

Interview with Graeme Davis

Strike to Stun: You were one of the designers of WFRP and TEW, and although you left Games Workshop some time ago, you are, it seems, still very much interested in the game. Why is that? Is it pure nostalgia, or do you feel that WFRP is still something special?

Graeme Davis: I still have a sentimental attachment to WFRP. I put 4 1/2 years of my life into it at GW and Flame. I also feel I owe something to the fans - after all, they kept the game alive for three years after GW dropped it and before Hogshead picked it up. To have so many people across the world feel so strongly about some things that I wrote, that's very humbling. And I love the world of WFRP, its tone and feel. I enjoy writing for it very much.



STS: You edited the last non-reprint supplement by Hogshead, *Apocrypha 2 - Chart of Darkness*. Could you explain the subtitle to those of us who aren't much into wordplay?

GD: James came up with the title. "Apocrypha Now" is obviously a reference to the movie "Apocalypse Now," which was inspired by Joseph Conrad's novel "Heart of Darkness."

STS: Did you get a lot of feedback from gamers? If yes, what were the reactions like?

GD: I haven't had a lot of direct feedback on *Apocrypha 2*, though I have read a few reviews. Everybody seemed to like some parts and not other parts, although opinions varied on individual sections. "Deep Trouble" was generally regarded as the weakest part of the book, but to be fair to Ken his father had just died, so it was not likely to be his best work.

STS: *Realms of Sorcery* is still highly anticipated. And there seems to be a chance that the ever-forthcoming supplement will finally see the light of day very soon. What can we expect?

GD: This may surprise you, but I don't know. I'm looking forward to it as much as anyone.

STS: *RoS* is supposed to patch up WFRP's flawed magic system. But there are other parts in the game mechanics which feel a bit dated. Do you think that there is a chance for a second edition of WFRP? What should be changed in your opinion?

GD: I think WFRP is unique among role-playing games in still being in its first edition almost 15 years after its original release. James and I have had a few conversations about the possibility of a second edition, but the conclusion we have usually reached is that people would prefer to have more sourcebooks and adventures rather than a second edition of the rules. The game mechanics of WFRP have never been its strong point, but most people seem to have come up with their own house rules, or to be willing to put up with the mechanics for the sake of the setting and the adventures. The questions of whether there will be a second edition, and if so, when are really questions for James to answer. In my own personal opinion, most of the game's mechanics could benefit from some refining and streamlining, especially combat and magic. But these changes tend to have effects that ripple all through-out the game, and before you know it you're throwing out everything but the setting. I've often toyed with the idea of switching WFRP to a percentage-based skill system, for example, but that would almost require starting again from scratch.

STS: The whole project of a second edition of WFRP is actually rather risky, since GW's background for WFB has changed quite a bit in the past decade. Do you feel that the two worlds of Warhammer are still the same, considering Bretonnia, for instance?

GD: I know a lot of WFRP fans don't like the way GW has been developing the Warhammer setting - especially Bretonnia - but honestly I don't think it's a huge problem. And we have to remember that - like it or not - WFRP is a secondary product and GW is doing the right thing from a business viewpoint by making sure the setting serves WFB as well as it can. I don't think the WFRP and WFB settings for Bretonnia contradict each other too seriously - you just have to think of the WFB image as the public face of Bretonnia and the WFRP setting as its grubby underside. Think of the movie "Jabberwocky," for example - the knights probably saw themselves as very much in

the Bretonnian mould, but because the central character of the movie was Michael Palin's peasant, we get a different point of view. The contradictions between the two images of Bretonnia actually offer excellent potential for roleplaying adventures. Don't forget, either, that the City of Mousillon is still as it was described in the WFRP rulebook - it is covered in the WFB Undead (and now Vampire Counts) army books very nicely.

Because WFRP has rarely set foot outside the Empire and Marienburg - in official publications, at least - there is little difficulty in accommodating new information from WFB army books. People howled when the Chaos Dwarf Empire suddenly appeared right where the Hobgoblin Hegemony used to be, but from the PCs' point of view, who knows what goes on so far away? I have to admit, I have more of a problem with the image of Emperor Karl-Franz as a mighty warrior riding a griffon.

STS: Ever since WotC presented their open licence strategy, there has been talk about a D20 WFRP. Do you think that this could be a viable option in order to secure the game's future?

GD: I don't think it will ever happen - but then again, I didn't believe it when I first heard that WotC had taken over TSR! I guess if it works for Call of Cthulhu, we'll have to see what happens with other games. I do think, though, that GW are still very protective of the Warhammer setting and intellectual property, and I don't think they would allow anyone other than Hogshead to produce WFRP material, either using the original WFRP rules of the D20 system.

STS: What do you think of WotC's open licence strategy in general? Will it further role-playing, or is it just a tool to secure their domination of the market?

GD: I think that remains to be seen. What I have been most aware of so far is a flood of small generic fantasy adventures, which reminds me very strongly of the late 70s and early 80s when publishers like Judges Guild and Mayfair Games were producing a lot of D&D and "suitable for use with D&D" products, which were extremely variable in quality. I think it will take a year or two until we see how things will go with new games and settings, such as the D20 version of Cthulhu and the Dragonfist martial arts RPG.

STS: GW's licence policy, on the other hand, seems to be rather restrictive. Is that the reason why so little supplementary material is being published, by Hogshead as well as by foreign-language publishers?

