

WARPSTONE

The independent magazine for Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay



THE WARPSTONE INTERVIEW

An Interview with James Wallis, Director of Hogshead Publishing

(April 1996)

I had arranged to meet James Wallis in Oxford Street amongst the bustling crowds of tourists and shoppers dodging out of each others way, not to mention the occasional bus and taxi. Leaflet distributors, advertising the skills of an English language college continually attempt to thrust flyers into your hand while you wonder how despatch riders stay alive with such a disregard for such simple road safety rules as say, red lights. If some poor 14th century peasant had been kidnapped and bought here they would use the word chaos or maybe hell. However if we travelled back to visit it would certainly be a lot quieter but you would have to put up with plague, starvation and the occasional knight beating you up.

It was from here (Central London not the 14thC) that we retired to a nearby cafe to talk. In interviewing James Wallis I hoped to find out where Warhammer FRP is going, how it was wrenched from Games Workshop's grasp and something about the man that had done so. "If you ever want somewhere quiet to sit-down in Central London, this is a good place." said James. However in central London this can be a bad sign, never the less it was empty and so began the interview. The conversation even had a musical soundtrack which seemed to increase in volume the longer we sat there.

James Wallis is a trained and experienced journalist having written for White Dwarf, Adventurer and Arcane amongst others within the gaming industry. He has however done plenty of work outside, mostly for Publishing magazines. "Journalism paid the bills and in the meantime I was doing roleplaying supplements." even now, "Hogshead does not pay my bills and I have now been freelancing again for about a year."

His publishing career started with Fanzines, the first being "Werman" published in 1982. "Werman was awful but my second 'zine was actually pretty good. Occasionally I reread it and think why can't I write like that these days." James believes that Fanzines are the ground root of the hobby and have a very important part to play . A large proportion of the people who are influential in the British market started off as Fanzine Editors but yet Fanzines remain under exposed. This is partly due to the fact there are two good professional Roleplaying magazines out there. "So people are getting their monthly fix." The Dying of the Light credits for James Wallis stated that he did not like to mention his previous work. The dark secrets in his gaming cupboard turn out be supplements for Palladium. Not Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles! I hear you cry. "Mutants in Avalon *was* one of mine. It was actually the first gaming supplement I wrote and I'm still quite pleased with it, given the brief that I was: It's after the Apocalypse and all the animals have mutated in humanoids and Arthur's back. Erm...I think I did a reasonable job. I also did 'Mutants in Orbit' which is exactly what it sounds like really. Less King Arthur in that one. They sold pretty well and before it was over merchandised it was a nice little system. Palladium are good employers but people in the industry seem to have this thing about them. You either love their stuff or hate it."

James started playing RPG's in 1981 and these days, apart from play testing WFRP products, he plays a version of 'Lace and Steel' and 'Empire of the Petal Throne' "For my money the best game ever published. Its hard to describe but its one of those completely

mapped out fantasy worlds and its such a rich environment. Three companies have put it out but none have been able to make it work, it's not a commercial game."

He also plays Ghostbusters "Horrible admission but it is a brilliant game, about the only comedy game that works as a comedy game." What about Paranoia? "Its funny the first two or three times but the jokes get a bit tired."

So is FRUP (forthcoming Hogshead comedy game) going to be a one joke concept. "Yes but it's going to be a bloody good joke!"

Hogshead Publishing (HP) was formally incorporated in October 1994, although James was running a Roleplaying company previous to that publishing 'Interaction' (now IF: Interactive Fantasy). HP was formed after he had been working on the game Bugtown for three companies at the end of which it ended up with Wizards of the Coast. When six weeks later they decided to produce all future games in house. "So I was left with four years work and no publisher in sight, so I though, sod it! I'll do it myself."

Hogshead started life with three full time staff but around June 1995 he realised it wasn't working. "We were losing money hand over fist quite frankly." So he stopped paying himself and all the others went freelance. Obviously publishing a game involves a large amount of people from writers to proof-readers to typesetters. "Some of these are paid or take payment in kind, some of them just do it because they love the game, which is great. Its one of the tremendously satisfying things about it, people really enjoy Warhammer."

To date HP have only published IF and the Warhammer material, which has been very good, keeping up the quality and feel of the original releases. So why re-release Warhammer? "A friend of mine who used to work for GW came to me and said that they were looking for someone to take over the license. I phoned Phil Gallagher said I was interested and that was it. It was a business decision, I knew it would sell well. It's a good game and its got a good fan base. We knew that no British RP company would succeed as a start up company unless it attached itself to a recognised name."

Warhammer is a way of funding other smaller games although James is keen to stress that he is dedicated to the continual development and growth of Warhammer.

Do you like WFRP? "I think it's great, one of the few games from the eighties that can hold its head up. Some of the mechanics are a bit dated but the background is very crisp, very original, there's still nothing else like it." It's the only game that successfully blended horror and fantasy. Earthdawn tried it but it was just sort of AD&D with squiggly things in there. It didn't work for me and from what I can tell it didn't work for FASA, apparently it sold like a cold, wet, dead dog."

