

MERPCON III : Overdose

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MERPCON III: OVERDOSE

As experienced by Joe Mandala

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MERPCON III promised many exciting opportunities. It offered me my first chance to meet several people in person with whom I have had long and fruitful relationships with over the years. It offered me the chance to visit the state of Washington, the city of Spokane in particular, which I had not had the chance to visit previously. It offered my wife and me the chance to leave our clutch of children in the care of another for a blessed few days of "away time." Those of you with children will realize just how precious this can be.

It offered me, in a peculiarly fortuitous bit of timing, the chance to jump back into a community I had vaguely drifted away from over a few years. Fortuitous because of a confluence of seemingly unconnected coincidences regarding gaming and Middle-earth: the release of the commercial license from Decipher; the go-ahead from my general editor at TGC to resume publication of Middle-earth material; the completion of a massive project by Thomas Morwinsky dealing with the general geography of Middle-earth; a change in my own professional circumstances affording more time to dedicate to these pursuits which I so dearly love; and perhaps most importantly (for myself, at least), a renewed inspiration to actually *do* something with the circumstances I find myself in.

The Pusher

So when I was invited by Hawke Robinson, that most singularly dedicated master of the merp.com domain, to attend and even speak at MERPCON, I immediately decided to give it some thought. You must forgive me my hesitation -- I had already been requested to attend Origins and the awards ceremony there as a representative of the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts & Design. I suspected, though, that I'd been invited to help set up tables and chairs and such so that GAMA wouldn't have to bother. That is, after all, the purpose of AAGAD, is it not? I decided, instead, to take Hawke up on his offer and make the trek to the cool and temperate clime of Spokane and attend MERPCON III.

It must be said that Hawke Robinson has been bearing the burden of keeping the core of the communication infrastructure intact for the Middle-earth gaming community for some years now. He is, as I've stated, a very dedicated man, and deserves more recognition than he gets for his efforts. He is

also the organizer of MERPCON and puts forth an amazing amount of effort in getting it together and pulling in the people to make it a successful event. Hawke is a generous and congenial host, and I would like to personally thank him and his family for their hospitality.

The First Hit

My wife and I arrived in Spokane on Thursday after a harrowing experience flying through Denver International Airport. Never fly United Airlines through Denver International. You have been warned. United is the devil incarnate. Or, rather, they are the earthly equivalent of the bureaucracy of hell, if there is such thing. Being from the Great Plains of the United States, and having left the hot and humid summer there, we were looking forward to some cooler and drier weather. It was not to be so. Spokane decided to spare us the homesickness of missing the weather of our native land. Hawke picked us up and brought us to our home-away-from-home, where we promptly began working on building characters for the gaming sessions that would begin the next evening. Thankfully there were air conditioners.

The first sessions were to be using MERP 2nd Edition, and creating the characters for those sessions was a powerful dive back into a gaming system I had not used with regularity for years. It brought back many good memories, and I must say that I began to yearn, just a little, for a time when I had hours upon hours to spend simply creating stories for my players and then unleashing the horrors of the elder days upon them. We worked on characters late into the night, and continued the next day, until it was time to head down to the convention site. By then we had a small crew of folks, so we loaded up the gear and got the wagon train rolling.

The Rush

That night, on Friday, about half of the guests were there as we were setting up, and everyone pitched in. It was a great group effort. I will say that the feeling at this gathering was much different than any of the other conventions I have been to in the past -- even the smaller ones (and MERPCON fits squarely into the group of smaller conventions). It is a very close-feeling convention, with a lot of informal conversation and rubbing of shoulders. I quite enjoyed the atmosphere. Hawke gave an introductory talk, welcoming us all to the event, and we jumped into gaming.

The campaign that was run over the weekend was First Contact -- set in the Second Age in the early 7th Century as the Númenóreans first began to return to Arda. The parties (there were two separate tables running the same campaign) consisted of diverse groups, including some of the "locals" -- people of the tribe of Haleth who had migrated southward to the coast of Andrast after the War of Wrath. There were some Númenóreans, of course, as well as Sindar Elves and Dwarves. The premise was an assault by the forces of darkness, men of the shadow, on a group of villages of these folk of Haleth over a period of a decade or two. The PCs returned to the area regularly, and conveniently these visits coincided both with our respective sessions and also with the occurrence of Very Bad Things(TM) happening. The first session was great fun, even if it was a disaster that ended with the death of the village chief. Nobody said that First Contact wasn't a messy affair.

