

Article for Profantasy – c. 2,400 words

JACK VANCE & THE D&D GAME

By Gary Gygax

© 2001 Gary Gygax All rights reserved.

It was by reading BIG PLANET in a pulp science fiction magazine that I first became acquainted with Jack Vance as an author. Mark you, at that time, the early 1950s, I was so avidly following imaginative fiction that I often read two book or pulp magazines a day. Of course, on days I had lots of things to do I could manage only one book, or even just a short tale, but that's a different story... Back to this one, after finishing the BIG PLANET yarn, I decided that Jack Vance was one of my favorite authors, one of maybe 50 or so that I thought were "tops". My list narrowed considerably as I matured, so that by the 1960s, the writers for whose work I actually looked for was down to about a dozen. Lo and behold, I found a new novel by Jack Vance then. As a matter of fact I have that very book now.

THE EYES OF OVERWORLD published by Ace Books, Inc. in 1966 absolutely enthralled me as no work of fantasy had done for a long time. To my mind Cugel the Clever was just the sort of anti-hero that the genre needed. What a delight to get to know this fellow—from a safe distance—and read of his misadventures and less-than-ethical exploits! Later, when I picked up THE DYING EARTH, I was treated to more of the same sort of fanciful tale, an environment whimsy with characters to match. Fantasy set in a far future with just familiar elements of the medieval and renaissance in the environment to make it possible to relate to the environment. The strange and demonic denizens of the Dying Earth, the even odder inhabitants and their societies, the bizarre characters, were so perfectly melded into a whole as to enable not mere suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader. One just had to believe that such a place existed, or rather will exist in some millions of years time.

Need I say that I am not merely a Jack Vance fan, but that he is in my opinion the very best of all the authors of imaginative fiction? Well I am and he is!

When I began to add elements of fantasy to medieval miniatures wargames around 1969, of course the work of Jack Vance influenced what I did. Along with Robert E. Howard, de Camp & Pratt, A. Merritt, Michael Moorcock, Roger Zelazny, Poul Anderson, J.R.R. Tolkien, P.J. Farmer, Bram Stoker—and not a few others, including the fairy tales Brothers Grimm and Andrew Lang, and conventional mythologies—his writing was there in my memory. Happily so. What I devised was based on the fantastic creations of many previous writers, an amalgam of their imaginations and my own, and it was first published in 1971 as the CHAINMAIL Medieval Miniatures Rules, the "Fantasy Supplement" thereto. Not much later, in 1972, I wrote the first draft of what was later to become the first commercial Role-Playing Game, DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, published in January, 1974.

Just what portions of these works, the subsequent AD&D game, stemmed from inspiration related to the writing of Jack Vance? Several elements, the unquestioned foremost being the magic system used in these games. To my way of thinking, the concept of a spell itself being magical, that its written form carried energy, seemed a perfect way to balance the mage against other types of characters in the game. The memorization of the spell required time and concentration so as to impart not merely the written content but also its magical energies. When subsequently cast—by speaking or some other means—the words or gestures, or whatever triggered the magical force of the spell, leaving a blank place in the brain where the previously memorized spell had been held. Because I explained this often, attributing its inspiration to Jack Vance, the D&D magic system of memorized then forgotten spells was dubbed by gamers “the Vancian magic system”.

Of the other portions of the A/D&D game stemming from the writing of Jack Vance, the next most important one is the thief-class character. Using a blend of “Cugel the Clever” and Roger Zelazny’s “Shadowjack” for a benchmark, this archetype character class became what it was in original AD&D. Also some of the spells and magic items found in the game were inspired from one or another of Jack Vance’s works. Notable are the *Imprisonment* and *Evard’s Black Tentacles* spells. The latter was devised after reading the short story, “The Bagful of Dreams” in *FLASHING SWORDS* #4 published in 1977—not in time for my work on the *Player’s Handbook* but added to it later in the *Unearthed Arcana* supplement. Did I mention the *Robe of Eyes*? Ah, and who can forget the *Ioun Stones* magical items. Before actually publishing the latter, I consulted with the creator, of course, to get permission.

