

Goodman Interview: Grimtooth & Friends

by Jim Wampler

Candid conversations with the chaotic crew that devised hundreds of deadly and diabolical traps guaranteed to scare the plate mail off even the most seasoned of dungeon delvers.



Rick Loomis

Founder Flying Buffalo

Goodman Games: So, let's start with a brief history recap: you founded Flying Buffalo in 1970, initially to facilitate a new play-by-mail game that you had written called Nuclear Destruction. You incorporated the company later in 1972, and later still, even purchased a micro-computer (before such a thing as personal computers even existed) in order to run your game so that you could play yourself. So Flying Buffalo started out as the world's first play-by-mail game company?

Rick Loomis: I bought the computer so that I could handle as many customers as would sign up for my game. Those MMOG's that are so popular with millions of players? That is exactly what I had in mind back in 1972 when I bought the computer. If I only had 100 customers, I could run everything by hand. But I knew that would never make enough money. The idea, and hope, was to handle thousands, and possibly millions. Yes, there were other people running Diplomacy games by mail, but I was the first person to do it for a living, instead of a hobby.

GG: Then in 1975 a very young Ken St. Andre approached you to sell a game that he had written primarily out of frustration with trying to understand the original



D&D rules. Tell us how that led to Tunnels & Trolls (T&T), the world's second published fantasy role playing game.

RL: Ken had borrowed a copy of D&D from an employee of mine, read through it in an evening, and decided it was too complicated and "not done right." He invented his own RPG, and played it with his friends, then printed 100 copies to sell to his friends. He knew I was going to the Origins game convention in Baltimore and brought me his last 40 copies and asked me to sell them at the convention. I knew this was a stupid idea - the game had no board, no counters, and no one "wins" at the end. No one would want this nonsense. But Ken was a friend and I didn't want to hurt his feelings. I figured I'd take them to Origins, put them on the corner of the table, and then when no one bought them, I could tell Ken I tried. But to my surprise I sold all 40. So

hey, I can admit when I'm wrong - I came home and asked Ken if I could publish it.

Shortly afterwards, another friend of Ken's, Steve McAllister, in a conversation right after a local science fiction convention, suggested that someone should make an RPG adventure like a "programmed text." I probably should explain that: back in the 70's there was a fad in education called programmed texts. The textbook would present a problem: "What is 7 minus 3? If your answer is 10, turn to page twelve. If your answer is 4, turn to page fifteen." If you turned to page twelve, it would say: "No, sorry, you added instead of subtracted. Now go back to page one and try again." If you turned to page fifteen, it would say: "Yes, congratulations, you subtracted correctly. Now here is your next problem." He thought it would be interesting if the book could lead you through an adventure that way. I agreed and immediately went home and wrote Buffalo Castle, which was the very first solo adventure for any RPG. It was in 1975, before any of those Choose Your Own Adventure or Fighting Fantasy books. Then Ken quickly wrote "Deathtrap Equalizer Dungeon" and "Naked Doom" and solo adventures became T&T's niche.

GG: In 1981, Flying Buffalo continued to pioneer the burgeoning

RPG market by publishing the Catalyst series of system-neutral role playing supplements. How did that come about and what made you decide to go with a system-neutral approach? It's a common practice now, but not back then...

RL: D&D was obviously a huge market, much bigger than T&T, and we wanted something we could sell to all those game players.

GG: Although the Catalyst series went on to include adventures, campaign settings, and treasure and magic books, the very first Catalyst series book was Grimtooth's Traps. How did that come about and why a book featuring just dungeon traps?

RL: Other folks had published books of spells, monsters and treasure. I wanted to publish something no one else was doing, and at the time no one else had done a book of traps.

GG: At what point did you realize that you had a massive hit on your hands - one that would eventually lead to a series of eight books?

RL: We released Grimtooth's Traps at the San Jose Origins Convention and sold over 100 copies at \$10 each. That was our best Origins up to that point, and we were very pleased. After the convention, I heard from other publishers that it had been a terrible Origins - sales were awful. When I discovered how bad everyone else's sales had been, I realized we had a hit on our hands.

GG: On that same note - what do you think gives these books such enduring popularity? These books are all basically about how to kill player characters more efficiently

in a dungeon, after all. Is it the pure insidious nature of each and every trap? The humorous approach of the books? Or being such a collaborative effort with dozens of contributors, did the whole concept simply metamorphose into something greater than any of the individual parts?

