

FROM OUT OF SWIRLING CHAOS...

Note: This interview was conducted in late 2004, and was originally intended to appear in the unrealised *Stormbringer* fanzine, *A Million Spheres*. The article has been reproduced here in its entirety, neither edited nor updated.

As this is our first sample issue of *A Million Spheres*, we thought it would be appropriate to bring you an interview with one of the individuals whose dedication and efforts in the mid 90's brought about *Stormbringer's* (or one could say Elric!'s) finest and most productive periods - Australian Richard Watts.

It was during this time (Richard's involvement spanned almost a full decade) that *Stormbringer* evolved into the system we know today. Richard was an integral part of many of the game's key revisions (including as a lead author of the Elric! edition) and assisted in the development a number of the system's most praiseworthy supplements. It goes without saying that much of what Richard wrote, edited and produced during his time exploring the Young Kingdoms has now become canon in the *Stormbringer* game world.

In the following interview, *A Million Spheres* brings you a brief insight into Richard's involvement with *Stormbringer*; some of his highs and lows, and his many ideas on what was, and might still to be, in the worlds of the Eternal Champion.

First, let us say thanks for taking the time to conduct this interview, Richard. I am, as I'm sure most of the readers are, interested in learning more about your time working on our favourite fantasy setting. More over, as although most followers of *Stormbringer* will be well aware of works of 'Richard Watts the author', I'm sure they know little of 'Richard Watts the person'.

With that in mind, before we get into the details of your time on *Stormbringer*, maybe we should introduce you to the readers?

Sure. I'm a 37-year old, queer, single guy who lives in inner city Melbourne, in the Australian state of Victoria. I work part time as the Artistic Director of Express Media, a non-profit youth arts organisation, and I'm also a DJ, a freelance writer/reviewer, and the producer/presenter of 3RRR FM's weekly 'Smartarts' program. I started role-playing in 1982 when I was introduced to *Basic D&D*, discovered *Call of Cthulhu* and *Stormbringer* in 1984-85, and I never looked back. Since then I've written for Chaosium and White Wolf, been burnt and burned out, and recently returned to role-playing in early 2004 with gusto. I'm a huge fan of *Pendragon*, *Call of Cthulhu* and of course *Stormbringer*. I've also flirted with *Paranoia*, *MERP*, *Palladium*, and several other systems, including a couple of years playing various versions of *White Wolf: The Angst* during the 1990's. Currently the only role-playing I'm doing is a fortnightly *Call of Cthulhu* campaign with a group of friends with whom I've been gaming for almost 15 years.



Although obviously you're also well known for your other role-playing books and products (especially your vivid, and if I may say, 'boundary-breaking' *Call of Cthulhu* adventures), where and when did you get involved with *Stormbringer* and Chaosium?

I discovered *Stormbringer* by reading a review in the newsletter of another role-playing club, and given that I was helping run our own club in Moe at the time, it was pretty easy to talk my fellow members into buying the first edition of the game. When our role-playing club collapsed a year or two later, I was lucky enough to inherit that particular boxed set of *Stormbringer* (along with the first edition of *Call of Cthulhu*), and I still own it today. In late 1984 I first made the acquaintance of Mark Morrison, who at that stage had just started to write a scenario for Chaosium's forthcoming *Dreamlands* book for *Call of Cthulhu*, and he encouraged me to write my own scenarios (thanks Mark!). My first published scenario for Chaosium appeared in Keith Herber's *Arkham* guidebook for *Call of Cthulhu* in 1990, and based on the tone of the piece, Keith recommended that I try my hand at writing a *Stormbringer* adventure. It wasn't long after that Chaosium offered Mark and I the *Sorcerers of Pan Tang* book and things just snowballed from there.

For my part, it has always seemed pretty obvious that there was some special appeal in *Stormbringer* and the way it connected to the works of Michael Moorcock. As for yourself, what do you think is the most appealing aspect of the game and, more importantly, what do you think makes it different from, say, *Dungeons & Dragons* or other fantasy games?

Part of it is undoubtedly Moorcock's cosmology and mythology underlying the game (the whole concept of the Multiverse, the Eternal Champion and the endless battle between Law and Chaos), but I believe that the system itself is also remarkable. Lynn Willis refined everything Chaosium had done up to that point for *Runequest* and other Basic Role-Playing systems and synthesised it into an intelligent, efficient and simple gaming system that I only wish more people had the chance to play.

That, of course, leads to the question – how were you introduced to the writings of Michael Moorcock? Was it like myself, as the result of the role playing game? Or had you read of the albino prince before you had a chance to role-play his world?