That wasn’t difficult, for some considerable time previously I had written a fan letter to Jack, received a reply, written back, etc. Somewhere buried in one of many file cabinets stored in my basement is a folder with quite a few pieces of correspondence from Mr. Vance. As a matter of fact, we had hoped to have him as the Guest of Honor for an early GenCon, but at that time his appearance fee was a bit beyond TSR’s budget. He was very gracious when I spoke to him about being a Guest of Honor. Jack told me frankly that he was not particularly comfortable in such a role, mentioning that the fans, “seem to think that I should have little green horns growing from my forehead or something...” In retrospect, I believe that the Good Mr. Vance just didn’t understand the awe in which his fans hold him, was not at ease with the adulation given to him. Anyway, later on when I got in touch about the *Ioun Stones*, permission was graciously given, and so a new and unique set of magical items was added to the AD&D game. Indeed, what mage did not long for those 14 different colors and shapes to be circling his head? Mordenkainen, my own chief spellcaster PC, went on many a harrowing expedition searching for them, eventually wound up with an even dozen.

What did the creator of the concept for these marvelous magical stones ask in return for adding them to the game? Only what I was planning to do in any event, mention his books in the work. Not only is Jack Vance a great author, but he is a very nice guy too.

Aside from ideas and specific things, the very manner in which Jack Vance portrays a fantasy environment, the interaction of characters with that environment, and with each other, is so captivating that wherever I could manage it, I attempted to include

the “feel” he brings to his fantasy tales in the AD&D game. My feeble ability likely managed to convey but little of this, but in all I do believe that a not a little of what fans consider to be the “soul” of the game stems from that attempt. Of course there were, as noted, a number of other authors who had considerable influence on what I wrote, so let it suffice to conclude that in all a considerable debt of gratitude is owed to Mr. Vance, one that I am always delighted to repay whenever the opportunity arises. It should go without saying that whenever I see a new title of his, I buy it and read it with avid pleasure.

Years past when I was doing that, reading one of Jack’s SF novels, I came upon a “Lord Gygax” therein. I immediately phoned and complained that I was had not appeared as a vicious “Starmeter”, merely a luckless noble. Mr. Vance turned a deaf ear to my implorations, and sadly “Lord Gygax” has never returned in some greater and more adventurous role in his stories. Drat! Now that would be what I consider as *real* fame....

To spice up my own D&D campaign back in 1974 I added a number of special “dimensional portals” so that players might enjoy adventures in strange places that were different from the “everyday” realms of fantasy. The favorite of the players was one drawn whole from a series of SF novels written by Jack Vance, and through play therein futuristic weapons were brought into play against sea monsters and trolls, the various dangerous critters of dungeon and wilderness in the D&D world. How sad the players when these weapons their PCs possessed ran out of energy...

As influential as Mr. Vance was in inspiring what went into the work that became ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, the game I created was not meant to reflect, let alone recreate, his, or any other fiction author’s, own world or worlds. Clearly, the AD&D game was designed to accommodate a wide variety of fantasy concepts. The game and the environment I devised for play were written so as to serve many different tastes and styles, and in this it seems to have succeeded quite well. In doing that I used myth and legend, ancient and medieval historical bases, even some aspects of the Renaissance. To the delight of his many readers, Jack Vance is so creative as to devise entirely unique and wholly wondrous environments.

The “Dying Earth”, for example is a marvelous, dark far-future world setting. The earth is no longer our world, just as the sun is no longer the Old Sol we see. It is a planet so ancient that its earlier history has been lost and forgotten. Of the later ages, a staggeringly long series of epics, information is revealed only in tantalizing snippets. All of its places are striking in that they are strange yet somehow familiar, and there is no question that something startling and new will be revealed at each turn. To inhabit the world are suitably odd and eccentric races, characters, and creatures. To my thinking, this milieu is creative far beyond the bounds of what has been offered in any material written for the role-playing game. This shortcoming has changed, because gamers are now able to enjoy direct play in the astonishing world that is the creation of Jack Vance, the home of Cugel the Clever, Rhialto, and so many other outstanding figures.

