

DESIGNER'S NOTES

There's only one RPG for which I can tell you the exact date I first gave it a try: *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*. I was a freshman at New York University. For some reason, I had gotten it into my head that I'd stop gaming once I got to college. Finding a good group of people can be a challenge and I was more interested in the NY punk scene than trying to locate gamers. Luckily for me, I practically tripped over NYU's nascent game club. I was returning to my dorm after a punk show at CBGBs and there in the common room were about a dozen people roleplaying. I watched them for a bit and when there was a break in the game, I introduced myself; by the next week I had joined the Society for Strategic Gaming. We played various RPG and board games that fall and at semester's end most everyone went home for the holidays. A few of us were left in the nearly vacant dorm and we were looking for something to do. Dave had gotten a copy of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* and the first installment of the *Enemy Within Campaign*, so we decided to try it out. Pat, Gene, and I made two characters each and we played all evening long. It was December 23, 1987. I know that because I still have the character sheets for those adventurers, faded photocopies with rusting staples holding them together. On the back of my Elf Outrider, I started writing down amusing quotes from our sessions. The page starts with this notation: *12/23 the first session*.

The game was an instant hit. When the rest of the group got back from Xmas, we told them they just had to try it. Soon the whole club had the *WFRP* bug. We usually met once a week on Sunday nights in Hayden Hall, but soon we were playing extra sessions during the week. There were several occasions when members skipped studying for important tests or blew off doing term papers so we could play more Warhammer. I can't really speak for the rest of the group, but fate ultimately proved I made the right choice. After all, 16 years later I got the amazing opportunity to design the second edition of what was still one of my favorite RPGs of all time. You hold the results of that effort in your hands.

— A FATEFUL MEETING —

It turns out December is a good month for *WFRP* and me. On December 11, 2003 I was attending GenCon SoCal with my company, Green Ronin Publishing. That evening we had a meeting with Marc Gascoigne of BL Publishing and Simon Butler, the newly appointed head of Black Industries. This meeting was the culmination of two years of negotiations with Games Workshop. After about an hour of conversation and questions, Simon said, "We'd like to work with you." And that's when this process really began. A month later we were whisked off to Nottingham for a week of meetings at GW headquarters. We mapped out a strategy, a process, and a schedule. We met with key people like Alan Merrett and John Blanche. We got to know Simon (another old punk, as it turned out) a lot better. By February I was back in the States with the most important job I'd ever had in the game industry staring me in the face. Now that the fate of *WFRP* was mine to influence, what exactly was I going to do?

