

AN INTERVIEW WITH M. ALEXANDER JURKAT – FOUNDING OWNER OF EDEN STUDIOS

Late in 2021 I reached out to Alex Jurkat for a chat. As you likely know, Alex was a founder of Eden Studios and was their Business Manager/Head Editor during the company's heyday in the late 90s and early 2000s. Being present from the very beginning, he helped guide Eden Studios (and its precursor New Millennium Entertainment) through their formative years, and into the Unisystem era of the early to mid-2000s.

I'm incredibly grateful to Alex (and Dave Chapman, who facilitated the connection) for his time and the sheer amount of detail he provided to me, in covering not only the development of Con X but also life at Eden during its most exciting and productive period! I hope you enjoy the following interview as much as I did.

Hi Alex, before we get into the juicy details about your time with Eden Studios, I should ask, what brought you into the roleplaying hobby?

I started gaming in the 1970s during high school with a subscription to Strategy & Tactics by SPI. I used to play solo games in my living room, mostly simulating WWII battles. My grandparents, who fled the Nazis in WWII, were none-to-pleased by this hobby. When I got to college, I played a D&D-like dungeon crawl game (mostly home-brew) but it did have character development (in the form of loot accumulation). I should try to track down the name of that game -- it was my RPG entry ramp. In 1980, I was introduced to a copy of the Player's Handbook and had a head-exploding moment. A never-ending, story-telling game that changed over time and was given life by a human DM -- the very concept was mind-boggling.

THE CREATION OF CONSPIRACY X AND FORMATION OF EDEN

That story sounds familiar! So, how did a young, avid gamer become an owner and Business Manager at New Millennium Entertainment (the precursor to Eden Studios and Con X's first owner)?

I moved to Albany, NY in the late 1980s to take a lawyer job. I appeased my comic addiction by visiting a local store Imagination Games & Comics. George Vasilakos owned that store, and over time, we got to talking about our passions. I started gaming regularly at the store with George and other regulars. We started attending Gen Con as a group. When Magic the Gathering arrived, we got some of the first cards (Alpha) and I experienced my second mind-boggling game. When we returned home, we all got stars in our eyes, thinking "we can do this." We scraped together a bunch of cash (including my savings and inheritance from my grandparents), mortgaged some properties (we had very indulgent parents), founded NME, and launched the Battlelords collectible card game. We sold a bunch of cards and made a bunch of money. We also made a slew of amateur mistakes, including overprinting, and ground through cash. No truer are the words -- How do you make a small fortune in the game industry? Start with a large fortune. As NME was collapsing, we teamed up with the writers of the initial version of Conspiracy X, fleshed out the text, edited heavily, and added art. And lo, NME diversified into roleplaying games. Con X was a minor success, particularly over in the UK, during the heydays of the X-Files, but it was far too little, too late to save NME.

Ouch, sounds like some hard lessons learnt. Despite New Millennium Entertainment's troubles, you must have come away with some desire to continue publishing games?

George and I and three others teamed up in founding NME. We were in an "all for one, one for all" mood in our youthful ignorance and didn't much focus on what would happen when things collapsed. It was much easier and more fun to just assume that success was in the bag. The initial release of Battlelords brought us heady days, particularly our first Gen Con as a publisher. The extraction/wrap-up was much worse, and more long lasting. All in all, George and I survived financially (but it hurt a lot) and learned an enormous amount. Mostly, our takeaway was that we could do this game-publishing-thing and we really wanted to keep going.

But NME folded in the end.

NME just had too many debts and not enough cash to continue the Battlelords game. We designed a supplement release, in the pattern of Magic the Gathering, but we couldn't pull together enough cash to get it

to print. We also couldn't pay off the core release printing bill. So, everyone took their lumps in shutting down the company. Lots of money and property was lost. George, Ed (*Healey -Ed*) and I formed Eden and purchased the rights to and debts from Con X and started again.

And what was it like working at Eden Studios? As this was before the age of the Internet and remote working, I'm guessing you all had to come together somewhere?

Eden offices were located in the basement of George's house in the early days. We could gather around the various computers and phones we had set up and get stuff done. The creative aspect of the job was wonderful and kept us enthralled even as the financial and business aspects wore us down. The conventions were similarly invigorating. Being part of the industry, interacting with fans (even those complaining about missed release deadlines), and hanging with other creative types always recharged our enthusiasm for our work.

