

Interview with Anthony Ragan

Strike to Stun: Do you consider yourself a typical gamer, i.e. a freak, or can worldly matter arouse your interest?

Anthony Ragan: Well, I consider myself a typical gamer, but I consider myself a geek, rather than a freak. Like a lot of gamers, I have interests that "outsiders" raise their eyebrows at - such as gaming. But I also have more mainstream interests: fine cooking, a broad range of music and reading, US football (Go Niners!) and basketball (LA Lakers). I try to follow international, national, state, and local politics so that I can be that rarest of breeds, an informed voter.



STS: Are you presently running a campaign? If yes, what is your style of GMing or playing?

AR: I'm not running anything at the moment, but I hope to be doing so, soon. My style is fairly loose and informal: I like moderately complex rules systems, such as Chaosium's BRP, GURPS, WFRP, and others, but I don't like stopping the game to look up a rule. In those cases I'll just wing it and fix the mistake later, if need be. I do try to be consistent, though, since a lack of consistency will drive players crazy. I emphasize character interaction (PC-PC or PC-NPC) over location, and try to portray my NPCs as living characters who actually reside in the game world, with goals and plans and fears of their own. Doing this provides a believable texture to the world.

STS: Making their hobby their profession is certainly a dream many GMs dream. How did you actually become a writer for RPGs and specifically for WFRP?

AR: It was almost an accident. I was at GenCon in the late 80s and played in Ken Rolston's playtest games for Something Rotten in Kislev. I mentioned afterwards that I'd like to write for WFRP, and Ken suggested I do a draft for an article about Marienburg, a location GW wanted to develop. I did and, to my surprise, Ken liked it and passed it to GW. Even more to my surprise, GW liked it! That was the origin of the original White Dwarf Marienburg articles. That led to gigs with Target Games (the makers of Mutant Chronicles) and, eventually, work with Hogshead when they acquired the WFRP license. In essence, making one contact lead to others.

STS: And is it really a dream come true to be a professional writer?

AR: I'd say so. The work itself is by no means glamorous: I don't know about you, but I find writing hard. But the end result is fun and it's a kick to see one's name in print. And it's especially fun when a fan comes to the booth at a convention and tells me how much fun they've had GMing or playing something I wrote.

STS: Can you actually make a living as a freelance writer?

AR: Not in the games industry, unless you live in an area with a low cost of living - or you're as prolific as Steve Long or Robin Laws. Unfortunately, I have to maintain a day job. I hope to branch out into more mainstream writing and make a living at it, eventually.

STS: Tell us something about the way you work. Are you typing away late into the night in your little cabinet or is there a lot of negotiation and collaboration involved?

AR: Most of my products so far have been solo, so I'm usually chained to my keyboard on nights and weekends. I'm very easily distracted (sad to say), so I like to go places where I can isolate myself and forget the passage of time. I also tend to write in spurts, thinking for a long while and then putting a bunch of words on the screen. I have a very bad habit of trying to get it right the first time, instead of writing a draft, then rewriting. At 42, I doubt I'll ever break the habit, but I'm trying.

STS: What was it like to work for Games Workshop and Hogshead, compared to your other professional experience?

AR: Both have been very easy to work for. GW gave me plenty of leeway to stay true to WFRP (as opposed to their view of the Old World in WFB) and Hogshead was very understanding when some major outside problems

delayed the Marienburg manuscript. I'd have to say that my experiences in the industry as a whole have been quite positive: if you act like a responsible professional with your editors, they'll likely treat you with the same courtesy.

STS: M:SdtR must have been a huge project. On what grounds did you decide what to incorporate and what to leave out?

AR: Mostly by what would fit in with the assigned page count. You'll note that Marienburg has many more neighborhoods than are described in the individual chapters. I decided early on to not do more than a sentence or two for those other districts, leaving them for the GM to develop as he or she saw fit. If I had, the book would have been way too big, or the districts would have received superficial treatment. I also had access to unpublished material from Flame Publications: when I thought their stuff added something unique to the city, I adapted it and incorporated it. When it duplicated something I already had in mind, I left it out.

STS: There already existed an excellent city sourcebook for WFRP before you started your work, i.e. Middenheim: City of Chaos. What was the justification for publishing another city book, and in what way is your book different from M:CoC?

