

Interview with Daniel M. Lawrence
CRPG Pioneer and Author of Telengard
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By Matt Barton

I recently had the great pleasure of interviewing Daniel Lawrence, a pioneer in the CRPG industry who started off writing CRPGs for mainframes. Perhaps his most famous CRPG is Telengard, which was one of the earliest (if not the earliest) game of its type for early platforms such as the Commodore PET, Atari 800, and TRS-80. It features "procedurally generated dungeons" so that no two games are exactly alike, and is set in real-time. Indeed, in many ways it's an early Diablo! In the interview below, I talk to Daniel about these early games and more general questions about what a good CRPG should be. The interview really helped me straighten out some important details about this historic game's development. Enjoy!

Q: First off, I'm a bit confused about your work on earlier CRPGs. On your website, you state that you released a game called DND back in 1977, programming it in BASIC under the TOPS-10 operating system. Could you talk a bit more about your development of this game, such as what influenced you and what other CRPGs (or tabletop RPGs or wargames) influenced you? My research is rather sketchy on CRPGs available for mainframes during this era, so any information you can provide will be very helpful.

A: Well certainly I had played Dungeons and Dragons™ the paper game put out just previously by TSR. DND as a game evolved from a simple beginning showing where your character was and grew, adding creatures, specials, better displays in response to the suggestions of the players at the ENAD (engineering administration building) at Purdue where I was a freshmen. That summer I took it home and ported it to the Decsystem-10, which is the version that ended up getting handed around so much.

Q: There is also another program called dnd that was apparently written by Whisenhunt and Wood back in 1975 for PLATO. Is there a relationship between these games other than the names? I'm guessing that their "dnd" and your "DND" are two entirely different games. How does your game compare to theirs?

A: Not to my knowledge at the time. I did not know/see the other game, but note I was in the same area of the country as they were. Some of my play testers may have well been giving me suggestions from their experiences elsewhere.

Q: It's been pointed out to me that Telengard features "procedurally generated" dungeons rather than "randomized" dungeons. I'm not sure I understand the difference. Can you please explain?

A: When I reproduced DND on the commodore Pet (8k RAM) I certainly had no room for the dungeon maps stored in the data files back on the main frame. Take your character's X/Y/Z position, do some math involving prime numbers, pick out a few internal bits of the result and there you have a description of the current location!

Q: You say on your website that your Telengard game predates both Wizardry and the Temple of Apshai series. Are you certain of this? Also, what about Garriott's Ultima and earlier Akalabeth games? The reason I'm asking is that mobygames and other sites list Akalabeth and the first Apshai game coming out in 1980, whereas to my understanding your game was released in 1982. Any clarification you can offer here would be immensely helpful. I'm also wondering if you played these other games,

and what you thought of them.

A: DND was written in 1976. Telengard was written and played locally by myself and the local crowd in 1978 when the first Commodore PETs came out. I had ported it to the Atari 800, the Apple][+ and the TRS-80 before it was noticed by Avalon Hill and licensed for marketing.

Q: One of the many interesting aspects of Telengard is it's "real time" gameplay. What influenced your decision to make the game set in real-time, and why do you think it took so long for CRPGs to return to real-time?

A: In the terminal room where it was play tested, we had a limited amount of time on the machines at a session. Also the people player were quite competitive with each other. The real-time aspect was to get them moving and not hog the terminals.

It just got carried over to the microcomputer later.

Q: Telengard is often described as a "pure dungeon crawler," without a story or quest to drive the action. Do you think that stories and characters just get in the way of a good CRPG? What do you think of story-heavy CRPGs?

A: In 8k of memory there was no room for a story. Today there should be a story in CRPGs, but unlike most of them out there now, it should not be a static story preprogrammed into the game, but a dynamic one created on the fly by the motives and personalities of the actors (NPCs) within the game setting.

Q: Can you describe the challenges you faced in making a CRPG for the early home computers? It must surely have been a challenge to go from mainframe programming to the Commodore PET.

A: Memory, Memory, Memory. I had to get the maximum play out of the smallest amount of code. It is one very dense hunk of BASIC programming.

Q: What was it like working for Avalon Hill back in the early 1980s? They were obviously a big publisher of wargames, but how did you fit in as a computer programmer of CRPGs?

A: I did not work for them. They saw my game at a gaming convention where I was running competitions and demonstrations and they approached me and solicited the game for resale.

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