

WHISPERS OF A MAGIC WORLD...

AN INTERVIEW WITH BEN MONROE

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Over the years many individuals would come to guide the direction and future of the Stormbringer RPG, crafting it into the game we all remember so fondly. One such contributor is Ben Monroe, a one time employee, and long time supporter of Chaosium. Ben has been a contributor to numerous incarnations of the Basic Role Play system (BRP), including Call of Cthulhu, but perhaps of most interest to the followers of Stormbringerrpg.com was his involvement with the 4th edition rule set. More specifically it was his redesign of the magic system that better reflected how demons, elementals and objects of Law should be dealt with in game – a vision that continued right up to the last printing of Stormbringer.

And this interview is timely for another reason – Ben’s recently announced *Magic World* RPG. Soundly based on the mechanics of Stormbringer, it brings a new chapter of this venerable system to life and hopefully will introduce an entirely new generation of GMs and players alike to the system we all love.

Hi Ben! Thanks for stopping by to chat about your history with Chaosium and Stormbringer, and more over your exciting new game, Magic World. So without delay, let’s begin...

Just looking at your contribution to gaming, it easy to see that you have long and varied gaming history. Would you care to share how you where introduced to our hobby, and moreover, the works of Moorcock?

I started gaming in 1980 with one of the Basic versions of D&D. My first exposure to Moorcock was actually in the Melnibonean Mythos section of the Deities & Demigods book. After I’d been playing D&D for a few years, a pal and I discovered RuneQuest. One of the guys at the local game store (Games of Berkeley) was a fan, and told us all about it. I wasn’t convinced, but ended up picking up the Trollpak supplement to use in my D&D games. It was cool, but I couldn’t figure out the system. A week later I went and splurged on a copy of RuneQuest (the second edition) and was instantly hooked. The system just worked so well, and I loved the setting of Glorantha.

After that, I noticed the Stormbringer game in the catalog which came in the RQ box. I was interested, but decided to read the books first to find out if I’d like them. Picked them up at the local specialty Scifi/Fantasy book store, and was hooked. I’ve not read them in years, but I absolutely loved them at the time.

A few years later, I scored a copy of Stormbringer, and absolutely loved it. It took what I most liked about RQ (the simple, sophisticated rules set) and made it even more fun to play. Through most of the mid-late 80s and into the early 90s, if I was playing fantasy games, it was either RQ or Stormbringer.

So that would mean you’ve been a fan of Stormbringer from the beginning? What then would be your favourite edition of the rule-set?

I'd love to paraphrase Sandy Petersen here, and say "4th edition, because it has my name on it". But, honestly, I think that the Elric! game is the purest expression of the system. Much of this is due in no small part to the excellent editorial work of Lynn Willis, one of the unsung heroes of the RPG industry

You're definitely preaching to the converted here. I've always thought that Lynn was the real driving force behind Chaosium in 90s and early 2000s. Still Chaosium has had a number of great editors and contributors over the years, including yourself and that leads me to ask, how did you get your start there?

Shortly after graduating High School, I was offered a job at Chaosium in the warehouse. Shipping, receiving, all that good stuff. After a year or so of that, I came into the production office, where Lynn and Charlie trained me in the finer points of layout and publishing. To this day, I still have razor scars on my finger from laying out the third edition Call of Cthulhu books. Yes, indeed I did sacrifice blood in the publication of that book.

And that lead to writing?

I was beginning to do more editorial duties at Chaosium at the point when Games Workshop had started focusing on their internal projects. Because of this, they weren't going to be reprinting either the Call of Cthulhu, or Stormbringer hardcover books.

After getting CoC back in print, we turned our eyes to Stormbringer. After some discussion, they gave the project to me, with Lynn's oversight. My main goal was to create a magic system that I felt reflected the magic of the stories better than the existing one. My original idea was something a lot more like the Magic System in Ars Magica. I wanted to do something where every sorcerer had different powers from the others. I banged around some ideas inspired by Ars Magica and Fantasy Hero.

What I ended up with was the magic in Stormbringer 4th edition. I was trying to create a fluid, freeform magic system, but in the end we agreed that we wanted to keep the 'bound demons' aspect of the whole thing. So, what I ended up doing was taking the Superworld powers, creating clusters of them, and using them to create the 'powers' in Stormbringer. I think it worked out pretty well. Loz' "Eastern Magic" is a lot closer to my original ideas, but I couldn't figure out how to express it at the time.

