

INTRICATE DESTINIES

INTRICATE DESTINIES is an article on creating campaigns in Stormbringer 5th edition
written by Richard Watts (©1995, 2004)

CREATING A YOUNG KINGDOMS CAMPAIGN

Creating a *Stormbringer* campaign can be a complex task, assuming that the Game Master is, like Michael Moorcock, attempting to tell a long and involved story with its own set of heroes, villains and memorable occurrences. The best such campaigns are planned from the beginning, but it is also possible to begin without a grand narrative envisioned from the start, instead starting with a simple idea for perhaps one or two short, self-contained adventures and embellishing the plot as you go. This, after all, was how Moorcock's own epics grew.

Regardless of your approach, planning and running a Young Kingdoms campaign can prove challenging to even the most experienced Game Master. This article offers a few thoughts concerning campaigns that Game Masters might wish to consider before your own campaign or plans for one progress too far.

CHARACTER-DRIVEN VS. PLOT-DRIVEN CAMPAIGNS

A *Stormbringer* campaign is effectively a major story told in a series of chapters. Each chapter is usually a stand-alone adventure that sometimes advances the over-all plot while telling a story of its own. A more complex campaign might instead be a series of major stories, like the Elric Saga itself, each divided up into its own sequence of minor stories, and each major story addressing a facet or a theme of the overall campaign that when combined present a complete and epic story arc. Conversely, a campaign can be more simple, and consist of a series of episodic adventures which bear little or no relation to one another. While less satisfying than a more structured campaign, this latter style of campaign are considerably easier to run.

Some campaigns will use a particular device to unite the adventurers; an example of this is the plane spanning Chaosium campaign *The Rogue Mistress*, in which the adventures sail on a remarkable ship. The adventures that appear in the book *Sea Kings of the Purple Towns* are an example of a more loosely connected campaign. While each adventure the book is self-contained, overall they present aspects of a story and offer hints and clues to the adventurers that culminate in an attack upon the Isle. Other campaigns might see the adventurers cast in the role of members of the City Watch, as members of the same barbarian family, or as residents of a particular court. Most published adventures for *Stormbringer*, including *Rogue Mistress* and *Sea Kings*, are plot-driven.

More memorable campaigns are often character-driven. Such campaigns allow the players to direct and control their adventures (as opposed to plot-driven games in which the direction of the game is pre-determined and the needs of the story are pre-eminent). A common feature of character-driven campaigns is that the adventurers' lives are as important as their deeds, with their loves, families and actions in what is usually considered 'downtime' in plot-driven games, just as important as the moments of spell-casting and swash-buckling. Character driven campaigns require considerably more effort and input from the Game

Master, but can ultimately be far more rewarding.

Regardless of whether you run a plot-driven game or a character-driven one (or as is common, a combination of the two) it is strongly recommended that your campaign have a definite structure and a story all its own.

DO I FOLLOW THE SAGA?

You should not feel constrained to mould your story on the events of the Elric Saga. Having the adventurers die along with the world does not have to be the ultimate fate of a *Stormbringer* campaign. Game Masters and players both certainly may not enjoy such a conclusion.

Playing *Stormbringer* allows us to reconfigure the Elric Saga should we so desire. Instead of Chaos destroying the world, your campaign might climax with Chaos defeated at great cost. A campaign could be set 10 or 100 years before Elric sits upon the Ruby Throne, giving the Game Master plenty of time to build the campaign up to its own conclusion unrelated to the events of the Saga. Of course, in such a campaign the adventurers might still die when the world ends, but only after a long and event-filled life. Perhaps they even die in happy dotage long before Chaos consumes the Young Kingdoms.

You might also allow the adventurers to escape the Earth's doom to an alternate Young Kingdoms where the world never ends, or to another plane altogether. The best campaign perhaps, would see the adventurers achieving peace in Tanelorn after great tribulation, and in that sweet city survive the Earth's end to go forth into the new world created by Elric's final blast upon the Horn of Fate.