GD: Yes. Almost every penny GW makes is based upon either Warhammer or Warhammer 40,000, and they know the value of these properties. Accordingly, they are very careful about third parties making use of them, whether in the form of Hogshead producing WFRP material or someone else making computer games. I know, for example, that every new WFRP product from Hogshead has to be inspected and approved by GW, both at the concept stage and as a finished product; RoS, in particular, came under a lot of scrutiny according to what I have heard.

STS: WFRP is nowadays a game that is very much in the hands of the fans. Many of them put very serious work to it, as can be seen in Warpstone or the Le Grimoire tomes, which amount to actual supplements. What is the status of these texts compared to the official publications in your opinion?

GD: I'm constantly amazed by the passion and creativity of WFRP fans. I wish I had as much time to put into the game myself. A lot of the unofficial material is of superb quality, although there's always the chance that it might conflict with something that is later published officially. But as we've already discussed, GW themselves are not free of blame in that department! It's always up to the GM in my opinion - if you see something that inspires you and makes you want to use it in your campaign, then it doesn't matter where it came from.

STS: Apart from WFRP, you have written background and rules for a number of different systems, such as GURPS, Call of Cthulhu or Vampire: The Masquerade. Is there something like a smallest common denominator for all of your projects, some sort of personal style that runs through your work?

GD: Hmm - I never really thought of this. I suppose if I have an identifiable style as an RPG writer it is that I like to make players think, and I like to confront them with situations where fighting is the worst possible option. I also prefer a horror style over high fantasy - I like to place each creature with care and use it to its maximum effect, rather than throwing wave after wave of orcs and goblins at the PCs, and that tends to be a feature of horror rather than high fantasy. I think that horror and fantasy make a very potent mix - some of my favourite fantasy stories are still Robert E. Howard's early Conan stories, which have a strong horror element.

STS: What is the best and what is the worst thing you have ever written?

GD: I'm probably the worst person to ask this question, because no-one can judge their own work completely objectively. My favourite out of all the things I've written is probably "Shadows Over Bogenhafen," though I like "A

Rough Night At The Three Feathers" as well, because I wrote it purely as an experiment and it seems to have worked. Probably my worst effort was the Fimir adventure, "There's a One-Eyed Fellow Hiding to the North of Kammendun" in WD (the title, by the way, is a parody of a popular 19th-century English poem, "The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God," which begins "There's a green-eyed yellow idol to the north of Katmandu). Firstly, I wrote it in three hours, and it shows. And perhaps worse, I was so in love with the joke title that I built the adventure around it, rather than starting with a good solid adventure and worrying about the title later.

STS: Describe some of your current projects!

GD: Hogshead has a few proposals of mine for consideration at the moment. Apocrypha 3 is in an advanced stage of planning, and another project is tentatively titled "De Bestiis Chaotis," and would involve a number of short encounters showcasing specific monsters, backed up with expanded information and rules (basically similar to the Fimir article in WD way back when, but higher quality), and linked together by the book "De Bestiis Chaotis," which is a book of forbidden lore containing information (of varying reliability, like the mediaeval bestiaries of our own world!) on monsters of various types. I'm also working on a proposal for a Sylvania sourcebook which would cover the material presented in the WFB Vampire Counts and Undead army books, describe the County of Sylvania and include a good amount of adventure material.

Apart from those projects, I have recently submitted a second edition manuscript for GURPS Vikings to Steve Jackson Games, and I'm starting work on the second edition of GURPS Middle Ages 1, a.k.a. Medieval England. I also do the occasional bit of editing for SJG, most recently GURPS Discworld Also.

In my "day job" as a computer game designer, I'm currently working on a massively-multiplayer online role-playing game, which I'm not allowed to say anything about - except that it's the first time I've had the chance to work on a computer RPG (believe it or not!), and I'm thoroughly enjoying it!

STS: Like many other RPG authors you are nowadays involved in designing computer games. What is the difference between writing RPG material and developing computer games?

GD: The biggest difference, I've found, is that you can't leave anything to the GM, because there isn't one - and when a computer doesn't know what to do, it will either do nothing or it will crash! On the one hand, this means that the designer has to try to anticipate everything any player will ever possibly try to do, and on the other hand, it is impossible to accommodate such a wide range of possibilities, so you have to decide where you are going to support the player's freedom and where you are going to restrict it. It's a lot more work than writing tabletop RPG adventures!

STS: Computer RPG are currently rather popular. Do they harm traditional pen-and-paper role-playing, or do you feel that they rather introduce many young gamers to the genre, who will then go on to discover 'real' RPGs?

GD: In my opinion, computer RPGs today are where tabletop RPGs were about 20 years ago, although there are exceptions. Online roleplaying games like Everquest, Ultima Online and Asheron's Call are a big market right now, but they haven't really come to grips with how to handle all those people - technologically they can, but I think that little thought has been given to the game experience, leading to very little narrative and atmosphere, and most players resorting to the cycle of kill-loot-level-repeat that was characteristic of early D&D. Ultima On-line stands apart to an extent, because the players have taken the world very seriously and it does work - mostly - as a society. I would like to think that players of computer role-playing games might be attracted to tabletop RPGs because of the superior game experience that they offer, but I honestly don't think that's the case. Computer games in general filled the mainstream market niche that roleplaying was aiming for in the late 1980s and early 90s, and paper RPGs went back to being a minority hobby, as they had been in the 1970s. I think that most of the new blood that comes into the tabletop role-playing hobby does so through D&D still, and some gamers check out other systems and stay involved in the hobby. (mw)