

# *THE* *SAGA*

February 2023

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Gaming  
Forever**

# THE SAGA

February 2023

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• One Year of the Saga! - A Letter from Mike	Page 4
• Fantasy Grounds at My Tabletop	Page 6
• A Return to Smaller Conventions	Page 10
• Creative Commons and You	Page 12
• Appendix i: Conan the Barbarian	Page 18
• Into the World: The Companions, a thieves guild in Kowal	Page 26
• SagaBorn 1.5	Page 28
• Art Gallery	Page 30



A SagaBorn Roleplaying Game Compatible Product

## Welcome and Happy 1st anniversary of the Saga!

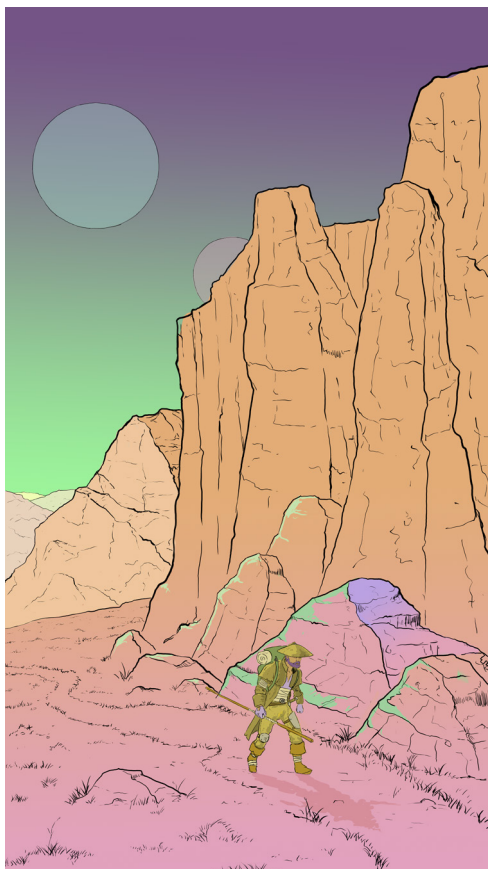
I had so many fun things planned for this issue, and then the big dragon went and messed up the last couple of weeks. It really threw a wrench in the works of SagaBorn, and I went through all the stages - sadness, anger, revolt. And then I grabbed my backpack, my wandering stick, and a snack and I decided to just go on another adventure.

In big news, the OGL mess pushed forward our timeline. I rushed SagaBorn 1.5 out the door, better to have it in people's hands than archived and locked away in a vault. Depending on where the OGL drama goes, it may or may not stay published. Same goes for all the SagaBorn and Pathfinder Compatible books. Only time and lawyers will tell.

I still finished quite a few articles; a convo about Conan, a discussion about smaller conventions, and a short story of a hero in the SagaBorn universe. So still some great stuff!

Thank you all for a year of support, and expect more of the same, if not more, in the future!

Mike





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# SagaBorn Inklings

## FANTASY GROUNDS AT MY TABLE TOP

by Michael Bielaczyc

This is not a paid promotion, and I make no money directly from Fantasy Grounds sales or use. I do provide the SagaBorn system for free through FGU and will provide add-ons in the future on the platform (which may be for sale). Ok, now on to why I decided to use it at my table.

First, I am a sucker for tech. I have too many projects, too many dreams, too many pots to stir. And I want them all done as perfectly as possible. So when I find a tool that helps alleviate some of the heavy lifting, I am grateful. I have used many tabletops over the years. From theater of the mind to full 3d printed terrain, they all have their charms and are all valid playfields. When I was initially looking for a digital tabletop, I wanted one that did two things - making maps easier to provide and helping me with organization.

I tried a couple, but they were always lacking in functionality and management. Even when I paid a subscription, I found myself frustrated with the storage options. I had a player license for Fantasy Grounds, but the UI always seemed lacking. But I saw potential. I started using it mainly for the combat tracker, but as I got over the learning curve, I found it had great potential.

