

Preston P. DuBose's

e-Publishing Secrets

The shocking truth
about starting your own
RPG company.



How to *Save Money* Starting Your Own PDF Game Company.

Industry Secrets Revealed!

*“In a single page, you’ll learn the secret
to saving thousands of dollars in starting
your own RPG publishing company.”*

You’ll also receive a special bonus:

10 Secrets for PDF Publishing Success.

These secrets are lessons existing publishers learned the hard way, through costly and time-consuming trial and error! Publishers talk about these lessons privately among themselves, but now you can learn the tips that publishers wish they’d known when they started.

But first, the BIG SECRET. *Turn the page* to learn the greatest time- and money-saving secret in starting your own PDF company.

**The best way to save thousands of dollars and
hundreds of hours while starting your own PDF company is:**

Don't.

Introduction

The first version of this PDF was only two pages long.

That's right. Originally this "secret tell-all" was just a gag. "How do you save money starting an RPG company? Don't start one." It came from an instant messenger conversation with one of my RPG publishing partners. We both got a chuckle over it. Then, as happens with all bad ideas, somewhere along the way I started taking it seriously. Now you're reading the result. Just for the record, I do stand by the advice on the previous page. The single best way to save hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars and probably hundreds of irretrievable hours of your life is to avoid the publishing flypaper trap.

Even though this began as a joke, the advice on the following pages is dead serious. I'm sharing with you 10 pieces of advice I firmly believe every potential publisher should know before taking the plunge.

While the advice on the *previous* page would save you a lot of time and money, we both know you're not going to take it—and I would feel bad if you did. If you are serious about publishing, then the advice on the *following* pages will help you avoid certain pitfalls and set you on a path to publishing titles of which you can be proud.

A History of the OGL and its Impact on the RPG Market

Before I even start on the tips, let me brief you on how we (RPG e-publishers) arrived at this point and what we might expect in the near future. If you are considering jumping into RPG publishing, what follows is a short summary of the marketplace since inception of the Open Gaming License through the present (fall 2007).

Wizards of the Coast released the Open Gaming License (OGL) in the year 2000. If you have heard of it but have not actually read it, you can download it from <http://www.wizards.com/d20>. Initially publishers and potential publishers viewed it with a good bit of distrust. People expected that Wizards of the Coast was somehow using it to trick people into writing content that they (Wizards) would later "steal." This turned out to be far from the truth. To

date Wizards has used almost no OGL material from outside sources. Over time, more writers put their faith in the license as they saw that no brimstone-cloaked devil appeared to collect the souls of early adopters.

What followed was the RPG publishing equivalent of the Oklahoma Land Rush. As you would expect, some found success while others stumbled. Game stores, and fans, found themselves in a situation few had experienced before. Roleplaying game material was being published faster than collectors could afford to buy it. Furthermore, the quality ranged from outstanding to can't-believe-someone-would-put-his-name-on-this, which further frustrated buyers.

Today, the land rush is mostly over. In any emerging industry, the advantage goes to those who get in early and establish a presence. 12 to Midnight got in the publishing business more than four years ago, and we were latecomers. Today there are hundreds of e-publishers, and this in a hobby whose fans are either 1) skeptical of PDF products, 2) ignorant that third-party PDF titles even exist, or 3) couldn't care less since they've dropped tabletop gaming in favor of World of Warcraft.

The market is correcting. Game-store owners and print distributors have already been burned by the earlier flood of RPG content now collecting dust on shelves or littering dollar bins. Their response has been to narrow their selections to publishers who have demonstrated the ability to create titles that sell. In the PDF world, fans are demonstrating the same inclination. Those who are regular buyers have figured out which companies and authors consistently release quality titles and which ones don't. Some may set aside extra dollars to experiment with "unknowns," but others wait for buzz from positive reviews before risking their limited gaming dollars.

