

# LARPing Goes to Disney World

On a “Star Wars” spaceship, the company has taken live-action role-play to a lavish extreme. Guests spend days eating, scheming, and assembling lightsabres in character.

By [Neima Jahromi](#) May 23, 2022

*On the Galactic Starcruiser, guests spend days playing “Star Wars” characters, fighting for the First Order or the Resistance. Illustrations by Tim Peacock*

In February, when it was cold and wet in New York, I rode a jitney under blue skies from the Orlando airport into Disney World. Before reaching the Magic Kingdom, the bus passed a range of gray crags perched on scaffolding—a sliver of Black Spire Outpost, which, in the “Star Wars” universe, is a settlement on a planet called Batuu. Nearby, the Millennium Falcon rested below a control tower built into the rock; Stormtrooper helmets were for sale at a sun-bleached military-surplus garage. Black Spire is also the destination of the Galactic Starcruiser, a spaceship that carries hundreds of interstellar tourists to and from the outpost, on what Disney calls an “immersive adventure.” The Starcruiser begins its journey floating in space, light-years from Batuu and Black Spire. In reality, the spacecraft is a massive brutalist building that sits beside a highway.

In 2012, Disney spent four billion dollars to buy Lucasfilm, which produces the “Star Wars” films and TV shows, and acquired not just the imaginations at Lucasfilm but those of its fans. The creation of the Galactic Starcruiser suggests a wager: many “Star Wars” enthusiasts, not content with repeat viewings of “The Mandalorian” or dressing up as a Stormtrooper at a convention, will pay to experience this fantasy universe through live-action role-play, or *larp*. In a *Larp*, players, often in costume, improvise stories and borrow from such genres as medieval fantasy, science fiction, and vampire

movies. In the indie *LARP* *Dystopia Rising*, people spend the weekend staggering around as zombies—or hiding from them. In *Sahara Expedition*, the Italian *larp* collective *Chaos League*, inspired by the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, leads archeological expeditions that dig for artifacts in the African desert.

For more than a decade, Imagineers—Disney designers and researchers—have been looking into *larps* and interactive theatre, and running “playtests” in the parks. In 2019, Disney opened *Black Spire Outpost*, which put some of its experiments into practice. Disney calls nearly all its employees “cast members,” and at *Black Spire Outpost* most cast members are *Batuuans*. As guests walk between gift shops and rides, the cast members invite them to role-play. A local in earth-toned robes might draw a visitor into his confidence, to sell her a lightsabre, while a hero from another planet leads a kid behind trash cans to hide from soldiers in white armor. At *Black Spire Outpost*, these interactions last for a few minutes; on the *Galactic Starcruiser*, they go on for two nights.

“Do you know about the term ‘magic circle’?” Lizzie Stark, an American *larp* designer, asked me, a few days before I went to experience the *Starcruiser* myself. “It separates your reality from the reality of the experience that’s being created for you.” In the nineteen-fifties, when Walt Disney sought real estate for his first theme park, in Southern California, he feared that the grandeur of the Pacific would overshadow his creations, so he settled away from the ocean and encircled the park with a railway. Every part of *Disney World* builds boundaries. Guests board the boats of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride only after walking through a warren lit by lanterns and piled up with cannonballs and wooden barrels. By the time they get to their vessel, they can almost smell the sea.

*In recent decades, meeting Disney characters involved standing in line, maybe getting a photo. Now you can live alongside them.*

The *Galactic Starcruiser* encourages guests to help build the circle. After a

simulated ascent into orbit, passengers arrive in the hull of a spacecraft, where crew members ask what planet they're from. And then the game begins.

"The world is so huge now, it feels endless," Cecilia Dolk, a Swedish *larp* producer and creator, told me. "When you go into a fantasy universe, it's smaller, you can focus." In the old parts of the Magic Kingdom, this is not always true. The day before my journey on the Starcruiser began, I stood in the park and watched a float decorated to look like a pile of treasure roll past an Early American bakery where women in bonnets made waffles. Atop the pile, Tinker Bell sat waving, like a pixie Jackie Onassis. Cinderella's castle loomed behind her.

