
The World According to LARP

David František Wagner on the popularity of the live action hobby and (occasional) art form

By Jan Velinger
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It is not uncommon at Prague's Letná Park overlooking the city to see futuristic gangs battle it out dressed in scavenged armour and homemade weapons like something out of *The Road Warrior* or *Fury Road*.

This is one kind of LARP (live action role play). But there are many others.

David František Wagner, a PhD student at Charles University, knows a thing or two about that: he has co-authored more than two dozen content-basedLARPs inspired by history and politics.



One, called Legion: A Siberian Story, is based on the story of Czech legionaries in Russia during WWI (not as a reconstruction of large-scale events but emotions and situations experienced by soldiers there). Another, entitled 'The End of History?', is inspired by recent international developments and crises. It is a far cry from some of the live action hobbies that existed in the Czech Republic before, Wagner explains.

"There was a tradition of re-enactment slash scenic or historical fencing which was fairly popular but that evolved into wholly different areas: you would have stunt actors or fencers or even fencing masters trying to re-enact martial arts in the 1990s and you still do today."

Once LARPing caught on here, what happened? Did it follow world trends?

"I think the state of the hobby in the Czech Republic is quite specific. Generally-speaking, 10 years ago we were quite behind and we copied a lot from Nordic countries. Today I think things have changed and I think the trend has even reversed a bit: we are producing LARPs that are different and going in different directions, and for that reason are also attracting people from abroad.

"The world of LARPing now is also a lot more diverse, so it is no longer a question of one area setting trends, whether we are talking about western or Nordic Europe or the United States. But I like to think we have added our own facet to the hobby and have moved things in a good direction."

It seems to me, at least as an outsider, that there is a strong intellectual foundation to some of these LARPs, especially those that tackle more serious historic or political storylines... For somebody who is a complete newcomer, what does LARP boil down to?

"If I should use one very short definition, it is first and foremost a game where you play a role in a set time and space. This is unlike other reality games such as Pokémon Go which you can continue anytime you pull out your phone. The time limit here is set in advance and can be from two hours to one month. Similarly, the location can be a room such as the one we are in, or the whole city. The whole city is a little extreme but it is possible.

"And of course you have some kind of role. The roles can be as simple as a soldier if we are talking about a battle LARP to much more complex roles where you get 15 pages of your character's memoirs or you get a set of Director's Notes and you have to work with those. You are going to steer your character in a certain direction, to add your own ideas and interpretation of who that person is, and it is up to you how the game plays out. One of the most basic principles of LARP is making choices. You take decisions and the games take that feedback in and the story is changed by the decisions you take."

In LARP, to what degree should we differentiate between genre and setting? Are they separate?

"They can usually be although there are some LARPs where genre and setting are mostly the same. Post-Apocalyptic Battle Royales will always take Post-Apoc as their setting and they are their own thing. Basically, you have sci fi, fantasy and modern battles and then you have historical or present-day content games with a lot of plotlines and these can also be played within numerous different genres – from mysteries to romances and comedies and so on."

One of the big differences here between something like immersive video games with emergent gameplay is this contact with other people. People from all walks of life, some less, some more experienced with LARPing... and I imagine in that respect there is always some measure of surprise.

"Sure. For example, to this day we have a LARP entitled 'Legion' 23 times. And every single one of them was different. Different things happened. You have something like 54 characters with different plotlines and all kinds of choices of what to do and lots of room for players' interpretations. That means you have a different outcome each time."



When you run these LARPs are you there in a moderating role, are you overseeing the game and making sure it moves ahead or are you participating just like the others?

“It depends on the game and the particular role you have within the organisational team. During every LARP you have members of a production team who are in the background. Someone responsible for accommodation, for food and so on. Still others are on-hand to take the part of short non-player character roles – characters who the players encounter randomly (this can be for example, a three-hour stint within a game that unfolds over two days), and those people are ‘in’ the game obviously.

“Still others can have roles at a kind of intersection in and outside the game: workshops before the LARP begins and others overseeing the whole project and that everything is running smoothly. You have all kinds of involvement at various levels from the organisational team.”

We’ll talk about a LARP you ran just recently called ‘The End of History?’ in just a second but one more question about participants – who are they? Is LARPing for example popular among university students?

“Yes, we do get students, I am one myself. I am personally completing my dissertation at Charles University’s Faculty of Education. The audience is very broad and the last few years there has been no basic age spectrum. We have students, professors, lecturers and many others anywhere from the age of 18 to around 68 or so. I think 69 was the age of the oldest person to take part so far.”

‘The End of History?’ is named after a famous essay and later a book published in the 1990s by Francis Fukuyama when we were coming out of the Cold War and there was a great degree of optimism...

“That’s right.”

Did you write that LARP alone or with others?

“Well actually, most LARPs are a collective effort because you have to include many points so view; the implementation of this particular LARP took a year to put together. It began as a Master’s thesis as kind of an experiment more than 10 years ago and so we thought why not try and make it into a game with rules and everything, not just for students of international affairs but for anyone. And it had nine or 10 runs.

“Based on what we learned, we then introduced improvements including new rules and new content. Based on information we compiled from the previous experience, we were now able to go into much more detail. We built on the experience of five years ago and this time around were able to allow players much more freedom. More details meant

we could talk about more things. If the discussion focussed on Israeli settlements in the Golan Heights, the discourse could be much more nuanced because of the increase in information and better maps and so on.