Now that you have an understanding of the current sentiment in the RPG market, let's talk about the 800 lb. gorilla. Many e-publishers have been speculating over what will happen when Wizards of the Coast releases D&D 4th edition in 2008. There is even a fair chance you are reading this because you were inspired by the new possibilities offered by 4e or the OGL. Some publishers have expressed hope that it will act like a giant reset button that re-levels the playing field. Personally I can't imagine many stores—or fans—unlearning the lessons from the last

decade. Furthermore, too many publishers have already established their homesteads following the last land rush. They're experienced, organized, and they have a reputation among fans. Starting over with a new edition of a game system won't do much to erase that advantage.

However, with changes to the D&D game system come changes to the trademark license. It is important to understand that there is a difference between the OGL, which is a license to share game content, and the trademark license. The Wizards trademark license is what allows publishers to claim compatibility with D&D or d20 Modern, mostly through the form of the "d20 System" logo. The latest word from the Wizards brand manager is that with the introduction of D&D 4th edition, the d20 trademark license will go away altogether. The next few weeks and months will see further revelations about how far publishers can go in claiming compatibility with new-edition Wizards products; but from early appearances, it looks like publishers will be forced to rely much more heavily on their own brand rather than the d20 logo.

In fact, long before the official announcement from Wizards, some publishers (Green Ronin and RPG Objects, for example) have shown the foresight to release their own stand-alone game systems as a means of severing their dependency on the d20 logo and reinforcing their own identity in the marketplace. Others employed alternate, open systems like FUDGE or FATE. The award-winning *Spirit of the Century* by Evil Hat Productions is one example. Yet other publishers in the "indie" game scene have found critical acclaim with their own non-OGL games, such as *Primetime Adventures* and *Dogs in the Vineyard*.

Now that you have had a brief summary (full of sweeping generalizations) of the last eight years of the RPG publishing industry, I hope you can better put my advice in context. What follows are 10 things I've learned in almost five years as an RPG e-publisher.

My hope is that it opens your eyes to the realities of RPG publishing and helps prepare you to approach your endeavor strategically, as a business venture.

10 Lessons for an RPG e-Publishing Startup

1 Set your priorities. I've observed that many people who come to RPG forums doing research on starting a game company are doing so *after* deciding to take the plunge, rather than to decide *if* they should do so. Let's back up a few steps and talk about priorities and options. Why do you want to start a PDF publishing company?

- a) Is it to make a lot of money? Although I do not have access to sales figures, based on conversations with others I would estimate that fewer than the top 10% of RPG publishers on the biggest online RPG e-book store are making any significant money. Furthermore, at least some the publishers in that bracket already have a reputation with fans from their print editions in game stores.
- b) Is it so you can share all the hard work you put into your adventure or setting with the rest of the world? Give it away. Seriously. You can even create a cool companion Web site, wiki, or podcast to draw fans and generate interest.
- c) Is it so your game design prowess will be known far and wide? See option b above, or even better, try getting an established publisher to publish it *for* you. And don't tell me you've tried two or three and they've turned you down. Put this essay down right now and come back when you have at least 20 rejection notices¹.
- d) Is it because you have an entrepreneurial spirit and you want to try running a small business?

Option d is certainly the best reason to start your own PDF company, and arguably the only reason. If your goal is to *be published* rather than to *publish*, look to the other options at your disposal. Starting an e-publishing company means running a business—marketing, catalog management, building and maintaining a Website, accounting, and so on. If you just want to see your game published there is an easier way: freelance writing.

¹ Dude, if 20 or more PDF publishers have turned down your RPG then there's probably a good reason. If *they* don't think it will sell, then you probably need to at least consider option b.

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2 **Leverage the success of others.** Okay, we have already established that you probably already made the decision to be a PDF publisher before you picked up this PDF. Right now you are probably internalizing a way to justify why your situation is different. The case I hear most often from new publishers is that you have a great idea/setting and you can't stand to see another publisher screw it up with bad art, heavy-handed editing, etc. Okay, it is your baby. I can appreciate that. If you are going to do this, at least apply some business savvy and take advantage of marketplace conditions. You don't *have* to set yourself up as a publisher and take on all the responsibilities that entails. Give very serious consideration to setting yourself up as a game design studio.

