

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Forging the Realms Archive | 9/7/2012



Mirt Strides out of the Mists

By Ed Greenwood

How and where and when did the Forgotten Realms start? What's at the heart of Ed Greenwood's creation, and how does the Grand Master of the Realms use his own world when he runs D&D adventures for the players in his campaign? "Forging the Forgotten Realms" is a new weekly feature wherein Ed answers all those questions and more.

he Realms didn't begin with Elminster.

Oh, no. It all started with Mirt.

Short stories about Mirt, to be precise, not *Dungeons & Dragons* lore, because there was no such thing as D&D back then. When I first brought Mirt to life, the game wouldn't exist in published form for another eight years.

So the [Forgotten Realms](#) setting began as a story, or rather, a series of episodes in the life of Mirt. While I was still a young lad, I had read darned near every book in my father's den. Whenever I demanded more adventures of the favorite characters I had discovered, I usually received a reply from Dad that the creator of this or that intriguing hero or scoundrel had been dead for some time—so if I wanted to read any more stories, I'd have to first write them myself.

So I tried to do my own writing, with what a charitable critic might describe as "mixed results." I got better as I went on, because "better" was really the only direction to go from where I started.

Along the way, characters started to develop in my mind, and one of them was Mirt the Moneylender (who had once, years earlier in his life, earned a reputation as a tough-as-nails old mercenary known variously as "Old Wolf" or "Mirt the Merciless").

I delighted in Fritz Leiber's tales of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, enjoying both their lighthearted surface jauntiness and their small, story-by-story revelations of Nehwon, the world those two heroes adventured through. I wanted to write my own fantasy tales of the same sort—not an imitation starring two capable heroes, but episodes centered around a very different protagonist: Mirt the Moneylender.

I wanted to explore what it would be like for a wheezing, sly old man to swindle and outdeal his way through merchant adventures after he was too decrepit to do the agile Mouser thing—or for that matter, the hew-through-all-foes Conan thing, either. Mirt had once been a swashbuckling sword-slinger, yes, but he was older than that now.

He was a lot of Shakespeare's Falstaff; a little bit of Guy Gilpatrick's wily old drunkard of a freight steamer's engineer, Glencannon; and a whiff of Poul Anderson's intergalactic trader Nicholas van Rijn. I wanted a fat, food-stained man with prodigious appetites for fine cuisine, wine, and women, a sharp-as-steel business mind always four or five steps ahead of most trade rivals, and a wearer of big floppy sea boots, who moved gruffly through life with a limping, wheezing lurch. Mirt could no longer outrun foes, couldn't outfight many or climb anything, but could (had to!) outthink many folk, and had loads of experience. Though he could no longer leap onto a horse as it galloped past or vault large pieces of furniture in a swordfight, he had done both often in his



past, and he had a fair idea of what his opponents might be capable of.

I pictured Mirt as swindling his way along the seacoast of a medieval-cum-Renaissance fantasy land, from port to port, one step ahead of creditors, rivals, and local authorities. The first place he fled from, in the chronicle I assembled, was Luskan (although that first, mercifully unpublished 1966 tale referenced a hasty departure from Mirabar, thanks to a little misunderstanding regarding gems), and the first place he arrived in thereafter was Neverwinter.

I knew that Mirt was heading for a great crossroads trading city where a friend of his dwelt, a man called Durnan, who was a similarly elderly former Conan figure, but wise and worldly enough to be termed a “thinking man’s Conan.” I also knew that Durnan was settled, with a wife and a family, and he wouldn’t leave that great city to go gallivanting with the old rogue he regarded as his best and oldest friend. He could be Mirt’s ally, rescuer, and co-conspirator when Mirt was in the city—a place Mirt loved and would return to often—but wouldn’t sail or ride elsewhere.

As for that “elsewhere,” I knew almost right away that the coast Mirt was working his way along was the Sword Coast, but it was a year before I knew he was heading for Waterdeep (a place with a “deepwater” harbor and hence a great port, but “Deepwater” sounded too much like real-world New England, whereas “Waterdeep” sounded sufficiently different that it could be part of my unfolding fantasy world), and that the world that held the Sword Coast and the fierce, stormy Sea of Swords beyond it was “the Forgotten Realms.”

It was called that because I envisaged many parallel worlds (in later D&D terms, “alternate Prime Material Planes”) linked by magical gates (what later editions of the game call “portals”) existing side by side, as it were. Our real world was closely linked to Mirt’s world, but in recent centuries most of the gates had been destroyed, had come under guard and so were no longer open to free passage, or literally forgotten. So the formerly close-by existence of this parallel world accounted for our legends of dragons and magic and so on, but we had “forgotten” the way to get to those realms. Hence, our real world wasn’t full of flying dragons and wizards that could blast them down, and the world that still held such things was “the Forgotten Realms.” Michael Moorcock is usually credited with first using the term “multiverse” in fiction, but the concept is much, much older; I first encountered it (developed beyond the old folktale and fairytale treatments of “fairyland” being linked to our real world) in [The Wood Beyond The World](#) by William Morris, published in 1894 (C.S. Lewis borrowed the idea for Narnia, calling it, as I did in the early days for the Realms, “the Wood Between The Worlds”).

Back to Mirt. What I’m really getting at here is that the Realms developed as a way of telling stories. Although I spent years puttering away for my own amusement detailing fantastical Faerûnian trees and herbs and gemstones and the like, I accidentally avoided being overwhelmed by trying to design an entire fantasy world from the ground up. I began by looking over the shoulder of Mirt the Moneylender, seeing the world through his feuds and narrow escapes and con jobs.

More than a few years have passed since I first envisioned Mirt wheezing his way toward me, sharp and steady eyes gleaming above his half-smile, and I’ve discovered a lot more of the Realms since then—but Mirt has guided me through all of it, looking for new traders to trick, and new escape routes whenever flight proved the better part of valor.

It’s been quite the trip.

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the *Forgotten Realms* setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, and he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.