Mall of the Titans: PDF Self-Publishing, RPG E-Tailers and You

By: Michael L. Fiegel

GM: "...and having defeated F'fup the Magic Dragon, you set sail from the shores of Honna-Leigh and arrive home, where you settle down with your riches to live happily ever after."

Player: 'Wow, that was the coolest, most original adventure ever. You should publish it and sell it. You'd make millions of dollars."

GM: "Hmmmm..."

We've all been there. For me, the year was 1991, and like many Game Masters (back then, we were called "Dungeon Masters"), there came a time when the game modules were all used up. It was time to improvise, time to crack out the graph paper and colored pencils and draw that map. You know the one. Ten by ten corridors, concealed doors, a squiggle for a curtain, a circled-T for a trap, a maze of twisty little passages, all alike. It was great. It was perfect. It was mine.

And it had to be.

Back then, even if you had dreams of sharing your ideas with the rest of the world, there was no practical way to do it. You could submit to Dungeon or Dragon and pray, or you could start your own gaming company (which many did), or you could make photocopies and hand-distribute them. But in general, there wasn't much you could do to self-publish your own material in a real, effective, immediate and affordable way.

It's only within the past few years that all the pieces of the technological puzzle have come together to make RPG self-publishing a reality for even the average gamer. Prior to 2001, for example, the format of choice (PDF) was, well, far from choice. Not universally supported, slow, and laden with security problems, it simply wasn't up to par. Before 1999, most people didn't know what DSL meant, much less how to order it for their homes; now, even a large PDF file can be downloaded in two minutes, rather than two hours. And consider the fact that the World Wide Web and the PDF standard didn't even exist for most people, except perhaps as concepts, prior to 1992.

But now, with all these things in place, you can take your home-spun product, digitize it and share it with the world, without having to even think about printing, paper stock, dot gain, half tones, distribution, credit cards or fulfillment.

The last quarter of the 20th Century may have been the heyday of the traditional pen-and-paper Role-Playing Game, but the 21st Century just might belong to the PDF.

Portable Document What?

Format. It's a document standard from Adobe, makers of Photoshop, Illustrator, and, most relevant to our concerns here, Acrobat, the program that enables individuals to produce the electronic documents called PDFs. Up until a few years ago, the PDF was not widely embraced, in part because the traditional print industry was afraid of the potential repercussions and security issues, and in part because the standard was far from universally accepted or supported. Nowadays, however, Acrobat Reader is pretty much available everywhere, and Acrobat itself, which is used to churn out the PDFs along with Distiller, runs about $249, quite reasonable when one considers what it's capable of doing.

If you're a publisher (or wish to be), then you'll certainly need to learn more about how to create PDFs, a topic this article can't hope to cover. If you're a gamer thinking about buying PDFs, then all you really need to know is that they can effectively replicate what you might see in a printed gaming product on your screen, allowing you to either view on your monitor or print them out on your printer.

Therein lies the first argument raised by those who dislike the growing popularity of PDFs; that their value compared to print products is diminished once you try to print them. In other words, a $6 or $7 PDF product of 72 full-color pages may look wonderful on screen, but can take hours to print, and can easily use up an entire ink cartridge, which, depending on what sort of printer you use, can range in cost from $10 to $30 for a black cartridge, or $25 to $40 for color (Canon tending to be the cheapest, Lexmark most expensive). The end result: that $6 product could wind up costing $76 if it eats up all your ink.

Of course, this is a "horror" scenario, and unlikely to actually occur. The beauty of the PDF is that you can print out only what you need, and most of the time draft format (a real ink saver) is more than adequate for use in a gaming session. The easy replaceability of lost or damaged pages also offsets some of the cost of ink and paper: someone spills Mountain Dew on your Dungeon Master's Guide, and you're out $30; if the same happens to your PDF version, you just reprint the pages that got wet.

This is to say nothing of the fact that a growing number of gamers are turning to more hi-tech methods of gaming. A recent gaming group I was a part of saw the GM and one player using Palm Pilots to roll dice and keep track of stats, and another player mapping on his laptop. In short, PDFs are not designed to replace traditional rule books and products; they are an alternative, and a supplement, for those who need or want such an option.

This raises the spectre of exactly who would want such a product. Unfortunately, due to the relative ease of producing a PDF product, a glut of low-cost, low-effort products has hit the market. In a hobby shop, you can easily avoid the more cheaply produced items, but online, there's less of a chance to browse the item before you buy it. The end result: you may get stuck with a bad product.

"Electronic publishing has become the way for anyone to put out a D&D compatible product with almost no cost," said Monte Cook of Malhavoc Press. "Unfortunately, that means that a lot of d20 electronic products are crap, and the PDF market has got a bad rap because of it."

