



The Great Pretenders

You Won't Believe What These Sane People Do For Fun. It's . . . Unreal.

by

Tamara Jones

Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, July 14 1996; Page F01

The Washington Post

The vampires are hanging out at their favorite diner, eating french fries with too much ketchup and trying hard to find some mystery in a suburban summer night. The vampires flirt and laugh and smoke *Marlboro Lights* as they talk about politics, power, immortality and sucking the lifeblood from mere mortals. This is Washington, after all.

For Gus Knapp, resplendent in black frock coat and spats, this is a fine way to pass a Wednesday evening. The 39-year-old museum technician lives with his mother in a lovely old mansion and spends his workday cataloguing fossils at the Smithsonian. He collects stamps and plays the bagpipe. He thinks of his life as pleasantly dull. Except for this. This is edgy. This is exciting. The other vampires nod in agreement.

Vampire, pirate, alien, spy. Werewolf, robber baron, Muppet, nun. Casablanca one weekend, *Babylon* the next. On any given night, and virtually every weekend during the summer peak, thousands of adults across the country are playing make-believe in cheap hotels, empty warehouses, private homes and isolated woods. In elaborate period dress or ordinary street clothes, they portray characters in scriptless fantasies that can run for a few hours or several years. Known as *live-action role-playing*, or *larping*, the hobby draws heavily from the ranks of bureaucrats, computer wonks and bored youths -- which makes this area prime territory in the world according to larp. There are conventions, workshops, fan clubs, a quarterly journal and game reviews. The *Interactive Literature*



Foundation, a larp clearinghouse based in Merrifield, has had up to 2,000 names on its mailing list and figures 400 people form the core of active players in the region.

In truth, the whole phenomenon began nearly 20 years ago when *Dungeons & Dragons* was the hot new fad, turning campus geeks into netherworld creatures with special powers and, critics warned, a somewhat slippery grasp of reality. The game drew a lot of bad press after being linked to some teen suicides, and fundamentalists decried it as a satanic tool. But the trend seemed to pass, the panic subsided and the kids who were playing it grew up and abandoned their fantasy worlds.

At least, that's what everyone assumed.

Dress-Up Time

Dirk Parham got the wig this time. It's a wonderful wig, tight black ringlets cascading halfway down his back. His wife, Moira, will need it to play a barmaid on an imaginary riverboat cruise later, but for now, the wig belongs to the mad French pirate-hunter, "La Rouge." Parham flips the ringlets over his shoulder and adjusts his fake mustache. He rented a swashbuckler's costume this time -- he had to put down a \$100 deposit on the thing, but it was worth it for the tailored crimson jacket and the lace-cuffed blouse beneath it. Poor Moira is a Spanish nun, drab in a brown habit.

The Fort Meade, Md., couple has been larping since 1992, when Dirk debuted as a mad vivisectionist in a sci-fi game and was so excited that Moira had to sample live-action too, so she played Grover in "Murder on Sesame Street." Now their closets are jam-packed with their costumes and props -- the \$150 cowboy tux Dirk splurged on, all the padded weapons they use to wallop other players in medieval troll wars, the alien outfits and ball gowns. This summer, Dirk, who is 31, and Moira, who is 28, have gone larping nearly every weekend, all weekend. It is, asserts Dirk, "the bulk of our social life, and our permanent hobby." Adds Moira: "I hope we never stop doing it."

Now they join 40 others in the conference room of the Day's Inn in Timonium, Md., the rented site for a 17th-century fantasy game called *Port Royal*, set in the tumultuous Jamaican capital of the era. *Port Royal* begins on Friday night and runs until noon Sunday, with the more zealous characters playing straight through, including the five ringers from an improv group called the *Role-Playing Machine*, which supplies extras to fantasy games in exchange for room and board. The *RPM* offers *dial-a-character* service -- the governor orders footmen for tonight's masquerade ball; the captain needs two drunk sailors to fire the overturned chairs serving as cannons.



Like most of the games being produced these days, *Port Royal* was created on a home computer by larpers who, it turns out on opening night, haven't quite finished yet. Already the organizers look dazed from the stress and lack of sleep. Fantasy can be such hell.

David Wood, pasty and intense, prefers to run games rather than play them, *"because I at least have the illusion of control."* He and three friends spent a year creating *Port Royal*, but the real story will be told by the players as they go along. No one could predict that the nun would rip off her clothes and offer the key to her chastity belt to an aristocrat whose rebuff would cause her to commit suicide. Or that the mayor's shrewish wife would suddenly disappear. Or that the madame would fly into such a snit when shot by *El Diablo* that it would take four organizers, a painful public apology and promises of mob retribution to keep her from quitting the game.

