

TWENTY QUESTIONS

EXCELSIOR entertainment

Welcome to another new article in the pages of Fictional Reality. In 'Twenty Questions' we'll get a hold of an industry executive and bounce a bunch, hopefully twenty, questions off of them. For the debut of this article I managed to corner Thom Talamini from Excelsior Entertainment long enough to answer the following...

1. What exactly is Excelsior Entertainment?

Excelsior is a game design and manufacturing company, though this is not how it started out. We began in the area of imports back in 1998 (back then it was a two man job) and spent a few years growing and successfully selling specialty items to the game and specialty retail markets in the USA. After growing the business we were looking at being involved more directly with our first passion, gaming. Many of us have done game industry work over the years and enjoyed the heck out of the experience. Being able to create is a very addictive drug and one not easily overcome. Around this time Target Games was shutting down and we didn't want our favorite games to disappear with the company.

Having worked with Heartbreaker in the past, many of us had prior relations with the owners of the intellectual properties, who had left Target with their IP's months prior to the fall of Target. I contacted the guys and talked with them about relaunching the MC: Warzone and Chronopia brands worldwide. We all believed in the properties and wanted very much to see them continue. Suffice it to say an arrangement was reached and Excelsior was granted stewardship of the properties. We are incredibly honored to be given this opportunity and are working hard every day to turn these brands into something worthy of the trust placed in us.

Since we had come to this agreement with Paradox, we have scaled back all of our non-manufacturing and development efforts to concentrate on this worthy venture. Excelsior now focuses on manufacturing these games and a few related projects in other markets.

2. Who works for Excelsior Entertainment and what do they do?

I suppose we can start with me. My job is to make sure it all happens and to assemble the team to make bring these projects to light, no small feat I can assure you. Because of the way I prefer to do business and



work, our team is more of a family than simply a business. We work together and often hang out after hours together. We are all friends here and I care about the happiness and success of everyone in my family.

As a small family we have a very eclectic way of working in that we all know how to do most of the things that need doing and frequently help out in all areas of the company. Sometimes this means we are all on the phones selling, other times we are in the warehouse packing or in the casting room making little men. Other times we get to sit down and flesh out ideas and expand the games in the studio. Most of us work long after the time clock has shut down for the night, but since we care about what we are doing the extra effort is worth it. It isn't uncommon for many of us to be in the office for 15 hours at a clip.

The rest of the In-House Excelsior Team consists of the following talented and great people, all of whom I am privileged to call colleagues and friends and have as part of the Excelsior family.

Lance Katz heads up our sales office. He is generally found on the phones talking to stores and working with Crusaders. On the design side Lance has been laboring on expanding the Dark Eden universe particularly in the area of the US territory. Lance joined us following his tenure at Target and is often found doing demos in stores and spreading the word.

Tom Rooney, or Dooley as he is referred since we have too many 'Toms' in the family, has been busy heading up the Warzone project core book. In addition to his efforts in this arena, Dooley handles much of the small day-to-day issues that crop up, often acting as my walking memory. Dooley is no stranger to Warzone and Chronopia and had done some work for Heartbreaker back in the old days in a regular freelance capacity.

Peter Flannery, a name well known to fans of Warzone and Chronopia is the latest addition to the family and we all couldn't be happier. He is a talented sculptor and gifted writer whose vision and creativity will be readily apparent beginning this month. Having an in-house sculpting talent was paramount to me and I had been speaking with Pete for many months about a full-time position. In fairness, Pete doesn't actually live stateside though I am sure we will see him over here from time to time.

Dave Jones came on board to spearhead the Chronopia project, having been intimately involved with its design from the early days of Heartbreaker. Dave has done practically everything at one time or another and while we wish he could be with us full time, for now we will make due with what we can from Dave in a part time basis.

Doug Rawley has been with me since the beginning (we go way back). Doug has had a varied career and brings many talents to the production department at Excelsior, which is a deep bag of tricks if you spend any time with him. He is the man that oversees the casting and mold making departments. In addition to this, he also oversees the warehouse and shipping of products. So yes, Doug is perpetually busy.

