
Designers & Dragons



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This Kind of Quest

When I was asked to write the introduction for a book on the history of roleplaying games in the 1990s, I jumped at the chance. This decade almost precisely defines my first adventure into roleplaying games as a career. My friends and I started *Wizards of the Coast* in early 1990, and then we sold it to Hasbro in late 1999. That's about as close to "the '90s" as you can get!

Looking through the table of contents at the companies listed takes me back to a special time in my life. The history of each of these companies is a story about people—one, two, or a handful of gamers who shared the dream of taking their place next to the industry giants from the '70s and '80s, people we grew up admiring as heroes. Who would be the next Gary Gygax, Steve Jackson, or Greg Stafford? Could it possibly be someone like us?

I don't know *all* of these RPG designers, but I know most of them. And here's what I can promise: These companies were started by hardcore RPG enthusiasts—people who love RPGs. They were gamers first and businesspeople second.

This isn't the sort of industry some MBA business executive out to make money dives into. Oh, sometimes the suits will gather around and peek at this strange world we live in, but as soon as they talk to a distributor about what sales levels are for new titles, or learn how fragmented the retail channel is, or discover no Wall Street analysts write about this category, they run away to a "real" industry.

And I say that's okay. This kind of quest needs a hero who is in it for the journey, not just the loot.

The stories you'll find here are about real gamers—heroes and heroines who didn't get financial backing from banks or venture capitalists, but funded their games with credit cards and help from friends and relatives, sacrificed careers in

“respectable” industries, worked odd jobs on the side to put food on the table, and kept reaching for the prize through every setback life could dish out.

My thanks to Mr. Appelcline for telling the tales of these companies, their games, and the designers who made them, so that we might better appreciate the epic quests they had to complete to bring us this treasury of roleplaying games. I hope you will be inspired to begin a new adventure of your own, either around the gaming table or on the road to becoming the next great RPG designer.

Peter Adkison
Seattle, 2014

Foreword: The '90s

This is a book about the roleplaying industry as it existed during one of its most innovative periods ever. It's about hobbyist gaming in the '90s. More specifically, it's about 21 different companies that began publishing roleplaying games in the '90s — from constant innovator White Wolf through any number of publishers who each brought something novel and unique to the industry — including foreign translations, internet roleplaying games, diceless roleplaying, story games, and more.

The roleplaying industry is a very creative one, built on the backs of dreamers who are able to imagine different worlds. It's also a small industry, which makes it vulnerable to any number of disasters. That's what you'll find at the heart of this book, beneath the trends and under the skin of the companies: a story of designers and their dragons.

There are designers aplenty within these covers.

Some of them were the old guard (with varying definitions of "old") come back to lead new companies, among them: Terry Amthor, Bill Bridges, Andrew Greenberg, Gary Gygax, Marc Miller, Margaret Weis, and Erick Wujcik. However, there was also plenty of new blood, and many of these designers brought the biggest innovations to the industry, such as: Richard Garfield, who shook the roleplaying industry to its core without ever designing an RPG; Steffan O'Sullivan, who turned to the internet before almost anyone else; Mark Rein-Hagen, who created the game that would define the decade; John Tynes, who brought innovative and evocative designs to multiple companies; and James Wallis, who presaged the indie game movement a full decade early.

And the dragons, they're sadly here as well.

In a decade full of innovation, it's no surprise that the roleplaying industry's biggest dragons came in the form of innovation itself. The CCG boom and bust not only hurt roleplaying publishers — who had troubles selling their RPGs in the face of higher-profit CCGs — but it also damaged the entire system of distribution and retail. Even today, the front-list mentality created by CCGs persists. The d20 boom and bust wouldn't hit until the '00s, but the roleplaying publishers who had the bad luck to get started in the late '90s would nonetheless hit it while going full speed.

Bookstores surprisingly caused the next biggest problem, as book returns and store reorganizations heavily damaged the top two publishers in the RPG industry.

There were certainly other dragons in the era — including financial troubles, creative troubles, and personal troubles. However, they tend to be occluded by the big three — CCGs, d20, and bookstores. In an era with such huge and sometimes surprising changes, it's sometimes harder to point out the minor factors that contributed to companies' falls (though you'll find them too!).