As time went on, George opened a new retail store, so we moved our offices there. A retail store brought a regular cash flow with it -- it didn't matter whose product was hot, there was always hot product. George has always had a talent for picking the right products to invest heavily in. The store always benefited from whatever the hot product of the day was. Day-to-day activities for me didn't change much. I stayed on top of moving the texts through the writing and editing stages, planning new products, getting things over to George for art and layout, and proofing/harmonizing the layout with the content of the text. George took on both Eden and the new store -- Zombie Planet. As time went on, ZP started taking up more and more of his time. Revenue from the store grew past and ultimately overshadowed Eden. It just didn't make sense to sacrifice the store's well-being to devote more time, effort, and money to Eden.

DEVELOPMENT AND RELEASE OF CONSPIRACY X

You've already mentioned that NME was the original publisher of Conspiracy X, but how did the opportunity to create and release the game come about? I note that its three original authors - Rick Ernst, Shirley Madewell & Chris Pallace - don't seem to have been professional game developers at the time.

George handled most of the initial contact with Rick, Shirley and Chris. I'm not certain how that relationship developed. As with most gaming related events, it likely started in George's retail store. The three authors had been working on the game for some time and the core concepts and rules were set when NME signed on to publish the game. I put a fair amount of work into editing the game, NME set and enforced some meaningful deadlines, and we all helped round the game into shape as those deadlines were missed by the initial authors. George did the bulk of the heavy lifting on the graphics side (as he did with all NME and Eden product). Still, the core of the game was in pretty good shape when we started.

And you were able to leverage Con X into Eden's first roleplaying game?

Basically, we spent some of our Battlelords earnings on publishing Con X, believing that the product was solid enough to drive sufficient revenues. We didn't have a good idea of the relative cash flow between collectible card games and roleplaying games, but we were hopeful. Looking back, hope was NME's greatest strength. We were as surprised by Con X's solid success, as we were by Battlelords collapsing under its own weight. Turned out, the market really wanted a conspiracy-oriented roleplaying game, and Con X hit enough of the right buttons to keep folks coming back.

The first edition of Conspiracy X became a bit of a hit after it was released (in 1996), and I'm sure that was in part due to the numerous supplements and support that it developed over the next few years. Was there some grand strategy for the game line, or did it simply develop organically?

Once we extracted ourselves from NME, and started Eden, we focused everything on Con X. The game sold regularly to distributors and the industry model (understood by George from his retail store) dictated that issuing regular supplements was the way to keep cash flow up. We plotted out a line of supplements and started cranking away. We used the money we earned from the current supplement to fund the next supplement, and those regular releases sold the core book and other prior supplements. For a time, sales grew all around and we believed we were on our way. As it turned out, we were just seeing a repeat of the sales pattern we experienced with Battlelords, just on a lower scale and with a more extended time frame. Basically,

a game line, if successful at all, sells well on release (oh shiny) and for some time after as regular supplements are issued. In time, folks move their leisure dollars to some other new shiny game, and sales of subsequent supplements drop steadily. In time, sales don't support the publishing costs of a new release, much less regular company overhead, like marketing and paying staff and freelancers. Back in the Con X days, Kickstarter didn't exist. We couldn't go to our supporters and ask for up-front money to publish our next effort. We got some help from Esdevium in up-fronting costs in the early going, but that wasn't a sustainable route. More and more distributors were pumping all their spare cash into the next Magic the Gathering release. They weren't interested or able to provide sufficient up-front money to print roleplaying books. Every subsequent release was a gamble -- we dump all available cash into the print run costs and hope we could earn enough on sales to keep the company going.

Of course, one Conspiracy X product that never saw publication was the long-discussed Extinction. Any insights into what we might have seen in that?

It's been ages since I spent time with Extinction, but the main storyline was the return of the Saurians. Yep, "return". Boy is that story a mind-bender. As usual with these things, the "aliens" dwarfed humankind in tech, but they had their own limitations and, most importantly, internal divisions. Basically, we would have layered on the world an entire new level of intrigue and power struggle. We also brought to the light of day most of the conspiracies that were behind Con X. That allowed for more of a war-oriented, battle game, for those who wanted that kind of game. New intrigue and conspiracies would also be added, for those who wanted to maintain the former sort of game. The Extinction world's reaction to the new reality supercharged the supernatural and turned those phenomena to "11". Just writing up this summary gets me excited about the game all over again. As far as I know, George still has publication of that work in the back of his mind, and on the "some-day" agenda. It would take some serious work to get it in publishable shape, but it certainly could be done. I would love to be part of that, time and energy permitting. In fact, similar words could be said about Beyond Human. That's another project that I would love to find the time and energy to dive back into.

