About this interview: it was commissioned for a well-known pop culture website during the summer of 2014. The interviewer told me that he wouldn't run it. I'm especially disappointed that he did not answer the questions I'd asked him, each of which would have opened the door to a further response.

1. You tend to be a polarizing figure in roleplaying games. People either love or hate Ron Edwards, mostly based on who you are, or what you have said, rather than the games that you have made. Why is this, do you think?

What do you mean by "people?" Groups? Persons claiming to speak for a group?

I ask this because I don't think *individuals* "either love or hate" me. I've seen no evidence of that at all, either on-line or in person. When I meet people, they typically have questions, they may be intrigued, they may be looking for cues about what they've read – but they don't confront me with slobbering adoration or vengeful hate. The only time that "people either love or hate" seems to apply is when someone purports to represent a group of some kind, usually incredibly vague like "the average gamer" or "traditional role-players" or similar, or laughable, like "everyone." Or similarly, typically on-line, when someone addresses a group of some kind, usually in terms of demonstrating how thoroughly they represent it or belong to it.

I instantly distrust posts or dialogue in those terms. I think it's a mask for trying to score points in a perceived group and literally nothing to do with me, my writings on-line, or my games. Nerdrage, flame wars, whatever you want to call it, is hugely prone to social positioning. Spot someone who can be tagged "not OK?" Great! Pile onto the big criticism fest and score points for being a good person, or belonging to the group. The last thing on earth someone doing this wants is actually to engage with the material they're talking about.

There isn't a lick of sense in trying to interact with that. Fortunately, the opposite is true when we're talking about individual people. Ask individuals who've talked with me on-line, by hangout, or in person, and I doubt you'll find "love or hate" among them.

The way you phrased your question is full of assumptions and assertions I find difficult to understand, and which look to me like they come right out of that nerdrage/positioning swamp. I tried to answer literally, but may not have seen what you wanted to know about. Please re-ask it in a more specific way if I didn't address what you wanted.

2. Much of the "hate" comes from one comment made by you on [Vincent Baker's blog](#), where you said "When I say 'brain damage,' I mean it literally. Their minds have been **harmed**." Do you regret making this comment, or do you think that you could have said it better? Are the reactions against this comment from many aspects of the gaming community justified?

I'll discuss this issue with anyone who's actually read what I wrote, rather than cherry-picking one-liners.

[Name], do *you* know what I meant regarding brain damage? What caused it, what it's like, who I'm talking about ("they"), and which games? Do you know what discussion was going on at the time? Your citation is a year past the beginning of that discussion. Do you know whom I first identified, by name, as having suffered this condition?

I'm not asking these questions as a counter-attack. I'm saying that no one can respond to innuendo, OMG posting, rumor, the telephone game, the perceived opportunity to be morally righteous, and subcultural identity-politics. I want to know you're asking as an individual person with specific inquiries, not the representative of "everyone" or "gamers."

I'll need some answers and will answer any questions that occur to you about what I'm saying.

The original writings are right where they always were, unchanged, and my follow-up can be found in this 2008 interview: http://theoryfromthecloset.com/2007/05/14/show008-interview-with-ron-edwards/. There's also a useful summary by a third party a while ago, here (read the second post first, as you'll see from the author): http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php?topic=33122.0.

3. The basis for much of the conversation on this topic, both pro and con, come from people defining story differently in a roleplaying setting. How is it that you are defining "story" and what is its importance to you in a gaming situation?

What is "a gaming situation?" Is that the same as "a role-playing setting?" A particular one, or in general? With respect, your terminology is too vague, and I have to translate it.

First, at least in the role-playing I've been doing and seeing all these years, play produces made-up stuff: characters, doing stuff, stuff happening, cause-and-effect in that fiction … basically "the fiction" is a pretty good term for it. So, easily enough, the role-playing I'm talking about produces this stuff.

When is the fiction a story? Two things make it a story. First, if the fiction somehow involves a recognizable real-life human problem, even if the characters and situation are incredibly fantastic or impossible. Second, if the fiction includes escalating events which ultimately resolve the problem, in any way. (All this is Lit 101, boring version. I'm not pretending anything different.)

Now here's the key: there's no kind of role-playing that *can't* make a story. Nor is there any reason that it *should*.

The question is whether people are there to do that as a first priority, strictly as a matter of preference and mood. Now I'm not talking about fiction at all, but me and you and Joe and Sally at the table.

Because let's say I don't feel like that priority today and instead I really want to go to town on my fun of problem-solving under fire, even competition. I want to be at the table with people who are not only doing this too, but appreciating how well I do it (or how hosed I get when I try). Maybe what we end up doing at the table makes a story by the above definition, maybe it doesn't, and I don't really care either way. On the other hand, let's say that you're sitting at that table too, and although your character is absolutely perfectly suited for this game in rules terms, just like mine, you really do want the fiction to have that story quality, and to see it created and collectively appreciated in play.

See what I mean? I see no real question about what a story is (I'm not a Deconstructionist), so the only question is whether we want to enjoy making one in play, as a first priority, as opposed to any other first priority. This turns into trouble at the table if and when our first priorities clash.

But don't stop there. Role-playing history has landed us with 100 ways to mis-read what I just wrote. Stick with me for the next part.