From a historical point of view, the most catastrophic event of the '90s was the loss of many of the industry's primordial companies. Though some were later resurrected in different forms, Avalon Hill, FGU, GDW, Hero Games, ICE, and Task Force Games all died in the '90s. FASA followed shortly thereafter. Oh, and a little company called TSR fell beneath a whole flight of dragons. As has been said before, dragons have stamina; they keep wearing away at companies and their designers, like the sea against the shore. In the end, they always win.

The story is not in the victory or the loss, but in the fight.

Of the 21 companies profiled within, about 8 are still active publishers of roleplaying games. Another several are still in business, but running at a low level or outside the tabletop RPG industry. Compared to the publishers of the '70s and '80s, that's really quite a fine ratio. However, if the history of our industry has told us anything, it's that in another decade or two, many of these publishers will have moved on as well. For now they continue to fight the hobbyist fight.

Come and read the story of the 21 most notable companies to enter the RPG industry during one of its major periods of innovation — the story of their designers and their battles against the dragons.



About the Icon: Daniel Solis' icon for the '90s is an ankh. It represents the coming of White Wolf. However, it goes beyond that to also highlight the new styles of play and the new types of players that the '90s brought.

A Future History of Roleplaying

Though this book focuses on roleplaying companies that began publication in the '90s, many of their stories continued beyond that decade. Therefore, the trends of later times affected these early publishers. The most important future trends are detailed, in brief, below.

○ **The D20 Boom and Bust (2000–2004).** Wizards of the Coast changed the whole industry a second time when they released *Dungeons & Dragons Third Edition* (2000) under a license that allowed anyone to create supplements for it. Hundreds of new companies cropped up to do so, while many old publishers also moved into the new and lucrative space. Existing publishers who didn't do so found it hard to stay afloat. Just as with CCGs, a bust quickly followed the boom.

○ **The Indie Revolution (2001+).** Many of the storytelling ideas from the '80s and '90s have been reborn in recent years as the indie game movement. Small publishers are publishing games that matter to them, and they're often about stories, morality, emotions, or other weighty issues—not just fighting goblins.

A Note to Readers of the First Edition

If you read the previous, black monolith edition of *Designers & Dragons*, you'll find that the information on the '90s in this new edition is slightly increased. The history of Metropolis Ltd. is new, while that of Hekaforge has been expanded. Appendix I is all new as well.

In addition, articles have been updated for companies still in business (and that actually added a fair amount to this book, since about half of the companies are still around).

Whether you've encountered an edition of this book before, or are a newcomer to Designers & Dragons, I hope you enjoy yourself while reading many of the histories of hobbyist innovation.

Shannon Appelcline
March 29, 2013



Part One:

The Storytelling Small Press

(1990–1992)

The small press explosion that began in 1984 continued right into the early '90s, with new companies formed specifically to produce new RPGs continuing to appear. Many of them were *original RPG producers*, including White Wolf, Phage Press, and Dream Pod 9 — each of which appeared specifically to publish its own game.

Other paths into the industry continued to exist. AEG was an example of a *magazine publisher* — though like most, the company eventually abandoned its periodical to focus on other sort of roleplaying releases. Meanwhile, Atlas Games and Pagan Publishing proved that *licensees* could still excel in the industry.

Storytelling games — where plot and character were more important than exploration and combat — also proved to be an important and expanding trend in the early '90s. Games of this sort dated back to at least the mid-'80s — when *Paranoia* (1984), *Toon* (1984), and *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985) appeared — but now companies were being created specifically as *storytelling publishers*. White Wolf may have been the first, but Phage Press also ably advanced the banner. Even publishers like Atlas Games and (to a lesser extent) Pagan Publishing soon began to focus on storytelling games of their own.

It was a time of continued innovation in the industry, but also a calm before the storm that would soon shake the industry to its roots.

Company	Years	First RPG	Page
White Wolf	1990-2014	<i>Story Paths</i> (1990)	7
Atlas Games	1990-Present	<i>Tales of the Dark Ages</i> (1990)	52
Pagan Publishing	1990-Present	<i>The Unspeakable Oath #1</i> (1990)	75
AEG	1990-Present	<i>Shadis #1</i> (1990)	94
<i>Crafty Games</i>	2005-Present	<i>Back to Basics</i> (2006)	106
Phage Press	1991-2005	<i>Amber Diceless</i> (1991)	109
Dream Pod 9	1992-Present	<i>Night's Edge</i> (1992)	116