TSR owns the world when it comes to the fantasy RPG genre, others have tried to encroach but no-one as yet has made a real go at it. The main problem is that to most people D&D is roleplaying, how many conversations have you had where you've tried to explain what roleplaying is and ended up saying after many blank looks (however much you tried to avoid it), oh you know Dungeon and Dragons.

Hogshead sold about 6,500 WFRP rulebooks in a year, which is not as many as they hoped but still enough to see them in profit. What has amazed James, is how well the supplements have sold. After all, conventional wisdom is that you'll sell half as many supplements as rulebooks but Aepochya Now! has gone back to the printers already (1st printing run being 4000). Even with such sales James has no illusions about challenging TSR's dominance of the market.

HP prints its products in America for business reasons as over half of WFRP products are sold there while the UK counts for about ten per cent. Due to existing contractual agreements they cannot sell to Japan, France or Italy. WFRP sells well for HP in Scandinavia, Iceland, Poland and Germany. "Germany's the number two customer. I don't understand why there isn't a German language edition."

Of course as a whole Europeans tend to speak far better English than we do French or German. "It's true, quite frighteningly true. What's also embarrassing is that they don't seem to understand that. I had a phone call this morning from someone saying why don't you put out a German Edition. Well, I speak about five words of German and two of those are Actung and Spitfiren."

Hogshead did not release the rulebook as a Second Edition, because it would have taken

too long. Development of an RPG takes about two years and Hogshead wanted to get the game into the market and re-establish it.

How much creative control have GW retained? "They get approval over everyone we do, adverts, the lot. Anything which uses their trademarks, Games Workshop is Warhammer. Without Warhammer it would be nothing. Those trademarks are worth millions so they are very concerned about anyone that is using them, so they demand approval. We deal with Phil Gallagher who was one of the original writers and who now looks after all their licensing and Andy Jones whose one of their games designers. There both people who are very clued into the Warhammer world and if we send up something that's wrong or breaches continuity, they will stop it and ask for to be changed. Occasionally they say this doesn't fit in with something you don't know about but which we are going to be releasing in eighteen months time and I go OK...fine. It's useful. There are a good bunch of people, they're not unreasonable at all."

Games Workshop obviously had to be convinced you would look after WFRP. "Yes, a large cheque. No, Phil needed to know I knew what I was doing. I sent him copies of other books I had written and IF so he knew that I could put a book together. I had to convince him I was going to be a decent business man not just some fan who had dreams of seeing it back in print."

A lot of fans still harbour resentment towards GW for their decision to cordon off their own market and retreat from the rest of the hobby (Virtually becoming the British hobby). Whilst James finds GW a pleasure to work with, WFRP suffers from associated snobbery. "Some people think Warhammer:GW, GW:THE GREAT SATAN." Due to this HP have had some problems convincing people they are not a division of GW. There are people who will not touch the game because of the GW name including distributors in America who recently took GW to court over their decision to distribute their own products themselves. (James believed the case was thrown out).

Some of the original writers have remained involved in the development of the game. Graham Davis is still involved and Phil Gallagher has creative input through GW although does not actually write anything. A number of the original artists are working with Hogshead, although not necessarily on WFRP products.

All the supplements to date have been released late, indeed Death on the Reik was promised for February 1996 and four months later there is still no sign. This is partly due to the effects of the company's rationalisation and technical problems. As James explained "DOTR has hit fairly significant printing problems. I won't get boringly technical because it is boringly technical but its all to do with the incompatibility between British and American printing film. Think of one thing and think of it's complete opposite and you've got the sort of dichotomy we're dealing with. DOTR doesn't exist on disk. We are trying to find a way to convert the film without spending more than it will cost us to actually print the book."

It is doubtful that the first printing of the Enemy Within Volume One will ever make a profit, but there is still enough demand to make DOTR worth releasing once the technical problems have been overcome. It is hoped that DOTR will be out late summer.

Hogshead have proposals for new supplements coming in all the time but a number of other projects have been briefly mentioned as future supplements:

Carrion up the Reik (great title): James stated that this depends on the reception of DOTR. He is unsure whether this will be set before PBT or serve as a replacement because of PBT's relative unpopularity. "I have an idea for CUTR which will not be the title its published under, it will probably be 'The Man in the Golden Mask.' Alexander Dumas meets Ian Fleming."

Warhammer City the Middenheim Source book: "It all depends with what happens with PBT. Its not one of the ones a lot of people have asked for. I suspect there are enough copies out there to satisfy demand."

Marienburg Source book: This is being written by Anthony Ragen who wrote some of the Marienburg material in WD and is in the style of the old Blade City source books. It will possibly see the light of day later this year.

Brettonia Source book: This will not be started in earnest until after GW release their forthcoming WFB supplement.

Realms of Sorcery: This is being written by Ken and Jo Walton two very experienced writers and there is a possibility of an August release date. James mentioned that it may also be released as a limited edition hardback (black with gold letters) to celebrate ten years of WFRP.