Now, let's talk about people who like stories but don't want to risk seeing them made in play. I consider them cowards. They want a grand story to be there in play, period, and crucially, they know pretty much how they want that story to go. Therefore if outcomes of some kind at the table get in the way of that intent (or plan, or control), or if someone at the table does something counter to it, then this disruption must over-ridden. Their intended story is going to be the fiction, no matter what.

You see what I did there? I'm talking about the difference between role-playing together to experience and create a story, *using* the outcomes at the table, vs. the experience of your character being in someone else's guaranteed story, *despite* the outcomes at the table. Horrifyingly, the whole word "story" in role-playing culture has become associated with the latter, not the former.

How can that be? Why is one person slapping down others' story-excited role-playing and overriding the systemic outcomes at the table called "story-oriented?" Why is the system specifically called "Storyteller" the most egregious railroading mechanism known to the hobby? How can it be that this "story-oriented GM" play must control my every contribution at that table, so I *can't* make this kind of fiction my priority in the moment? Why is this called, by a definite majority of role-players world-wide, "good GMing?"

This is why the word "story" engenders rage and counter-attack from many role-players – not because they don't like stories or don't want them in play, but because they don't like being pushed around and rendered a penny-whistle at the table of the person who plays the Moog organ.

The rage is even fiercer from people who *want* their characters to have agency and do dramatic, passionate stuff in the fiction. I understand this response perfectly because I share the very same indignation, but the historical hobby-result turned into a catastrophe: the priority of enjoying agency, excitement, and consequential action had – by the 1990s – been completely obliterated in the collective hobby-mind. The idea that you can make a story at the table specifically by not planning its outcome was absent from any text and from any dialogue at all.

Whine about "theory" all you want, but this is my contribution: unabashedly stating that story creation through play itself, through characters with agency, with unplanned and non-negotiable outcomes using the game mechanics, is possible and easy.

It's easy to understand the shocked resistance I met, not from those who didn't care about stories in their games at all, but from those loved their self-image of the Good GM the Storyteller, who takes care of the game to make sure horrible players don't "ruin" the story. To people who preferred the other players at their tables to be infantilized and for their allegedly brilliant stories to be kept safe, and to publishers who'd defined their whole product line by delivering canned stories and telling people not to let the players mess with them, I was the devil. I understand that reaction perfectly and defied it head-on: it's cobra vs. mongoose.

However, strangely, many role-players who wanted what I'm offering reacted with fear and confusion. Talking with them seems nearly impossible at first. The disappearance of vocabulary for making stories with agency, without full control by anyone, is tragic. It's as if slavers called themselves the Freedom Lovers, and then bizarrely, the people who despised slavery bought into that and said they hated freedom. So then I come along and say, "Be free, I have some ideas how," and the very people who hate the slavery most say, "Freedom Loving! Aggh! Never!"

It's easy to get over this with only a little bit of non-hysterical interaction. No one who actually read my essays or talked about them and real play with me, ever made the mistake of thinking I'd call externally-railroaded plot "story-priority role-playing." It's patently obvious that I think it's the precise antithesis of any such play. But a person isn't going to understand this until he or she stops hyperventilating.

Do *you* understand this? When I say I want to play story-centric role-playing, as a first priority (and again, *when and if* I want to, not always), I'm not talking about having a den-daddy Good GM ™ who can fold me into his or her brilliant story *for* me, so all I have to do is provide colorful dialogue. That isn't story-prioritized role-playing at all, because at that table, what we *do* is by definition *never* going to make the story – it's already in place as imposed by one person at the table, or (just the same) being improvised by one person at the table.

4. To you, how important is story to a gaming situation?

I must first stress that this whole topic is merely about preference and mood. Wanting to make stories via the fiction of role-playing isn't a privileged or better priority. It's one of the possible priorities when engaged in this cool form of fiction-making, and that is all. In order to answer sensibly, I'm reading your difficult phrase "a gaming situation" very much with "<u>a</u>" as an individual time, not as a representative, blanket, or archetypal thing.

That said, my answer is, sometimes a lot, and sometimes not at all. It's a matter of my preference at the moment.

If it's a lot, i.e., if I'm in that particular mood, then I look for a game to play that reinforces that desire, for me and everyone else. No game can replace that desire, which is a creative and social thing, but its moving parts can be better-suited to it than another's, or it can have nifty features to reinforce the desire in a particular way.

Again, and to reinforce my point above, when I'm feeling that way, I totally don't want play which *imposes* story, in the sense that one person at the table is empowered to direct other characters' actions to conform with an intended outcome. Doing that isn't always personally and creatively abusive, but in my experience nearly all of it is, and even when it's not, I simply dislike it. So I avoid groups which seem to rely on it, and I avoid games which clearly include that imposition as an assumption for play.

Let's not forget that I might be in a completely different mood and have a completely different preference at some other time. If so, then I look for a different game that fits my current priority better. Similarly, I'll then pick among those for techniques that seem pretty cool for something specific about playing that way.

This all works the other way around, too – if someone else is already proposing a game, I say to myself, "Can I get behind the creative priorities and collective enjoyment this game best reinforces?"

