

Sons of Cimmeria #1

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WHEN ALEX AND our friends at Mongoose Publishing asked me to let the Sons of Cimmeria (Sons of the Desert, anyone?) know a bit of our plans for Conan, I was somewhat reluctant at first – it is so easy to come off as a ‘suit’ who cares not for the character or the original author, or about Role-playing games for that matter. But here I am and I ask you not to over-interpret like a Kremlin Analyst of the seventies – or by Crom, to hell with it!

When we took over management of CPI in autumn of 2002, the lands lay barren indeed. We inherited a computer game deal already in the works, and a new pastiche book by Turtledove was in final publishing stages. That’s it. We needed to re-establish the character in publishing, entertainment and overall licensing activities from ground zero.

One of the first tasks was to work with Wandering Star to get their beautiful edition of R E Howard’s Conan into an affordable format, so that the ‘genuine’ Conan would be available to all. The first volume was published last Christmas by Del Rey/Ballantine and sold out in three weeks, it’s already in its third printing! The second volume (of three), The Bloody Crown of Conan, will be out this fall.

As you know, the character has a large following of comic book fans, so the next job was to find a publisher for the new monthly series who shared our vision both creatively and visually. With Dark Horse as our publisher, it feels like Conan has come home! The idea is to faithfully adapt Howard’s stories, and tell them in a chronological order of Conan’s life. The first issues have been spectacularly well received by the trade and readers alike – the series is Dark Horse’s top seller and we hope it will continue many, many years. We will break out of the continuity by doing mini-series and one-shots now and then.

The Hyborian Age is as rich in detail as Middle Earth, but few know of it. The general perception of the character and

mythology has been very linked to that of the first movie starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. As good as that movie is (and I really like it), it does not tell the story of Howard’s Conan. Howard described much, and other writers have added great stuff to the world since, but the source material was spread out and hard to grasp.

I, and my colleague Theo Bergquist, have a background in RPG’s, both as players and publishers. I founded Target Games in the early 1980’s, which developed many universes and game systems including Mutant Chronicles, Warzone, Doomtrooper, Kult and Chronopia. I met with Theo when he started publishing a local Swedish RPG that I used to put out in the eighties and we found that we enjoyed many of the same visions. So we knew that if we could get a great RPG out, we would have a useful factbook about the world itself, and this would assist us when trying to describe to other licensee partners what it looks like. As a bonus, if the game was good enough, we felt thousands of really hard core fantasy experts would discover Conan’s awesome world and spread the gospel! As a licensor, it is important to pick your partners carefully. We looked around, and Mongoose Publishing caught our eye as a publisher putting out excellent material. Well, the rest of that part of the story you know.

An important issue to us is a unified vision and a high quality control. This summer will see the first series of a great line of toys from McFarlane Toys, a clear industry leader. Todd McFarlane himself is a great Conan fan, has been collecting stuff since he was young, and he too shared our vision.

Looking over the horizon, the stuff we are working on now will start hitting shelves in 2005. It includes a very exciting book program with Ace/Berkley. We have decided to tell the tales of three adventurers, from Stygia, Cimmeria and Aquilonia in respective trilogies. We work closely with the authors who have not yet been publicly announced, but who all have previous experience from writing in universes such as those of WOTC. We will have the same artist illustrate all covers, his name is Justin Sweet and he has a very modern, yet classical approach. These books will take place during the Hour of the Dragon setting, and will not feature Conan per se but he will of course be an omnipresent character.

We are also working on an online game which will take place in the same regions as the books. I hope we can tell you more later this year – but work has been going on since last summer and it looks fantastic. The MMOG arena is getting very crowded – but this one game will stand out as done by an experienced team with a solid engine, in a well recognized and believable setting.

I have left the entertainment until last. So much speculation – will it be Arnold? Is Milius involved? Does CPI want a ‘childish’ Conan? Etc, etc. The Conan movie will cost a lot of money to make, probably 100 million dollars or more. It is only natural that the studio will most often have control over who directs, and who is the star in such large projects. Our ambition has been to get as many visuals and product partners together sharing our vision that Hollywood will take notice, and recognize that it works, and is appreciated. We will of course have some influence how the movie will look and feel, but the fact of the matter is, he who pays makes the ultimate decision. We have a good relationship with Warner Brothers, who are currently working on the script, and we hope to go into pre-production this year.

On another note, we are working with a company called Swordplay Entertainment on a series of animated feature-length direct-to-dvd’s based on Howard’s stories of Conan. These films will be made for the mature audience, and possibly cut for certain distribution, and look very promising. The first one is Conan/Red Nails and the script is fantastic. We hope that this film will be ready for Christmas 2005.

I thank Alex, Ian, Paul and the rest of the Mongoose staff for the opportunity to address the Sons of Cimmeria directly – I hope you enjoy gaming in the fantastic world that Robert E Howard created. Unless you have already foraged into the literary side, or read the comics, I hope you will. If you have time between the gaming sessions!

Fredrik Malmberg
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Conan Properties International

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