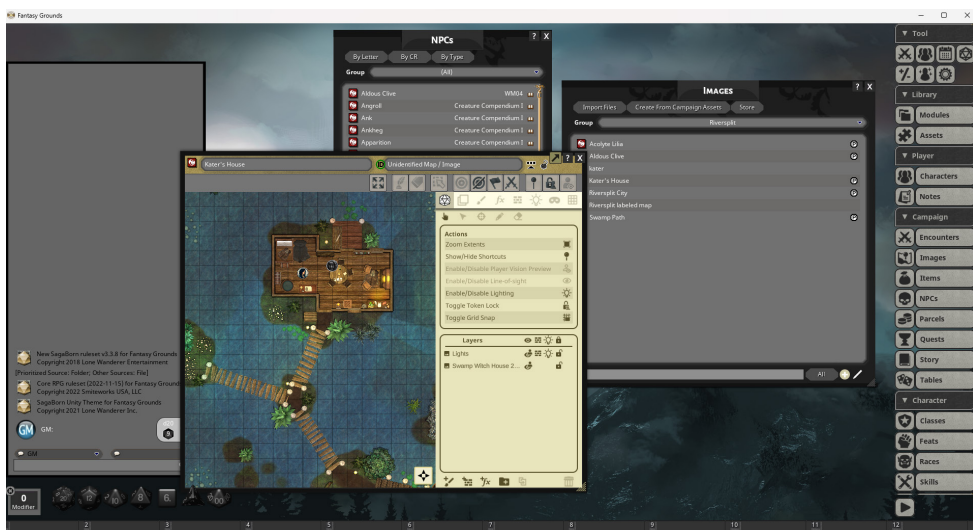
# CUSTOMIZATION

First off, you can make it whatever you want. From a large selection of rulesets to some of the more simple features, the beginner can get in and use many of the functions with a bit of time spent watching tutorials.

As I delved into the deeper functions, they released Fantasy Grounds Unity, and for me, that changed everything. All the small bugs I had encountered were all squashed, and I started using the program entirely.

Sure, you can organize images, tokens, story elements, encounters, and more, but I could also start to program in my ruleset. For many, this is a step too far, but remember, this means it is also easy to put in your own homebrew rules.

You can also import all sorts of creatures and NPCs and quickly make copies for editing. For SagaBorn, I have a whole Character Gallery and quickly pull NPCs based on level and class, and then just change up the name and token.

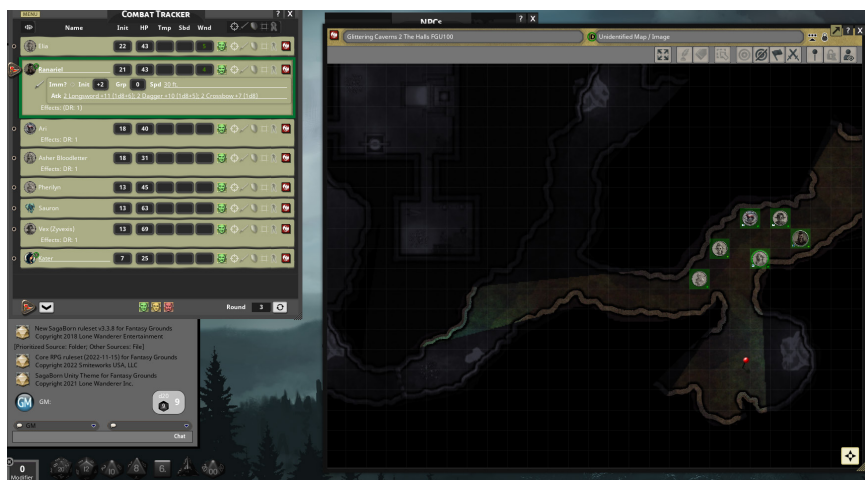




## MAP TOOLS

There are also quite a few great map tools at your disposal. Line of Sight is a great one, allowing players only to see the part of the map from their token's position. Add lighting effects and weather, and the maps can come to life. There are a few artifacts of the old UI, and moving around the map can be clunky. Using the middle mouse button allows you to drag across the image, but it still feels a little off.

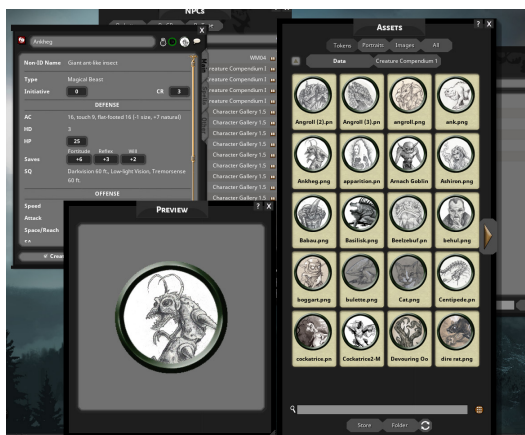
Players have full control of their character tokens and can target their enemies, allowing attacks to tell you if they hit and can automatically apply damage, all without GM intervention. Anything that take a little load off the person running the game is a win for me.



## ORGANIZATION

When I used another VTT, which came with a monthly charge, I was amazed at how bad the file organization was. I use a lot of art and maps for my games, and a campaign quickly fills folders worth of resources. With Fantasy Grounds, I found organizing the storing these very easy. Since Fantasy Grounds is locally hosted, the size is only limited by your hard drive. I love highly detailed maps, and

Different sidebar categories allow you to find what you need quickly.



