

MerpCon IV Report

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Executive Summary

MerpCon is an acronym for "Middle-Earth Role Playing Convention", a role-playing gaming annual summer-time three day long international convention held in Spokane, WA, USA, focused on role-playing gaming in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth. J.R.R. Tolkien is the author of "The Hobbit", "The Lord of the Rings", and many other works. The first MerpCon was presented in 2005. The fourth event was in the summer of 2008. The event is 100% free to participants, volunteer-run and open to the public. RSVP requirements must be met to provide seating for gaming events, though there is no such requirement for attending others activities such as the guest speaker segments. Volunteers, participants and guest speakers travel from around the world or join via the Internet to take part in the event.

Though MerpCon is still small, it is growing incrementally. In 2005 there were 7 attendees for all three days, with a peak of 13 on Saturday during the guest speaker segment. In 2006 there were only 5 attendees for all three days with a peak of 9. In 2007 there were 9 attendees for the entire event, with a peak of 15. In 2008 there were 13 attendees for all three days, with a peak of 22.

Participants have come from all over the USA and even Germany. There have also been online participants through the live audio and video streaming and interactive real-time chatroom. The online participants were known to come from US, Canada, UK, France, Finland, Saudi Arabia, Spain and China. There were other participants whose locations were not disclosed.

Role-playing gaming is an activity much like "let's play pretend", but with some structure and common rules to help facilitate game play equitably. Role-playing techniques are used in psychology (Gestalt therapy for example), provided for executive retreats, and many other aspects of our lives. Role-playing gaming is generally a cooperative group experience, where participants sit at a table with paper, pencils and randomizers (such as dice or cards), and "experience" through

verbal interaction, an “adventure” together. MerpCon focuses on those who wish to adventure in J.R.R. Tolkien's setting. MerpCon is the only event worldwide dedicated to this focus.

Introduction

MerpCon is held each year during the last weekend of July and runs for 3 days from Friday, through to the end of Sunday. Setup occurs on the Thursday night before the event, and tear-down on the Monday after the event. To date MerpCon has been held each year in Spokane, WA, USA. This is an internationally unique event dedicated to scholars and fans of J.R.R. Tolkien, author of "The Hobbit", "The Lord of the Rings", “Roverrandom” and many other works.

MerpCon's Relationship to Long-term TR Goals

Running this annual event ties in well with some of my goals in developing a career in Therapeutic Recreation. In addition to learning the many “standard” therapeutic modalities taught through the program at EWU, role-playing gaming may offer a very useful tool for many diverse populations in a therapeutic recreation approach. One of the many benefits of TR is the extensive diversity of available “tools” one can use to help clients improve the quality of their life. I have a current running hypothesis on the “Therapeutic Aspects of Role-playing Gaming”, this thesis is posted online at <http://www.rpgresearch.com/project-documents/history-and-therapeutic-aspects-of-role-playing-gaming-web-version>.

RPG Research Project Overview

I have begun the lengthy process towards learning what will be necessary to acquire funding to gather scientific data under the title of the “RPG Research Project”. This project is intended to be a large scale (1,000+ subjects), longitudinal (10-20 years), multi-phased, multi-variable, triple-blind research study covering multiple population groups from ages 8 to 80 with both able and disabled populations - including the Deaf, various aspects of the generalized anxiety disorders categories, and Autism spectrum populations.

MerpCon Founding, History, and Projection

As the founder of MerpCon, I proposed to the community that I would run the event completely out of my own pocket for at least 5 years. If there was not some measurable growth over that five year time-period, then I would end the effort. So far, the growth has been minimally sufficient, one more year remains before I make the decision on whether to continue it beyond the fifth year or not.

MerpCon is a unique event. Most role-playing or general gaming conventions have many different game genres and interests, are usually overwhelming in size to many participants, and heavily commercialized, not allowing as much “real” role-playing gaming as many participants would like. Some of these mega-conventions may have a table or small section related to Middle-earth gaming, but none make Tolkien a focus. Generally, none of the Tolkien-related conventions include any role-playing gaming. MerpCon fills a unique niche. Based on the number of participants on the merp@merp.com email list, this is certainly a smaller niche group. In 2005 there were approximately 800 registered users on the email discussion list, and approximately 18,000 registered users on the main website dedicated to this community, <http://www.merp.com> . Interest spiked during the Peter Jackson Lord of the Rings movies, with around 1.5 million unique visitors per month. These numbers have since dwindled significantly down to 150 users on the email list, and around 5,000 registered users on the website, as of October 2008. There has been a steady decline back to the “core” community, but the numbers will likely spike back up with the upcoming “The Hobbit” movies around 2010/2011.

