

Role-Play Aspects Involved in
Belegarth Medieval Combat Society

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In looking for a topic to choose for this assignment I was worried that I would find something I would not be satisfied with. I wanted a unique cultural scene that wasn't a career, but also wanted to look at something I had a lot of misconceptions about. Around this time I had seen the movie "Role Models" and thought that there was a group here in Thunder Bay that did something similar. This was the only topic that came to mind that I felt I should look at because it was way out of my comfort zone and I wanted to push myself. Not too long after I decided on my topic I found out that they were holding practices at the university. After I attended the first practice I was still unclear of what I wanted to focus on. However, after examining the Belegarth website and gaining a better understanding of what Belegarth was I knew what I wanted to focus on. Belegarth is "a live-action battlegame organization devoted to simulating Dark Age and medieval combat. Participants may focus on history, but are also free to include elements of fantasy such as those from J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings" (Belegarth.com). The fantasy aspect of this sport really interested me because I had not really seen too much role-play in the group I was examining. Upon further examination I learned that the amount of role-play involved is limited to the amount that an individual wishes to incorporate. Studies have not been done Belegarth, but there have been some studies that examine role-play although they are very minimal. One study examined role-identities and discovered that "what social actors say and do in an encounter has implications for who each will be for the purposes of that encounter (Spencer, 1987)." Another study examined played using an exploratory model. An important thing to note from this study was that "the full theoretical significance of the "self" concept does not unfold until the possibility of playing is considered (Csikszentmihalyi & Bennett, 1971)."

These studies point out important aspects of play. They can be incorporated to include the group of Belegarth, especially the role-play aspect involved.

This study will look at the role-play aspects involved in Belegarth. The main themes will focus on character development (creating a persona), role-play aspects of the group involved here in Thunder Bay, and aspects of role-play found in the online forums of the Belegarth main website and aspects on the Belegarth Wiki. Data and analysis are examined together so that the reader can grasp a better understanding of the sport as well as for easier flow. Before my data and analysis I will give a brief description of my cultural scene.

Cultural Scene

For this project I gathered information from the Belegarth group here in Thunder Bay as well as information from the Belegarth.com forum and the Belegarth Wiki. I thought that all three of these sources would be important for providing a greater understanding of the role-play aspect in Belegarth. A description of each source will be provided below.

Belegarth is a sport that has become increasingly popular within the city of Thunder Bay in the last few years. The realm (which is a belegarth chapter divided by geographical area) in Thunder Bay is called Thunder Guard. Over a series of four weeks I attended practices they held at the Lakehead University Hangar as well as one practice that was held at Vicker's park. For most of the practices there were a lot of different people that I had not seen before, so it was difficult to get a chance to talk with everyone. Most of my observations were obtained from the practices that were held. The practices at the Hangar were always on a Saturday evening from six to eight and the practice at Vicker's park were a held on a Wednesday at the same time. In order

to gain some more information and individual perspectives I found it easier to email some of the members questions due to time constraints at the practices. I did not have a specific person in general who really helped guide. This was due to time constraints and the fact that most of people in Thunder Guard claimed to not be into the role-play aspect (or at least didn't want to admit it). The information I did gain from the practices and the individuals I did talk to or email was very helpful.

The Belegarth website is a very informative website that provides information to new members or people interested in the sport. Another aspect about the site is that it has a forum for existing members to interact and discuss the sport. The forum consists of many different areas that participants can choose from. The different areas of the forum include General, War Council, Events, Belegarth, and Random. My main focus was the general forum, but more specifically the area dedicated to role-play. There are numerous topics being discussed throughout the forum and it is these topics I examined in order to collect data.

The Belegarth Wiki site (geddon.org) has numerous amounts of information about Belegarth. It includes all the different Realms involved in the sport, as well as the individual participants, descriptions for specific terms and so much more. It is hard to provide all the information that is contained on this site because it can be difficult to navigate and does not have too many easy-access menus. It is an open website where members are free to add and change anything they feel necessary. Although it is difficult to navigate, I found this site as an important aspect because it contains all the members within Belegarth and so I thought this would help in gaining a lot more overall information.

Character Development (Creating a Persona)

In examining both online sources and talking to members from Thunder Guard certain aspects became clear as important steps in creating a persona and developing one's character. This is one area I wanted to examine further in-depth because this is an important role-play aspect. Belegarth is very open in the area they have for role-play because a person is able to put as little or as much work into their persona as they wish. One member from the Thunder Guard group suggested that a person should create their persona to match their personality. Certain aspects for creating a persona became clear when I started talking to the participants of Thunder Guard as well as examining the two online sources. In examining the data available to me five areas of character development began to stand out. These five things were the name, race, weapon choice, garb/armour choice, and back-story. In looking further in-depth into these five aspects I wanted to see how much emphasis is placed into the specific areas of character development and how much is typically incorporated by participants.

