

THE LAST DEFENDER ...

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN R. WHITE

Note: This interview was conducted in early 2018 and is © Marcus D. Bone and John R. White.

In the mid-2000s through to the early 2010s, the worlds of the Elric and the Eternal Champion witnessed a revival not seen since the arrival of Keith Herber and the 'Cthulhu Conglomerate' (Mark Morrison, Richard Watt, Geoff Gillian, etc.) at Chaosium in the early 90s. Through Mongoose Publishing's two Elric of Melniboné editions, a re-envisioning of our favourite fantasy game was brought to life by a new wave of young, savvy authors...

But, as changes occurred at Mongoose, the energy and passion for the Eternal Champion subsided, and by 2012 only one author – new appointed – would remain to expand the Young Kingdoms. That man was John R. White who, while only seeing one of his creations 'Talons of Winter' reach full publication, showed how much more the worlds of Elric, Hawkmoon and Corum could have offered us all! In early 2018, StormbringerRPG.com had the opportunity to chat with John and discuss his gaming life, love of the Eternal Champion and just what might have been...

Welcome John! Thanks for taking the time to chat with Stormbringer! So, let's kick this off with the question I ask all my guests – How did you get into gaming... and what's your geek cred like!

I got into wargaming with model soldiers at around the age of twelve and some four years later I was introduced to a game of Dungeons and Dragons at my local club.

I am a keen historian and re-enactor and have also worked as a squire, cataloguer and researcher at various museums, including the Royal Armouries. I enjoy putting a lot of effort into worldbuilding and I suppose am often drawn to settings that involve my love of researching favoured lines of fiction such as Pendragon, Judge Dredd and Elric.

I like games to be driven by the experiences and personalities of the protagonists and try to avoid campaigns where an obsession with mini-maxing rule systems is followed by players. I'm quite happy to skim and skip rules and dice rolls on occasions where the narrative or flow of a game call for it, but I also try to enforce a bit of realism in how items are obtained, carried and used. Thankfully, I have still the luxury of a weekly gaming club and am able to alternate Gamesmastering and running Player Characters.

I can see how a game like Elric/Stormbringer would appeal. How exactly did you discover the worlds of Moorcock and more importantly these great games?

When I bought a box set of D&D back in '77 it also included a flier that mentioned various fantasy authors and characters. I had already read a lot of Howard and Tolkien, so I decided to look out for any Moorcock novels. That summer I bought a copy of *Sailor on the Seas of Fate* whilst on holiday, I reckon sixteen was a good age to encounter the moody albino, though I still enjoy keeping up with the increasingly rare fantasy works that are penned by the author.

I was an eager purchaser of the original Stormbringer boxset, though Moorcock's multiverse, besides creating a large number the Eternal Champion's avatars, has also spawned numerous incarnations of roleplay systems and, as time has passed, I have enjoyed collected and gaming all of them. I felt that the 1993 Elric! version of the rules was a great improvement in game balance and gave a more accurate, coherent and detailed presentation of the world of the Young Kingdoms. The dark, gothic tone of the source material was more to my personal taste than some of the wacky, random cartoon excesses of the earlier versions. The Mongoose versions that followed by Lawrence Whitaker are especially appreciated. I currently tend to use them as my core rules, though there is some individualized 'Changequest' (as I term bastardized rules) that incorporate part of the Elric! set and some homebrew ideas.

I agree, I'm – for better or worse – a fan of the Elric! (and later) editions over the more 'gonzo' early releases. But that does leads me to ask – is there any supplements or adventures from what I call 'the middle years' that stand out to you?

For sentimental reasons, I loved the Fate of Fools scenario book. On reading it I appreciated the story telling skills of the two authors and I knew I just had to run them in a campaign that would attempt to capture the rich detail and interesting characters and plot twists. It led to some atmospheric role play sessions with some very good friends and apparently, showed Dan and Fifty (two friends who went on to be RPG writers) the rich potential of wilderness/outdoor based roleplay adventures.

I felt that the first companion books of the original Stormbringer series perpetuated old dungeon bash tropes complete with rooms full of treasure and all or nothing luck rolls with whimsical magic blessings and curses.

I suppose, if you ask the fan of the earlier editions they would say that what you are describing there is exactly their appeal!

So, how did you get into the writing side of things? I do recall you had a least one story seed in the Richard Watt's *Old Hrolmar Monograph*...