“We also know more now about the numbers represented by Hezbollah, for example, so we were able to put that into the game thanks to unique hindsight we had gained. So the game takes place in the time period of 2006 to 2014 and during some of the initial runs there was less clarity about why some situations happened or came to a fore. Now we can go into much greater detail because we have a greater overview of what happened five years ago.”



In this kind of LARP, everybody gets a position to follow in their portfolio?

“Yes and that is important. In ‘The End of History?’ players represent certain factions with different measures of influence within a given state. So, for example, four people play delegates for Syria. They are not given personality traits or relationships like they might have elsewhere, such as ‘you are mercurial and melancholic’, ‘you are looking for romantic involvement’ and so on. You would get that in a game like our ‘Legion’, where relationships are important.

“Here, players represent a broader group, such as the Sunnis, and are given the task of representing their values and goals. The aim is to sustain your position or increase your influence in pursuit of your goals and so on.”

“Someone else might represent the leader of another delegation, for example, the Assad government. They get a starting position and certain values too. Then, it comes down to whether the player makes compromises, for example, with the Kurds, or not. That decision, how far to negotiate, is up to the player alone.”

And this echoes real-world situations where there is backroom dealing or are secret negotiations going on. So I suppose it allows players to feel a little what it might be like to be in that kind of situation. Or, barring that, allows them to contemplate just how difficult it can be to achieve something like a lasting peace...

"[The experience is focussed on the essentials]. There are parts of such situations which are completely discarded or taken out: there is no formalism and of course the whole process is very simplified and time is condensed. In real time, the game takes two days which in game time represents eight years. One of the big takeaways for many participants is that things are far more complex than can first appear.

"It is not that simple and a lot of the feedback afterwards is that players learned that negotiating is kind of hard. They often say they didn't expect it to be that difficult. The second thing they find, is that situations can be really complicated and there are NO easy solutions for a lot of stuff. If that would be the only take-away from the game I would still be really satisfied."

How do you document different LARPs? Do you use video, photography, audio?

"It depends on the type of LARP – there are some where it is actually the opposite, where there are a lot of emotions involved and we want the experience to remain private. But yeah, we take mostly pictures [Ed. Note: which especially make sense when period costumes or other strong visuals are involved]. With something like 'The End of History?' we didn't take pictures because it was just people in business suits. At more picturesque games we have two or three professional photographers on the set."

That brings me to the raison d'être for LARPing whether it is this or someone wanting to go out there to be Mad Max: ultimately, how would you describe it? Is it entertainment? Is it art? Is it amateur theatre, or is it preparation for real world situations, for someone studying political science or training to be a future intelligence analyst?

"I'd say LARPing is a medium that can be applied for any one of these uses. We certainly strive for all our LARPs to be entertainment but at the same time, especially with content-based games we, as the authors, would like to think that what we are doing approaches art. That is really what we are trying to do.

"At the same time it can be used for training or for empathy, communication, negotiation and teamwork exercises. But there I am sure there are other forms that are perhaps more useful - games without roles for example - that are better for teambuilding."



How did you yourself get into the pastime?

“That’s kind of a strange thing – I don’t really remember now. When I was a teen I dabbled in pen-and-paper dice-based RPGS, I did historical fencing and I was interested in amateur theatre. Then someone invited me to a LARP and I enjoyed it. Consequently, I wrote my first LARP two years later when I was 16. When I was 19 or 20 it became a really big part of my life and I haven’t regretted it since.”

How quickly would you say the hobby is growing?

“We have this philosophy that the supply should exceed the demand because only then new people can come into the hobby. That means there is a risk that sometimes we have to cancel games. On ‘Legion’ and ‘The End of History?’ around 20 percent of the players were newcomers. That is pretty stable across the board, no matter what the LARP. “Another thing we know is that a majority of people who try end up staying with the hobby. That doesn’t mean they immediately start making their own costumes or anything but that once or twice a year they come along and play for a weekend. And that is enough for us completely.”

I love stories, storytelling and world-building but I appreciate that some people dislike games of any kind. Have you met with any negative reaction from anyone who came along and really disliked the experience?

“For the last five years with our group, rolling.cz, and for 14 years through the hobby and making games I have met thousands of players and sometimes there is negative feedback. But it is usually that they didn’t like a particular LARP, not that they don’t like LARPs at all. By my estimate there is maybe five percent of people I met who just do not want to play LARPs – which is perfectly ok!

“Quite often, though, it was more that a particular LARP was not right for them. It can happen that there is a case of awkward motivation from the start and that’s pretty bad: if someone is there only to please a partner, that’s a mistake. If they don’t want to be there in the first place, they will not enjoy the game - you can’t just be a passive bystander.

“But if it is something you want to try, it is inclusive and anyone can do it. We have people in their 60s making up stories, willing to march 20 km in ‘frozen Siberia’ and we have people who are 19 who work very well with everyone, there are people with disabilities who are able take part just fine and it all works. You have to put something in you .”

“LARPing is an interactive medium and you have to put creative energy into it to enjoy it.”

David František Wagner, born in 1988 in Písek, South Bohemia, is a PhD student at Charles University currently completing his dissertation at the Faculty of Education. The focus of his thesis are Christian churches in the former Czechoslovakia during the communist regime (1948-1989).

Wagner has been involved in live action role play since his teens and has written more than 30 LARPs to date.

LARPing, he says, allows participants to experience something new and to see the world from a new perspective while still being FUN.