

SLEEPING IN THE BATH

I came to Cons quite late in my hobby career to be honest. No real reason for that, just a bit of an introvert I guess. University got me out of that mind-set in short order. I say University, I really mean the unstoppable momentum of my then newly forged association with my great friend Gaz. My faltering memory wants to blame him for many things I've espoused in gaming, and I usually err on the side of self-deprecation and decency, but with Cons? It's absolutely all his fault.

I think my first Con experience was at a thing called The Immaculate Convention, which was held at a horticultural hall in Chelsea. Just a one dayer, a show up, walk around and join in type affair. A bit like a village fete, but with more 'comedy' t-shirts. I vividly remember seeing a fantastic Car Wars set up, that was scaled up to use proper model cars. It had ramps and tunnels and the whole thing was made out of graph paper like some architectural model of the Thunderdome. I made a mental note to return and have a crack at it later. When I did come back round, a few hours later, I couldn't help but spot that the cars hadn't noticeably moved. Hmmm. I also recall sighting a (to my eyes) genuine gaming celeb in the form of one Marcus Rowland. He was one of the perennial White Dwarf contributors, so walked on water as far as I was concerned. I summoned up the courage to approach him, and tell him how much I'd enjoyed reading his Maltese Falcon adventure for AD&D thieves. He was gracious, thanked me for remembering it, and off he went. A gent, and for my money, one of the unsung heroes of the indie game movement.

But I don't remember any of the games I played. I'm sure there were some, there must have been, but it was more about a nice day trip with my pals really. This was to set a precedent as it turns out.

My Con cherry having finally failed its save, I jumped into the Con calendar with gusto over the next decade or so. The best of times were always brought about by GenCon, which was never the same thing twice. I'd missed out all the Camber Sands stuff, and joined in around the time it was darting about from Loughborough, to Manchester, to London and even Minehead. Prior to my first GenCon, I was a bit nervous. My expectations were that this would be some kind of roleplaying test, and that I might be found wanting if my skills weren't up to the task. I mean, this would be where the very best of the best would be running games right? The elite. The Olympians of the polyhedral and the hand-out. Forged in Gygaxian prose and tempered with Lovecraftian guile, would I be equal to the standards expected at this high temple to role, play and game?

I was. Easily.

Holy heck were my expectations dashed. Turns out, and brace yourselves for this revelation, that the event was chock full of people no better (and frequently worse) than me and my mates, making it all up as they went along, with a pint in one hand, and a crumpled generic ticket in the other, looking for a half decent game, or at the very least somewhere quiet to have a little snooze (these last two not always being mutually exclusive). I was astonished to find out that the vast majority of games were, being as kind as I can here, quite ordinary. The GMs were unprepared, and proud of it. The scenarios were either crushingly linear or bafflingly opaque. The players were hung over, asleep, or hyped up on a caffeine and sugar blend, with the commensurate lack of sleep or basic social protocols. Like soap.

Don't get me wrong, I loved every minute of it. Because I was with my own. A heaving mass of people just like me, all gamers, all bent on the same thing, and crucially, fenced off from the everyday realities of rent, jobs and flipping football conversations. And the nightlife! We drank

heavily, all the time, and when the sun went down we got dolled up for Vampire LARPS and swapped beer for gin and port. Together.

The LARPS were the highlight of the GenCons and we ran through them in flouncy shirts with arms aloft shouting at the Obfuscation and Majesty idiots. Gaz was always leader, he had all the confidence you see. Pete was always the face man, he had all the patter you see. I was always the fall guy, I had all the beer you see. We produced aluminium attaché cases full of bags of (fake) drugs, money and guns. They went down an absolute treat in the clubs of Manchester afterwards. Doug had never seen a 6 foot platinum blonde transvestite having a wee in a car-park before. If we hadn't wrestled the pistol from him, he may never have seen morning. In the LARPs themselves we busied ourselves being agent provocateurs, seeking out the biggest flashiest players and demanding to play with them. We did staged deals, some went well, others less so (look, I thought she fancied me, alright?). And each and every year we came back and upped the ante. We came in medical scrubs one time, with blood bags, drips and trolleys to boot. Looking back, I reckon we must have been terrifying to behold.

Special guests were a staple of the Con scene. The word 'special' might have been a bit of advertising puff to be honest, as it included among it's luminaries various Star Wars actors (all the ones in full face masks), and the slightly creepy form of Mr Bronson out of Grange Hill. He loved the attention. There was a charity fund raiser to pay for him to get off with a couple of the organisers. Classy.

Speaking of class though, we did get full value out of Claudia Christian out of Babylon 5, and Howling Mad Murdock out of the A-Team. They mingled, and joined in wholeheartedly, without worrying the future officers of Operation Yewtree in any way. They were brilliant. Similarly, I spent a few hours queueing to meet one E. Gary Gygax and have him sign my programme. I asked him if he still got any regular gaming in. He said he played Chainmail every now and again. He was a sweet man, and it was a singular honour to be able to shake his hand.

As the Cons went by, they became more and more about the social, and less and less about the games for me. We had some crackers, including the single best game I've ever played in (Cthulhu, against all type) and some excellent stuff at various Continuums, Dragonmeets, Furnaces and Tentacles. I've had the chance to play with some respected designers, and made some excellent friends that last to this day. But the abiding memories of those days are the laughs we had as a gang, often as a result of truly dreadful gaming experiences. Or more likely, at our own Inbetweeners like behaviour, like seeing our mate grubbing around in the mud grasping for faked common Magic cards ("I'll be minted!"), or as fully specced out pirates 'boarding' a Cyberpunk game and demanding tribute. Like I say, it's all Gaz' fault.

I frequent fewer Cons these days. Family commitments and a creaking liver keep me from most of them. But I love the whole notion of the things. The special scenarios. The bonhomie. The desperation to buy something, anything. The escape. The old friends. The inevitable adequate Cthulhu game. The auctions. The Rocky Horror Shows. The Terminator burgers. The bar-room debates. The anticipation. The sore throat. The scanty breakfast.

Actually, on reflection, probably not the auctions.

Dare I say, as a group, we got quite good at Con-going. We even developed a name for ourselves. We became The Smart Party, but that's a story for another time.