

For Battalion reviewer, AggieCon 20 proves wildly diverse, entertaining

By Keith Spera

REVIEWER

Depending on whom you talked to, the impressions and opinions expressed about AggieCon 20, Texas A&M's big science fiction/fantasy convention that ended Sunday, could be wildly divergent.

Eight-year old Leslie Becker, emerging from the dealer's room, had one word for it: "Weird." Her 12-year-old brother, on the other hand, raved about how the room "was full of cool stuff."

I knew something mystical was afoot when the complete lyrics to Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" appeared in big chalk letters on the sidewalks stretching from Hart Hall to the east end of the library on the morning the convention started.

Over the course of four days, AggieCon was sometimes strange, sometimes confusing, usually fun and always interesting.

Except for a semi-serious threat from an AggieCon worker aimed at a fellow *Battalion* staffer ("tell us who discontinued Bloom County, so that we might hang them," which became moot when I pointed out Bloom County was back in *The Battalion*), Thursday proceeded uneventfully. Conference attendees were still studying the schedule of events and had yet to get into costume. Dealers were still setting up their wares. Fantasies had yet to begin.

Sitting on a bench on the second floor of the MSC, smoking a cigarette and checking out the convention's schedule, Judith Ward, 54, waxed nostalgic about her eleven years of attending AggieCons, and other sci-fi/fantasy conventions.

"The first two years I came to AggieCon, I didn't say a word," she said. "I was awestruck to see and meet the people whose books I've read. I found out these people wouldn't bite me, and got to know them. Now every year is sort of like a big reunion."

The reunion really got rolling on Friday.

The center of the convention (or "con," if you're hip and cool) was the Dealer's Room. It was here that you could buy anything from the latest sci-fi paperback and collector's edition comic book to handcrafted jewelry, Star Wars action figures, posters of unicorns and demons, and just about anything else having to do with medieval characters or spacemen.

This was also the place where a fun little cross-section of people paraded through to find that right gift for themselves or a loved one.

A pale, thin, 12-year-old boy with glasses debated whether he should purchase "Black Wizards" ("an army of ogres and zombies guided by Bhaal, the super-deity of death and destruction, threatens the gentle Folk while the puppet king acquiesces," according to the synopsis on the book) or "Streams of Silver" ("Bruenor the dwarf, Vulgar the barbarian, Regis the Halfling, and the dark elf fight monsters and magic on their way to Mithril Hall, centuries-old birthplace of Bruenor and his Dwarven ancestors").

A father shelled out \$100 for a hand-painted set of "Blood Bowl" characters, which he planned to give to his 10-year-old son.

The dealer who sold the game

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— Judith Ward, 11 year Con attendee

said Blood Bowl is a game "sorta like football, except it features humans vs. orks, which are similar to goblins."

Tammy Davis, 25, decked out in a long black dress with a huge pewter unicorn hanging from her neck, said she spent more than \$400 by the second day of the convention, spending most of it on cassette tapes of medieval music and "filk" tunes. Filk music involves taking known music and putting unusual lyrics to it, Davis said.

"An example would be a song that uses the Oscar Meyer weiner jingle and has lyrics about Star Trek," she said.

Fantasies don't come cheap these days, a fact allowing those who deal in sci-fi and fantasy knickknacks to make a tidy living.

"I quit collecting and started dealing about 10 years ago," dealer Rick Colon, 30, said. "This is a real profitable business. I used to own a record store, but this is a better business. When times are hard, people won't buy for themselves, but they will buy stuff for their kids."

Colon's display offered several hundred comic books, ranging in price from \$5 to \$150 (with the first edition Green Lantern being one of the more expensive items), some wargame sets and several action figures, including a 10-inch Boba Fett

(the bounty hunter from the "Star Wars" series) fetching a \$75 bounty of its own.

Who is the hottest guy in comics right now?

"It'd be between the Wolverine, the Punisher, and Batman," Colon said. "I think that the Batman movie that is coming out will push him over the top."

Strolling about the dealer's room on Friday were a whole host of characters in costumes. At least one costume was for practical, besides pleasurable, purposes.

Barry Austin, 19, an AggieCon worker, was decked out in a black cape and tights, and said he was portraying a warrior wizard character featured in one of his favorite books.

