

CHAMPION OF THE YOUNG KINGDOMS... AN INTERVIEW WITH FRED JOHN BEHRENDT

This interview was conducted in 2020 and is made available via Stormbringerrpg.com.

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Over the years many writers, developers and creatives have adapted the works of Michael Moorcock in their own vision, and with each addition and adaption, the vision and purpose of the whole grows becoming a stronger and better property. The roleplaying games of *Stormbringer* and *Elric!* are no exception to this rule, as seen in the various changes and variations to each of the editions. Each of the contributing authors and developers have put their stamp on the game play and the style story being told.

My guest today, Fred John Behrendt, is one of these icons, an author whose adventures and scenarios has done much to guide and enhance the style what we now see is the platonic representation of roleplaying in the Moorcock's Multiverse – the struggle between Chaos and Law, and eternal balancing of the fates. With scenarios such as **Sisters of Chaos** (from *Sea Kings of the Purple Towns*), *The Myrrhn Link* (from **Perils of the Young Kingdoms**) and, amongst other contributions, *The Web of Chaos* (from **Rogue Mistress**), Fred stands as a champion of the games we still enjoy today!

Hi Fred, thanks for taking up the invite to have this chat. I know its been a long time – I don't like to think about it really – since the 90s when you were involved in this crazy old RPG, but I appreciate getting to reminisce! However, before we get to warming up the old memory coils, did you want to tell the readers a bit about yourself; How did you get into gaming, what was your first RPG?

The first “adult fantasy” game I played was Sorcerer, designed by Redmond Simonsen and published by Simulations Publications Inc. (SPI). I really liked it, and still have that original copy from long ago. My brother, a few friends, and I also played a few other SPI games over the next year or so. That must have been around 1977.

The following year I read a newspaper article about this complicated “roleplaying game” called Dungeons and Dragons. The article extolled how great and educational it was for kids and young people! (This was before the moral panic of a year or two later.) A few weeks after reading that, I had in my possession the Holmes edition of Basic D&D. For the next year or so we played the hell out of D&D and AD&D until our little band of adventurers graduated from college – or dispersed into the wide world for other real-life reasons.

Sound so familiar, keeping gaming up as we get older is hard – although I'm buoyed by the rise of platforms like Roll20 and the like. I have to say, I'm guessing that, like me, you were already a big fan of fantasy and sci-fi by the time you started gaming? Did you discover Moorcock via the RPG or the novels, by the way?

Definitely the novels, by at least five years, maybe longer. I burned through the DAW editions of the Elric Saga and the Hawkmoon's stuff over the course of a few months. At that time, actual

bookstores were my main source of paperback fantasy – so it took me that long to locate them all. After the hunt, reading them was almost a disappointment -- but only because they contained so few pages!

Ha, I can understand! But that lead you into the RPG, I guess? How did you get involved with Stormbringer at Chaosium?

I learned to play the game through the St. Andre & Perrin first edition, *but my first involvement with Chaosium was when I* made a blind submission of a scenario for Call of Cthulhu. Lynn Willis accepted that first Call of Cthulhu scenario – after asking me to rewrite it three times – I called it The Paintings (but it was eventually published as Mansion of Madness). Soon after, as mentioned above, I submitted an idea for Rogue Mistress.

Ben Monroe was reworking the magic system for the fourth edition and they wanted to follow up the new rules with a campaign book – so I guess Greg sent a proposal to every freelancer in the Chaosium address book. Honestly, I had more interest in Moorcock's work than Lovecraft (blasphemy!), so I jumped at the chance. I worked like a devil on that scenario – getting up at 4 am for a few weeks to work on it in the pre-dawn quiet before I had to head off to work. I submitted a final draft – which Greg accepted (unbelievably!) and then -- silence until Keith Herber got back to me several months later, letting me know they were going ahead with the project. (There was some doubt? What!?) Eventually, Keith related a tale about the long delay -- but maybe that is best reserved for another time.

Yes, it seems the story of Stormbringer's publication - in all its editions and guises – has been littered with 'ups and downs'.

I have the keenest memories of the 4th edition. I received a draft of the revised 4th ed., magic rules from Greg Stafford after I submitted a proposal for The Planar Knife, in Rogue Mistress. I spent more time playing around with that edition than any other. I'm not sure if it had any greater appeal than other editions – it just worked out that that was the era where I played the game most and wrote for it.