A greater narrative focus was achieved in 2010, a few miles away, when Universal Studios Orlando unveiled the Wizarding World of Harry Potter. The Wizarding World had roller coasters, of course, but its real innovation was the fidelity of its setting. Guests drank Butterbeer under the wooden rafters of the Three Broomsticks, then stepped out into the village of Hogsmeade, with Hogwarts Castle in the distance. At Ollivanders Wand Shop, visitors could spend thirty dollars on a wand, after a bit of retail theatre guided by a sorcerer in a purple coat. Universal had established a new kind of magic circle; within a year, according to the Orlando *Sentinel*, park attendance increased by forty-one per cent.

An attractions arms race began. Disney's New Fantasyland opened in 2012. It focussed on princesses—Belle, Snow White, Ariel. You could eat at Beast's Castle (the Be Our Guest Restaurant) or visit a cottage where you passed through a magic mirror and helped Belle relive her fraught romance with the Beast.

The latter experience, Enchanted Tales with Belle, was surprisingly popular. There are complex animatronics involved—Lumiere, the candlestick, stands on a mantel, bending his metal waist as he tells a story—but the primary appeal is the interaction with Belle. "Our live characters are the most

important part of our parks and resorts; they're the enablers," Scott Trowbridge, a senior Imagineer, told an interviewer shortly before New Fantasyland opened. Trowbridge, who oversaw the early development of the Wizarding World, had left for Disney in 2007. "We'll probably replace our Imagineers with robots before we replace our cast members," he said.

Snow White used to roam the Magic Kingdom. But, even before Instagram became endemic, she was mobbed by guests who rushed her for hugs, autographs, and pictures, as if they had come across Anne Hathaway on a hike in Runyon Canyon. Many chance encounters have been replaced by "character meet-and-greets" at designated venues such as Princess Fairytale Hall.

When I visited the hall, Snow White welcomed her guests in a transatlantic falsetto. The lights on her red cape and her ruby lipstick were bright. A little girl in a Minnie Mouse skirt offered her autograph book across a velvet rope but retracted it in anguish when a cast member told her that, owing to *COVID* restrictions, the Princess could not be approached. Instead, the girl got a socially distanced photo. Snow White extended one foot and folded her hands under her chin. "Have you ever had gooseberry pie before?" she asked me. "It's the only thing that puts a smile on Grumpy's face."

Real-life royalty liked meeting characters from their favorite stories, too. In the sixteenth century, Henry VIII had a group of yeomen play Robin Hood and his Merry Men, so that he could eat venison with them in the forest. Decades later, as Lizzie Stark writes in "[Leaving Mundania](#)" (2012), a book about *larps*, Queen Elizabeth I was entertained by the ancient Greek poet Arion, who appeared riding on a "twenty-four-foot-long mechanical dolphin."

*Some Starcruiser passengers dress as their favorite characters. Others avoid boldface names.*

Technology both propelled and inspired these fantasies. In 1901, visitors to the Pan-American Exposition, in Buffalo, boarded an airship hoisted on cables and watched painted canvases go by, representing Niagara Falls, the

clouds, and the disk of the Earth. They landed on a lunar surface, made of plaster, where they ate green cheese, browsed souvenirs, and encountered moon people. After the Second World War, Walt Disney, an avid model-railroad builder, visited the Chicago Railroad Fair and watched a pageant of historical reenactments on an outdoor stage—the deadly journeys of the forty-niners, the driving of the golden spike. “Disney wept at each appearance of Lincoln’s funeral train,” Richard Snow writes, in “[Disney’s Land](#),” from 2019. In one scene, Disney donned a top hat and frock coat and served as an extra.

