Before beginning today’s show, I want to acknowledge what’s going on in this country right now. I work on these episodes weeks or months in advance, so this episode is focused on the COVID-19 crisis. I am currently working on an episode about systemic racism, but that won’t be out until later this summer. So, in the meantime, instead of asking you to support Imaginary Worlds on Patreon, I’m asking if you would donate to an organization that fights for social justice like the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or Campaign Zero or the ACLU. And consider making regular donations, not just a one-time thing. Thanks, and try and stay safe everyone.

Previously on Imaginary Worlds.

*Play the Battlestar Galactica music under both larp episode.*

I have always wanted to start the show like that!

This is the third episode in a series about larps, which is short for live action role play. The first episode from 2017 was called Winning the Larp. I looked at the history of live action role playing, from college students dressing up as knights to immersive experiences where people pretend to be characters from Battlestar Galactica on a real decommissioned naval destroyer. And larpers would even travel to other states or other countries, with their homemade costumes, to play wizards or vampires for days at a time.

In my second episode “How I Won the Larp,” I went deep into larping myself. In both episodes I used the words “winning” or “won” in the title because it’s an inside joke. On one hand, larps are games. Your characters have goals with cross-purposes. But you shouldn’t strategize like it’s a traditional game. The best way to “win” the larp is to have an authentic emotional experience. If everything goes wrong and your character crashes and burns – those can be the most satisfying larping experiences.

I wasn’t planning on doing a third larp episode. I was actually thinking about how much I miss live theater in New York. I was reading about how some shows are trying to adapt, performing over Zoom. That’s when I discovered that some of the most innovate theater happening right now is live action role playing.

You’re listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I’m Eric Molinsky. In today’s episode, I’m going to talk with four different creative teams about the ways they’re figuring out how to larp
while sheltering in place. Feel free to listen to the previous larp episodes, but you can also come into this cold because that’s how a lot of people are discovering this medium. And in describing these larps, I have to give away a few spoilers.

Let’s start with the simplest form of technology: the phone call.

Ryan Hart is one of the founders of Sinking Ship Creations. I’ve done few larps with them before. They’re very intense. The players are in confined spaces together for hours, with props and costumes. It’s the kind of live event you couldn’t do right now. But Ryan says, they had already been thinking about ways to do broaden their audience and not be so tied to specific time or place.

RYAN: And the other big problem that we have with larp is that we wanted to try and make it more viable in terms of logistics because having, it's not like a theatrical run quite often where you can get a theater and say we're going to do this for six weeks. It's something that has to be scheduled. You have to go through, and the venue ends up eating so much of your, not just money but energy.

So their creative director, Betsy Isaacson, suggested they try doing phone larps. This was before COVID-19. At that time, they were wondering if people would feel comfortable being on the phone that long.

BETSY: Somebody has to take an hour out of their day or 90 minutes out of their day to do a phone call. And this is kind of annoying and they don't know how good the experiences and you've paid money for it and dah, dah, dah. And now everybody's interactions have become phone and Zoom calls anyway. And so, it suddenly doesn't feel that much as much of an imposition to be like you have to take an hour out of your life to do an hour-long phone call.

Both of the phone larps I did with them involved the actress Jennifer Suter. She was so good, I decided not to interview her because it would break the spell that I had actually talked to the characters she played. Ryan says, he totally understood that.
RYAN: I think the biggest thing that we have to remember is that an experience doesn’t start. It’s not a wall to wall thing. Like you want your design to be wall to wall in that like it’s going to start when you pick up the phone. It’s going to end when you put the phone down, but that’s not really true. It really begins the moment you become aware of it and it ends a moment. You forget it.

The first larp I did with them was called Fragile Recall. They sent me the audio of the first few minutes. It began with me getting a number to call for a psychic who was going to connect me with one of my past lives.

*INDIAN MUSIC*

This is actually the music I heard over the phone. And the psychic character seemed to be a fraud, played as a joke.