Realms of Chaos: Hogshead did submit a Realms of Chaos supplement but this was rejected by GW as they were not happy about the idea of Chaos PC's. Indeed as part of the Licensing agreement James gained access to Flame Publications' archives which included The Horned Rat, an entire supplement never released for the same reason.

As a ten year old game Warhammer does hold its head up, mainly because of its excellence but also due to the fact that fantasy Roleplaying developments have come to a virtual stop. "I do see an awful lot of people doing what's already been done and I think people are looking around for a new direction. "

As most of us well know roleplaying tends to be very popular with those that do and virtually unheard of by those that don't. Of course in Britain RP tends to be a very secluded hobby with this subculture labelling players as the atypical 'nerds'. "It has got stuck with the nerd tag and we're never going to get away from that now. So what! If it worries you why are you roleplaying. Its never going to become a mainstream pursuit, it demands too much input, too much intelligence, too much participation to become a mainstream hobby."

By remaining such a small and diverse hobby in Britain has resulted in a severe lack of conventions and until recently Independent magazines. Some great ones have come and gone and early White Dwarf is still held up as the ideal by many people. At the moment two (both good) professional independent magazines are providing the gaming community with their news and views.

James provides a voice of pessimism/realism here. "There are two pretty good magazines but they will go bust and I say that with some confidence." This is an opinion backed by experience. "Since 1980, twenty-two professional RP magazines have started up and of those three are still in existence and none have been running longer than two years. I think that says something." He believes that Arcane is the closest that anyone has got to getting it right, if they don't over stretch themselves and sees Valkrie as a good solid magazine but one that's never going to set the world alight.

At present UK conventions are in quite a sorry state (although individuals ones are good), compared to say Germany's 'Spiel' which attracts over 100,000 visitors. Ireland puts together more frequent and bigger events than the UK. "It shows what an appallingly state, Britain's Roleplaying industry is in. Gaelcon is brilliant. Three days of Guesness basically. Its got the atmosphere of the old Dragonmeets (we're all here because we really enjoy what we're doing) and that's what I'm not getting out of the hobby now. That's what I'd really like to put back in."

"If someone came to me and said would you sponsor our convention? If I happened to have the money, then yes. There is some word that Arcane (Future publishing has its own conventions branch) they may be putting something together, that would be ideal." Fingers crossed folks.

With Hogshead James would like to prove that a British games company can succeed and put down some foundations for a decent British Games Industry, with a lot of small companies working together. "One of my bugbears is a lot of British companies start up with quite good products but will not talk to other companies so they don't make the mistakes they are about to make. They make mistakes and they go bust and it happens again and again. If your thinking of starting a company for gods sake come and talk to me. I've been in this industry for six years and writing for eleven. Please come and talk to me I do not want to see you go bankrupt."

In order for the British Games Industry to flourish there needs to be a solid retail and distribution structure. James is happy with the retailing side but some of the distributors "should pull their bloody fingers out." Virgin for example, always seem to take a long time to restock. "They've [Virgin megastore] had no copies of the rulebook since January. Virgin is deeply fucked up. The buying has been taken over centrally by a guy whose name I won't repeat but if a good game slapped him round the head he wouldn't

buy it."

"SDVM are a very good distributor, they know their stuff, order in good quantities, helpful, friendly and pay their bills on time. If everyone was like SDVM I would be a very happy man but many aren't."

HP have no targets for how many copies of WFRP they wish to sell but believe in two years they will have sold 12,000 to 14,000 as well as publishing eight supplements. This should firmly re-establish WFRP and hopefully secure it's long term future.

Other forthcoming Hogshead releases are Bulletproof and of course FRUP, which James is writing on his own. Talking of FRUP there was once a time when you were supplied with dice on purchasing a game but know its more likely to be cards or.. (wait for it). "The only roleplaying game with a Jellybean mechanics system."(?!?) However, these won't be supplied free due to EC regulations, possibly? Rumours are that TSR eagerly await its release. IF will be re-launched soon and has just been nominated for an Origins award as best professional magazine and so we wish them luck.

James also stated that he would like to develop intellectual properties in much the same way as FASA have done with Battletech. However you are unlikely to see FRUP the movie but Bulletproof? Well maybe!

My impression of James Wallis is that he certainly knows what he is doing and is ideally suited to re-establishing WFRP and maybe even, as he hopes playing a vital part in the re-emergence of the UK industry. Of course James recognises that WFRP has a large enthusiastic fan base on which a solid foundation can be built, but for the game to flourish things must move forward. "We depend on the old market while the new one establishes itself but we cannot depend on it forever." Let us hope this happens and WFRP doesn't die again.

FOOTNOTE (June 1996): This interview took place in April and some things have changed since then. Release dates have slipped back again but everything seems on course (see news) and Virgin even have had some new stock in, which has sold out again and has yet to be replaced. The final words I shall leave to James Wallis, these were posted recently to the WFRP mailing list. "Hogshead is doing okay and more to the point, I'm enjoying myself. Don't expect me or Hogshead to stop any time soon."