

An Examination of the US LARP Hobby

2013 version

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INTRODUCTION TO THE 2013 VERSION

Nearly eight years ago I met some wonderful British larpers, one of whom I'm still close friends with. We began chatting via instant message and forums and they eventually asked me what larp was like on my side of the Atlantic. I pondered their question for a good while and then wrote up a whitepaper in response because their question covered so much ground.

In the years since then, some of the information contained within has either become irrelevant due to age or because the hobby has grown and advanced beyond what was initially described. I had originally thought to rewrite this whitepaper, however I decided rather than rewrite it I would just update it.

There is a degree of historical value that can and should be given to things which help us remember the past; of where we have been and where we thought we'd be going. In this revised version I have removed dead links, updated the costs in Euros to reflect current exchange rates, updated the title to reflect the changing scope of this paper, and provided updates to topics discussed within that were either under debate or had yet to be resolved during the original writing. The original whitepaper titled "Shape of the US LARP Hobby" will remain accessible at my website, www.mortalisrpg.com, with this revised version taking its place beside it.

As with the original version this examination comes from my own experiences, however since the original I have been able to attend some conventions throughout the US and connect with several other larpers across the States, which has allowed a sharing of feedback and thoughts so I'm able to pull on those experiences that I didn't have when I wrote the original version of this whitepaper.

INTRODUCTION TO THE 2006 VERSION

It's good to look at and study the hobby in different countries and presented by different people. What follows is an examination of the U.S. larp hobby from my experiences and what I have seen where I live (Pacific Northwestern part of the U.S.A, consisting of Washington State, Oregon and Idaho, though some people also include Montana and British Columbia, Canada¹) and what I have been able to gather from people I have talked to and web sites and forums I have visited on the Internet. As for my personal experience, that comes from groups I have participated in, in Washington (not to be confused with Washington D.C.), my home state.

THE FORMS OF THE HOBBY

Because of the different definitions terms may have depending on what part of the world you live in I felt it best to start with defining terms and building from there. Within the U.S. larp scene I see two distinct forms with one of those forms having two sub-forms. These two distinct forms are Theatre style and Live-Combat style.

In 2006 there were three predominant styles that I noted: Theater, Live-combat larp, Live-combat battle game. I outlined them below:

Theatre style larps don't use any kind of mock weapon (boffer or otherwise) and instead use an alternate resolution system for combat and conflict resolution such as rolling a die or drawing a card from a deck for the randomizer then adding that number into whatever skill or ability is used to determine success or failure or comparing skills or stats from character sheets. There is the commonly perceived thought that theatre style games focus more on plot and character development as there isn't

¹ See <http://www.gonorthwest.com/Visitor/about/map.htm> for a map of the Pacific Northwestern part of the U.S.

a huge combat focus. But like any larp there are theatre style larps that are weak in plot and character development. Most theater style larps are not a if-you-can-do-it-you-can-do-it form of larp as almost every aspect of the character (sneaking or lock picking for examples) is resolved via the resolution system and not on the ability of the player to actually pull off the act.

Live-Combat larps use mock weapons as a part of their conflict resolution. These larps are much more of a if-you-can-do-it-you-can-do-it form of game. If you can pick the lock you've picked the lock, if you can sneak by the orc, you've snuck by the orc, and etc. While theatre style larps tend to have simpler conflict resolution system (draw card, roll die, or etc., add to ability, compare result with combatant's result) live-combat tend to be more rules heavy. This is not to be confused with the creation of a complex, hard to understand resolution system, but more that the rules need to cover more than just how to handle resolution: There are safety checks in place to ensure the safety of the weapons used (criteria that must be met for them to qualify for use) and the participants (legal targets or illegal actions with weapons) during the event. The common perceived thought is that live-combat larps focus primarily on combat with less emphasis on plot and character development. To a degree this is true as it depends on what sub-group the game falls under: Role-play or battle game. Many people just roll these two sub-groups up and call them both live-combat larps.

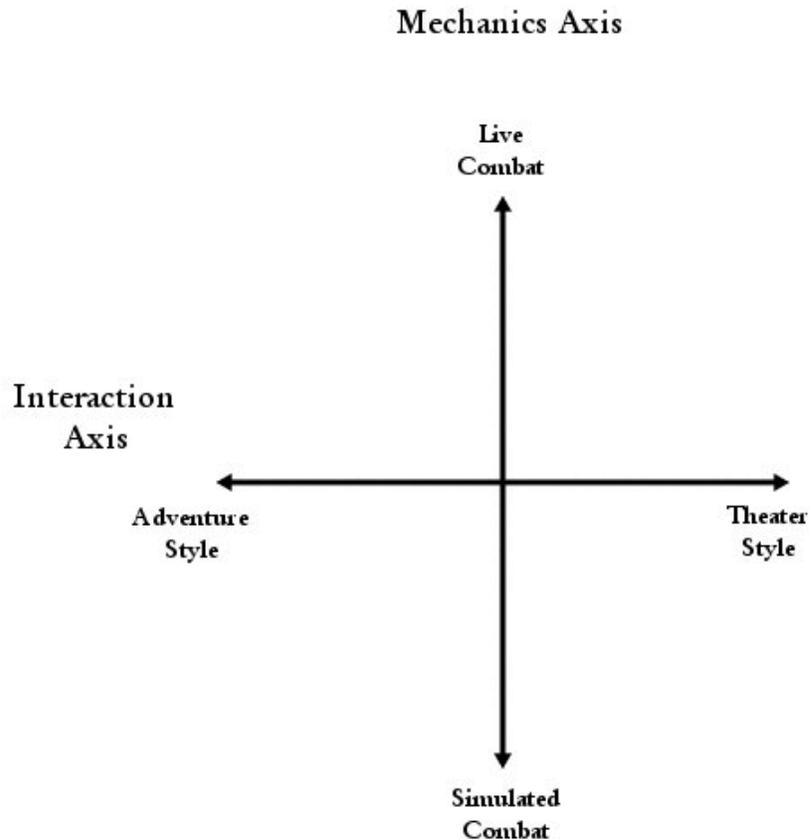
Role-play oriented larps put the focus on plot and character development within a story and less on just combat. Role-play oriented groups try to keep the focus on the story and only involve combat when needed because the story warrants it. This doesn't mean that an entire event that happens to be combat heavy isn't a role-play oriented live-combat larp, but that the combat is there because of story and plot, not because that's the extent of the event without other reasons.

