

A bilingual history of Latvian larp

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SCENE

DOCUMENTATION

Latvia is at its heart a bilingual country, having retained a large number of inhabitants of Russian descent after the reign of the Soviet Union. Every Latvian attending school before the 1990s learned and used Russian as a second language, while the following generations have mostly renounced its use in the public sphere.

This has had a profound effect on all aspects of Latvian culture and has resulted in the formation of two distinct groups of people – those that speak predominantly Russian and those that speak Latvian.

Nowhere can this segregation be seen more clearly than in role-playing, a hobby that is very much based on narrative and social interaction. Thus you can never speak of Latvian larping as a single phenomenon, but must rather address its two groups as separate pieces – the Latvian and the Russian.

The two groups have separate histories and often congregate as distinct communities.

At the very beginning, in the early 1990s, all information regarding role-playing came to Latvia from the East across the borders from Russia, where fantasy larps were gathering large numbers of Tolkien or Sapkowski¹ fans. Role-playing enthusiasts of Russian origin visiting their motherland came back with experiences from hard weapon fighting, high fantasy settings, historical simulations and tactical gamism.

¹ Author of the renowned “Witcher” saga.

Larping soon gained a small following in Latvia. The first game was hosted in 1997, leading to the formation of an official role-playing improvisational theatre. A club called “Dragon” came into existence during 1999, started by Russian-speaking role-players. Larps created by the club developed an emphasis on storytelling, detailed costume creation, hard weapon fighting mastery, social interaction, the use of diverse knowledge in history and life sciences, and strategic economic or war tactics in game design.

The first game hosted in Latvian was held in 2003 as a response to the Russian-speaking movement and was based on historical reenactments of ancient Latvian culture.

During this time, a new line of players appeared with a younger generation of gamers that looked more to the West. This group of role-players was inspired by D&D, Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings, as well as by computer games such as Diablo or Fallout. They wanted to break free from the oppressive rules and precautions needed for any hard weapon fighting action larp, and create games with boffered weapons where any player might step in to fight without great fear of getting injured. Led by a game master known as Kamazs², numerous games were created based on a choice of location that enabled greater immersion into the game-world to gain maximum reality and fun by using gamist elements such as quick level-up systems and simple fighting rules. For example, an abandoned military town was used for a post-apocalyptic larp, and a remote island in the middle of a lake for a tension-filled social larp.

² Actual name : Martins Ceplis.

Latvia is a very small nation and can boast no more than about 300 role-players having ever participated in a larp. Thus, a game master wishing to create an event that gathers over 100 players has to look to both larping groups. In recent years, Latvian larps have become more integrated, bringing together both Latvian and Russian speaking role-players.

Language, however, is always an issue; hence bi-lingual larps have become more or less a norm. Sometimes English is preferred as a second language, since either side is more acquainted with this foreign language than the one used by their countrymen. With a choice of two widely known languages such as Russian and English being incorporated into a game, it is no wonder that at times larpers from neighboring countries of Estonia and Lithuania also join Latvian venues. Now, even foreigners from Western and Northern Europe have started appearing at Latvian larps.

Game mechanics, Latvian style

Larps in Latvia are predominantly based on worlds designed by individual or small groups of game masters who find pleasure in writing detailed world descriptions including geographical, historical and cultural backgrounds.

To make the games seem more real, and to facilitate simulation for the players, rule systems tend to include social constructions or interactions, world economics, religions, magical, alchemical and fighting systems. These often differ from game to game or from group to group, and are not very different from tabletop RPG or action computer game systems with level-up, class and hit point systems modified for the individual project. Russian larpers have a preference for more complex rules and often virtual³ aspects as part of the game system, while Latvians have expressed a simpler approach by a 'what you see is what you will get' style of play⁴.

Most Latvian and Russian larps tend to be not so much based on enactment of pre-written roles and scenarios, but true improvisation based on stricter or looser storylines. Within each such story there are always

³ Such aspects as economy, medicine or magic tend to be role-played virtually, while real life actions are substituted by using smaller physical gestures or pronouncing words whose effect is imagined and accepted as real. For example, a coal miner does not go out and dig up coal, but receives a note every hour stating how much coal he has gathered in the mines.

⁴ In such cases, if a coal miner is required to mine coal, there will be a location in which he has to physically dig up coal from the ground and hand it in to the game masters in exchange for in-game money.

missions or “quests” that potential players can receive or find during the process of the game. Game masters create a number of ‘world’ level quests relating to particular groups or stories incorporated into the game-world. The designers always strive to create multi-leveled and multi-faceted scenarios allowing for player initiative and development of all in-game events.

Numerous players enjoy the act of creating their personal characters, trying to place themselves or an imagined persona into the reality proposed by the game master. Writing the background story and picking out character traits for your alter ego is a bit like a pre-game ritual for some, while others really are in it just for the action, and may simply bring along a themed costume which leads to the generation of a character once they arrive at the game site. Large games tend to include key character roles from which players can choose or which are distributed beforehand by the game masters. These are still only described as general guidelines pertaining to history and status, while the players enacting them are obliged to interpret and develop their character within the gaming world without guidance from the game masters.

The real side of Latvian larp

Once the game masters have created the basic game world, they attempt to raise hype around their project by word of mouth, the Internet or at the few small existing gatherings of larpers, role-players and fantasy or sci-fi fans. LatCon, hosted every year in May, is always a place where game masters can meet with potential players and see what the competitors are planning on hosting in the near future.

To gain greater awareness and encourage players depressed by the economic recession to come to their games, Latvian game masters enjoy creating small trailer movies which are often a whole event of their own.

As the hobby is still in its infancy, with no industry to cater to it and participants with very little money to spend, games generally have a non-existent budget and are financed by the organizers themselves, out of

their own pockets. No outside sponsors or beneficiaries have been linked to larping so far, since the hobby tends to be regarded by the general public as childish and escapist, at best mildly entertaining when reported on a few occasions by the media. Delivering live action role-playing games to willing players is up to the couple of dozen people willing to spend time and money to organize larps, write world descriptions, referee games and enact non-player characters.

Still, larp survives, and each year at least three to five relatively large events take place outdoors over several days, usually gathering some 50 to over 100 players; in addition, some smaller one-day-span games take place indoors or outdoors for 30 or less participants.

Over the decade that larp has existed in Latvia, there have been games of fantasy and sci-fi, set in cities real or imagined, gathering from just ten to even three hundred people to search for treasures, go to war or open the gates to Hell. There is no visible development or change so far. Some themes come and others go, some rules are added and others removed – still the whole point is to get people together, dress up in costumes, take on roles and explore the realms of our fantasies.

It is always about gathering to have fun. Believe us when we tell you that we know how to have it and where to look for it.