In 1955, when Disneyland opened, one early ride travelled through the diamond mines and forests of “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.” The experience perplexed visitors, because it left out Snow White. The creators had assumed that people would want to adopt the perspective of the Princess. But the easiest identity to take on was the one they were already inhabiting—that of a guest. As the Finnish *larp* designer Johanna Koljonen told me, “The thinnest possible role for someone to play is a version of yourself who believes the fiction to be true.” Other rides got this: Jungle Cruise passengers are visitors on a tour; the mortals who enter the Haunted Mansion are guests of the ghosts.

By the twenty-first century, Imagineers felt that parkgoers might want to inch closer to the spotlight. Around 2008, Trowbridge invited families at Disney World to participate in a pirate-themed playtest called the Legend of the Fortuna. Some guests were resistant. “Am I going to have to wear a hat?” Trowbridge recalled one mother asking him. Her family dug for treasure on the beach and parlayed with buccaneers. Dozens of cast members trailed the families, reacting to them as they hunted for gold and pirates. “By the end of that experience, it was the mom who had her cutlass up, holding the villain back,” Trowbridge told me. (Was she wearing a hat? “She was wearing a bandanna.”)

“We’ve trained our guests really well to think in one way about how to see a

character—stand in a queue, maybe get a photo with them,” Wendy Anderson, a former Imagineer, told me. The latest innovations involve guests more deeply. “We’re giving you the tools to believe it’s real.”

The Galactic Starcruiser embarked on its maiden voyage at the beginning of March. Days before, Imagineers hosted a kind of dress rehearsal, inviting Instagram and TikTok influencers, as well as journalists, to participate. (When the experience opened to the public, a cabin for three to five people cost as much as seven thousand dollars.)

*“Would you mind reading to yourself? I’m trying to sleep.”*

*Cartoon by Michael Maslin*

I ordered an Obi-Wan Kenobi costume from Amazon, so that I could look like the Jedi who lives on the desert planet of Tatooine and watches over Luke Skywalker, a farm boy who harvests moisture from the air. TC Conway, a former Disney cast member who used to help run a fireworks display, is a frequent poster in Facebook groups for the Galactic Starcruiser. He told me that most denizens of the groups, when choosing a costume, avoid boldface names. “They definitely want to be their own character, because they can control it easier,” Conway said. “They don’t want to be Luke. There already is a Luke. I hope I see none on the ship.”

Leaving the Obi-Wan Kenobi outfit behind, I opted to be a moisture-farm-equipment salesman, and wore a Carhartt work vest. Ivy, my girlfriend, and Tim, the illustrator of this piece, joined me on the trip. Ivy dressed as an engineer, in a black jumpsuit, and Tim, in a quilted jacket, was our adopted son, a descendant of mineral miners from the planet Mustafar. On departure day, we walked down a long corridor from the parking lot to the “launch pod,” an elevator with gray and orange panels. Screens depicted our ascent into space—orchestral music swelled as the blue sky gave way to a vision of the Starcruiser floating against the stars. The doors opened onto a twenty-three-foot-tall atrium dotted with circular couches.

“My name is Christian,” a cast member in a blue uniform told us as he signed us in. “I’m from the planet of Naboo.” He led us to a turbolift—an elevator

playing a version of itself—and asked if this was our first time aboard a starcruiser.

“First time in space,” Tim said.

“Wow,” Christian replied, as he showed us our room. “So this must be all new to you!”

Many things were familiar but had novel names. Christian described the offerings of the “refresher,” gesturing toward the bathroom. Other things were more sci-fi. “That is D3-O9,” Christian explained as he walked over to a small screen on the wall. “Our logistics droid.” Pushing a white button started a video chat with a yellow-eyed robot. Like Siri, D3 responded with automated scripts. At one point, a Stormtrooper appeared as a hologram in the foreground of the screen. I told him I liked his helmet. “Our helmets, yes,” the Stormtrooper said. “Sleek, bold, intimidating—advanced onboard tech.”

