

AN EVENT

“HISTORICON is *THE* largest gathering of gamers and exhibitors in North America dedicated to one hobby—historical miniature gaming! We expect upwards of 4000 attendees and 93 exhibitors offering everything from figures to terrain, from across the nation, as well as from Canada and overseas. There will be games ranging from ancients to ultra moderns [!] with a little Fantasy/SciFi, along with tournaments, seminars and painting events; almost non-stop gaming!”

This makes very little sense to me, but nonetheless, I am very excited.

THIS PLACE

I am in the Lancaster Host Resort in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. It’s a hotel, golf course, restaurant/lounge and convention center. Most things look pretty much in line with that floral & brass kind of standard that a lot of hotels seem to strive for. It’s doing a good job of reaching that mark. The Host is sort of *the* place for professional or specific-interest gatherings. This is not necessarily because the place is so great but because there aren’t really any other rival complexes in the area. It is also the place for families on vacation who are interested in staying somewhere with the word “resort” in the name.

It presides over the part of Lancaster that is trying desperately to attract tourists with chintzy Amish knick knacks and outlet shopping. Having grown up in the general area, I find it all horribly embarrassing and rarely go there. Today, though, I am interested.

A HOBBY

Historical Miniature Gaming is a term that needs some explanation. Gaming refers to the fact that there are players, who play with one another at the game; Miniature refers to the game pieces, which in this case are “miniatures,” or tiny people; and Historical refers to the theme that unites this grouping of games: they are based on true events in history. So basically what happens is, during a game people assume the role of an army in the form of tiny armymen and take turns directing their armymen in warlike maneuvers, the extent and results of which maneuvers are determined by dice. The play occurs on large tables that have been three-dimensionally outfitted with varying aspects of topography and landscape, such as small hills, trees, streams, boulder fields, domestic structures, fences, etc. These tabletop displays are officially called “terrains” and are very carefully made and meticulously laid out (a dusty layer of snow on the tips of trees for winter battles, for example).

PEOPLE

In the convention guide, the final page contains an article called “THREE LEGGED TABLE or THREE PILLARS of WISDOM (RELATING to MINIATURES CONVENTIONS)—Why Do We Go to the Shows? What is the Attraction?” The reasons are as follows:

1. Camaraderie with friends we don’t often see.

2. Intriguing games and interesting gamemasters.
3. Vendors and manufacturers of the products we want.

The allusions to strength and structure in the article's title have to do with supporting Historical gaming by showing up and buying stuff; perpetuating the industry by being an active participant. I am very fond of this philosophy.

COMMERCE

A big part of the convention is the opportunity to sell and buy things related to Historical Miniature Gaming. At the Host, this part of the convention happens in the Expo Center, a boxy sort of structure across a parking lot from the main building. People sell unpainted miniatures (including men, weaponry, ships, tanks, horses, dragons, etc.) paints, guides to painting miniatures, accessories for terrains, books containing rules for games and histories of battles, cards, posters, t-shirts, movies. I am attracted to a game about the Civil War, on which instruction book features a drawing of Ulysses S. Grant having eyes the most heartbreaking shade of blue. Some of the vendors are of course very much geared to Historical games, but some tend towards games with more fantastical themes, for which there are other, much larger conventions (and much more notorious convention-goers). After looking at table after table of similarly themed wares, I start to get the feeling that if it were physically possible to walk around and through the results of an internet search, it would oddly feel a lot like this.

A CRAFT

Some vendors sell miniatures painted so expertly and detailed that they are displayed with magnifying glasses beside them for close inspection. It is an occupation (and a profitable one, too) to paint miniatures, with some of the more elaborate pieces selling for over a hundred dollars, which may seem rather outlandish for something only a few inches tall. I can say, however, that the sort of time and labor that must go into crafting such a thing would seem to make it "worth it." Plus, they look amazing and kind of weirdly real. I take part in an "Intro to Painting Miniatures" session where it takes me about an hour to turn my figure into a colorful blob that does not look very impressive, even from far away.

MY FRIENDS

I am here with two friends. One friend, K, used to actually work at gaming conventions, having been employed by a company that designed games and their accompanying texts, figures and terrains. He's sort of my liaison/interpreter/guru, speaking the language and ensuring nothing is lost in translation. I ask a lot of annoying questions, stunting each answer with about five other questions before he can even get to the meat of the first. He likes explaining and almost always finds a way to make his answers terribly engaging, which I greatly appreciate, what with all the minutia I'm trying to catalog. He asks intelligent and informed questions of the other convention-goers and it is exciting to see him so fluent in something I don't understand.