The aspect of development that seemed most important when looking through all my sources was creating a name. This makes sense because this is something that is not too difficult to come up with, and it is the name that one is recognized with, especially at out-of-town events. I was told that for creating a name one should try to make it medieval or based off of J.R.R. Tolkein because these two things are what Belegarth is highly based off of. Some examples of medieval-type names include Antoinette, Xavier, Dralle, and Esalvapar just to name a few. There are some people, however, that choose to create less serious sounding names such as Butterfingers, Chicken, Big Jimmy, and Flounder just to name a few. Most of the members within the Thunder Guard group fit into the medieval and Tolkein areas of name creation. I think this had to do in part with their serious attitude towards the sport. This attitude can be seen

among a lot of the old members who have been in the sport. They usually have their own weapons, have more elaborate garb and follow the rules of the sport more closely than other members. The wide range of name choices and leeway for choices is very open. This allows members to put their own individual spin on who they are trying to portray and after all they are the individuals who will be taking these persona names onto the field, so they should feel most comfortable and confident with them.

The second area for creating a persona to point out is race. In gathering information I found that this is one area that appeared to make someone stand out as more into the role-play aspect than others. For example, most members of Thunder Guard are human. In fact, in asking participants and looking at the Wiki I did not see many people from Thunder Guard who had a race other than human besides one Scout (under 16 but can fight against older members). I was told he was a Coyote, but was unable to find out for certain whether or not this was true. Not all people who have a different race than human are necessarily more into role-play, but can make them stand out as so. In examining the Belegarth Wiki site I was able to count a total of thirty-two different races that were listed. Some of these appeared to be based off of Tolkein, but others seemed to be created by other individuals. Some examples of race noted on the site include Human, Goblin, Ogre, Bugbear, and Manbearpig to name a few. In examining the role-play area of the Belegarth forum I found a poll about the different types of races in Belegarth. The two most popular categories of races from this poll were humans and then savage humanoids (includes goblins, bugbears, orcs, trolls, etc.). This was quite interesting because these two options were fairly close in their numbers, but there may be other reasons for this. The higher number of responses for different races other than human probably has some bias due to

the fact that it is in the role-play aspect of the forum and people who read it may be more into the role-play aspect of belegarth overall and therefore are more likely to post on the forum.

Weapon choice is the third aspect of character development. This topic can match one's race, but does not have to be. It can also be based on individual preference. Some examples for weapons that match with race are an Ogre using a club, elves using bow and arrow and humans using swords. There are numerous types of weapons that can be created and used within Belegarth. Some of the foam weapons used within Belegarth are swords, javelins, clubs, arrows, daggers, and rocks. Another aspect that somewhat relates to weapon choice is one's ability to create weapons. This is called foamsmithing. This aspect can be integrated into one's persona if they choose, so it is worth mentioning. A lot of different weapons were used among the Thunder Guard group. Some weapons used among this group were swords, clubs, javelins, and daggers. The ability to choose a weapon that suits a person regardless of their chosen race shows how open the role-play aspect is as well as how much choice a person has.

Another aspect of character development is garb and armour choice. I have come across and been told numerous reasons for why people choose the clothing they wear. One reason is that it can be seen almost like a team jersey in any other sport. Members from the same unit usually wear the same colour garb with similar logos. This unifies a group, but individuals can make their own individual contributions to what they would like to wear and are not limited to the colours of their unit. Another reason for clothing choice I received from a member of Thunder Guard was that the more elaborate garb shows effort and that one is serious about the sport of belegarth. For example, garb is a common requirement at out-of-town events, so if one puts the effort in at home they are expanding the seriousness of the events and putting in a effort

to do so. One aspect I did notice especially at the practices was that the older participants who had been in the sport for a lot longer period of time had more elaborate garb than new attendees and younger members. This effort that the members put into their garb displays their commitment and respect they have towards the sport. Another influence on this may be the fact that the members have not been in the sport as long, but as they remain in it they may choose to incorporate this aspect better. Use of armour is another aspect that can help shape one's character. The type of armour one wears can contribute to the total look of their persona. Most reasons I had received or noted for armour use was more for the extra exercise. One member of Thunder Guard chooses to wear chainmail that weighs fifty pounds. Another thing I noticed about armour was that it could be used for intimidation. When I joined in one of the games a member was wearing leather armour on his chest and over his head. He looked very scary and intimidated me. Throughout the whole time I was playing I avoided fighting him just because he was so scary looking. Armour and garb had more of a primary purpose dealing with the contribution to the game itself, but did have some aspects that contributed to role-play.