## OVERALL

There are still a few clunky parts of the UI, but overall it makes running games way easier, so I am willing to overlook a few imperfections.

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# A Return to Smaller Cons

by Michael Bielaczyc

Photo by Thomas Kerns

We have all heard of ComicCon, DragonCon, and GenCon. But are those really the conventions worth visiting?

I have worked and attended DragonCon and GenCon for decades, and they definitely have their benefits. But as time has gone on, they have become larger than life, crowded, and maybe even a little overwhelming. Small local cons have slowly fallen out of vogue as people flock to the larger venues. But is it time to return?

I am writing this as I leave the first small con I have attended since 2019. And I am feeling pretty happy. There is a welcome feeling to a small con that the big ones just lack. These affairs are almost always volunteer-run, and due to this, there is a great amount of pride and care given. The dealer's hall and art show have a wide variety of goods and art, and it reminds me of the first days of my artistic journey. People starting out often can't afford or even get into the big shows, but these small shows are always ready to welcome new creative folks.

Plus, it just feels like family. After 2020, I will admit I have some anxiety about being around people, especially in a professional environment. Making games and art, even after 20 years, can still bring up the feeling of being an imposter. And big conventions often exacerbate that. You have to survive the hunger games style jury to get in, be bombarded with questions about what "professional" media you have been featured in, and then be judged by art awards that artists often put too much stock in. At the small conventions, you are celebrated for being you. They don't

care if your game is a gold star seller; they just want to play it. They don't care if you have been published in the latest big brand book; they ask you what your new artwork is about. It's amazingly refreshing.

# CHATTACON 2023

For this visit, I did not come as a guest or professional (though I did hang up art in the art show). I came with friends as we “invaded” from our now-defunct personal gathering, labeled ElfCon (of course). We spent our days both enjoying the con and the local area. Even though it was cold, we braved the frigid streets to find some cool restaurants and took in a few small local sites as we did. We returned at night to play games and enjoy the Consuite (for those not in the know, Southern conventions have a tradition of hosting a suite for snacks, food, and drinks, and ChattaCon’s is one hosted with pride.)

We stuck around for the shows and panels we were interested in. We bought art from some very talented people. And we left with loot from the dealer's hall.

Parking was easy to find and relatively inexpensive. The hotel was easy to get in and out of. And there was only a small wait for the elevator. And for any who have visited a big con, you know how rare all of these are at them.

So next time the bug for a visiting convention hits me, I think I may go visit a small local con rather than spend thousands to be lost in the crowd at a big one.



The ElfCon crew after a few beers at the photo kiosk.



# Creative Commons and You

by Lonnie Ray Atkinson

When Mike asked me this past month to write an essay explaining what a Creative Commons License could mean for artists and creators, I wasn't sure if he had picked the right person. It's often difficult for me to write anything that's not soaked in my own politics. That said, I will try to get the basics out of the way first and leave the beard stroking for those willing to indulge.

To put it simply, if you're someone who wishes to share the fruit of your creative labor with others, Creative Commons licensing gives you an expansion of legal options to do so.

Built around attribution, adaptation, and the commercial nature of distribution, there are multiple versions of the Creative Commons license. Depending upon the project, you can combine or omit the following elements to meet your needs/personal desires.

- ⓘ BY – Credit must be given to the creator
- ♻ SA – Adaptations must be shared under the same terms
- Ⓜ NC – Only noncommercial uses of the work are permitted
- Ⓜ ND – No derivatives or adaptations of the work are permitted

From conservative libertarians who equate choice with freedom to those most generous and free spirits wishing to unconditionally give it all away, Creative Commons has a little



something for everyone. You pick and choose what suits you, what you want in a license. You call the shots.

In all cases, this tool offers far greater choice and functionality than conventional copyright, including the choice to not utilize it at all. In short, its potential is what you make of it.

I personally benefited from Creative Commons when I made raw a capellas of various lyrics/melodies available for remix, adaptation, and modification on the ccMixer site. Although there were admittedly many resulting mixes that were not exactly what I would have preferred for what I submitted, every now and then I would be treated to a finished work that went beyond my expectations. A complement to my work that I couldn't have achieved on my own.

I was able to, in advance, set the terms of use for my work and, as a result, ended up with fully produced songs to share with thousands of people. Yet I would have never felt comfortable engaging in such an experiment if there hadn't already been this establishment of flexibility in rights-granting and a community of those who embrace it.