Battle game oriented larps put the focus on the combat and don't have much plot and character development isn't based on story. Battle game groups tend to be capture the flag, but boffer style. This isn't to say that the combat doesn't have a goal in mind, but that the event as a whole is to engage in fighting with little to no role-play whatsoever.

It's important to note that even though most larps will tend to fall into one of these categories, there will always be a game or organization which doesn't quite fit any one category and instead may be a cross category hybrid. The most common hybrid is Adventure Style in which there is an in-game location where primarily theater style play may take place, but there are modules that allow for primarily live-combat style play.

Since then there has been an increase of discussion in an effort to better define the styles of the hobby here in the US, and that includes an update to definitions. The US LARP Wiki², which I administer and provide hosting for, is where I'm pulling these definitions from. The focus of these updated definitions comes from the Focus of Interaction theory, which Mike Young extrapolated upon in the Wiki.

² The US LARP Wiki can be found at <http://larpwiki.mortalisrpg.com>



Interaction Axis

Adventure Style

An adventure style LARP bears the most superficial resemblance to a tabletop roleplaying game. The focus of interactions of an adventure style LARP is player to environment. The players' characters tend to be a party of adventuring heroes, and while the characters may have individual differences, they band together and fight alongside each other. The world, in this case, can be portrayed by non-player characters (portrayed by people who are not players, often called non-player characters (NPCs), monsters, or cast), GMs, elaborate props, scenery, or signs.

Players in adventure style LARPs tend to find their characters trying to solve puzzles, fight monsters, deal with powerful foes and generally live the lives of heroes.

Theater Style

A Theater-Style game is denoted by the focus of interaction being player to player (as opposed to player-environment, player-GM, or player-audience). The player characters are not a solidified party, but rather a group of factions or even each player out for him or herself. Theater style LARPs tend to focus on politics, negotiations, power struggles, and social interactions.

GMs are usually needed when the players wish to do something that affects the world outside of the player set (for example, making a phone call to an ally not in the game, or exploring a nearby haunted house). Non-player characters (NPCs; sometimes called cast) are fewer and there are usually fewer adventurous plots. The heroes and villains (if any) are all portrayed by players, not by NPCs or GMs.

Mechanics Axis

Live Combat

Live Combat, (also known as Boffer) larps include a high degree of verisimilitude and requires the players' abilities to perform an action. If a player wants to hit someone with a sword, she must actually hit the player with a prop representing a sword, usually a padded weapon. NERO™ is a well-known live combat organization.

There are many advantages to live combat. Combat, and all other mechanics, happen in real time. You don't have to stop the game and wait around to get a GM ruling. And there is a real adrenaline rush when you are carrying a sword and suddenly see a gang of monsters running right for you.

The main problem with live combat, however, is that you cannot play a character who is a better fighter than you actually are in real life. Some groups try to offset this by allowing characters to do more damage, but it doesn't matter how much damage you do if you cannot hit the other person in the first place.

Simulated Combat

Simulated Combat is more abstract. It uses an external method that does not rely on player ability. For example, if you want to hit the other person with a sword, you may have to make a rock-paper-scissors challenge. You might not even have a sword prop; it may just be a 3x5 card with the word "sword" written on it. Mind's Eye Theatre is a simulated combat system.

The biggest advantage to simulated combat is flexibility. It is easy to run a game that has guns, or swords, or computer hacking. Further, most live combat games require a physical representation for items, but you can run a simulated combat game on a budget using index cards to represent items. This is useful if your players are supposed to create items in the game.

Finally, you can play simulated combat games in places that would not readily allow live combat, such as bars or museums or swimming pools or china shops. And it is easy to create a character that is more skilled than you, the player.

The biggest disadvantage to simulated combat is that it is intrusive and can often be time consuming. Combat and mechanics take a longer time and can take you out of the game. Often, a GM is needed to adjudicate results. Simulated combat games can often also lack verisimilitude. Holding a padded "sword" that you can hit another player with just seems more "real" than holding a card or miming it.

Intersection

Most live combat LARPs tend to be adventure style and most simulated combat LARPs tend to be theater style. There is some sense to this. The quick, unobtrusive mechanics of live combat work well in a game where the focus is being a hero and fighting monsters, while the flexibility of simulated combat mechanics allow for a variety of situations for negotiation and politics.

However, this isn't an absolute rule. There have been a number of simulated combat/adventure style games, and a few live combat/theater style larps. These larps do tend to be in the minority.

But this tendency of alignment has caused a confusion, and the genres are usually said to be Theater-Style vs. Live Combat. This is usually a shorthand for Theater Style/Simulated Combat vs. Adventure Style/Live Combat.

A form of the hobby that is often included under the larp label, but whose focus is less on story and characterization are the live-combat battle games. A live-combat battle game is (pulling from the US LARP Wiki), “a style of game which is defined in the terms of a combat engagement, with a goal of killing the opposing team, or capturing a location or "flag" item. These games are limited in scope of timeframe and roleplaying and are most often used in boffer style groups. Battle Games are inherently Player vs. Player (PvP) and characters often have multiple lives to allow them to return to the game and extend the timeframe of the game.”

A couple of other styles that one might encounter used within the hobby here in the US, particularly in reference to Adventure Style games, are Line Course and World Course. A Line Course game is “[a] linear adventure in an adventure style game. You start at point ‘A’ and go until you reach the end, like a dungeon quest. IFGS is known for their line course games.” A World Course game is “[a]ny kind of non-linear adventure with possible branches, or with sub quests that might not have to be carried out in any specific order. A world course creates a setting, such as a village or military camp, and then allows PCs to travel wherever within the bounds of the setting they wish. NERO and The Alliance are significant world course games.”

There has been an effort to introduce European Fest Style games here in the US, however they have not quite taken hold over here in the States. ConQuest America and Devia have been attempts at introducing this style to the States.

There are a few other terms I feel need defining since they have specific meaning within US larp culture: convention game, one-shot, and campaign or chronicle.

