aside the business aspects of the issue, rather than offering gamers a gamut of different kinds of products—one of the chief benefits of being a consumer under the d20 license—the industry gave them a lot of the same. Frankly, the game needs DM-focused products on the shelves to perpetuate itself. Multiple general interest, player-focused products were released covering similar topics. (Just in compiling this book, I reviewed not one but two d20 versions of *Cerberus*, two different d20 versions of the sword *Excalibur*, two different takes on true-to-history medieval knights, and more.) Worse, these d20 general topic sourcebooks competed not only with each other, but with Wizards of the Coast. While in the short term it may have been financially sound from an individual publisher's point of view to release such products, it set up the industry as a whole to crash in the long run. Players just didn't need all these books, and if forced to make a choice, will almost always go with an “official” Wizards product rather than a third-party d20 System title covering similar topics.

Of course, some products went too far the other way. Wisely avoiding the general topics, some publishers went far afield to come up with sourcebook topics that no one else had done yet. Topics that—in 1984, or even 1994—would have been submitted for articles in *Dragon*® magazine, became entire sourcebooks in 2004. We saw products focused on a single d20 monster, or a single d20 school of magic. While such topics are of interest, and the potential audience for d20 products is large, it's simply not large enough to support entire products covering such niche topics.

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NEW RULES

Another factor that shaped d20 products in 2004 was the release of D&D's v. 3.5 edition the previous year. The new core rulebooks updated the rules and revised the system across the board, not in major ways—it was still the same game—but with pervasive small changes. Many of the changes fixed truly problematic issues and were much needed. Overall, however, the rules to the game changed just enough that customers perceived v. 3.5 to be virtually a new edition of the game. Calls for publishers to release v. 3.5 editions of popular titles already in print (or to release online conversion notes) became common. Designers across the board saw that the v. 3.5 changes, while simple for players to grasp and for DMs to convert “on the fly,” were somewhat painstaking to implement in written conversions. In other words, the changes affected game play far less than they affected rules writing. A “3.5 DM” could easily use most v. 3.0 products with little work, but actually creating a v. 3.5 conversion of the same books was a time-consuming process. (And it also proved to be a waste, because the audience rejected conversion products in favor of the constant stream of new titles.)

So, d20 publishers spent a lot of resources to convert old products and get their new products “up to speed” with the new rules, but for their efforts they saw little or no benefit. Online rules conversions earned no profit and did not help to drive sales. If anything, d20 sales fell across the board after the release of v. 3.5. Backlist sales of all v. 3.0 compatible products (both d20 System and core products) certainly plummeted. Although almost all d20 publishers greeted v. 3.5 enthusiastically, it is difficult to use hindsight to see that the revision did anything but hurt them (it was likely an economic success for Wizards, at least in the short term).

FEWER, BETTER PRODUCTS

Thus, in 2004, the slowdown in the number of print releases and the decrease in print publishers that started in the second half of 2003 continued. While by the end of 2000, and certainly throughout 2001, literally dozens of new d20 products appeared on store shelves every month, by 2003 these numbers had fallen by half, and in 2004 by half again.

From the point of view of the game, however, this is almost certainly a good thing, not a bad one. While lots of choice is good, it's far better to choose between three good products rather than 10 mediocre ones. So despite my earlier negative remarks, it's actually the case that some of my favorite d20 products were released in 2004. I love *Hamanuptra*, the Egypt-themed boxed set from Green Ronin Publishing. *Sword & Sorcery's Relics and Rituals: Excalibur* book is an excellent example of how to apply the d20 rules to a specific genre (or, perhaps more appropriately, how to apply a specific genre to the d20 rules). Necromancer Games' *Tome of Horrors II* and The Inner

Circle's *Denizens of Avadnu* added a lot more cool new monsters to the mix, as did Wizards' own *Monster Manual III*. And speaking of Wizards, *Unearthed Arcana*, probably the best book the company's released since 3rd Edition began, also came out in 2004. Goodman Games and Necromancer Games both put out cool adventures that harkened back to “old school” modules released in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

It was, in fact, a very good year for d20.

Despite claims that d20 is dying (which have been around for as long as d20 has), the facts don't appear to bear out that prognosis. On the contrary, while sales can no longer support the vast number of publishers that originally entered the field, many of those that remain continue to see successes. More importantly from the point of view of the game, after years spent experimenting with the system, a good number of designers have an excellent grasp of the ins and outs of what is, in fact, a fairly complex and robust rules set. The system, intentionally created to be easy to understand but challenging to master, proved difficult for designers to handle at first. In other words, most of the products released right after the game came out, in late 2000 and into 2001, weren't very good. But just as the players and DMs have mastered the mechanics, so too have the most talented game designers risen to the fore. Many of them are represented by the material selected for this book.

WHAT'S THIS BOOK ALL ABOUT?

