AN EVIL EMPIRE

Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay was published in 1986. I was 18 years old, making this the first true grown up game I’d played as a geeky fragile new adult. This game was made for me. I’d been raised on Games Workshop as a nascent hobbyist all through my teenage years. They kept me fed and clothed in hobby goodness with their monthly love letters that they called White Dwarf. I was aware that they dabbled with ‘others’ who preferred to push tin soldiers around an upturned Subbuteo pitch, but I forgave them for that. They always came back to me with their strange and wonderful little articles and scenarios from other worlds.

As a Brit, I couldn't help but be beholden to America for my gaming needs. That's where it all started, and that made it all the more exotic and fascinating. I adored Marvel comics (still do) and loved unpicking the vernacular of another countries geek speak. The English reprints existed of course and I duly collected and catalogued them all, preserving them with all the reverence they were due. I convinced my sceptical parents that these would be worth real money one day! How wrong I was. These reprints were nothing more than carbon copies of the original four colour comic books with the odd adverts in them. Fun fact! The British imports were edited by a young man called Neil Tennant. You might know him better these days as the voice of the Pet Shop Boys.

Over here we had our own superheroes in the form of Judge Dredd and Jonny Alpha. I couldn't quite get to grips with them, they were a lot more mature than the adventures of Charles Xavier's graduates. They swore ("Drokk!") and they shot people. They were a bit political. It was a bit too grim and gritty for me.

Strange then that the UK take on the fantasy role playing game should take such a hold on me. The cover of WFRP proclaimed itself a "grim world of perilous adventure". It had an orange mohawked tattooed dwarf decapitating an ogre with a massive battle axe. A world away from The Machinations of Bargle. It looked like a bible. It was all in slightly smudgy font in three columns on heavy rough paper. It had those evil grinning sun icons everywhere.

But it was from GW and it was an artefact, a thing to own. Seems strange to say now, but there were really very few games produced in a single big hardcover. It's standard practice now, but back then almost every game came in a box. You could physically kill someone with this thing if you were of a mind.

WFRP did to D&D what 2000AD did to comics. It put a darker twist on all the tropes, and had a wry chuckle doing so. Sure, at its heart it's a bunch of fantasy guys, including dwarves, elves and halflings, all jaunting around on quests beating up monsters. But such monsters! It was like someone had taken the Monster Manual and the Call of Cthulhu books and dropped them in a blender. They were either terrifying, or ludicrous, which made them even more terrifying.

The key to the setting was Chaos, again a notion pulled straight out of D&D via Michael Moorcock, but made nasty rather than merely unpredictable. The pantheon for WFRP revolved around the battle between Law and Chaos. They each had their Gods, but the Law team really just stood on the sidelines gawping at the sheer unbridled lunacy/genius of Khorne, Tzeentch, Nurgle and Slaanesh. These four beauties epitomised the WFRP ethos. The world is going to hell in a hand basket, and it's because of you. It's not the monster in the woods or down the dungeon, it's in your nature, it's the
enemy within. Mind blowing.

WFRP was, in retrospect, a funny old game. It's full of clunky mechanics and odd little nuances. It barely had a magic system out of the gate. It had facing rules. In amongst those oddities were some lovely little touches though. The careers system, fate points, trappings. All things that have bled into the gaming lexicon since then. But it was hard work navigating the book. What really made WFRP a great game was its campaign, The Enemy Within.

This campaign made WFRP playable for me. It was a fabulous read, with one of the best opening hooks for a campaign I've ever seen.

(Spoiler alert! Since the adventure is about 25 years old I hope you'll forgive me mentioning a few details?)

In the opening scenes the party come across a corpse with a letter from a lawyer. The corpse is due to inherit a fortune, he simply has to arrive at a preset destination and claim it. The corpse is the spitting image of one of the pcs. Result! Later we discover that the note is a fraud, placed by the Cult of the Purple Hand to lure their target into a trap.

Aaah, the cult. There's a sequence a little bit later where the cult try to make contact with their agent, who the PC is unwittingly impersonating. It involves secret signs, which the GM has to act out, scratching their nose, and tugging their ear. It made a striking change from simply calling for initiative.

It was details like this that really made the world and the game come to life. It was all the best bits of a great Cthulhu scenario welded to a fantasy setting. Conspiracies, investigations, negotiations, corruption, but all placed before the players in a way they could actually effect. It was brilliantly playable, with the mysteries unfolding as a result of the characters actions. Sometimes it was opaque, but never frustrating.

The first main adventure, Shadows over Bogenhafen, was a master class in presentation. An entire town, with a festival taking place, and an underlying conspiracy that gradually unfolded. WFRP didn't pull any punches either, if the characters failed, the equivalent of a chaos nuke went off utterly changing the world map forever. This at first level. So much for a ratcatcher and his small but vicious dog, this was big time stuff.

