

THE HERALD OF DOOM ... AN INTERVIEW WITH MALCOLM WOLTER

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Despite being first published in 1981, it is fair to say that Stormbringer's heyday was in the mid 1990s, when a group of enthusiastic authors took the game to new heights. One such 'upstart' was Malcolm Wolter, who with his layout and design talents was to contribute to numerous ELRIC! supplements during this period. Perhaps more importantly, Malcolm would also go on to publish the short-lived, but much praised, *Herald of Doom* (HOD), the first and only fanzine dedicated to Stormbringer.

Welcome Malcolm, thanks for taking the time to talk to us here at Stormbringer!. Before we start grilling you about The Herald of Doom and your time working for Chaosium, would you care to tell us a little bit about yourself?

I'm a born-again geek and the poster child for the positive influence gaming can have on one's life (I actually have that poster around here somewhere). I'm also closer to 50 than I am to 40, an anglophile (and proud of it!), and happily married to the finest woman on the planet. I live in the suburbs of the 4th largest city in America where I'm a partner in the city's largest brand-experience firm. We help medium- to large-sized companies develop and manage their brands, and I lead the digital practice. I have two daughters, ages 5 and 2, both of whom are unbelievably cute, and exhausting. In a past life (about 15 years ago), I was a professional musician. In other lives before this one, I may have been a knight, or possibly a pâtissier.

Well that gives us something in common, well as much as in the fact that I'm an avid consumer of pastries! But before I let myself get distracted, I have to ask the age out RPG interview question, so how did you get into gaming?

Oh, man...that's a long story. In a nutshell—ever since I was a very little kid I'd had a fascination with knights, and many other historical and mythological heroic archetypes. In grade school I read every book in the library on Greek and Norse mythology, American "tall tales" of the western frontier, and biographies of just about anyone with epaulets and gold braid on their shoulder. In hindsight, I don't know if I owed my early love of these traditional hero-stories to the Jungian "collective unconscious" or some other unseen influence, but it's been a constant in my life for as long as I can remember and remains with me now, thankfully undiminished.

I was a sophomore in high school when I first became aware of a game called "Dungeons & Dragons." It was about 1980 and the guys that were playing were what would much later be called, "gaming geeks." In fact, they were the sort of über-geeks that have fed so many unfortunate stereotypes these last few decades—highly intelligent, but socially challenged guys with a very particular sense of humor which was primarily fueled by their ability to recite, flawlessly and from memory, the entire Monty Python corpus. Well, from a distance it was a little too geeky for my

comfort, and I didn't really want to get involved with that subculture. In many ways, I've never been able to assimilate with that culture, although I was for a time able to quote THE HOLY GRAIL with the best of 'em. But, it's never quite been a fit for me. This is not in anyway to disparage geek culture—there are millions of great people that embrace it and I sort of envy their unvarnished enthusiasm. It's just not something that's felt quite comfortable for me. I've brushed up against many other subcultures with similar results. In the end, I'm just not a "joiner," really, and can't fully embrace any of them.

Anyhoo, a year or so later, a couple of guys (who were part of another subculture—musicians!—that I wanted to hang out with) invited me over to play some board games. We played Risk, for a few months. Then, out of the blue, one of them asked if we'd be interested in trying Dungeons & Dragons. I demurred, but went along, just 'cause I wanted to hang out with these guys.

My first character, as I recall, was a Dwarven fighter—I don't remember his name, or his fate. The adventure was just your typical "Keep on the Borderlands" dungeon crawl. In fact, I'm pretty sure it was "Keep on the Borderlands." That very night my life completely changed. It was one of those rare, but wonderful, defining experiences that people have; it was completely transformational. I immediately understood that, through this remarkable game of interactive storytelling, I didn't have to be a passive consumer of heroic tales. I could co-create them with the help of willing friends and an active imagination.

And that led you to Stormbringer? Or where you more of a Moorcock fan?