We took a turbolift to the Crown of Corellia Dining Room, a vast hall flanked by a stage and a lunch buffet. Half a dozen Lukes, Obi-Wans, and Han Solos sat beneath iridescent light fixtures. At the buffet, a Luke attired in a white karate *gi* grabbed a plate of salmon as other passengers poured cups of blue milk, a delicacy on Tatooine. There were also people in Earth clothes. “I got this space food,” a man in a black T-shirt at a banquette said to himself. “I’m about to space-eat. Just like a space fool.”

Three decades ago, when Disney animators began work on “The Lion King,” they brought a lion named Joseph into the studio and sketched him. They also travelled to East Africa to study lions in the wild.

Some twenty years later, when Imagineers wanted to study *larps*, they went to Europe, where, after the release of the “Lord of the Rings” movies, “you could buy foam *larp* swords at the supermarket,” Bjarke Pedersen, a Danish *larp* designer, told me. Pedersen and Koljonen, who are married, started as vampire and fantasy *larpers* in the nineties. Pedersen, like many of his

American counterparts, was inspired by such role-playing games as Dungeons and Dragons, though he bristled at the actuarial tables—Gary Gygax, a co-creator of D. & D., was an insurance underwriter—that determined the outcomes of combat. “It didn’t really fit the culture here,” Pedersen told me. “Nordics are way more collaborative than adversarial.” Pedersen and Koljonen became active figures in the Nordic *larp* scene, a community that prefers games with deep emotional involvement and few rules.

It’s difficult to overstate the ubiquity of *larping* in Scandinavia. Østerskov Efterskole, a boarding school in Hobro, Denmark, offers classes in which students pretend to be ancient Romans or superheroes in order to learn about math and history. The Swedish Gaming Federation has secured hundreds of thousands of dollars for youth *LARPing*, and the national government has long provided funding for youth clubs, hoping to promote civic engagement. (Mission accomplished: in 2016, Pedersen and Koljonen formed a company that organized a vampire *larp* at the European Parliament, in Brussels.)

*A good LARP provides “alibi,” an excuse to act in character without feeling self-conscious.*

In 2008, Cecilia Dolk, the Swedish *larp* designer, helped create the game No Man’s Land. Nuclear war and a pandemic ravage Sweden; small bands of survivors hunt for food and supplies. Dolk and her collaborators collected some twenty thousand euros and set about scouting locations and gathering gas masks. “One day, a guy on crutches came up to me and was, like, ‘I can do pyrotechnics,’ and someone else said, ‘I have a friend who has access to a plane and needs flight hours,’ ” she recalled.

She showed me a video of the results: survivors ran for cover as smoke rose from the rooftops around them. “If you saw that now, would you guess it’s real or fiction?” she asked. It looked real to me. “That’s good and bad, I think,” she said.



Five years later, Dolk worked on the Monitor Celestra, a *larp* that drew inspiration from the TV space opera "Battlestar Galactica." The game was played three times, on a retired Swedish warship. The team of *larp* producers that made Celestra, one of the first so-called blockbuster *larps*, functioned more like a business than like a group of hobbyists. Four hundred participants paid about five hundred dollars each. Disney Imagineers were there, mixing with a crowd of veteran gamers and first-time *larpers* in the ship's cramped metal corridors. Dolk and a crew of more than eighty volunteers had installed flashing green lights that warned of fictional radiation leaks and built wooden stands that displayed radar maps and weapons systems. In a secluded room, half a dozen volunteers controlled what came across the radar. At least once, a small spacecraft approached, and *larpers* on the bridge wanted the craft to dock on the Celestra. The team sent Dolk, dressed in a jumpsuit, to play the pilot. Control of the ship went back and forth between a moderate faction and one that wanted to impose martial law. On one voyage, there was an ethnic cleansing.

Such conflicts underscored the security of Scandinavian life. "We had too much food, too much safety," Dolk said. Nordic *larpers* chase the same highs as rock climbers, she suggested. "We are emotional junkies," she said. "Most of us *larp* because we can feel it and smell it with our bodies."