The first Moorcock novel I read was a hardback version of *Elric of Melniboné* that I found at my local library in 1981 or '82, when I was about 14 years old. I was basically living on a diet of fantasy at the time, but I still remember the thrill that first Elric book gave me – it was so unlike all of the stock fantasy novels I was reading at that time. Over the following years I tracked down all of the Elric novels, as well as the Runestaff series, the Swords Trilogy, etc. I have a definite preference for Moorcock's early, passionate, pulp writing rather than his more recent 'literary' work which quite frankly I find tedious.

I guess like all of us, Moorcock's writing style has changed and developed with time. As for your own time working on *Stormbringer*, what would you define as your most productive and enjoyable pieces?

The first official adventure I wrote for *Stormbringer* was a tournament for the Australian convention ConQuest in 1991 called 'Screaming Statues' co-written with Mark Morrison, which eventually morphed into the scenario 'Slaves of the Demon Isle' in the sourcebook *Sorcerers of Pan*

Tang which was published by Chaosium in 1991. The last thing I officially contributed was *Atlas of the Young Kingdoms Volume One: The Northern Continent*, which appeared in 1996. In the intervening years I was spending a lot of time in the Young Kingdoms, and had some rather grand plans for the *Elric!* line which never eventuated. Given that the work I did on *Elric!* has since been republished in both the *Dragon Lords of Melniboné* rulebook as well as the latest edition of *Stormbringer* I guess you could say that I contributed to those two books also. Whether or not I contribute anything official to *Stormbringer* in the 21st Century is in the hands of Fate (and also depends on what happens with Chaosium's *Stormbringer* line in the wake of the proposed trilogy of *Elric* movies).

I see that during this time most, if not all, of the *Stormbringer* supplements list you in the by-line, either as the principal author or as a key developer. What was your role with the line at the time? Were you just an interested freelancer, or did you have Line Development responsibilities?

Somewhere between the two I guess. My role was never official in any way, but certainly Lynn Willis respected my ideas and I was the unofficial line developer, or at least the creative developer, at least for a couple of years. At the time the line was axed in the mid-90's I had writers working on the next two volumes in the *Atlas* series, several city sourcebooks (Bakshaan and Old Hrolmar) and a couple of campaigns. Sadly, none of them ever saw the light of day.

I guess then, one must ask, how much time and effort did you personally devote to the game?

It was only ever a hobby, albeit one I was passionate (perhaps even obsessive) about. I was probably writing a day or two every week, jotting down notes, developing tournaments for a couple of Australian conventions, e-mailing various writers, or dreaming dark and haunted dreams...

Sounds strangely familiar... How did you go about getting material published? Was there a system Chaosium followed for new supplements? Or did you just write and submit pieces you thought appropriate to the game and setting?

For the first few books (*Pan Tang*, *Purple Towns*, *Perils of the Young Kingdoms*) Chaosium dictated what they wanted to see and we wrote them. Once *Elric!* was in development it was more a case of me proposing what should come next, and Chaosium agreeing to that. The *Melniboné* sourcebook was caught somewhere between the two, as I had originally been writing it for *Stormbringer* but by the time it came out it was an *Elric!* title. (I still love that book by the way, although the interior art still disappoints me.)

Talking about writing, how did you go about writing the things you did? Is there some secret 'Richard Watts' system all aspiring *Stormbringer* authors reading this should follow?

In all honesty, I can't recall if I had a system or not, though given that I was ingesting large quantities of illegal substances at the time, my memories of the early 1990's are a trifle blurred. That might answer your inspiration question though. ;-)

In all seriousness, my inspiration was primarily Moorcock's own works, coupled with my over-active imagination. A dangerous combination.

Ha, so although you had no set system (or not a least one which stands out) do you at least have a favourite adventure or supplement?

I would have to say that *The Northern Continent* is probably the product I am most proud of, and took the most pleasure from developing. Partially its an ego thing – that baby is basically all mine, as opposed to the much more collaborative process which led to *Pan Tang* for instance (and having Lynn Willis describe *the Northern Continent* as ‘lovingly and ingeniously written, a triumph of sustained creation’ was a great ego boost!) but also because I think it’s the most fully realised book I ever worked on. I was lucky enough to be officially unemployed at the time of writing it, so I was able to pour all my energy into its pages without distraction, and I think it shows. From time to time I pick the book up and flick through its pages, and even *I’m* surprised by the sheer amount of detail invested in almost every entry. Some of it I don’t even remember writing (although that might be partially attributable to all the dope I was smoking at the time)!

And of course with every good thing comes the bad. Was there anything you look back on now as being your least favourite *Stormbringer* contribution?

Probably *Perils of the Young Kingdoms* because it was the book I had the least influence over. At that stage Mark Morrison was on the official Chaosium payroll, and was developing the book while living in San Francisco. Some changes were made to my scenario that I wasn’t entirely happy with, and I don’t think the cover sells the book at all well.

Sadly, everything eventually comes to an end, how did your particular association with *Stormbringer* finally come to a close?