Late in 2004, we at Malhavoc Press put out a call to all d20 publishers, announcing that we were compiling this book and inviting them to submit what they felt was their best material from 2004. Response was very good, and the best of what they submitted lies between these covers.

But before discussing the selection process, let's look at the context a little more closely. First of all, I was the sole judge of the selections. Like anyone else, I have my own preferences for certain kinds of material. For example, I like prestige classes that make good NPCs as well as good PCs—they need to have a solid story hook for a character as well as good mechanics. Further, at this point in d20 System development, all material not only needs to be solid and accurate, it really needs to offer something new. Monsters, no matter how cool, that have nothing but a claw/claw/bite routine and improved grab aren't going to make it into this book. There's nothing wrong with those kinds of monsters and, in fact, you need them in the game, but at this point it's impossible to judge such a monster as being among the best when there are so many more creative choices out there.

Since this is a “best of d20” book, and not a “best of background material” book, I focused first on the d20

mechanics. Flavor and story elements were very important, but they were always the second thing I looked at.

And of course, I could only review the material that was submitted.

Unlike awards such as the Origins Awards or the EN World/Gen Con d20 System Awards (the ENnies), I didn't look at products, but at the individual rules content within them. While some of the submitted books were wonderful as cohesive products, I was interested only in portable rules "bits." Often that meant feats, monsters, spells, items and so on, although this book contains plenty of examples of material that isn't nearly so easily classified. This means that certain aspects of making a wonderful book (layout, art, organization, and so on) played no part in my selection. It also means that if some bit of material was terrific, but not usable outside of its original context, I didn't select it.

In other words, this book needed to be, well, a book. While one point of the *Year's Best d20* project was to recognize excellence, another was to present a usable product of great d20 material—a distillation of the vast amount of content out there. This collection presents it in a way that makes it easy to use, but also allows you to rest assured that it is of good quality. Even the best feat or spell didn't make the cut if it required the reader to see the entirety of the book it appeared in for a reader to appreciate its greatness. On the other hand, a couple bits of material were included only because something I selected required them to appear (great feats with other feats as prerequisites, for example).

Note that, in the selection process, I didn't take care to ensure that the material in the book was comprehensive. For example, I spent no time or effort to make sure that spells for every level and class were represented, or that all the classes ran the gamut of various character choices. If this balance occurred in any way, it was coincidence.

If we'd had the room, I would have liked to include an encounters chapter in this book. This certainly would have featured sections of Goodman Games' very cool *Crypt of the Devil Lich*, *Vanishing Goblin's Rooms With a View*, and a few choice encounters from *Necromancer's Trouble of Durbenford*, *Caverns of Thracia*, and *Ancient Kingdoms: Mesopotamia*.

SO, WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

If you're like me, you like to comb through sourcebooks and adventures and raid them for things to use in your campaign. You recognize that only rarely does a book come along that you'll be able to use in its entirety, so you grab bits and pieces here and there.

If you are just such a "game product raider," this book is for you—and all the raiding has already been done for you, to boot. For a raider, this product is all loot.

It's also for you if you're a harried DM who sometimes feels lost in the morass of material out there, or a player whose DM is leery of allowing you to use material from various sources. Here, all in one place, is the good stuff. Again, the work's all been done for you. Gems have been pulled from the rough.

USING THIS BOOK

Throughout *The Year's Best d20*, all references to spells, feats, and other rules that are not presented in this book come from the v. 3.5 revision of the three Core Rulebooks—the *Player's Handbook*, DMG, and MM—unless otherwise noted. Sidebars and introductory sections explain why a particular item was selected or suggest how it could be used in a game.

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About the Presenter

Since 1988, when **Monte Cook** started working professionally in the game industry, he has created games for Iron Crown Enterprises, TSR, Inc., Wizards of the Coast, and WizKids Games. Highlights of his career include codesigning the 3rd edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* and creating the HeroClix system of superhero combat. Industry recognition of his work includes the Origins Award, EN World d20 System Award, InQuest Gamer's Choice Award, and the Pen & Paper Fan Award. A graduate of the Clarion West writer's workshop, Monte also has published short stories and two novels. In his spare time he runs games, paints miniatures, and reads a lot of comics.

About the Illustrators

Toren "MacBin" Atkinson is known by night as the lead singer in the Cthulhu rock band, *The Darkest of the Hillside Thickets*, but by day he collects Saturday morning cartoons and is a voice-over actor. You've seen his work in *Green Ronin Publishing* and *Malhavoc Press* titles, as well as in his own pulp sci-fi roleplaying game *Spaceship Zero*.

With an MFA in *Theatrical Design*, California artist **Caleb Cleveland** has worked "in the wings" in both theatre and film. Recently he has illustrated mostly for fantasy book and game publishers. View samples of his artwork at his website <www.calebclleveland.com>.