I ran Shadows at least four times, with almost totally different results each time, and that's even with the pregens. This was advanced gaming. I had to be on my toes as the pcs could, and did, go anywhere and do anything. I had to reveal a complex world to the players at the same time, without dragging down the pace or anticipation. It's a testament to the adventure that it always felt like light work. Perhaps because I'd internalised it over multiple readings. It remains one of the best adventures I've ever run.

It was utterly trumped by the next episode in the series, Death on the Reik. This was roleplaying heaven in a box. Beautiful maps, and loads of them. An open ended cross country quest with picaresque characters and situations in abundance. All climaxing in Castle Wittgenstein, a Gormenghast like edifice chock full of mad invention. The members of the von Wittgenstein family, all corrupted beyond human limits, lurching around the castle pursuing their mad agendas. There is
no higher pleasure than GMing a frock coat wearing, viola playing cockroach to an audience of wide eyed players.

Death on the Reik made me the GM I am today. It is one of those adventures where the funny little details still get brought up when I share a pint with a player decades later. Harbull Furfoot, our Halfling, died in a cave to a Skaven blade. We held a funeral for him on the moorlands of the Reik, attended by a sober Druid who read the rites. There wasn’t a dry eye in the house.

Of the many times I’ve run this campaign, the end of Death on the Reik has often been the stopping point. It’s a long campaign, so that’s part of it. The other reason is that the next instalment, Power Behind The Throne is perhaps the hardest adventure to GM I’ve ever seen.

Don't get me wrong, it's brilliant. It’s an urban adventure, set in Middenheim. It’s a free form adventure from the player’s perspective. They roam about, talking, exploring, picking up little plots as they fancy. But behind the screen there’s a dizzying amount of moving parts for the GM. There's about 30 NPCs, all with proper agendas, and a specific timeline for their activities. Many of them change personalities over the course of the game, or are not as they first seem due to circumstances that the payers may not discover. Most are deeply unpleasant. The 'point' of the adventure is for the players to influence the NPCs to their cause. Each has a number of votes, and the players need enough to win at a crucial time. But the characters don’t know any of this in the beginning, and it’s the GMs job to drip feed the multiple conspiracies into the sessions, all through complex personalities, in a city environment that has a huge festival in full flow.

I've run this to conclusion twice before, and I’m not sure I’ve ever done it real justice. It's an absolute beast. On paper, I’d say it’s the best adventure I've ever read. In play, it bested me.

Something Rotten in Kislev was enormous fun. This was penned by Ken Rolston who GW has shipped in from the states to write for them. He was one of first gaming idols (Fun Fact! Ken is now the man behind all those Elder Scrolls video games). As a Yank, Ken brought those more four colour sensibilities to WFRP. To be fair they had always been there. There's a healthy seam of black comedy running through WFRP. Gobboes anyone? (Fun fact! I once had a chat with Warhammer's creator, Rick Priestly. He said he was always trying to get more whimsy into the game, but was never really allowed. He then told me a filthy story about a special 'attack' he had written for giants)

Rolston wrenched the campaign to the east, setting three scenarios in Kislev, this worlds Russia. I loved running these games. They’re were much more self contained, mission like. There was another opportunity for overacting with a mute NPC who can only communicate through sign language. There were mini games too, with a duel in a wood with a bear, and a chase scene with skeletal horses. This adventure was really distantly connected to the main plot of the Enemy Within, but I cared not. They were enormous fun.

(I should point out here, I always played Power and Kislev in the wrong Order, as I've presented here. Not really sure why. I think it was accident first time out, and seemed to have no ill effects)

The whole shebang finished up with Empire in Flames. I never played it, and apparently I've not missed much. The reason why I've not played it is nothing to do with its perceived lack of quality, it’s more bittersweet. I had a copy of it under my arm when I tentatively approached John Blanche at Games Day. He had painted the cover, and was an absolute icon to any GW fan. A legend. Trembling,
I asked the rather intimidating figure behind the desk if he would sign my book. Grunting assent, he flipped open the cover, grabbed a near at hand biro, and with both hands on the pen scrawled the name JOHN in huge capital letters and circled it. He had actually ripped the page. I walked away feeling terribly let down. He had just vandalised my precious book, the capstone of the best series of adventures ever produced. He didn’t revere these books the way I did, so I stopped revering him. And to an extent, I stopped revering GW a bit that day too.

In years to come I would find myself immersed in the Wargames side of the Old World. For those early WFRP days though, it was a different world. In my mind it was D&D for mature, creative, clever types. Which is what I wanted to be. It had a spirit to it, rebellious, verbose, dangerous. It was a gateway to an entirely different Appendix N.

Eventually, and perhaps inevitably, it also helped pay my mortgage.