Huge, huge Moorcock fan. I didn't really discover the heroic fantasy genre until about the 7th grade. A friend had introduced me to JOHN CARTER OF MARS, all 10 or 11 books of which I devoured (another life-changing moment, I must say), then Fritz Leiber's Nehwon stories. I joined the SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB about the summer before entering high school and one of the first books I got was Lin Carter's FLASHING SWORDS VOL. 4. In it was a story of this doomed albino prince — a chapter from SAILOR ON THE SEAS OF FATE, the one with Saxif D'aan being pursued by that spectral horse — and I was blown away (again with the life-changing). From then on I read everything about the Eternal Champion I could find, what is it — 80 books or something crazy like that? Moorcock brilliantly captured all the key elements of teenage angst — feelings of alienation, powerlessness, rebellion, the desire to leave home — you name it, it's in there. It's still astonishing to me that MM could concoct such powerful stories when he himself was little more than a teenager and I prefer those early stories to all of the Elric stories that he's written later in life, which seem a bit plodding and over-wrought by comparison (IMHO, of course). His original concept of turning the traditional "swords and sorcery" hero story on its head was absolutely brilliant. I was particularly enthralled by the meeting of the four different aspects of the Eternal Champion on the Ship That Sails Between the Worlds and later delighted in reading that same encounter from each of the heroes' perspectives, in their own chronicles. A masterful stroke of genius, that.

I stumbled across the very first Stormbringer [RPG – ed.] edition in AUSTIN BOOKS — which was, and continues to be, one of the best comic/game stores in the multiverse. I remember my knees going all wobbly when holding the box — with that great Frank Brunner cover — just

thinking of the possibility of adventuring in the Young Kingdoms. I bought it on the spot. I still have it, carefully preserved in a storage box along with hundreds other artifacts of that great Golden Age of gaming. I stumbled across Ken St. Andre's email address last year and sent him a thank you note for creating that game. He graciously sent a nice reply. I met MM at AggieCon in the mid-80's and he too was very gracious as I more or less tripped over my own tongue when I got to speak with him briefly. And, man, does he have a hot wife! She's from Texas, y'know. They actually lived here for a time, near Austin, but I'm not sure if he still lives here, or has returned to England. I imagine the heat alone would be enough to send him packing, never mind the culture shock.

For all that excitement, I don't think I ever got to play a single game from that first edition. But it was an eye-opening experience and it must have been the first system I'd ever seen besides D&D. Fun times.

It's always fascinating to hear how people were drawn into the world of Moorcock and the Stormbringer RPG. Which, by the way, is your favourite edition of the game?

I liked the ELRIC! (Stormbringer 5th Ed, ?) best. It seems like it was the most mature (obviously, having been through 4 previous editions. I liked the new magic system and the whole thing just seemed more polished and more — depthful (yeah, I know that's not a word, but it seems to fit here). I stopped following the game in the late 90s, I guess, and aren't familiar with any of its progeny, although I've skimmed through Lawrence Whitaker's ELRIC OF MELNIBONÉ from Mongoose. It looks great! So many games, so little time!

Don't we all know it! So, were you more of a player or a GM?

Since the mid-80s I've only GM'd — the one exception being when Greg Stafford GM'd an impromptu session during a recent visit to Houston. That is as epic a story as any in my gaming "career." Two nights before the event I got a call from Nocturnal (current publisher of PENDRAGON) that Greg was going to be in town and would I be interested in sitting in on a game? HELLS, YEAH! So Greg blew in and we played at Stewart Wieck's dining table. (Mr. Wieck is the co-founder of White Wolf Game Studio, and co-author of VAMPIRE: The MASQUERADE and MAGE THE ASCENSION. He's founded NOCTURNAL MEDIA, publisher of KING ARTHUR PENDRAGON, in 2010. — *Ed.*) It was definitely a night to remember! Greg improvised a 4-hour session, with only a little pocket notepad and some dice. It was very, very cool.

Yeah, pretty much all of my gaming stories pale compared to that...

That definitely sounds like fun, and I'm sure all the readers are as jealous as I am to hear a gaming story like that. Obviously you've known Greg Stafford for a while, but just how did you get involved with Chaosium?