At one point I ran a campaign of Rogue Mistress for a local RPG club that supported 14 players at its peak. (Running that was murder.) I was in and around the edges of the Elric! edition (I offered Lynn a few notes of the text, ran one brief Elric! campaign, and played in a few games), but that's where my involvement pretty much ends.

Understandable, we all come and go in our interest, and from what I have gathered there is no real prospect of making a real living in gaming! You mentioned there your proposal for the Planar Knife, and that makes wonder what your writing process was back then?

I almost always started with a treatment (or pitch) – which I employed to find out if an editor had an interest in the scenario idea. From there (if the pitch was successful) I usually built up a rough outline composed of brief paragraphs. I expanded those paragraphs into the final text. I still work that way for creative projects – although they are much more seldom now than in the past. I think this is a pretty typical method of work for writers, and in my case it certainly evolved from the days of my earliest submissions.

Sound approach! And it worked, you created some really iconic scenarios over those few short years. Any in particular standout? Any favourites amongst your 'children'?

I still like The Web of Chaos (from *Rogue Mistress*) – though I recognize it has problems (but it was only the second scenario I ever wrote). And, while I also like Sisters of Chaos (Sea King of the Purple Towns), I guess I most like The Myrrhn Link (Perils of the Young Kingdoms). Some of the situations and NPCs in the scenario provide a good GM with many opportunities to mess with the players and engage them with the story (like it or not). I also like the air of tragedy I think I captured in the narrative. It's a good reflection of my bleak outlook.

Also, while I'm thinking about it – and I doubt anyone has ever believed otherwise – Kariss Burning in the Sea Kings book, although inadvertently attributed to me, was written by Richard Watts.

Ha, I'm sure Mr Watts will read this and think 'yay, vindication at last!'. Just kidding, although I was there, I think this seems to be the endearing ideal I seem to get from the various conversations and discussions I've had with contributors in the past – it was a good, tight group!

And so, as you said early, slowly moved away from freelancing and writing for Chaosium?

I feel there were several overlapping factors. First, Chaosium was unable to continue paying freelancers in what I considered to be a timely way. Also, I just burned out. I worked with Chaosium to publish ten scenarios over a relatively brief time period. Two years, maybe? (I seem to recall Mark Morrison suggesting I was asking for trouble by working at that pace.) Eventually, sitting in front of a computer 12 to 14 hours a day (including day-job time) just caught up with me. I took a break from writing gaming scenarios and never really got back into the rhythm.

Let me say, that it's a bit of a shame you did, your scenarios rank up there with the best released for the line. Was there anything you wrote or drafted that never saw the light of day?

I submitted a treatment for a book-length Stormbringer campaign that Mark greenlit, but the money issues, the weariness described above, just got the better of me and it went nowhere. (Also, I think Mark moved on around that time, so my enthusiasm was undermined further.)

The campaign was called Crown of Thorns and was an interdimensional McGuffin hunt for a Chaotic object of the same name. I think the McGuffin turned into different things depending on the plane of existence where it resided. (On our plane, it appeared as a ring of thorns continuously weeping blood.) Also, Chardros ... there might have been something about Chardros.

Recently, I've thought about drilling into my files to see if I still have that treatment, but ... other matters always seem to intervene.

Fascinating, and, ha, there's always room for Chardros in every Stormbringer story! If you do track down that draft, the Stormbringerrpg.com site is always happy to archive bits of gaming history like that. While we are here, I should ask, is there anything you'd liked to have seen produced or created?

In terms of roleplaying – I would have liked to see a rpg-game attempt to recreate the ironic strangeness of Jerry Cornelius, Miss Brunner, Catherine, Frank, and Una Persson. But as the Cornelius chronicles are somewhat more difficult material, I imagine it would be a hard sell for a

publisher, let alone roleplayers.

I was into tabletop miniatures in those days and I would have liked to see a well-developed tabletop game set in the Young Kingdoms (with nice minis, of course). But on that note, I'm sure there are (or were) miniatures rules along those lines out there for the Eternal Champion genre. I've just never stumbled across them.

The desire for a Jerry Cornelius RPG seems to be a common theme amongst the Eternal Champion authors... I'll say I'd agree, I think it would be great!

Well, thank you for your time, Fred, and I appreciate all your efforts over the years. It's great to catch up with the authors and creators that shaped my favourite RPG!