*TRANSITION SFX*

But then I was transferred to the past. I found myself talking with a vulnerable scared woman named Edith Thompson.

*Hello?*
*Who am I speaking with?*
*This is Eric*
*Eric? So, you’re my future self? Or maybe the guards are just putting me on.*

Edith was in jail in London – in 1923. She told me her husband had been killed by a mugger. When the cops discovered Edith was having an affair, they decided Edith and her lover must have planned to knock off the husband. They were innocent but no one believed so. So, Edith decided to lie and say it was her idea, to save boyfriend Freddy. But it didn’t work. They were both sentenced to death.

I had a really intense, heart-to-heart conversation with Edith about the different roles we play in life. We talked about the qualities we have in common since I am supposed to be her reincarnation. In the end, she told me the best way I could help her was to tell her story – her real story.

So, I did. That’s when I someone said -- Edith Thompson? She’s a real person. Her death was the catalyst for the anti-capital punishment movement in the UK. When I talked to Betsy, who designed the larp, she said they didn’t want to advertise that Edith was not entirely fictional, but they’re glad I figure it out. Also,
I could’ve gotten another character from history, a fashion icon named Babe Paley, but they thought Edith was a better fit for me.

BETSY: We often do research on people beforehand

Oh, you do?!

BETSY: You have a public profile!

But in general you do pick like, like you, you, she actually would pick me and look like because she knew she was talking to me. She looked me up to see to sort of mold Edith towards me somewhat.

BETSY: Yes.

Hm. And what, how, where do those choices play out exactly? Just generally speaking in, in the phone calls.

BETSY: So, there's not a strict script for Edith or Babe obviously because you're talking to a person, basically there's a document of long list of things that Edith or babe wants to know questions they want to ask parts of their own life they want to tell. And it's just a matter of, okay, we're just going to, I don't know, bold face stuff that might be particularly resonant to whoever we're talking to.

The next larp I did was called Girl on The Phone – with the same actress, Jennifer Sutter. I knew it was going to be about a woman who was kidnapped, but I thought it would be an hour-long call. It started with 20 minutes of text messages. This character, named Irene, woke up handcuffed in a cell. She managed to grab a phone and was dialing numbers randomly. That’s how she got me.

Eventually, we did talk. I learned she’s a college student visiting her grandmother in Caracas. The kidnappers thought they could get a ransom out of her – thinking she must be a rich American – but she had no family except her grandmother.

When she was on the run, I used Google Maps to guide her through Caracas. I used Google Translate to help her communicate with a character in the background – who was also played by Jennifer. I thought I was being clever using Google, but Betsy told me, I was always meant to do that.

BETSY: Jennifer is really, really good at what we call back leading, which is basically getting people when they aren't quite getting like, Oh I'm supposed to go on Google maps to, to have that trigger in their own heads. Well essentially thinking that it’s their own idea, which is really, really, really nice for such things. Well it's funny cause I felt like I thought I gave her the most ridiculous advice on how to get out of handcuffs, which is to use a little latch on her watch to, to pick
the lock. And I have no idea if that is possible outside of a cartoon. What other options are there to get out of those handcuffs?

BETSY: So, she's got hair pins in her hair, so people suggest hairpins. She's like, oh gosh, I have a body pin also, she's got a sink and soap in her cell and often times if you just put some sort of grease on your hands, including soap, you can slip your hands out of handcuffs.

Oh! I did ask her what was in the room. I'm terrible with D&D with this kind of thing too where I find out what's in the room and I'm like, well that's not useful. And then later I find out it was actually everything I needed to get out of the room.

BETSY: Yeah, I mean it's the sort of thing where often we have people Googling how do you get out of handcuffs? And one of the things that will come up pretty quickly is like put soap on your hands.

