

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

I often get recommendations from listeners for episode ideas – and one of the most common suggestions is to do an episode on Larps.

If you're like – an episode on what? Larp stands for Live Action Role Play. When most people hear Larp, they think of really nerdy guys dressed in plastic medieval armor whacking each other with foam swords in a park. The swords are called “boffers” by the way, which doesn't help their cause.

The weird thing is in the world of nerds of geeks, where I live comfortably, Larping often considered too nerdy and too geeky. Like I was recently talking with a guy at a game shop who was rattling off all the role-playing games that he does and then he said, but I draw the line at Larps!

Caroline Murphy is not surprised.

CM: Boffer fighting looks nerdy, it just does, I never want to see videos of boffer fighting.

Caroline does a lot more than a boffer now. She's a Game Master or GM, which means she runs Larps. She often writes them too – and yes Larps have plots and character backstories you're supposed to follow. Sometimes hundreds of pages of rules.

As a GM, her job is to hover, and watch the participants like a referee. A GM can also play characters that are designed to challenge the players or advance the plot. And sometimes they present puzzles to solve.

CM: Larps are ridiculously undervalued for what they are, you're getting tailored crafted story for you and your friends for an entire weekend, that's incredibly valuable!

Now there was a time when people were embarrassed to admit they were Star Trek fans, or God forbid, “Trekkies.” ComicCon used to be mocked. When I worked in animation in the '90s, Cosplay was the thing you were supposed to hide but now that's cool, even sexy. So are Larps the next big thing?

I mean they're not just swords and shields. There are post-apocalyptic Larps, There are Larps set in space, costume ball Larps, World War II Larps. Caroline wrote a Larp where humans interact with fairies – which sounds cute until the

humans realize the fairies are using them as pawns in their very creepy courtship rituals.

CM: So half the players are humans in fae realm are playing horror and half the players fae are playing romance game.

But the more I talked with Caroline and other game masters around the world, I began to realize that Larping isn't even a game anymore. I think that Larping has evolved to the point where's redefining what we consider to be works of fiction or art.

Yeah, seriously! If you don't know what's up with Larps these days, you're in for a surprise --- after the break.

I always assumed that Larps evolved from Dungeons & Dragons – like some guys were playing in their basement in the '70s and someone said, you know what would be cool? If we ran out in the backyard and pretended to be our characters!

Evan Torner says that's not right. He's a professor at the University of Cincinnati who specializes in game studies. He says to find the roots of Larping, we have to go way back to the psychiatrist Jacob Moreno, who was a contemporary of Sigmund Freud.

ET: You know at the time, Freud was more popular where you look into individual psyche and unlock secret and unconscious and Moreno yeah but you're actually composed of these roles you take upon yourself and they don't quite all jive together, so part of what's therapeutic of role playing is bringing out aspects that you know are in yourself but you're too embarrassed to reveal them without a fictitious alibi.

Morenos ideas were eventually picked up by the US military during the Cold War, when they were figuring out how to interact with the Soviets during a crisis.

ET: The RAND corporation was running games in late '50s and early '60s realized the researchers were having too much fun so they stopped and that culture continued to be cultivated at Stanford and MIT and never went away.

The Society for Creative Anachronisms was founded in Berkeley in the mid '60s. They were the first to start the boffer-style sword fighting.

And yes, eventually all of this merged with D&D and the other tabletop games.

LS: I think D&D and early Larp were kind of a US phenomenon, there are a lot of attributes follow US culture.

Lizzie Stark is a journalist who wrote about Larping for her book, “Leaving Mundania,” before she became a full on convert to Larping.

LS: In classic fantasy Larp you have character, your character has level, has hit points, has skill points and to me this rehashes the American dream, you know when you show up to a new game, you’re level 0 and through study hard work, showing up every month your character obtains wealthy, power and influence in the game world.

In the 1990s, Larping branched out into different genres. A game called Vampire: The Masquerade was a huge hit on college campuses. But when Evan Torner it, he hated it. In fact, that experience was one of the reasons why he wanted to study role-playing from a psychological perspective.

ET: I could sense this weird tension we’re doing this for fun and the minute they get into game try to dominate you and subvert your will, and that lack of consent and the status those who had most power, created cult like situations where people didn’t feel like they could leave, if they left would be shunned from community.

Now Larping was already being played around the world by this point. But when Vampire: The Masquerade came to Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland, the game itself began to change.

ET: The American rules are competitive, they want you to gain advantage over other people and Nordic people did away, concentrate on character, theme and atmosphere.

And thus, a new kind of Larping was born – Nordic Larps.

LS: There are a lot of things that make Nordic difference, they have every man’s right to roam, freedom to use public land, there’s a culture where you don’t sue each other, don’t have hazard law, you don’t need insurance and there’s government funding for cultural activities.