Here's another point: twenty-five years ago, when I was really struggling between enjoying seeing stories emerge from the components in play and disliking stories shoehorned into play, and not knowing quite why play seemed to go one way sometimes and the other way other times, I was pretty intensely focused on getting the former to happen. You could say I was obsessed, and not as interested in other priorities.

Since then, with literally hundreds of different games, having discovered and satisfied that particular creative priority in many different ways, having myself found new design spaces toward that end, I find that the other creative priorities are now "unlocked" for me too. When I talked about the challenge-solving, competitive priority, I was speaking from experience – I love to play that way, with people equally fired up about it. (And if you do it with me, watch out!)

Therefore, in practice, I've found that many people do seem obsessed or utterly focused on a particular priority in play, and it's often because that priority has not been well-met for them, not reliably or to the intensity they would like to experience. Like me, the same people are later much more open to a variety of priorities, and are comfortable setting their favorite one (if they have one) aside for another, when they're in the mood for it.

This is a really good point for a follow-up question. If you get tangled up here, and if we don't solve it, then this whole interview is moot.

5. How exactly did this lead to the development of your game Sorcerer? How does Sorcerer, and other games that you have designed, address these ideas of story and encourage them?

You have it backwards. Developing Sorcerer led me to "this," or rather, to designing toward my desire to play with this priority. This goes back all the way to 1985 when I began organizing long-term Champions groups, but really kicked in about 1990 when I realized I had a bunch of proto-game notes all over the place (like many other people, then and now) … and then even more so upon encountering a number of game designs in the early 1990s, the ones I referenced in Sorcerer. I hit upon demon-centric, sorcerer-only play as the most uncompromising model for what I wanted in 1992.

By the mid-1990s, I knew I was doing something different from Hogshead Publishing, whose games seemed to be about trading and competing for narrative control, which seemed to me then, and still does, to be crude and boring. "Play to see who gets to say what happens," or "color in what we all already know is happening," isn't fun for me, because it's still all about *control* of the fiction. I was interested in play which utilized other, more subtle tools we already had, like interesting interplay between GM/player contributions, and outcomes with random components, not in passing a stick around and listening to one another make stuff up.

Finalizing Sorcerer is all intertwined with other stuff, so I'd be better off with a whiteboard … from 1998 through 2002, there's an interplay among my publishing, commerce, play, design, the development of the Forge in stages, and the booth at GenCon. Ask more about that if you want.

As for *how* the game design I'm talking about works to address and reinforce (not "encourage") this priority, that's a whole 'nother interviews … Briefly, there is no magic rule. I'm talking about human priorities, not moment-to-moment mechanics. However, when I look at a group playing a game and I consider a lot of the procedures they're following, and watch how they interconnect and how they result in a fun time, then there's a lot to learn about how it works. To start talking about that, check out this very old essay and ask questions about it: http://www.indie-rpgs.com/_articles/narr_essay.html.

6. Your new edition of Sorcerer, funded through a successful Kickstarter campaign, put out an annotated edition of the game, basically the same text as the previous edition but with notes explaining your thoughts on what you wrote now. What made you choose this approach rather than a whole text in a new edition, integrating what you have learned over the years since Sorcerer first came out? Do you see yourself doing a "new" edition of your game one day?

It *is* the same text, not "basically." The pages on the left side are the original pages just as printed beforehand. The only new material is found in the annotations. Oh, and the covers of course. Long ago, Thomas Denmark told me he'd like to do Sorcerer covers for me, and to my relief the offer was still open years later. The original covers were extraordinarily effective – I've seen the art rope people literally across a convention floor – but they were also very much of their day, around 2000, and it seemed time for a new look to celebrate the anniversaries. Thomas really nailed it, I think.

As for a revision in the sense of a full re-write, well … OK, I certainly support revisions when a game has undergone changes that the authors can no longer think of as minor patches. I did exactly that with the transition from PDF to book for Sorcerer anyway, and again with Trollbabe (PDF 2003 PDF, book 2009). I'll probably be re-doing S/Lay w/Me this way one of these days too; the revised text and some new art are already on-hand for that.

However, when it comes to the 2001 Sorcerer, and for any of the games with that sense of completion in my mind, I find that I hold a music album approach. I'll try to explain … OK, I would love to own a copy of *The Velvet Underground and Nico* with some creator comments, a library of discovered photography, and maybe some technical explanations (what the hell did they do in the studio for the second half of "European Son" comes to mind). But do I want the group to re-unite in order to re-record and re-cut *that exact albu*m as if they were to "fix" it? To "do it right this time?" Hell no! Historically, the album was made when it was made, and did what it did. The band members have proceeded through their careers, in some cases, their whole lives, and done more, other stuff. Continuing to play older songs, absolutely, refining or changing them for new performances, sure … but I can't imagine any musician wanting to re-create an old album, the more so if it were a knockout of any kind in its day, and a continuing inspiration to the present.

Consistent with that argument, I think the majority of new editions in RPG publishing are blatant marketing moves and from my creative and utility-centered view completely unnecessary – even a bit disgusting.

After all, what Sorcerer as originally written demonstrably did and still does is open doors to the kind of story-prioritized play I described above: not planning a story, but making a story via characters with agency, subject to non-negotiable rules outcomes. I had hoped back in 2000-2001 that the number of people who liked those particular doors would eventually justify a 500-book

print run; it did not occur to me that any more people than that would be interested, or to plan for more printings.

