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A Healthy Dose of Imagination

“Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don't we consider it his duty to escape? . . . If we value the freedom of mind and soul, if we're partisans of liberty, then it's our plain duty to escape, and to take as many people with us as we can!”

— J.R.R. Tolkien

Too often in today's society is the role of imagination downplayed, belittled and resigned to something only meant to children. However how is the future to arise if there is no one to imagine it, to think of how it could be? Without imagination there can be no progress, no steps forward. In addition the phrase “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy”, applies perhaps as never before when through the digital world the line between work and the rest of a persons life becomes blurred and ill defined. So why not take a break from the world and imagine and play, let your self have fun. Imagine for a moment that you are no longer yourself, instead you are a great warrior, before you stands a horde of orcs, be they minions of the dark lord Sauron, or some other foul power. Between you and certain death you have only your sword and your skill, with a blast of horns and murderous cry the orcs surge forward as the sun glints off of their rusty and crude blades. Their gnash their teeth and salivate at the thought of your death, as their first orc reaches you, your sword swings down and cleaves his head, back and forth you sweep your sword, trying to keep them back. From the corner of you eye, a great burst of

flame leaps forth as the wizard enters the fray, the smell of burnt orc flesh assaults your nostrils. Just as it seems the tide might turn in your favor, and the large and hideous visage a troll appears behind the orcs, distracted you feel a sharp blow land on the back of your head, and all is dark.

LARP or live action role play evolved out of table top role playing games in the 1970's, such as Dungeons and Dragons. In the beginning mostLARPs resembled the Tolkienesque fantasy depicted in most of the role-playing games of the times, but in the years since has evolved to depict everything from historical settings, to science fiction, to the popular steampunk movement. At the core of every LARP is the idea that people should be more than an audience or observers, and so the players will assume a character and interact with the other players and situations designed by the game master, as their assumed character. I began LARPing when I was in 7th grade, and later in high school began work at an afterschool program offering a LARP program for its students, called the LARP Adventure Program, when I was in high school. Working with and being involved with this particular community has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life, and some of the most fun.

From an early age I always liked anything fantasy related, my favorite book when I was a child was *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien, and generally enjoyed any fantasy book I could lay my hands on. I had already discovered Dungeons and Dragons by 6th grade, and while it would be many years before I would fully understand the rules, my friends and myself would spend hours making up characters and stories for them. I then met Eric, who started a small LARP class for myself and one of my friends. Within a few weeks we had 5 members and would meet every week during the weekends for two hours a day.

From the start I was hooked, LARP fulfilled my boyish love of hitting my friends, and my love of fantasy. While the class fell apart after a little more than a year, I stayed in contact with Eric and would pick up LARP again through him in late high school.

In high school I started working at an afterschool program with Eric helping to run LARP classes for the students. This is one of the few programs that runs LARP for young students and as such makes it unique amongst LARPs. The program works with students for the three years that they are in middle school, and now includes a high school program for those that wish to continue to be a part of the program and take on a more involved role. The program has grown to the point where we have around 50 middle school students, 15 high school members, and handful of adult volunteers in addition to Eric and myself who run the program.

Due to the community nature of LARP and the amount of work that it takes to run, most LARPs will end up with a large amount of community involvement and volunteering. This holds true in our program, and while the fact that it happens is not unique, it does make every LARP unique. The overall tone and function each LARP will be different because of this, even for LARPs that might share a rule set, or be a part of the same large community (such as the NERO community which has chapters in many states), each will have a unique feel based on who is involved. Our program is also defined by its status as an after-school program, which dictates the themes and subject matter that we can include due to our age range.

Like all LARPs this group has some particulars to it that allow it to function as its own discourse community, as well as be a part of the greater LARP discourse community. The program uses the NERO LARP rules as the basis for its system, which is

shared with many other LARPS including the local NERO Boston. However over the years we have modified and added to the rules to allow them to fit our own needs as they arise, leading to our own sub-set of rules that exist only within the program. Like any discourse community has particular inside jokes and phrases that arise from our particular group of individuals.