AR: A couple of different reasons. First, WFRP'ers seem to like urban adventures - it's one of WFRP's features. So, another city book seemed a sensible way to react to fan demand. (I'm happy to say the old articles were quite popular and fans often asked for the city to be developed further) Also, the Old World needed some sort of "crossroads" setting, a place that could be a jumping-off point for adventures all over the world. As the greatest port in the Old World, Marienburg was ideal for this.

As to how it's different from Middenheim, well, I think my book concentrates more on the Marienburgers themselves: locations are secondary to who lives (or lived) there. It's the interactions with NPCs that most interest me in a RPG, so I tried to take that approach. And, because it's a bigger book, it goes into more detail about the history, politics, and geography of the region. Middenheim just didn't have the space to do that.

STS: Did you do a lot of research for M:SdtR? If yes, what were your sources?

AR: I didn't do all that much, really. I'm fairly well-read on 16th century European History, so I just used my own knowledge to create a place that would "feel right." I wasn't overly concerned with "historical correctness," since I think WFRP has a lot of anachronistic elements anyway that give it its unique style. About the map, though, I did do a bit of research: the map of the city is based on the maps of Amsterdam and Venice from the Encyclopedia Britannica. I xeroxed them, cut them into pieces like a tangram, and then rearranged them into one whole for my rough sketch. I can still see the originals in Ralph Horsley's final version of the map.

STS: Every creative invention seems to be potentially threatening the consistency of the Warhammer World, or so many WFRP experts think. Was that thought in the back of your mind while writing Marienburg, or did you emphasize your right of poetic license?

AR: It's an interesting problem. For every person who says "this violates the spirit of the Warhammer World," you find another who thinks it (whatever "it" may be) is just fine. What we really mean is that, within broad boundaries, we each have a personal vision of the WFRP setting. This is especially true depending on whether one started with WFRP or WFB (versions 4 or later). I just tried to stay true to my conception of the Old World: a loose modeling of the early 16th century, with strong elements of dark fantasy and horror lurking in the background. I definitely wanted to control the magic power available, since I think the game's "feel" is changed substantially when powerful magic is common.

As for consistency with prior products, well, I tried to be consistent, but more careful observers than I will tell you where I blew it

STS: Your take on Marienburg's secession from the Empire has caused some discussion. Do you feel that your view of Marienburg has generally been well accepted?

AR: I'll be honest, this is the first I've heard of the version of Marienburg's secession causing a controversy. I thought I was being true to what was written in the original articles. As for how well-accepted it's been, nobody's written me to complain.

STS: Games Workshop, of course, has changed the Warhammer World much more than any Hogshead supplement ever could, most of all by radically transforming Bretonnia into the land of Arthurian Romance and Chivalry in WFB 5 and 6. What is your opinion of this development?

AR: In all honesty, I don't like it. I prefer the dirty, grimy Bretonnia that resembles France before the Wars of Religion or the Revolution. The idea that Bretonnia could stay at a high medieval level of technology and development while the rest of the world advanced to the Renaissance made no sense to me. That said, I think the members of the WFRP list came up with an excellent compromise: the version of Bretonnia in the WFRP rule book is the "real" Bretonnia, while the WFB version is the propaganda the nobles delude themselves into believing. That actually enhances the dark fantasy feel of the game, emphasizing the ruling classes' disconnection from reality.

STS: There has not been a lot of new stuff for WFRP since Marienburg, lots of supplements are in the pipeline but hardly any have been released. What do you think about Hogshead's product policy?

AR: I wish Hogshead were more productive, but small companies in the RPG industry have to deal with the reality of unforeseen circumstances, such as writers and artists flaking out, or very slow response times from the licensor, or any of a number of things. Part of it's my fault: I've been working for other companies instead of sending in WFRP proposals. (Bad Anthony, bad!) However, I think the next year will see a great increase in the number of WFRP products being released. Let's keep our fingers crossed.

STS: Are you involved in any present or future project of Hogshead's?

AR: Yep. None that I can talk about because of non-disclosure agreements, but I and a writing partner have proposals in for two major works, and I'm putting together a proposal for an adventures anthology. I'll also be contributing to a forthcoming race book and Apocrypha 3 (that last is far in the future).

STS: How about your future as a writer? What are you working on right now? And can we expect a novel one day?

AR: I'd love to do a novel - I just need an idea.

I've just finished working for White Wolf on a project that will come out in 2002, and I recently had an adventure for Deadlands published, called "Rain o'Terror." And, living in Los Angeles, I'm one of several million want-to-be screenwriters.

Mr. Ragan was interviewed by Markus Widmer