Nor did I realize that it was going to spark such interest in people who said, "There are doors like that? No! Really? How do they work?" Against my expectations at the time, that second audience – characterized by surprise and curiosity – is still there, a never-ending stream of arrivals, for the same reasons as before. Indoctrinated in plot control as "story role-playing," they are simultaneously intrigued and fearful, and the raw defiance of the book as written – kneeing railroading in the groin – is exciting. To this audience, the book turned out to be much like its own fictional content: demonic.

Right, so, if that happened with it as originally written and still does to an oncoming audience with exactly the same needs, then why screw with the tool that evidently works? That's why the original text stands, and why my annotations are nothing more than refinements of talking about it, most of them pulled from real historical discussions anyway (as acknowledged) – not much more than putting hyperlinks into the text to the on-line discussions. I annotated it to bring the extant content forward better, not to replace it.

A final point: I wrote the first draft of Sorcerer after my birthday in 1994, when I turned 30, and posted the first playtested-and-playable version about exactly two years later. The much-more-playtested book was published in 2001, just before I turned 37. When I decided to replace that book design with the anniversary version in 2011 (15 years from the on-line publication in 1996, 10 years from the book in 2001 … OK, it was a little late), I was 47. That's a different life-stage, a different set of priorities, a whole different constellations of games I'd played and felt different things about. By then, I'd published six more games and posted the playtest drafts for at least six more. It's not as if Sorcerer as such is my life's one work.

7. How does your day job impact how you work as a game designer?

Good timing for that question. You may know that I've been a university professor almost continuously since finishing my doctorate in late 1997. It so happens that a lot of things came together in the past year, including a big book contract and getting my Adept Press ordering and printing process better organized. Contrary to popular belief, academics isn't a very lucrative profession. Although I really enjoyed the day to day work, the other rewards and hassles were simply less compelling every year. So … I'm jumping off that boat and turning to writing full-time. As I mentioned, at least I got the contract for the mainstream book before doing so. Wish me luck.

To answer more fully regarding the past twenty years, however, I found little conflict among all the different things I do with my time. I didn't really experience a feeling of crunch until after my kids were born, in 2007 and again in 2009. I'd like to be able to provide better for them without shorting my time with them so much, and as it turned out, academia created more problems for that than game design/publishing or anything else did.

If you want to know more about my academic status, my thoughts on the work and the career, and anything else of that sort, please feel free to ask.

8. Why independent/self-publishing? What is so important about this approach for a game designer?

The real history of RPG design has always been grass-roots: not some elevated closed body of "real designers" or "real publishing," distinct from the consumer masses who gratefully receive their bounty; but instead, mere gamers, regular people, who happen to like designing new stuff in the context of how they enjoy playing. "By and for" is a marketing cliché now, but it's rooted in truth. I like to say I'm a gamer with a design disorder, and among those of us afflicted this way, I'm also in the further subset with a publishing disorder.

From the early 1970s to about 1980, role-playing publishing was either independent or through a third-party publisher who was himself merely a fellow hobbyist. (There wasn't much venue: conventions and hobby stores which are hard to describe today. Back then, there was no commercial crossover among comics, movies, SF/fantasy books, and hobby games. Maybe a little bit between movies, books, and toys, but not in the SF/fantasy geek zone. For that, you went to hobby stores and bought glow-in-the-dark models.) This period was characterized by an incredible ferment of game development, criss-crossing influences, ever-escalating creativity, and fascinating ideas. It was the *original* design-and-publishing phase of role-playing, best described as a completely disorganized cottage industry, with its sales and production pretty much improvised on a case-by-case basis, more like zine publishing than anything else.

Two grim cases might have prompted some reflection about creator ownership. Almost immediately after the initial limited publication of D&D (1974), the property went into IP and ownership crisis which turned its actual content into a hot mess for thirty years, hurling many of the primary creative contributors under the bus at different points (yeesh, does *this* sentence deserve a ten-paragraph footnote). By 1980, a dispute between the owner of Metagaming and Steve Jackson led to the effective destruction of The Fantasy Trip. In other words, when creative work met someone else's ownership, the creative person was the one to suffer.

By the early 1980s, a new infrastructure emerged, eventually becoming folded into the three-tier distribution system dominated by Alliance, tuned toward the model of periodical publication, which is no surprise considering that Diamond was involved too. This, unfortunately, produced what's called *traditional* RPG publishing, earning that name through its persistence and its impact. I'm sure you know it well by its evident impact by the late 1980s, including the sudden reduction in visible RPG companies, the sudden bloated size of core books, and the incredible increase in splats.

You should probably ask some questions here if you aren't familiar with what I'm talking about.

I see Shadowrun as the title that exemplified all the developing badness in this economic context. I'm not talking about whether Shadowrun is a "bad game." It's reasonably possible to have fun with it, much like the other games of the time and just beforehand: Rolemaster, GURPS, Rifts, D&D2, ICE's RuneQuest, and Champions 4th edition. Also like them, inelegant, over-written, stuffed with junk, generally dismissive of real humans at a real table, and in some cases quite different from their zestier original forms. More importantly, FASA in general optimized distributor profits in the new model of periodical publishing.