Of course, this can also be said of the whole industry; in the rush to publish after Wizards of the Coast put out the SRD and OGL, dozens and dozens of fly-by-night operations churned out a steady stream of d20-related material to feed a hungry public. And as many soon discovered, the reason those products looked sub-par was because they were.

So how can the prospective PDF buyer avoid getting burned? The safe bet is to stick with the names you know -- many of the same companies that are big in the d20 print industry are also starting to move into the PDF market as well. This is not to say that you should avoid the unknown, of course. Certainly, it's not easy to see what's inside a PDF from an unknown company or individual until you've already purchased it, but you can still do your homework. Read the reviews on your favorite gaming website. Visit the company's own website. See if they have any Free PDF samples available. And use common sense: if the cover art for the PDF looks like it was drawn in crayon on the back of a shovel, chances are that PDF was produced on a shoestring budget. Quality (and lack thereof) is usually evident.

It's a hectic, wonderful, terrifying time for the industry. And it's just getting started.

Something Like a Phenomenon

Within the past eighteen months or so, the Internet has seen the arrival of a new breed of websites, devoted to handling the "tail end" of the PDF self-publishing business. Which means you can focus on conceptualizing and creating your electronic masterpiece, without having to worry about the nuts and bolts of actually marketing and selling it.

This phenomenon is no great surprise when you consider the direction the Internet as a whole has been heading. Websites like Ebay, Paypal, CafePress and Yahoo! Stores have revolutionized the way people feel about e-commerce as a whole by taking things that used to be difficult to do (sell items, collect payment, and print items on demand) and making them affordable and easy. And to be certain, you could use those services, and others like them, to electronically publish and sell Role-Playing products.

But what those sites lack is the same sort of appeal that the Hobby Shop has for the bricks-and-mortar RPG customer. Namely, the ability to browse amongst an assortment of exclusively RPG-related merchandise, to purchase a product, and to take that product home immediately (or, in this case, as fast as your modem will let you).

Websites like RPGShop.com and Wizard's Attic certainly have the focus right, but since they sell physical products, a customer still faces the issue of paying for shipping, and then waiting (a week? two weeks? longer?) for an item to arrive at her doorstep. Which does no one any good when they've got a gaming session scheduled an hour from now.

With an electronic product like a PDF, however, one can quite realistically locate, purchase and download a product in just a few minutes. And for the publisher of such a product, making it available for customers to do just that is almost as simple.

My own first experience with RPG PDF downloads was with RPG.net's Virtual Mall, at http://mall.rpg.net/ (for the record, I am Columns Editor and a past columnist there). The RPG.net mall features an assortment of some 200 downloadable products from 40 publishers, ranging in price from less than $1 up to $13 or so. With many products available free of charge, and not a lot of clutter, it's not a bad way to learn how to test drive a PDF download or two. RPG.net's mall charges a fairly standard 20 percent commission on sales (i.e., if you sell an item for $1.00, they take 20 cents for their trouble). Their partnership with Wizard's Attic is also a plus.

However, the site's own documentation and FAQ pages acknowledge that it is still a work in progress, and there are some evident bugs to be worked through (though nothing that affects basic functionality). Indications from vendors are that overall sales volume and vendor reporting are somewhat less than optimal.

Another option is SVGames (http://www.svgames.com/), which offers mostly standard "pen-and-paper" items, ordered and shipped in the ordinary fashion, with a particular category (ESD, or "Electronic Software Delivery") just for PDF and other electronic products. Selection is fairly large, with over 600 items available, and site owner Sean Vanderdasson brings a plethora of experience to the store, having served for more than five years as Wizards of the Coast's VP of eCommerce. Thus, it should be no surprise that the majority of the products available for download are older, now out-of-print TSR/WotC AD&D products, including everything from rare 1st Edition Sourcebooks to not-so-rare 2nd Edition Splatbooks. For customers in search of a way to replace their older AD&D collection with PDFs, this is certainly a treasure trove.

However, many of those larger sourcebooks are split into separate files (a necessary evil, considering the size of some), with a Windows-only software solution needed to rejoin them. This means that non-Windows users (like myself) have a somewhat more limited selection to choose from. Vendors will encounter a larger userbase, although this must be weighed against a higher commission (50 percent) than on other sites. Impressions from those who've sold there indicate that sales volume is solid, but that reporting (apparently limited to offline quarterly reports) could be improved.