Let's see... I think I had some questions about the ELRIC! rules and I wrote a letter (y'know— those paper things that required envelopes and stamps) to Chaosium in the summer of 1994. Lynn Willis sent back a very nice letter, patiently answering all 10 or 11 questions. A few more letters followed and before I knew it I was pitching the idea of an ELRIC! 'zine. Soon after that, I

volunteered to help with freelance design and layout work for any Chaosium titles. I was a full-time professional musician in those days—living sort of hand-to-mouth—and thought it would be nice to make a little extra cash doing something I was passionate about.

And that's how the Herald of Doom came about? Did you have any specific goals for the magazine when you kicked it off or was it just a matter of seeing what became of it?

I wanted to produce a 'zine that was as close as possible to a commercial-quality game supplement. My secondary goal included attracted hundreds of subscribers around the world and changing the way people thought of "fanzines". I succeeded in the first goal, I think, but fell somewhat short with the second one!

I don't know about that, even today the Herald of Doom is held up as an example of just how good a fan 'zine can be. It is also a bit of a who's who of Stormbringer/Elric! contributors, which is always great to see. How was the response from the gaming community?

Well, there really weren't easily identifiable "communities" then—at least not as we know them today, where you can just Google up a forum for your favorite game and instantly be in touch with hundreds of fans. I had virtually no contact with other fans of the game at all. The line authors—Richard Watts, Mark Morrison, and Lawrence Whitaker (my apologies if I'm forgetting anyone)—were very supportive and of course I relied upon them for the majority of the written content. The biggest challenge I had was finding quality artwork. I mean, Michael Kirkbride (who later went on to much bigger and better things, including a stint at LucasArts) submitted some great illustrations, but he was really the only illustrator I could call on, and it didn't take long, I think, for me to wear out my welcome — which is understandable. So, I saw the writing on the wall. I didn't want to fall back to sort of public domain art (read, 19th century engravings) or cheesy contemporary clip art. Knowing I couldn't deliver the product I wanted without great artwork, I decided to shut down the 'zine after only a year.

I didn't really receive a lot of feedback from my subscribers, save Jason Durall, who sent me a very complimentary letter from Japan. He was teaching English there at the time, as I recall, and had not yet become the prolific RPG author that we recognize today from the credit lines of so many great RPGs. In the end. I think I had about 35 or 40 subscribers on five continents. A very small audience indeed. But, hey, it was fun while it lasted.

So the Herald of Doom only had a short run due to the availability of artwork?

Well, since I promised subscribers a year's worth of 'zine, I was pretty much obligated to produce four quarterly issues, and that's what I did—and without, I think, a compromise in quality. However, it sadly became clear that the pace was unsustainable.

Shame, I wonder if in this more 'connected' time if a fanzine like this would be more successful in attracting subscribers and submissions. I suppose we'll never know given the game's current torpor. On to more cheerful discuss, I must ask what was your process for creating each issue?

Well, first was gathering the content. I'd ask the various line authors for contributions—anything. Sometimes they would have remnants that had been cut from one publication or another; sometimes they would just polish up things from their own campaigns. I actually contributed a

few pieces, so I'd have to write them, of course. Then I'd coordinate with the artist, mostly Michael Kirkbride, to develop illustrations and art direct him as best I could. Or I'd scour previous ELRIC! and STORMBRINGER supplements for art that I could reuse. Then I'd scan all the art and compose it all on my Mac—I think it was one of those Motorola clones at the time—using Quark Xpress and edit down as needed for copyfitting, etc. Then I'd take it to a short-run printer where I had them printed — I think it may have been on a high-end copier called a Docutech— on some special paper that had that gray, parchment-like mottling to it that makes scanning them so difficult now! Then they were trimmed, collated and side-stitched (stapled) together. Then it was printing mailing labels, affixing them and a trip to the post office!

Fascinating stuff and the final produce is a real testament to the effort and energy you put into producing the 'zine.

Beyond the Herald of Doom, I know you were involved in a couple of the game's supplements? What was it like working on these?