RL: I'm not really sure. I suspect it was because Paul O'Connor, the first editor, decided to go with humor. It's like you and Grimtooth getting together and laughing about how you and he are going to terrorize that poor, hapless adventurer. Humor is difficult to bring off properly, and Paul did it just right. People don't just buy the books to get trap ideas. They are always telling me they just love reading them.

Paul Ryan O'Connor

Editor, *Grimtooth's Traps*



Goodman Games: You were the editor on Grimtooth's Traps, Grimtooth's Traps Too, and Grimtooth Traps Lite (tell me if I missed anything)?

Paul Ryan O'Connor: I'm pretty sure I edited Traps Ate and Traps Lite, too, as a freelancer for Rick, well after I left Flying Buffalo. As

with all the Traps books, it was as much or more a writing job as an editing job, as we never had enough submissions to fill out a given book, and most of what we received had to be heavily re-written.

GG: What was it like trying to ride herd on such a diverse and highly creative group of contributors? Did you feel like the lone Lawful Good guy at a Chaotic Neutral rave party?

PRO'C: It was more like being Sauron among the Hobbits. On the first Traps book, I had plenty of old Buffalo pros (chiefly Mike Stackpole and Larry DiTillio, though all the staff pitched in) to create content, sometimes under multiple names, but with every instance of Traps the books were largely written by the "editors," with most fan-submissions being heavily edited or re-written. Artist Steve Crompton was also heavily involved on the creative side, often taking crazy notes and making them into working traps that were then written and "designed" to fit his very fine illustrations.

I was always happy to award credit to the fans - that was half the fun of these books - but for the most part, the books were written by staff, and in this regard, I have to thank Liz Danforth for letting me lead the Traps project. She handed me the assignment when I was a teenager and let me see it through with minimal oversight. I will always be in her debt for the trust she afforded me with this series.

GG: The Grimtooth's Traps books are full of solid gold game content with the traps alone, but starting almost immediately with

Traps Too, the books began to include metacontent, like crossword puzzles and even a Grimtooth comic. Whose idea was all of that madness?

PRO'C: I left Buffalo during production of Traps Too, so you'd have to ask Liz or Mike or Pat Mueller about their thinking, but I expect it was a mixture of their desire to stretch the genre, of a dearth of ready traditional traps content for the book, of a looming deadline, and their own creative nature that caused them to arrive at that particular decision.

GG: What special challenges did the Grimtooth's Traps books present that were different from the other Catalyst series books?

PRO'C: The biggest challenge was in being first. Grimtooth's Traps was the first of what would become Buffalo's generic /Catalyst series books, so we were figuring that part of it as we went along. Traps was always more free-wheeling than the more serious Citybooks and such, but we still had to blaze a trail for the way generic books were written and presented.

I made two decisions as the editor of Traps that I think really made an impact on the series. The first was that the book needed a "narrator." I was thinking of someone like the Crypt Keeper from the old EC horror comics, and Liz suggested that I use the Grimtooth character that she and Ugly John Carver had created for Sorcerer's Apprentice magazine.

The second was deciding that the project should be generic, rather than Tunnels & Trolls specific (it had begun by soliciting Sorcerers Apprentice readers to send in their best T&T traps). I loved T&T, but recognized it

would limit our market and pushed for a generic approach. In this, Traps was part of a wave of products reacting to the dominance of Dungeons & Dragons, a kind of precursor to the more formal Open Game License program that later publishers would use. I don't think we were the first to do generic (that was probably Judges' Guild) but along with Chaosium we really pushed that form forward. Traps lost the Origins award to Chaosium's Thieves World, which was a terrific product that has kind of been lost to the mists of time, I think largely because it wasn't generic so much as multi-system, but it was still part of that making-the-best-of-things that all RPG publishers who weren't TSR had to deal with at the time.

GG: Many gamers prefer to mainly either play in games as players or to run them as referees. As a former editor, I imagine that you prefer to referee games?