When her character was running through the streets, I thought the actress had gone outside. But she was using sound effects. When she fled to a café, I heard background chatter in Spanish, and the clinking of glasses. Eventually she got a ride out of there. It sounded like she was in a car. Betsy says they did look to audio dramas for inspiration.

BETSY: One of the things I like about it is there's a lot you can leave to the imagination. Like there's a lot of things that we simply couldn't do on a regular stage like you did Girl on The Phone where there's a woman running through Caracas. There's no way we could do that on a set. You know, we don't have a reconstruction of Caracas, but with the phone and some sound and sound engineering, suddenly we can do, you know, quote unquote sets that we don't, we don't have access to, that we could never have access to.

Can you please help me! I don't know where I am! I don't know if I'm even in Caracas!

It did feel like a thriller. Since I've been mostly sheltering in place, the hours in the day can fly by. But this one hour I played the game, every minute counted. And there were moments when she had to hang up because the kidnappers were looking for her. As I was waiting for her to text me back or call me, I was staring at my phone in silence. But those were the most stressful moments in the game because my sense of time was so radically heightened.

But Betsy says, there are downsides to using the phone.

BETSY: You can't control the other person's surroundings. Like we had someone do fragile recall pretty recently with construction outside his house. And so it was just like
Jackhammers the entire time and we were like, damn it, this is supposed to be really sober and atmospheric and their actual jackhammers going off and this is incredibly annoying.

Managing player expectations has also been a challenge for the second company I talked with, except their larps are played for comedy.

Carly Dwyer and Jasmine Kimieye Graham are two of the founders of Intramersive Media, which is based in Salem, Massachusetts – yes, that Salem.

JASMINE: Well if you say enough Massachusetts town names, the way they're spelled in a chain, it does sound arcane and magical

That is very true.

JASMINE: Gloucester was to Dorchester
CARLY: Saugus!

When they got shelter in place orders, they were worried about paying the bills, and keeping their actors employed. That’s when Jasmine came up with the idea of a larp called Magical Help Desk where you play an I.T. specialist. The actors in the troupe would play witches and wizards who call you because their wands or crystal balls are malfunctioning. Jasmine has worked in I.T. She’s always thought that every time she got a technical support call it was like she had been given a quest with a small hero’s journey to complete.

JASMINE: Every time to a certain extent, you do get that little hint of anxiety because you don't know what you're walking into and you have to have an idea of what to do. Even if you can't solve it. We have to be able to make that connection and be able to point someone in the direction that they need to go. So, you go in and you feel this fear because it's stepping into the unknown and you're like, oh my God, I got to do this. I'm the one, I'm the chosen one who has to fight this thing or do or solve this problem. And then at the end you're like, Oh, I vanquished the dragon of malware.

Carly had to be convinced Magical Help Desk would work. I mean she loved the idea, but when Jasmine told her the player was going be in the role of the I.T. specialist and not the witch or wizard calling in, she said:

CARLY: I don't know about that. I, for me as like coming in, it felt like giving, I was going to sound like I'm going to sound like a bad person. I say this is the idea of giving over. Like that amount of control to the audience member felt very different from where I normally come from. It did take some convincing from her that like the structure of the
game was really going to work. And you know, I, I, she and I had a lot of pushback where I'm just like, well you know like from our experience in immersive theater, if you give the audience too much room, they're going to they'll derail and then you're going like, and Jasmine just kind of kept pushing me back. She was like, no, no, trust me. She's like, I know how tech support works because I don't.

I did two Magical Help Desks and they were a blast. Before the calls began, I was sent an onboarding document, like I was a new employee. It explained how the development of wireless technology had been interfering with traditional magic. And I got a pretty in-depth troubleshooting manual, telling me things like how to do a factory reset on a magic wand.

My first call was with a wizard named Wendall who had opened a door to a parallel dimension in his basement and accidentally let in all these little creatures. Now his wand was broken, and he couldn’t close the dimensional door.