My experience is, by no means, unique. There are countless and diverse examples of Creative Commons utilization. I'm sure you could come up with multiple scenarios for your own artistic endeavors. None of which would prohibit you from engaging in traditional commerce. All of which offer greater potential for your vision and labor to be appreciated and, if you so desire, added to and expanded upon. Often in ways you would have never conceived.

Now onto the beard stroking.

For those who may be suspicious of any alteration to or tweaking of our current recognition of ownership under Capitalism, rest assured. Creative Commons is not some demonic

vacuum portal into a Marxist wet dream of society. On the contrary, it is still an acknowledgment, and some might say an endorsement, of copyright and intellectual property, both of which are key to the very core tenets of Capitalism.

This makes total sense, in that we do not live in a future utopian economy. Creative Commons licenses are specifically engineered to fit into a capitalist economic model. I would suggest that, in a truly just system, the current benefits of a Creative Commons License may very well look like setbacks. Though I state this only to point out how much there is to be gained and how far we have to travel.

Fortunately, Creative Commons may prove to be a bridge (or at least a brick in the bridge) leading to a better world, where a concept like “The Commons” can truly be applied to intellectual inquiry and creative pursuits.

Wikipedia, one of the most shining examples of Creative Commons, describes the commons as “the cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a society.” Depending upon the society, the amount of resources which are accessible to all may vary greatly.

Under our current property rights regime, conventional copyright is about legitimizing the authority to deny access to resources. As I wrote in *Revival - A new kind of Good News* and a radically different *Promised Land*, the very concept of intellectual property is about protecting a system of control. Declaring possession over the knowledge of a life-saving drug and ensuring its subsequent “protection” could mean keeping that knowledge a secret, preventing the drug from ever being produced. We, in our current system, actually consider this a right. The knowledge would still exist. It just can’t exist on our terms, only on the owner’s terms.

Treating a piece of knowledge as property is nothing more

than granting the right to decide who will not benefit from it (perhaps if they can't afford the price you set), even if that benefit is the saving of one's life.

In the name of capitalist competition, intellectual property treats something you dug up as if it were your creation. When in reality we're all just stumbling upon what was already there, what already exists. And whether by intention or by accident, being the first person to stumble upon something doesn't make it any more yours than calling "shotgun infinity" is a legally binding contract to sit in the front seat for the rest of time.

Admittedly, with everything we've been conditioned to believe about the benevolence of capitalism, ownership, and intellectual property, I think it's quite natural to feel possessive of your creative work. Creative Commons merely suggests there is more.

You have an opportunity to step outside the status quo, to interrogate alternatives. Embrace that opportunity and be open to the possibilities. These licenses enable the kinds of practices that allow for greater exploration of our collective creative potential. To grasp their promise, you need only browse the works created through CC-assisted collaboration and the vast achievements of open source software and hardware.

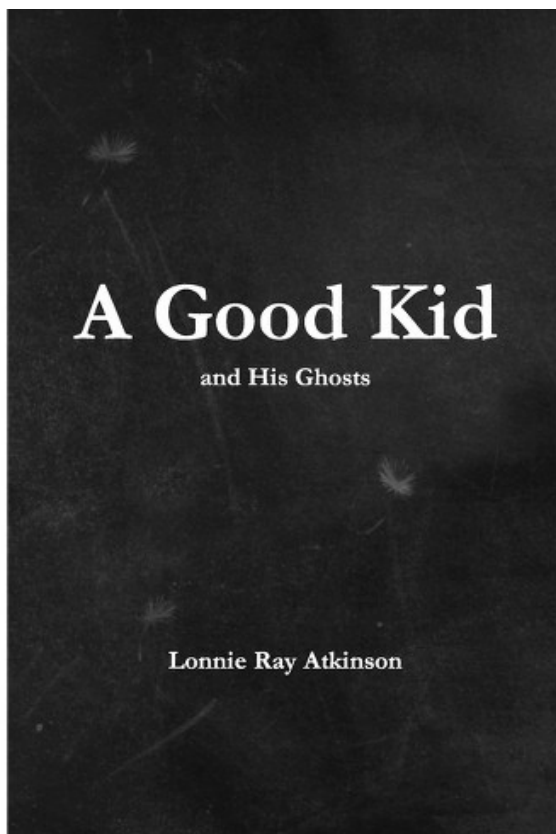
I want a world where the pursuit of knowledge and creativity is equitable and just, where information is shared and efforts are not stifled by the secrets demanded by greed and competition. There's too much important stuff buried out there for any of us to be hoarding our portion of the treasure map.

I'm not saying Creative Commons is going to take us directly to the promised land, but I believe most definitely it can add to the map.