The term 'convention game' is typically used to describe a short, couple-hour theater style/simulated combat single-run game that is run at a convention.

A game that is designed to run in a single game period, usually consisting of 2-6 hours in length, however sometimes longer, and whose storyline is confined to that single game is called a one-shot game. The most typical one-shot games are theater style/simulated combat games. A game that consists of a storyline that stretches across multiple games and tends to continue on for several years is a campaign (typically within live-combat larps) or chronicle (typically within theater style larps, and the MET ones in particular) game.

Within this paper I'll be using the terms Theater Style in reference to any theater style/simulated combat style games, Live-combat larp for any Adventure Style/Live-Combat game, and Battle Game for any Live-Combat Battle Game as those tend to be the predominant styles.

A cousin to larps, especially live-combat larps, is the living history or historical reenactment groups like the Society for Creative Anachronism³ commonly called the SCA. While they have their similarities: each person has a character or persona they play or portray, they do have rules in place for the safety of combat participants, and do provide a social venue. They also have their differences: Focus on living history with little to no room for non-historical interpretation and core fantasy elements are not commonly found at historical reenactment groups (I don't see people casting fireballs at each other or being a sneaky rogue trying to steal a

³ The SCA's web site can be found at <http://www.sca.org/>

chest of coins). Their events are dedicated to recreating an aspect of history and to live history. Many such groups, too, don't consider themselves a larp, even if they refer to their events as a game. If reenactment groups were to be classified as a larp, they would most likely to be placed as a battle game group as their events tend to focus on reenacting a historical battle, or having some cross group battle or war at the event (beyond court being held and general socializing). It's important to remember that there are larpers who participate in historical-reenactment groups and vice versa; just as much as there are those that don't cross participate.

The vast majority of larps and larp organizations in the US are not-for-profit ventures and tend to be run club style. Once and a while there will be a for-profit venture that starts up and finds success. On the whole though, larp in the US is typically a non-for-profit venture and it's not uncommon for there to be a bit of a "community grumble" if a game is found to be someone's attempted money maker. That being said, outside of game such as Vampire or Werewolf run under the MET system, larp isn't a money maker itself in the States and when it is, it's typically because the tools needed to play the game (rule books and supporting setting books) are the money makers. Auxiliary business that support larps such as costume and garb suppliers, latex and boffer makers (commonly called foamsmiths), and prop and SFX (special effects) makeup stores tend to be where money is made in relation to the hobby rather than the games themselves. Most larps are lucky to break even and it's not uncommon for a larp, particularly if it's new and starting out, to lose money initially.

EVENTS, GATHERINGS, AND DRESSING FOR THE OCCASION

United States larp group events tend to last either part of a day or for several days, with typically the latter being held over a weekend. Theater and live-combat battle games commonly last part of a day, or at least the better part of the day. The exception to this is when there is a convention or special (multi-day) event (such as a battle weekend gathering) then the event last for the better part of the convention or the duration of the special event.

Multi-day events tend to be held over weekends as most people have these free without conflicting with work or school. Live-combat larps primarily run over a weekend with the event starting Friday evening and ending on Sunday with Saturday being the primary event day. Friday is often seen as the day that you get there and get set up, with the event starting late afternoon or during the evening and Sunday as seen as the clean-up and check out day with the event ending late morning or early afternoon. This leaves Saturday as the primary event day. Those theater style and battle game groups that hold a convention or special (multi-day) event tend to follow a similar event structure as a role-play oriented larp's multi-day event: the first day is opening ceremonies, set up, arrival and unpacking; last day is clean up, departure, and closing ceremonies; the days between the first and the last are dedicated to the event.

United States larp events commonly run once a month, though there are groups that run a couple of times a month or even weekly. Those groups that run a couple of times a month or weekly tend to be theater style larps or battle game as it's easy to find a site and do site preparation for a single day. Conventions and multi-day events for them are the exception to the rule and these are specially organized and thus require pre-registration whereas their usual single-day events you can just show up and play.

Live-combat larps typically run just once a month because of the preparation involved and the need to secure an appropriate site. Common sites for weekend long role-play oriented larps are campgrounds with cabins and a main lodge that are rented out. The cabins usually have heaters and electric lights plus bunks with mattresses (just bring your own sleeping bag or bedding), there are flush toilets and running water and the kitchen at the lodge is full service (dishes, flatware, stove(s) and oven(s), cooking utensils and pots and pans, plus storage space for refrigerated and non-refrigerated food).

There is always the exception to the rule: I, myself, have played in a theatre style game, but the game only ran once a month because of how role-play and plot intensive it is and the amount of preparation the GM needed to do. I've also been to a weekend Live-combat larp event where we camped out in tents for the weekend and cooked our food over the campfire.

The costs associated with attending an event differ with the type of event a person is attending and how long the event is to run. Below is an average cost⁴ comparison breakdown for attending a single day theater style larp or battle game and a weekend long live-combat larp. This does not take into consideration any expenses regarding to costuming/garb/kit including any weapons or armor a person's character may use or wear, any membership fees that may be required or costs associated with any convention /special event, such as badge purchase.

Single Day Event

Site/Registration fee: Free to \$10

Travel expenses: \$15 to \$40

Food (snacks and/or a meal): \$10

Supplies (make-up or non-renewable equipment such as glow sticks): none to \$10

TOTAL: \$35 to \$70 (about 25.84€to 51.67€)

YEARLY TOTAL IF ATTENDING EIGHT EVENTS⁵: \$280 to \$560 (about 206.69€to 413.38€)

Weekend Long Event

Site/Registration fee: \$25 to \$60

Travel expenses: \$40 to \$75

Food (food for a weekend): \$25 to \$50

Supplies (make-up or non-renewable equipment such as glow sticks): none to \$30

TOTAL: \$90 to \$215 (about 66.44€to 158.71€)

YEARLY TOTAL IF ATTENDING EIGHT EVENTS: \$720 to \$1720 (about 531.48€to 1269.65€)

While larp in the US covers a wide variety of genres, some tend to require more work in costuming than others. Typically the easiest to find costuming for outside of anything modern or based on modern life is fantasy-medieval. However, this also depends on what a player is able to make or purchase and it's not uncommon, particularly among the battle game crowd or those who are quite young or very new to the hobby, to find a cotton t-tunic paired with a pair of jeans and sneakers. Typically those involved in live-combat larps tend to try to keep as much blatant modern clothing either hidden (long underwear during cold months under a full length dress with long sleeves or trousers and tunic, for example) or out of their outfits altogether. There are always those, however, who will just toss on a tunic over their t-shirt and jeans then wrap up in a polar fleece cloak with modern print design all over it. With steampunk becoming popular in the US there are some steampunk larps and the people who play in those tend to take care in costuming appropriately. Modern day games and post-apocalyptic tend to be the easiest to costume for since a player can raid their own closet to come up with a costume or visit a thrift store and purchase something for very little money.