"Nordic *larps*—they're not for everybody," Trowbridge told me. Some of them "can be intense experiences, and that is probably not what we want to offer to our mainstream audience." Imagineers also studied escape rooms and fourth-wall-breaking theatrical experiences such as the noirish "Sleep No More." ("In L.A., there's some interesting horror-based stuff," Ann Morrow Johnson, an executive Imagineer who worked on the Galactic Starcruiser, told me.) "We've tried to bring all these forms together," Trowbridge said.

After the Imagineers played Celestra, they discussed the game with some of the *larpers* they had met. When I asked Trowbridge what he'd admired about experiences like Celestra, he was reticent. I asked Dolk if she or her crew had

any memories of the Imagineers on the ship. "We don't kiss and tell," she said.

More Nordic *larp* designers, inspired by the success of Celestra, started setting highly produced games in popular fantasy worlds instead of inventing them entirely. "We gave birth to a new genre of *larps*," Dolk said. As Disney and Universal poured hundreds of millions of dollars into interactive settings, theme parks and blockbuster *larps* came to resemble each other. Universal Orlando opened a second "Harry Potter" land in 2014—the year that a group of *larpers* leased a medieval castle in Poland and started a "Harry Potter"-inspired *larp* called the College of Wizardry.

In 2017, Bob Chapek, then the head of Disney's theme parks and resorts, took the stage at the D23 Expo, in Anaheim, where Imagineers preview upcoming attractions, and confirmed rumors of a luxury "Star Wars" resort that would offer guests a "multi-day adventure." "One of the things I'm most excited about is that every window in this place has a view into space," he said. In other words, there would be no windows.

The next year, at Knutpunkt, a *larping* conference ("*knutpunkt*" is Swedish for "junction"), attendees wavered between excitement and anxiety about the Starcruiser project. "It's a little bit like your favorite indie band suddenly appearing onstage at big national stadiums," Lizzie Stark told me. "It's really cool, but there's also this feeling of 'How dare they?'" Evan Torner, a longtime *larp* organizer, told me he worried that corporate players would drive out indie ones: "Only the industry can really afford to book the big arena shows." An international group of gamers published the "Local *Larp* Manifesto," pushing back against exorbitantly priced *larps* with elaborate costumes and expensive sets. I asked Alessandro Giovannucci, an Italian musicology professor and a member of the Chaos League *larp* collective, whether he was concerned that corporate theme parks would eclipse the indie *larp* scene. "This is the way of all subcultures," he said. "It happened to punk rock."

Other *larpers* hope that the success of the Galactic Starcruiser will draw new audiences and investors to an emerging group of professional game designers. Jay Knox, a co-runner of Sinking Ship Creations, a *larp* company in New York, got into such games after a friend took them to a vampire *larp*. "All of the cool kids I met that night are my friends now," Knox told me. Knox and their business partner, Ryan Hart, charge each participant anywhere from a hundred dollars for an afternoon *larp* to around a thousand dollars for one that spills into the streets and bars of Manhattan for two days. Neither of them blinked at the Starcruiser's price tag.

In Calculations, written by Caro Murphy, a veteran *larper* with a side-swept cyberpunk haircut, Sinking Ship customers play a spaceship pilot delivering medicine to Mars, where colonists have been dying from an illness that causes "shortness of breath." Murphy adapted the game from a nineteen-fifties sci-fi story by Tom Godwin. In 2021, Disney hired Murphy as an "immersive-experience director" for the Galactic Starcruiser. Murphy said that a Disney rep had told them not to talk about their work at the park, so we spoke about *larps* in general terms. "There is this tension between the commercial part of *larp* and the community part," they said. "A lot of people think of *larp* as intrinsically based on volunteer labor, but those volunteers are increasingly responsible for the physical, mental, and social well-being of everyone involved. That is a massive job."

In January, at the height of the Omicron wave, Hart ran Calculations for me in his Lower East Side home. In the basement, I sat on a paisley-print sofa under the stairs. A laptop on a table connected me to my A.I. assistant, Gabi, voiced by Allegra Durante, a professional actor.

