

The Beginning is the End is the Beginning

This is a tale of two supplements: *Ends of Empire (EoE)* and *Greyhawk: The Adventure Begins (TAB)*; one the last in its game line, the other marking the rebirth of its game world. Stylistic it makes sense to stick the two reviews together, the trouble is with style is that it does not often make sense. Drawing comparisons between the two books is extremely hard; contrasts on the other hand are abundant. *Greyhawk* is one of the *AD&D*'s proto-settings, when described as "E. G. Gygax's *Greyhawk*" it tends to mean the mother of all fantasy roleplaying settings. *Wraith* on the other hand was one of the most controversial and provocative modern RPG's.

Firstly there was its subject matter, all the characters in *Wraith* are dead. Not only that but they are dead and unhappy for they have become trapped in a gloomy purgatory, ensnared in their diffidence between the concerns of life and the fear of the beyond. From a game design point of view *Wraith* also put forward a workable method for players to take on roles as elements of the other player characters' personalities. It allowed the game duties to be shared far more evenly amongst the players forming something of a template for many roleplay critics and advocates.

Needless to say that *Wraith* could never really summon up huge support from the people who loved the likes of *Greyhawk*, it was a game that was not just anti-heroic but also touched on some very serious taboos in our culture. Most players rejected it outright because it was too depressing, too close to home and simply was not "escapist" enough. The line has now been cancelled as a result leaving only a small core of fans to mourn it.

Greyhawk on the other hand has a large number of fans and players, I'm not sure where it stands in comparison to settings such as *Krynn* and *The Forgotten Realms* but its influence on the latter if not the former is huge. *The Forgotten Realms* is under the care of a good wizard and has a large trade city that is the centre of the "known world" and is a "wretched den of villany". The difference is hard to see but lies in the flavour of the background. Both are Fantasy Role Playing worlds as you know and love them and have played in countless times before. The flavour of *Greyhawk* is more medieval though, partly due to the almost scholarly stewardship of British writer Carl Sargent. While it suffers slightly from the "magic as technology" and "everything and the kitchen sink" syndromes it does manage to present for the main a grimly primitive world where civilisation is uncertain and the triumph of Good over Evil moreso.

Fans of *Wraith* though should take heart though from the experience of their *Greyhawk* counterparts. When *Greyhawk* was cancelled by *TSR* in favour of more market-orientated FRPG worlds a small group continued to write for and about their favourite setting combining their own efforts with those who had written *Greyhawk* material commercially. A lot of the effort and mood of this period is captured in the online fanzine *The Oerth Journal*, a periodical that is well worth reading.

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So there we have it, two games – one radical and modern, the other earthly traditional both dealing with the trauma of roleplaying marketing and cancellation from opposite sides of the field and both the subject of this review.

Firstly the physicality. *EoE* occupies the greater width on your bookshelf while *TAB* comes with a folded glossy colour cardboard map and separate black and white map and location booklet.

In terms of art, perhaps predictably, it is the *White Wolf* product that beats its rival thoroughly. *TAB* has few illustrations and those it does have are clean lined and almost comic book in style – in terms of content the illustrations are bland with little suggestion that this is anything other than yet another fantasy game. In contrast *EoE*'s interior art confidently embraces a wide variety of artistic styles while keeping a coherent sense of where it is. This is not just another game; this is a place and one that allows individual interpretation without losing its consistency of theme and imagery.

Looking back over the book I think what really impresses me is the level of art *direction* involved in its production. The pictures really are illustrations, each one visualising some aspect of the text around it. I admire the effort expended in so completely melding the art and the words almost as much as I do the resulting effect for the reader.

However as recognition of a job well done I have to admit that when it comes to complete, almost obsessive, attention to detail FRPG is your genre. *TAB* includes an isometric map of Greyhawk that not only maps out the location of the streets but the location of every individual building and the relative heights of each one. It all looks fantastic too and is actually far more useful than you would imagine. In my games for example there are endless chases around the city and the issue of whether you can get onto the city walls or certain buildings from their neighbour's roofs is actually relevant. The last time I saw something as complete as this was in the *Indiana Jones* game from *TSR*.

Of course all the art in the world cannot save a book if the content is bad. Only art books are viewed, all other books are read.

I do not really think of myself as a layout fascist who becomes enraged if a book lacks an index or fails to include sub-section headings in its contents. I do have my limits though and surprisingly it is not *EoE*, which manages to glue three regular books together with a mere six contents entries, that is the loser here. *TAB* is actually the offender and for two reasons; firstly there is the curious column arrangement throughout the book. The first column is approximately two-thirds of the page while the second column fills the remaining third. The result is that you end up treating the second column as a sidebar and scanning across it to the first column of the next page. It may sound conservative to be championing the simple virtues of the 50-50 column split but hey! it works.

