

# MASTER OF THE SLAVES OF FATE... AN INTERVIEW WITH JASON DURALL

**Note:** This interview was conducted in late 2009, and is ©2011 *Marcus D. Bone* and *Jason Durall*.

The closure of the *Elric!* line in the late 1990s could have been the death nail of the Stormbringer legacy at Chaosium. Yet with the boom that followed the release of Dungeons and Dragons 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, the early 2000s saw the return of not only *Dragon Lords of Melniboné* – the Open Game Licence incarnation of Stormbringer – but also a 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the BRP rule set. Unfortunately this revival lasted only long enough for just one new OGL supplement to be published – *Slaves of Fate*. Written by long time Chaosium stalwart Jason Durall, this adventure sadly illustrates what could have been...

In late 2009, **Stormbringer!** had the opportunity to talk with Jason, about writing for Chaosium and his experiences in the ill-fated return to the Young Kingdoms.

**Thanks for taking the time to talk to us, Jason. It's really great to talk with the people who brought the Stormbringer line to life! Before we get into the detail, however, I wanted to take a moment to mention that I recently discovered you actually make a living writing and designing games! I have to ask, how did you find yourself in such a wonderful career?**

I'm an old-school gamer who began playing the old re-colored original edition of D&D back in the late 70s. My mom bought it out of the Sears catalog as a Christmas present, and I'm sure she wonders if she made a terrible mistake there. Anyway, I was always interested in science fiction, fantasy, horror, and comics, and gaming has always stuck with me. After college, I was working in Japan as a college teacher, and did some freelance game writing during my downtime. That eventually turned into a job in the computer game industry, where I work as a writer/designer for MMORPGs.

**That's really cool. I'm sure most of the readers are jealous! So, how did you discover the Elric saga and the Stormbringer? Did you read Moorcock first and then discover the RPG? Or was it the other way round?**

I played D&D on-and-off through junior high. I bought the *Deities & Demigods* book and saw the Lovecraft and Moorcock stuff, and had to know more, so I sought out the stories by each author. When I read about *Call of Cthulhu* in an issue of the old *Twilight Zone* magazine, I ordered a copy. That was my gateway drug into the world of Chaosium's BRP-based games. I saw an ad for *Stormbringer*, and since I'd loved the Elric novels, I picked up the game. I thought it was the best game ever written. I still think it's the best Elric game ever written.

**So that means you got into the game right back at the start, right?**

First edition. First printing. As far as my own game sensibilities, it would have to be one of the most influential games I've run or played. Ken St. Andre's *Stormbringer*, and *Amber Diceless*

*Roleplaying.*

**Ah ha, so your favourite *Stormbringer* supplement is?**

My favorite products for the game are the first two companions... the *Companion* and *Demon Magic*. As for favorites among things I've worked on... sadly that would be the stuff that didn't get published.

**It's great to see that the original *Stormbringer* material is still fondly remembered. So then, having been a fan for so long, what aspects really appealed with the setting or system?**

The ease of character generation. The massive inequities in power levels among starting player characters. The uncompromising, brutal critical system. The integration with the setting. The "sense" the rules made, such as non-escalating hit points, armor protecting against damage, short combat turns, critical hit results, skill improvement, etc. I immediately saw in that game the ability to homebrew my own settings, and in the years after it came out, I ran games set in Hyboria, Middle-earth, Tragic Millennium Europe, Corum's five planes, Lankhmar, and some historical settings... all using the *Stormbringer* rules set.

**That's pretty neat, and shows just how flexible the base system is! I suppose this sort of personal writing meant the transition to Chaosium author was pretty straightforward. How did you get your 'big' break?**

I'm not entirely sure I remember, but here's the best I can recall. I had pitched an adventure at Chaosium for *Stormbringer*, and they kept me on their possible contributor list. When they transitioned the line over to Elric! I was in that playtest, and wrote a ton of feedback based on my thoughts and some play sessions. Lynn Willis was, I think, having some personal issues at the time, so a lot of the feedback never made its way into the published game, but they did use almost verbatim a paragraph I had written about the Melnibonéan language that is still in the newest edition.

**And that lead to further work? What else have you contributed to *Stormbringer*?**

That paragraph! Also, I wrote *Slaves of Fate*, the sole adventure for the doomed *Dragon Lords of Melniboné* d20 version of the game. There was a time where I was going to do a fanzine of my own called Black Sword Chronicle, but I ended up getting a job in Japan and it got abandoned. Then *Herald of Doom* (Malcolm Wolter's awesome fanzine) came out and made it superfluous. I may have written something for HoD, but I might be mistaken. I also submitted a few NPCs to one of the monographs (Cadsandria?), but that was a minor contribution. I've also playtested a few things over the years, including the revised *Hawkmoon* that eventually became the monograph. There have been a lot of false starts over the years... things I started writing for Chaosium that got waylaid when their published priorities changed.

**Such is life! Obviously, you've had quite a few things that have not, as they say, made it 'out-the-door' for one reason or another; anything in particular you regret not seeing published?**

That is a huge answer. There are a bunch of things that I did some work on, but got axed in early development.

The thing that got me into Chaosium's circle of contributors was a pitch for *Escape from Nadsokor*, an adventure sourcebook covering that place. Then there was a thing I pitched to them about groups and societies in the Young Kingdoms... wizard orders, mercenary groups, hidden cults, etc.

I think there was another adventure I pitched where the players would be Melnibonéans cast into the Young Kingdoms after the Sack of Imrryr, forced to return to retrieve some Maguffin. I have a bunch of files of things started and that got back-burner.