Well first of all what kind of wand are you using? I'm using, admittedly it's not one of the main brand wands if you catch my meaning, not one you buy somewhere it’s one I got while adventuring in the Cursed Plane of Alandrea, I don’t know if you’ve heard of it. I have not, do you know what kind of magic they use in the Cursed Plain of Alendrea by any chance, is there a specific magic system they rely on there? There used to be when people in the Cursed Plain of Alandrea, when they were alive, but when I got there, that wasn’t the case…

The whole thing was completely ridiculous, but I felt empowered afterwards, like I did something useful. I helped someone. And it was a great emotional high on a day when I've been feeling pretty down.

I had the option of helping Wendall on a second call, but I decided to mix it up and talk to a different character. I didn’t realize if I had stuck with Wendell, I would’ve discovered that a story was unfolding in front of me.

CARLY: Actually, all of them have arcs. All of them have storylines. If you really liked talking to Wendell, you can call back and you and again learn more about Wendell and learn more about what all this tech went wrong for a reason. Finding out why though. Like what the underlying kind of deep stories are is part of like the Easter egg fun of it.

Magical Help Desk has been such a success, they’re considering a more ambitious second round.
CARLY: One of the big pieces of feedback that we got from Magical Help Desk was we had a number of players turn around and go, I love it. I want to do it again, but I want to be the caller. And I want to bring my friends. What we're playing around with is like the idea of a tactical field sport. So, you and your party go out adventuring and you get into a bad situation and you have X amount of time with a resource to help you troubleshoot your problem in the field.

*I'm imagining like the Blair Witch Project, but they're actually able to call tech support halfway through the movie*

CARLY: (laughs) Oh my God that may be the best way to explain it!

They're also thinking of adding visuals because their actors have costumes at home and could do a makeshift green screen.

Sinking Ship Creations is in a similar position. Girl on the Phone and Fragile Recall were so successful, they're brainstorming how to do video larps. In the meantime, they're offering a video larp for free called Debrief, which they did not create themselves, it was designed by colleagues of theirs.

I wanted to try it out, so I played it with an old friend of mine named Dan. Our characters were MI6 agents in 1960. We were each given 15-page character biographies before the game. His was a double agent for the Soviets, and I discovered this after he was killed. But I was able to call him up for one hour using this machine that communicates with ghosts – which is Zoom. Since he was playing the ghost, he sat in the dark, lit only by his phone. I didn't record the call because I knew I'd be embarrassed by how bad my British accent was. But Dan is a professional actor, and he totally nailed it. It was an amazing experience and playing out those characters turned out to be a cathartic experience for both of us in different ways.

After the break, I'll talk with more larp designers who are delving into video and discovering that Zoom can be its own artistic medium.

BREAK

Jessica Creane is a game designer. She was actually in my episode, “Board Games Go Indie” from 2018. So, the idea of doing virtual larps isn’t new to her. In fact, she’s working on mobile game where you act out the story of Romeo and Juliet with a stranger through text messages over a five-day period.
JESSICA: It’s all about these moments of finding really intense intimacy and connection in a world that is trying to keep you apart.

That’s a common theme in her work. And for the last year, she had been performing a show in New York called Chaos Theory. It’s not technically a larp because a lot of it is focused on her performance but it is immersive theater with a lot of interactive games as part of the show.

The premise is you’re going to a meet up for scientists. You can create a fake scientist character or be yourself. Her character is the guest speaker, and during her lecture on Chaos Theory unravels to the point where it becomes a lesson in chaos itself.

JESSICA: Chaos Theory came out of the 2016 election. It was a strange time for everyone and particular, particularly strange for me and my family is we had, I had, my father had passed away about six weeks before the election, so there was this confluence of deeply personal feelings of chaos and this also completely communal feeling of chaos in the country. And so, I had this sensation that chaos was everywhere, and it was either going to crush me or I was going to find a way to, to make it an asset.