⁴ Currency conversions done for costs in Euros on November 22, 2013.

⁵ I have chosen to limit the max to eight events a year as opposed to 12 to account for those events which may be missed due to illness, schedule conflicts, or other causes. There are those who participate in multiple LARPs may attend multiple events a month, or play in a game whose schedule does provide one game every month.

THE BIG PLAYERS

Like any hobby, there are the key players; those that have created a game that's grown to where it's become a recognizable creature in the hobby. Each group of the hobby – theater, battle games, and live-combat larp – has its key organization(s) or game(s) that are widely recognized by others who participate within that group as well as those who don't participate in events held by that group. This doesn't include any games that are popular in any given region, just games which are well known and popular across the U.S. as a whole. Any given region will almost always have an independent game or two that is popular in that area.

For theater groups, White Wolf/Mind's Eye Theatre or MET⁶ games (Vampire, Werewolf, Changeling, or Mage) are recognized as the primary players, with Vampire being the top one. This includes those games that are Camarilla, now the Mind's Eye Society⁷, and non-Mind's Eye Society based as well as those that espouse tightly to the MET rules and the World of Darkness as outlined by the White Wolf books and those that deviate with their own house rules or those that have created their own alternate World of Darkness. The Mind's Eye Society is an organization that is responsible for the organized play of several groups/games in a global chronicle. The Mind's Eye Society, formerly the Camarilla, has existed since 1992 in a couple of different incarnations and was taken over by White Wolf in 2003 and control was relinquished in 2010. In 2012 Onyx Path Publishing⁸ was founded and that company took over the creation of RPG content and novels for the White Wolf *World of Darkness* lines, since CCP (who bought White Wolf in 2006) was no longer in a good position to do publishing in addition to the main business of making computer games. The Mind's Eye Theater license has been awarded to By Night Studios⁹.

For the battle game oriented live-combat larps there are three key players: Amtgard¹⁰, Dagohir¹¹, and Belegarth Medieval Combat Society¹². Amtgard has existed since the early 1980's and now boasts many chapters across the U.S. with the majority in the southwest and western parts of the country. Dagohir has existed since the late 1970's, they now have chapters across the U.S. with the majority in the eastern and central parts of the country. Both Amtgard and Dagohir have solid memberships and each have built up several chapters (50-75) across the country. Belegarth was initially formed from a set of loosely organized clubs and franchises starting in December 2001 after the majority of them broke away from Dagohir. In July 2002 the group was organized enough to incorporate in the State of Illinois. They are a later member to the nationwide family of battle games, however they've got chapters dotted across the country.

For the role-play oriented live-combat larps there are three key players: NERO¹³ (formerly NERO International), The Alliance LARP¹⁴ (formerly the NERO Alliance), and the International Fantasy Gaming Society or IFGS. NERO started in the late 1980's and in 1998 there was a split in the organization and NERO International and the NERO Alliance were formed. The years surrounding the split were full of heated

⁶ More info on the MET system can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind%27s_Eye_Theatre

⁷ The Mind's Eye Society site is located at <http://www.mindseysociety.org/>

⁸ Onyx Path Publishing's site can be found at <http://theonyxpath.com/>

⁹ By Night Studios can be found at <http://www.bynightstudios.com/>

¹⁰ Visit <http://www.amtgardinc.com/> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amtgard> for more information on Amtgard.

¹¹ Visit <http://www.dagohir.com/> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dagohir> for further information on Dagohir.

¹² Visit <http://belegarth.com/> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belegarth_Medieval_Combat_Society for more info on Belegarth

¹³ For more information on NERO visit <http://nerolarp.com/>

¹⁴ For more information on The Alliance LARP visit <http://nerohq.com/>

“debates” and “discussions” between the two NERO factions as evident in old Usenet posts¹⁵. This was renewed with a lawsuit against NERO International’s president Joseph Valenti by NERO Alliance’s president Mike Ventrella in late 2005. Documents from the lawsuit are still available on the Internet¹⁶ and The Alliance has a page detailing their side of the split and subsequent lawsuit¹⁷. The lawsuit eventually was resolved with NERO International gaining the right to the NERO name, however both are allowed to continue the use of their respective rule book based off the original one from the original NERO. The NERO site doesn’t include anything about The Alliance in the history of their organization and in the past NERO has not acknowledged the existence of The Alliance. At WyrdCon (more on this later in the paper) in 2011 I had a chance to meet Mr. Ford Ivy, the founder of NERO long before the split. One of the questions I asked him was to whom he sold NERO when he decided to sell his ownership of the company and he stated that was Joeseeph Valenti.

The International Fantasy Gaming Society¹⁸ (a.k.a. IFGS) has had a much quieter existence since its inception in the early 1980’s. It is named after the fictional group in the Dream Park series by Larry Niven and Stephen Barnes. Unlike many of the other larp groups, IFGS has had a much slower growth rate and only has about a dozen chapters in existence at this time.

THE STATE OF THE U.S. LARP HOBBY

Part of understanding the state of the U.S. larp hobby includes understanding the history of the hobby. Wikipedia’s late January 2006 article on LARP¹⁹ included a good, albeit brief, history of the U.S. larp hobby:

AmericanLARPs have no single point of origin, although many of the groups still in operation can claim a lengthy history.