Andrew Grant, or Andy as we refer to him, helps Lance in sales and also helps out in the warehouse. Andy is our resident Brit, coming to us from Leeds England by way of the University of Pennsylvania. Andy is the chief instigator of games in the shop and helps keep everyone in stitches with his wry English humor. I think I have picked up on quite a lot of slang from Andy and I know that Andy has picked up a whole lot of my choicest expressions.

Kathy Notch is our accounting department and a hell of a great lady. She is only in the office a couple days a week but manages to keep everything in order in spite of my best efforts to lose paperwork.

Tom O'Hagan is our resident handyman and warehouse worker. He is a hell of a great guy who is always eager to lend a hand when needed.

Jimmy Ellis is our resident finisher. This means when I have finished roughing out a sketch I send it to Jimmy to render and finish. To his credit, Jimmy is creative,

intuitive and very capable; an emerging talent, good friend and all around great guy.

And lastly there's Roxanne Reynolds. She replaced Heather as my right hand and her job consists of coming in after five pm and helping out in the office any way she can. There is a surprising amount of filing and such that accumulates during an Excelsior day but she loves working here (at least that's what she tells me).

In addition to this close-knit family, Excelsior has a great assortment of part time help and volunteers that all help us get things moving here. Our Crusaders do an outstanding job interacting with stores and presenting at conventions.

3. Do you run your crew like Tony Soprano or do you just look like him?

Hmmm...I could answer that but I'd have to kill you. Seriously though, I have been getting this a lot lately. Wonder why? Someone talking out of school?



4. How is Excelsior Target Games?

Let me first preface my answer by saying that I am not an authority on how Target did things so I will stay with what I know.

Target was a large company, encompassing many divisions of which the adventure games were only a small part. That division, which included the former Heartbreaker Hobbies, maintained a design studio in Scotland, a corporate office in Sweden, and two production facilities in Ireland and the US respectively. Excelsior on the other hand is very small and we have to make do with the resources at our disposal. We are keen to make sure all our talent and resources stay



under one roof where we can make sure things happen with the same vision, where quality can be checked and where a sense of belonging can be realized. This will evolve of course but for now it is how I feel things need to get done. Excelsior works closely with fan feedback and market research (I am making no comment on Target's practices here because I can't) and has been focusing more and more of its resources exclusively to the development of these brands.

We have an esprit de corps here where everyone is free to contribute ideas and suggestions that we consider at the design meetings. Our company is my family, and I am very protective of it and the work we do.

5. What has been going on with Chronopia in the past two years and why did it take so long to get in gamer's hands?

Actually it has only been one year and seven months. In reality there are several factors that have caused the Chronopia book to be released later than we had hoped. The first is the "Target Effect" as I refer to it. From distributors to retailers there have been many that have rejected the notion that the games are back and being supported by a US based company, so angry are they that Target left them suddenly in a lurch as they were committing time and resources to the lines. It's an understandable though unexpected reaction and it has forced our production schedule back almost a full year. It wasn't until recently that a US distributor would even tell their stores about us. In essence we have been almost "punished" because of what happened with Target even though none of us here were directly involved. These are good games and we know they can sell well if given a chance, though it has been arduous, uphill climb.

The state of affairs of Target's dissolution was another obstacle. Many newer figures do not have molds and had to be redone. All the art and painted models were plundered from the beginning and after a few months Paradox itself was able to collect some digital files for

us. Ultimately we had to rebuild all the text and images from scratch, as well as develop a newer look for the games.

The next obstacle was the loss of the first design lead (whose name is omitted) that dropped the ball and no doubt has caused me to personally oversee everything. This is why I found Dave Jones again. After play testing several newer games of Chronopia with Dave, I wanted to make some more changes to the mechanic of the game to improve it. The first thing the design teams were tasked to do was to create a template that would allow for the development of any model in the game, insuring its balance. This had not been done before any other work could commence and is a lot more involved than one would think. This process took over a month of number crunching alone to accomplish.

Lastly, there were some more changes that I wanted to make to the game in essence to improve it, but this took another month of time. What makes it hard to understand is that the game had to be prepared in such a way that future releases could be added seamlessly to the game. Other than a misprint or piece of errata that occurred for an editorial reason, the games must have solid rules and an expandable rubric.

More recently we had learned the ins and outs of book publishing and had various delays in getting the books done. I am confident that we have this issue mastered for the next time. Now that the ball is rolling, I expect a faster and more consistent release schedule.