If you do decide that you want your campaign to follow the events of the Elric Saga, and end as the Young Kingdoms ends in a holocaust of flame and fury, then it's going to be a long time coming (unless of course you decide to open your campaign in the last year or months of the world's existence), which means that your *Stormbringer* campaign might possibly run for years of game time, providing you with the possibility to tell many tales, and individual but intertwined story arcs for each of your players.

CHARACTER-DRIVEN PLOTS

In character-driven campaigns the Game Master develops plots out of the adventurers' actions and backgrounds. Character-based stories can be played out over many years. Try not to rush the story. Hints and revelations for the characters can be scattered out among the separate adventures and only slowly merge into a visible storyline of your devising. If revelations come all at once, or all the time, their impact will be lessened.

Plot ideas for character-driven campaigns often come when the player first generates her adventurer. Players should be encouraged to generate rich and colourful backgrounds and back-stories, leaving the Game Master plenty of leeway where plots are concerned. Ideally you should participate in the adventurer's creation in order to assist with, and take secret notes about, possible plot seeds that arise during the process.

An example of a character-driven plot is the lost or amnesiac adventurer whose only possession, when first starting out as an adventurer, is a ring bearing a strange and foreign insignia or heraldic device. After many adventures they come across an ornate key bearing that very same insignia. The key bestows sporadic dreams of a mysterious door in an unknown city. One day, in the course of another adventure, the

adventurer discovers the door they have dreamed of, which can be unlocked by the key they carry.

Whatever lies behind it (another world where the adventurer is the usurped king, his memory stolen by magic? Stairs leading to a lost city, its crypts full of fabulous but cursed treasure?), and what its implications are (Plots within the alien court? Invasion by a rival nation? A curse which slays all those dear to the adventurer?) are all elements that must be considered by the Game Master when developing the plot of such a campaign. Theft or loss of either key or ring could form additional adventures. Such side-plots can be used to tie events in with another adventurer's back-story.

EPIC STORMBRINGER ADVENTURES

The stories you involve the adventurers in should strive for the epic, as does the Elric Saga. Epic stories are ones in which:

- The adventurer battles armies and wins a kingdom; overthrows tyranny, be it Law or Chaos; rules wisely and well; until his consort (who has been built up since the start of the campaign and who is a well-known and beloved NPC) takes a secret lover (perhaps with reason if the adventurer has always been disappearing for months on end on yet another adventure), or turns to Chaos, and plots to kill the adventurer, and he is forced to kill or exile her.
- The adventurer comes from a humble background, travelling the world in her youth with a pack of rough and ready companions; gradually develops an allegiance with one Higher Power or another; eventually rises to rule whichever Church they are faithful to, only to discover, with the help of her old friends, that the Church is riddled with corruption/cultists/treachery. Does she destroy the institution she once revered? Set up a rival church? Turn her back upon the church to live as a hermit?
- The adventurer becomes a great and famous foe of Pan Tang, but because of the great risks his life faces, has been loveless, the price of such triumphs. As a youth he defends his village from a pirate attack; goes on to take on a Pan Tangian fleet and is immortalised in a popular ballad; eventually faces capture and imprisonment upon the Demon Isle; in the slave pits there discovers the love of his life, only to tragically lose him or her to sharks or demons in their final dramatic escape.
- The adventurer gains love at great cost, perhaps the death of a close friend or family member (the king's soldiers discover the adventurer's old father unwillingly sheltered the outlaw she loved and kill the old man as punishment; a favourite brother is slain helping the adventurer rescue the handsome prince she loves) or even the death of a whole tribe, village, city or nation.

Moorcock's works tend towards the grand and the cataclysmic. Your campaign should be no different.

FROM PLOT THREAD TO TAPESTRIES

Interweaving the separate plots of your *Stormbringer* campaign and the deeds of the Elric Saga can be a challenge. Character-driven plots however can be easily linked:

- The killer of one adventurer's parents plays a despicable role as the henchman of another villain in the betrayal of the other adventurers to enemy forces.

- One adventurer's sorcerous foe turns out to possess a grimoire giving clues to another adventurer's amnesiac past.
- And so on.