The last important aspect of character development is the back-story. This is a story written by the individual to describe their character and how they ended up in the realm or unit that they are presently in. This is a major creative aspect that is contributed to mainly outside of the game itself. A person can put as much effort into this aspect or can choose to not write this aspect at all. I felt that this area led more into the role-play aspect I was looking for. Out of the members of Thunder Guard that I gathered information from it seemed most people had a back-story to their character but it was minimal or limited. In the online sources I used I found something similar. The Belegarth forum did have a topic where people could contribute their

back-stories, but could also had parts to build on this and add to other persona's existing stories.

Character development, or creating a persona is an aspect of Belegarth that people can contribute as little or as much effort into as they like. I asked some of the members of Thunder Guard what the purpose for the names, back-stories and so on if the role-play aspect is small. One interesting response I received was that this aspect can help them in gaining new members, but also helping more shy individuals open up and be more comfortable. If one is a shy individual, but has the ability to create a whole other persona unlike themselves it can be very motivating for some individuals. This can help open up doors and make these individual's more confident all around.

Role-Play Aspects in Thunder Guard

I was hesitant to focus my topic on the role-play aspects of Belegarth because I was told it was so minimal and it did not appear very prominent within Thunder Guard. A lot of areas I did note or thought to be role-play seemed to have other purposes attributed to them. These include one aspect of role-play noted outside of the game, the Edge of the World rule, intimidation tactics, and the use of garb/armour. These appeared to be the main areas where there was role-play although they were fairly minimal.

The first role-play aspect that I witnessed was at the very first practice I attended. While sitting on the sidelines and having some of the Belegarth aspects were explained to me by the Marshal, three scouts came and sat near us. As the marshal was discussing some of aspects specifically role-play one of the scouts begins howling and acting almost like a dog. After this it is explained to me that his persona is a coyote. Whether or not this is true was hard to determine. It is worth noting, however. The reason why the scout may have acted in this way is just because

she was discussing role-play aspects. Another reason may be that he really does enjoy the role-play aspect of the sport. I wasn't able to determine this because he was under eighteen years of age and could not interview him.

Another aspect I found as role-play within Thunder Guard was the "Edge of the World". This was explained to me as the edge of existence. If anyone steps over the boundaries they are considered non-existent within the game. In the hangar the white lines on the field were considered the edge of the world and at Vicker's park it was the tree line. This rule within the game was the most enforced rule that I noted. It was always enforced by the marshal, mainly to the tyros (members that are eight to fifteen). The reason I consider this role-play is the fact that it was enforced as "Edge of the World" and not just the boundaries. It did serve an important purpose, which was safety. If members were getting too close to the edge, especially where people were sitting, it would be pointed out so that people would not be injured. This aspect is similar to and displays the limits that role-play has within Thunder Guard.

There were a few minor aspects of role-play found within the game play itself. These aspects revolved mainly around intimidation tactics used by older members of the group. One example is the day I first attended a practice I witnessed three warriors with a sword in one hand in a shield in a another walked in a line shoulder-to-shoulder following after a singly tyro. When the tyro noticed them coming after him he ran away as fast as possible. It was explained by the marshal that sometimes the warriors do this to scare the younger members, but they do not usually engage in a fight unless the tyro initiates it. Another example I noticed was during the last practice at the Hangar. A warrior dressed in his garb with a shield and sword came running and yelling towards a younger tyro. He became frightened rather quickly and ran in the opposite

direction yelling for someone to help him. The two aspects discussed above should be considered role-play because they are initiated by the warriors even when they know that they should not battle due to the age and size differences. The tyros appear to be aware of this as well, but still run away and get scared when it does happen.

The use of garb and armour can also be noted as having some role-play among the members of Thunder Guard. For the armour some of it can tie into the intimidation tactics above. These individuals come off as more frightening than individual in regular clothing. Also, armour can be used for exercise and as a personal reference. Heavy chainmail can help a person exercise and also can help in other aspects of the game, such as taking more hits to kill a person. Garb has been described as something like a team jersey in comparing it to other sports. Different units have a few different types of colours they use in their garb, so each member looks united on the field, especially at out-of-town events. Also, used in the garb and on shields are symbols for these units. The fact that garb and armour appeared to have other purposes than just for role-play suggests that appearances may be somewhat deceiving. This is partly the reason why I thought role-play was more prominent than it really is. This also creates a lot of misconceptions and is possibly reasons for some of the ridicule that they face.