Sadly, my career in a certain company that produced fantasy and sci-fi wargaming figures and rules prevented me getting involved professionally with roleplay gaming companies for over a decade. As a fan of Elric roleplaying I was lucky enough to correspond with Richard Watts and Lawrence Whitaker on various forums and private emails and was happy to offer opinions and research on Young Kingdom related topics.

Richard was kind enough to let me write a scenario seed for his *Old Hrolmar Monograph*, a task which if nothing else, expanding my skills on a computer!

Obviously, you also had an interest in Mongoose's *Elric of Melnibone* edition as well?

I finally got involved with paid freelance writing after I took voluntary redundancy from Games Workshop and decided to become self-employed. Other Mongoose writers were helpful with feedback and Nick Robinson who edited the Signs and Portents Magazine approved regular monthly submissions of *Elric of Melnibone* and Judge Dredd articles.

And how did working with Mongoose and *Elric of Melnibone* eventuate?

By the time I was wanting to write books for Mongoose no *Elric of Melnibone* were being produced and Lawrence was leaving the company. I made various pitches including a Bestiary and a City Book that would detail three cities in a similar fashion to the earlier one the company printed. The company went with my pitch for a book that detailed the region north of the Sighing Desert.

Any challenges in that?

I was pretty free to choose locations and themes, though I think background rules and material were a big plus for the company's approach to sales lines rather than a pure scenario book. A big problem for me was the revision of the RQ system into Legend. The rule changes were minimal, but they wanted the books to fit into the small, paperback volumes the Legend system was using, which meant I had to split my adventures and background material into two volumes. Early on I was asked to try and conform to the Legend magic rules, but I was reluctant to drop the well written and magic rules Lawrence had established and argued my case that they were integral to a game set in the Young Kingdoms.

I enjoyed expanding on snippets of information provided in the more recent *Elric* works, especially *The Black Blade's Summoning* and *Earl Aubec of Malador*. As the huge area of land I detailed included a wide range of cultures, I happily immersed myself in topics such as whaling, Himalayan flora and fauna and sulphur mining. Renaissance Venetians, Marsh Arabs, Inuits, Sami, Vikings, Greenlanders and Aztecs proved inspiration for some of the different peoples and authors like Melville, Hoffmann, Robert E Howard, Keith Taylor and Poul Anderson seem to have been the genesis of a few colourful passages and characters. The format I adopted for the two cities I chose to detail was based on that used by Lawrence Whitaker in his City Book set in the Southern Continent. The book also includes a few player characters and plot threads from earlier campaigns I have run with a dozen or so of my Huddersfield friends.

The biggest challenge was deciding which chapters went into each book. I opted to put a city in each book and put themed scenario seeds in each location. *Secrets of the Steppes* featured the more accessible or better-known regions, whilst *Talons of Winter* featured remoter areas and also the sandbox campaign.

Besides my regular gaming friends, I used other play testers via the internet who proved to be reliable, insightful and supportive. They were pretty universal in declaring the unpublished *Talons of Winter* the better of the two books as it had some colourful villains and drew a lot of threads together into a grand campaign that could be played in a wide variety of ways.

I would like to mention give special mention to James 'Bill' Biltcliffe whose life was tragically ended through illness last year. Besides playing in many campaigns together he gave me a lift back from the weekly wargame club during which time he proved an excellent sounding board on all the different games I have run and writing ideas I have mooted.

Sorry about your loss. I know how hard it is to get the constructive criticism needed to raise a project up from a simple idea through to fully-fleshed out reality and its often friends and family who provide the

best inspiration.

But you were happy with the result of your work?

I had originally offered to do some of the artwork for the books but my received no reply to my suggestion, though I admire the artwork that accompanied my Elric book. Like all my Mongoose drafts submitted there was very little revision evident bar a few bits of grammar. As I recollect, I once had the word 'Bastard' (or maybe 'Bloody') changed in a magazine piece but the demonology, streetwalkers and violence always remained unmodified.

Ha! Funny how as an industry the common place seems more taboo than violence and sex! Oh well, just another challenge for the budding author I suppose.

And you were there to the end, right? Did you have insight as to why the line closed down?