6. What kind of new sculpts can we expect for Chronopia? Is there a timeline in place to fill the gaps in the figure lines? What's the most exciting Chronopia figure that will soon be available?

There are quite a few new sculpts coming down the pike for Chronopia. We have infused the game with a new level of depth and we need the models to reflect this. Some of what is coming down the pike is:



Black Sister Champion, Novice Shaman, Risen for each race, Ascended, Tunnel Warriors, Forgotten, Goblin Spearmen, Shadowstalker, Carnomancer, Arch Chronomancer, Dragon Skull Warriors, just to name a few.

As for the most exciting figure coming down the pike I'd have to say that is a personal preference. Since you are asking me though, I'd say there were two I am particularly excited about seeing. The first model I am looking forward to is the Ogre Deathseeker, the second is the Funeral Barge for the Devout and of course the Arch Necromancer and Carnomancers will look diabolical as well.

7. Are there any new armies coming to Chronopia?

Yes, there are. The first is coming back with a vengeance from the annals of Chronopia's dark history while the second is simply a new group we are presenting to the tapestry of Chronopia. At this point I would rather not reveal much about them yet though I promise you'll get the scoop when we do.

8. Where does Empire Chronopia fit into the mix?

Empire Chronopia is waiting for the other games to get running smoothly again. We have no Empire resources from Target so we have to start from scratch again.

9. What is going on with Ultimate Warzone?

Now there is a question. While I was busy fleshing out Chronopia, Dooley and Lance have been hard at work getting Warzone ready for development. The game is currently in the last play test phase. We have one team of developers working on the background story and linking it to the current timeline, another team of statisticians working on the point costing rubric, an adaptation of Chronopia's, and a third prepping the layout for the book. Once play testing is wrapped up, a month long period (give or take), we can put the final project together and send it off to print.

What you can expect to see in the Ultimate Edition is a comprehensive game that blends the creativity and rich detail of the Mutant Chronicles setting with the more balanced game play of second edition. You'll see a diversity of models, tactics and options available to

the player as well as role-playing links that will allow a role-player to segue in and out of a miniatures game. I should mention that this is first and foremost a miniatures game, though there is so much information and material that we have assembled that even a role player will enjoy the book.

Each Corporation has been extensively developed with new troop types and abilities. We have added the Cartel back into the game, improved on the powers of the Art and Dark Symmetry, restored the AI component back to Cybertronic, adapting much of the wonderful groundwork laid out by Bill King and Mike Stackpole, and even restored much of the diversity offered by first edition Warzone.

It is important to note that with Warzone we had a metaphorical kitchen full of ingredients painstakingly developed over a long period of time. We wanted to organize this information and blend together these exciting ingredients into a masterpiece that would feed the mind and spirit for years. It was important for us to remain true to the vision of the original game designers' vision, though we have put an Excelsior spin on it. We didn't want to reinvent the wheel with this project; we simply wanted to pay homage to the work done before.

To help us to this we have tied the games setting to an interactive campaign system that links with our Organized Play Leagues and Sanctioned Play Leagues. What this all means is that once the game is released we will be able to allow stores and players during special events to affect the development of the Mutant Chronicles Storyline.

The first story arc, "Let the Universe Burn" centers around the activities of the Nephrite Valpurgius and his gambit to become the sixth apostle to the Dark Soul. His exploits will shape the fabric of the MC Universe though the other Apostles are not too happy about the possibility of sharing power. Players will be able to learn about these events and through their games affect the results for good or ill. Spinning off this storyline is the introduction of the Dark Apostate and the organization simply referred to as the Apostate. This "officially banned" group doesn't exist according to the Brotherhood though in point of fact, they very much do. The Apostate is perceived to be a collection of rouges and criminals when they are



perceived at all, though in reality these criminals all come from the ranks of the Brotherhood. Their tale is told in the Ultimate Edition and further in the Malcontents Supplement.

