

“What did you do this weekend? I LARPed!”

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All “nerds” have suffered the judgement of others with regard to our hobby, whether in silence, or aloud.

In the year 2000 I was playing an MMO game called ‘Asheron’s Call’ in my downtime between attending computer programming courses at DeVry University. Catching occasional random chatter around campus while waiting for class to start I heard, or I think I heard a fellow student say the name of the game! I was shocked! Other than my brother and our neighbour who we turned onto the game, I had never met anyone else who shared in this activity before.

I looked about the room expectantly. Who said it? Was it him? Or him... Or her? I got frustrated and was uncertain how to proceed. This wasn’t something that was generally talked about openly, this wasn’t mainstream. I needed to approach the subject delicately for fear of ridicule as a nerdy, basement-dwelling computer gamer, but I desperately wanted that connection with a fellow nerd.

I waited a few days, biding my time, listening intently to the same old classroom and hallway chatter I had heard a thousand times before. I hoped, day after day, to catch an utterance of that sacred name which filled me with unbridled nerd glee, but none ever came. Deduction was my only hope, so I became a regular Sherlock Holmes, ‘He wasn’t there... She wasn’t there... He doesn’t even like computers...’

One by one, I narrowed down the suspects and finally I found the culprit. My chance came at long last. During a group activity I sat beside him, I leaned in, and with all the courage I could muster I whispered to the guy, “Asheron’s Call.”

My world came to a halt for a moment and the words seemed much louder than they were. I must have been wrong. I was wrong. Nothing to do now but sit back and wait for the inevitable ridicule to begin. I sat back in my seat and the seconds felt like minutes, but then fate smiled on me. I watched as a huge smile crept onto the culprit’s face and he nodded at me.

When class ended we went to the cafeteria. There in a corner with two more fellow nerds that my new friend introduced me to, we talked for hours about the game we loved. It was awesome! It was better than awesome! These were kindred spirits who understood my love of the game, who shared my chosen hobby and there was no judgement or ridicule in this safe place.

In the years since, I have relived this same experience in various ways. First I experienced it with Magic the Gathering, then Dungeons & Dragons and numerous other nerdy activities. Now though, I find myself at the point now where I'm completely and utterly fed up with it.

14 years have come and gone since that fateful day and the tables have completely turned. Today "Geek is chic." We now live in a time when MMO's and computer gaming are talked about openly, they're regarded as a choice of activity of popular people and they're even recommended by some health experts (minus the sedentary nature of the beast) to increase mental acumen and hand-eye coordination. Magic and other collectable card games have also grown exceedingly popular.

Even Dungeons and Dragons has crept out of its dank basement cell and into the light of acceptance, just ask Vin Diesel about his D&D PC 'Melkor,' a character so beloved he got some fake tattoo screen time in the movie 'xXx (Triple X).' So why is it that, while these aforementioned games have grown in acceptance by the general populace, LARP (Live Action Role Playing) still bears a seemingly insurmountable negative stigma suffers both at the hands of media and those of other nerds?

The first part of the problem I see is how LARP is represented in media. This unfortunately can only be countered by the growth and spread of LARP despite the media's portrayal and by showing the world what LARP is actually about. Truth be told, most nerdy activities can easily seem strange and abnormal to those outsiders looking in. LARP is an experience that needs to be had to be fully understood and other games have done a lot to ensure the media fully understands the game, and therefore the culture before reporting on it.

The concept of LARP as a comedic fodder for film and television must be countered by making sure it is seen in all its many facets by the media. Don't get me wrong I love Role Models, and other LARP focused entertainment, but unless we counter that image, it will remain. You can make any subject matter comedic by introducing socially inept characters into it. A show about doctors can be serious and dramatic like 'Grey's Anatomy,' take that show and make the characters social misfits and you now have the very funny sitcom 'Scrubs.' So it is/can be with LARP.

The second part of the problem I see is the as LARPer we need to know what LARP is! This may sound silly but, Live Action Role Playing is any activity where you take on the role of someone other than yourself in a setting that is not in the here and now. So First Aid or other simulations, historical reenactments, role training, and murder mysteries are all examples of Live Action Role Playing. Regardless of what you call it you are LARPing when you do these things.

It doesn't end there either, LARP is universal and it's how we learn. A child who pretends to be a firefighter may someday grow up to be one. To learn mathematics people often wheel and deal in simple LARPs based on mythical fruit futures: "If Sally has 9 apples and Bobby eats 7, how many apples does Sally have left?" Even puppies and kittens when they play fight are LARPing (taking on the roles of aggressors and defenders) to learn valuable self defense skills. When viewed this way in the truest of lights, LARP is one of the most natural things we can do. It transcends races, cultures and even species.

The third and biggest problem I see is how we, the players and organizers act when asked the question "What did you do this weekend?" If we ourselves don't respect our hobby enough to own up to it, how can we expect the rest of the world to respect us? If we act meek and shy, if we're unwilling to give an assertive response due to fear of judgement, what we're actually answering is "What I do is shameful, it's so bad and unseemly that even I, the participant, am too embarrassed to talk about it."

That's right, I believe the biggest reason that LARP is still at the mercy of negative public opinion is that we LARPer refuse to tell the rest of the world that we are proud of ourselves and our hobby. We have refused to come out of the closet as LARPer, though all of the leaders of our communities are screaming for it. We have refused to tell our detractors to take their uninformed, brutish and bullying opinions, which are based in absolute ignorance and stick it where the sun doesn't shine. Especially when this opinion is coming from our fellow nerds and geeks who sometimes put forward the ludicrous opinion that skulking alone in a basement, cultivating a sickly cave tan, while pawing at a mouse and keyboard is somehow less socially regressive than, fresh air, improvisational acting and crossing swords with friends who aren't just disembodied voices on your headset. I should know, I avidly do both of these things and I have the sickest of cave tans.

So what can we do? If you are an organizer hold the LARP flag high and wave it good and hard! Contact media outlets and bring them out to games, look at partnering with schools and researchers, and put out as much material as you can that shows what LARP truly is! For the designers, design games that have a low barrier of entry or at least offer tools that help bridge any gaps. Design games that are inclusive and not elitist, games which cultivate the community as a whole and help to bring more and more first-timers out to LARP.

For the LARPer, be proud of what you do! LARP doesn't need a closet to hide in; it needs heroes to combat the negativity and ridiculous stereotypes that are propagated through ignorance. Be active, use your imagination and most importantly interact with other people and communities as a LARPer that is pro-LARP. Go to conventions in costume to promote your games, run demonstrations, and don't be afraid to be seen in parks or public places. Ensure that when in public places you have appropriate signage and someone to communicate with the media and casual onlookers.

Most importantly don't be afraid of the question "What did you do this weekend?" Answer with a smile on your face and an epic story on your lips! "I LARPed!"