

THE WARRIOR OF JET & BLACK ...

AN INTERVIEW WITH GARETH RYDER-HANRAHAN

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“He had seen the man before - but only in dreams, or visions very similar to dreams. It was the man he had seen in France and later in the Kamarg. He was dressed in full armor of jet and gold, a long helm completely enclosing his face.”

THE JEWEL IN THE SKULL, BOOK III, CHAPTER IV

For many long-time fans it came as somewhat of a shock when – in the mid-2000s and seemingly out of the blue – Chaosium ‘handed’ their Eternal Champion gaming licences over to Mongoose Publishing. For myself personally, as a big fan of the Elric, Hawkmoon and Corum games, I never really expected Chaosium would willingly give up their control these properties, despite their somewhat ‘love-hate’ relationship with these worlds over the previous quarter of a century. Of course, the reaction to this shift was typical of what one sees when any big changes occur with anything we love; a mixed of anger, excitement and not a little trepidation. What would come of my favourite game? Would we get to explore new aspects of the Eternal Champion? And – hang on – just who are these Mongoose guys, anyway?

While history speaks for itself, it is undeniable that Mongoose Publishing’s stewardship of the Eternal Champion was another high point for the licence, not only bringing in new players and fans into the Multiverse, but also creating games that reflected more closely the actual worlds Moorcock had laid out all those years before. More importantly, Mongoose had a new way of working, one that ensured that the lines would be actively supported and would see regular releases. And to do that you needed talent.

It is fortunate, then, that our guest today was the very person shoulder tapped to bring Mongoose’s vision of Hawkmoon’s Tragic Millennium to life. An author young and raw enough to hold no fear leaping into a new property that had a long and complex history, and which therefore brought with it much expectation. None other than the *now* well-known and immensely respected, Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan!

Hi Gareth, thanks so much for taking the time to chat with me. It's always a great pleasure to talk to the individuals who contributed so much our favourite roleplaying games. Let me start, as I always do, with the simple question of – would you mind telling the readers a little bit about yourself...

I'm a full-time writer, living in Ireland. As I write, there are Alarming Noises from the corridor, suggesting the children are abroad. I shall continue to hide in my office and neglect them.

I primarily write role-playing games – initially for Mongoose Publishing, then Cubicle 7, and now mostly Pelgrane Press. I'm also a fantasy novelist – I've got three books out from Orbit Books in the Black Iron Legacy series. Find me online [@mytholder on twitter](#) or at [garhanrahan.com](#).

Re: the children, I don't blame you. My own are the excuse I use for not doing as much on the *stormbringerrpg.com* site as I should. So, how did you get into gaming... what's your origin story...

I was a huge Tolkien fan as a kid (and still am. A huge Tolkien fan, that is, not a kid. Where was I?) Anyway, the local gaming society ran a Middle-earth one-shot in the city library. I had no idea what roleplaying was, but they had a map of the Prancing Pony and they let me play an elf who'd passed through Moria. It was obviously the coolest thing ever.

In college, I joined that gaming society, ended up writing a lot of one-shots for our local convention, and those one-shots got me into freelancing.

And presumably you discovered the world of Moorcock and the Eternal Champion around the same time?

I'm unsure when I first became aware of Elric and Moorcock – probably through references in Dragon magazine. (I do recall someone comparing the sword of Turin Turambar to Stormbringer, and not knowing which Tolkien book Stormbringer was from... god, things were so different before the internet.)

I never read Moorcock in any systematic fashion – I know I picked up the last of the Second Ether books randomly, which is a hell of an introduction to his cosmology.

I certainly hadn't read Hawkmoon when I got assigned the job of writing the rpg and kept getting it mixed up with Hawkwind for a few days afterwards.

Ha! Well Moorcock is a common denominator there, so I can understand the confusion. Interesting though about what you say about reading the books, as most fans of the Eternal Champion games came through to the hobby by consuming way too much Moorcockian fantasy; which in itself brings a considerable amount of baggage and expectations! I suppose coming in fresh, however, must give you a different sort of perspective on the Hawkmoon material, and its creative fabric?

I think I like the concept of the Eternal Champion more than most of the actual stories – which is probably an artefact of trying to tie a bunch of very disparate stories, written at many different stages in Moorcock's life, all together into a single metanarrative. And I certainly haven't read them systematically – I've read bits of Elric, read Dancers at the End of Time, one or two others, but a lot I only know through osmosis. I recall reading... uh, is it Sailor on the Seas of Fate before I had any understanding of who Erikose or Corum were, and being very confused and a bit irritated that these other weirdoes were showing up. There's a lot of predestination and prophecy, which feels like lazy plotting.