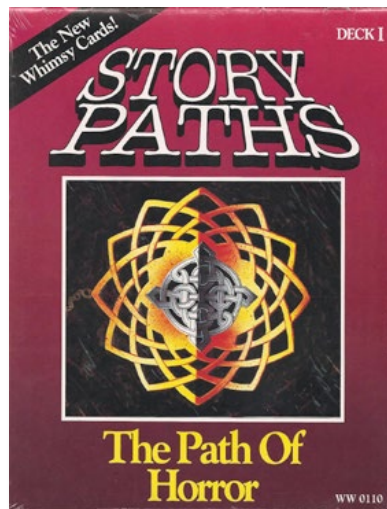
White Wolf: 1990—2014

Several years ago, White Wolf was one of the top companies in the RPG field, claiming a 25% share in the industry. Its rise to such heights from very small beginnings was amazing, and in recent years its downs and ups have been just as impressive.

Prelude to a Game Studio: 1986—1990

Though the growth of the RPG industry was slowing in the mid-'80s, the industry was still fairly young. The number of long-time RPG designers was small (and many still remained with their first companies), and therefore it was possible for fresh new faces with innate talent to break in. Such was the case when two Alabama brothers — Stewart and Steve Wieck — sent a *Villains & Vigilantes* adventure to FGU. Much to their surprise, *The Secret in the Swamp* (1986) was accepted and published.

Publication was a validation and though the two were still in high school, they decided to take the next step: self-publication.



1990: Story Paths: The Path of Horror

A short time later they were printing 30 copies of their first magazine, *Arcanum* #1 (June 1986).

"Stewart just came up to me during class break during high school one day and said 'Let's start a magazine,'; I said 'Sure'; and we got to work that night on the first issue."

– Steve Wieck, "The RPGnet Interview #17," rpg.net (February 2008)

Thirty copies is really the smallest of small press, but the response was sufficient for editor-in-chief Stewart to decide his fanzine had the potential to be the basis of a business. Unfortunately, *Arcanum*'s name was too similar to TSR's *Unearthed Arcana* (1985), so Stewart decided an alternate title was required. He settled upon "White Wolf," after the fantasy hero Elric of Melniboné.

White Wolf #1 (August 1986) appeared just two months later, produced by "White Wolf Publishing." Like its predecessor it was a stapled and photocopied fanzine, printed entirely in black & white — not really the stuff a future top-tier RPG company is made of. But the Wiecks persevered. Over the next couple of issues the print run jumped to 140, then 200. The magazine started being printed professionally with issue #4 (1986).

With issue #5 (1986), a second color to the cover was added, and distributors — beginning with Glenwood Distribution, run by Bob Carty — began to order the magazine, resulting in a print run of 1,120. White Wolf Publishing was clearly on the road to success. This was reflected by a cheeky illustration in that issue, which showed a white wolf wrestling with a dragon (and clearly getting the better of it). It was by a young Rich Thomas, who got involved with *White Wolf* after answering an ad in *Dragon* magazine. He'd become a staff artist with issue #7 (1987), then the magazine's art director with issue #11 (1987).

Meanwhile, *White Wolf* was changing in other ways, starting with issue #8 (December 1987). That issue's cover was printed full-color on glossy stock, the periodical's name was changed from *White Wolf* to *White Wolf Magazine*, and most importantly the Wiecks printed 10,000 copies. They gave many away at Gen Con 20 (1987), which helped them to market the magazine in a big way.

Early issues of *White Wolf* were primarily about *AD&D*, but that focus also changed with issue #8, when the young magazine became more "indie." Over the next 16 issues, *White Wolf* published numerous articles about two young games with innovative settings and rules: SkyRealm Productions' *SkyRealms of Jorune* (issues #8–16) and Lion Rampant's *Ars Magica* (issues #11–24). The magazine also gave attention to a perennial fantasy alternate, Chaosium's *RuneQuest*, (issues #15–22). Most of the articles for these game systems were written by the authors of

the games themselves, showing off the advantages of an independent magazine, beholden to no one.

As *White Wolf Magazine* highlighted independent games, it eclipsed Chaosium's *Different Worlds* magazine (1979–1987) — the former star in the category, which was then ending its run. Based solely on its magazine, White Wolf Publishing had become a notable force in the industry.