Riding the Wave

Morning comes early when you bed down at 3 a.m. We arrived a tad late Saturday morning, but jumped right into gaming. We were supposed to be switching game systems at table #1, but the group decided to stick with MERP (as table #2 was doing) to save time on character conversion. There were three gaming sessions on Saturday, continuing the First Contact campaign. They began with a sort of small-scale civil war, progressed to a general plague, and ended with a wide-scale kidnapping of all of the village chieftains. Needless to say, it was an exciting and gut-churning ride. I suspect, though, that the villagers must have begun to associate the "visitors from far-away" with bad times. It was a fun campaign, though it felt a bit rushed at times. There was a *lot* to accomplish at MERPCON III.

The first guest speaker of the convention was Chris Seeman, of Other Hands fame (as well as "of his-unnumbered-other-accomplishments fame, but that is too long a list to recount here). Chris talked about online gaming, and the advantages of the Play-By-Email (PBEM) model over the Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) model. He cited the ability to manipulate the narrative as it builds, the ability to interweave multiple group narratives much more easily, and also the ease with which you can transfer these narratives from the format of a role playing game to the format of a novel. Chris mentioned that we don't really have a lot of contact amongst each other currently, and was interested to know what everyone was doing in terms of games -- systems, methods, et al. He pointed out the need to reach out, perhaps to the fan fiction groups, and most especially to establish strong communications even within the ranks of those of us who game using Middle-earth. Most of his presentation was taken up by an excellent question-and-answer session discussing the ways in which game masters might be able to make their games more "Tolkienish," and avoid the trap of the generic fantasy setting, and also discussing social issues in gaming.

Perhaps the most exciting revelation of the convention as far as future work is concerned was the presentation that Thomas Morwinsky gave on the new map set that he and others developed, working from the Ambarkanta maps and from Pete Fenlon's maps (as well as other sources). The new publication *Other Minds* has a detailed article dealing with this work. Thomas went on to talk about the importance of geography as foundational to other aspects of Tolkien's world -- things like vegetation patterns, migrations of peoples (and where they end up living), political organization, and more. The work itself represents an astounding amount of effort, and serves as a reminder of what our community is capable of (several others contributed to the project -- it was a collaborative effort). It was clear, though, that the work does not stop with a single version of the maps. There will be challenges and modifications certainly. More importantly, however, this will provide a base upon which to build not only more work, but a model with which to build it.

Very late on Saturday evening Michael Martinez gave a talk. Michael is the author of several excellent books on Tolkien, including *Visualizing Middle-earth*, and *Understanding Middle-earth: Essays on Tolkien's Middle-earth*. Did I mention that it was late? Michael was very gracious to agree to speak to us as late as he did. What he talked about, mostly, was the development of new standards, using the new maps that Thomas' group had developed as an example. He explained that as time goes on, and new standards become the norm, new work is based on those standards, but they do not remain the

standard indefinitely. It served as a warning, of sorts: do not become complacent. Do not continue to work with the assumptions and preconceptions that you have held. Open your horizons and keep an eye out for new ideas -- incorporate them when they are good, and keep developing those new standards. If you don't, you will run the risk of trying to compete in a world of ideas that has passed you by. As a more mainstream author, Michael represents an intersection, for us in the gamer community, with those other communities with whom we really need to have more interaction. Those groups with whom we must exchange ideas, or face the prospect of becoming an echo chamber of ideas left behind long ago by the rest of the world.

Euphoria and Oblivion

Sunday started with a bit of a groan. There wasn't enough coffee in Spokane. There wasn't enough even in the whole of Washington state -- yes, even with Seattle on the other end of it. Chris Wade did teach me what an Americana was. Starbuck's may be evil, but they can make a good quick iced coffee. After a quick dip into the day's gaming, we jumped to a presentation by Cason Snow, a visiting Library Scientist from Illinois.