At present, the leader of the pack is RPGnow.com, at http://www.rpgnow.com/ . Part of RPGHost, one of the most expansive Role-Playing-oriented networks on the Internet, RPGNow is able to remain specifically geared to the RPG PDF market, as traditional product sales are split off into an older sister site (RPGShop.com). This exclusive focus on PDFs, along with a large network of users (250,000 across all RPGHost sites) and customer base (more than 11,000) means that RPGNow has been fortunate enough to hit the ground running and quickly take the lead in a portion of the industry that's barely two years old.

RPGNow takes either a 20% or 25% commission (the higher commission bringing with it additional perks and services for vendors; more on that below), and presently offers between 400 and 500 PDF products, many of them free downloads, others averaging around $5 or $6 for a decent-sized (as in page count) product. The variety available is almost excessively democratic, including everything from amateur efforts by total newcomers to the field, to some of the best-known PDF products by some of the biggest names in the industry, including exclusive deals with Atlas Games, Pinnacle Entertainment, West End Games, Fiery Dragon Productions, Mongoose Publishing, Wingnut Games and MicroTactix Games.

It seems ludicrous to complain about the variety and quantity, but the fact that it can sometimes be hard to separate the wheat from the chaff is the site's biggest (and some would say, only) flaw. And it's a problem that the field as a whole is facing.

Too Much of a Good Thing?

If you know anything about d20, you know who Monte Cook is - author of the Dungeon Master's Guide, co-designer of the new Dungeons & Dragons system, and, as one of the most public faces of gaming, arguably this decade's version of Gary Gygax (no offense to Mr. Gygax, of course, who is still Chairman of the Board in this writer's opinion).

But if you're relatively new to the idea of PDF RPG material, you may not know that Monte Cook is also one of the biggest proponents of the PDF Gaming movement. His Book of Eldritch Might (http://www.montecook.com/mpress_BOEM.html) was one of the first, best-selling and (arguably) most important d20 PDF products of all time.

Eldritch Might certainly could have been released solely as a print product, but Cook's decision to also put it online as a PDF was momentous, even if it seemed like a long shot at the time.

"Before I released the Book of Eldritch Might as a PDF in April of 2001, I

found two companies with on-line for-pay d20 products," said Cook. "Both were adventures, and neither appeared to be having much success. A couple of people were selling on-line products before then, but they were mostly map products or counters. Even WotC tried its hand at it with a couple of products (Alternity titles) in 2000 without a lot of success."

The gamble paid off. Eldritch Might was released online to great fanfare, and sold thousands of electronic copies in just days, a phenomenal achievement for any RPG product, and astounding by PDF standards. "D20 had everything to do with that," said Cook, "because at the time people were hungry for anything compatible with D&D." And the hunger continues; nearly two years after release, Eldritch Might still appears in current PDF bestseller lists, and according to Cook, has been selling 3-4 copies a day steadily for at least a year. Since its release as a PDF in April of 2001, the PDF has also spawned two sequels and a spinoff (Book of Hallowed Might). Not bad for a trial run.

This is far from typical.

"When RPGNow started, just about a year ago, there was suddenly one common place where everyone could offer their products, and e-publishing got a good fat kick-start," said Matt Drake of Spectre Press, a publisher of PDF products (http://www.spectrepress.com/). "People saw top-ten sales lists and said, 'Hey, I can do that!' What they don't know is that the top sellers for this week may have only sold 5 copies this week. And they're on top because everyone else sold 1 or 2 - assuming they sold any."

The truth of the matter is that PDF publishing is not a place to get rich quick. Most titles sell fewer than 100 copies, the top sellers lucky to break the 500 mark. It's easier than ever to get your product listed, but still as difficult as ever to get noticed. At least, for the long term. Sell over 200 products and you're among the top sellers in a given month, but prepare to be knocked off next month when a whole slew of new products arrives. Lather, rinse, repeat with increasing frequency as the months go by, and PDFs gain in popularity. As the market widens and more products appear on the market (as many as 3-4 a day appear on RPGNow at some times, some 20 a week), the available market share that each individual product enjoys diminishes just a little bit more.

The good news is that with the proper marketing approach, PDF products can have a much longer "shelf life" than their print counterparts. The rule of thumb in the RPG industry is a three-month sales window; that is to say, if a book sells 100 copies in April, it will sell 50 in May, 25 in June, and die off thereafter. PDFs may crest higher and faster at first, then fall fast and hard within a few weeks (as initial buzz wears off), but in the long run, the slow trickle of a few sales a day can easily meet or surpass the sales of an equivalent print product.