What this means (in most cases) is that you take a game all the way from concept to creation (including art and layout), but you work with another, established publisher to actually publish the title. That means you tie into their existing fan base and reputation and off-load at least some of the business responsibilities for things like marketing and selling through online stores.

This is becoming a common practice in the RPG e-publishing industry. We refer to it as "imprinting," as in "Studio X is an imprint of Publisher Y." 12 to Midnight has two studios who imprint with us. They have complete autonomy, but they know we're always available to offer advice and help. Of course you will have to work out the terms of your agreement with whatever publisher you choose, but in general you can expect the publisher to take a small percentage of sales and have a final yes/no decision on whether or not to release a title under their umbrella. For instance, they probably aren't going to want to damage their reputation by releasing a title riddled with errors or filled with hate speech. They may also be able to help with layout, art acquisition, and some degree of marketing, and they'll certainly be responsible for listing your title at online retail outlets, collecting payment, and paying you on a regular basis.

For a case study in how imprinting can be win-win, take a look at Reality Deviant Publications. RDP wisely chose to become an imprint under a much better-known PDF publisher. Now, after two years of learning the ropes and establishing an identity with fans, they recently announced that they are striking

out on their own. In essence, RDP went through the equivalent of a small business incubator program.

3 **Ideas are worthless.** People who can actually deliver a complete, well-written, and well-edited manuscript are invaluable. You will meet many people who are wildly enthusiastic about their ideas, but only maybe one in five will return with a finished manuscript.

Be someone that other people can count on to follow through on what you promise, whether it is finishing a manuscript or artwork, or paying on time. Always remember that your reputation is at stake. Five years from now someone could be reviewing applications at [dream job of your choice] and pass over your resume because she remembered that you dragged your feet for three months before paying her for artwork.

4 **Let the X-Box controller get dusty.** Whether you're writing, painting, or running a game-design studio, you have to set your priorities. If your goal is to show off your m4d l33t g4m3r sk!lz or to master the trivia behind all your favorite TV shows, then go for it. However, if your goal is to have people talk about your RPG studio or speak your name with respect, then you need to set boundaries on how you spend your "free" time. This most likely means giving up non-productive entertainment, like TV or video games.

If you plan to run an RPG publishing studio and you are young and single, you can probably get by with ignoring this advice (up to a point). If you have a significant other or spouse, go ahead and cancel your World of Warcraft subscription for a while. If you have kids too, then just plan on setting aside whatever it is you do for entertainment altogether. There are only so many hours in the day, and if you want your studio to be successful then that means spending hundreds of hours creating content and attending to the details. That time usually has to come at the expense of other activities.

5 **Rely on the kindness of strangers *after* you've done your homework.** You can find a lot of good advice on RPG publisher-related forums. In particular, the e-publishing forum on ENWorld from

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2003 to 2005 carries a lot of good advice. Sometime after that point, either publishers stopped frequenting the site quite as much or most of the questions had already been asked and answered. You should also get your hands on the e-publisher bundle from RPGNow. This is the definitive bundle of guidebooks for beginning RPG e-publishers. It includes an explanation of the Open Gaming License, how to make your product look professional, and a general “ePublisher Guide” with pages of valuable information. Just be aware that some of the info—especially the sales data—is more than a year out of date so take it with a grain of salt.

The RPG publishing world is pretty small. We are all fans of the hobby (we have to be, because we certainly aren’t doing it for the money), and we are generally willing to help out with advice when a new e-publishing studio asks. However, it is just good manners to actually do your research before jumping on a forum and asking for someone to hold you by the hand and tell you everything you need to know about being a publisher. We e-publishers can usually tell by the quality of your question whether you have bothered to read RPGNow’s ePublisher Guide or the old publishing-related threads. Furthermore, it just makes more sense to use your time with experienced publishers wisely rather than wasting time asking questions that you can answer yourself with 15 minutes of searching and reading.