Every community no matter how large or small will have its own way of speaking and communicating, while an outsider may know the words that they say, the meaning will be lost on them. LARP is no different, and each community within the greater LARP community has its own insider terms and sayings that might not extend beyond their own group.

To start a global term common to all LARPs is the idea of in-game/out-of-game. While at first the term may seem simple and self-explanatory, there are nuances to the term that only become clear when you are familiar with the game. The basic idea behind the term (and indeed to obvious one) is that it refers to something (person, object, knowledge) that is a part of the game (or not a part of), so the other players would be in-game persons but a random person who walks by would be out-of-game. However because LARP is a game that requires you to take on the persona of a character you must then consider, the difference in knowledge between your-self and your character. In this example your character is in-game, but you yourself are out-of-game, something that you know, your character might not know. This requires players to always think about where their knowledge comes from, while you might know from the rulebook that a purple colored potion is probably poison, your character might not know that, and then there would be no reason for your character to not drink it, even though you know it will most

likely end badly for you. This concept of in-game/out-of-game, then becomes central to the game running properly, because if one-person begins to use out-of-game knowledge, they can ruin it for everybody.

For the large loose-knit (if related at all) community of LARPs as a whole, the community could be broken down into groups that use the same set of rules. One such group would be the NERO rules. NERO stands for New England Role-playing Organization, and was a LARP that started up in New England and has since spread over the country (with 45+ chapters spread over 35 states, and parts of Canada). The NERO rules system creates a joint set of rules and terms that all of these chapters share in common, in addition they all share a joint game-world and events at one chapter could affect another. While the LARP Adventure Program uses the NERO rules we do not share their game-world, however because we both use the same rules we can (and have) played joint games with them. This means that when we bring our group of kids to a NERO event, and they for example cast a stone bolt (“I call forth a stone bolt) and throw their spell pack at t NERO player both persons understand what has just happened. So while the rules set itself (NERO) is a term that defines a particular community, it also creates a whole set of insider terms for that community (stone bolt, endow, slay, weapon proficiency, death count and Earth Circle for example), that can be used and shared by every member of that community to make the game run.

Finally within The LARP Adventure Program itself we have our own terms and jokes. One of these is the joke of the “LARP gods”. The term first arose 5 years ago when preparing for an event, the night before the event Eric and myself were at his house packing everything we would need for the event. Boxes were everywhere, it

was 1 in the morning and we had to wake up at 6 to arrive at location on time, and we were nowhere close to being ready to go. So we began to joke, “The LARP gods need sacrifice!” so the joke went that the fickle gods demanded sacrifice of time and space (as in living space as was taken up by the boxes that consumed Eric’ house) or your event would suck. And indeed the event the next day went wonderfully, how ever the next year there was no sacrifice to the LARP gods, we did not have to stay up late every night the week before, and there was not horrible mess of boxes around the house for weeks, and so the LARP gods took their sacrifice in blood, I ended up bashing my head on a piece of metal during the event and bleeding. So five years on we still joke about the LARP gods, it has come to represent the work and effort that must be paid to make an event go off. It is a joke for when we are tired and sick of moving boxes of costumes and props that perhaps our efforts might pay off and appease the fickle beings of fate, to give us good fortune, and a way for us to laugh off the bad things that happen (like a bleeding head).

Any group or community that is together for an extended period of time must have some values, and rules based in these values to hold them together. Otherwise there is nothing to define how a member should act, and so an individual can act in an inappropriate way and throw the whole group off. The LARP Adventure Program is no exception, we have rules and values not only to keep the game fair and balanced, but also to make sure that the students behave appropriately and respect each other, and the community. Some of the most important values in the community are the respect of seniority and commitment, self-reliance, and honesty.