When theaters shut down, she wanted to keep doing the show going because the themes felt more relevant than ever. So, she transferred it to Zoom.

JESSICA: Some of the choices were simple like what can get cut, what needs to get cut in order to make room for what people really need in this moment. And so there was this a deep dive into what is actually necessary. Like what are the things that are missing most in our lives right now that the show can help provide? And part of that was immediate real time human connection, particularly with strangers and the sense of open possibility of meeting others. And so, we took things that had been a, for instance like a live action game where players have to draw the world's best circle. And usually it's a pretty crazy game. Like people will try to stop others from drawing the world's best circle by eating the paper or they have an option to seduce the other team or the whole room. And so it gets pretty, pretty like traditional colloquial chaos in those moments.

That was easy to do on Zoom because Zoom has a “whiteboard” drawing feature. But developing a sense of group dynamics was much harder.

JESSICA: One of the things that’s been really challenging is like, how do you laugh on zoom? It’s an acoustic nightmare if everyone has their mics off and yet we really need that. We need those moments of being able to laugh together to feel connected. We
had started out thinking, well, we'll just keep everyone on mute the whole time. And then immediately got feedback that people were just feeling very isolated in those moments of just laughing by themselves in their rooms. So, we tried, um, reactions next that people could put up reactions for the little like thumbs up for laughter and that didn't do it. Um, we tried the chat option and ultimately just came back to leading people on muted more often.

Tiffany Keane Schaefer had a similar experience transferring her work to Zoom. She's the artistic director of Otherworld Theater in Chicago, which specializes in fantasy and science fiction. The theater had to shut down, but their larp division, which is called Moonrise Larp Games, is thriving online.

Tiffany: Maybe that's why it's so been so easy for us to adapt because in larp it is very much actually that we find the location first. We're not like, Oh, we want to tell a Wizarding school larp. We want to tell that story. Well, where are we going to do it? It's more like, wow, we found this old dormitory, we should do a wizard school, larp here.

That's how she and her team approached Zoom – like it was just a location they had discovered, and now they had to figure out what stories to tell there.

The larp they're running on Zoom is called Valhalla. It's a Viking-inspired sci-fi role-playing game. It's more like a traditional larp, where a group of players are guided by game masters, who also play NPCs or non-playing characters. And if they were larping in a real location, the players would break off to have side adventures. Well, Zoom has a feature called “breakout rooms” where you can talk with other people outside the group.

Tiffany: Being able to name breakout rooms, just saying planet Valkyrie, and traveling to it, there's something exciting about it and it's very simple, but you know, you're not just always in this one chat, you're actually like in digital space traveling.

You can also change the background behind you on screen. It's a feature called virtual backgrounds. I've used as a joke when I'm doing Zoom calls with friends to make it seem like I'm in Paris or sitting in the Batcave -- but they're using to make it seem like the characters have physically changed locations.

Tiffany: When we visit different planets, that's when we start to like, you know, the, the NPC that it's from that planet will have a background that embodies that planet.
But the biggest challenge has been creating a sense of group dynamics – and making those human connections in cyberspace.

For instance, Tiffany is used to making eye contact with players. If she’s looking at their faces on a grid, the players don’t feel like she’s making eye contact. But if she looks at the camera, she doesn’t feel like she’s making eye contact. Also, the players don’t have the same level of technology at home, or the same Wi-Fi speeds. So, there can be awkward silences, or people talk over each other.

TIFFANY: We had to learn as performers that there is a delay, so everyone was like, Oh, there’s a void. I’m going to fill the void with my voice. And so, uh, that was a learning curve. I will say that the alienation effect goes away probably in like our one right now in in hour one of our larp and each time we learn together, we find a way around it. Our brains adjust to the alien way of communicating. I think that works really well in an online larp that’s in space.

They’re still trying to figure out how to do group larps on Zoom where they’re not traveling in spaceships. But overall, going virtual has been a breakthrough for the company, which was very locally based in Chicago.