Cason's talk was about the ways that we all could try to get role playing materials accepted into library collections using Tolkien as a bridge. The now-mainstream acceptance of Tolkien and his works makes a perfect inroad for gaming communities to utilize a great public resource (our libraries), and to share it with a wider audience. He offered many great ideas on how this might be accomplished, and some advice on how to approach library boards with proposals (who are apparently in love with numbers and statistics, and desperate for people to use the reference sections of their collections). It was a great reminder to me of when I was younger -- how much I had myself used the public library not only as a resource for gaming, but as a venue. I had forgotten that, and I wondered if there were any younger folks in my own home town who had access to the same sorts of resources that I did when I was just wetting my feet.

After Cason's presentation we gamed a bit more and I gave my presentation, which as inexplicably been termed a sort of manifesto by certain parties, who will remain anonymous for their own protection. I'm not certain why it was received as such -- my impression from the other end of the barrel (as it were) was that I meandered on about how we should all open up the community to the wider scholarly Tolkien community that exists, and sink or swim on our own merits in that wider community. I may have mentioned a time or two that folks should perhaps lose a bit of reticence and begin submitting material with greater regularity and with less hesitation -- but only a time or two, I'm quite certain. Perhaps thrice.

Finally, we got back to the conclusion of the campaign, which by this time had merged into one massive table; due to a small amount of attrition we had lost a few to concerns outside of the convention. We did manage to defeat the enemy, though the game master for the final few sessions was a brutal man who had an inordinate amount of fondness for the evil creatures he commanded. We love you, Carl.

In the end, our Wose companion (one of the PCs) collapsed from overdose, having ingested far too

many herbs in doing all that he could to ensure that the rest of the party had been able to complete their objective.

Rehab

In conclusion, I'd like to be serious for a moment at least. MERPCON III had several very important revelations. While the exhaustion-induced euphoria and sheer happiness at being there (finally) did have something to do with some of the enthusiastic conversations dealing with how the Middle-earth gaming community was to proceed going forward, I think there is a real sense that we are at the beginning of something different.

There is, of course, the launch of *Other Minds* magazine. This is the obvious successor to *Other Hands*. It is worth stating, however, that the sort of environment into which *Other Minds* is being born is vastly different than that into which *Other Hands* was born. The newer magazine is being released into a world where no commercial company is producing, or even owns the license to produce, gaming material for Tolkien's works. It is beginning in a time when the Middle-earth gaming community is starting to embrace the ideas of scholarly exchange and communication; the ideas of open criticism and peer review. Apart from the practical protections this will afford *Other Minds*, I believe that this will provide the magazine with the unique opportunity to pull in material from disciplines and groups to which *Other Hands* was not as visible (to the detriment of us all). Despite the feverish work of Chris Seeman, one man could not do what an entire community is capable of, but it still will require the work of an entire community to make what we have here into what it has the potential of being.

There is an opportunity here -- a happy coincidence of accidents that we can take advantage of. This opportunity is for us to widen our vision and open our community. Not only should we be clamoring for submissions and material from enthusiastic GMs and aspiring writers in the gaming world, but we should, as a community, be willing to do the same and enter the wider world of Tolkien scholarship. We have an opportunity to do so now, at this moment in time. I do not know how long this moment will last -- it may be indefinite. It may only last a few short months. One thing MERPCON made clear to me, though, was that we have the ability to make it happen. There are some very dedicated and very sharp people involved in this community. Only some of them were there at MERPCON. Many could not make it, and still more have yet to be heard. It is my hope that more will see its value in the future and be able to attend. It is important to be in the same physical place -- just as important as the power and ease of instant global communication, in many ways.

Remember why we do this -- why we game in Middle-earth. It is because we love the work that Tolkien has created. It is because we love his world. And it is because we love gaming. That is precisely what MERPCON is about, and this year was no exception. My thanks to everyone that made it possible. I had a great time gaming, I was very happy to meet everyone that I had a chance to meet there, and I was very happy to get away for a while and immerse myself in something that I truly love.

And now, I will be very happy to get some sleep.