At the same time, I love the idea of repeating, recurring concepts and archetypes, and you have to admire the sheer scope of the mythos.

I know where you're coming from there... some of the stories can get a bit heavy handed on the whole destiny and prophecy angle, and it often does feel as if everything is a little preordained... hopefully in a good way? But that does raise a question, if you weren't a Moorcock fanatic, how did the opportunity to develop Hawkmoon arise?

I'd done a bit of freelancing for various companies before Mongoose. Initially, it was just a hobby – my career plan™ was to get a grown-up job in IT, and do a little writing on the side. Then, the computer company I was working for cut a large chunk of their workforce. I had a little money saved, so I said “hey, I'll see how long I can write for until the money runs out.” It still hasn't. A few months after that, I got a full-time role at Mongoose. I had enough of a track record to get the interview, but not much beyond that.

Ah, that makes some sense. So you ended up at Mongoose and, from what I recall from talking to others who were there, it was a bit of a 'treadmill' in regards to development and production at times?

Mongoose certainly had demanding deadlines – as a staff writer, you were expected to turn out 70,000 words or so per month, which is a lot. Sometimes, though, you had a lot of creative freedom; you'd be assigned a book title, but everything else was up to you. It was a joy to burble about “undead” or “dragons” or whatever, with no restrictions except your own creativity and the surly bonds of the d20 system.

At other times, you'd get assigned something that didn't resonate, or you knew nothing about, and those books could be hellish. (I got assigned to do a Wild West game when the only western I'd ever deliberately watched was Back to the Future Part III)

Later, they started taking licences with existing fanbases, and doing games based on those. Again, sometimes that worked perfectly well – I was a fan of Babylon 5 already, so I was happy and able to write game supplements for that line. Other licences... less so. They picked up Glorantha, for example, which was... very brave. There's a staggering amount of Glorantha lore out there, and extremely committed fans. You can't become a Glorantha expert overnight. Or after ten years of fervent study, for that matter.

I actually dug up the original emails that assigned me the Hawkmoon line. It came out of the blue, and I'd never even heard of Hawkmoon before. That said, it wasn't too tricky to get up to speed – there are only seven novels in the series, and the setting is relatively self-contained.

With such freedom, you must have had some idea where you wanted to go with the line?

The first few books in a line tend to be obvious choices. You've got the core rulebook. You've got a setting guide. You've got a book of adventures. You've got extra monsters and crunchy bits. Once you hit those obvious options, you can be more ambitious or esoteric, but that was as far as we got.

If the line had continued, I'd have pushed for Asiacommunista and Amerikha books, and maybe a series of adventures where you're trying to rally resistance to Granbretan as they conquer Europe (something like the Pirates of Drinax adventure I did for Traveller – lots of local adventures that connect up).

It's a shame we didn't see those, I do think that when we get a new Eternal Champion roleplaying game, we too often only get the condensed core of the setting, and too many of the interesting concepts are always left unexplored.

But talking about the books that did see the light of day, given you weren't an expert on the Tragic Millennium, how'd you go about develop the game? Was it a case of undertaking hours of research upfront, or more one of just jumping right in and seeing where you ended up?

For the corebook, there was just no time to do anything fancy – read the books, identify the key characters, locations, gadgets, powers etc, and then adapt them into an existing ruleset (Runequest). Half-way through the process, the corebook got changed from a supplement to an existing rulebook to a stand-alone product, which meant a lot of adapting existing text. I may have glanced at the older Chaosium books online, but I was on holiday in Australia and New Zealand at the time, so my scope for research was... limited.

Granbretan and Secrets were a little bit calmer. For Granbretan, my main concern was making the material useful in play – “here's the invincible empire of evil, full of places you'll never get to see and people you'll never meet” can be a fun read, but it's no use as a gaming supplement. Secrets was a lot of fun; I like writing adventures, and this adventure let me run all over the world and play with the post-post-apocalyptic vibe.

If I got to do it again – well, how much development time do I have? Do I have longer than two and a half months or so to make the corebook?

I can understand that – once you had the core system mechanics in place it was more about bringing the setting to life, right? So, how did you go about making it a distinctly 'Hawkmoon' game?

The big twists were the emphasis on ranged weapons – flame-lances and the like – and sorcery, especially the weird science-sorcery of the Empire. And the influence of fate and the Runestaff, which I wish I'd been able to explore more.