10. When can we expect it to be released?

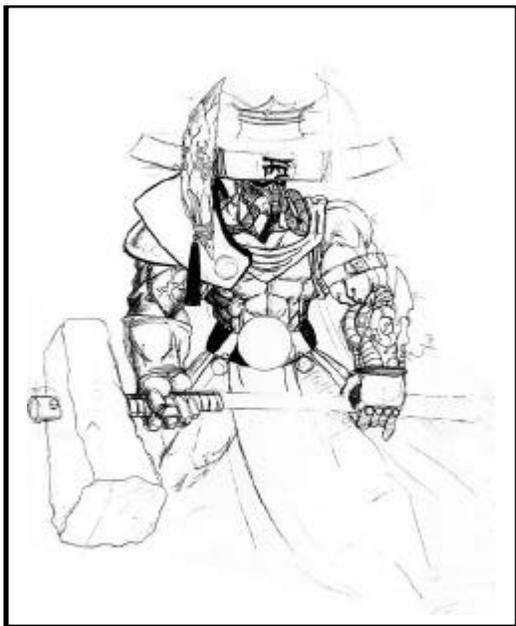
I believe we should see a Fall release for Ultimate. It will not be a boxed set however, but rather a single, massive book.

11. What kind of new sculpts can we expect for Ultimate Warzone? Is there a timeline in place to fill in gaps in the figure lines? What's the most exciting Ultimate Warzone figure that will soon be available?

For new sculpts we are taking the same approach we did for Chronopia in that we felt it important to make sure all the core troops from the books were available first. We are developing many new troops to fill out the armies as well and these will be mixed into the releases over time. Occasionally we will resculpt some of the figures that could use a face-lift and an update.

When new troops or personalities are created and released, should they not be in the book we will have their information on the website for players' immediate download so that they need not wait for a new book to explain their troops. While a monthly magazine would also be a way to proceed with this information share, it is not in the schedule yet.

The most exciting sculpts I am looking forward to seeing are actually in the Mishima line. The Emperors Guard and the Priests of the Four Winds will be dynamic additions to their arsenal whose KI powers will give Mishima a new flavor and range of tactics. I have included some of my sketches of these guys that Pete will be rendering into sculpts.



12. What role will Dark Eden armies have in Ultimate Warzone?

Quite an important one since Valpurgius has taken up residence here and the eyes of the Corporations have turned towards the Dark Planet. We have spent great time and effort to mainstay the established forces on Dark Eden and flesh out their uniqueness. Additionally we had the opportunity to look at the rest of the World and develop the inhabitants of the other continents as well. The Sky Lords of the former Isles of Japan have proven very exciting, as have the Scrap Nomads of the US.

The army composition in Ultimate will be more advanced than it is now. While the status of basic units, elite units and such are still in place and expanded, the game will now offer options for flavoring your army in many new ways. You'll be able to have Dark Eden troops to support your army as well as Cartel, Brotherhood and Doomtroopers. With Dark Eden there will be more of a reason to be there on the planet and more of a reason for the inhabitants of Dark Eden to be off world.

The warriors of Dark Eden will offer players non-conventional gaming options that will certainly add a unique flavor and color to the games. In the tournaments and ranking events I have witnessed their popularity has already started to increase.

13. Will there be a Chronopia role-playing game?

Yes, there will. The seeds of the RPG have been planted in the core rulebook for Chronopia. From here we will introduce a separate book that allows players to take the Miniatures game and convert it into an RPG. In this manner the players can move between the two styles of play seamlessly or simply stick with the style they prefer. While a balanced game is important in any

style and we certainly are careful to examine the mechanic we use, the back-story or fluff we feel is critical to a successful project. Because of this we know that the games will have plenty of appeal to players of either style of play.

15. What is the process that takes place before a miniature is in a blister for sale in a game store?

So you want the dirty little process eh? Fair enough though I know how we work is not necessarily how other companies work. That said the process begins with the storylines coming up and the production schedule. I look at what books will be released or what units we have developed and fit them into a schedule so that the releases are coordinated. The pieces are detailed in the composition in a pack (will they be units or individuals), and assigned a SKU (stock keeping unit).

The next step is to look at design. As I have a very specific vision about what I want for these games so I stay very hands on and generally rough out a concept sketch that I hand to a few illustrators we use to finish. These pieces of art are then sent to Pete for sculpting with attention being paid to make the pieces fluid and dynamic. If the piece doesn't have a reference in a book we then prepare its write up at this point so that it may be used in game play immediately when it is available for sale.