6 Compensate for your limitations. Unless you’re some kind of genius, you’re probably not a professional artist, writer, game designer, editor, webmaster, cartographer, accountant, and layout artist. Rather than doing some of those things poorly, face your limitations head-on and find professionals who do well the things that you don’t. Yes, you could choose to look at this as throwing money at a problem. However, you can also choose to look at it as investing in your reputation as a quality publisher.

Notice that I’ve used the word “professionals” to describe the freelancers (or studio partners!) with whom you should collaborate. By that, I mean people who do the work in question on a regular, frequent basis. 12 to Midnight has had success collaborating with people who are trying to break into the business (whatever business that may be—art, editing, and so on), but the key is that they are actively pursuing that

goal and getting frequent practice at it. Your sister-in-law may have done a first-rate job of editing papers back in college, but skills like that tend to atrophy without frequent use.

Speaking of editors, good editors are invaluable. Fans in this hobby are generously forgiving when it comes to production quality, but expectations are rising. Good grammar and punctuation is invisible to the reader, but bad grammar and punctuation is like a giant neon sign blinking “amateur.” If you only have one spelling or grammatical error per page, you have too many. Do not be the one who gives PDFs a bad name. If your editor doesn’t make the manuscript bleed red on the first pass, it probably means you need a better editor.

7 Reviews are worth their word-count in gold. Many reviewers only review print products, and the ones who do review PDFs are buried in a deluge of review requests. This is yet another result of too many products and not enough fans. At one point, ENWorld PDF reviewers admitted to receiving more than one new title a day.

Do not hang your marketing strategy on sending your PDF to a few reviewers and the next week having glowing reviews drive customers to your game. It is an unfortunate reality that reviews often take more than a month to appear after you provide a reviewer with a complimentary review copy. Speaking of which, “comp” copies are pretty standard these days and are not considered unethical. Offering any other incentives—namely anything with a cash value, such as a coupon, discount, free t-shirt, etc.—moves you into a grey area or beyond.

I shouldn’t have to tell you not to take your frustrations with the slow review system out on reviewers themselves. Most reviewers on Websites are unpaid volunteers, which means they get to pick and choose what they review out of a pile of new titles. Loudly claiming some sort of entitlement on volunteers’ time isn’t a winning strategy.

Most reviewers do not have time to actually playtest your title. They usually base their reviews on a read-through. Generally, the only time you’ll see a playtest review is when one of your customers takes the time to write one. Since there’s absolutely no incentive for them to do so, these are both the most valuable and most rare.

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In desperation, you may want to succumb to fans who write to you or post in forums offering to review products. Tread carefully. Always ask to see links to their previous reviews. Some will take your title and never review it, while others, frankly, just don't write well. Bad reviews are disappointing, but they come with the territory. Badly *written* reviews (especially after *your* manuscript was professionally edited) make you want to claw your eyes out. Trust me: you don't want to be kicking yourself for providing a comp copy to someone who spoils your surprise ending, completely misreads your creature description, focuses only on the negative, or assumes that everyone has the exact same likes and dislikes as he does.

Finally, at some point you'll be tempted to respond directly to a review. This is almost never a good idea. Badly written reviews mostly reflect back on the reviewer.irate responses from publishers reflect—very publicly—on the publisher. If you absolutely feel compelled to correct an error, stick to a short, simple statement of fact. For example, say, "The page count is actually 64 pages, not 46 pages as reported." Potential customers are going to think much better of you if you do not give in to your urge to express your opinion on the reviewer's ability to form coherent sentences.

8 **"Contract" isn't a dirty word.** I'm not a lawyer and this isn't legal advice, yada yada yada. However, it *is* business advice. At their most basic, *contracts exist to avoid misunderstandings*. I put that in italics because if you walk away with nothing else from this PDF then I hope you at least remember that. When you hire a writer, artist, or layout person, or any of the other myriad jobs necessary to run a publishing company, put your expectations in writing. At the very minimum, you should describe what you expect, when you expect it, in what format, how much you're paying and when, and what happens if the freelancer fails to do what the contract says. Do not *assume* the freelancer will do suchandsuch. It only takes another minute to write it out, and it could make all the difference.