"This is an air lock," Hart explained. "This leads to outer space"—he waved his hands toward the foot of the stairs. I looked around. A covered basket and a large black chest sat near a TV and a bookshelf full of Dungeons and Dragons manuals. This was my ship. "Game on," Hart said and jogged upstairs.

Gabi told me that the ship had drifted off course because of an unaccounted-for hundred-and-forty-pound mass. In other words, there was a stowaway. I searched the ship, terrified that I would find a human body as I lifted the covering of the basket (towels) and then opened the chest (bedding). Finally, behind a pillow, I discovered a pair of eyes. A young woman with black pigtails—Lucie Allouche, an N.Y.U.-trained actor—stared at me from a crawl space under the stairs. Gabi had told me that stowaways must be sent out the air lock. If we didn't act, the Martian colonists would not get their medicine and we would both die adrift in space. The first stranger I'd touched in two years sobbed against my shoulder. Eventually, she ascended the stairs to her death.

After the *larp*, Hart explained that Sinking Ship normally provides more spaceship ambience: dim blue lights, a speaker that mimics the sound of pressurized air. Such elements bolster what Nordic *Larpers* call "alibi," an excuse to act in character without feeling self-conscious. I told him the game was still pretty sad. A lot of customers seek out *larps* that make them cry, he said. "That's all they want from me. I'm, like, I could do a lot of shit. I can do comedy. I can do romance, action, thriller. All of those are much harder than crying."

Tears are a metric for Disney attractions, too. "I know we've been successful in some of these things when I see people cry," Trowbridge told an interviewer last year. "We're not always aiming to hit that mark, but I think that's got to be in the mix—to have those emotionally resonant important experiences."

In the "Star Wars" films from the seventies and eighties, the outgunned Rebels destroy the Empire. In a trilogy of sequels that Disney produced more recently, the First Order emerges from the ashes of the Empire and the Resistance rises to defend the freedom of the galaxy. The Starcruiser story is set amid the sequels. Just before the action began on the ship, the passengers gathered in the atrium. Two Stormtroopers, led by Lieutenant

Croy, a First Order officer with a sneering British accent, walked out onto the second-floor balcony overlooking the space and told us that we were all under investigation for Resistance activity. We also met the cruise director and the captain, and the onboard entertainment, two humanoid aliens, one with green skin and one with purple skin. A mechanic in a blue jumpsuit, named Sammie, darted nervously through the crowd. Each character guided smaller groups down different story tracks as passengers decided what kind of role they wanted to assume. Resistance fighters trailed after Sammie, the captain, or the cruise director. First Order sympathizers did the bidding of Croy.

The afternoon progressed quickly: in the engineering room, a dark cavern full of pipes and machines, Sammie and a group of children in white and brown robes studied the schematics of the ship. Upstairs, on the bridge, a ninety-foot screen acted as a window onto space. Players stood in groups of four or five, twisting knobs and pressing buttons at control stations. Suddenly, tumbling rocks filled the screen and Wagnerian music began to play as we heard the dull crash of an asteroid glancing off the hull. I was already sweating when, as in the *Monitor Celestra*, a smaller spacecraft appeared. The Resistance fighter Chewbacca roared at us. By directing drones depicted through the window, we got Chewbacca onto our ship. (Another echo of *Celestra*: the Galactic Starcruiser is set in a less familiar part of the "Star Wars" universe, giving the Imagineers more room to make things up and putting less pressure on guests to do homework.)

A few hours before dinner, I started to get messages from Croy on my datapad—an iPhone installed with a Disney app. He wanted a favor: Would I walk to a touch screen by the turbolift and download data from the ship's computer systems? If I helped Croy, I might be welcomed to a clandestine meeting with him. It seemed less like a video game than like scrolling through texts on a Friday afternoon and angling for invites to the right parties.