One idea I've toyed with, is to go back to the Superworld Powers (you could just as easily use the "Powers" in the BRP Core book) and allow sorcerers to have a budget of a certain number of points to build their spells with. Something I'll probably try in my own MagicWorld campaign at some point.

Sounds like a great job! So, what lead you to leave?

I left Chaosium to go to college. I didn't have the time to keep working on the books at the time, but used to stop by the office every few weeks, and chat with the guys about what they were working on. Lynn and I had lots of great discussions about the game, Call of Cthulhu, etc. I can only hope that some of those conversations helped in his development of the game.

All good things come to an end I suppose. But, if you allow a little naval gazing here, what else would you have liked to have seen produced for Stormbringer, either why you were working on the line or

afterwards?

I was always disappointed they never were able to finish the Atlas of the Young Kingdoms series, or do some more stuff with the Million Spheres. I'd have loved to have seen another edition of Hawkmoon at some point.

Jason Durall had had a brilliant idea of redoing the game in the late 90s. His take on it was to pull back on the 'action fantasy', and focus more on the doom and tragedy of the series. Make it a competitor to Vampire, rather than D&D. I would have very much liked to have seen that.

MAGIC WORLD

Why don't you tell us a little something about this exciting new game that you've been working on?

MagicWorld! This is a really exciting project for me. One I'm sure will thrill some people, and annoy others.

I was thinking about Chaosium, BRP, etc. a few years ago. I'd been talking with Jason Durall quite a bit during the development of the BRP Core rules. We both agreed that BRP needed another 'starter' game. Probably something fantasy as well. The more I thought about this, the more I started thinking about Elric! as a generic fantasy system. I'd used it for such plenty of times, and in many discussions with BRP fans, I found that the general feeling in the BRP community was that Elric! was just an absolutely marvelous game, and would be a great BRP "starter" game.

Around this time, I was talking with Charlie and Dustin about some projects. Sort of off the cuff, I mentioned to them "What would you think about just stripping all the Moorcockisms from Elric! and reissuing it as a generic epic fantasy game?" They liked the idea, so I spent some time kicking it around.

In the end, we came up with the idea of taking not just the Elric! core rules, but a number of the supplements, and a few of the RQIII books, shuffling them all together, and then banging them into some semblance of awesomeness.

The idea was that there were some great materials produced for these games, and some brilliant ideas in them. But, due to one thing or another, they never had achieved the recognition they could have. Notably, many people who might otherwise really like a BRP fantasy game, never looked at Elric! or Stormbringer, simply because they weren't fans of Moorcock, or the stories.

Sounds like the sort of game we've all been waiting for since Stormbringer was cancelled! I have to say though, that there is a huge amount of material there for you to call on, in what sort of format is Magic World going to be published?

As it stands, there are currently three books in the MagicWorld range. Depending on the success of the line, there may be more down the line. But, I feel right now these are a fairly complete RPG all together.

As I stated earlier, most of the text (95%+) of these books was taken from existing books. I spent weeks doing a huge cut-and-paste, cleaning up the documents, removing anything to do with Moorcock, blending them together (especially in the case of introducing RQIII materials) and making sure we had what was needed. The three books are as follows:

MagicWorld core rules: this is primarily a combination of the Elric! core rules, with the Seafaring material from “Seas of Fate” added, as well as the entirety of the RQIII “Creatures Book”. All the creatures have been gone over and made sure they conform with the core rules. Primarily, this meant such things as converting over movement rates, skills, etc. Furthermore, all the sorcery “spells” from all the Elric! supplements were pulled over into this book. A handful of spells were not ported over, as they just didn’t work. The demon and elemental summoning rules were pulled out of the book and placed in Advanced Sorcery (see below). There were a handful of changes and additions to the system, but I’ll go over those below.

Advanced Sorcery: this is the “Magic” supplement for the game, though there’s no reason you couldn’t use it for any BRP game. This book contains most of the text of the Bronze Grimoire, again excised of any Moorcockisms. We added the demons and elemental rules from the Elric! core rules, as well, as all the other demon powers from Bronze Grimoire and other Elric! supplements. Finally, the “Drugs” section from the Melnibone sourcebook was added in here, and repurposed as “Herbalism”. Some of the ‘drugs’ were toned down a bit, and one or two new ones added.

