



EPIC

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Teaching Guide by the author

RATIONALE AND THEMES

Epic is a lengthy book with a demanding vocabulary and a number of complex themes. It is also a wild adventure in a rich fantasy game world, and has an immediate appeal, particularly for those readers who enjoy computer games. The most appropriate classes to work with Epic are probably the junior years of secondary school, but fluent readers in senior primary school have enjoyed the book without great difficulty. The most notable themes of the book are the possible justification of violence, the nature of virtual reality, consciousness, ambition and existentialism.

SUMMARY

The novel is set in a distant world, New Earth, where everyone has to play a fantasy game, Epic. Their successes or failures in the game determine their wealth and status in real life. Over the years a small governing elite has obtained a privileged position and can now eliminate any challenges to their decisions. The central conflict of the book is between a young group of friends and the Central Allocations Committee, a clash that is largely resolved within the game.

Erik, the main character, is a teenager who succeeds in fighting injustice on behalf of the whole of his society because of his determination, imagination and willingness to adapt to the developments in the game that governs his world: the fantasy game of Epic. His strongest enemy is Ragnok, a member of the governing Central Allocations Committee, who while charting a course to personal power in the real world fails because he underestimates the importance of

developments inside the game. Within the game itself we meet the extremely sinister vampyre and its alter-ego, the golden Avatar.

APPROACH

This guide offers six units for classroom exploration. The units are based on clusters of key chapters that the class should have read in advance. This guide has been written in order to facilitate an understanding of the events and characters of the book and to encourage creative writing, but the main aim of the units is to draw out major themes of the book, and to stimulate discussion around these and other possible themes. I am willing to respond to teacher and/or class comments or questions if sent to The O'Brien Press by e-mail. Contact books@obrien.ie

UNIT 1

Read Chapters 1–3, pp7–33

SUMMARY

Erik waits nervously with his father, Harald, only to learn that his mother, Freya, has failed in a challenge against Central Allocations. Through no fault of its own, the family faces the prospect of reallocation as they were unable to meet their production targets. Erik dreams of making everything right and succeeding in a challenge to the uncaring authorities. He enters the game of Epic and experiments in the creation of characters and in learning about one of the most fearsome monsters of the game, Inry'aat, a red dragon. After repeated deaths he reluctantly promises to go nowhere

near Inry'aat, but he defies convention with his latest persona, a very special woman who lacks all attributes but beauty. Astonishingly the game characters seem to respond to her with far more animation than Erik is used to, and a shopkeeper even gives her a valuable jewel as a gift.

Discussion Points

- The book opens with a description of raindrops on a window pane. To some extent this is a metaphor for what is about to happen to Erik. The first page ends when Freya enters the room. 'I'm dead,' she announces, a tremble in her quiet voice (p7). How effective is this first page in drawing you into the story? Even though it is not yet clear what has happened, do you feel something catastrophic has occurred to Erik and his family?
- What kind of game is Epic? Has anyone in the class played games like it? Epic is not simply a fantasy wargame, so examples of games without combat in which the player tries to obtain wealth, clothes and items for their character are also relevant. Imagine you had to play a similar game to earn spending money. Would that be fun, or is it possible that the game might become a repetitive chore? Can you see why Erik might try something different to being a warrior with lots of strength? Is it very strange for a boy to pick a girl character in a game, or vice versa? [For a scholarly discussion of this issue see www.gamestudies.org/0401/kolo where the researcher found that 15 per cent of males in one particular game played female characters].
- '... his own parents considered him a child still, untrustworthy and unequal to

a discussion on a future that would affect them all' (p11). Erik considers himself a strong and trustworthy person, but the behaviour of his parents casts doubt on that judgement. How important to you is the approval of your parents or carers? If you were to assess your own character would anyone's opinion matter more than that of your parents or guardians, even your own?

- 'Oh no. Not again. Oh, Erik, why can't you get on in the world?' (p15). What are the consequences of death in Epic? Why do Erik's parents want to get him to stop what they consider to be fooling around with the game? If your future depended on your success in the game, would you play for slow steady gains like Bjorn, or might you risk it all for possible major gain as Erik does?

ACTIVITIES

1. DESIGN YOUR OWN FANTASY CHARACTER FOR A GAME LIKE EPIC.

Imagine you have 60 points to allocate to the following categories: physical strength; agility; speed; magical power; healing power; beauty. Invent a background for them such as apprentice wizard; scholar, swashbuckler, thief, artisan, aristocrat, pirate, monk, gladiator, druid etc. What starting skills might come with your choice? Strategically is your character designed to play the game on their own or as part of a team where you play a relatively specialised role? Which of your friend's characters would fit well with your own in a team?