Among the live-combat groups, Dagorhir Outdoor Improvisational Battle Games (Dagorhir) was founded by Bryan Weise in the Washington, DC area in 1977. The International Fantasy Gaming Society (IFGS), also live-combat but with a complex rules system more clearly influenced by Dungeons and Dragons, was started in 1981 in Boulder, Colorado. (IFGS took its name from a fictional group in the novel Dream Park by Larry Niven and Steven Barnes, which described highly realistic, futuristic LARPs.) At about the same time (but before 1981), the Assassins' Guild was created at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to pursue "killer" or "assassin"-style live-combat games with toy guns, but also to encourage creative design in LARPs. While NERO is currently one of the more widespread live-combat groups, with over 50 chapters in the US and Canada, it was founded only in 1988.

Theatre Style LARP began in America at around the same time. In 1981, the Society for Interactive Literature (SIL) was founded by Walter Freitag, Mike Massamilla and Rick Dutton at Harvard University. The club's first public event was in February 1983, at the Boskone science fiction convention. A substantial part of the SIL membership broke off from that organization in 1991 and formed the Interactive Literature Foundation (ILF), which in 2000 changed its name to the Live Action Role-Players Association LARPA. The mid-Atlantic and northeastern US has been a center for Theatre Style events, especially the Intercon LARP conventions.

¹⁵ Old Usenet posts can be viewed at Google Groups by searching "NERO Group" in this group: <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/rec.games.frp.live-action>

¹⁶ The lawsuit documents can be found at <http://www.larping.net/Nero/lawsuit/>

¹⁷ The Alliances’ side of the split and lawsuit story can be found at <http://www.nerohq.com/break.php>

¹⁸ Visit the IFGS site at <http://www.ifgs.org/>

¹⁹ The Wikipedia page on LARP can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Live_action_role-playing_game and the history for January 2006 still exist so you can see what the page and information looked like when it was originally pulled for this article.

The northeast US plays host to many, smaller, fantasy-based LARPs, such as Lione Rampant, Quest Interactive Productions and Mythical Journeys, all formed in the early 1990's by fantasy enthusiasts with a love for character roleplay and adventure, but without large player bases or complex rule systems. Some of these LARPs were formed as splinter groups of larger, more franchised LARPs, such as NERO. Such LARP groups tend to run in the spring and autumn, utilizing summer camp facilities (such as 4H and group campgrounds) in their off-seasons.

The northeastern LARP scene, founding place of SIL, NERO, and the MIT Assassin's Guild, continues to have an active LARP scene, due to the large number of college campuses present. Other universities along the East Coast have been strong "incubation" sites for northeastern LARPs. Early (pre-internet) campus-based LARPs formed in isolation, developing their own style of games with little crossover with other styles or regions. The existence of larger regional organizations, of published LARPs, and of the internet has helped to create a field of "LARP theory" and deliberate experimentation with LARP forms.

Since 1999, the mid-Atlantic US has been a center for a number of crossover Theatre Style/Adventure Style events or "campaigns," which fall outside the medieval fantasy genre which tends to characterize a majority of Live Combat LARPs. An initial impetus for this was the attempt of various fantasy groups to adapt the Call of Cthulhu as a LARP genre, however the genre has expanded to substantially wider horizons. The progenitor LARP in this genre was Mike Young's Dark Summonings Campaign, followed by transitional LARPs including the Mersienne Medieval Fantasy Campaign (medieval fantasy), Outpost Chi (science fiction), 1948: Signals, 1936: Horror, as well as the heavily Call of Cthulhu based Altered Realities Campaign and the Victorian "steampunk" Brassy's Men Campaign. Together this network of current and previous events make up a substantial and innovative body of work which characterizes a vibrant mid-Atlantic US LARP Community. The rise of many campaigns all drawing from the same community has tended to preempt growth of non-campaign games, though, and to some degree push out the 'less dedicated' gamers due to the higher commitment needed.

West coast wise the larp hobby really began in the late 1980s to early 1990s, depending on what part of the West coast area one looks at, as the larp movement made its way westward from the East coast and really took off after Dragon Magazine published an article on NERO and the larp hobby. Looking at the larping hobby in a broader view and from an economic standpoint the history could be summed up in the following paragraphs:

Larping as a whole began in the late 1970's to early 1980's depending where in the country you lived. Throughout the 1980's larping was primarily focused in the battle game oriented live-combat larp with Amtgard and Dagohir leading the way and if you were lucky enough to find a theater style group, a bit of theater style larping. The hobby really took off in the late 1980's and early 1990's when the battle game oriented live-combat larps had finally solidified themselves organizationally and developed a solid player base and role-playing oriented live-combat larps began to appear, created by those who either 1) wanted more immersion that they could get in a table-top game or 2) those who wanted more plot and storyline to the game that what is present in a battle game oriented larp. It was at this time that NERO (pre-split) made its appearance and IFGS began to see more growth.

Throughout the 1990's larping as a hobby grew, fueled by an economy that provided people with enough discretionary income to attend events or start their own. Many independent games sprung up during the 1990s and larps already in existence saw significant growth. The Internet also had a large impact with the ability to disseminate information regarding the hobby, events, and information from various groups to a wide audience with ease. It was at this time that the Camarilla started up and the White Wolf/MET games began to grow in popularity. Throughout the 1990s the Camarilla saw vast amount of growth and the number of non-Camarilla games grew just as fast.

When the dot-com bust happened in the later 1990s and the economy slowed, penny-pinching tightened on already existing shoestring budgets and there were groups that closed down because of lack of funds and/or rising costs. Members also began to penny-pinch due to rising travel costs (gasoline a.k.a. petrol), registration fees, and other event expenses. This penny-pinching only got worse with the recession in the early 2000s. Rising costs of housing, fuel, and inflation in general along with the growing unemployment rate caused many people to severely tighten their budget. Money that was once looked at as being discretionary now had to be used to pay the bills. Larp groups suffered as they fought to stay afloat and in operation. Members had a hard time attending events, as budgets were often very tight. By the around 2004 the economy began to change, the unemployment rate drop, and more people were able to secure a bit more discretionary income and the hobby stabilized and slow growth resumed.

Despite this tumultuous past, Amtgard, Dagohir, NERO, and the White Wolf/MET games still saw growth; even if it was slow, it was still faster growth than the rest of the hobby. As of early 2006 the hobby had recovered pretty well from the economic illness it suffered during the dot-com bust and subsequent recession.