TIFFANY: The greatest treasure that we’ve really been able to experience is the global platform. We have players all over the world, and now we’re getting a digital community.

I asked Carly if Magical Help Desk has also helped them expand their audience beyond Massachusetts.

CARLY: Like hard. Yes. Um, in fact people, people will email us like they’ll buy a ticket, we’ll send them the onboarding and we’ll get an email being like, this is my first time ever doing anything like this.

Although in some ways, virtual larps have been a victim of their own success. They’re attracting a lot people who wouldn’t otherwise sign up for a larps in person.

Betsy and Ryan told me that some of the new players who signed up for Girl on the Phone or Fragile Recall didn’t really understand what they were getting into.

BETSY: And they want -- honestly, they want more of a story being told to them over the phone and don’t get like you really need to interact with this for it to be a story. They feel sort of betrayed at the end and they’re all really angry. And that's just been a
marketing question of, oh gosh, we really need to market this so that people know that they have to interact to get a story.

RYAN: So, when somebody says, I'm going to do a phone larp, I'm like, they're like, I don't know what this is. I don't really understand what I've action role play is. I say, we're just trying to give you an experience and this experience is going to be first person -- if you will engage with it. You have the opportunity for reaction and opportunity to have this sort of experience where you have an emotional reaction to it.

And you don’t need acting skills. You just need a willingness to play along. And larps are elastic. They will take the shape of whatever you bring to the larp -- emotionally or psychologically. Again, Carly and Jasmine:

JASMINE: It does not in a way that I think a lot of, some of the experiences I've seen or stuff that's going on, it doesn't ignore the circumstance. Right? So like I feel like we're kind of stuck between two things right now where it's either I obsessively scroll through my news feed and read all the terrible things that are happening in real life, or there's a lot of people who would rather like ostrich this out. So this is a game that takes away a lot of the burdens that we are dealing with right now but also likes you flex that anxiety muscle lets you flex that accomplishment muscle will completely acknowledging that you are beholden to technology for all of your socialization right now.

CARLY: But it's also still putting value on creativity in a time where a lot of creative institutions have had to shutter. You know, we might be a year out from theaters opening, we don't know. So, until then, we want to make sure that creative art making, and live theater and live artistic interaction is still going and to keep it in the forefront of people's mindsets. When the theaters do open, they might be six or seven months behind other forms of outdoor socializing people go back.

I think we’ve all discovered from the virtual staff meetings or mini-college reunions we’ve been doing on Zoom is that a virtual space is not a substitute for a physical space. But what I like about these games is that they embrace the limitations of this technology while also creating a world inside of it. I love the idea that there are imaginary people who exist only these virtual spaces. And they're waiting to talk to us. So, give these characters a call. You never know where it could lead.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Betsy Isaacson, Ryan Hart, Tiffany Keane Schaeffer, and Jessica Creane. Carly Dwyer, Jasmine Kimieye Graham
By the way, Jasmine and Carly aren’t just residents of Salem – they’re practicing witches, although Jasmine has strayed from the path, much to her family’s disappointment.

JASMINE: My mother is a witch; my grandmother was active in the witch community her whole life. My adopted sister is a high priestess in one of the local covens.

*Are your parents like, Jasmine, are you ever going to settle down with a nice witch or warlock some day?*

JASMINE: Ah, yeah, kind of! (Laughs)

That conversation went to some pretty interesting places. It didn’t fit with this episode, but I put a link to the audio on the imaginary worlds site.

You can find links in the show notes to all the larps that I discussed. Also, registration is still open for the virtual class that I teach through NYU. It’s called Creating a Narrative Podcast, and you can sign up on the NYU website.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. If you really like the show, please leave a review wherever you listen to podcasts, or a shout out on social media. That always helps people discover the show.

You can learn more at imaginary worlds podcast dot com.