

# Interview: In the sandbox with Kevin Crawford (*Silent Legions*)

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## Interview

**Teilzeithelden:** Kevin, thanks for finding the time today. You are by now a well-known indie publisher of roleplaying games. You recently released a new game [funded by Kickstarter](#), *Silent Legions*. Would you like to tell us something about it?

**Kevin:** *Silent Legions* is a modern-day Lovecraftian horror game built on an old-school sandbox framework. Unlike traditional Lovecraftian games, it doesn't involve the Cthulhu mythos – instead, it's built to help the GM create their *own* mythos, something fresh and unknown to the players. The great majority of the book consists of a system-neutral set of tools for building ineffable gods, malevolent aliens, far dream-realms, magical artifacts, sinister cults, and the investigative adventures that involve them. I launched a Kickstarter for it in November of last year, concluded it successfully in December, and got the PDF and print books ready for backers a month ahead of schedule, finishing up at the end of last month.

**Teilzeithelden:** You are indeed renowned for your work on sandbox games. What inspired you to mix up something like the Lovecraftian Mythos and a sandbox? Most material for Cthulhu games seem to be republished adventures or whole campaign paths.

**Kevin:** Part of it is simply the fact that sandboxes are what I do. Whatever it is, I take it and I add sand. I *like* sandboxes. I like the sense of freedom that comes from a well-run sandbox and I like the sense that the outcomes in this world will depend entirely on my choices rather than an overarching story line. Now, there are disadvantages to the form, of course – a story arc allows for deeper foreshadowing, development of particular themes, more events that touch on specific PC background elements, and other narrative benefits, but I personally prefer the virtues of the sandbox. So if I enjoy Lovecraftian horror – which I do – the natural thing is to take it and see how it could be transformed from its traditional story-arc model into a sandbox one.

Another part of it, however, is the way in which the sandbox gaming model echoes the fundamental cosmicism of the Lovecraftian theme. In Lovecraft, the protagonists are provisional heroes at best. They're not fated for victory, they're not destined to play a great role in events, they're just poor devils in the wrong place at the wrong time, or those cursed by misfortunes of blood or inheritance. When they manage to defeat the schemes of the cults of the elder gods, it's because they just happened to be in the right place and did what they had to do. In a sandbox game, there are all these nefarious cult plans going on, but the PCs aren't destined to defeat any of them. Who they meet, what they do, and how they fail or succeed is entirely on their shoulders.

## An evolving sandbox

**Teilzeithelden:** So, this isn't a static sandbox, but an evolving one. I saw you included rules for making the world dynamic. Would you tell us more about that?

**Kevin:** In my sci-fi game, the [free \*Stars Without Number\*](#), I included rules for "factions." These were simple mechanics for background organizations or groups that were active in the campaign, dueling amongst each other for whatever goals they happened to have. These rules were quite

popular, so I lifted and adapted them to *Silent Legions* as "cults." They're built so the GM can create a few of them at the start of the campaign and dice out their interactions behind the scenes, creating new points of occult conflict and sorcerous upheaval for the PCs to discover or engage. Eventually, the PCs might gather enough allies and support to form their own "cult," a more benevolent secret organization for battling the evildoers on their own terms.

**Teilzeithelden:** How do you see the balance between the GM creating content and the players shaping the game? How does that interaction work in *Silent Legions*?

**Kevin:** One of the greatest threats to the success of a sandbox game is an overworked GM. The problem is that the naive conception of sandbox preparation tends heavily towards overprep. People think of sandboxes and they think, "Oh, I have to detail everything interesting about this place. I have to create a whole city, or even a whole region, and I have to plant all this interesting stuff in it before I can let the players at it." And then the GM falls over from exhaustion before the place is ever created, or worse, they go through all of it and then the players immediately fixate on something the GM never even thought about during prep. Sandboxes require *technique* for their creation. They're not something you can just barrel into unless you've got creative thews of steel or a hyper-supportive player group.

With that in mind, *Silent Legions* builds the technique into the process. It guides the GM to creating the important parts of the world and then helps them assemble what they need for the next session of play. It's not about creating an entire world at once, it's about roughing out the general outline and then detailing only what you're going to need for the next session of play. It describes how to put together adventures so that they take the form of "templates" – rough outlines that the GM can quickly drop onto a particular location, letting the Friends, Enemies, Secrets, and other specific details they set at creation time fit neatly into the narrative slots in the plot. These templates theoretically fit any of the locations of interest the GM made, so they're always equipped with *something* to throw in front of the players even if they veer way off the map.