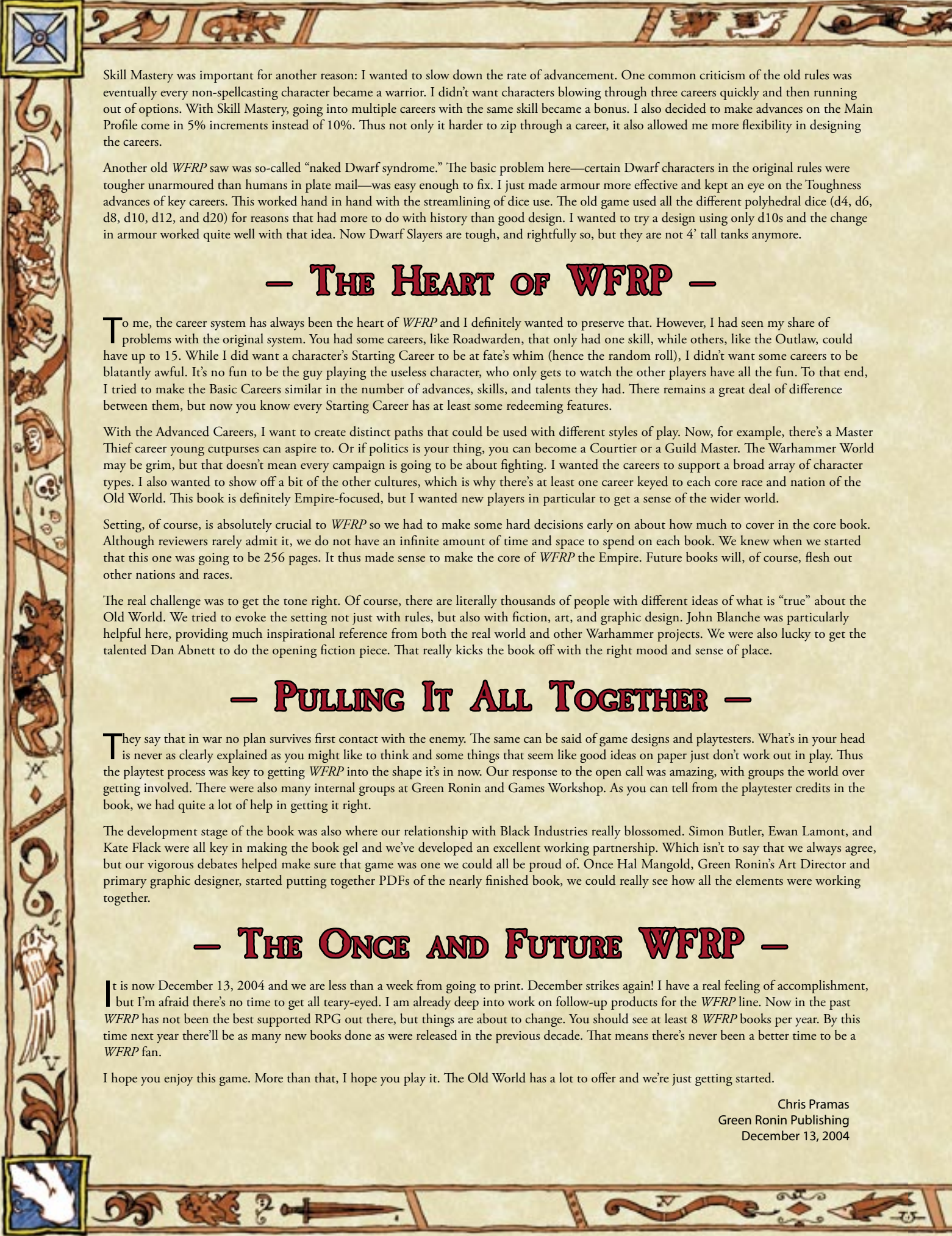
— FIRST STEPS —

In some sense, the first decision was the easiest. Do we update the old rules and just throw everything out and start again? I knew right away that I wanted to keep key elements of the original game, the career system in particular, so from the beginning it was a matter of updating and streamlining more than starting from scratch. The only thing I wanted to jettison outright was the old magic system. That had always been meant as a stopgap, but somehow it was a stopgap that lasted for nearly two decades. *WFRP* fans had long been dissatisfied with it and a much clearer picture of what Warhammer magic was all about had developed over the years in the miniatures game, books, and novels. I wanted to create a magic system that reflected Warhammer magic properly, one that made it perfectly clear when you used magic you were manipulating nothing less than Chaos energy (with all that implies). I sketched out and rejected several different ideas before coming up with the system now in place. The new rules are, as one playtester put it, "Faustian" and that's exactly what we were striving for. There's power to be had, but when Chaos is involved, nothing is certain.

But now I'm getting a bit ahead of myself. The first two things I tackled were Characteristics and Skills. The old stat line had quite a few Characteristics derived from the minis game of the era (such as Initiative and Leadership) that seemed either unnecessary or redundant. I streamlined those down to the Profile you see now. I also added in things like Insanity Points and Fate Points to the Profile, so all the key numbers for a character could be taken in at a glance.



Skills were the next challenge. The original game had quite a large number of skills, except many of them (like Fleet Footed and Very Strong) weren't really skills at all. They were more like special abilities. To make things more clear, I decided to break them out into two categories: skills and talents. I was able to fold the standard tests into the skills, so everything would work the same way and with the same rules. I also added rules for Skill Mastery because the original system was binary (you either had a skill or you didn't) and the only way to get better at a skill was to increase your Characteristic. It's now possible to be an excellent Navigator, for example, without having Einstein's IQ.



Skill Mastery was important for another reason: I wanted to slow down the rate of advancement. One common criticism of the old rules was eventually every non-spellcasting character became a warrior. I didn't want characters blowing through three careers quickly and then running out of options. With Skill Mastery, going into multiple careers with the same skill became a bonus. I also decided to make advances on the Main Profile come in 5% increments instead of 10%. Thus not only it harder to zip through a career, it also allowed me more flexibility in designing the careers.