I've worked on a lot of licensed games (Babylon 5, Conan, the Laundry, Doctor Who, The One Ring, Hammer's Slammers) and I'm comfortable in identifying the essential gameable elements of a setting and finding something that appeals. For Hawkmoon, it was the melodrama of the main protagonists, coupled with the surreal, Tragic-Europe background and the hint of cosmic weirdness. It's a story you can think of in terms of the cover art for a metal album.

Hawkmoon's actually fantastically well suited to adaptation as a roleplaying game. The setting's weird enough that the players can play pretty much anything they want – wanna be a dwarf sorcerer? A foppish French swordsman? Mad scientist? Alien space bug? Mutant cyborg? Sure! There's a whole country of bad guys invading the rest of the world. There's a guy who hands out quests from his secret base – Count Brass. It's part serious, part goofy. You sort-of know the geography and the cultures already, because it's post-apocalyptic Europe, but at the same time, no-one blinks if you drop in a city full of sentient tigers or ancient robots or whatever. And the Runestaff gives you a collection of cryptic voice-of-the-GM characters like the Warrior in Jet and Gold, who can run in and deliver prophecies and quests as needed. Hell, if your players are feeling bored, you can spin them off through the Multiverse for a quick jaunt to Garathorm or some other world. It all just -works as a framework for crazy adventures.

Well, you can take it from me, you did a great job in that perspective. But it does make me curious, of all the thousands of words you wrote does anything really stand out to you?

I'm very, very fond of the opening fiction to the Granbretan sourcebook – the absurdist play. I love being able to look at an existing story from an unexpected angle.

The Hawkmoon corebook also gave me my best typo – I wrote the line “an armoured knight all armoured in armour”, looked down at what I'd written, and took the rest of the day off as my brain was clearly broken. I got the Hawkmoon assignment just as I was off on a holiday to Australia and New Zealand; I remember checking out second-hand shops in Wellington for the Count Brass books.

From what I recall, the Hawkmoon corebook was rather patchy and thin, but the Granbretan and Secrets books were a lot better. Or so it felt at the time, anyway.

Ha – Wellington – my hometown! I can probably even guess which second-hand bookstore you went to as well!

I should ask, did you have a chance to run any of your ideas or concepts past Michael Moorcock himself, or was all your development done in isolation? Just wondering in case there was anything in particular you have to cover in the books?

Oh, man. No. No contact that I can recall. In terms of freedom, it was pretty much “we have the Hawkmoon license. It's using Runequest. Off you go.”

I still have my original outline, preserved for eternity in the amber of Gmail:

- Introduction: Two/three page 'what do you in Hawkmoon games
- Character generation: changes to the RQ rules, with new backgrounds/new skills etc
- Setting History. Time line, major events, rise of the Dark Empire.
- Gazetteer - places to go, things to do.
- Mutations and Wierd Science - mutant PCs, sorcery, technology.
- Other Rules Changes: I'd like to have a definite Fate mechanic, where you can use Fate points to reroll stuff - but the more you do this, the more you get tied to the mystic weirdness of the Multiverse. Swearing on the Runestaff or carrying around too many magic items boosts your fate, to the extent that you get dragged off to other dimensions on bizarre quests instead of getting to go home.
- Characters from the books - Hawkmoon/Count Brass/Meliadus/Kalan etc etc etc etc.
- Monsters

And that was it. I don't think there was any pushback on anything in any of the books. That said, I might not have been in the loop – if Mr. Moorcock objected, the editors could have made changes without telling me. I don't think that happened, but marvellous and strange are the ways of editors.

Shame, I'm sure Mike would've loved your take on Tragic Millennium.

It unfortunate, but in the end the line didn't really see that many releases, did it? Although it's pleasing to know that you did get to explore the iconic Granbretan.

I recall being struck by how much Granbretan had fed into the Warhammer 40k universe, with its

throne-globes and named orders of armoured warriors, so I sort of tried to reverse the flow and suck some of the Warhammer vibe back into Hawkmoon. I just wish I'd put way more jokes in – I'm sure I missed some of Moorcock's.

What about Secrets of Tragic Europe, it's a pretty neat campaign.

Again, I think they gave me pretty much free reign, just "do a Hawkmoon campaign". I knew I didn't want to do something that would clash or overlap with the books, and as Hawkmoon pretty much finishes off the Dark Empire, that left me with (a) exploring Tragic Europe and (b) delving into the part.

One of my friends was a big fan of the old Chaosium Hawkmoon, and got very excited when he found out I was working on a Hawkmoon adventure. The whole Moon-Bog sequence is very, very much a series of jokes, from Baron Von Krofts to all the Galway tribes.