Instead of hobbyists who wrote and published for one another, now the model relied on freelancers pumping out words for routine release to a disconnected consumer base. It turned game designers into initial idea-people with no subsequent authority over the finished game. It also relied on bulk sales, with minimal return per unit to the publisher, and no feedback-loop from end-users. This is a formula for disaster in content, favoring pastiche, pablum, and unnecessary

repackaging. It offers little hope for inspiration, comparison, enjoyment, and utility (or innovation if you care about that). It turns raw book size, size of print run, and production into necessary, gatekeeping features.

This horror became so entrenched that the newcomers didn't defy it, but imitated it, usually to financial distress, like Wizards of the Coast and White Wolf. More production value only meant more debt. The former was only saved by Magic: the Gathering, and the latter by what amounts to a palace coup and a complete change in financial and creative policy.

I've written extensively about the three-tier distribution system and its toxic impact on publishing infrastructure and game design. Let me know if you have questions about my position on that. My point here is that it had become traditional in the most restrictive sense: not only the way things happen to be done, but the *right* way to do it, the *only* way to do it, and the *legitimizing* way to do it. I can go on about individual titles and lines if you'd like.

All along, underneath, the grassroots design continued as furiously before, but no longer evident in steady publication, no longer visible to the end-user role-player base, and no longer inter-connected at all. Genuine straight-from-play game design had become closeted.

The few that found niches or managed to get some decent distribution are well-known, especially Eric Wujcik's Amber. But of most of those which made it into print came to grief, especially in the mid-1990s, and why? Because they didn't fit the model of pumping out thick-ass core books and an endless stream of splats. Silly amateurs, they thought publishing games which were merely *fun and interesting* would somehow be successful. Again, if you want a list of titles, let me know.

I first published an early form of Sorcerer in late 1996, and I started looking pretty seriously into how I might want to develop it further. It was clearly not going to be a thick-ass core book and although I had a couple of ideas for supplements, they weren't splats. The more I observed and learned, the more I saw the games I liked most, and which inspired me most for Sorcerer, sell out and then disappear. The excuse was always "No one buys it" + "It's sold out."

I knew that song already. I was pretty close to the comics industry from the mid-80s through the late 90s, and got a good look at my friends' lives and the context of their work. I read *Cerebus the Aardvark* too. Say what you like about Dave Sim, but at that time, he was absolutely right about independent publishing in comics – especially the part about actually gaining the profits of your work, however small or large, rather than disappearing into a completely broken, speculation-driven money-pit claiming to be an "industry." I thought hard about his 1994 independent creator drive and the resulting *Guide to Self-Publishing* (1997), also about what I'd learned about Page 45, the excellent comics store in the UK. It struck me that RPG publishing needed a solid review from a similar perspective.

My thinking at the time is well illustrated by my 1999 writings: http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/12/ and http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/13/. I decided that I'd publish Sorcerer by myself. I wasn't alone in this, but I was the first to avoid dropping a fortune into it and crossing my fingers. I went with PDF for sale instead – the first RPG publisher to do so, ahead of Monte Cook by a few months – and determined from the start to consider print only when and if it seemed financially sound.

My answer to your question is that self-publishing and creator executive control are synonyms, and since the so-called "traditional" model had landed role-playing economics in the toilet by the mid-1990s, D&D included, shifting to what seemed to be better in comics, up-front, non-apologetic self-publishing was perfectly obvious to me.

I'll talk more about specific games in your #11, but it ties nicely into your next question too.

9. Since you were one of the designers responsible for the gaming theory discussion site The Forge, and even before that on blogs and internet sites, you have been identified with the "movement" known as "indie gaming" or "story gaming" within the tabletop RPG communities. How do you identify this group, and what do you think are some of the important features of it?

I'm getting this question a lot these days, which makes me tired. All those terms are such yellow runny dogshit.

"Indie" is a ridiculous term which I did not choose for the Forge's URL or tagline. The term I wanted was "independent," defined strictly and only as self-publishing, with full creator ownership, i.e. control. *That's* the movement I led, and yes, "led" is the right term. It only means that I was bold about a good game: not to hide and apologize for publishing my own work, but to name that feature as a point of pride. I also stress that leadership, as I see it, has nothing to do with telling anyone what to do, but rather demonstrating what's possible to anyone who's interested.

Significantly, one didn't have to like me or agree with me or even acknowledge any association with the Forge to be part of that movement. If you wanted to stick up for your own work and maintain your authority over what was in it, how it would be produced, how it would be distributed, and what would be done with its funding and its return, then great, I was there. If you wanted to do this with discussion at the Forge, you could; if you wanted to use my considerable help at GenCon 2002-2011, you could. Many self-publishers did one or the other, many did both, and many didn't do either. Those who didn't do either were still players in that movement. I *led* in that movement, I was not *in charge* of it or anyone in it.

I don't care if you hate me, love me, or masturbate screaming my name. If you are an RPG publisher who created the work, who makes the executive decision about what's in it, and who controls its finances, and if you see that as a great thing, a point of pride, a way to see what you want to happen, happen, then you are what the Forge made visible, i.e., what my leadership made possible. People who tried it in 1994 were crushed – literally run out of the hobby. People who tried it in 2004 could become internationally successful.