## Lonnie Ray Atkinson

### Bio:

A writer who grew up in East Nashville (back when that shit meant something), Lonnie Ray Atkinson is a nonbeliever still holding onto the promise of redemption. Rather than focus on the failure of his projects to attract a larger audience, he prefers to consider himself the punk band of writers. His most recently released books are *Don't Think Of A Republican* and *A Good Kid and His Ghosts*. *Tough Guys, Bad Dudes, and Other Men My Father Knew* is set to be released this year.



Get *A Good Kid and His Ghosts* through [unsafemedia.com](http://unsafemedia.com)

A monochromatic, atmospheric illustration. In the center, a woman with long dark hair, seen from behind, sits in a small wooden rowboat on a dark, calm body of water. She holds a long oar. Above her, in the misty, pale sky, looms a massive, ethereal face with glowing eyes and a wide, toothy grin, reminiscent of a giant ape or a celestial entity. The overall mood is mysterious and slightly ominous.

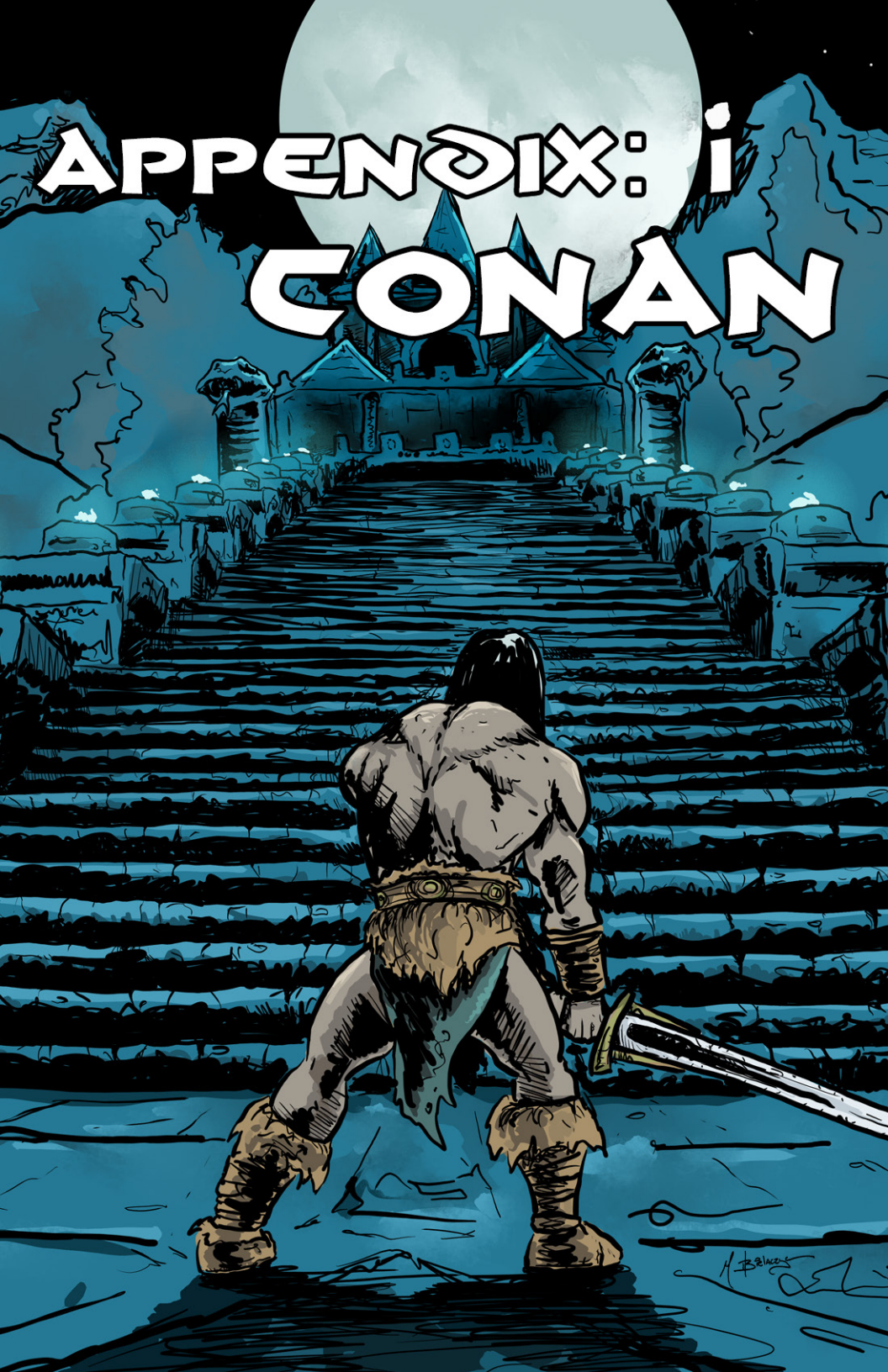
# Tale of the Eternal Sea

A Short Story by  
**Dane Clark Collins**

**The latest fiction from Dane Clark Collins,  
available wherever you get your digital books**



# APPENDIX: i CONAN



# CONAN AND FRIENDS

It's time for that discussion of imagination again, the Appendix i of our creativity, where Dane and Mike discuss the things that made them the creatives they are.