Pete then scans the work in for me to approve and once accepted the greens (the terms for a new sculpt) are sent in for molding. Doug will take these new sculpts and create a master mold and following this process a production series of molds are crafted. This process alone can be quite labor intensive since we want the piece to maintain its detail and design.

Once the molds are finished, casting begins. Once they are finished a proof set are sent to our painters for rendering. At this point the model is ready for sale.

16. What's up with the Chainmail/Chronopia conversion that's going on? Will I be able to use my Chainmail miniatures games of Chronopia?

The Chainmail project was a way to help out players who felt put out by the cancellation of the game. We

know what it is like to have this happen and it is a crappy thing. The Chainmail rules will allow the use of those figures in the game though not in tournaments or sanctioned events. It is merely a chance to help these players out and it adds a bit of diversity as well and allows a new group of players to enjoy the world of Chronopia.

14. Why did you decide to go to the Unit Cards for deployment in Chronopia and Ultimate Warzone?

Funny story that. I had often felt that one of the weaknesses of miniatures gaming was deployment. I had watched too many games get won or lost at the deployment phase and this bothered me. One of the most exciting parts of warfare (if there is such a thing) is the not knowing what you are facing, the mystery of your opponent's composition and exact position.

While at Gen Con 2001 I was in a room trying to sleep while everyone else was playing Warzone (quite loudly I'll add). In the heat of battle and an ensuing debate I was awoken to an exchange between Daniel and Dooley who were reviewing the crushing defeat Dooley just suffered. The premise was that Daniel's deployment was what gave him command of the board early on and hence won him the game. The discussion was quite engaging and served to remind me of my previous objections to playing standard miniatures and made me determined to find a way to add the exciting unknown back to the game, to remove the command of the board during deployment practice.

After careful thought many possibilities were generated. I filled pages of notebooks with ideas. The problem I was then confronted with (since most of the ideas were sound) was how to implement them. I began to focus on logistics and realized I wanted something that would go with the product as it was sold so there wasn't anything more to buy. The Unit Card idea quickly followed and design work began.

One of the early decisions about this design was would the Unit Cards be preprinted or not. I opted for the open, "to be filled out" variety because I envisioned a game played with options, with ways to customize your troops and with ways to advance them in campaigns. I didn't want a game with static stats when it could be so



much more. Having a picture painted on the card also seemed pointless since the Unit Cards provide anonymity to ones forces. This being the case it became obvious what needed to be done.

The final cards designs were created from the various artworks we had to convey the look and feel of the army in question. The backs were set up to allow for the inclusion of as much material as we could get on it. Sure, you'll need to write small but it is worth it. As a record keeping tool the cards also work great since they can be carried with the miniatures in any figure case designed and greatly reduce the amount of paper clutter you have.

When you sit down to play a game of Warzone or Chronopia now you'll have an ominous feeling of nervous tension as you set up the field and have no idea what you are looking at. Making it more tension filled is the use of dummy cards or False Leads, which are essentially blank cards mixed into the composition of your army deployment that allow you to misrepresent the actual disposition of your forces. The larger your games, the more there are making it hard to guess where exactly your opponent is.

17. What's going on with the online version of Warzone?

That is a question best left for Paradox since this is their baby. Our busy schedule doesn't allow us to keep in as constant contact as I'd like so my knowledge of where this is at is limited.

18. What is your favorite army to play in Chronopia / Ultimate Warzone?

In Chronopia I very much like the Swamp Goblins. These are my current favorites though before they were developed it was the Blackbloods. There is just something primal and menacing about the Children of the Gourd that makes me enjoy playing them.

In Warzone it was and has always been the Brotherhood first and foremost. For a change of pace I really enjoy Mishima.

19. What kind of hours do you work?

Hmmmm, am I being set up for something? I am generally in the office around 9:30 am and leave around 11:30pm - 1:00 am. In the morning I go through paperwork and calls. The afternoon is spent dealing with orders and production issues. The evenings are spent on the phones or in development. The weekends are either times for development work or catch up work from the week before. Often there is too much to do with not enough time to do it.

20. Where do you see Chronopia and Ultimate Warzone a year from now?

I see these two games doing very well in a year. They are superior products that I know will find a home with gamers. I see many new models, supplements and support systems in place. The second half of 2002 and 2003 I see as a great period of growth for the company and the time when we finally overcome the baggage we inherited.

You can run, but you'll only die tired.

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