The Forge showcased people's pride in self-publishing and literally changed the surrounding dialogue. It demonstrated that self-published RPGs produced the vanguard of good games, as they always had, period. It called out the abusive, anti-grassroots infrastructure of the three-tier distribution system and broke the prior ideology that self-publishing was marginal in any way. It revealed what people were interested in talking about when their fears (meeting publishers' needs, satisfying a nebulous market) were allayed, and demonstrated as well that such talk could be remarkably productive.

"The internet" didn't do it. The internet can be counted on for only two things, porn and gossip. Anything else that happens there is people exerting effort. On the positive side of that effort, what

the internet *can* do is to provide multiple connections and surprising interactions that would otherwise have been impossible, but it *won't* provide that without mindful use of its features. That's what the Forge was.

You're welcome.

You left out another lousy term that fits into your question: "Forge game." From the very start of the endeavor, back when Ed Healy and I founded Hephaestus' Forge, we were always looking for "little games" tucked away in the internet. There wasn't any decent search engine at the time, no Google for sure, nor any Paypal, and most discussions were still on Usenet … remember webrings? Anyway, that was a major goal, hunting down these variously-developed games, playing them, getting the light shined on them a bit more.

Unsurprisingly, people arriving at the Forge (now "the Forge," founded by me and Clinton R. Nixon) were just like me and the other early members: we wanted to talk about good and bad game experiences, and about how role-playing and rules work. This included some well-known creators who had just shifted to self-publishing and had been active at the Gaming Outpost, and were now interested in the Forge, like John Wick with Orkworld, and through me, Greg Stafford with Hero Wars. Others were more directly parallel with me as newcomers who'd put our own games together: Dav Harnish with Obsidian, Jason Blair with Little Fears, and later, Jake Norwood with The Riddle of Steel and Luke Crane with Burning Wheel. The hunt-and-discover for unknown little games continued though, and that's what brought more people in all the time, including Vincent Baker with kill puppies for satan, and many more.

All these people and the rest of the interested participants engaged in a furious ferment of "what the hell are we doing here and how does it work" discussion completely free of any need to mouth familiar platitudes.

All that couldn't help but yield more game design. So a lot of games began which had been brought up as ideas, then discussed through playtesting, and by 2002-2003, became small-press publications, such as InSpectres, The Pool, Universalis, Dust Devils, and My Life with Master; and soon after, The Shadow of Yesterday, Primetime Adventures, and Dogs in the Vineyard. Everyone was influencing each other, so you can definitely see a commonality. Still, up through 2004, no one was talking about Forge games. I think it's because these publications were great and all, but the exposure to incredibly diverse games in every phase of development was so broad – so many, tons more. Stuff you probably never ever heard of, like Wyrd or Violence Future or ReCoil or The Great Ork Gods or Robots & Rapiers … geez, there's no point in picking among at least two hundred titles. Many were no less influential than the more visible ones, even when barely past the idea stage. Some never left that point and some become almost publishable.

I think the "Forge game" term arose due to the contests: Iron Game Chef most of all, and some 24-Hour RPG Challenge games, and the hybrid of these I first ran called the Ronnies. Iron Game Chef 2004 really cemented a certain look-and-procedure which merely reflected the design topics of that moment (see its winner Ganakagok, as well as The Mountain Witch and Polaris), but laid the foundation for a "2005 look and feel" in publications. This effect was also reinforced by the founding of Indie Press Revolution, whose initial stable reasonably included the more visible games.

Although I liked all these games quite a bit, and I appreciated that most of the next wave of titles were indeed quite individually distinctive, I didn't like this hint at subcultural uniformity very much, nor the shared assumptions about play that seemed to be more and more prevalent in the designs. I tried hard to retain the primary focus at the Forge on discovered games, rather than those written almost entirely within the Forge discussions. By 2006, I altered the forum structure at the Forge to favor newer participants and most significantly, decreed a two-year maximum for participation at the Forge booth.

I slapped down the use of the term "Forge game" so hard and so constantly that a replacement term sprang up, out of my reach: God help us all, "story game …" the third in a row of absurd terms, or rather, it started as an empty term and has become absurd – even noxious.

[Name], do you know who coined the term "story game," and why? Do you know which games it's been applied to, and when?

If you know the answers, then you know that the "story game" was not and never has had anything to do with me. The very idea is appalling. I've never used the term and never seen it applied to any of my work. If something is called that by its author, then I understand it's a useful marketing device, but the label tells us nothing about the game itself, especially whether it's a good game at all. *Some* are, I'll grant you that. Nothing else.

10. Including, or outside of (whichever you prefer), your games, what do you think are some of the identifying games of this "movement?" I don't want to sound like I am belittling things with my use of quotes, I am not sure if this is the right word for all of this, or if it is even a preferred word choice by you. If it is, or isn't, a movement then what do you think it should be called?

I'll save talk of more specific titles (begun above in #9) for #11. Here I'll focus on the last part of #10.

For this question, you're right to be cautious about this. Remember, to me, the only "movement" is self-publishing, not game design, and certainly not any particular body of publishers or specific type of game. I think better game design is a secondary feature necessarily to be more common, when more games are self-published.