2. THE IDEA

Read the background to the idea of having successes or failures in the game determine their wealth and status in real life. See www.obrien.ie/Interviews.cfm?ID=30

UNIT 2

Read Chapters 4–8, pp34–75

SUMMARY

A scene from Erik's memory, from seven years earlier, reveals just how serious is the 'law of violence.' Even though the children are only playing, Erik breaks his tooth and the older boys, B.E. and

Bjorn, might be in trouble as a result. They could be accused of fighting. On New Earth the alternative to resolving issues by violence are duels in the arena between game characters. Harald reluctantly offers to lead a successful challenge from the village of Osterfjord against Central Allocations. Erik is thrilled and finds the taste of vengeance sweet, though a part of him is dismayed that his parents have obviously kept secrets from him. Central Allocations Committee meets to discuss the situation. They are a clearly aging and competitive group of people, and angry that their decisions have been challenged. They reveal that they have a method of cheating and one of them in particular, Ragnok, takes great and sinister pleasure in using a special character, The Executioner, to eliminate the characters of those who dare oppose them.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- 'Those first settlers brought with them one rule, a rule that we have obeyed ever since. There is NEVER any reason for violence' (p 39). Would you like to live in a world where there was never any physical violence?
- What kind of issues cause people to resort to violence? Do you think that it could ever be possible to avoid all physical conflict by dealing with issues differently to the way they are dealt with now? Can outbursts of anger always be avoided? Imagine you had been brought up, like Erik and his friends, never to hit anyone, might this lead to other, and different, expressions of temper? Consider how Erik smashed the clay mug (p9), and suggest ways you might vent your frustration.
- 'Case number 133, year 1124. Snorri the warrior versus Central Allocations. Snorri the warrior from Estvam accuses Central Allocations of denying his wife a hip operation' (p 50). What do you think of the way the people of Epic resolve all their conflicts by fighting only inside the game? Why would Central Allocations seek a way to cheat?

ACTIVITY

This activity demonstrates how a bias in a system can quickly lead to huge unfairness. It requires two to four packs of playing

cards depending on class size and time. Explain the rules in advance.

- Place squares of paper in a box, all white apart from six that are yellow.
- Ask everyone to pick a square. Those with the yellow ones are Central Allocations (CA).
- Hand out two playing cards randomly to every person but three to CA.
- Everyone then has a few minutes to swap cards with each other if they want to.
- At the end of the trading time you add up the value of the cards, with Aces being 3pts, King, Queen, Jack, 2pts, the rest 1pt.
- Now, the critical bit! If 2 cards are the same suit, add 2pts to the score. If a CA player has a set of 2 the same suit they add 2pts, if they have 3 of the same suit they add 3pts. The top six scores become the new Central Allocations.
- Collect all the cards, except those possessed by the CA members, who get to keep theirs. Repeat.
- If time allows, repeat again.

It should be clear to everyone that all the cards are going to end up in the hands of CA and it has become impossible to get on the committee if you only have 2 cards. Stop the game at this point.

Ask the class what can be done about the unfairness of the game. Possible strategies for those outside CA include refusing to play, co-operating to get an individual up into CA by pooling cards, refusing to return cards, persuading CA people to give back their extra cards. If they can't decide upon any of these then you might wish to declare the person with the most points as winner.

I played a version of this game once. A group of about 10 of us pooled our cards, collectively giving us a very high points score, although the game ended in confusion because the rules didn't allow for 10 people taking up 1 place on CA. It was interesting though, as by the second round we realised something had to be done to change the rules.

UNIT 3

Read Chapter 15

SUMMARY

Erik, in the character of Cindella, is

shopping. To his amazement the game comes alive and the NPC (Non Player Character) shopkeeper transforms into the Avatar. The Avatar holds a conversation with Erik that proves it to be self-aware, although it also expresses a great deal of distress and confusion.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- What do the following words mean: avatar; undulation; androgynous; metaphysical?
- 'What? What are you?' Erik was utterly bewildered.
'I do not know. What are you?' (p145). Who or what is the Avatar? Why might it be distressed? Why, do you think, does it feel it can trust Erik?
- Do you think that computers will ever become sophisticated enough to be conscious? How was your own sense of identity formed? Does this suggest human beings might be different to computers in fundamental ways?
- 'We are definitely not NPCs,' he decided. 'We have free will' (p148). Read the conversation between Erik and the Avatar, pp146–148. If you were asked whether or not you were just a character in someone else's game, how would you answer? Is Erik's response a good one?

