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## Splat! One Less Mutant to Deal With



Andrew Council for The New York Times

A smoke canister adds drama to a Dark Angel scenario paintball event.

By HOWARD M. UNGER  
Published: June 22, 2007

IS that all you've got?!"

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A soldier shouted taunts at the enemy while rapid fire from the nearby woods pelted the wooden tower he was ordered to protect. Another soldier called out for a team to assemble behind the two-story outpost. Crouching in a corner, a medic, no older than 15, shouted in a cracked voice that he was prepared to handle casualties.

The attack intensified. Now the genetically enhanced mutants were lobbing in artillery shells.

Suddenly, a rocket struck the garrison. Death had come in the form of a mini Nerf vortex football.

"We're dead!" shouted Davi Velasquez to his human comrades, most of whom were unaware of the rocket attack. "We're all dead!"

Now the group would have to sit out for 10 minutes.

War is hell.

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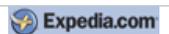
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Throughout a weekend this spring, scenes like this were repeated again and again. Figurative helicopters were downed, tanks destroyed and squadrons erased. Streams ran yellow with exploded paintballs.

Nearly 400 players took sides for Dark Angel, a 26-hour “scenario” paintball game based, in part, on the television show of the same name and set in a part of [Virginia](#) known more for Civil War battles than the war between the Transgenics and the Breeding Cult.

“Most people still want to play G.I. Joe,” said Ronn Stern, an owner of SplatBrothers Paintball, which staged the event at its 92-acre park in Prince George, southeast of [Richmond](#).

But scenario paintball is a bit different. Unlike regular paintball, scenario games have themes — military battles, alien invasions, drug-cartel wars, struggles between species set in some dystopian vision of the future — and players do not win simply by shooting their opponents.

They must complete elaborate missions, as in Dark Angel, where the humans had to hold off mutant supersoldiers. At some games, which can run well past midnight, players are given “character cards” to aid in the storyline, while others choose specific roles defined by an unofficial rulebook, an online tome adopted by nearly 80 paintball parks.

Mr. Velasquez, a polymer chemist who goes by the nom de guerre Coyote and used to compete in standard paintball tournaments, said he almost quit paintball altogether until he attended a “Lord of the Rings”-inspired scenario game. Mr. Velasquez said he went to the game because he is a fan of J. R. R. Tolkien, and he thought he could sell off his paintball equipment. He came away a scenario fan.

“I found a completely different perspective of paintball,” he said, “one where all types of people can have an impact on the field and, because of that, where all players — young, old, skinny, fat — are accepted readily.”

Patrick McKinnon — he and his wife, Diane Howe, are producers of the Dark Angel battle — puts it another way: “It’s big boys and their toys, a real American thing.”

Mr. McKinnon, Ms. Howe and their chief referee, Bobby Goedecke, sat in an RV, which served as central command for the event. Mr. McKinnon was quick to defend what, at first glance, looked like hundreds of commandos readying for deployment.

“There are people who spend \$1,000 for a paintball gun,” Mr. McKinnon said. “Well, I’ve seen a set of [golf](#) clubs sell for \$7,000.”

As he spoke, Ms. Howe, whom he met at a scenario paintball game, radioed coded instructions to generals in the field.

“It’s a glorified game of tag,” he said.

“At 200 miles per hour,” Mr. Goedecke added.

THE scenario concept has been around almost as long as paintball, which sprang up in 1981 in [New Hampshire](#) when two friends found a new way to use a device primarily used to mark trees and cattle from long distances. More recently, scenario has grown as paintball gear producers have fed a demand for realism and high-end equipment.

In the late 1990s, games usually attracted about 50 players. Since then, the sport has exploded. The first Invasion of Normandy event held by Skirmish USA drew 1,700 players to its field in Jim Thorpe, Pa., in 2002. For this year’s Invasion of Normandy, next month, Skirmish USA is expecting close to 5,000 entrants.

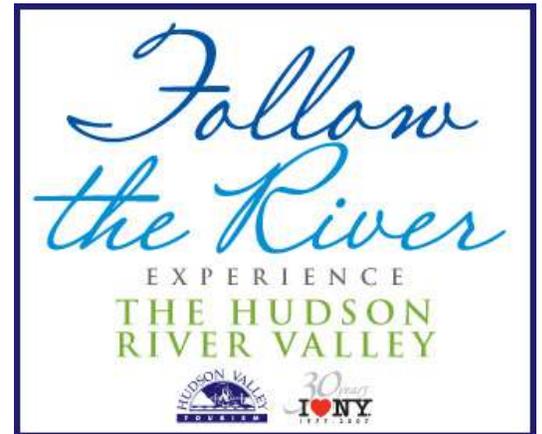
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According to the National Sporting Goods Association, from 2001 to 2006 paintball was the second-fastest growing sport in the country (after football), growing 44 percent to more than eight million participants. (The sport had a moment of adverse publicity in May, when it was reported that five of six men charged with plotting to attack Fort Dix in [New Jersey](#) had played paintball as part of their preparations.) Paintball equipment sales last year were \$340 million, according to the trade group.

“The sport is constantly evolving, and you’re seeing the market develop,” said Mr. McKinnon, who turned down a Ph.D candidacy in neuropsychology for a life of paintball entrepreneurship. Before staging science fiction-, history- and war-inspired events around the country like the Living Dead, Hellchild and Guardians of Grayskull, Mr. McKinnon owned a paintball field near [Houston](#).

Camouflage outfits of the top scenario teams are festooned, [Nascar](#)-style, with logos of equipment manufacturers, which have recently discovered the market for paint land mines or paintball guns resembling M-16’s. Sponsored teams are usually paid with free gear and are obligated to use only their sponsors’ paintball grenades and other products. In addition, makers of night-vision equipment and radio communication systems have found a new market for supplies intended for police and military personnel.

Not surprisingly, many scenario players have military backgrounds.

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