In its first incarnation, White Wolf Publishing also gave *some* indication that it was interested in the wider world of RPG publication. That began right in its first year of existence, when the company released an *AD&D* adventure by Stewart Wieck called *The Curse Undying* (1986). However, that was the company's only publication outside of *White Wolf Magazine* for four years.

Then in 1990 a new supplement appeared: *The Campaign Book Volume One: Fantasy* (1990), which included work by a young Ken Cliffe — also a *Villains & Vigilantes* writer before he came to White Wolf. The book was developed with the same independent ideas as *White Wolf Magazine*: it presented six fantasy settings in a generic manner that could be used with any game.

Though it built on the same independent ideals as the magazine, *The Campaign Book* would actually mark a new direction for White Wolf Publishing — as would become evident when a final puzzle piece fell into place.



Lions, Campaigns, and Stories, Oh My: 1990–1991

Enter Lion Rampant. They were a young roleplaying company — founded in Minnesota in 1987 — and one of the three independent publishers befriended by the Wiecks and their magazine. By a set of strange coincidences described in their own history, around 1990 Lion Rampant ended up in Georgia — just one state over from White Wolf Publishing — and then saw their funding disappear. They still had the creative talent to create great roleplaying material and their books still sold well enough to pay for their creation, but cash flow problems made it impossible to get that cycle started once more.

So, Lion Rampant and White Wolf Publishing decided to merge. White Wolf's Stewart Wieck and Lion Rampant's Mark Rein•Hagen became the co-owners of a new company that was called simply "White Wolf." The *Ars Magica* roleplaying game came along with the deal, as did the other members of Lion Rampant's staff,

including Lisa Stevens and Nicole Lindroos. This new White Wolf — founded in late 1990 and fueled by the creative staff of two different companies — is the heart of this roleplaying history.

White Wolf Magazine #24 (December 1990/January 1991) announced the merger (and quietly noted the new company name in its indicia). In his editorial, Stewart carefully explained that the magazine would remain *independent*, despite the company's new interest in roleplaying production.

"White Wolf Magazine will not become a house organ magazine. While house organs do service to the company they represent, they ultimately do harm to the roleplaying industry."

– Stewart Wieck, "Runes," *White Wolf Magazine #24* (1990)

By the time they released that announcement, White Wolf was already finishing up the first publication that was the joint work of the two former companies. It was an unassuming gaming accessory called "Story Paths," which expanded on Lion Rampant's *Whimsy Cards*.

The *Whimsy Cards* (1987) had been an innovative pack of 43 cards that gave players the ability to influence the storyline of an RPG by playing cards with text like "bad tidings," then explaining how that card influenced the plot of the game. White Wolf's new *Story Paths* — whose publication began with *The Path of Horror* (1990) and *The Path of Intrigue* (1990) — did the same thing, but offered more evocative detail for a very specific genre of gaming. Each deck also showed the new "White Wolf" logo and promised "A Renaissance in Games." There were originally supposed to be six more of these 24-card decks — including Paths of Danger, Hope, Deception, Discovery, Whimsy, and Suspense — but they were never produced.

That was because of Lion Rampant's final debt. For nine months following the merger of the companies, the Lion Rampant name and logo were maintained. Sales of the company's old stock were being used to pay off various debts that Lion Rampant owed. But nine months later there was one debt still remaining: the money invested by Dan Fox, the financier who moved Lion Rampant from Minnesota to Georgia. To pay off this remaining debt and to ensure that White Wolf's IP was clean and free, White Wolf traded Fox the *Story Paths* line. Fox would eventually sell them to Three Guys Gaming, who released a new edition of 81 cards in 1996, then dropped off the face of the earth.

Though they'd lost the first product jointly produced by White Wolf and Lion Rampant, the staff of the new company wasn't worried. They knew that much bigger things lay ahead.

Before we finish on the topic of White Wolf's origins, we should briefly talk about its changing company name. As we've already seen, White Wolf Publishing was merged with Lion Rampant to create White Wolf in late 1990. A few years later, beginning with *White Wolf Magazine* #34 (January/February 1993), White Wolf started doing business as White Wolf Game Studio — a brand name that they continued using until their demise.

Calling the company a Game Studio back when they'd just put out some cards would have seemed a bit funny, but by the start of 1993, White Wolf actually had considerable gaming publications under their belt, as we'll now see.