ACTIVITY

WHAT IS REALITY?

The teacher asks the class to imagine that they have built a computer that has come alive. With the teacher playing the role of the computer, the students are asked to explain the world, describing what human beings are, saying how they know that they are real and not created the way the teacher/computer was. If students say that they have free will, teacher responds that he/she has too. The point is that if 'artificial' intelligence did exist, it would be just as real as evolved intelligence. There would be differences, such as the fact that the class could reprogramme you. On the plus side you might effectively live forever, assuming you can transfer machines when the old one wears out. You might also be able to replicate yourself and have millions of versions in existence. Each one would begin the same but then gradually diverge from the others due to different experiences.

UNIT 4

Read chapters 19–24, pp186–227

SUMMARY

Erik and his friends decide to get away from the threat of assassination by Central Allocations by going on a voyage. They disguise their intention to challenge Central Allocations from a distant city, Cassinopia, by pretending they are setting sail in search of treasure. This pretend journey is taken seriously by the most powerful and evil character in the game, the vampyre, Count Illystivostich. The vampyre betrays them into the hands of another game character, Duke Raymond the pirate. Svein and B.E. are turned to stone, the others are held in captivity. While negotiating for the life of Cindella, Erik finds that the vampyre is self-aware, like the Avatar, but more sinister.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- What do the following words mean: ethereal; ennui; sibilance; augury; conjecture?
- 'Bjorn, you've come!' Erik leapt up, delighted (p192). Bjorn does not agree with the idea of challenging Central Allocations to a duel. Yet he joins the voyage all the same. Why? What words might you use to describe his character?
- Writing style: The descriptive passages concerning the vampyre and its style of speaking are very different to the rest of the book. We first meet him when we hear 'a voice, terrible and cold, dripping with poisonous sibilance, and yet terribly beautiful and persuasive' (p190). Later, Erik looks into his eyes and sees 'Ennui without comprehension, lifted only by the prospect of chasing prey whose corruption and befoulment was sufficiently challenging to offer diversion' (p202) Does this more ornate language suit the character of Count Illystivostich?
- 'Only Bjorn seemed able to resist the corruptive seduction of the vampyre' (p202). The vampyre is able to influence the decisions of the humans playing Epic. How does it seduce B.E and/or Svein and/or Anonemuss, and even Bjorn? Does this suggest it has a grasp of human weaknesses? Is this

frightening?

- 'You can think for yourself? You are not just a programme? That's amazing!' 'Is it?' The vampyre shrugged dismissively. 'It seems natural to me.' (p224). What manner of creature is the vampyre? Why did it make the mistake of telling Cindella and Anonemuss how to end the world?

ACTIVITY

WRITING DIALOGUE

Write a conversation between two very different characters, perhaps between someone from medieval times and someone from today; or between someone who is brave and boastful and someone who is timid; or between two people with very different accents. The conversation can be about anything at all, but the point is to distinguish between the two characters by the way they speak, rather than by what they say. Ideally the difference will be so clear that nothing more is needed to determine who is speaking that the dialogue. Read a book by Roddy Doyle, note how he rarely needs to attach 'he said' or 'she said' (or equivalents) to the dialogue because the reader generally knows who is speaking.

UNIT 5

Read chapters 25–27, pp228–258

SUMMARY

Having been thrown off the Central Allocations committee, Svein makes a surprising appearance at Erik's house. He wants to negotiate for enough wealth to return to the game in style. Inside the game, the players are all rescued thanks to Bjorn's patient walk across the seabed and his discovery of an undersea city. The fact that the players had earlier given away Neowthla's Bell of Summoning had previously shocked Svein, but that act of generosity is now more than repaid as the Merpeople not only rescue the characters but also restore B.E. and Svein from having been turned to stone. Meanwhile Ragnok mounts a decisive coup by killing off the characters of his CA rivals and, more horribly, murdering the elderly Godmund. His long laid plans have come to fruition and he is