The Great Recession from late 2007 through early 2009 has also had an impact, particularly among emerging games as well as the number of games a player might have attended. During the recession people once again became more conscious of costs and reduced the number of games they went to, if not halted attendance for period of time. Games that were well established before the recession typically weathered it without much problem. The bigger problems seemed to come from those trying to start up new games or who were already struggling to exist, particularly live-combat larps since those still tend to be the most expensive to run as well as attend.

This isn't to say that all games suffered, those games that were creative in their approach to advertising or running games typically did okay, even if they were newer. Also, games located in areas that weren't hit as hard by the Great Recession fared better, sometimes far better, than games elsewhere in the country.

The hobby is by no means in danger of disappearing from the country, rather, on the whole it is thriving. When there are recessions growth tends to slow to a crawl if not halt, and when the economy picks up growth also tends to pick up. Also, whenever there is anything that comes out from Hollywood that incorporates larp we see an influx of new blood into the hobby. The same when movies such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* and now *The Hobbit* are released.

WHO MAKES UP THE HOBBY MEMBERSHIP

Just as the table-top RPG hobby was primarily male dominated early in its existence, so was larping, but larping saw a lot of growth (especially in the 1990s) in regard to female membership and it quickly became a very mixed gender hobby. The hobby has also seen a growth in the age range of its members.

Early in the hobby's existence many of the members were in their late teens and early to mid-20s. It was very much a young adult's hobby and was (and still is) a very popular hobby among college age adults (18-23), but the age range of its player is growing as more and more hobby members are now in their late 20s and early to mid-30s.

It's important to note that many battle game oriented live-combat LAPRs tend to have a low minimum age requirement (12 or 13 years old), most role-play oriented live-combat groups tend to have their minimum age requirements in the mid to late teen years (14-17), and most theater style groups (Camarilla and non-Camarilla games are included in this) are adult focused groups (18 plus years old). Because of this there are games and

groups with a strong contingency of young members and there are games and groups with a strong contingency of adult members. This also doesn't mean that a game or organization that tends to have younger members won't have older members and vice versa.

Along with the increase in the age range of the hobby members come the changes that come with age: education level, marital status, and financial status. Just like any other hobby there will always be those that don't go on to post-secondary education (college/university study), but there are a large number of larpers who do continue on in their education and do earn degrees. As a matter of fact it's quite common to find a club at a college or university campus, especially larger schools, dedicated to the larping hobby, even if that club espouses a particular rules set or organization. With a post-secondary education under their belts the larping hobby is seeing more and more professionals within its ranks. Often with an increase in education a person also increase their earning potential and a much better chance at securing a good job with decent pay. This translates to a larger pool of discretionary income available.

Age also plays into the growth of the number of larpers in relationships: married or unmarried, though the number of married larpers and larpers with children is growing. This change is also starting to shape some of the dynamics of the hobby as well. You would think that with a rise in education level and earning potential (and thus, hopefully, a well-paying job) a larper would be able to devote more financial resources to the hobby, in particular to their kit, but with a past that includes a rocky economy and more and more larpers needing to devote more finances to non-discretionary needs (family and/or children), this isn't always possible. Also, there are older larpers (in their mid to later 30s and even some in their later 20s) who are deciding to retire from the hobby. Age related health issues, children, and life in general aren't making participation within the hobby a reality any more. Some have also grown tired of the hobby and have decided to focus their attention on other interests or aspects of their life.

Looking at the breakdown from the standpoint of the style of game – theater, battle games, and live-combat larp – battle-game oriented larps tend to have the youngest members. Since their events are usually single day events, rules systems tend to be simpler, and events rarely have underlying plot (especially plot that deals with mature topics), and parents may look at battle game oriented live-combat larps as more of a boffer sport the youngest members of the hobby, young teenagers around 12 and 13 years old, will cut their teeth on a battle game oriented live-combat larp as their first larp. Older teenagers who have been larping for a while and young adults who may be larping in a live-combat group for the first time will move up into role-play oriented live-combat larps because of deeper story, longer running events, and in many cases better immersion into the game setting. Theater style games tend to focus on more adult oriented storylines, or storylines that the younger member of the hobby may have a hard time grasping because of their subtle nature, or because of organizational rules²⁰. Because of this, theater style games tend to be frequented by the adult crowd because the game length makes attending an event do-able when a player has a demanding job or a family. This is because theater style games tend to be a single day game, running for 4-6 hours, much like battle game oriented live-combat larps.

Just because a battle oriented live-combat game tends to be popular among the youngest players doesn't mean that adults don't play it, that all theater style larps are adult only, or role-play oriented live-combat larps only members are the young adult, college age crowd. There will always be groups that defy the stereotype and people that stick with a particular form because they prefer that style, no matter their age.

²⁰ For example, the Mind's Eye Society requires all its members to be at least 18 years of age.

THE LARPING “COMMUNITY”