Though MerpCon is still small, it is growing incrementally. In 2005 there were 7 attendees for all three days, with a peak of 13 on Saturday during the guest speaker segment. In 2006 there were only 5 attendees for all three days with a peak of 9. In 2007 there were 9 attendees for the entire event, with a peak of 15. In 2008 there were 13 attendees for all three days, with a peak of 22.

Participants have traveled from all over the USA and even Germany. There has also been online contributions through the live audio and video streaming and interactive real-time chat room. The online participants were known to come from the US, Canada, UK, France, Finland, Saudi Arabia, Spain and China. There were other participants whose locations were not disclosed.

The Future of MerpCon

If MerpCon is continued beyond the five year mark, the most important issues to be addressed will be financial, legal and participatory sustainability and growth. Some issues to address include:

- Creating either a non-profit or LLC business entity to run the event under
- Licensing/permission issues from Tolkien Enterprises and/or the Tolkien Estate
- Charging admission
- Charging for vendor booth space (considerably more growth is needed for that to be viable)
- Merchandising sales to offset some costs
- Accepting donations and/or charging various fees to cover costs
- Either better facilities and lodging arrangements in Spokane or a complete location change to Seattle instead of Spokane for greater population density and airport accessibility
- Paid staff vs. volunteers
- Insurance coverage for liability protection (injury/accident)

Participation, Growth and Costs

MerpCon is growing, but still a very small event. It is hoped that MerpCon will continue to grow at a steady, predictable and manageable pace, but many variables can impact the future success of this event in coming years. To date the event is completely volunteer-run and free to the public. Each year has seen an increase in the need for volunteers, and an increasing challenge in finding committed volunteers who can be reliably counted on to participate as needed.

Scheduling

The time slot of the last weekend of July was chosen because it conflicted the least with other similar events around the world, and with other large events in the Spokane area. Occasionally the Spokane Air Show occurs on the same weekend, but generally does not draw the same type of audience, so there has not to date been any apparent conflict.

MerpCon was originally started as a rather marathon-like event. Anyone could come to any of the guest speaker segments anytime they wished, but in order to participate in the actual role-playing game events, players had to commit to be in attendance for all three days. The first year of MerpCon the event started “officially” on Friday at 5:00 pm and ended on Sunday evening at midnight. The schedule was intended in planning as follows:

- Friday 5:00 pm to midnight.
- Saturday: 9:00 am to midnight.
- Sunday: 9:00 am to midnight.

This worked out to approximately 32 hours of event time over a two and a half day period (taking out time for breaks, and meals). Additionally, considerable slippage was allowed on these time lines, so in reality the event ran more like the following:

- Friday 5:00 pm to 11:00 pm.
- Saturday 9:00 am to 1:00 am.
- Sunday 9:00 am to 2:00 am.

This ended meaning that participant event time was more than 40 hours over just two and half days. Based on feedback from the “MerpCon Participant Feedback Form” questionnaires, it became quite clear that this rigorous schedule was far too grueling except for the few “die-hards” willing to subject themselves to such a lengthy commitment.

Facilities

So far, MerpCon has not had to pay any fees for facility usage, but instead has relied on being allowed to run at locations that do not charge fees. This has had some consequences in less than ideal settings, that will have to be addressed before the next year's event, as it has continued to be one of the top three issues according to respondent feedback.

The original facilities for MerpCon I were at Merlyn's Games & Comics on Main Street in downtown Spokane. This ended up being a far less than ideal facility. There was no proper air conditioning during this summertime heat. There were other regular weekly gaming events coming and going that were very noisy. The facilities were run down, with uncomfortable seating, and lots of echo from the high ceilings, cement floors, and lack of other sound absorbing materials, and the store closed earlier than originally agreed to by the owner due to a clerk wishing to leave early. This environment meant participants had significant trouble hearing all that was being said, and their level of fun and "suspension of disbelief" was constantly degraded. As a fall back, I had registered to use a room at the Hawthorne St. Spokane County Library in North Spokane. These facilities were far better, and everyone commented on the increased comfort including A/C, comfortable chairs, and better acoustics. Unfortunately for the following year, these facilities were no longer available for such a lengthy stretch. I spent approximately \$1,800 USD that year.