I worked on several titles for the ELRIC! game from 1994-1995, starting with (I think) THE ATLAS OF THE YOUNG KINGDOMS VOL. 1: THE NORTHERN CONTINENT. I also worked on THE UNKNOWN EAST, and THE BRONZE GRIMOIRE. On all these titles I contributed art direction (although I did not have much control over the actual art submissions, in many cases), design, typesetting and page layout—as well as a little editorial work, here and there. I also did THE COMPACT ARKHAM UNVEILED, and sold Willis on the idea of updating the CALL OF CTHULHU logo, elements of which remain in use to this day—by far my most visible (albeit teeny tiny) contribution to the industry.

Working on these titles was both exhilarating ("Woohoo! I'm working in the gaming industry!") and unsatisfying. Chaosium simply did not have the vision, the budget—or both—to do right by this material when it came to branding, art and production—and I'm talking all of their product lines. Finding artwork was a challenge and even when you worked with freelancers, it was like herding cats (over a long-distance call). The writing was great, but the production values were sub-par, compared to what competitors were doing at the time. With a few exceptions, Chaosium publications have never looked that great on the shelf and I can't help but think this contributed (and continues to contribute) to Chaosium's position as a hugely influential, but ultimately niche, player in the industry. Certainly some would argue that's not a bad thing. For my part, I would have liked to see the company enjoy more financial success. It was a challenge getting paid in those days because cash flow was ever a challenge for them. Not that they were bad people, of course, and being a serial entrepreneur myself, I was always sympathetic. But, clearly, cash flow issues strain relationships with creatives and inevitably sour a few of them beyond repair. To be clear, that did not happen with me. I eventually got paid everything that was owed to me. I drifted away from the company simply because I felt I couldn't deliver the quality I aspired to, given the constraints of budget, resources, authority, culture, distance, etc. I wanted to produce books that were equal, visually, to the best of TSR's work of that same era. I just knew I couldn't get there.

All that said I see they're still publishing. Congrats to Charlie and the crew for successfully navigating the stormy Seas of Fate these past three decades! Branding issues aside, they've

forgotten more about the industry than I'll ever know.

And of all contributions to Chaosium's gaming line, which did you enjoyed the most, or felt came out the best?

Definitely my work with the HOD. Simply because I had complete editorial control and was able to offer my own vision of the game without being constrained by Chaosium's "house style" or other preconceptions.

One thing I do like to ask all the Stormbringer alumni we talk to is – Is there anything you'd have liked to have seen produced for the line either in its 'heyday' or the years since?

I was talking to Jason Durall once, and he always thought it would be cool to have an Eternal Champion RPG, where you could actually play an aspect of the Eternal Champion of your own making. I'd never thought about it before, but that would be pretty cool. Enormously hard to do, but very interesting. It strikes me that it would be well-suited for solo gaming, since the stories are all focused on one hero. Problem is every Champion comes from a unique world, so it would be quite an ambitious undertaking for game designer and Gamemaster alike. I don't know if Lawrence Whitaker's recent ELRIC OF MELNIBONÉ wanders into that territory, but it's a very interesting idea. Man, I really need to pick up Lawrence's books just to get caught up on the Young Kingdoms.

Well than you for taking the time to answer these questions, and it is always wonderful to catch-up and chat with the people who made all of our lives so much more interesting back in the day! Before I let you go, however, is anything I've missed, or comments you'd like to make?

Yes! I've been working with Chaosium's founder, Greg Stafford, on lots of very cool KING ARTHUR PENDRAGON material. I started by doing layout and production on the *Book of the Entourage*. Greg and Stewart were so happy they gave me a little more rope and I ended up giving the entire line a sort of design overhaul, and took on editorial duties as well. To date we produced the *Book of Battle, 2nd Edition* and the *Book of the Estate*. PENDRAGON is a great game that's been enormously influential in the gaming industry since 1981. I've been running THE GREAT PENDRAGON CAMPAIGN for a little over a year now and we're having lots of fun creating very memorable, character-driven stories. Greg has a very fat pipeline of books planned, so there's lots of good news for PENDRAGON fans. Stay tuned.

Well, as a fan of all things Chaosium, I'm glad to have seen Pendragon return to the hands of its original author and I'll keep my eye out for these in the future! On a personal note, I just wanted to say thanks for always taking the time to chat with me and bearing with me getting this interview up and available. Thanks again Malcolm!