## **Mike:**

This month we are visiting the inspiration that really started the whole sword and sorcery thing we love so much. It's time to travel to the Hyborian Age.

*Between the time when the oceans drank Atlantis, and the rise of the sons of Aryas, there was an age undreamed of. And unto this, Conan, destined to wear the jeweled crown of Aquilonia upon a troubled brow. It is I, his chronicler, who alone can tell thee of his saga. Let me tell you of the days of high adventure!*

Start the amazing soundtrack from Basil Poledouris.

Nothing gets me in the mood for tabletop gaming more than that intro and soundtrack.

So we can't speak of inspiration in fantasy without thinking of Conan. My first fantasy story, when I was in the third grade, was about a barbarian. He was a complete rip-off of Conan, and he even cursed to his god, Rom (who is the god of war 40 years later in my current writing). Also, that led to my first understanding of making art and critique. I handed my father a 4-page story as a third grader, and he read it, handed it back, and said, "don't use the word 'damn.'" Critics, am I right? The movie I put on to hype me up before a big session is often Conan the Barbarian. The covers painted by Frazetta are still unmatched. And the worldbuilding by Howard was so well done. Despite the problematic stuff (it's almost 100 years old at this point), the world is engrossing.

When we look at what shaped the fantasy that made Dungeons and Dragons, Conan loomed large. And I know Conan was a big part of

your fantasy love. So let's start simple, how did Conan enter your life?

### **Dane:**

Conan the Barbarian came out when I was seven, and I remember being curious about it, but I don't think I was old enough to appreciate it. I understood the sequel better but only thought of it as a fun, silly movie.

I've written about this on Creative Grimoire, but briefly, it was when I was going through a family tragedy when I was thirteen that I found myself staring at the Frank Frazetta painting on the cover of my father's paperback copy of Conan the Barbarian. It disturbed me about as deeply as anything ever had, and I couldn't



Conan the Barbarian by Frank Frazetta

stop looking at it. I was looking for any escape from my life I could find, so I started reading, and had never, at that point, felt so immersed in a book. Hours slid by without me noticing, and I believe it was the very next day I went digging through my father's collection for book two.

I'd read some fantasy novels of the lighter variety and was into them, but I understood quickly that this was something different. Where most high fantasy books treated

magic as beautiful and otherworldly (if sometimes misused), Conan treated it as dark, mysterious, and possibly originating in the murky depths of the unconscious. Instead of virtuous royals on



glorious missions, here was a lone barbarian struggling to survive, attempting to avoid magic and its evils but thrust into its midst by fate and often coming away with his life barely intact.

In some ways, it could almost be considered a horror story.

The biggest surprise was that he didn't even resemble the bumbling drunkard from Conan the Destroyer. I believe that movie cemented an image of what Conan is in the minds of most people, and it's unfortunate.

**Mike:**

Conan is viewed so differently by so many people. On the surface, I would think I wouldn't be attracted to Conan at all. A larger-than-life, muscle-bound "barbarian" who is a Gary-Stu (mildly joking) is not my first choice of hero to read about. But there is just something fun about the pulpiness of Conan and his adventures. Sure, a bit of it doesn't stand up to the standards of time, but these are stories written almost 100 years ago. The old pulp stories caught a sense of adventure that many stories these days don't have. To travel through other lands and places while sitting on the bus reading has always been the first joy of reading. It's a vacation to a new place without all the travel mess. Conan was written because Howard wanted to write historical fiction but didn't want to get bogged down with making sure all the history was right. So it's like having an adventure in a parallel universe, which is always fun.

So creatively, how do you think Conan has shaped your view of fantasy or fiction in general?

**Dane:**

It really was the beginning of the development of my style.

When I first decided I wanted to be a writer, I'd only read cheesy fantasy (though I didn't yet realize it), but those books took me to another world, so that's what I wanted to write. I even wrote seven chapters that were probably terrible.

Then I read Conan, and I discovered something different. Now I wanted to make readers feel that thing Conan had made me feel...a sense of dread and discomfort. Dread and discomfort can be fun and lead to self-discovery when the threat is imaginary. I think that's one of the reasons for fiction, so why not dive into that?