**Teilzeithelden:** Kevin, there are a lot of tables for creating monsters, plot seeds, cults, alien places in the book. I got to try some of them for a demo game, and I have to say the monster and cult creators worked like a charm. Where do you find inspiration for all this material and how do you make it gel so well together?

**Kevin:** Honestly, the raw material is the easiest part of any of my books. All of it's right there for anyone to pick up, all these tropes and elements and themes just sitting there to be lifted. If something is coherent and stylized enough to be recognized as a genre, it's coherent enough to have a vast haul of tropes to lift and refine. You just reach in and start grabbing. The hard part of my books, the part that leaves me cursing and tearing my hair and bitterly resenting my word processor is the *fitting* of this material.

It's not enough to just give a random list of some tropes. That doesn't work. Recapitulating a list of genre elements doesn't inspire anybody and it especially doesn't help the GM at the table figure out what they're going to dish up to the players next week. The tropes have to be fit into a framework and smoothed out so they interlace properly, so all the pieces fit together into something coherent and *interesting*. If the end result doesn't present an obvious adventure hook, then the process is bad and needs to be reworked. Nothing should just exist for its own sake. Everything has to boil down into something the GM can actually use at the table.

## The engine under the hood

**Teilzeithelden:** Speaking of which – the same seems to be true for your own roleplaying engine. In my opinion it is complex enough to keep players interested, but simple enough for everyone at the table to keep track of the rules. You evolved this engine in your own published games, right? What specific elements would you personally want to highlight about it?

**Kevin:** I'm pleased with the *Stars Without Number* engine. It worked well for [Other Dust](#), [Spears of the Dawn](#), and now *Silent Legions*. It's a good and serviceable engine. It's derived from [B/X D&D](#) with a slice of [Traveller](#) and my own innovations are very limited – just decorations around the edges or genre-specific adornments. Its chiefest virtue, to me, is just that it's largely transparent to players and GMs. Even people who don't even like *D&D* understand hit points, armor class, and ability scores from 3-18. It's a case-hardened system with decades of stress testing and by this time people know pretty well how to use it and whether or not they want to.

This transparency is important because these are all sandbox games, and that means the GM needs to be able to drag in as much outside material as possible. They need to be able to plunder 40 years worth of material, looting it for their own sandboxes and conjuring up vast swaths of content with a dip into Google. I can't imagine any improvement or innovation I could add to the system that would outweigh the value of being able to just rip decades worth of content for your own table's re-use and reskinning.

**Teilzeithelden:** You still found space to innovate with mechanics like Slaughter or Fray Dice.

**Kevin:** True, but that's a matter of small, specific changes to adapt to a particular genre's needs. In the case of Slaughter dice, it reflects the Lovecraftian genre's lethal combat and the constant danger that PCs face regardless of their hit point totals. In the case of Fray dice, it reflects how pulp heroes and *Conan*-esque warriors casually dispatch minor foes even while doing other activities. They're useful innovations that help fit the games to their genres, but the fundamental rule remains- you have to be able to play [Keep on the Borderlands](#) with these games without significant editing. If the game lets you do that, the game lets you loot the past for your sandbox fittings.

## What Kevin plays and how he rolls

**Teilzeithelden:** Kevin, you mention the TSR classic *Keep on the Borderlands* – and you also mentioned *Basic/Expert D&D*. Is this where you "come from" as a gamer?

**Kevin:** Indeed so, albeit my first module was [B1 – In Search of the Unknown](#). I cut my teeth on *Moldvay Basic* back in 1983 and have been gaming ever since. It hasn't always been *D&D* that's absorbed most of my attention, but I've always been neck-deep in the hobby.

**Teilzeithelden:** Did you mention the *Keep* because it is a personal favorite? What drew you towards devising sandboxes?

**Kevin:** The *Keep on the Borderlands* is pretty emblematic of early *D&D*. It's not perfect by any means, but it's sort of a summa of the sandbox, a little bijou of the type. If a game can deal with the *Keep*, then a game can use just about any old-school material for grist. Sandboxes in particular became a point of interest for me starting in 1993, when I got involved with online gaming. A lot of these games involved creating elaborate settings or worlds and then waiting for random players to create random characters within the theme. You could try to run long-term story arcs with them, but you couldn't necessarily control what players would be available or what kind of characters would be to hand. You more or less *had* to adopt sandbox principles just to be able to cope with the environment.