Enter the World of Darkness: 1991

Mark Rein•Hagen's most impressive attribute as a game designer is clearly his constantly bubbling creativity. Though he (alongside Jonathan Tweet) created the definitive game of medieval magic in *Ars Magica* (1987), he wasn't content to rest on those laurels. As early as 1989 he was thinking about turning over the *Ars Magica* line to freelancers, so that he could start his next big project.

"For a while there was talk of a game called Shining Armor, which could be a companion game to Ars Magica, focusing on the Chivalric Knight; but I think other games, such as Pendragon, already cover the area well enough (or at least have saturated the market)."

– Mark Rein•Hagen, "Looking Ahead," *Running Rampant* #2 (Autumn 1989)

Rein•Hagen's first idea was to create a series of linked games set in the Middle Ages, beginning with a knightly game called *Shining Armor*. Then he considered moving *Ars Magica* into the modern day as an urban fantasy. *Inferno* was another early idea: a game where players roleplayed in Purgatory, perhaps even taking on the roles of characters who had died in other campaigns. (A transformer explosion and the unlikely destruction of the sole manuscript led the team to decide *that* particular game was cursed.)

On the road to Gen Con '90 with Stewart Wieck and Lisa Stevens, Rein•Hagen hit upon a game that combined all of these concepts. It would be dark and moody like *Inferno*, it would be an urban fantasy with some history from *Ars Magica*, and it would be the first in a series of linked games.

The game of course was "Vampire: The Masquerade." Rein•Hagen had originally considered a licensed "Anne Rice roleplaying game," but then decided that a license wasn't necessary to create a gothic vampire RPG. However, there was one other potential obstacle: once the group arrived at Gen Con, they saw Stellar Games' brand-new *NightLife*, an urban monster game. Fortunately, they soon

decided that its more humorous take wouldn't get in their way. Mark Rein•Hagen began work on what would become his main project for the next year.

Early in 1991 — with *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) reaching completion — White Wolf pulled out all stops for a new marketing drive. They prepared a 16-page full-color glossy pamphlet that described their new game and sent 30 or 40 thousand copies to distributors to give away. This got players, retailers, and distributors alike excited about the game, priming the industry for their new release.

White Wolf was trying to evoke a very specific mood with their new game: a gothic feel that really hadn't been seen in roleplaying games before, except in TSR's classic *Ravenloft* (1983). That theming was first revealed in a textual introduction that led off the pamphlet. It began:

“She passes me by with a quick glance into the alley. I break away from the shadows. An arm's-length away, I can hear her heart pumping.

“I have become death, the destroyer of souls.

“Gliding toward her, the smell of her life-plasm waifs over me, arousing me. She is only inches from my caressing touch. My mind screams with lust.

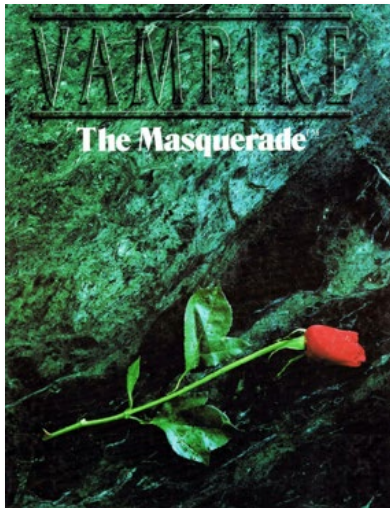
“NO!”

Prose vignettes of this sort would become a constant feature in the White Wolf lines.

However, when *Vampire* was released, its dramatic cover — which featured a single red rose and an ankh laid on green marble — overshadowed the game's evocative prose. The cover was based on a photograph that White Wolf took after their first cover, by Dan Frazier, came in looking too much like every other roleplaying

game. The spontaneous photograph of that green marble instead produced a wonderful, unique, and iconic vision of the game.

It wasn't just the cover of *Vampire* that was startling. The entire game was different from anything seen before in the roleplaying community. In the best tradition of Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire* (1976), White Wolf's new game revealed a world of politics, machinations, angst, and internal conflict. Though RPGs were already becoming more about plots and people — and less about dungeons and fighting — centering a whole game on these subjects was entirely new.



The mechanics of *Vampire* weren't quite as innovative, but they definitely contributed to the game's success. By 1990, when he started work on *Vampire*, Rein•Hagen lost his former mechanics guy — Jonathan Tweet — who left Lion Rampant the previous year. Rein•Hagen turned to a new designer for his new game: Tom Dowd, the co-designer of *Shadowrun* (1989).