However, there are many advantages to offering a PDF product, to vendors and customers alike, varying depending on the type of product being offered. In general, PDF products tend to fall into five categories:

1) PDF Only. These are products which don't have a print version available at all, the intent typically being for the customer to print them out on their own printer. The benefit to the vendor is clear - no inventory or production costs, and the ability to offer a lower-priced product to the customer. The best of these, however, are those that also offer a clear benefit to having the customer print them, as with the printable villages and buildings from MicroTactix Games, at http://www.microtactix.com/ , whose products can be found almost exclusively through RPGNow.com. Producing a cardstock product would be more expensive, and would greatly reduce the ease with which a customer might expand their use of the product. Need to double the size of your printable orc army? Run off an extra sheet of cutouts. This sort of offering also gives customers in rural areas, or outside of a publisher's home country, the opportunity to access products immediately and without ludicrous shipping costs.

2) PDF, Revise, Then Print. Many companies are using PDFs as a test ground for their products, allowing them to access a wide test audience hungry for new material. The immediate feedback before thousands of copies have been printed results in a better product for the end customer, and a much happier publisher, who may have saved thousands of dollars in the process. Monte Cook, Bastion Press and RPG Objects have pre-released books

in this fashion. Ryan Dancey (the man behind the Open Gaming Movement) had this advice: "Print to PDF first. You'll get invaluable feedback you can use to improve your product before you go on press... That's the advice Peter Adkison gave me in '96, and it saved close to $100,000 in screwed up printing for L5R."

3) PDF And Print, Simultaneously. Offering both PDF and Electronic versions gives a much wider choice to consumers, who are always the best judge of what's best for their own needs. "All my products come out in both formats (because) both mediums are worth supporting," said Monte Cook. "While many prefer to have a printed, bound book in their hands, some appreciate the utility of an electronic file. And for some people who live far from a game store, electronic products are their only option for getting hold of a Malhavoc Press product."

4) PDF After Out Of Print. Many out of print books from WEG, Pinnacle, Mongoose, Fiery Dragon, Atlas and TSR are available now in PDF format, offering gamers a way to access information that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to get a hold of. Such an option is also valuable for newer releases that don't warrant a reprint, but are popular enough to be made available again. "The Slayer's Guide to Gnolls proved to be a very successful release for Mongoose Publishing, and despite the best of intentions it was never reprinted after the initial print run sold out," said Alexander Fennell of Mongoose Publishing. But by releasing the product as a PDF (in this case, with RPGNow.com), Mongoose was able "to allow all those who missed the first printing the chance to pick the book up now."

5) PDF With Option To Print. Releasing a product as a PDF first is a good way to see if there's enough interest in it to warrant a printed product. "PDF publishing for me is a gateway to print publishing," said Matt Drake of Spectre Press. "By publishing electronically, I can analyze which products can do well, which will fail miserably, and which are a decent investment. If a game sees any popularity online, there is a good chance it will be profitable in print." It's also now possible to allow the consumer to make the decision about when to print, and in what quantities - RPGNow.com now offers a Print on Demand service, as well as an option for customers to burn their PDF selections to CD-ROM.

In the end, it's these sorts of choices that will give RPG PDF products the edge in the coming months and years. A book is just a book, but a PDF can be a number of different things.

And I'll Form The Head!

In one of the incarnations of the popular 80s cartoon Voltron, an assortment of giant robotic lions, piloted by color-coded teens, would inevitably find that they faced an insurmountable challenge, and would have to pull together at the last moment, adjusting their configuration to form a giant robot, and thereby revealing a new array of weaponry designed to overcome the odds and come out ahead. Often it involved a Blazing Sword. Which was pretty cool, you have to admit.

I'm not saying the PDF industry is like Voltron, but it's certainly a fair comparison to say that things are in need of adjustment if the trend towards E-publishing is going to succeed in any real fashion.

RPGNow in particular has thus far done the best job of catering to the specific needs of a d20-hungry audience. RPG.net's Mall offers less d20 specific product, and lacks the built-in traffic available to RPGNow. And even though SVGames has more purely AD&D-centric material, the bulk of it is pre-d20, and thus debatably compatible. More importantly, RPGNow's exclusive focus on electronic downloads, the support of major players in the industry, and the additional features it is beginning to offer to support its core offering all represent what many believe is the future of d20 gaming, and Role-Playing in general.

"How many other sites spent $10,000 on promotion?", said James Mathe, the man behind RPGNow.com, who is not at all ashamed to be the current king of the hill. "How many others have our level of customer service? How many others have our level of tools for vendors to use? I think we earned our position."