I felt more at ease in the Sublight Lounge, a plush cocktail bar, playing a card game called Sabacc. Sabacc blends poker with blackjack and provides something essential in a *larp*: a reason to do nothing. Sara Thacher, a senior Imagineer, attended the College of Wizardry in Poland twice, and realized that “alibi” could encourage rest. “A big ‘Aha!’ moment for me there was just being in a castle, in a wizard robe, having a cup of tea, and having this alibi, this reason to be there,” she said. Sabacc, like the cup of tea, permits passengers to take a break from the action without breaking the fiction.

Under the dim maroon lights of the Sublight Lounge, Ivy, Tim, and I tried to hold a conversation with a musician, Ouannii, a green-skinned alien with a white faux-hawk and a mouth shaped like a Minivac. She didn’t speak Galactic Basic (English), but she did understand that Ivy wanted to pose with her for a photograph. At dinner, Stormtroopers paraded Chewbacca into the dining hall and arrested him. “Lock him up!” Tim yelled. Croy rushed over to Tim and shook his hand.

These encounters were fun, but Koljonen, the *larp* designer, had told me that she would not judge the Starcruiser to be successful unless guests were “ ‘Star Wars’-ing at each other.” At one point in the evening, we carried red cocktails into the Climate Simulator (a walled rock garden open to the sky), where we found two passengers who seemed ready to role-play. One, dressed like Han Solo, said that his name was Lynx. The other had long silver hair, face tattoos, and vampire teeth. Her name was Kes, and we learned that she had two hearts. We discussed the persistence of slavery on Tatooine. Lynx told me that their home planet, Iridonia, a rocky wasteland roiling with lava, had a good social safety net.

*“I always knew fedoras would come back.”* For many *larpers*, the most valuable thing about role-play is the change of perspective. Chaos League, the Italian collective, created a *larp* about water shortages in the developing world, in which players received only half a litre of water per day. (The group did a poor job of communicating that they wouldn’t let players

die of thirst, Giovannucci told me.) The collective has since received grants from the European Union to make *larps* about climate change. Betsy Isaacson, a *larper* who used to work with Sinking Ship, offered a simpler explanation of *larping's* virtues. Sure, it can be used as an empathy machine. "But also I like frivolity," she said. "I am pro-escapism." During the pandemic, Isaacson organized *larps* with incarcerated men. She would write them as the editor of a nineteenth-century Arizona newspaper, and the inmates would send back dispatches from the American frontier. "People are, like, 'Escapism is bad,' " she said. "And I'm, like, 'Are you a jailer?'" "

Disney has learned not to discomfit its visitors. On the second day of our cruise, I had a breakfast of whipped eggs in a "Batuu-spiced" white sauce with Ivy and Tim. The well-appointed interiors of the Starcruiser are not a typical setting for a "Star Wars" story; the films don't usually align themselves with the upper classes. One of the sequels features a resort town called Canto Bight, whose patrician guests are scoffed at by the downtrodden protagonists. But the Imagineers felt that luxury would better fit a resort experience. "We wanted people to have impeccable service, so you can relax and enjoy your story," Wendy Anderson, the former Imagineer, told me.

After breakfast, Ivy, Tim, and I boarded a custom-built truck standing in for a spacecraft. We were headed for Black Spire Outpost, the rugged market town. Imagineers hoped that the tension between the comforts of our voyage and the grunginess of our port of call would enhance the exotic appeal of Batuu. "When that transport door opens," Anderson said, "it really feels like you've gone to another world." She was right. As we waited outside Savi's Workshop, a black-market lightsabre dealer—for two hundred and twenty dollars, guests can assemble their own lightsabres—cast members stood under worn brown canopies that shaded them from the hot suns (Batuu has three). They told me that they had commuted from nearby slums on dilapidated shuttles. "They're like your transports, but junk," one of them said.