All of these melodramas captivate Ellen Endress, a 30-year-old Greenbelt lawyer who has been larping since 1988. *"No one wins the game,"* she says. *"You all come together to form a consensus reality. . . . When I'm gaming, I don't remember I'm a public defender. I don't remember financial difficulties I'm having. I'm in the world they created and I don't surface again till Sunday afternoon."*

Wood, a 30-year-old data processor from Grasonville, Md., doesn't watch his fantasy world take shape. He stays in his room feverishly *"writing up extra documents we needed."* His imagination leaves a paper trail -- some 200 pages of character description, about 160 pages of last-minute developments for some key players, plus hundreds of *"item cards"* describing each and every imaginary prop in the game. Paper sharks, paper kegs of rum, paper pistols. Then there's the rule book. Twenty-three pages of rules, many of them, the players would ultimately decide, incomprehensible and easily ignored.

Still, the larpers meticulously fold all these pieces of paper into little squares and carry them at all times. They need this information. They welcome these instructions. Of course, they do!

Because what would a fantasy world be without order?

Just imagine.

Xanodrian Adventure

The rules are never simple. When Doug Bischoff and some buddies first created the mythical world of *Xanodria* in college, they simply invited some friends over, went



outside and ran around trying to hit each other with two-inch wooden dowels. They decided they needed some rules after someone got a concussion.

Now, *Xandoria* is played every three weeks on 300 borrowed acres of woods and farmland outside Allentown, Pa. Nearly 50 larpers, including a mother of two, a Jersey truck driver and, of course, Dirk and Moira Parham, pitch tents and camp out for the weekend, even sleeping in character as barbarians, zombies, goblins and medieval warriors. Now their weapons are made out of padded plumbing pipe. Now they are forbidden to hit each other in the head. Now the *Xandoria* rule book is 200 pages long.

Every game must have its rules.

- *For vampires*: No staking, no blood-sharing, no biting.
- *For pirates*: No physical violence, no smoking, no alcohol.
- *For trolls*: No tree-climbing.

Fantasy conflicts are all resolved with a roll of the dice, a quick game of *rock-paper-scissors*, or, in the case of war games only, a well-padded, pre-approved weapon.

There is a lingua franca among larpers, as well.

- *Mollusk* -- someone who comes to a live-action game and fails to interact.
- *Smogging* -- acronym for the "*secret masters of gaming*"; to tell war stories from games.
- *Powergamer* -- player who rides roughshod over others; also *munchkin* and *powergeek*.
- *Boffer* -- games allowing combat with padded weapons.
- *Celerity* -- superhuman speed; a special skill for some vampires.
- *Hosing* -- to ruin someone else's plot in brilliant and public fashion.
- *Mundanes* -- people who don't larp.

The first rule in any game is always the same. It is more than a rule. It is a *creed*, a *commandment*, a *sacred trust*. Violating it could ruin everything. It's a very simple one.

Don't scare the mundanes

Game Dedication

Dirk is wounded. He fell into some poison ivy in the woods of *Xandoria* while battling some villagers on a troll patrol. He twisted his ankle. Back in his tent, he pops some Aleve, wraps his swollen foot and crams it back into his boot. He can't let the *Game Masters* know he's hurt or he's benched. Dirk couldn't bear that. He feels



a deep sense of obligation when he's gaming. *"You are part of a production,"* he explains. *"You can't let the others down."* Besides, if things get really bad, there are half a dozen emergency medical technicians playing this weekend. They revived the *Lavaman* who passed out from heatstroke last summer inside his thick rubber costume.

Dirk Parham usually plays a weekend game straight through, without sleep, relying on adrenaline and the occasional caffeine tablet to keep him going. Like so many other larpers, Dirk cut his teeth on *Dungeons & Dragons* as a kid, playing the tabletop version. He got into it after his parents were watching the evening news and heard the report of a 16-year-old boy named Egbert missing for weeks in a steam tunnel where he played the fantasy game with his friends. *"Knowing I liked science fiction, my parents turned to me and said, 'Gee, son, that sounds like fun. Maybe you'd enjoy that,'"* Dirk recalls.