As a result of Dowd's history, some *Shadowrun* mechanics inevitably seeped into *Vampire*, most notably “comparative” dice pools. This was a new method to roll dice that *Shadowrun* created. Skill values determined the number of dice to roll, but the dice pools *weren't* added up (as they were in *Champions*, *Star Wars*, *Tunnels & Trolls*, and other early games featuring “additive” dice pools). Instead, each individual die was compared to a target number and then the total number of successes was counted.

Dowd adapted the *Shadowrun* mechanic fairly exactly for *Vampire*, though the die type changed from a d6 to a d10. The resulting system had advantages and disadvantages. On the downside, the probabilities of the system are confusing. It's a rare player who can quickly say what the odds are for “rolling 3 successes on 7 dice requiring a 7+ for success.” This problem was highlighted by the fact that GMs had to choose target numbers for each roll. On the upside, casual and first-time players liked the fact that skill levels were low and so could be represented by filled-in dots on character sheets — making the game look *much* less intimidating than the number-heavy standard for RPGs.

Two other game design elements were notable in *Vampire's* success: disciplines and clans.

Disciplines — such as dominate and other vampiric powers — effectively made *Vampire* a dark superhero game rather than a horror game. Horror games had always been a hard sell, with Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) a very rare standout. Conversely, superheroes were a proven winner in roleplaying.

Clans — organizations that *Vampires* swore allegiance to — made the game more accessible. Though Rein•Hagen's *Ars Magica* featured the similar Houses of Hermes, it was actually Chris McDonough who suggested clans for *Vampire*. It was late in the game design process, and playtesters were having troubles with character concepts. McDonough suggested that something like *D&D's* character classes was needed. The result was the *Vampire* clans, depicting standard vampiric archetypes; they would become invaluable when *Vampire's* gothic stylings let it reach out into new communities of players.

White Wolf's marketing blitz was successful, and the game was sent back to the printers within a week of its initial release.

Though *Vampire* marked a new beginning for the new company, 1991 also represented a time of endings for White Wolf. Steve Wieck — after graduating from

the Georgia Institute of Technology — left White Wolf to begin MBA-equivalent training at GE. Meanwhile, two of the remaining Lion Rampant staff also left: Nicole Lindroos returned to Minnesota, where she went to work for Atlas Games, while Lisa Stevens headed out to Seattle to become the first employee of a scrappy young publisher called Wizards of the Coast.

White Wolf was already growing its own staff, but with so many founding members of the company gone, it was the remaining two — Stewart Wieck and Mark Rein•Hagen — who put their mark on what would perhaps be the most creative period in the company's history: 1991–1995.

Five Years, Five Games (Plus One): 1991–1995

Following the ground-breaking release of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, White Wolf did something every bit as innovative and amazing: they put out a new roleplaying game every year — each set in *Vampire's* World of Darkness and each using *Vampire's* Storyteller rule system. The next four games were: *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (1992), *Mage: The Ascension* (1993), *Wraith: The Oblivion* (1994), and *Changeling: The Dreaming* (1995).

Each core book featured an abstract, iconic cover. Some of the results were attractive, but none as impressive as *Vampire's* green marble. There were also some missteps. *Werewolf's* first-edition cover featured die-cut claw marks that easily ripped. *Wraith* was called “noseroids” by some wags due to the game's nearly unreadable cover logo.

Behind those covers, each game built upon the core strengths of *Vampire*. They featured dark, dystopic visions of the world that centered on super-powered protagonists and included societal organizations to assist players with their character concepts. Though each of these new lines inevitably harkened back to *Vampire*, they were also each unique.

Werewolf (1992) depicted its shape-changing heroes as magical protectors of Gaia and offered a very different vision of the World of Darkness, thus showing how one setting could support two very different viewpoints.

Mage (1993) was, to a certain extent, the game that Rein•Hagen imagined way back in 1989 when he first talked about the possibility of a modern-day *Ars Magica* — though now the original game's Order of Hermes appeared as just a single tradition among many. It was also the first World of Darkness game that Rein•Hagen was not explicitly involved with. That's because White Wolf was growing beyond that initial partnership of Wieck and Rein•Hagen. As we'll see, Rein•Hagen's step back from RPG production wasn't the only change occurring in the company that year.

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