A forty-five-hour *larp* is exhausting. Back on the Starcruiser, I lay in bed and looked out the porthole. We kept jumping to light speed and landing in asteroid fields. Suddenly, I heard shouts through the door. First Order spacecraft filled the window. I went out to the atrium and ran into Kes, the silver-haired *larper* I'd met in the Climate Simulator. "We're being blockaded, which usually means conscriptions," she explained. The First Order had hung crimson flags in the atrium, making it clear that we were under martial law.

*LARPer*s often experience "bleed," in which imaginary feelings blend with real ones.

Tim later approached me, during a musical performance meant to act as cover for subversive activities in the atrium. He told me he thought that Kes might be a cast member. He'd seen her being chummy with Croy in the engineering room.

I used the Internet for the first time in twenty-four hours to Google the name of the *larper* Disney had just hired. I edged around the crowd. "Caro?" I whispered to Kes.

"Yes!" Murphy said, grinning.

I asked if we could finally talk about the Starcruiser, perhaps over dinner. They checked with a publicist. "We can go to dinner," they said. "But I have to stay in character."

We met Ivy, Tim, and Lynx—the Han Solo from the Climate Simulator—in the dining hall. We marvelled at how many children seemed to have aligned themselves with the First Order. "A lot of tattletales on the ship," Lynx said. Later, Croy would boast that he had turned sons against fathers.

A red light began to flash. All the passengers filed back to the atrium, where the *larp* came to its climax with a lightsabre duel on the balcony overhead. Croy told the Stormtroopers to wipe us out, and I found myself shrinking in fear. When a happier outcome was revealed, most passengers cheered, some started crying, and others slipped off to the Sublight Lounge for a few



more hands of Sabacc.

I spotted Scott Trowbridge and Ann Morrow Johnson standing together in the atrium.

"Sorry for the disturbances," Trowbridge said, smiling.

"Yes," Johnson told me. "I know it wasn't how you'd want a cruise to go."

I retreated to a hotel room in Kissimmee, with a lightsabre I had assembled on Batuu. I clicked it on and off. A real window looked out onto a parking lot where a circle of teens stood kicking at the ground. I turned on the television and learned that Russia had invaded Ukraine.

*Larpers* talk about a concept called "bleed," the sensation that occurs when the emotions you imagine your character having mix with your own. Now the "Star Wars" fantasy of asymmetric warfare had bled into real life. On one of the Starcruiser Facebook groups, a poster complained that the "Star Wars" costume she had ordered on Etsy had been stalled because the seamstress lived in Ukraine. "We are a nation of craftspeople," a Ukrainian *larper* named Ilya Kuchinsky told me from his apartment in Kyiv. Kuchinsky makes detailed plastic armor for fantasy battles that rage across the world. On Telegram, he had been joking with his *larping* buddies who were fighting on the front. "We talk with a lot of fantasy idioms," he said. "We call the Russians Orcs.

"We used to be one big *larp* family," he went on. But, in recent years, he couldn't help seeing Russians as the enemy, citizens of an empire that viewed Ukraine as a colony. Still, he said, "not speaking as a Ukrainian but as a *larper*, it's bad for *larp*, because the Russian *larpers*—they're a great community."

Kuchinsky felt that *larping* had made it easier to stay calm even as the war became more brutal. "We change realities so many times that the situation now is not so hard for us," he said. "Except when we lose our friends or

members of our family. You can't be prepared for that." Recently, he had driven a hundred miles to evacuate two families from Chernigov, a heavily bombarded city near the Russian border. "When I was driving through enemy territory," he said, "I thought through different situations: What if I need petrol? What if I see tanks? What will I do? It was a kind of *larp* adventure, but with more emotional depth."

A few weeks later, I listened to an interview with a Lucasfilm executive who had worked on the Galactic Starcruiser. The Resistance always prevails, he confirmed, but the story leaves room for players who fantasize about martial law and First Order uniforms. Or, as some *larpers* put it, if you play to lose, you'll get a better story. It reminded me of advice Kuchinsky had for the Russian forces and their expansionist aims. "Please don't try to win," he said. "Just enjoy where you are." ♦