"I've pushed myself too far, sometimes, I admit it," he says with a chuckle now, nursing his sore ankle. *"A lot of people have an attitude in general that gaming is for misanthropes or failures, and that's not the case."*

Sometimes his parents chide him. You're divorcing yourself from reality, they say. *"Yeah, well,"* Dirk replies, *"reality is unpleasant."*

Xanodria has its own full-time volunteer makeup artist, a guy named Jason who works down in the barn applying latex scars, zombie faces and such. Dirk hobbles down the hill to change character. Moira is already there, being made up as the ghost of the farmer's wife she played this afternoon until she killed herself. *"I enjoy challenging myself,"* she says. *"I always try to get some character with a big problem to solve."*

Back in the *"village,"* volunteers are making stuffed cabbage for dinner in the \$5,000 custom tent that serves as the inn. Barbarians are sitting around picnic tables. *"No find glass,"* one of them grunts. *"Where's the sun block?"* another asks.

A handful of players gather around the campfire they've built despite the sweltering heat. Their conversation makes sense only to them.

- *"I have seen water faeries, sir, when the moon is full . . ."*
- *"I'm just suggesting mayhap there's another way. Mayhap."*
- *"Remember, Raven, goats are power."*
- *"Goats aren't power. A hunchback in the desert is power."*
- *"Want some more Gatorade?"*
- *"I like Omar. Omar is gifted in a certain area better than the camel."*

The last observation makes a monk laugh Gatorade out his nose.

Different Strokes

The *Interactive Literature Foundation* keeps a bank of the myriad games its people play. "*Marin County Socialites*" and "*Snuggle Bunny Ring-Wraiths*" and "*Busstop*" and, although not independently verified, a nude game in California called "*Buck Naked: Texas Ranger*." Or "*Lifeboat*," which foundation president Gordon Olmstead-Dean describes as an "*intense*" game in which 14 of his best friends were locked inside an RV for 36 hours with the windows blacked out. Not once, but twice. "*The toilet broke both times*," he recalls.

Stake Sandwich

At Brinkley's Family Restaurant in Falls Church, the vampires are finishing their french fries. Some have gone upstairs to the bar, where one of the members of the vile sewer-dwelling clan was seen doing the electric-slide on the dance floor.

Sewerman turns out to be a Marine honor guard who does this "*because it gives me something to do besides go drinking in Georgetown every weekend*."

This particular run of the vampire larp comes from a wildly popular published book series known as *The Masquerade*. The players meet every other weekend at private homes for their big games, known as grand balls, and repair to Brinkley's on Wednesday nights for mini-games. "*We have 70 people between the ages of 16 and 60*," boasts organizer and storyteller Richard Devine. The Falls Church "*system*" is linked linked via Internet to similar groups in 40 other cities, including a dozen in Brazil. What happens to a character in a clan operating out of Washington can affect the outcome of a plot in Chicago. It also means that players can dip into other games in their continuing characters when they travel out of town on vacation or business.

"*People do get weirded out*," admits Devine, a 23-year-old designer of computer home pages for the Department of Transportation. "*If I walk up and say every two weeks I think I'm a vampire, people don't react well*." He considers this *improvisational theater* and laughs at alarmists who call it a cult. Only one person was ever thrown out of the game, and that was for saying cruel things to some overweight players.

"*I've always been introverted*," Devine says. "*Having red hair and being tall and thin didn't help. I didn't really feel accepted or a part of anything till I hooked up with these people*."



There's Michael King, a 28-year-old contractor from Centreville, and Julia Ryder, a 26-year-old administrative assistant in Manassas. There's a Mennonite minister, an artist, Gus Knapp in his spats, and a teenager with inky black hair and pierced everything who whines, *"It's not like we go to dark alleys and torture small animals."* There's Robert Owens, a 31-year-old land contractor who left the game bitterly after his longtime character was killed the previous weekend. *"I've had philosophical differences with the rule structures,"* he says. *"I'm Asian American and I wanted to play an Asian vampire and there's no room for that."* He is back tonight trying to recruit players for a new game he is starting, one where his character can be reincarnated.

Tonight's plots involve a plan to overthrow the prince of the city and the conversion of 24-year-old Janet James from good vampire (*one with some humanity left*) to bad (*overpowered by the Beast within*). She has been kidnapped and taken outside by three bad vampires under the supervision of the *storyteller*.

"It's a huge field," the *storyteller* is saying, gesturing at the parking lot. *"There are lots of trees."* The traffic on Route 7 rumbles past. *"Three guys are jumping her."* *"Okay,"* one of the attacking vampires says, pausing to cadge Janet's *Marlboro* for a few drags. *"I brutally smash you in the head and flee. Celerity."* He checks off the word on his skill card.