I know the catalogue of Conspiracy X support is already quite substantial, but do you recall if any other releases were ever planned or prepared for the line? I seem to recall that you might have lost at least one book or supplement to a hard drive crash at one point.

We had some technical difficulties with lost material. Storage tech was evolving quickly -- we moved from floppy discs to hard discs to CDs to DVDs. There were some other technologies tossed in between as well -- I can't even remember their names (I believe one of them started with Q). We weren't big enough to have robust IT practices. That task mostly fell on George as the art assets were the greatest space hogs and needed to be transferred somehow to the printer. This was also before the time of huge Internet upload and download capabilities.

On the other hand, we had a core group of dedicated fans and we were receiving work proposals all the time. Eden's game lines, set in the modern day, were designed to co-opt any flavor of conspiracy, hidden agenda, horror, or supernatural storyline. As the AFMBE supplements showed, we could go anywhere with the games. A lack of material wasn't the problem; cash flow (as always) was. George, CJ and I could only do so much and we couldn't afford to pay enough folks to come in and carry more of the workload.

That I can understand, balancing what can be marketed and sold against what you want to do with all the ideas bubbling around in your head. Now I know I could ask a zillion more questions on the Conspiracy X line, but wasn't Eden's only -- or even their most successful line was it...

Oh, but before we move on, I should pause and ask -- is there anything else you'd have liked to have seen published for Conspiracy X back in its heyday?

Extinction is the main unfinished business in my view. Otherwise, the plotlines, supplements, and adventures are limitless. I would like to see material specific to other countries, with commensurate international conspiratorial groups and conflicts. A parallel set of adventures/supplements which sketched out the intrigues in present day (which of course would have to be updated for the 2020s) and the repercussions of those conflicts/tensions as of the time of Extinction would be great fun to explore, and tell stories in.

THE ARRIVAL OF UNISYSTEM AND NEW GAME LINES

As mentioned, in the last years of the 90s the release of new material for Conspiracy X obviously slowed, but this was replaced by the arrival of new games like All Flesh Must Be Eaten (AFMBE) and Witchcraft. Were these always planned to be part of Eden's family of games?

I don't think AFMBE was on the radar when we shut down NME and started Eden. We were mostly focused on Con X and making it a success at the time.

As mentioned, the downward trajectory of supplement sales is a given in the roleplaying game industry. Other companies can short circuit this effect somewhat by releasing a new edition of the game, and then recycling all the old, already published content in that "new" line of games. Eden's master plan involved diversifying into other roleplaying games and supporting several lines at the same time. George and CJ Carella got to talking and ultimately, we decided to merge Myrmidon (CJ's company) properties (WitchCraft and Armageddon) into Eden. We also had a much greater appreciation for the shortcomings of the original Con X game system. We felt that the Unisystem was a much better rules engine for all our properties and would allow us to make our games compatible. That meant a supplement for any of our game lines could be sold to fans of any of our other game lines.

And in 2002 the first of Eden's licensed games – Buffy - was released. That must have been a thrill to help publish. What was it like working on a game that forms a part of a much bigger commercial 'universe'?

By the time we began a big push for Buffy, we had four lines running -- Con X, AFMBE, WitchCraft, and Armageddon. AFMBE was the main product line keeping the company in any degree of solvency, and that wasn't saying much. Buffy was our ticket to the big time. Once we landed it, every resource we could scrape together went toward getting that product done. Again, no Kickstarter around to fund the print run and talent costs. We had to up-front the printing costs, which were substantial -- full color, glossy pages, thick book. We were able to turn to Esdevium to help out with a significant chunk of the printing, and we didn't need much in the way of an art budget (given the stills from the shows). We could engage the writers on spec or deferred payment, and CJ was a key part of the company in those days, so we had a writer-editor-graphic artist core (CJ, Alex, George) all set. Getting the text done and through Fox approvals was a struggle. They were used to approving underwear, knick-knacks, toys, and other merch that could be looked over for a few minutes and judged. Thousands of words of RPG text was a completely different beast. Needed lots of handholding, time, and effort. We spent weeks rounding up as many high-quality images as we could from Fox -- again, not something they needed to deal with as they worked through other merch. Then we needed to find the images that fit the text and get the layout just right. As usual, we devoted our time to the products that had the best chance of returning significant revenues. Given the royalty structure we proposed in order to secure the license to Buffy, we were literally betting the entire company on Buffy's success. There was just no way that Con X could compete with that.

And with all these lines developing in the early 2000s how did you keep the pipeline of new product flowing?