11. What is it that makes these games, and these designers important for you?

 Nothing more nor less that they arose from the play-experience and – if avoiding pitfalls – can inspire the play-experience of others. This is *not* the same as game texts which merely permit me to read about the fiction of someone else's game. It's about seeing how someone does it and being excited to do it too, for the fictional content or the procedures or both, as sparks or ingredients.

Because *that* is the hobby. All this bogus talk of "saving the hobby," "growing the industry," focused on the retail stores and distribution system – what utter bullshit. The real hobby is play, talking about play, and more play. The real industry, small as it may be (and not as small as you might think, in gross funds), is the cottage production emerging from the talking.

I hope you can see that the "movement" you're talking about isn't anything to do with the 2000s or the Forge or me. It's the ongoing ferment of play, talk, design, and play that began in the early 70s

and has never stopped. I happened to be the person who pried hardest at the lid that was clamped down on it from about 1988 through about 2002. Now that lid is wide open and I'm saying, "Did it!" about opening that lid, not about what kind of games are now made visible or made possible in the new environment.

So when you say "These games," I am not talking about anything to do with the Forge. I'm talking about the games that provided excitement, straight from the players who did those things with that imagined content, right to the reader. You might be surprised at some of the games I'd include from the earlier days: Ken St. Andre's Tunnels & Trolls, George MacDonald's original authorship of Champions, Steve Jackson's authorship of GURPS, the original publisher-contributors to (The) Chaosium's titles, like Sandy Peterson and Greg Stafford, and more. Some of these companies shifted away from independence, with turnover of personnel and sales to other companies, but that's where they began.

You can see quite clearly how such publishing became marginal by the late 1980s, with "little games" buried on the shelves by splatbook-lines and glossy bulky core books, usually into their unnecessary 2nd editions by their second year. One little Morpheus, one little Prince Valiant, Amber as I mentioned before, Over the Edge … As well as probably the most distinctive subset of games in this category, from this period are what I call Fantasy Heartbreakers. Have you read my essays about them? Do you know why I like them so much?

Through the mid-90s, games like this appeared and disappeared: The Whispering Vault, Maelstrom, Zero, Extreme Vengeance – some self-published, some third-party hobbyist as in the 70s, but all marginalized by distribution and retail as "not big enough." There was also Hogshead Publishing, experimenting with general freer-form and satirical design and either self-published or very close.

I wrote about the next wave earlier, which is marked by certain common themes and procedures across entirely separate designers: Hero Wars, Orkworld, and Sorcerer; with The Riddle of Steel and Burning Wheel still in development but soon to appear. I also wrote about work which was either showcased at or developed at the Forge: The Pool, InSpectres and other games by Jared Sorensen, Dust Devils, Universalis, My Life with Master, Trollbabe, Dogs in the Vineyard, The Shadow of Yesterday, The Mountain Witch, Polaris … to pick it up from where I left off in 2005, the list moves on to Capes and Burning Empires, and then we're talking about a cornucopia of crazed brilliant designers like Nathan Paoletta, Jason Morningstar, Avery McDaldno (formerly Joe MacDonald), Kevin Allen Jr., Tony Lower-Basch, Emily Care Boss, Joshua Newman, and the list goes on.

But again, to focus on that particular set of individuals interacting with one another badly misses the point. More importantly, at that time, the ideas and techniques sprouted up all over, including interested traditional-publishing people, techniques showcased at the Forge with serial numbers filed off, people active at the Forge now developing stuff for bigger companies, clear influences picked up at one step removed, and more like-minded parallels. It's not identification or membership that matters, it's the spread, rooting, and flowering of the way we play at the table, the way we talk about it, and the way it enters texts. You can see it in the Nordic scene, which had been actively arty since the late 90s, producing Jeepform by the mid-2000s; Projekt Odyssee in Germany; the activism led by Narrattiva and other translators in Italy, including the Gente Che Gioca forum and InterNosCon; a general wave of translation and connections across the world; and the OSR is another excellent example, emerging right at this time in 2005.

It's scattershot, various, individually rooted in distinct local practice, vocalized by vivid and sometimes bonkers personalities, shifting in focus, impossible to nail down into a single organization … And that's how it is, no matter what. *That's* the hobby, back in full flower, visible for the first time since the mid-1980s. You can see the influences shooting back and forth among all the bits, further cross-pollinating, mutating wildly, mostly published just the authors see fit.

That's why *all* of the self-published games are important to me, regardless of which I might like or prefer to play, and regardless of what a given author might think of me, regardless of (bluntly) whether they stink or are great. This incredible ferment is what I came here for: to play, to talk about, to criticize, to be inspired by.

[Name], your questions #9-13 seem founded in a completely wrong-headed idea about a movement: a designated leader, named and numbered membership and a characteristic product line. That's not even a movement, it's a corporation in all but name. I'm talking about something people *can do*, not what they call themselves or whom they associate with, or whom they diss or back up on-line.

12. Developing an online community has marked your development as a publisher and as a designer. How is this important to you from either, or both, of these perspectives?

I'm disgusted by what's happened to the term "community" over the past decade: totally co-opted by advertisers and pundits, now meaning nothing more than a captive market whether for purchases or for votes, defined by adherence to designated, uniform phrases.