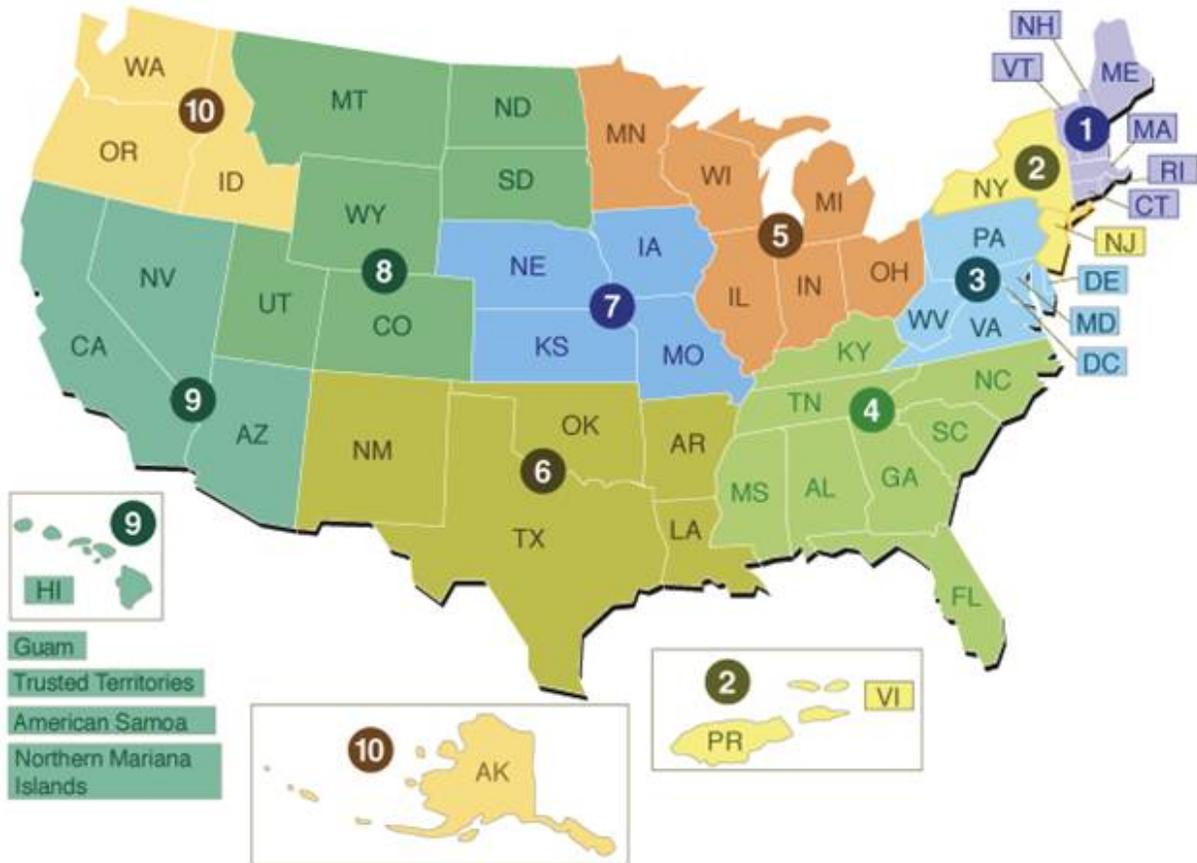
The U.S. larping community is rather fragmented with very little sense of community other than, “Oh, you’re a larper too” as an identifier that at least a person understand the hobby to some degree as well. Some of this fragmentation is caused by existing rivalries and the elitist viewpoints of some groups toward others. The rivalries can be caused by splinter groups breaking away from an existing larp due to rules and/or organizational disagreements and the bad feelings that ensue between the owners/GMs of the parent group and the splinter group as well as heated competition for the support of a small player base in a region. The opinionated and at times elitist viewpoints often drive groups farther apart, especially in where close-mindedness is an issue. There are plenty of people who feel their opinion is the correct opinion and won’t even try to look at the other side of the fence to attempt to see and understand the views of the people they’ve been debating with.

Another reason for the fragmentation is the nature of how the different styles operate. Theater style events typically run 4-6 hours in length and the best way to get the room needed to run these is to join up with other theater style groups and run events at conventions. Compare this to live-combat style larps that commonly run for a much longer period of time and require more space and separate space from other live-combat style larps to prevent confusion from unwanted rules system “cross contamination²¹.” Of course, this doesn’t mean that a theater style group can’t run an even by their own or that a group of live-combat oriented larps couldn’t benefit from working together.

Of course, not all groups are hostile toward each other, and over the years there have been a growing number of groups who are actively trying to promote a greater sense of community within the U.S. larp hobby. There has been more work to develop partnerships here and there among groups where they will try to assist each other be it increasing or stabilizing the player base, working to secure site arrangements that don’t conflict or encourage a site to rent to a different group, and in general better the sense of community within the hobby. There are also regions where the players will play in several games and “cross-pollinate” these games with other ideas and concepts, but this is not a national thing.

This isn’t to say that there isn’t any community within the U.S. larp hobby scene; it’s just a very loose “community.” Unlike many European countries which have strong national communities, the US instead has more regional communities that overlap at the edges. The US is so large that it’s been difficult to really create a national larp community, however the Internet has been a valuable tool for helping to bridge the gaps between regional communities. While at WyrdCon in 2011 I sat down with Ford Ivey and Mike Young and we penciled out what we felt were the major regions in the US. The map below is very close to what we decided upon as we worked on our map. Alaska and Hawaii are really the exceptions to this map and are regions of their own due to their distance from the lower contiguous 48 states. I’m not aware of any significant larp presence in any of the US Territories such as Guam or Puerto Rico.

²¹ Cross contamination in this instance doesn’t mean the unwanted influence of one LARP system upon another, but rather the resolution mechanics (verbal calls, specific gestures or hand signals, or color coded items for examples) that cause confusion among others who are not familiar with the rules systems in use.



MAJOR CONVENTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

As the US larp community has grown more interconnected there have been and continue to be efforts made to provide organizational and convention outlets to support and enjoy the hobby with our fellow larpers.

There are two major larp-centric conventions within the US as of this writing: Intercon²² and WyrdCon²³.

Intercon

Intercon began with the SiliCon LARP convention, organized in 1986 and have happened with regular frequency ever since. From the Wikipedia article on Intercon LARP Conventions, "[t]he Intercon LARP conventions are a series of live action role-playing conventions licensed by LARPA and produced by independent groups. To be licensed by LARPA Intercons must support some sort of open bid process in which local groups or individuals, regardless of affiliation, are invited to submit LARP events, and evaluated by some reasonably fair process. The Intercon Conventions have used the names Silicon, Intercon and DexCon. They have been, over the years, a core element of the growth of Theatre Style LARP in the northeastern United States, primarily in the Boston and Washington DC areas. Currently InterCon is held in Chelmsford, MA."

²² For more on Intercon visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intercon_LARP_conventions and <http://www.interactiveliterature.org/N/> (the 2014 Intercon site)

²³ For more information on WyrdCon visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wyrd_Con_Interactive_Theater_convention and <http://www.wyrdcon.com/>

WyrdCon

WyrdCon had its start much later than Intercon with the first convention being held in 2010. WyrdCon's original two goals were to:

1. Increase exposure to Interactive Theater by providing entertaining events
2. Increase exposure to the variety of Interactive Theater by providing educational experiences.