Indeed, RPGNow's level of support for vendors has earned them consistent praise for ease-of-use as well as functionality. The service offering includes an enhanced degree of security (customers need to enter a valid serial number to access products; multiple payment options including not only Credit Cards but also Money Orders and Paypal (accounting for 15 to 20% of all orders); detailed sales reports; and the ability to easily add, edit and delete products. The Gold Vendor Program (which takes an additional 5% commission on sales) enhances the offering with: advanced customer tracking, the ability to offer revised products (and give customers the ability to access them for free); e-mail sales notifications; access to press mailings; and the ability to share in banner exchanges across RPGHost's family of sites.

Such advertising and marketing is truly the key to growth in this area, and RPGNow itself has made a significant effort to spread the word about their PDF offerings.

"We periodically spotlight vendors in our full page ads in Dungeon magazine, Dragon magazine, Campaign Magazine, ENWorld Players Guide, United Playtest, Knights of the Round Table, Lejends Magazine, and a few online E-zines and demo CDs," said Mathe. "This, as well as banner exposure on our network, is offered for free to members of RPGNow." RPGNow's Print on Demand service is also available to all members, as will be

an ePublishers series of help books, designed to help prospective PDF publishers learn more about how to enhance their own product offering.

As little as three years ago, it would have been hard to imagine that the number of electronic RPG products on the market would be increasing at such a furious pace. Acceptance of the format has been somewhat less stellar, but with key d20 publishers climbing aboard, and several websites offering centralized marketing and sales solutions, and a variety of options to customers, it can only be a matter of time.

"I said two years ago on my website that PDF publishing was the wave of the future. Now there are two different websites devoted to nothing but selling PDFs," said Monte Cook. "Electronic publishing isn't a training ground for "real" rpg writing. It is real rpg writing. It's not a means, it's an end."

The end of the beginning, perhaps.

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Alphabet Soup Timeline

Until quite recently, the self-publication of d20-based RPG material in PDF format was difficult, if not impossible. Here's a look at the key elements involved in that process, the acronyms associated with them, and when they entered the public consciousness.

1970-1971 - RPG (Role-Playing Game). Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax present "The Fantasy Game," arguably the first RPG. Led to the creation of . . .

1973 - TSR (Tactical Studies Rules). Named for a local wargaming club. The original publishers of . . .

1974 - D&D (Dungeons & Dragons). The very first edition of D&D sold 1000 copies in its first year of publication, which would place it among the top selling PDF supplements nowadays. Eventually spawned the rules-heavy . . .

1977-1979 - AD&D (Advanced Dungeons & Dragons). Split class and race apart, further developed the now ubiquitous Zoroastrian alignment system, and added much of the material now present, in some form, in D&D3e.

1984-1985 - GUI (Graphical User Interface) and DTP (DeskTop Publishing). Existed before this time, but the release of the first Macintosh computer brought this to the general public as never before.

1986 - GURPS (Generic Universal Role Playing System). Published by Steve Jackson Games. Offering a centralized game engine that could be used to play the same game in many different settings,it is a precursor of the d20 System concept (at least philosophically).

1989 - THAC0 (To Hit Armor Class 0). Arrived with the release of AD&D 2nd Edition. The beginning of the end of the beginning of Role-Playing, and in many ways the direct ancestor of the d20 System.

1992-1993 - WWW (World Wide Web). The world's first web browser, NCSA Mosaic, is only ten years old.

The desire for more robust methods of sharing data on the Web helped drive the creation of the . . .

1992-1993 - PDF (Portable Document Format 1.0). Clunky, not widely used, and horribly expensive. Check back in 8 or 9 years. In the meantime, save up for some Magic: The Gathering cards from . . .

1997 - WOTC (Wizards of the Coast). Formed in 1990, but this is when they acquired TSR (see above), only to be acquired by Hasbro two years later just before the publication of . . .

2000 - D&D3e (Dungeons & Dragons 3rd Edition). Depending on your point of view, either the best thing that ever happened to Role-Playing, or a sign of the Apocalypse. Either way, without this we wouldn't have the . . .

2000 - SRD (System Reference Document). Material gleaned from the Player's Handbook and other D&D books available for use as open gaming content. This is what makes the d20 phenomenon possible. And, more importantly, legal. See http://www.wizards.com/D20/article.asp?x=srd for more. Goes hand in hand with the . . .

2001 - OGL (Open Gaming License). Allows people to use OGL content (including material in the SRD, above) provided they include a percentage of new material that is open for others to use. An article of this sort cannot cover its complexities. See http://www.opengamingfoundation.org/licenses.html for more.

2001 - PDF (Portable Document Format 1.4). Ah, that's more like it. 128 bit encryption, widespread support by printers, and affordability (Adobe Acrobat - $249, Acrobat Reader - Free). Now we can get to work.

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[Sidebar]