In considering the “Dying Earth” milieu, one must be prepared to accept some differences between it and the standard world of fantasy derring-do. While much has been forgotten, the whole of the race of mankind has matured, grown ancient and cynical. Naivete there is aplenty, but there is behind it cynicism, duplicity, and treachery. Of the knight errant, the noble quest, the honest forester there is little or none. Those are things of youth, innocence and the bright future where the hope is to live happily ever after. As

the ale-hewed sun of the decrepit earth totters along its course, there is always the question of it failing. There is no longer belief in such things as were known in a younger time. Too many ages have passed for the human race to cherish such fond notions. Time has disabused them.

So the milieu is one where Machiavelli would be considered the norm in civilized places, while in the hinterlands the oddest of things are to be expected, the populace as savage and more bizarre than any callow one recorded in the earth's younger aeons. This strange and sinister mixture provides a perfect background for the fantasy adventure campaign, of course. While the hero is no longer in the standard mold, that archetype remains with eremitic overtones—not quite an anti-hero, but certainly not a paladin. In its last age, the folk inhabiting the earth are more guileful, one might say.

Does that mean that the Dying Earth can not expect altruism, bravery, even a sense of wonder in its leading characters? Hardly! While such are rare enough here and now to be remarkable, these traits are definitely human, will persist as long as *Homo sapiens* in whatever evolved form remain extant. The trick to survival for such individuals on the Dying Earth world must be *cunning*. The brash and the foolhardy are “naturally” selected out early in the process of living in such an environment. It need not be dealt with at any length that the mage and the thief that exist in this environment are not at all unlike those created previously for us. Clearly both must be clever and cunning...

There is a truly great advantage offered to the Game Master when devising a campaign set on the Dying Earth. It is not highly detailed. There is no strict timeline laid down. All that has happened before is not “recorded”, nor is there an accurate gazetteer of for the world. What magic operates? Nobody can say or guess, because in the long eons of the Dying Earth's history, likely every form possible was discovered, used, and then forgotten...almost. That means that all that's necessary is to have the game in hand, the books that Jack Vance wrote about the world, to create a really compelling campaign environment. Using the creative base of the author, the GM's own imagination cannot fail but to rise to the occasion.

The Dying Earth is the perfect place for a sophisticated, whimsical, and enthralling fantasy campaign. It can be on virtually any scale, and feature whatever the participant group enjoys most. Combat and magic? Of course. The same is true for story and intrigue. To be forthright, the milieu is so broad as to invite any and all aspects of the RPG into play, and that in whatever mix and degree of emphasis is desired. Simply put, the Dying Earth milieu is just about a perfect one to transfer from fiction to game. The caveat is, don't think along “conventional” fantasy lines. It is a place where long ages have altered things, even magic and the human archetype to some degree.

In concluding this brief essay, it is impossible for me not to say I am most anxious to actually play a character in the game. If only Jack Vance were the GM I do believe that I'd drop everything else to fly out to California the minute I got the invitation. That dream aside, a pickup game at convention, or anything like that, will do. Think I'll create a wily and roguish character and name him Gnoodle,,,

Jack Vance is one of the most remarkable talents to ever grace the world of science fiction. His unique, stylish voice has been beloved by generations of readers. One of his enduring classics is his 1964 novel, *The Dying Earth*, and its sequels--a fascinating, baroque tale set on a far-future Earth, under a giant red sun that is soon to go out forever.Â But it was no children's game they were playing. Old Mother Earth, now abandoned by her spawn, foundered on the verge of extinction. Only the treasure Paddy sought would suffice to rescue the home planet-and incidentally to rule the rest of the cosmos.