PRO'C: I suppose I ran games more often than I was a player, yes. The thing that struck me as odd - as a teenager moved out to Phoenix, run away to join the circus with Flying Buffalo - was how infrequently the Buffalo folks actually sat down to play games. I think I ran as many T&T games as the rest of them did combined during my eighteen months on the staff. Now, as an older and hopefully wiser hand, I understand how making a job of things reduces your enthusiasm for what was formerly your hobby. And to be fair, we did game quite a bit back then, just not as much as eighteen-year-old me might have liked! As a kid, I had that crazy impression that the job would be all gaming, all the time.

GG: And I have to ask... your favorite trap ever? How many

player characters did it kill?

PRO'C: The Infamous Wheel Trap, of course, which as part of my editor's prerogative I gave the lead-off spot in the first Traps book. It must have killed dozens - hundreds? - of characters. We used to splash a lot of blood in my games. The guys wouldn't even name their characters until they'd gotten through the wheel room (and the decapitating roller coaster ride that preceded it in my gonzo gauntlet of doom - the Blitz Pitz). Ah, memories. We'd kill characters by the page. Kids these days, they have no idea ... (grumbles).

Steven S. Crompton
Primary Illustrator
Grimtooth's Traps, et al



Goodman Games: The Grimtooth's Traps series is a near-perfect storm of creative collaboration by a large and eclectic group of gamers. But if I were to single out any one contributor who seemed to especially symbolize the esprit de corps of these books, that would have to be you. How did you first get involved with Flying Buffalo and the Grimtooth books?

Steven S. Crompton: My younger sister Gina (and the

inspiration for Grimtina) met Rick Loomis at summer camp. He hired my sister and I to work at collating T&T solos and putting together box sets, back in 1980. Eventually, I ended up working in the Flying Buffalo store, where I met Liz. I had been taking commercial art classes in high school and she saw I could draw decent diagrams and floor plans, so she gave me the task of diagramming all the traps for this book they were working on. That book became Grimtooth's Traps. Paul O'Connors' warped humor took the book from being a semi-serious tome into something filled with dark, sardonic humor. As his twisted editing of the submitted traps progressed, my art reflected more and more that same humor.

GG: I understand that the character Grimtooth began life as Liz Danforth's humorous take on the troll depicted in the first edition Tunnels & Trolls box art. How much of the Grimtooth character in the Traps books is your doing, how much Liz's, and how much a product of a group gestalt?

SSC: Well I always thought I was just carrying on what Liz started with Grimtooth, but she says I took him in a whole different direction. Grimtooth was her design and her creation. As I drew him, certainly I was heavily influenced by MAD magazine and some of the humorous comics put out by DC & Marvel in the 1970s. I was a big fan of Superman and if you think about classic Superman comics and Grimtooth, you can see that both of them seem indestructible and both have a white dog and a blonde younger "sister." One of the other things Paul and I used to talk about all the time was the Dr. Phibes films and you can see

some of that sort of humor in the Traps books as well. Liz also has a decidedly dark sense of humor and I think that remains in Grimtooth to this very day.

GG: Did you ever get tired of drawing new and gruesome ways for player characters to meet their doom?

SSC: I think occasionally when I was working on a Traps book and would get about three-quarters of the way through, I'd get "traps fatigue." Really though, I pretty much loved drawing all the Traps. The tricky part was trying not to go too gory with the art. I liked to try to experiment using different styles and techniques in each book, which always kept me excited with the results.

GG: How much of the humorous approach to the material had its origin in actual play experience? Those were the gonzo days early in the hobby...

SSC: Well Paul and I played with Bear Peters and Ken St Andre, and those two definitely have a sense of humor when they run games, so certainly what they contributed was taken from that. Most of the submissions were from fellow RPGers, but most of them were not meant to be funny, they were serious traps used to kill over-powered players (a quite common problem back in the early days of RPGs). We added the humor to the best traps we could find or create.

GG: Decades later, you re-teamed with Rick Loomis to remaster many of the early Grimtooth's Traps books. They say you can never go home again, but apparently you can go back to the dungeon. What was it like revisiting all that great

material again in this day and age of the Old School Renaissance?

SSC: Well it always great to be able to go back and adjust some things that either didn't print well, or weren't as funny as originally drawn. In looking back at the older books, I was surprised by how little Grimtooth actually appeared, so I added him into illustrations and the margins to give him more of a visual presence. The other thing I noticed was that some of the traps I had drawn did not have any people in them, which tended to make the traps less interesting. So I added victims into the illos to give you a better idea of the size of the trap and how it would work. It's been great to be able to do that on art I drew over 30 years ago!