unassailable. We learn that he was the author of the New Leviathan.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- 'I have been discarded' (p230). Why did the majority of Central Allocations vote to get rid of Svein? How does he hope to get back on to the committee? What unites the Central Allocations committee? Contrast this with the reasons Erik and his friends help each other.
- 'I just don't trust you' (p231). What promises does Svein make to Erik? Is he sincere? How might you deal with Svein if you were in Erik's position? Would you treat him as an enemy or as a potential ally?
- 'It's about us, and our morals. Are we like them? No. It's that simple' (p244). Injeborg makes the case for turning Svein back from stone, while Anonemuss thinks this would be a mistake. They have very different approaches to the same question. Anonemuss is judging the situation from the view of how best to defeat Central Allocations, Injeborg from her instincts. Recall the fact that Anonemuss agrees with Machiavelli that 'the means accuses, but the result excuses' ie the ends justifies the means (p175). What do you think of this viewpoint?
- 'The paper had served its purpose and would not be needed any more' (p248). Thomas Hobbes wrote the original Leviathan, famous for arguing that humanity existed in a state of war against all and that life was nasty, brutish and short. Would you say that Ragnok looks at the world in those terms? What does he want from life? Why did the other members of Central Allocations underestimate him?

ACTIVITY

MEANS AND ENDS

Anonemuss and Ragnok are on opposite sides, but are they that different? Write a list of traits that they have in common. It might help to consider why they are the only humans in the book who believe it is acceptable to use violence. Imagine you were setting out to be the world tennis champion – write another list of the qualities that you think you might need. If this helps you to list more traits for

Anonemuss and Ragnok, go back and add these to list. Write down five ambitions of your own, the bigger the better, eg 'Save the environment'; or 'Become a star in a world-famous band'. Then think about whether these goals can be achieved entirely by your own efforts or if they require the generosity and help of many other people. Give them each a score between 1 and 10, depending on how much help you need, with 1 if the goal needs lots of help and 10 being none. Add up your score. What kind of ambitions do you think Erik or Injeborg have? What kind of score do you think they would get? Complete the same exercise for B.E., Anonemuss, Ragnok, the Avatar and the vampyre.

UNIT 6

Read chapters 29–30

SUMMARY

The lines are drawn for an extraordinarily vast battle, with almost everyone in the real world clipping up to take part. The forces of the vampyre and Ragnok are guarding the Ethereal Tower of Nightmare, everyone else is trying to get in. Injeborg makes an important speech to persuade people to support them, while Ragnok tries to put a halt to their efforts but fails. In the course of the battle an astonished Ragnok, playing the Executioner, finds that he has been outsmarted by Erik who succeeds, after heroic efforts by his friends, in getting into the tower.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- 'The arena was full. Never before had they seen so many people clipped into the game...' (p274). Injeborg stands before the vast crowd and explains the situation. Why do you think it is Injeborg who does this, rather than Erik? 'Once Injeborg had spoken, Erik understood his own feelings more clearly' (p244). It might help to remember the time they were arguing over whether to return Svein to life or not. Consider also her speech when they thought all was lost and Erik's response (pp218–219). Which of the two, Injeborg or Erik, do you consider to be the more articulate person?
- 'Central Allocations has decreed that

there will be no battle...' (p277). Why does Ragnok's manner fail to stop the crowd supporting Injeborg? Does he care? What does he think will happen?

- 'This is going to be awesome. The greatest battle ever' (p278). B.E. does not seem nervous at all. He wants the battle, but is he thinking about the consequences? Describe his character by comparing it to Injeborg's character.
- '...Harald?' Erik glanced around. 'Here,' said a voice from the shadows. 'Let's try to take him' (p287). At the start of the book Erik is deeply unhappy because it appears that his parents don't trust him. Has the relationship between parents and son changed? What is the relationship between Erik and Harald like now?
- Writing style: Very rarely, because it can cause confusion, the perspective changes within a chapter from one person to another (see also p28). Here, for a crucial scene during the battle, it switches to the perspective of Ragnok in his character as the Executioner (p287). Would the downfall of Ragnok be as dramatic if we saw it from Erik's point of view? What might we miss?

ACTIVITY

PUBLIC SPEAKING

Imagine you had to speak to the crowd like Injeborg does. You are trying to persuade hundreds and thousands of people to risk all that they own within the game and fight with you, in order to end Epic. What arguments might you use? Have a look again at what Injeborg says and make a list of her points, add in any points of your own that you think might also help. Rephrase her points if you think they could be made better. Take some volunteers to come to the front of the class and make their points to the class as if they were addressing the crowd. Speaking to crowds is a skill that can become better with practice. Imagine how hard it must have been for Injeborg to do this. Do you think it would make it easier or harder for her that the whole future of the world hung on the outcome?