My other friend, L, is visiting from out of town. He is staying with me at my house, and he and I spend much of the day before the convention starts actually *preparing* for the convention, doing a variety of things that turn out to be rather uninformed and not surprisingly, silly indeed. The theme of the convention this year is *Africa's Independence: The Wars of Africa 1905-2006*, so we start reducing this to things we understand. We page through *Heart of Darkness* and *Le Stranger* to put us in what we think will be the right mood. Then we go out in search of costumes. L ends up with a many-pocketed olive anorak, white pants and his old Ray Bans and camera, viz. a National Geographic photographer circa maybe 1959. I find a terribly high-waisted white linen skirt and beige blouse, which I wear with heels, a safari sort of hat and silk scarf, viz. archeologist, 1949. We take photographs of each other smoking cigarettes and looking overheated and mysteriously troubled, drinking liquor in the middle of the afternoon. We are like imaginary ex-patriots, Hemingwayian sort of characters. When K calls that day, I tell him what we have done and he says, in a very honest tone, "... Why?" I guess this is the sort of gaming I know how to engage in; elaborately childish yet literary in flavor. We end up not wearing our costumes to the convention, which turns out to be a good decision.

OTHER PEOPLE

When people imagine gaming conventions, they probably picture a certain sort of attendee. This is not at all the typical HISTORICON attendee. Picture a history teacher, bulk him up by mixing him with a professional football player, and then give him the wily nature and light footedness of Teddy Roosevelt, the uniform of which is a t-shirt, shorts and moustache. I find myself imagining them all in Civil War uniforms, dividing them into Unions and Confederates, and it is surprisingly easy to do.

I see two (2) girls playing a game in one of the gaming rooms, and also the painting instructor is a woman. She hilariously delineates the difference between the "funk" exuded by fantasy gamers versus history gamers throughout the course of a convention, the latter featuring pipe smoke, cured meats and an odor akin to a damp basement. There are a few women in the Expo Center too. And then there's little old me, #1 Convention Voyeur.

A COMMUNITY

"We expect upwards of 4000 attendees and 93 exhibitors offering everything from figures to terrain, from across the nation, as well as from Canada and overseas. There will be games ranging from ancients to ultra moderns [!] with a little Fantasy/SciFi, along with tournaments, seminars and painting events; almost non-stop gaming!" This is beginning to make sense to me.

THE GAMES

The HISTORICON program contains over fifty pages of gaming opportunities, depicted in paragraphs. For example:

Finns Assault, Winter 1940 – The Finns are trying to eliminate several Russian mottis in the Kuhmo region. Scenario involves high quality but numerically inferior Finnish infantry trying to eliminate pockets of ill-equipped Russians with armor support. Historically, the Russians were more aggressive in this area and, while not able to advance, were also not eliminated, thus tying up substantial Finnish forces. Finns are the newly released Winter War figures from Two Tins Soldiers.

There are also gaming events entitled *Napoleonic D-Day, North Africa, Sharpsburg: “Fer You Yankees That’s Antietam”, Crusader Lords, Birth of the Broadside, Iwo Jima: To the Far Shore, 19 Feb. 1945, High Noon on the High Prairie, The Greenskins are Coming, Hide the Sheep!, Battle of the Hydaspes River, 326 B.C.*, et al like you wouldn’t believe.

HISTORY

Out of history, these people have made games. Most people just make art, expressionistic, unengaging, overly poignant, sometimes perfectly moving. But here there is an almost constant revisiting of true events, a continual reimagining of scenarios thought to be dead and gone. I would argue that it is much different than simply studying military history and strategy (though certainly, yes, the people here are extremely knowledgeable in that regard). With military history, one studies the circumstances and strives to understand why certain actions were taken—in a sense, analyzing the past to understand a particular action and its repercussions *up to* this point. With military gaming, one revisits all the circumstances and fills them again with life—perhaps analyzing the past in order to gain access to a particular *present*. What with people always talking about how the present is overwhelmingly elusive (here and gone and whatnot), perhaps there is quite a bit of solid reasoning in increasing the lifespan of “the present” in any way possible (even, oddly enough, via the past).