For MerpCon II, the facilities were moved to the Spokane Kung Fu For Life School on Mission and Ruby. These facilities were kindly donated by the school and were considerably better than Merlyn's, in that it was carpeted, and no other conflicting activities were happening during that time. Every attempt was made to air condition the facility, but the existing A/C's were run down, and I brought several others of my own to help, but still the facilities were uncomfortably hot. The floors were carpeted and the seating was reasonably comfortable. I spent several hundreds of dollars on office chair seats and folding tables from Costco that year. I spent approximately

\$3,000 USD that year.

For MerpCon III, the event was once again held at the Kung Fu For Life School on Mission and Ruby. The facilities had become somewhat smaller due to cost cutbacks, but was otherwise mostly the same. I bought even more tables, chairs, and air conditioners, as well as other video and audio equipment to enhance the guest speaker segments. Even with 4-5 A/C's running, the facilities though better, were still uncomfortably hot. That year MerpCon had five guest speakers and I had to pay for most of their airline tickets, including one from Germany costing over \$1,400.00 USD. I had these individuals stay at my house, to save costs on hotels. All together, I spent somewhere between \$5,000 to \$8,000 USD out of pocket. This was definitely not a sustainable expense, and it took me nearly a year to pay down the debt this incurred. These costs did not need to be repeated in some instances since much of it was for equipment that is now used for subsequent events (chairs, tables, stands, video camers, web cams, audio equipment, etc.).

MerpCon IV was held at the new location for the Kung Fu For Life School on Division and Buckeye/Foothill. This facility was notably smaller, did not have carpeted flooring, had significantly more street-traffic noise, and large West-facing windows that let in far too much heat despite the air conditioning. Costs were kept to a minimum, even with catering added. Lunch and Dinner was provided on Saturday and Sunday from Quizno's, Domino's Pizza, and a Chinese restaurant. There were two guest speakers that year, and both covered their own transportation and boarding costs. I was able to keep the cost below \$1,000 USD.

Participation Demographics and Notes

This section details participation demographics, as well as some notes on each year's event.

MerpCon I Participation Summary:

There were some player conflict issues that became more serious as the days (and fatigue) wore on.

This meant actually ejecting one player at the end (and threatening to eject another). Neither of these participants joined any later MerpCon or related gatherings.

MerpCon I (2005)		Age Range
Number of Participants attending all three days:	7	19 - 38
Peak number of participants:	13	7 - 38
Total number of participants:	14	7 - 38
Total number of participants acting also as volunteers:	3	
Total number of additional volunteers:	1	
Participants places of origin:	Spokane, Coeur d'Alene, Seattle, Oregon, and Iowa.	

MerpCon II Summary:

The second year only had 5 participants attend for all three days with a peak of 7 during the single guest speaker segment. I was worried MerpCon was doomed, but I gave it another shot. 2 of the participants were also working as volunteers.

Participants were from Spokane, Coeur d'Alene, Seattle, Iowa, Oregon and Texas.

MerpCon II (2006)	Quantity	Age Range
Number of Participants attending all three days:	5	21 - 40+
Peak number of participants:	13	21 - 40+
Total number of participants:	14	21 - 40+
Total number of participants acting also as volunteers:	3	
Total number of additional volunteers:	1	
Participants places of origin:	Spokane, Coeur d'Alene, Seattle, Oregon, and Iowa.	

MerpCon III Summary:

The third year picked up noticeably, we had a dozen people for all 3 days, and a peak of 15 during the FIVE guest speakers sessions (including all the way in from Germany). Additionally the event was simulcast via webcam and audio stream live, and interactive with participants through an online chatroom from around the world (Finland, UK, Saudi Arabia, etc.), included 12 additional online participants during the guest speaker sessions.

Physically present participants were from Spokane, Coeur d'Alene, Seattle, California, Iowa, Kansas, Oregon and Germany.

Remote participants were from many states around the US, as well as some from Canada, China, Finland, France, Germany, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Spain and the UK.