9 **Raise the bar.** I mentioned it earlier—customer expectations are rising. Quality that was once acceptable just doesn't cut it anymore. "Average" is a rising standard—as it should be. You do RPG fans, yourself, and the market a disservice by publishing an "average" title. Before you even start down the path to publishing your masterwork setting, be critical and ask yourself how you plan to raise the bar above all the other settings out there. Will you invest hundreds of dollars in high-quality art? Will you introduce new scripts, sounds, or effects to take advantage of the PDF format? Will you have well-edited text and a professional, easy-to-read layout? The answer doesn't have to be yes to all of the above, but if you can't find a way to raise the bar, then you'd better at least be filling an empty niche.

10 **Follow your dream.** I've used nine points to expound on why this is going to be harder, more time consuming, and more expensive than you ever thought. Before that, I even told you not to do it at all. Now let me give you some encouragement. If you really have a great idea burning in your heart, then go for it. Be smart. Be cold and calculating. Be methodical. Be persistent. You could write the title that takes the RPG hobby by storm. If it doesn't ... then maybe your next title, or the title after that.

11 **Treat your money with respect.** (Bonus tip!) Talk to your accountant about the best way to handle state and federal taxes. Seek qualified advice on whether your company/studio should become a corporation or if a partnership would suit you better. Learn what is and isn't considered a tax deductible expense, then learn what deductions are common flags for audits. If this doesn't sound like fun, then either find someone trustworthy who can do it for you or reconsider whether you really want to start a business.

Credentials

Now that you have read my advice—particularly number 6—let me put my money where my mouth is and share with you my background and that of my partners.

Two friends, Jerry Blakemore and Ed Wetterman, had the same dreams of fame and fortune as most new PDF publishers. They formed 12 to Midnight in late 2002, invited another friend, then me in the spring of 2003. We released our first title, *Last Rites of the Black Guard*, in August of that same year. Since then 12 to Midnight has released dozens of titles, supported two game systems, gained and lost additional partners, created a freely available campaign world, and been honored to support two design studios as imprints. In 2005 we incorporated, and the officers elected me to be the president. Today the company is comprised of the following individuals:

Preston P. DuBose: That's me. I have 13 years of experience in business communications, ranging from advertising and PR to desktop publishing and design. I also have intermediate skills as a webmaster. In addition to serving as 12 to Midnight's president, I am the art director, layout director, and co-webmaster. I have also been known to write and edit a thing or two.

Jerry Blakemore: Jerry is a certified public accountant and also our chief financial officer. Not only does Jerry file our taxes, calculate and pay royalties, and pay our bills, but he also writes and edits.

Ed Wetterman: Ed is a renaissance man, having done everything from running theme-park security to improv comedy. Today he teaches in a high school, and his variety of experiences serve him well as executive VP and writing machine.

TC Largent: TC is a professional draftsman. He could practically design a map in AutoCAD with his eyes closed. His experience in the professional world brings new levels of realism to our maps.

Trey Gorden: Trey is a technical writer for a Fortune 50 company. As 12 to Midnight's lead editor, he has created a company style guide and document template that has improved the quality of manuscripts 100%.

Neal Hyde: Neal just joined the company this fall, but his extensive writing experience shines through in the quality of his writing and editing.

Brendan Quinn: Brendan also just joined the company this fall, but his years of experience in the IT field and Web development have already served 12 to Midnight well. It is thanks to Brendan that the company recently opened its own online store, the *Midnight Cellar*.

Conclusion

Thank you for taking a chance on something that started as—and which I intentionally designed to look like—a joke. By design, the advice in this PDF is fairly general. If you have more specific questions about running an e-publishing business or imprinting as a game design-studio, please feel free to stop by our company forum, the [Midnight Haunt](#). Industry pros helped 12 to Midnight as we struggled to establish ourselves, and we believe in paying forward.

Finally, I owe a big “thanks” to Trey Gorden for editing this document. Any mistakes still in here were undoubtedly introduced by me after his meticulous work.