I was due to be one of the guests of honour at a role-playing convention dedicated to Chaosium games here in Melbourne, and which was to feature various international guests from the US and the UK (including Greg Stafford and the *Tales of the Reaching Moon* crew). The morning I was due to head out to the convention I received an e-mail from Lynn Willis telling me that they were axing the *Elric!* line due to poor sales. To say that I was devastated was an understatement. Not only did the timing truly suck, but there had been no consultation or forewarning. I didn’t go to the convention, and I basically gave up on Chaosium for a couple of years. Indeed, a few years later I quit writing role-playing material at all, as I was burnt out by churning out work for White Wolf, and embittered by the whole experience of being a gaming freelancer. I actually took a complete break from gaming altogether for a couple of years, and it’s only been the last year or two that I’ve started to come back to it.

So now, almost 10 years on, how do you think you contributed most to *Stormbringer*?

Perhaps it is the particular focus and vision, and an attention to the detail in Moorcock’s original novels that would satisfy the fans? I was always uncomfortable with the original description of the Young Kingdoms in Ken St Andre’s version of *Stormbringer* for example, as there were obvious and awkward clashes with the source material. My time writing for *Call of Cthulhu* showed me that you had to treat the source material with respect, and that’s what I tried to achieve with *Elric!* and *Stormbringer*. The quotes from Moorcock which scatter the text are the most obvious way of doing that, but so are the finer details hidden in the texts of the various books I wrote and helped develop.

I guess with the end coming as it did, many of your ideas and products never saw the light of day. Was there anything you would've/would still like to see produced for *Stormbringer*?

God, what *wouldn't* I like to see produced? The completed *Atlas* series for starters, Loz Whittaker's magnificent *Hawkmoon* supplement, a campaign or two, a sourcebook for the Million Spheres... The list is considerable.

What about the future? Do you see any for *Stormbringer*?

At this stage the cards are still up in the air and we'll have to see just how they come down. Given Chaosium's financially worrisome state (which happily appears to be steadily improving) and the impending Elric movie trilogy, who knows what will happen? It's likely that the film production company will want to wrest all copyright of Elric-related products away from their current holders so that they have a monopoly, although it's also possible that Chaosium might be able to maintain control of rights for role-playing games based on Moorcock's works. Either way, I can only hope that the movie will increase interest in Moorcock's works, and that that will result in a renaissance for the *Stormbringer* game. I'd certainly like to be involved with the game if that turns out to be the case.

Before we wrap this up, I must ask, if today someone came up to you and said they were interested in writing *Stormbringer* adventures or material, what would be your advice to them?

Despite the fact that their options for publication are currently rather limited, I'd certainly encourage them to do so. Chaosium has recently published the *Gods of Chaos* monograph, which indicates that they're still happy to support the game, so that's certainly an option. There's also this magazine, and of course the Eternal Champion Yahoo e-group as avenues of publication and distribution of role-playing material set in the Young Kingdoms and other worlds of Moorcock's creation.

If anybody is planning to write for *Stormbringer*, whether its for professional or personal use, I'd also advise them to read carefully through the relevant source material (i.e. Moorcock's novels and the various material already produced for the game) and then to extrapolate and embroider upon that material by dreaming dark and magnificent dreams. The only limitation when writing role-playing supplements and adventures is the author's imagination, which can be easily stimulated by appropriate reference material. Books on the medieval world, archaeology, history and natural history can all inspire you.

Well thank you again for your time Richard, and all the best for the future. I know I speak for all *Stormbringer* fans when I say that we were all the more fortunate for having you dedicate as much time and effort as you did to our favourite fantasy role-playing game!

...Hey Richard, before you go, one last question. One which I'm sure all the readers would all love to know. Could you, would you, ever see yourself writing for *Stormbringer* again?

...Well, if you had asked me that question a year ago I would have told you that my involvement with the game was at an end, save for being an interested observer. Now I'm not so sure. I'm currently writing up a couple of tournaments I devised and ran back in 1991-1992 with the intention of releasing them for the members of the Eternal Champion e-group, and I'm also

exploring the idea of starting up a new *Stormbringer* campaign once my current gaming group finish the Cthulhu campaign they're currently embarked on.

Certainly if Chaosium ever plan to seriously resurrect the *Stormbringer* line I hope that I can be involved with it in some way; ditto if another company win the rights to the game once the Elric movies are in production. I still have a great love for the Young Kingdoms and the Million Spheres, and I believe that there is still much I can offer the game. Whether that is restricted merely to advice, or whether or not I could actually become the official line developer for the *Stormbringer* game in some bright, beautiful future I can't say, but I am certainly looking forward to finding out.

Thanks Richard, I'm sure that the readers have enjoyed your thoughts, memories and comments as much as we have here at *A Million Spheres*.