MerpCon III (2007)		Age Range
Number of Participants attending all three days:	9	21 - 50+
Peak number of participants:	13	11 - 50+
Total number of participants:	15	11 - 50+
Total number of participants acting also as volunteers:	5	
Total number of additional volunteers:	3	
Participants places of origin:	Spokane, Coeur d'Alene, Seattle, Oregon, and Iowa.	

MerpCon IV Summary:

This fourth year we had 15 people attend all three days, including a peak of 22. Also this was the first year we ran a youth table, with youth ages ranging from 8 years old to 15, run by a 15 year old. (We had a 17 year old at the adult table). The adults ranged from 17 through upper 50's in age.

This year we had two guest speakers (both published authors), the third session both speakers spoke together in a very interesting dialog, followed by Q&A from the audience.

The online participation was more sparse (timezones are a significant issue each year), with only about half a dozen online participants during the live session. Many opt to wait for the downloadable audio podcasts and video downloads when they are awake.

MerpCon IV (2007)		Age Range
Number of Participants attending all three days:	13	8 - 50+
Peak number of participants:	22	8 - 50+
Total number of participants:	25	8 - 50+
Total number of participants acting also as volunteers:	5	
Total number of additional volunteers:	0	
Participants places of origin:	Spokane, Coeur d'Alene, Seattle, Oregon, and Iowa.	

Special Guests

A number of MerpCon Guest Speakers have been at each event, including noted Tolkien scholars, doctors, professors, and published authors.

Guest speakers to date include:

- Professor Chris Seeman, from Iowa, USA, professor of theology. 2005, 2007.
- Michael Martinez, computer scientist, published author and Tolkien essayist. 2006, 2007, and 2008.
- Doctor Thomas Morwinsky, from Munich, Germany, doctor of entomology for the German Government's military. 2007
- Hawke Robinson, from Washington, USA. Founder of MerpCon, RPG Research Project, MerpCon, Other Minds Magazine and creator of Ea RPG System. Retired computer scientist published by the SANS Institute. 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.
- Joe Mandala, from Kansas, USA. Editor for The Guild Companion. 2007.
- Cason Snow, from Illinois, USA, librarian. 2007.
- John D. Rateliff, from Seattle, WA, USA. Author of "The History of the Hobbit", and many role-playing gaming contributions over the decades. 2008.

Lessons Learned

I have included feedback questionnaires (to be attached separately at a later date) at each event from each participants in the hopes of continuing to improve the experience of the event each year. Each time a new set of issues became the number one concern, and made efforts to address those concerns in the following years.

Below is just a quick summary of the topics that came up. I will go into more detail on each of these topics at a later date.

MerpCon I (2005), primary issue: Facilities.

Other issues: Schedule, effective conflict resolution with a couple players, volunteers.

MerpCon II (2006), primary issue: Scheduling.

Marathon is too much to ask for. Volunteers

MerpCon III, primary issue: Expenses.

Still too long, though more flexible at least. Need to stay more on schedule with guest speakers. Too expensive out of pocket. More volunteers. More socializing time.

MerpCon IV, primary issue: Sufficient Table Referees & Preparation.

Better facilities. Better on time with schedule transitions. Technical issues related to audio/video and streaming resolved further in advance. This time was much better cost balance. Youth table issues, conflict resolution. Online survey

Planning for MerpCon V

This is just a quick listing of the topics needing to be detailed in preparation for the next MerpCon in Summer of 2009. Guest speakers. Referees. Voluneers. Costs. Facilities. Schedule. Online participation. Online survey. More demographics information. Youth tables. ASL (American Sign Language) table.

References

- MerpCon Guest Speaker Biographies page - <http://merpcon.org/guest-speakers>
- Professor Chris Seeman provides a review of MerpCon I - <http://www.merpcon.com/newsarchives/merpcon-2005-report-part-1-chris-seemans-review>
- Michael Martinez's main website and blog article specifically mentioning his participation in MerpCon II - <http://www.merpcon.com/newsarchives/michael-martinez-comments-on-merpcon-ii>
- Michael Martinez's website blog article review on MerpCon III - http://www.tolkien-studies.com/blog/index.php/michael/2007/08/07/j_r_r_tolkien_and_merpcon_iii_july_2007
- The Guild Companion's Joe Mandala Review of MerpCon III - <http://www.guildcompanion.com/scrolls/2007/aug/merpconoverdose.html>
- Michael Martinez posting regarding MerpCon IV - <http://www.sf-fandom.com/vbulletin/showthread.php?t=28808>