LARP: Crash Course Games #26

Crash Course: Games
https://youtube.com/watch?v=SUYb29YV47w
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/SUYb29YV47w

Hi! I'm Andre Meadows and this is Crash Course Games. Now, when you think of larping, maybe you conjure up an image of a group of nerds wearing homemade costumes, sporting foam weapons, and casting spells on each other in the park. And yes, larping is something that many self-proclaimed nerds do love, but it is also enjoyed by lots of other people all over the world! The 2014 LARP Census (yes, that is a real thing) documented participation in over 80 countries! But larping is more than just a game – it's a game that merges performance, community, and art. It allows you to immerse yourself in the game by literally taking on the role of your character. So let's take a look at what larping is, where it came from, and the impact it has on its players.

[Theme Music]

LARP stands for live action role-playing game (apparently the G is silent). And according to interactive game researchers Falk and Davenport, it can be defined as "a dramatic and narrative game form that takes place in a physical environment. It is a storytelling system in which players assume character roles that they portray in person, through action and interaction. The game world is an agreed upon environment located in both space and time, and governed by a set of rules – some of which must be formal and quantifiable."

So larping is similar to RPGs in that the players take on a character and pursue goals within a fictional setting. The difference is that players are physically acting out their character's actions and interacting with others that are in character. Also like RPGs, LARPs are run by game masters or GMs. GMs are responsible for creating the world and controlling the narrative. They address its people and culture, technology and weaponry, and its setting and time period. Then they draft the rules.

This may involve creating a completely new set or modifying an existing system to address how the game will handle combat, magic, death, and character skills. GMs are responsible for acting as the referee at the actual game. They must also perform the role of event planner – arranging for a venue, advertising for the event, and handling the finances. To help the GMs, there are NPCs or non-playable characters which are kind of like NPCs in video games, except they're real people.

Non-playable characters take on the role of the characters that are part of the narrative. It is their job to help players along in the game by dropping hints and clues. The players, who are known as PCs or player characters, may create their character or be given one by the game master. And they don't just describe their character verbally like an RPG. They embody it, improvising speech and movement and creating costumes with specific equipment and weapons. And like in RPGs, a player's character can also change and develop as the game progresses.

And there are countless genres that can influence game worlds that these players participate in: Victorian, Fantasy, Horror, Dystopian Social Commentary – pretty much anything you can think of. As well as three main styles of play.

Demonstrative, or the battle game, is your standard boffer LARP (boffer being the foam weapons players use to beat each other). In this style, two groups go head to head on the battlefield, rushing at each other and attacking until one group is left standing.

Salon is a theatre type LARP which is focused on player interactions rather than combat. In this style, the GM generally plans out the characters in advance and gives each player a character card. The players then use this information to determine how they will respond to the narrative.

And then there's live steel where players aim for historical accuracy, using actual weapons and armor during play. Now the name is slightly misleading since players don't generally use steel weaponry, but instead rattan weapons that might leave a bruise, but won't maim other players.

But of course, there are no hard and fast rules, so LARP designers may use a mix of these styles in their games, whatever combination the GM decides is needed to achieve the goals of the narrative. What this means is that each LARP is unique in its mix of genre and style. And the goals of each LARP may differ too. Maybe you are tasked with finding the treasure and killing off foes, or maybe your objective is to solve clues to progress in the game. Either way, no game is complete without a set of rules.

Rules should cover the type of combat, magic, and skills that can be used in the game, as well as how the game will determine and treat deaths of characters. These rules ensure that there is a framework for decision making during the game by GMs, PCs and NPCs.

So how did all this LARPing get started? Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Role playing has been a form of entertainment for centuries. For example, in 16th century England, Queen Elizabeth I organized lavish events for historical role-play. And role playing in the form of historical re-enactment became widespread in the 19th century, with a particular interest in recreating the Middle ages.

Moving into the 20th century, role playing in the form of improvisation theater and "theater games" was developed as a way to train actors. But while these forms of role play all provided some entertainment value, they weren't actually games. So really it could be argued that the first modern LARP began in 1977 with Brian Wiese's Dagorhir.

Dagorhir was a live-combat group based in the D.C. area. It focused on costumed, battle-like play involving padded weapons and it helped define how we think of the game today. Now Wiese claims that his game was not influenced by D and D, but was a way to experience the adventure of fantasy stories like J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings firsthand.