For the most part, we used freelancers who we solicited to work on specific products. Where we could, we reached out to folks we had worked with before, or to folks we knew and really wanted to work with. As always, it was a high risk dance -- a well-known, experienced contributor could help sell product, and was much easier to work with, but every release had to generate enough money to fund the next publication. Extra cash to pay the freelancers or ourselves was never a guarantee. Juggling debt was a relentless struggle. More than one professional freelancer got shorted by Eden. That was easily the worst part of running our own business.

LOOKING BACK AND ONTO NOW . . .

Wow, I'm sure as you think back you must realise just how much Eden achieved in a few short years. Thinking about Conspiracy X in particular, does anything else stand out to you about the line?

Con X was our first successful-beyond-expectations product. Battlelords was a bitter disappointment and a near-death experience (financially speaking) for George and me. Con X showed us that we weren't completely mistaken in thinking that we could judge the market and produce quality product. It was also proof (at least we thought so at the time) that we could succeed in the game business. It introduced us to surprisingly and humbly supportive fans, and to quality industrial professionals who really wanted to work with us. That's heady stuff.

I also continue to marvel at the power and seductiveness of conspiracy theories. It's gotten scarier these days because we have supposedly rational people buying into the stuff, and acting as if they are real. It always baffles me that folks who hate and belittle the government, particularly the feds, also think that same government is capable of pulling off vast, insidious conspiracies and manipulations. I suppose it's because I've worked in several levels of government. I have a feel for those folks, and they sure ain't conspiratorial masterminds. For Con X, the current day setting and vast store of tappable "real-world" conspiracies made writing so easy. The formulation of the supernatural concepts of the game also made any kind of storyline possible -- just had to posit that enough folks believed it and it could be real.

And while the clock stands still for no one and, as you've mentioned, there was plenty of highlights (and lowlights), does anything else particular stand out from your time working at Eden?

So long ago, so much water under the bridge since then. Hard to say.

I do remember when we were working on the Aegis sourcebook, and had published blurbs on various Federal agencies using the department and agency seal as section headers. Then we discovered that it was illegal to use Federal agency logos and seals without express permission of the agency. That caused some consternation.

I also remember a number of mind-bogglingly good, nearly complete and publishable supplements produced by ardent fans. To this day, I regret that we didn't have the resources to publish more, or even some of that work. Those writers sincerely deserved to have their work available in print (now electronic form).

I'm sure the fans and writers would be pleased to hear that. The world of game publishing has changed a lot in the past 15-odd years, but I don't think it's got any easier. Speaking of changing, what has Mister Alex Jurkat been up to since wrapping up at Eden?

That's a big subject. Buckle in for story time.

I started my career as an attorney. Spent ten years working in possibly the greatest legal job possible. I was a Court Attorney for the NY State Court of Appeals -- the highest court in the state. I was part of the legal staff that created reports providing the judges background on the facts and law so they could make better decisions on (1) their jurisdiction and (2) the state law. I wasn't pigeon-holed into one type of law. I could jump from area to area as the case load demanded. Over time, however, I began to feel the need to create. Like all lawyers, I was simply helping to arbitrate disputes and distribute societal resources. I wanted to make something, provide jobs, indulge in creative efforts, and entertain.

That led to NME and then Eden. Indeed, for several years, I was doing both the law and game publication. That was crazy, and my legal career certainly suffered for it, but I was much younger and ambitious. Once I jumped off the cliff -- leaving the law and devoting full time to Eden, I thought I was living the dream. Once we extracted ourselves from Battlelords, each successive product line was more successful, culminating in the glory days of Buffy. With Buffy, we had enough revenue to pay ourselves something that wasn't laughably meager. We pushed back a bunch of debt, compensated some long overdue freelancers, and started plotting our future successes. Then came Angel and Army of Darkness -- to me the pinnacles of Eden's creative efforts. Of course, in a shorter period of time than we thought possible, sales of the Buffy supplements and those gems tailed off (as was the pattern with all RPGs). Gambles were getting more and more costly and success became oh-so temporary, if it came at all. I was also a decade plus into my game industry "experiment" and my wife was tired of carrying the family fisc -- always hearing about the next "great" thing that was going to change everything. Absent delusional stubbornness, I just couldn't justify devoting my life to Eden. At the same time, I couldn't imagine better work and was desperate to avoid going back to the law.