The fact that almost every aspect of Belegarth that I thought was role-play had more of a primary purpose was a bit of a shock for me. This definitely proved that I had a lot of misconceptions towards the sport. I am probably not alone in these beliefs, but have been shown that like my misconceptions other people's can change too. One of the members told me that the best way to stop the negative comments and change people's beliefs is to ask them to come try it out. This definitely reined true for me and change my viewpoints from this project on.

Online Forums and Belegarth Wiki

In looking at Thunder Guard I found role-play to be very minimal, but wanted to take a look at where it does come into play. In order to do this I decided to examine the Belegarth website as well as the Belegarth Wiki. These online sources would at least provide some kind of insight into the different aspects of role-play and to see to what extent it goes.

I first examined the Belegarth forum. It has an area specifically for role-play so this is where I obtained a great deal of information. The forum allows people to post anything they wish to discuss as long as it involves role-play. Some areas I found interesting and would like to discuss were role-play stories, how much of a role the aspect of role-play should have overall in belegarth, an area to discuss different persona's, back-stories, and races, and other miscellaneous posts.

The first thing I looked at was role-play stories posted on the forum. Some of the entries with the most responses involved a one-word story and two-word stories. These stories were contributed to numerous members and had only guidelines that it had to be medieval or belegarth based and they were to include only one or two words depending on the story they were contributing to. In looking at who replied to the post there were a fair number of different people responding, but also had a lot of the same people contributing. It may be possible that the people who contributed more to the story may have been more interested in role-play and the story-creating aspect. Also interesting to note was that by people just responding to and reading the posts shows that there is at least some form of interest in the role-play in Belegarth.

Another interesting aspect was a discussion about the role that role-play should have in Belegarth if any. This helped me in gaining an understanding of the viewpoints that different

members have towards this subject. Responses given dealt with being compared to a live action role-playing (LARP) group and had mixed responses. Some people saw being called a LARP as an insult, while others think it is an aspect that should be expected. It is pointed out here, like the Thunder Guard group pointed out to me that one can contribute as little or as much to the role-play aspect as they wish. Also noted was the fact that like the group here in Thunder Bay other realms get compared to the movie “Role Models” and get made fun of for it. Even when they are fairly different from each other. Other people have pointed out that it can be considered both a LARP as well as an action combat sport. These differences on opinions show the varying degree that role-play really has in Belegarth. One can put as little or much effort in as they like and this helps Belegarth appeal to a wide range of people.

Third, is the discussion of characters and back-stories that people have within the game. A post was created where people could contribute their character, race, weapons, and back-story, much like the areas of character development I discussed earlier. Most of the people contributing to this post had varying races and rarely included humans, unless their persona was half human. I thought this was interesting to note because it points to the fact that many of the individuals who choose a persona other than human like to contribute to the role-play forum more than others. This could also be due to the fact that people who enjoy role-play more will choose a race other than human. It doesn't necessarily mean that this is true, but is something to note.

Lastly, there were many different types of posts that would fit into a miscellaneous category. This includes tips for goblins on how to apply make-up, teasing of certain races (examples elves and dwarves), tips on how to better develop one's character and so much more. These diverse posts show that role-play does have a part within Belegarth and that some people

really do this aspect. Some of these aspects help people bring out their persona better in the game and contribute highly to role-play.

Next, I will briefly discuss the Belegarth Wiki. This is a website where members of Belegarth can contribute to any aspect of Belegarth. It has areas designated for all the different realms involved in Belegarth and then breaks it down into the different units within the realms and then goes into descriptions of individual members. This site has information on everything one wishes to know about Belegarth. It provides important terms, tips for new members, and so much more. It also has descriptions for the different races that are in use within Belegarth and currently has a total of thirty-two different races posted on the site. This site helps further show that role-play does have a place within Belegarth no matter how large or small.

In examining all the different aspects of role-play within Belegarth one can see that it does involve role-play, but maybe not as much as one might think. Some people are very dedicated to the role-play while others ignore it all together. The fact that its presence is so diverse is very interesting. A reason for this may be due to the fact that it helps gain a lot of members by offering the option. Whether or not a person wants to admit it role-play does have a part in Belegarth and should be noted.

This paper examined the role-play involved in Belegarth Medieval Combat Society. To gain a better understanding of what is involved in role-play character development, the Thunder Guard group and online sources such as the main Belegarth website and the Belegarth Wiki were all studied. These three sources showed that role-play is not very prominent, but comes out during the fighting as well as off the field. This project has taught me that Belegarth is much more diverse and complex than I had originally thought. It has also taught me to step out of my

comfort zone and just jump in without fear.

References

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