Nordic Larps are simpler too. American Larps have rules books that are sometimes 500 pages or more, which can be intimidating for newcomers.

LS: A typical rules set in Nordic might be 10 pages of rules, that would be long.

Eirik Fatland lives in Oslo. He writes and facilitates LARPs, and he's also considered an intellectual in the field. He says in those early days, there was a lot of trial and error in figuring out what made Nordic LARPs distinctive.

EF: The first big LARP was based on 1984. So it lasted for 5 days, we played it in a building that had been a mental asylum but was now empty some point in future, there had been nuclear war underground, so for five days people pretended to live in distant future, Orwellian society, and they work in character, eat in character, shit in character, sleep in character if they woke up because thought police ransack quarters, they would expect to respond in character. All this made for powerful experience, afterward players said this really changed my view of myself and the world, not happy but strong one. We also thought in this experience we needed drama, it wasn't enough just hang out and pretend to live in this dark future, and so we added AI trying to take over planet, there as a internet hack, these sci-fi plots, time travelers, for someone deeply immersed third day of LARP, yes I believe it now, I am a simple proletarian in 2097, I must go and get coupon to get food ration and suddenly time traveler from distant future popping up in cloud of smoke, this doesn't mix, it breaks the illusion and doesn't add to it.

So if American LARPs were dramatic even bombastic, Nordic LARPs would be subtle, even realistic. Eirik once played a LARP set in 1942 where they pretended to live in a Norwegian town that was under occupation by the Germans. The locals in that town watched quietly from the side, as if the LARPs were ghosts from the past.

EF: After we compare note with people who had lived through the war and there were surprising similarly, you did this? Or we did that.

Even in fantasy LARPs, they had a strong commitment to realism. A LARP based on Hamlet was played in the Danish castle where Hamlet took place. There's even a joke in Sweden about Nordic LARPs getting so fastidious about their costumes.

EF: There was a saying in '90s someone is bad Larper, he doesn't understand why you shouldn't sue your own leather boots for LARP. So the crafts is important so it's not enough good looking costume, there needs to be effort crating that costume, crafting that location.

I particularly enjoyed seeing the pictures from the American themed larp, to see people in Nordic countries dressed as "Americans"

EF: I played the first run of Just a little lovin, there were a couple American players and it was freaking me out to play with them, they knew much more who these people were supposed to be than I did.

That's interesting.

EF: But it's part of how Larp works, that we create this temporary bubble, this temporary reality and we live in a few hour or a few days, and this reality follows the rules we can remember. So if we're going to pretend to be people in ancient Rome, we can't learn Latin to pretend to be Romans, we speak whatever language but change other things, we might key phrases how to say hello or goodbye, some ways to be polite, some things values, what is honorable and what is not considered as much stuff we can cram into our minds, that's the contents of the world we're playing in a larp. Just Lovin in midst of AIDS crisis in early 1980s and happens in Saratoga upstate New York, that's the setting of the Larp, doesn't contain information people time and place would have about AIDS or about state of NY or the state of politics or anything, it contains subset of it.

Needless to say, when word got back to the U.S. about Nordic Larps like “Just A Little Lovin” there was a lot of interest and people like Evan Torner wanted to bring them over here. But the Nordic Larps got lost in translation, even if they were supposed to take place in the US.

ET: When were looking at advertising for Just A Little Lovin', and the website this is a game about HIV AIDS, there was huge Internet uproar at that term and we're like, you're right not game, it's play, we're playing through it but it's a Larp.

Lizzie Stark had the same problem with “Mad About The Boy,” which is a Larp based the Brian K. Vaughan comic book series Y: The Last Man. In this world, a plague has killed every man on Earth except one guy. The Larp centers around a government plan to fertilize women – but then halfway through the game, the last man stumbles onto the scene.

LS: We got accused of being sexist, hating men and reinforcing gender divide, and we got accused of being insufficiently radical game and running a game that was anti-feminist because comodifying sex, and it ended up being contentious even for people that were there the experience was good.

Lizzie saw that Nordic Larps were also playing into a class-divide here. They appealed to people with post-graduate degrees, and money to spare. Americans were used to Larps that cost 40 bucks.

LS: I found was that renting the site and providing food which was new but really important for social experience of the larp was more expensive so instead of \$40 we had to charge \$120 or 130 for the weekend, people didn't want to pay, and for experience where didn't know expect. we had to sell the experience of Nordic Larp and it would be worth it. Now there are Larps with \$450 tickets that are sold out in minutes.

And remember the boffer campaigns, those people that whack each other with swords? They were getting annoyed about this because it was basically implying that Nordic Larp were somehow better, more evolved than that silly, embarrassing geek stuff. And they pointed out that American Larps were tackling serious subjects – and they were developing characters a lot of nuance and depth.

But this is what I find so interesting -- Larping has evolved to the point where it's not really a game anymore. I mean if you're so deeply invested in your character and your story, there's not way to win a Larp, right?