On the other hand, Conan has since also become an example of what not to do in my writing. As a kid, I wasn't conscious of the problematic nature of some of the representations. But now I'm aware, and I do my best to avoid those stereotypes.

### **Mike:**

It's such a delicate balance to deliver in any artistic fashion. There is the want to write (or make) what you know and, at the same time, be inclusive. And no matter your background, being inclusive means you are going to include things outside of your experience. And those of us who try our best to be inclusive have to live in a world where Avatar 2 makes 2 billion. But that's a whole other story... or rant?

In the end, no art ages well. So many people hate artists like Warhol or Rothko, but they were expressions of their times, and we live in the world they shaped, for good or evil. The same with Lovecraft and Howard. There is a lot to learn about writing, both good and bad, from both of them. And sometimes themes come back around. One big thesis in Conan was that "barbarism" was better than the corrupt, abusive "civilization." That viewpoint has long since been lost, though I will agree that the word "barbarian" has been used with negative connotations way more throughout



Orange and Yellow by Mark Rothko

history.

So how does this problematic, ancient (again, almost 100 years old) pulp fiction keep calling to people? I also think it is a call not to barbarism but to nature. Conan also represents a simpler life. And not that bullshit, false, “the 50’s were better” simpler life. I am talking about getting out and away from stuff. So many times on a weekend, I have a list of things to do. Besides the house chores, lots of them include being behind a screen. Writing, making art, promoting, all under the hum of LED lights (do LEDs hum? I dunno, it feels like they do). But then I get up and drive to a trail somewhere and take a stroll with my partner, and everything gets



Conan by Cheese Hasselberger

better. As I walk down those paths, I feel my back straighten, my breathing easier, and the heaviness just lifts. No Twitts, no Booking, no endless organizing of writing documents in online clouds. Just a peacefulness. And I think Conan represents that, and it is something we all need to think about more these days.

### **Dane:**

We can definitively say, at this point, after so many studies, that nature is good for our health and makes us happier. If you have anxiety or depression, one suggestion a doctor or expert might give: spend some time in nature.

Before I found Conan, the most formative part of my childhood was living in Los Alamos at the top of a canyon. I had a path that led right down into the ravine, and some of my best memories are of wandering down there, enjoying the sights, smells, and sounds. I remember profound feelings of peace and happiness.



I've spent the rest of my life believing we've lost an integral part of our humanity by boxing ourselves inside square rooms in square homes inside neighborhoods inside cities connected by interstate highways, so far removed from nature.

It's great for mental health to spend a little time in nature, but even then, I think something is missing. The immediacy. The danger. The simplicity. The sense of awe nature can give us.

Conan books have cities, but they're young, and the best parts happen in the wild or in places ancient and forgotten. I had the sense of a philosophical debate between the forces of civilization

and the ineffable power of nature.

Of course, much of that comes from Frazetta's artwork. I often wonder if my experience with Conan would have been much different if the art on the covers hadn't already set a specific tone.

**Mike:**

Tone. That's a great word to describe what lasts with Conan and me. In the art, the film, and the descriptive writing, I see small bits of Conan reflected in the style of the Dark Return. It's something for us all to strive for in our creativity, setting a tone that fills us with a sense of adventure!



Conan the Barbarian, Universal Studios





# DARK RETURN

## INTO THE WORLD

### THE COMPANIONS

Called a thieves guild by some in Kowal, the companions see themselves as a specialized workforce for hire. Sure, they may be hired to relieve someone of a valuable item, but they also provide spying and infiltration for the nobility and governing body of Kowal. They are allowed to exist because they are beneficial to those with money and power.

The above-board side of the guild is run out of a large building in the Oldtown district. All services offered through this building are legal, such as protection, finding buyers, or research. This guild is run by a single president and has several contract groups for hire.

In truth, the Companions is run by a three-person council, and the identities of those individuals are kept secret. They go by the titles of Hand, Eye, and Hood. This higher-tier service system provides services beyond the law. To gain access to these services, one must be vetted and trusted.

While decisions are made for the whole guild by the council of three, each is in charge of their own company. The Hand is in charge of the thieves. They are not your common pickpockets or cutpurses; these are highly skilled cat burglars and thieves. The Eye is in charge of the spies of the Companions. For a fee, they will infiltrate and report back on any confidential information you can imagine. The Hood specializes in those who want a new life or smuggle in goods with no records.

The Companions House is a sprawling mansion found on Bulwark Lane. The large four-story manse is a maze of rooms, studies, offices, and halls. Those who visit often leave from a different door than they entered, leaving them disoriented. Across the street is the towering Friend and Foe Inn, a business linked to the Companions.