GG: What do you consider the single deadliest dungeon trap that you've created or been asked to illustrate?

SSC: In Traps Ate there is a trap called "One Orc's Sauna is Another Man's Body Liquid." Delvers fall into a superheated tube, where their liquefied remains are pored into a large "hot tub" while Grimtooth relaxes in while he drinks from a wine goblet. I don't know if it's the deadliest - but it's the most disturbing - and I drew it!

One last thing I wanted to add was that although I drew the vast majority of the traps in the books, there are five artists who actually did art for the Traps books. Liz Danforth has a dozen illos of Grimtooth that appear in the books (she also designed the original cover to the first book). Jeff Dee did the illo that is on the cover of Traps Too; Michael Von Glahn did most of the illos in Traps Fore and Scott Jackson did

some illos in Traps Bazaar. And yes, yours truly did all the other 400 illos in the Traps books.

Bear Peters *Jack of All Trades, Flying Buffalo*



Goodman Games: You were there at ground zero in Ken St. Andre's very first Tunnels & Trolls playtest. Was that your first gaming experience or do you go back even further than that?

Bear Peters: Even though it seems like the dawn of time, gaming goes back well before the advent of Tunnels and Trolls and D&D. I played Risk, Diplomacy, some of the very early hex grid tactical games; Gettysburg, Jutland, Panzer Blitz, as well as other board games. My mom taught me chess at the age of 7, and given my current age, I can't remember if we had Knights or if they were called Chariots.

We also played cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, and due to the advent of the "space age" had adventures set on other planets! These "flights of fancy" - along with the structure of boardgames - created in me and my friends fertile ground for the evolution of fantasy role playing games.

GG: You worked at Flying Buffalo

as a self-admitted "jack of all trades," and were an early contributor to the Grimtooth's Traps series. Who exactly was the original Grimtooth?

BP: The "jack of all trades" thing was evolutionary. In the early days at Buffalo everyone wore many hats. I provided content, helped with game design, printing, game assembly, collating, shipping, and did a little light construction (both in dungeon building, at which I was fairly good, and in erecting shelving, which later collapsed rather catastrophically!).

Strangely, though, I was not a substantial contributor at the beginning of the Traps products. I want to say that the idea evolved from Paul O'Connor, who gave Grimtooth a voice, and some fan mail Buffalo had received over the years. As things grew and evolved it became more and more the work of Steve Crompton, whose illustrations have served to clarify and delineate the "perfection" of Grimtooth's designs over the entire run. Over the years Grimtooth has gone from a fusion of many hands to become a personality in his own right. For me, Grimtooth became "real" when he "showed up one day" trying to get his kid sister Grimtina a job!

My affiliation with Grimtooth came about when my dungeon construction, particularly morphic rooms and traps, collided with the traps concept - sometime between Traps Fore, and Traps Ate.

GG: You've written many, many games and gaming products, but I'd like to ask about Grimtooth's Dungeon of Doom. If you wrote it, how come it's credited to

My First Design Meeting with Grimtooth

by Bear Peters

So there I was, sitting in my favorite tavern wondering what my next gig was going to be when up walks this short, wiry fellow with a sinister grin, wearing an olive drab trench coat and fedora.

"You Bear Peters?" he asked, plunking down his keister on an adjacent bar stool.

It kind of reminded me of the last time I saw Rob Carver, if you could ignore the pointy ears that poked out from under the fedora.

"Yeah," I said. "You look familiar. Have we met?"

Ever since I got tied up with Ken St. Andre, Liz Danforth, Flying Buffalo, and Tunnels & Trolls, long-eared, greenish, toothy guys in trench coats had ceased to surprise me.

"Not so much, kid!" He said grinning that signature toothy grin, "But I have admired your work for some time. Dungeon of the Bear, Catacombs of the Bear Cult... sound familiar?"

He took off his fedora, and tossed it on the bar. The bartender turned to him and upon seeing his bald pate and pale green face with it's long ears and sharp dentition, didn't bat an eye. (There were reasons why I like this place!)

"What'll you have?"

"Two of what he's having," the little Troll had noticed my empty pint glass.

Turning to me he announced, "Grimtooth, Trap Master Extraordinaire!" He said it in a way that made it clear that if I didn't know him by his title, I wasn't the man he was looking for.

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