My time and work product at Eden allowed me to work my way into the good graces of WotC. I began taking freelance work as a D&D editor/developer. Steady pay for work I adored. Compared to my law work, or my

current work (see below), it was still pretty meager, but compared to the net-negative of Eden, I was living large. Again, I got to work with great creators on great product (3e and later editions). Once again, success was more short-lived than I hoped. The freelance work dried up as 4e came on line. I weathered it, earned little to nothing for some time, then was able to get work assignments again once 4e cranked up. A year or so of good times, then work dried up again as 5e came on line. At that point, I found myself in the same position as the end of my Eden days -- no revenue, few prospects, no sustainability. It was time to "cut my hair and get a real job". My career myopia had so overstayed my wife's indulgence and support that my marriage was actually at risk.

So I took some career tests and coaching, discovered that I had an unusual mix of creativity and structure in my personality. Great traits for professors and librarians -- and as my wife unhelpfully pointed out -- game designers. I wasn't about to spend 7-10 years getting a PhD so I could teach, so I went to library school. I had no interest in dead trees and stone buildings, but information systems, information management, and information technology had always interested me. I reinvigorated my love of learning, got a Masters in Information Science, and started up my third career.

What I learned was that all my prior efforts -- law, editing, writing, games -- were just different aspects of information management. The content varied but the processes did not. I became fascinated with process -- really games are just voluntary processes focused on fun. So what's "fun"? Some study introduced me to the idea that "fun" for gamers (certainly for me) was the same as learning. As long as I'm learning something, I'm happy. I'm always attracted to the new hotness, and will pick it over mastering a familiar game. My "learning equals fun" realization led me to teaching, gamification, data analysis, and process improvement. I started thinking about process and data work in terms of autonomy/meaningful decision-making, empowering workers, inspiring continuous improvement, and having fun. No one thinks along these lines when defining work processes because they are "work" -- they are not supposed to be fun or educational. I discovered that if you could convince someone to let you work with their data and review their processes, you could add in simple gaming features (autonomy/meaningful decision making, flow--match skill level to challenge level, socialization, replayability) and instill a culture of continuous improvement and expanding productivity. I worked my ideas into a college-level course, taught it for several years, and built a reputation as a problem-solver in the process and data areas. My paying job happened to be at a manufacturing plant (which made plastics) but it could have been anywhere. Lo and beyond, it also turned out to be lucrative. I'll never make stupid money, but, in time, it reached, then exceeded my law earnings. Best of all, I was really enjoying my work. I now knew that I could find rewarding and fun work outside the game industry, and that employers not only accepted and respected that work, but would pay well for it.

As I look back, I sometimes wish I had cut my gaming industry career short by five or more years. I could have started my current, oh-so-much-more-rewarding information management career earlier. Then again, who knows which lessons from my time in the game industry were the most important or when they seeped into my core enough to color my developing expertise in other areas. For now, I look for projects that allow learning (makes me very daring about the assignments I'm willing to take on), creativity (which I can find in the oddest places), autonomy, and quality co-workers. That kind of focus always seems to bring satisfactory compensation in time. Sure, there's nothing like hitting a home run in an entertainment career, but mostly, it's trial, error, and self-doubt. Decisions that consumers make about spending on leisure time are just too variable and transient. As George knew long ago, you need to be part of the platform, not the content. It's worked for big tech, and certainly for George's game store. My deep dive is in process -- all work, play, and any other activity has a process. Processes can always be improved, and those who are successful at business (big business) understand that.

Wow that's a different view of gaming and its industry, but I think one other ex-developers and writers would find familiar, I'm sure. From a business perspective, and from my own professional experience, I absolutely agree with your insights on success.

But I'm sure part of you misses the business, right?

I miss the wonderful people I got to work with and make product for. Some were definitely jerks (can't avoid that in life), but the vast majority were creative, kind, interesting, odd-ball fun people. Most of my time is currently spent in the company of a long-standing group of beloved gamers. Even the work folks I spend most

of my time with have gamer sensibilities. Again, thinking about Extinction and Beyond Human tells me my love of that work has not abated completely. As I look at the last decades of my life, I would love to jump back into a great game project and build something cool and fun. Just as soon as the next interesting, paying process job and deliverables are done . . .

Well, I can't thank you enough for taking the time to chat with me Alex. I'm sure the fans on the Conspiracy X Facebook group (and elsewhere) will enjoy reading everything about the creation of over favourite game, its development under Eden and the all the good times that were had.

Best of luck for the future and know that if the urge to leap into a final draft of Extinction or Beyond Human ever becomes too hard to resist, I'm sure there's plenty of us out here on the web more than happy to lend a hand!