LS: I mean some people use the phrase won the Larp sarcastically, like our characters won the Larp and that's by being an awesome in the narrative you're in. The Nordic facilitators we joke about collecting player tears for GM vials – it's consensual crying, it's consensual crying, let's be very clear about that.

There's actually a term for when you experience the emotions of your character and you can't shake those emotions once the game is over. It's called "bleed." In there's a small field of psychological studies on how to debrief players after the Larp is over.

CM: That is the number one problem in bleed is having emotions, especially sexual emotions transfer from character to player,

Again, Caroline Murphy.

CM: Because people get into character relationships knowing repercussions of what that can be like, and not knowing how to control it and clear conversation, what are the boundaries, what are you comfortable with? They don't have touch up conversations about that stuff. So they're get into romantic relationship and powerful feelings of love hard to dispel and if you don't have experience it can be dangerous and gets people into hairy situation, their out of game husband and their in game wife and that can be a problem.

But isn't that what you want from reading a book or seeing a play or going to a museum? You want to feel something. You want to experience an epiphany, and see the world through the eyes of a character that is not yourself. So Larps are works of art – right? Lizzie's not so sure.

LS: Yeah, I think of course Larp can be art, anything could be art, the question is whether it's good art. For a lot of Larps the answer is yes but hard question to answer because different people can have different reactions to the same Larp. You and I go to Larp and it would be yours best and I thought plotline was boring and I didn't like the player I had to play close to.

And so Larp writers have to design games with that in mind, and not micromanage the players – which is a very different type of skill than writing and directing plays.

The other thing is if you put in a play, it can be seen by hundreds or thousands of people. A Larp is only experienced by the 10 or 20 people who are playing the Larp. I asked Caroline if that ever bothers her.

CM: It kills me! I've told so many stories, 15 years, and I've told so many stories and sometimes people will tell me a story that I told them and I forgot it., and these are things that changed people's lives, it changed everything for me in and out of game level, as a creator that's crushing there's this existential question of legacy.

Tempted to write novels?

CM: Yeah, I've been working on that, I'm in a writer's club, work on stuff.

I don't want to tell you what to do.

CM: I know what you mean, there are times which I feel frustrated as a creator that I've created something beautiful and that I can't show it to anyone, and there's no way to show it to anyone, and even if I could I don't know if it would be the same, like let's say I wrote amazing parlor style game, I've got best cast that I can imagine, I've cast all stars of Larps

Video tape

CM: And I have 360 camera in the middle of the room and set up twitch stream so watch but there's so much going on at the same time these two characters are whispering, what are they saying? Meanwhile, these characters having big fight, there are too many threads and they're so perfectly interwoven, you can't capture that. I don't think you can.

LS: But I don't think it's frustrating, I think it's one of the things that makes Larp so special. There are few experiences left where you have to be there. So to me, it's a feature not a bug, and there is something about Larp that captures magic of present moment.

Which is so rare in our digital age, when even Snapchat isn't as ephemeral as we want it to be.

So what are Larps? They're not games in the traditional sense. They're not like plays. And while I do think they're works of art, there's no category of art you could put them in. I asked Eirik Fatland what he would compare them to.

EF: Well, Larps, I like sand castles, like you build them, they can be beautiful, but the moment you reach perfection, tide comes in and washes away, it's about the creation of memories, it's a temporary beauty, and I think that makes it more beautiful, that you know it's temporary and what we're doing is for moment and for the memories.

Designed memories. I think that's a pretty good category.

So to be honest, I came into this episode thinking, Larps are interesting. I'm going to research them, and talk about them, but I don't have to do one, right? But I'm intrigued, and incredibly impressed.

Now I've been told don't make the mistake a lot of journalist make doing one Larp, and writing about it like you've had the definitive Larp experience. You need to try different ones and figure out who you want to be in this world. So I'll get there eventually, and I'll definitely let you know how it goes.

That's it for this week, thanks for listening. Special thanks to Evan Torner, Caroline Murphy, Emily Care Boss, Eirik Fatland, and Lizzie Stark -- who is not a fan of Game of Thrones but yes, she knows the Starks are a big deal in that show.

LS: Larpers would Gchat me with spoilers, like when the Red Wedding happens, people I haven't spoken to for months, they'd be like how did you feel about what happened to your family when they all died? (LAUGHS)

Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panoply network. Let me know if you're a big Larper, which ones you recommend. I tweet at emolinsky, or you can join the conversation on Facebook.

By the way, I am going to have my first live show at the Wythe Hotel in Williamsburg Brooklyn as part of the work by work on air festival, which is running from February 10th to February 13th. My presentation is going to be on Sunday the 12th, from 4-5pm. And afterward, there's going to be an event with the Radiotopia podcasts. So come by and join us.

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