Our community thrives on the work and effort that its members put into it, without the hard work of the members nothing could get done. For this reason the time

that a person has been with the program (seniority) and work put into the program (commitment) are things that are highly valued. To reflect this we have a system to honor those who have been there for a long time, and who put in lots of their own time and effort. The students when getting ready for an activity or trip are asked to line up by “rank”, which is determined by how many years a student has been a part of the program, and how much extra effort and time they have put in. This practice visually shows and honors those who do their best to make the community better. In addition to how they line up those who have put time often get extra privileges or rewards, for example we might let the higher ranked members of the first year group attend a second year event to reward them for their time and effort, or let someone design a new item or rule for the game. This also exemplifies those who behave and act appropriately, and lets other members of the community know how they should act and behave.

Another value held highly in the community is that of self-reliance. This means that we expect every person to be able to ensure that their responsibilities and needs are taken care of, and we expect every student to take care of bringing or ensuring that their own supplies are at an event or location. This includes a character’s costume, and other game needs as well as water and snacks for the players themselves. This is not to say that we do not encourage community members to ask for help or have other help them, but that no one should assume that another member is going to take care of something for them. For example every character has their own personal “boffer”, the padded weapon used in-game, for an event we expect every person to make sure that they will have their own personal boffer there, but we are happy to help a person get them there if asked. This is valued, and the practice put in place, to allow those who are

running the event or program to not worry about any individual member's needs and instead the needs of the community as a whole. This allows us to try to do bigger and better things, because we know that our community can take care of itself.

Between these values there is something that could be called the antithesis of our values, and that is sloth or laziness. Because we so highly value commitment and self-reliance laziness then becomes exactly what we do not want people to do. In *The Evolution of the Seven Deadly Sins: From God to the Simpsons* Lisa Frank quotes Homer's views on laziness. "If you don't like your job you don't strike. You just go in every day and do it really half-assed. That's the American way." (Frank 235) For our community nothing could be worse than someone who comes into work and does it half-assed. Such a person not only flouts the value of commitment, they also become a drain on the community, because they are not self-reliant and others must pick up their slack. When this happens and someone is being so lazy that it has become a problem and is hurting the community (being lazy for a day every so often is understood and accepted), we often point this out to the person, as well as move them down in rank and give them less privileges. If the person continues to be a drain on the community we will then ask them to leave, however luckily because of the way our community rewards hard work and effort this rarely happens.

Finally the last of the major things that we value is honesty, not only is it an admirable quality in general, but it vital to making a LARP game function. The game is full of things that require honesty from the players; a player must keep track of how many times they have been hit, what abilities or items they have used, and not taking advantage or unfair situations or loopholes. For example every character has a number or health

points or “HP” when a character is hit they lose HP, it is the responsibility of the character to keep track of this, and it is very easy to fudge because no one else knows how much the player has. If a player is found to be cheating and dishonest then they are removed from the game, as they ruin the experience for the whole group. In addition to making the game run, this teaches an important quality to the students that we work with, by encouraging them to be honest in the game, we can encourage them to be honest in their life as well.

While LARP still does not have much recognition and is mostly known only in the “nerd” community recent movies such as the movie Role Models have brought LARP to the attention of more people. In addition the popular steampunk movement has brought more people into the world of LARP and created whole new genres of the activity. As we move forward, and our lives become more complicated, we will increasingly become prisoners of the lives we choose to lead; appearances must be kept up, our many identities (online and otherwise) require attention, and work intrudes on personal life. It will become ever more important for us to escape from life, and explore the world of imagination, to let the cares of the world go and live only for oneself. To this end I would encourage everyone to find a community to escape in, be it LARP or something else, personally my life would be so much more dull without it.

Frank, Lisa. "The Evolution of the Seven Deadly Sins: From God to the Simpsons." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 35.1 (2001): 95-105. Print.

"J.R.R. Tolkien Quotes." *J.R.R. Tolkien Quotes (Author of The Hobbit)*. N.p., n.d.
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