When I was working on another thing for Chaosium (a sub-licensed revision of *Superworld*), I mentioned my desire to revise *Elric!* along new lines, making it more Gothic, more intense and personal, etc. Adding Pendragon personality traits, more "doom" mechanics, more stuff to make the player characters more tragic and more depressed... tying them into the fate of the world itself. I realized that the ultimate time to read the Elric books was in high school, when your problems are the most important in the world. It seemed to me that all previous versions of the game missed the boat when it came to instilling the sense of self-pity, gloom, and adolescent power fantasies and the accompanying sexual immaturity that made those stories so... potent to readers. I mean... now I find it difficult to read those stories and not to notice the glaring sexual implications inherent in the dynamic between Elric and his sword. So the plan was to revise it in a fashion that was unofficially labeled "Elric in the World of Darkness." Dustin actually offered me the license for a ludicrously low figure, which I should have taken them up on... all things considered. I did some work on it, but then they jumped to the d20 version and it got scrapped.

I next began working on a massive book called simply *The Eternal Champion*, which was going to be the guide to the Multiverse and the Eternal Champions throughout, with guidelines for creating EC and Companion characters, and structuring campaigns around that mode of play. It would have included everyone... from Ereke to Clen of Clen Gar, Jerry Cornelius, Asquiol of Pompeii, Sojan, Prince Flamadin of the Valadek, Konrad Arflane, von Bek, Roland, Bastable, Ulrik Skarsol, etc. with notes on their worlds, monsters, foes, and adventure ideas. I began working on it, drawing all kinds of notes and rereading the books... and then Dustin expressed some doubts that the sales of the EC line would merit such a monster book. At the same time, he asked me to work on the Basic Roleplaying core rulebook. I thought "Sure! That won't take more than a year, tops!" and pitched a smaller book to be written alongside it, called *Swords of Old Mars*, which would adapt the Michael Kane books.

Time passed, and I ended up changing jobs twice, losing my co-author early in the process, getting married, moving cross-country and back, having a child... and then finally BRP was published. Of course, by then the relationship between Chaosium and Moorcock soured to the point where they sold the license to Mongoose. So that ended any further *Eternal Champion* plans as far as Chaosium went.

I am now of course working on *Interplanetary* for BRP, which draws inspiration from the same stuff that inspired the Michael Kane Old Mars novels... but it's a more-or-less original setting at this point and only has thematic stuff in common with Moorcock's books... and the original Burroughs novels they were inspired by.

#### **Any regrets?**

I've had such a bizarrely peripheral relationship with the license, I'd just love to have gotten more of the stuff I worked on finished and in print!

#### **Have you ever thought about writing for Mongoose Publishing and their *Eternal Champion* line?**

Not really. I worked with them on a huge Conan project that got canceled, and both parties walked away burned by the experience. I talked with them briefly about finishing that project and repairing relations, but I suspect there was some miscommunication somewhere. I never heard back from them. I wish things had turned out differently, but sometimes it can't be helped.

**At least you got to see *Slaves of Fate* published, which - if any readers don't know - is an excellent way of getting a party of characters together for a longer campaign. What, by the way, was your inspiration for *Slaves*?**

With *Slaves of Fate*, I was specifically commissioned by Dustin Wright to do an adventure for the d20 game, and if I remember correctly, he wanted it to begin with a classic "You're in a prison hold of a ship... a prisoner of Pan Tang" sort of beginning. I think it was that specific. I was watching a lot of *Farscape* as part of a Sci-Fi Network marathon, which is essentially a human caught on a prison ship far from home, and I drew a lot of inspiration from that show. If you read the adventure and are familiar with *Farscape*, you might see a bunch of little nods to it in one fashion or another.

**Oww...now I'm going to have to brush off my copy and have a reread! Obviously, you've done quite a bit of writing within the RPG hobby. So, how do you go about the process of writing? I mean are you an 'in chunks' type of writer, or are you one of those who does a 'little bit' every day?**

Chunky style. I write in bursts of inspiration... periods of time when I can blast out thousands of words a day, with intervals of downtime mostly enforced by life circumstances. Now that I'm married and have a child to deal with, long stretches of quality writing time are harder to find than they once were.

**I know how that is... it only there were more hours in the day (or is that more money in roleplaying?!). Now, before I let you go, the final question I like to ask everyone we interview - If you had free reign, what would you've liked to have seen published for the Stormbringer/The Eternal Champion line?**

I have very little idea what Mongoose is doing with the license... it's sort of like not wanting to know what an old girlfriend is doing with her new boyfriend once you've both moved on. There are great writers like Lawrence Whitaker and Charles Green working for them, but I haven't checked their stuff out.

I suppose if there isn't anything similar in their lineup, I'd say someone (else) should do the above-mentioned Eternal Champion book. More short adventures. More long adventures. Campaigns. At least one epic campaign that puts the players as movers-and-shakers in the final war between Law and Chaos. Stuff that emphasizes that the Young Kingdoms aren't just another fantasy world where players form little parties of adventurers in search of treasure... it's a doomed and decadent world... a place in need of champions to stand against the gods themselves.

**You're preaching to the choir there. I can only agree with you and more. Well, thank you for taking the time for doing this interview. It is good to see that you aren't lost to gaming (in fact at the time this interview goes to 'print' your Laundry RPG has already garnered a enthusiastic following) and that you remember Stormbringer so fondly - even if things didn't always work out the way you wanted them.**