One of his reasons for the get-up was "to blend in to the crowd" (which says a whole lot about the general appearance of the AggieCon

Ken Smith, 34, of Austin, checks out the merchandise for sale in the dealer's room in the MSC at AggieCon 20 Saturday. Smith said he frequently attends conventions like AggieCon.

offer, and won the keys to co-host Becky Matthews' car, which somehow were given away at several other points in the evening, much to her dismay.

The first two contestants to square off against one another were a big bearded guy with the nickname "Wookie" on the back of his shirt and someone else in overalls and a baseball cap complete with antennae. They each won 20 sci-fi fan magazines.

After this excitement, a trip to Duddley's Draw in search of AggieCon-ers on the town seemed appropriate. None were found at Northgate, but sometime after 2 a.m., I

tasy fields who attended AggieCon was George R.R. Martin, who has written and produced several episodes of CBS's "Beauty and the Beast" series.

His presentation on Saturday afternoon started off a little shakily because of technical problems. A couple of TVs had been set up to screen an episode of "Beauty and the Beast" for the audience, but no cable was available to hook them up.

An AggieCon worker asked the audience, "Does anyone have a 25-foot coaxial cable?"

Surprisingly, no one did. George was cool about it, however, and began his talk while work was still being done on the TVs.

He chatted about how nervous CBS was about such an unusual show as "Beauty and the Beast." The network's fears apparently were unfounded, because the first episode did extremely well in audience screenings.

"Even though we were weird, they had to put us on the air," he said. Cheers and applause greeted his remark.

He offered some insight into the clash of art and money in TV. He didn't want the series to be the same every week, with the heroine Katherine getting into a dangerous situation and Jason the mild-mannered beast turning into a meanie and saving her.

"That would be the same as the Incredible Hulk series, with two beast-outs per week," joked Martin.

The network executives, however, wanted some degree of "jeopardy" (i.e., gratuitous violence that they think gets ratings) in each episode, he said. Several of the early shows had to be changed a bit to accommodate the executives, but Martin said once the show began to win its time slot, he had more clout and could do the shows more like he wanted. In the end, art triumphed.

Across the road from the MSC, on the second floor of G. Rollie White Coliseum, was a room where fantasy became a bit more real, a bit more physical—the Lazer Tag room.

Contestants armed with light-beam-emitting pistols and wearing light sensors on their chests stalked



Photo by Kathy Haveman

"Most of us here are social reverts. You talk to most of these people, they'll say that they should have been born 300 years ago, or 300 years in the future — this isn't really their time. Everyone picks their own fantasy. Instead of going off the deep end, they go to conventions."

— Barry Austin, AggieCon 20 worker

attendees), so he could be on the lookout for shoplifters.

"We haven't had much trouble here, but at a con I worked in Dallas, we were catching people left and right," he said.

"Of course, I'm also wearing this for fun," he continued. "Most of us here are social reverts. You talk to most of these people, they'll say that they should have been born 300 years ago, or 300 years in the future — this isn't really their time. Everyone picks their own fantasy. Instead of going off the deep end, they go to conventions."

After cruising the dealer's room, I checked out the AggieCon version of "Let's Make A Deal," one of several game shows imitated throughout the convention (I mean, con).

No sooner had I taken a seat when the leering game show announcer asked, "Who'll give me a quarter for what's in my right-hand pocket?"

Not me, buddy. Some madman took him up on his

ran into a group of them at the popular 24-hour eatery, Whataburger.

They were just coming off of a six-hour game of Quest, a role-playing fantasy game that had 12 teams of four running around outside Rudder Tower, trying to figure out which characters the other group members were portraying, and then acting accordingly.

"We had to save our village," said one hungry Questor. "It was invaded by what we thought were werewolves, but they turned out to be vampires."

Hey, it's a mistake anybody could make.

AggieCon on Saturday started for me at 1 p.m. with Nancie's Winds of Magic Belly Dancers. How did they fit into the AggieCon theme?

"We're more on the fantasy side of things," said one of the dancers. "We get you in the mood for fantasy."

Among the several well-known writers and artists in the sci-fi/fan-



Photo by Kathy Haveman

The Punisher, one of Marvel Comics most popular characters, was for sale Saturday at Rick Colon's exhibit in the dealer's room at AggieCon 20.

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See AggieCon/Page 12

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