Another old *WFRP* saw was so-called "naked Dwarf syndrome." The basic problem here—certain Dwarf characters in the original rules were tougher unarmoured than humans in plate mail—was easy enough to fix. I just made armour more effective and kept an eye on the Toughness advances of key careers. This worked hand in hand with the streamlining of dice use. The old game used all the different polyhedral dice (d4, d6, d8, d10, d12, and d20) for reasons that had more to do with history than good design. I wanted to try a design using only d10s and the change in armour worked quite well with that idea. Now Dwarf Slayers are tough, and rightfully so, but they are not 4' tall tanks anymore.

— THE HEART OF WFRP —

To me, the career system has always been the heart of *WFRP* and I definitely wanted to preserve that. However, I had seen my share of problems with the original system. You had some careers, like Roadwarden, that only had one skill, while others, like the Outlaw, could have up to 15. While I did want a character's Starting Career to be at fate's whim (hence the random roll), I didn't want some careers to be blatantly awful. It's no fun to be the guy playing the useless character, who only gets to watch the other players have all the fun. To that end, I tried to make the Basic Careers similar in the number of advances, skills, and talents they had. There remains a great deal of difference between them, but now you know every Starting Career has at least some redeeming features.

With the Advanced Careers, I want to create distinct paths that could be used with different styles of play. Now, for example, there's a Master Thief career young cutpurses can aspire to. Or if politics is your thing, you can become a Courtier or a Guild Master. The Warhammer World may be grim, but that doesn't mean every campaign is going to be about fighting. I wanted the careers to support a broad array of character types. I also wanted to show off a bit of the other cultures, which is why there's at least one career keyed to each core race and nation of the Old World. This book is definitely Empire-focused, but I wanted new players in particular to get a sense of the wider world.

Setting, of course, is absolutely crucial to *WFRP* so we had to make some hard decisions early on about how much to cover in the core book. Although reviewers rarely admit it, we do not have an infinite amount of time and space to spend on each book. We knew when we started that this one was going to be 256 pages. It thus made sense to make the core of *WFRP* the Empire. Future books will, of course, flesh out other nations and races.

The real challenge was to get the tone right. Of course, there are literally thousands of people with different ideas of what is "true" about the Old World. We tried to evoke the setting not just with rules, but also with fiction, art, and graphic design. John Blanche was particularly helpful here, providing much inspirational reference from both the real world and other Warhammer projects. We were also lucky to get the talented Dan Abnett to do the opening fiction piece. That really kicks the book off with the right mood and sense of place.

— PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER —

They say that in war no plan survives first contact with the enemy. The same can be said of game designs and playtesters. What's in your head is never as clearly explained as you might like to think and some things that seem like good ideas on paper just don't work out in play. Thus the playtest process was key to getting *WFRP* into the shape it's in now. Our response to the open call was amazing, with groups the world over getting involved. There were also many internal groups at Green Ronin and Games Workshop. As you can tell from the playtester credits in the book, we had quite a lot of help in getting it right.

The development stage of the book was also where our relationship with Black Industries really blossomed. Simon Butler, Ewan Lamont, and Kate Flack were all key in making the book gel and we've developed an excellent working partnership. Which isn't to say that we always agree, but our vigorous debates helped make sure that game was one we could all be proud of. Once Hal Mangold, Green Ronin's Art Director and primary graphic designer, started putting together PDFs of the nearly finished book, we could really see how all the elements were working together.

— THE ONCE AND FUTURE WFRP —

It is now December 13, 2004 and we are less than a week from going to print. December strikes again! I have a real feeling of accomplishment, but I'm afraid there's no time to get all teary-eyed. I am already deep into work on follow-up products for the *WFRP* line. Now in the past *WFRP* has not been the best supported RPG out there, but things are about to change. You should see at least 8 *WFRP* books per year. By this time next year there'll be as many new books done as were released in the previous decade. That means there's never been a better time to be a *WFRP* fan.

I hope you enjoy this game. More than that, I hope you play it. The Old World has a lot to offer and we're just getting started.

Chris Pramas
Green Ronin Publishing
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