

## [INTERVIEW] CRAIG SHEELEY - FROM DARKLINGS TO DARK ONES

-----

*Hey Craig, thanks for taking the time to talk to me. Let's start with the basics, huh, where did you grow up and how did you get into roleplaying?*

Well, I grew up in a city called Springfield. Springfield Missouri (one of the many Springfields around the country). Darned near the end of the Baby Boomer generation, a child of the Moon race, watching the Vietnam War on CBS news. You know, ancient history.

I first got into gaming with Avalon Hill's old Kriegspiel, back in 1971. It wasn't real enough for me, so I quickly moved to Panzerblitz. Then it was on – Panzer Leader, Starship Troopers, Tobruk. I discovered D&D and Traveller in 1977, as well as Ogre in '78. Sadly, I didn't play characters much; the idea of GMing was more my style, and I've been running RPG games ever since (too many GMs back then ran games in tactical style, and I was more used to handling teams like wargaming than being a team member, I guess.)

*Sounds familiar. I'm also more comfortable being the Game Master, rather than a player. So, just how did you get into the freelance writing gig?*

I got into game writing by writing little reviews for Space Gamer (*Ed. A long running digest of all things gaming that would be the gateway for numerous authors into the world of freelancing and RPG publications*). Then when Autoduel Quarterly came out (of course I got into Car Wars, from the get-go. If you'd ever seen local driving, you'd know why; also, I was driving a '73 Fury III four-door at the time – Lester Smith has seen it – and there was enough room under the hood for twin 0.50s, which I really wished I'd had) I started writing some articles for them, and it paid enough to help my hobby. So, Steve Jackson Games was looking for someone from the Midwest who could write, and they tagged me for the AADA Atlas series, my first published book. Then one of the freelancer writer organizers that was doing work for Talislanta noticed that and got me on board with the Talislanta sourcebooks.

*So you just fell into it? Well, lucky for us you did! And that led to work at GDW? How did the opportunity there come about?*

Please note that this was over 30 years ago; my memory is hazy on the particulars. I had written a lot of reviews for Challenge magazine (Space Gamer was gone, so I switched magazines), and I don't remember exactly how I met Lester Smith, but I had been working on some stuff for Twilight 2000 (2nd Edition, the improved one), and Lester attended our first local convention in 1991 (he gave me a prototype map for Minion Hunter; I still have it!). And since I was already doing work for GDW and he knew my stuff, he let me work on D-Con (my nickname; like the chemical products, Dark Conspiracy often involves 'killing bugs dead'). I liked the concept; since he had known me in the late 80s, I was amused when I noted that where I lived was Demonground (very appropriate – the area is weirder than it looks).

*D-Con, huh? I like that. And wow, seems like everyone in the community knew everyone else back then... (actually seems that things haven't changed that much, if I have to be honest, especially with the rise of social media)... And that led to you working on Dark Conspiracy?*

I liked the game, and the background idea. I particularly liked Lester's idea of making it a game that could incorporate any sort of horror nameable, especially the B-movie schlock that Lester loves so much! And the character generation was sure an improvement on the Twilight 2K system.

How did I end up writing for the game? Well, I knew Lester, he knew what and how I could write – he once noted that I was pretty prolific, and looking back on it, he was right – and apparently I was crazy enough to do a decent job.

*I know you contributed to not only Dark Conspiracy, but also other games in the GDW stable (such as Twilight:2000, etc.). That must have been confusing (post nuclear war vs post-modern eco-horror), did you ever get the urge to mix things up?*

Heh heh heh. In fact, one of the scenarios I wrote for Challenge (I'm still fond of the name of the character General Rockard from the scenario Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid) I snuck the insectoid ETs into a scenario that was ostensibly for Merc 2K. Little Frankie Chadwick was not amused that I got fantasy bugs in his mil-fantasy. (I thought it demonstrated how the games crossed over very well! A Merc 2K style campaign would fit very, very well into Dark Con.)

*Ha! Well, they did release Twilight Nightmares around the same time as Dark Conspiracy hit the shelves, so hopefully Frank got over it pretty quickly! And so what about your writing process, I know it was a while ago now, but do you recall how you went about getting your ideas down on the page?*

How do I write? Like lots of folks do; I have a few concept scenes, an often vague idea of what I want the story to be and how I'd like it to end, and then I try to fill in the intervening space to make it all fit. And make it all hang together; I'm a bit of a continuity freak.

*Yeah, I know I'm the same. But surely you must have had some inspiration that sparked your various articles and submissions?*

Oh, there were obvious 'inspirations' for my stuff in Dark Con. Two stand out: The denizens of Mechanica, the Symbiods are the robotic zombies from the awful movie Moontrap, and the Steriloids are a combination of life-destroying robots throughout sci-fi history, including the Terminator movies, the Daleks (not strictly robots, but hard to tell sometimes), and of course the big ones are the Bolos/Ogres – I mean, the biggest is the Mk V...sound familiar, fans of SJ Games Ogre?)

*Ah -ha, I always wondered if there was a connection there!*

*Oh, while I have you, I did want to ask about your experience working with other game companies on other lines, what was that like?*

The R. Tal stuff was more fun than the GDW stuff (please note I was too late to write Traveller stuff for GDW; I would have loved that), because it was a lot more free-wheeling sci-fi. I love the giant robot genre, and I quickly fell into the cyberpunk genre. I guess one particular advantage was my knowledge of things military, both technical and historical (no, I cannot quote history from Marathon to Waterloo and all it categorical), so I was sort of the ersatz military expert there. Not something I could pull at GDW, where they made wargames (good ones, too – Frank Chadwick's long suit). I must say, though, that my writing for GDW and the research I did helped a lot with the R.Tal work.

*But in the end, you gave up freelancing?*

I fell out of the free-lance market when my publishers died, one by one. And I wasn't on the internet for over a decade, so I don't know many of the publishers now. And in fact, the game writing market is nearly a matter of darned near self-publish, and a lot of those companies haven't an interest in dealing with free-lancers – I don't see many names I recognize in the business anymore.

*Yep, everyone – barring the few big players – seems to be doing everything themselves these days, which is both a boon and bit of a worry. But, thinking back on your time with GDW and Dark Conspiracy, specifically, any titbits of insider knowledge you can share?*

Except for my 'bugging' Frank's sensibilities that once, I can't think of any Challenge stories that stand out.

I'm really, really sorry GDW went ash-can. I'm afraid Frank Chadwick wasn't the resource manager Steve Jackson was (and is). Particularly since X-Files was just coming out when GDW crashed; Dark Con was so darned close to X-Files that it could have been the unofficial RPG for it! (And don't get me started on Men In Black.)

*Oh I know, and there been so many false starts in the last 20 odd years trying to bring the game back as well (Ed. Not looking anywhere in particular are you, Marcus?). But that said, one thing I do like to ask my interviewees is – if you had the Dark Conspiracy licence and could anything with it, what would, and could you do with it?*

If I owned Dark Con and had metric tons of free money floating around, I'd republish it 1st Edition style, with some minor modifications for the character generation and perhaps some of the combat system (do we really need that much work for indirect fire? Really?) I'd also drive up to Lester's place and haul him out of retirement; there has been so much sci-fi horror, both good and bad, that he desperately needs to lampoon!

*If only we could get the Dark Lord of DC himself to start writing stuff again, huh! Well thanks Craig for the chat, I appreciate you taking the time to reminisce! Maybe we can do this again sometime?*

I'm just glad to find people who still like the game, and maybe even play it.