"Oh, wait! Item!" Janet produces an item card representing a knife.

"I am so stabbing you!" she cries.

A game of *rock, paper, scissors* follows to determine who survives the battle.

"I got you this time!" one of the attackers crows.

"What are you using?" she wonders.

"Knife. Double-damage. Cutting your wrist. You fall to the ground, writhing, biting, and I hold you down." He grinds out the *Marlboro* in the asphalt.

"Freak, first you brawn me, then you smoke my cig."

Character sheets are consulted, pints of blood left are calculated, points are added and subtracted, and Janet determines that she can fight back. *"I'm ferociously biting you! Aggravated damage. You're unhealable for the night."*

"Owie."

The ritual is over. Janet has lost her last grip on humanity. She beams proudly as her friends congratulate her.

"Welcome to the pack, honey."

The Larp Dance

They met at an elite little seaside academy where their superiors had sent them to master Russian. They became crypto-linguists for a superpower and roamed a tense world cracking secret codes. It was all very exciting. Somewhere along the way, fatefully, they fell in love. The Berlin Wall toppled, the Cold War ended, and their lives were never quite the same.

Now Dirk Parham is an Air Force clerk and Moira, out of the service, answers phones and helps customers at Sutton Place Gourmet. Their jobs frankly bore them. They don't like to watch television or read the newspapers very much, either. It's just all so depressing. They try to escape whenever they can.

Copyright 1996: The Washington Post

From: gordon@cqi.com (G. Olmstead-Dean)
Newsgroups: rec.games.frp.live-action
Subject: Re: Wash. Post Article on LARPing
Date: 15 Jul 1996 19:30:28 GMT

Well...first, thanks to Tad for reposting the *Post* article.

Several people have e-mailed me this morning asking for my opinion and the general opinion of the *ILF*.

In general, I'm very pleased with Tamara's article. I feel like she put a lot of work in, and tried hard to capture the flavor of Live gaming, something that **all** of us, know is difficult to do in print.

The response I've gotten from colleagues and non-gaming friends has been overwhelmingly positive.

She seems to have picked a good circle of people to cite as examples of *LARP* players, and where she gives information on their professions, it is diverse...computer engineer, curator, lawyer, military...



The *IL* community in the Baltimore Washington area is a *very* big tapestry - no one is going to capture it all.

But most of the references are positive. Reading the article, *Port Royal* and *Xanodria* sounded interesting and exciting. She makes a point of highlighting that people doing this are sane.

Considering that most news coverage of *LARP* has revolved around the likelihood that most of the players are borderline psychopaths with possible criminal tendencies, I think this is a *real* step in the right direction.

If you run events anywhere where the *Post* circulates, *please* send us a listing for the *ILF Calendar* in the next two days. It is *way* past the deadline, but this is a special event, and we want as many members of the community to share in it as possible. There have already been twelve inquiries about the article, and we expect more. We'll be sending the next *Calendar* to everyone who inquires, and we want to give them as wide a range of potential chances to become involved in the *IL* community as possible.

If you don't live in the Baltimore Washington area, please remember the *Post* is a national paper, like the *LA* and *NY Times*, and probably circulates in limited numbers in your area. We're attempting to ascertain if the *Post's* online news service "*Digital Ink*" also carried the story.

I think that, while a point here or there may rankle in a community that has so long been accustomed to adverse publicity, in general the article presents the *IL* community in a very positive light.



From: Jim Edwards-Hewitt
Newsgroups: rec.games.frp.live-action
Subject: Re: Wash. Post Article on LARPing
Date: 15 Jul 1996 17:17:15 -0400

>We're attempting to ascertain
>if the *Post's* online news service "*Digital Ink*" also carried the story.

It's on www.washingtonpost.com.

They do have a feedback and discussion areas.

I actually liked the article a lot. Sure, there were a couple of cheap shots, only one of which I think will be noticeable to anyone who doesn't know the people involved. But the



article emphasized repeatedly that these are activities involving adults, real people who you might find next to you at work. It made clear that they are social events. For its length, it did a good job of capturing the incredible variety of things that can go on in all of our different games.

Finally, I'll admit that the thing that just has me grinning is seeing the term "*larping*" defined in the *Washington Post*.

- Jim

Jim Edwards-Hewitt (jim@visix.com)

Editor of *Metagame*, the *Journal of the Interactive Literature Foundation*