The point was never to make a community as framed by these despicable people. It was to generate an effect, not a body of membership. Turnover, not growth. Inspiration, not control. Self-empowerment, not group-based identity. *That* kind of community is incredible, and it happened. I wrote about this extensively in a series of threads in 2004, part of a bigger series called The Infamous Five.

Have you heard of that series? A summary of links is here: http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php?topic=33111.0. It's exemplified as well, as thoroughly as possible, in the events summarized here: http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php?topic=30641.0.

From my childhood and teens, I have a lot of personal experience with what are now called intentional communities, some of them notorious. I know exactly how they go off the rails. Ask me more about that if you're interested.

Therefore the existence and privileging of an online community in the toxic, latter-day sense is something I've actively resisted. Bluntly, I wanted people to arrive, learn what was useful to them, and to *leave*, staying to help with newer arrivals only if they wanted. I didn't want anyone to stay there as a form of identity. Just as I knew they would, though, time and again, people who began as fellow gamers and sharers of the vision to one degree or another (as they saw fit, which is good), became weird after a while. Talking about "growing the brand," "leveraging," creating an inner-circle mentality around me, and weirdest of all, treating me as a special friend and seeking my approval of them in some special way.

There's a 70s cartoon character named Cheech Wizard, by Vaughn Bode. He was an obnoxious mystic who usually avoided any positive activity in favor of getting drunk and laid, but on rare occasions produced wonderful visions. One of the running gags was his even more obnoxious apprentice getting kicked in the balls a lot. You see, a lot of characters thought Cheech was a guru, and the apprentice in particular thought Cheech was his ticket to the big-time. He resented Cheech's treatment, but never figured out that his problem was to define himself *as an apprentice* in the first place.

Like Cheech, I don't like apprentices. Not worshipful sincere ones, and not brand-bandwagon cunning ones. The social history of the Forge includes a lot of me kicking people in the balls as soon as they started talking about "we" and "the community" (in a certain way) and "branding," or getting weepy when they didn't get attention or special accolades.

This obviously hasn't and couldn't have gone well for me, either emotionally or in terms of business. A lot of backlash, some of it dishonest and mean, has come my way because of it. A lot of second-hand encounters with me, "perception" I guess we call it, is founded in people's shocked responses. However, I don't think it could have gone any other way, given my goals to identify, reinforce, and highlight an *effect* rather than form and guard a *group.* I led a great real-life non-buzzword community via the internet, up to and including its sensible ending, and I resisted constructing a vaporous, "community" in any way, especially any notion of myself as a center or authority.

13. Between your work on your games, and with the development of communities online, some say that you are like a "Godfather of Indie RPGs," having an influence on your area like Iggy Pop had on punk. Or maybe I am the only one saying this. What are your thoughts on your influences on gaming, or what *others* may think are your influences on gaming?

I don't believe I've seen that exact term applied to me, and I'm confused by what it's supposed to mean. Are we talking about Iggy as the musician, as an exemplar, or as taking a direct hand in promotion of others … or what? Is the analogy regarding me about the godfather, the punk-ness, or what?

Regardless of how the term "godfather" is supposed to mean regarding Iggy Pop, and regardless of whether the whole phrase applies to me, I find the term repugnant, as a hobby or pop culture thing. If I were to have an analogy of that kind turn out to be true, historically, then I'd hope for it to be The Velvet Underground. You know, whose first album "sold a hundred copies but everyone who bought it started their own band."

Remember, I reject the whole idea of "indie RPGs" as this isolated, one-website-specific group of people who happened to talk intensely with one another for a while, or as this fixed list of titles with a common social origin.

To get a better idea of what happened … do you know what exactly what the Forge booth was, at GenCon 2002-2011? Do you know what the criterion was for participating, and how it worked financially? Do you know which games were eligible and why?

14. What games out right now have your attention, and your enthusiasm as a gamer?

I don't think my opinion about "the new" is especially interesting, and I dislike punditry and reviews, so I appreciate your phrasing "as a gamer." That I can answer. I am not very good at keeping up with "newest" stuff, being more of a filter-feeder through others' recommendations and games in development, and on my own, more inclined to comb older games. So typically, my current to-play list includes D&D 4E (I've played some recently and want to DM a long game) and a set of playtesting I'm behind on: Matt Snyder's Dagger & Shadow, Phil Lewis' Wrath of the Autarch, and Roko Joko's Daka Fal.

See what I mean? Out of print stuff and still-in-development stuff, mostly. And there's nothing newsworthy about it. Catch me a few months before or later and you'd get a different and very similar list.

15. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me about these things. As my final question for you today, what is coming up for Ron Edwards?

Given your focus in this interview on a game first published in 1996, an internet discussion from 2006, and a website closed over two years ago, I think the better question is "what has really been happening all this time?" Do you know what I've published since then, or perhaps played any of it?

Do you know of my history-and-politics books, each including a game as an individual chapter: Spione, Shahida, and (in development) Amerikkka?

My straight-up fantasy games Elfs, Trollbabe, and S/Lay w/Me?

My superhero comics game in development, Doctor Chaos?

My three odd little "really about religion" games in development, under the title Estimated Prophet?

My series of essays in development about D&D?

How about my Heartbreaker Redemption Project, with my re-working of an early 90s manuscript into Circle of Hands?

I'd love to answer any questions you have about any of these.