Despite my involvement as a writer I only learnt that the Micheal Moorcock license was dropped by the company via gamer forums. I suppose there are good financial reasons for playing cards close to your chest if you are a publisher. I think print runs were very small by this stage; I'd pre-ordered a copy of Secrets of the Steppes (besides anticipating my author copy) and rang up about it when it didn't arrive a few days after the release date. The staff member who took my call sorted out a copy for me but told me I was 'lucky to get one' as few were left.

As no one seems to have fielded the MM license, it seems that there is no confidence in the commercial viability of MM roleplaying publications. The author is not read as widely among gamers as he was thirty years ago.

I've no idea if anyone else wrote unpublished Elric material for Mongoose, though my friend Dan had put together a pitch for a couple of adventures.

That must have been annoying...

Sometime later, to be frank, I was getting rather jaded after writing several volumes of Judge Dredd RPG material that lingered on an editor's cyber desk without seeing print. The company involved busied themselves in another core rulebook change, only to drop the 2000AD licence (again without any heads up to myself). I'm not currently involved in writing anything for Mongoose, but 'never say never'.

Luckily, Lawrence Whitaker offered me a chance to write on the concluding adventure on Design Mechanism's Book of Quests project. I enjoyed the collaboration and feedback and of the small community involved and feel that I learned a hell of a lot about writing.

And if I understand correctly, it has led to other work in our hobby?

Yes, following on from this, I also wrote material for the Luther Arkwright line published by Design Mechanism. (Surely of great interest to Moorcock fans? The writer/artist of the two graphic novels openly acknowledges the influence of MM). To my regret, my productivity and quality on the core rule book was below par, partly due to various private circumstances; fortunately, a candid and helpful appraisal of my strengths and weaknesses from Lawrence was forthcoming. After this, I penned (if such a term is still applicable in the age of computers) a train ride scenario for Parallel Lines, the succeeding book of Luther Arkwright scenarios. To my further satisfaction, I

was able to provide most of the illustrations for the entire volume.

Another project I was involved with was the Kickstarter release of *Orbis Terrarum*. This is a home brew fantasy system written by Dan Voyce and Simon Clements that has evolved and grown for well over a decade of gaming amongst the Huddersfield crowd. Some of my all-time favourite gaming sessions have been on this world of their devising and I look forward to many more. I highly recommend it, gritty combat system and a big entesis on the metier of a player character to encourage roleplay. Best yet, a lot of the history, politics, powers of the world are not set in stone for players, the 'truth' is selected by the GM who personalises them to his own version of *Uma*, as the world is called. Players who own a book will never be sure of what the secrets of a GM's campaign are except, possibly, through gaming experience. I wrote a few pages for the core rule book and have also provided illustrations for it and the first scenario book. I also contributed a scenario for the Quick Start rule set that's available on Drivethru. It includes an old style bar room brawl and a set of maps based on the plans of one of my local watering holes!

I have written up and illustrated *Bright Lights, Dark Waters*; half a dozen scenarios and a similar amount of scenario seeds for adventures set in OT's city of *Nostapyrax*. This should be a Kickstarter project tied in with the release of a city book.

As you can probably guess, I have already experimented with rules adaptations to OT for roleplaying in the *Young Kingdoms*!

I am currently engaged doing some freelance writing for yet another RPG company, though I'm not at liberty to give any details.

Excellent! It seems that, if nothing else, working on the *Elric of Melniboné* line opened up other hobby doors!

And that probably wraps it up from me. Before I let you go, however I always like to ask – *If you had the Eternal Champion RPG licence, what would you do with it?*

Well I liked it in the format Lawrence had developed at Mongoose, if only it could be resurrected! I would have liked to see someone produce a book around the second *Corum* series plus Dan Voyce ran an excellent *Corum* campaign that I would like to see published. Getting the *Talons of Winter* adventure and setting in print would be an obvious personal goal, ideally combined with the work I did for *Secrets of the Steppes*. There are lots of *Eternal Champion* worlds to inspire writers. I confess I'm keen to get back to writing *Elric* material; a comprehensive *Bestiary* would be a good addition to a *Young Kingdom* range, a couple of sourcebook/Atlas volumes for the Southern and Western Continents and perhaps a multi-planar adventure.

As I always say... maybe, one day, maybe. Well thanks again John for taking the time to chat. I appreciate the opportunity to reminisce about a better time for one of my favourite RPGs...

But before I get all weepy-eyed for a past lost in time, I'll leave you to have the final words...

It's amazing how influential *Moorcock* has been on writers and gamers. Thanks for keeping the flame alight *Marcus*.