As of late, however, WyrdCon has expanded its reach to become a storytelling convention encompassing transmedia, alternate reality games (ARGs), tabletop RPGs, and larps.

There are two key organizations who have attempted to become nationwide resources and support organization for the hobby in the US: LARPA²⁴ and The LARP Alliance²⁵.

LARPA

Since 2006 LARPA has faded away and is no longer around as the Internet and social networking have provided the means for larpers to network and find the resources they need. LARPA's focus ended up being along the East Coast and the Mid-Atlantic States in particular. LARPA did run a Yahoo! Group email list (unfortunately it's no longer around) that was quite popular for several years, however it died when they switched to forums hosted on their own site and put the group into archive mode.

LARPA's mission statement was as follows: The Live Action Roleplayers Association (LARPA) is a non-profit organization that exists exclusively to promote live roleplaying around the world. LARPA does not run games, and does not promote any one system, group, or type of event. LARPA supports and promotes all live roleplaying, and LARPA members come from many different groups, backgrounds, and types of event. LARPA promotes live roleplaying by providing schedule information to make it easier to find an event or group to participate in, and works to educate the general public.

LARPA also works to build the live roleplaying community, providing a place for everyone involved in running, organizing, promoting, or just participating in live roleplaying events to network, discuss and learn from each other. One of the principal activities of LARPA is licensure of the INTERCON name for LARP Conventions.

LARP Alliance

The LARP Alliance was based in the Los Angeles part of California and was founded in 2001. It "was established in order to improve communication, support, and education regarding Live Action Roleplaying throughout the entire community and with the general public. Programs and events designed to achieve this are run often and the LARP Alliance assists others by providing staff, props, resource materials, and contributing donated promotional items. The company exists to motivate and inspire the larp community and bridge the gap to bring in new larpers.

"The mission statement was later evolved by the LARP Alliance, just after the company became a corporation, into the present mission statement, "To strengthen and bring together larpers by developing resources for players and staff; assisting with promotions, venues, and organizing community events; and facilitating education and training."

Unfortunately the LARP Alliance was unable to successfully organize itself to do more than become resource to larps in its local area and be the larp contact for Hollywood and the various media outlets in the Los Angeles area. The last I knew the company was in the process of restructuring and getting their paperwork in to regain their active business status with the State of California. A quick search at the California Secretary of State

²⁴ As of 2013 there are currently no website that LARPA has active, a visit to the Wayback Machine will provide archived versions of its websites https://web.archive.org/web/*/http://larpaweb.net

²⁵ For more information about the LARP Alliance visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LARP_Alliance,_Inc. and <http://www.larpalliance.net/>

website reveals that their status is still suspended²⁶ and does not look like they will be back in operation any time soon.

DEVELOPMENTS AND INFLUENCES

As the hobby in the US has become more interconnected across the country, and these days the world, and has matured some over various developments and influences can be seen on the hobby. Some of this development has also come from the change and progress of technology available to us or that we use in our every day lives.

Nearly eight years ago when I first wrote up my “Shape of the US LARP Hobby” paper Shades LARP List and various Livejournal communities (such as LARPer and LARP Addicts) were the primary ways that larpers connected and advertised their games (besides on their own web sites). As social media has grown in popularity those venues are no longer in use as the primary ways to connect. Today Facebook has become the way that larpers network across the nation, and there are a plethora of groups available; from those set up for a specific game or system to those for larpers in a given region to those who fit some other demographic (for example the LARPettes, a group for female larpers).

The hobby is also becoming more accepted by mainstream media and culture, particularly since the rise of films from Hollywood which include larp such as *Role Models* and *Knights of Badassdom* and books like Lizzy Stark’s *Leaving Mundania*. The acceptance of geek culture within mainstream society has also helped the hobby gain a degree of acceptance. Despite its growing popularity the hobby is still a niche hobby, much like table-top RPGs. I think, much like table-top RPGs, larps will still remain a “geek and nerd’s hobby” even as it gains greater acceptance within mainstream culture.

One significant influence that started in Europe and has migrated over here to the States has been the use of latex weapons, particularly for live-combat larps. This rise in the use of latex weapons happened primarily after many of the big live-combat larps started allowing their use in their games in the late 2000s and smaller, regional games quickly followed suit as they realized that in a light touch system they were perfectly safe. Boffers are still used in battle games because of safety since the padding on a latex weapon does not meet the safety standards battle games require, but boffers built for battle game purposes do, and the level and intensity of combat would quickly destroy a latex weapon. Sometimes latex weapons will be used as props in theater style games to add more of a “what you see is what you get” feel to the game (ex. I’m carrying a knife, so I carry a latex knife, even though I also need to keep the item card on me and possibly visible).

Another has been the rise in popularity of Nordic larp. With more Americans (particularly those who live on the East Coast of the US) making the trip over to the Nordic countries in recent years for their yearly Knutepunkt conference, the US has seen a rise in Nordic larp/art larp influences. From Lizzy Stark’s late 2012 run of *Mad About the Boy* to Shoshana Kessock’s run of *LIMBO* at GeekGirlCon in 2013 nearly a year later. As of late 2013 this appears to be a growing trend that will persist for some time, if not have a long term influence on US larp and US larp culture.

Over the years there has also been efforts made to develop larp as a form of art than just a game (largely influenced by what we see coming out of the Nordic countries) as well as use larp for more than just entertainment. Seeker’s Unlimited²⁷, a California based non-profit organization has developed some edu-larp games and related curriculum to help teach various concepts like math and business skills to students.

²⁶ To find the LARP Alliance record visit <http://kepler.sos.ca.gov/>, select "Corporation Name," and do a search for "LARP Alliance."

²⁷ For more on Seeker’s Unlimited visit <http://seekersunlimited.com/>

CLOSING STATEMENT

What has been presented above is the opinion and views of one member of the U.S. larp hobby, taken from my personal experiences and what I have read online and discussed with others. My views and opinions are not the views and opinions of every member of the hobby, and I'm hoping that those who have read this (U.S. larpers in particular) will understand that their view and opinion of the hobby are just as important as my views and opinions of the hobby are. This was written to help the international community gain a better perspective of the nature of the U.S. larp hobby through the eyes of one member of the U.S. larp hobby.