A similar game was created by Peter Carey and Rob Donaldson in 1982 in Cheshire, England called Treasure Trap. This LARP was also a live-combat group, but it did use an RPG for inspiration, using the location-based system of hit points and armor from Runequest. And while Treasure Trap only ran for 2 years, it did spawn many successors, including Durham University Treasure Trap and Labyrinthe.

And starting in the 1980s, Larping can be found just about anywhere including Russia, which happens to have one of the biggest and most varied LARP scenes in the world. It's during this time period that the most commercially successful LARP, Mind's Eye Theatre, was published. This game shared the theme and setting with the RPG Vampire: The Masquerade.

Thanks Thought Bubble! Now the types of larping we've talked about so far could be considered the more traditional approach, but there's also a type of larping that has differentiated itself from all others: Nordic Larping.

Now Nordic Larping was actually established in the 1980s with one of the first LARP events being created in 1985 by Swedish LARP group Gyllene Hjorten and it's a campaign that continues even today. But Nordic LARP as a concept and approach was established by the annual Knutepunkt conference which was held in

Oslo, Norway in 1997 and now rotates between Finland, Sweden, and Denmark.

Nordic LARP is a variation of what we typically think of as larping, but it tends to focus on real-life situations rather than fantasy, and limits combat and magic, focusing more on immersive environments. As Lizzie Stark, writer of Leaving Mundania, puts it, the focus is on: “trying out a certain mindset or exploring an emotion, rather than saving a town from orcs or finding enough loot to buy a sweet magic item."

What this means is that unlike traditional LARP where players are encouraged to make their mark on the created world, Nordic LARP encourages players to focus on developing the character through the game’s narrative. It encourages the players to experience the life and face the challenges of someone else’s life that exists in the real world.

Europa, for example, is a LARP that explores the experiences of refugees. Players take on the lives of people escaping their own war-torn countries, and play out the real-life tensions that exist between ethnic groups and between government representatives. Now the idea of playing a refugee victim as a game may sound controversial, but its goal is to help players better understand the challenges of others.

Larping, in all of its forms, has exploded in recent years as its communities continue to grow and its uses outside of gaming are being discovered. Larping is being used in different sorts of educational contexts as a tool for teaching languages, conflict resolution, team building, therapy or even a way to test theories in fields like economics and law. LARP is especially interesting from a psychological standpoint.

As Lizzie Stark writes, “The yearning to experience personal emotion is one of the hallmarks of the LARP movement today. Many larpers want to experience emotions – the loss of a friend, the thrill of battle, the pain of betrayal – that they would never have occasion to feel in everyday life. ” Unlike many other games, larping places demands on both the body and mind.

As Dr. Bowman, a researcher of role-playing communities, points out, players often end a game feeling exhausted and emotionally raw. A player’s LARP character becomes an extension of themselves as well as a form of escape.

And some players even play the same character for years, so ending a game or losing the character entirely can be difficult. Add this to the intense emotional and physical content of the narrative, and players are likely to experience emotional highs during the game, but also lows that can manifest themselves in what’s known as post-LARP depression. But don’t worry, many LARPs hold group debriefing events to help provide a sense closure and sort through feelings. And players may also perform an individual de-roling process to readjust to regular self after being in character.

So larping is unique in that it allows its players to explore certain aspects of their self and their emotions that they wouldn’t necessarily have a chance to do in regular life. And to do so in a safe environment, supported by a community. They allow the player to fully immerse themselves in their character, the story, and the game in a way that other games cannot.

As David Ewalt, author of Of Dice and Men puts it, "LARPs are allowing this unique way to express yourself or put yourself in someone else's shoes. It's illuminating. I think we'd live in a much more interesting world if everyone tried a LARP." So thank you for playing the part of watching this video and I’ll see you next week.

Stan Muller: Crash Course Games is filmed in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana, and it's made with the help of all these nice people. If you'd like to keep Crash Course free for everyone, forever, you can support the series at Patreon, a crowdfunding platform that allows you to support the content you love. Speaking of Patreon, we'd like to thank all our patrons in general, and we'd like to specifically thank our High Chancellor of Knowledge, Morgan Lizop, and our Vice Principal, Michael Hunt. Thank you for your support.