**Teilzeithelden:** How much do you play yourself – both as GM or player – and how much of this is focused on your own products?

**Kevin:** I play strictly online these days, as I grudge the time necessary to arrange and sort out face-to-face play. My day job is about 40 hours a week and my writing consumes almost everything else barring meals, sleep, and necessary errands, so I don't like wasting time. But in terms of online gaming, I usually get in at least four or five hours weekly. Some of it is for my own material when I need to playtest something, but mostly it's for other games. [Mage: the Awakening](#) lately, though I've spent long periods with [Exalted](#) and other *White Wolf* games.

## The work of an indie publisher

**Teilzeithelden:** When I look under *Sine Nomine Publishing* on *RPGNow*, I see an African-themed game (*Spears of the Dawn*), Asian-themed products ([Red Tide](#) and [Scarlet Heroes](#)), a science fiction game (*Stars Without Number*) and now finally a Lovecraftian horror game (*Silent Legions*). No fantasy heartbreaker? How come?

**Kevin:** I'm reluctant to write a game unless it does something that isn't already commonly available, and the fantasy space is heavily, heavily invested as it is. It's one reason why *Silent Legions* is a roll-your-own-mythos product. Why bother to write another Cthulhu game when there are so many great ones already there? Why bother to write another *D&D* when *D&D* works just fine as it is, or [Labyrinth Lord](#), or [OSRIC](#), or [ACKS \[Adventurer Conqueror King System\]](#), or [Swords & Wizardry](#), or half a hundred other recensions. If I'm going to make a fantasy game, it's got to do something unusual.

I have a rough outline for one that I work on from time to time. It's a sandbox game, of course, but one that focuses more heavily on heroic, *Exalted*-esque PCs and a game framework explicitly built to support them doing Big Things in the world. Getting that framework right is enormously important and excruciatingly hard, so I wouldn't expect to see it too soon-though perhaps next year I'll put more into it.

**Teilzeithelden:** Speaking of which – *Sine Nomine*, that's a one-man enterprise, right? Do you live off of making RPGs?

**Kevin:** It's just me by my lonesome, plus the artists whose work I commission. While I do have a day job, I actually made more from *Sine Nomine* than I did from my ordinary paycheck last year, and I could live quite comfortably off *Sine Nomine* income alone if I had to. For now I keep both jobs because I am extremely fond of money, but I enjoy encouraging other small publishers and would-be writers to turn their hand toward profitable and effective products.

**Teilzeithelden:** Your last Kickstarter attracted over 1,000 backers. Besides the quality of your products alone, how did you ensure that people found out about them?

**Kevin:** Four years of free products, essentially. My market-fu is weak, but I have persistence. *Stars Without Number* has had tens of thousands of players grab the free book and give it a read. Some of those stick, and some of those tell their friends, and over the slow progress of years the game becomes more and more known, and more and more people start watching for other *Sine Nomine* materials. Persistence, low entry costs, and a steady – some might say “incessant” – stream of new material to keep people's interest all add up to 1000+ KS backers on my projects.

**Teilzeithelden:** During your last campaign you made several posts detailing how you are handling publishing details like making sure enough commissioned art comes in on time. Your KS was indeed unusual in its prompt delivery – unusual for the platform itself, that is. What was your intention behind sharing this information?

**Kevin:** Helping other small publishers. There's an enormous pool of creative talent out there, people who are publishing really fascinating stuff... but management skills are not a strong overlap with creative writing skills. Especially dull, tedious middle-management stuff like project audits or supply sourcing or shipping logistics. Running a small, simple RPG Kickstarter is honestly not complicated, but you have to know what the dangers are and the steps you need to take to deal with them. Sharing this information with other publishers will help them dodge the perils and make KS a stronger, more reliable platform for RPGs as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

**Teilzeithelden:** Thank you for your time, Kevin, it has been a pleasure. Is there anything you would like to mention yourself – upcoming projects, for example?

**Kevin:** Keep an eye out in June for *Starvation Cheap*, a mercenary and ground war supplement for *Stars Without Number*. I'll be running a mini-Kickstart for it to support my education in using full-color interiors, and backers will get a tasty sheaf of system-neutral tools for building wars and creating engaging battlefield situations and adventures.