

## Nine Worlds, London, 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> August 2013

*Saturday*

Having an academic conference alongside a science-fiction and fantasy convention was always going to be an interesting experience. Where else would I meet a furry, orange and black, six-foot-gun wielding mousebat (I'm sorry I don't know the name of your character) whilst looking for a talk on the theology and science fiction of C. S. Lewis? However, the two



seemed to fuse perfectly for the weekend as the friendly, inquisitive, and open nature of the convention bled over into the conference and you could intersperse your hours of rigorous thinking with other fan-based talks (of which there was an overwhelming number and variety), do a bit of niche shopping in the pop-up market, or take part in a multitude of role-play or other games. Indeed, it seems that this conference's inviting, safe, and diverse nature was bridging more than just the conference/convention gap as attested to by this reviewer:

<http://piratemoggy.tumblr.com/post/58148406717/case-lore-nine-worlds-has-set-the-precedent-you-cant>.



rapidly as he told me stories of national and international championships. The game is essentially a hybrid of dodgeball and basketball (without the bouncing of the ball) and, I have to admit, a lot of fun. Ultimately, I don't think it's for me as I don't think I'd ever get used to having to have a broom between my legs for the entire time but I definitely suggest people give it a try if it ever comes near you or check out their website if you want more information: <http://www.quidditchuk.com/>.

The underground's engineering works had made me late for the first round of academic talks so I decided to fill in the time until the next session by poking my head into the Muggle Quidditch taster. I had actually spent part of my train journey chatting to one of the players for Great Britain's Quidditch team and it certainly sounds like the sport is growing

After Quidditch, the first talk I attended was given by Ashton Spacey on "Gayle Rubin, Gay Wizards, and Denying a Paradigm". Spacey argued that the reason why mainstream Fantasy and Sci-Fi texts often depict only the most regular and safe of sexual paradigms – namely, because alternative sexual paradigms do not sell well – can be undermined when we look at

the popularity and nature of fan fiction. Spacey specifically focused on Harry Potter fan fiction which displays far more subversive, exploratory potential than both its original counterparts and the mainstream canon as a whole, whilst also being extremely popular.

The second talk was given by Sasha McKenna who spoke on “Understanding Ethical Intuitions Through Superheroes”. McKenna introduced everyone to how thought experiments are used in philosophy and how the storylines of many famous superheroes and anti-heroes are particularly suited to be used in a similar fashion, especially in relation to questions of moral obligation.

Thirdly, Matthew Pocock talked to us about “Synthetic Biology and Genetic Modification: A Convergence of Fact and Fiction”. Pocock introduced us to syn-bio and GM and demonstrated, with some fascinating examples such as self-healing concrete, how the gap between the realm of sci-fi and fantasy and what we can actually do and manufacture is closing.

There was then a dual keynote address from Jutta Weldes and Christina Rowley on “The Politics of Violence and Security in the Whedonverse”. Weldes and Rowley argued that the academic discipline of security studies could be greatly enhanced by looking at the security models found in pop-culture shows such as those of Joss Whedon – particularly *Buffy* and *Angel*. The Whedonverse, they argued, rightly presents the issues of security as resting on complex terrain which necessitates an engagement with personal identity, a breakdown of the “us vs. them” binary, a multiplicity of discourses, and much more open negotiation between such discourses.

Given that I was presenting on role-playing games (RPGs) without having played one for a number of years I thought I had better check that my theories still held up in practice and signed up to an RPG – the *Buffy*-based *Monsterhearts*. This was a game I stayed with for around four and a half hours until I had to get my train. I regrettably had to leave just as my Ghoul character had decided to abandon the other players (a Werewolf, an Infernal, and a Fae) in order to rig a school election just as they were attempting to convince the Werewolf’s estranged pack – who had killed the Infernal’s parents it turned out – to protect them from a group of Fae bikers the Fae player had stolen from as well as hide the estranged Werewolf who had just hijacked the school bus to escape from the federal agent trying to uncover who had killed the Infernal’s parents...and I thought my high-school life had been complicated!



## Sunday

The next morning I was presenting at the first round of talks. Before me came Maria Costello who spoke on “The 48k ZX Spectrum: Material culture and early home computer game history in Britain”. Using this chunky, old, yet nostalgically wonderful piece of technology and its games as examples, Costello argued that contemporary theories about the history and nature of computer gaming are so focused upon visuals and narratology that they neglect the importance of game-related objects in game history and the gaming experience as a whole.

Anthony Keen followed with a talk on “Genre Sensibility in the First Three Novels of Iain Banks”. Keen maintained that in these novels both the writing personas Iain Banks and Iain M. Banks (books bearing the first name are his mainstream novels, the latter his science-fiction and fantasy) are at work and that they stand out from the rest of the corpus for that very reason.



Then it was my turn. These were certainly unusual circumstances for a PhD student to be giving their first ever academic conference presentation, but I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. My talk was entitled ““Real Adventures for Real Heroes””: Does *Dungeons and Dragons* deliver what it promises?” I explored the potential role RPGs like *Dungeons and Dragons* can take in a gamer’s life and what, if any, ‘real’ world impact they can

have. I did so by analysing the epistemological and moral merits and demerits found in the psychological impacts and the theatrical and communal nature of RPGs. Given the heated debate that followed my talk, which ran well into the break, I was satisfied that I’d managed to get across my philosophical points to a mainly non-philosophical audience without reducing them to horrendously general or banal ideas and that the enthusiastic game-playing audience weren’t too horrified by this novice’s claims.

After that I headed off to see Deborah Hyde – Managing Editor of *The Skeptic* – talk about the origins of European vampire folklore. Hyde worked through a variety of diseases that have been used as potential explanations for vampire symptoms and thus the rise of vampire folklore and highlighted where interpretation issues lay. She also explored the folkloric ways of stopping a vampire and both drew out the possible explanations for them and how the supposed anti-vampire tricks may actually have *caused* some further vampire symptoms.

Finally, I attended Matthew Voice’s talk “The Hobbits and the Critics: Heroes in *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*”. Voice analysed the depiction of the stereotypical, martial hero in *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit* and how Tolkien used *The Hobbit* to create another version of the hero that might surpass the first: the non-martial and peaceful hero thrust into the midst of circumstances

beyond the ordinary that retains these characteristics where other heroes fall into the violent heroic tradition. Voice then bemoaned that the recent *Hobbit* movie had actually taken a backwards step in this respect and had turned Bilbo into something more akin to the typical, Beowulf-esque hero, particularly during his most cinematic moments where he ‘rises to the violent occasion’. This, Voice maintained, says as much about our culture as it does the film industry and Hollywood.

I rounded off my weekend in the light-hearted manner it began in a session called “Social Gaming with the Haberdashery Collective” where I engaged in a spot of ‘lemon and spoon battling’ and ‘blind Nerf wars’.

With hundreds of sessions over the weekend it’s impossible to get across just what a wealth of both fun and academic insight there was to be had but if I can come up with another talk I’m sure I’ll be back to tap into the veins I could not this time around.