Eric Lofgren's early influences included comic book art, the oils of Frazetta, and the inks of Berni Wrightson. Upon discovering roleplaying games, he schooled himself in fantasy art and now illustrates for *Malhavoc Press*, among other publishers. Visit his website at <www.ericlofgren.com>.

Scott Purdy, a UK-based illustrator, has a great love of horror, evil, and all things tentacular. He wills clients his way if they have need of nasty critters to bring to life. You can see more of Scott's work at <www.scottpurdy.net>.

Malhavoc Press

Malhavoc Press is game designer Monte Cook's d20 System imprint devoted to the publication of evocative game elements that go beyond traditional fantasy. *Malhavoc Press* products such as *The Complete Book of Eldritch Might* exhibit a mastery of the d20 System rules that only one of its original designers can offer. Current titles are available to purchase in either print or electronic (PDF) format at <www.montecook.com>. Look for Monte Cook Presents: *Iron Heroes*, available now.

Character Classes

This chapter presents interesting new character options, from unusual spellcasters to warriors with a twist.

Character classes, whether prestige classes or alternate core classes, can be a real design challenge. Not only must they walk the line between generality and specificity, they should be equally well suited to nonplayer characters and player characters. When selecting the classes for this book, I was looking for choices that offered a different type of option than the ones that already existed in the game. And in the final cut, the selections also needed a nice flavorful story element that I could adapt to my own campaign.

ARCANE WARRIOR

Prestige class by Bruce Graw; originally published in the Advanced Player's Guide by Sword & Sorcery.

In a world filled with magic, warriors often find it difficult to survive. A single well-timed spell can bring down the mightiest fighter—or worse, bring him under the control of an enemy. The only defense against such opponents is often

who are skilled in combat but who also wish to gain some benefit of magic. Through their own abilities and practice, they have learned special ways to employ arcane power for their own betterment in combat.

Although the arcane warrior does not gain spells *per se*, the class does provide a number of spell-like and supernatural powers that duplicate certain spell effects. The primary advantage of these abilities is that they are not affected by arcane spell failure ratings, thereby allowing the arcane warrior to fight more effectively in any situation.

Hit Die: d8.

REQUIREMENTS

To become an arcane warrior, a character must fulfill all of the following criteria.

Base Attack Bonus: +12.

Abilities: Constitution 15, Intelligence 15.

Skills: Concentration 6 ranks.

Feats: Any one metamagic feat, plus at least five feats chosen from the list of those available as fighter bonus feats.

Spells: Able to cast arcane spells, and cannot be restricted from the transmutation school.

CLASS SKILLS

The arcane warrior class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are Climb (Str), Concentration (Con), Craft (any) (Int), Handle Animal (Cha), Intimidate (Cha), Jump (Str), Ride (Dex), Spellcraft (Int) and Swim (Str). See Chapter Four: Skills in the *Player's Handbook* for skill descriptions.

Skill Points at Each Level: 2 + Intelligence modifier.

CLASS FEATURES

All the following are class features of the arcane warrior prestige class.

Weapon and Armor Proficiency: Arcane warriors are proficient with all simple and martial weapons, all types of armor, and shields (except tower shields).

Spell-Like/Supernatural Abilities: The arcane warrior can employ his spell-like abilities without having to make arcane spell failure rolls. To determine the effective caster level of any such ability, add the character's arcane warrior level to that of any arcane spellcasting class levels, unless noted otherwise. For example, a Wiz1/Bbn13/Arw5 is treated as a 6th-level arcane spellcaster for his arcane warrior class abilities.

to have magic of one's own—or to be so skilled in melee that even spellcasters can't stand up to your power.

To protect themselves, fighters either adorn themselves with magical items and defenses or ally with wizards capable of dealing with opposing spellcasters.

Sometimes this isn't enough, however.

Friendly mages are not always available, magic items can be stolen or disenchanting, and the fighter might be on his own. Small wonder then that some fighters turn to the magical arts to improve their own abilities.

The arcane warrior appeals to characters

A Warrior-Wizard

The arcane warrior is a prestige class that fuses warrior and wizard. It was one of three similar classes I reviewed for this book—and of course there's the eldritch knight in the DMG, the eldritch warrior in The Complete Book of Eldritch Might, the warrior of darkness in the Book of Vile Darkness, the mage blade in Arcana Evolved, and a number of others.

So why bother with another one? I liked that it sidestepped the issue of marrying spellcasting with combat ability and gave the character inherent magical abilities instead. It appeals to my sense of what a "magical warrior" would be like—her inherent magic just makes her better. It protects her, makes her weapons (more) magical, and enhances her. There's a lot of flexibility with this class, particularly with its weapon enhancement abilities. You might say that a character of that high a level would already have a good magical weapon, but I'd counter that arcane warriors don't need a powerful magic weapon—they can focus more on other kinds of magical gear, which ends up being a real boon. Mechanically, this would be a cool class to layer on top of a character that already has levels in eldritch knight.