Take care to think such links through before introducing them to your campaign. Often it can be wise to create a plot lynchpin in advance, around which key elements of the campaign can be based. Asking your players to create adventurers who are all members of the same extended family, the same trading cartel, or residents of the same city, can provide you with the point upon which to hang your plot. Better only a few such strong and believable plot-links rather than too many and too trite.

Elements from the Saga can be added to campaigns with little difficulty. A feature of all Chaosium's background supplements for *Stormbringer* is the inclusion of pertinent details drawn from Moorcock's novels to aid the Game Master in presenting such events as the sack of Imrryr, and the threat of the Flame Bringer, as part of the background of their games.

Alternatively you may find brief references in Moorcock's books or the game's sourcebooks which inspire whole campaigns. The Game Master could use the sack of Imrryr, in which almost everybody dies save for Elric and his crew, as the devastating finale of a long campaign featuring Straasha, pirates and the sea as its theme. Another Game Master might want to set an entire campaign in the Weeping Waste, with the adventurers playing superstitious, spiritually aware tribespeople. Virtually any adventure is possible in the Young Kingdoms and the planes surrounding it, especially during the Conjunction of the Million Spheres.

WHAT ABOUT ELRIC?

"Elric of Melniboné, proud prince of ruins, last lord of a dying race. Sorcerer and slayer of kin, despoiler of his homeland, crimson-eyed albino who had within him a greater destiny than he knew."
- *Stormbringer, Part One, Prologue*

Sooner or later the Game Master is likely to want to introduce Elric to the campaign. He is, after all, one of the most important characters in Moorcock's entire cosmology. Elric's doom – and the doom of the Young Kingdoms which he precipitates – should cast its shadow across the adventurers' lives from time to time, but it is wise not to allow the characters to become too close to the crimson-eyed albino; nor to allow Elric, as a character, to dominate your game. Remember that it is the adventurers who are the heroes of your campaign, not Elric himself.

Give the adventurers plenty of opportunity to learn about Elric and develop their own opinions of him as a character in the game (as opposed to a character in a book who has entertained the players) before they finally meet the proud Prince of Ruins. Gossip concerning Elric constantly circulates through the Young Kingdoms and has since his coronation. The adventurers will hear ballads, rumours and outrageous lies about Elric long before they finally encounter him themselves.

A meeting with the brooding albino will have more impact if it occurs as part of a pivotal or climactic moment in an adventure rather than as a random encounter, although there is something to be said about having the adventurers meet him only in passing. Alternatively allow the adventurers to meet Elric twice; once when he is young and hopeful, after he has left Yyrkoon upon the throne of Melniboné and embarked upon a year of exploration in the Young Kingdoms, and then again after the sack of Imrryr, when he is

horror-haunted and despairing of his fate. This will impress upon the adventurers a sense of the weight of doom in the Young Kingdoms, and perhaps foreshadow what Fate has in store for them themselves.

In my own campaign the adventurers met Elric just once, and even then only fleetingly. Having inherited The Strong Arms, a tavern in the Purple Towns, the new landlords were having trouble with Caram, the light-fingered young son of one of the barmaids, who on several occasions had been found in visitors' rooms rummaging through their belongings. It was this habit which brought the lad undone, for he was foolish enough to draw Stormbringer from its scabbard while Elric lay sleeping there during a visit to the Isle which would climax in the Sack of the Dreaming City. The boy's screams, and the hungry song of the rune-sword, roused everyone in the inn, the adventurers and Elric included. The boy died; Elric left; and the adventurers were left to reflect on the vagaries of fate and their brief encounter with the legendary albino and his hungry blade.

No matter when an encounter with Elric occurs, the event should always be dramatic and memorable. In some campaigns the characters might only hear of Elric from other travellers, or experience second-hand the tragedies and chaos which the Melnibonéan leaves in his wake. In other campaigns they might meet him directly, although such an encounter should be fraught with peril. Passing through a city such as Dhoz-Kam or Bakshaan in Elric's wake is perhaps the best way of illustrating the air of menace and mystery that surrounds the albino. It demonstrates his fate but allows the adventurers to taste the albino's destiny without the risk of having to meet him personally. Stormbringer is, after all, notoriously hungry for souls, and even brief acquaintances of Elric of Melniboné tend to have regrettably short lives...