Secondly *TAB* really does need an index for the same simple reason that every guidebook has an index. The book is a collection of entries sorted by nothing

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more than geographical proximity. This means that if you need to know what magical schools exist in Greyhawk then you have to know where they are located in the (fictional) city! A travel guide of a real city would be useless if it took this approach. Suppose you were visiting New York and you wanted to read about the Guggenheim Museum would rather look up Guggenheim in the index or take a guess that it was on the Upper East Side and then read through every entry for that section of the city?

Things get worse when you consider important NPC references such as those of the Mayor Nerof Gasgal. Gasgal is mentioned on pages 61, 63, 87 and for a while I was under the impression that Org Nenshen was his brother rather than his Guildmaster. A mistake easy to make when there are no cross-references to the other entries and without an index you are reduced to endless page flipping to find what you want.

A practical example? A player recently asked where Greyhawk makes its money since all the background states clearly that Greyhawk mints its own coins which are then used as a defacto standard all over the lands of the Flaness (the continent that the city lies in). I could not remember for the life of me and instead of simply looking up “City Mint” in an index I had to do a little detective work.

Initially I had a suspicion that the Mint would be in the Grand Citadel, the large castle that houses most of Greyhawk’s arms and men. Indeed page 81 states that all Greyhawk’s taxes are stored in the Grand Citadel but no mention of newly minted currency.

I then thought it might be in the Foreign Quarter due to that location’s proximity to the docks. Nope, nothing there. During the course of writing this review I discovered the City Mint is actually in the Clerks Quarter of the city. Perhaps obvious in hindsight but the only way I could find it was to start at the first entry and read every entry in order until I eventually found it (page 96).

Of course none of this page flipping told me that Greyhawk’s mineral wealth in the forms of ore and gems are primarily obtained from gnome mines in the Cairn Hills (page 59). Neither did it tell me that the moneychangers **are** located in the Foreign Quarter and that in their entry are the figures for exchanging other currencies into Greyhawk coinage (page 102).

The reason that *EoE* gets away with its minimal contents and complete lack of index is due to its logical narrative progression. The separate volumes have been carefully assembled so that the reader, progressing from start to finish will never have to be flicking back and forth to find the relevant information. For example, the Mnemoi, a grouping within *Wraith* society that corresponds to a Clan in *Vampire* or a school of magic in *AD&D*, are introduced in the initial scenario at the beginning of the book. They later have a full volume dedicated to them but to run the adventure it is sufficient only to know what is presented in the scenario and expand that information only afterwards or as needed. I do not think that I really appreciated some of the thought that had gone into the setting of the volumes until I came to review it.

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The real battle is in the content though and here things begin to get tough in the comparison stakes.

EoE is really three books in one: the End of Empire scenario, Guildbook: Mnemioi and the Ferryman supplement. *TAB* is meant to be a sourcebook for the city of Greyhawk but is more grandiosely marketed as all you need to start a campaign in the Flaness. *EoE* is the final part of an evolving gameworld with a background story, something you either love or loathe. *TAB* is your street by street guide to a fictional world.

They seem totally different but I think the key is that they are both concerned with background. As a first book in a series *TAB* is trying to introduce you to its setting, as the last *EoE* assumes that you are familiar with the lay of the land and tries to cram as much of its setting between the covers as possible. The question is, disregarding size, which does the job better?

EoE is the more indulgent book, in comparison it has space to burn and uses a lot of it on “flavour text”. This device is exceedingly common in *White Wolf* books and is rarely loved by readers. This trick is rejected outright by the lean and mean *TAB*, if it has a paragraph it wants to use it to convey something pertinent as punchily as possible.

The sad truth is that, perhaps because of the nature of the two settings, while *TAB* might get its facts over quickly with a minimal amount of fuss it also does so in an extremely bland fashion. *EoE* may meander through its descriptive passages but in doing so it builds up an atmosphere and feel for its subject that becomes far more powerful than the merely factual statement.

TAB tells you what Greyhawk is but never shows you and that can be a fatal mistake in prose. The reader’s imagination can fill the gaps but I was disappointed to find *TAB* quite so lacking in invocation, it never really takes you there or makes you imagine the reality that it is describing.

Driven back to the ropes then by *EoE*’s slow but powerful narrative *TAB* can still surprise. It does manage to set up all manner of brief one-liner style hooks that can be dropped into an existing scenario as is as a brief diversion or built up into a more Byzantine variety of plots and schemes. *EoE* seems to think that if it can convey the background then the games will flow forth.

So there you go plucky little *TAB* broken by a combination of style and content. Did it ever have a chance? Well apart from a few pg. XX’s on the behalf of *EoE* – not really. *EoE* is one of those rare books that freed of commercial pressures leaps free and manages to mine a deep vein of myth, contemporary thought and artistic observation. It is one of those books that is a pleasure to read and re-read – rewarding each visit.