The Companions House by Michael Bielaczyc

If you are into tabletop games, I am sure you have heard about the OGL mess. If not, open YouTube or Twitter and look at any RPG talking head; they have been giving CNN style 24 hour coverage.

So I am not going to bother you with all of that information. I wrote about how it affected SagaBorn on the website, which you can browse at your leisure. I do not have a “open mouth headshot in front of a splash screen” so you may not recognize it as an article about the OGL.

But I will tell you that it messed up our timeline for SagaBorn 1.5, and to make sure it came out and got in people’s hands we just published it as is. Now that we know that the OGL supposedly won’t be rebuked, I do plan on doing some edits and hopefully adding some art.

This also means that I can’t trust any big brand, so we already started working on a new system. It will lean heavily into storytelling and group rulings. But that is for the future! For now go grab the SagaBorn Core Rulebook 1.5 for free on Drive Thru Rpg!





# SAGA BORN

ROLEPLAYING GAME

CORE RULEBOOK V. 1.5

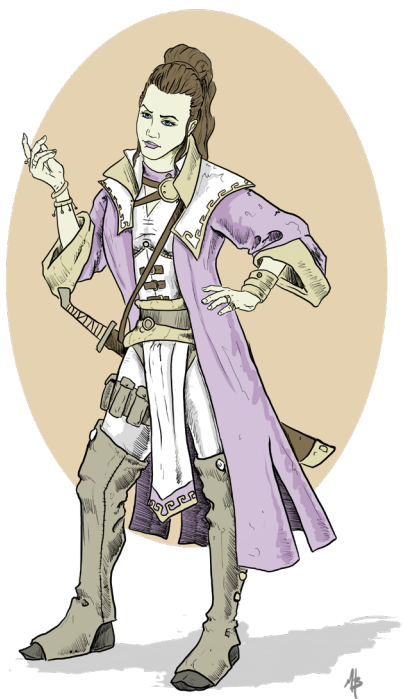


# SAGABORN ART GALLERY

## 2022

by Michael Bielaczyc

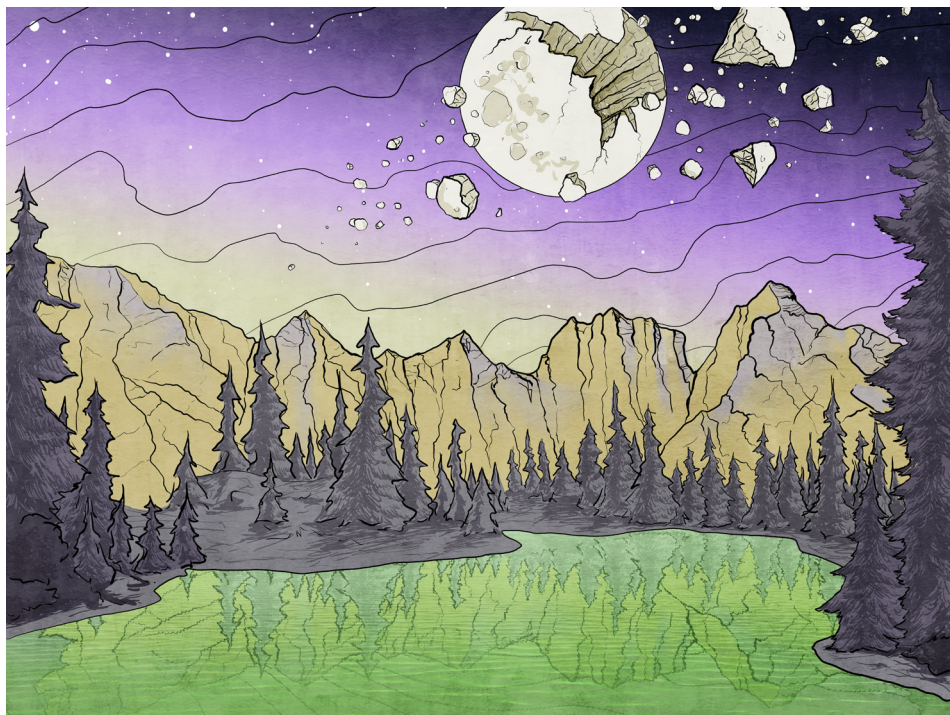






A promotional banner for 'SAGA BORN'. It features a top-down view of a game map on the left, the title 'SAGA BORN' in a large, ornate, golden font in the center, and a bottom-down view of a game map on the right. The background is a collage of these map views.

**Maps on  patreon starting at \$1**







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# Is SagaBorn at your table?



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