The only bit that got cut out was a lot of stats, and that's because the Hawkmoon statblocks had that awful hit-location chart that bloated them absurdly. I'm rather fond of the adventure – I still get the occasional appreciative note.

And so you should. If you ask me the whole line came to an end way too quickly, but I suppose that's the world we lived in back then (before Kickstarters and Facebook fan groups were about to demonstrate just how populate these games are). Do you recall if anything else (outside of Loz Whittaker's *Castle Brass*, of course) was ever written for the Hawkmoon line?

There was a scenario, *Hunters of Granbretan* by Bryan Steele, although that may have gotten tagged onto the back of Granbretan or Castle Brass. I don't know why nothing else was released – I got shunted over to working on the new edition of Traveller, which took up the rest of my time at Mongoose.

I know there were plans to do a Corum game, and an Eternal Champion book, but such plans often came to naught.

Would have loved to have seen a new Corum game myself. To me, Elric, Hawkmoon and Corum are core of the Eternal Champion – at least on the gaming table.

But I believe you left Mongoose Publishing soon afterwards, why was that?

Eh. They decided they had to cut costs, so my contract wasn't renewed. It was... unexpected but not unwelcome. I'd been there six years, which was longer than any other writer had survived in the pressure-cooker, so I was thinking of moving on anyway.

But when one door closes another one opens, right? I know something of your efforts with Pelgrane Press (being a fan of most of their Gumshoe games), but I'm sure you've work on plenty of other great things since leaving Mongoose?

Big things I've worked on since – the biggest is probably the Dracula Dossier campaign, for Night's Black Agents. I've also done a lot of work on The One Ring line (for Cubicle 7 and now Free League) and the 13th Age roleplaying game. I might point Hawkmoon fans in the vague direction of Cthulhu City, which is an alternate take on the Mythos that has a little bit of Granbretan in its DNA. I also put in a wholly gratuitous side quest to the Camargue in a recent Fall of Delta Green adventure.

Oh – I’m doing a Fantasy version of GUMSHOE One-2-One. GUMSHOE is Pelgrane’s investigative system, and One-2-One is the one player/one GM variant. There are three sample characters, and each of them has a Companion and an Artefact, usually a weapon. In fact, the fighter-archetype’s Artefact is an evil black sword that occasionally talks to him...

Nothing like returning to where it all began! And you’re a novelist now too...

I should plug my novels, *The Gutter Prayer*, *The Shadow Saint* and *the Broken God*. If you like thieves, alchemical weirdness, monstrous gods and intrigue, they have all those things and stabbing too. There’s even a free one-shot rpg to go with them!

Interesting, you’ve piqued my curiosity, and I see that there are audiobook editions available over on Audible.com too... hmm...I do have a few credits spare...

Well, thanks for your time Gareth. Always great to talk to the people that worked so tirelessly to bring the games and worlds we all love to life! Oh, I better ask – if the opportunity to work on the Eternal Champions licence ever came up again, any thoughts on what you might do with it?

It’s a weird one. There’s probably too much cruft built up on the concept to be a viable game – you can hardly say “hey, read these twenty books that may tangentially connect with each other before you play this game” and expect to sell many copies to new players. That said, I can envision a fun game where you’re playing different original incarnations of the Eternal Champion, pulled from world to world to battle excesses of law or chaos. A sort of fantasy take on *Quantum Leap*, maybe – but the point there would be dropping the player into unknown worlds and not drawing overmuch on Moorcock’s existing works.

Totally understand, I feel the same way in part. On reflection, I think some of the more modern ‘systematically narrative’ game systems we see today are probably more suit to enable the situations and style of gaming in the Multiverse.

Oh well, any final thoughts before I let you go? Any great stories I might have inadvertently missed asking you about?

I don’t think so. *Hawkmoon* was an odd experience – I used to joke that I spent more time arguing on the internet about who owned the rights than Moorcock spent writing the books, which is only slightly true. It was never part of my formative exposure to fantasy, so I didn’t have too much of an emotional involvement in it – but I became quite fond of the stories, for all their flaws. At the same time, I knew from friends of mine, and from the continuing popularity of the French edition, that people did love the series, so I tried to do it justice.

Thank you very much. It’s always a pleasure to look at old projects; licensed rpg books can be so ephemeral.

It’s been a pleasure, and much fun doing this with you Gareth. As I look over my shoulder at my poor groaning and overfull gaming shelves, I see your name on more than a few books I have stacked up there. So, I for one look forward to seeing what else comes from my favourite Irish RPG author (oh, and I’m so hanging out for Fall of Delta Green’s *The Borellus Connection*!!).