GM’s Pack: this last pack is a combination GM screen, booklet and reference sheets. The screen is about what you’d expect, but I predict you’ll love the external art. The booklet which comes with it is almost the entire text of the RuneQuest Third Edition “Gamemaster’s Book”. The seafaring rules were pulled out (as the core rules include maritime info), as was the “Money Tree” scenario. A few other minor things were dropped. Mostly fiddly detail that nobody ever used. Finally, I went through all the different “NPC Digest” sections of the Elric! books, and compiled them here.

Wow! That sounds fantastic! And I look forward to it coming out very soon. So, while we are on the subject of writing and creating RPGs, what was it like to create your own game?

Lots of cutting, pasting, checking against hardcopies of the books. And then the problem of ‘inspiration’. If you call that a problem...

Often times, I’d be looking at a set of rules in the book, and a ‘better’ way to do it would hit me. I put ‘better’ in quotes, because these ideas were ways I’d like to do things differently, which would better reflect my play style. So, in these cases, I had my cadre of ‘experts’ which I’d go to and bang the ideas around. If we all agreed it was a worthy addition to the game, I’d draft up something to make it work. If we couldn’t agree on the usefulness of the addition, I normally dropped it. To that end, I’d like to call out Jason Durrall, Steve Leary, Ian Kauffman, Nick Middleton, and most especially David Ackerman as my ‘inner-circle’ through this project.

Now that is what I call a team of experts. Did that mean that there are going to be changes between, say the old Stormbringer rules set and Magic World?

Many of the changes are cosmetic, and probably mostly related to character generation. I’ve added in skill categories, and category modifiers. We also now have cultures from which to choose; sort of like how they were done in RQIII, but much simpler to sort out. You now choose from a list of four cultures, each culture has a list of associated skills, and you select three of them that your character was trained in. Each of those three skills gets a +10% bonus.

Further, instead of getting a spread of a certain number of skill points, and having the player

spread them incrementally across all his skills, you now get a 'pyramid' of skill points. After choosing your occupation, you have 8 'occupation skills'. You then get the following bonuses to the skills: one skill at +60%, two at +40%, and four at +20%. This allows you to spread the skills out quickly across your occupation skills. You will get further points to add to 'hobby' skills in the same way. And finally, for those who want to keep the old system, I've included the points as a total, and you can just spread them as thin as you want.

A few other things here and there as well. Lots of little things like that, really. Mostly, I think what was added were optional ways to do things, and advice to the GM.

Rules aside, one of my favorite additions to the game is the setting created for it, "the Southern Reaches". David Ackerman put this together, and I think it's marvelous. I should note that the game itself is completely setting-free. There's no reference to the Southern Reaches at all in the core of the rules. The setting is a final chapter, and used as an example of what you could do with the game. It's all wonderfully celtic, otherworldly and fey. Very evocative, and with plenty of mysteries for the GM to detail. There's a lot about the 'dragon' under the kingdom, but David never comes right out and says what it is. It could be a dragon, or an otherworldly horror, or a living misty madness, or just a metaphor for the decay of the kingdom. Very cool stuff.

Go on though; there must have been some hard decision you had to make around what was to be kept and what was needed to be dropped?

Honestly, none. I had a great core to work with, and with the ability to cull other material from RQIII and other Elric! books, it made my job easy. It's been a joy to work on, and I sincerely hope it helps in reestablishing BRP's presence. I think we've got a great 'intro' BRP game here. The core rules work very well on their own, and should come in as a less expensive book than either the BRP Core rules, or the Call of Cthulhu rules. Now, when you want to tell someone to try BRP by hunting down an old, used copy of Elric!, you can just point them at this instead.

Excellent!

As I said above, my hope is that this game becomes the new 'intro' game to BRP. It's been far too long since Chaosium have had a fantasy RPG under their wings. I would love to see this game do well for them, and allow them to spread their wings once more.

Well, thanks to the interesting and insightful chat, Ben, and it's great to see that the spirit of Stormbringer lives on with Magic World. Before I let you go, however, and I ask this of everyone we interview, do you have any advice for people looking to get into game writing and development?

Write. Don't think that your ideas are brilliant, just because your friends tell you they are. Listen to the editors to whom you send your stuff, and carefully consider their advice. Also, if you want to design RPGs, you must remember this if you forget everything else: you are not writing a novel. You are creating a framework for others to tell stories.

Thanks again, Ben. I know that the fans of this site and I look forward to what the future holds for Magic World and more!