DRESS TO EXPRESS
LIVING A DOUBLE LIFE THROUGH ‘COSPLAY’

BOOM TOWN
POPULATION UP 43%
In the end Lillian, the creepy clockwork doll, had to die. It wasn’t so much about preserving people’s safety as a question of gallantry.

The dead wife of a crazed circus ringmaster who’d been reanimated using mechanics and magic had begged so prettily to be finally to rest.

Whether she’s allowed to remain at peace will be revealed in October when upwards of 50 Zeppelin Games players reconvene at Riddells Creek for their next steam punk-inspired adventure.

For several years Rowallan Scout Camp has served as the setting for the nation of Fumare – the centrepiece of one of a surprising number of alternate worlds populated by live-action role-play (LARP) groups to be found across Melbourne.

These range from the epic medieval battles of Swordcraft to elaborately woven fantasy and sci-fi scenarios like Legends of the Five Rings and Stargate evolved from the grand-daddy of role-playing games Dungeons & Dragons.

The steam-powered world of Zeppelin Games fired up in 2006 with its own quite distinct aesthetic.

“We run our world on the rule of cool,” says Joe Wills, Coburg resident and one of four non-player originators of Zeppelin Games.

“If it’s interesting and makes a good story then the physics work and we don’t have to care about reality. You may think coal can’t actually power gigantic steambots (steam robots). It can in our world,” adds co-creator Robert Anderson-Hunt.

“We also have lots of ‘orrible murders with a serial killer, who’s yet to be caught, running around at every event.”

As befitting a well-rounded universe, the players themselves are a diverse lot.

Captain Hardland Attwood, an officer in the navigation and signal corps resplendent with his back-portable telegraph complete with working Morse key, is more commonly known as Bryce Bannon, electrician.

Michael Waghorn is a student photographer who doubles as Sir Vincent Calloway, a newspaper man who produces a Zeppelin World digest to keep players up to date during events.

Janey Loutit aka Vallie Conagher is a medical research assistant. As we clump up the blue-cobbled nightcart lanes of old Coburg for the photo shoot with the creepy clockwork doll (Hannah Stanley) tottering behind us, wearing her convincing wide-eye contacts and kewpie skirt, Loutit explains the appeal.

“It’s very social, but it’s active, not passive. “With the Goths and a lot of the older school subcultures everyone would dress up and then they’d just sit around.

“With this you actually have a reason to dress up and do stuff with your friends.”

A few kilometres west in Yarraville, Aaron Fenwick has stepped out of his usual role as storyteller with one of Melbourne’s best-known LARPs Caligo Mundi to become a player in an Anne Rice-style vampire saga The Masquerade.

He plays mobster-turned-vampire Rudolf Sweet while archaeology student Caroline Seawright draws on her love of ancient Egypt and Japan to inform her characters.

“I enjoy the ability to take on a character and act out the part - it takes you away from the daily grind at the end of a week, and gives your imagination a workout,” Seawright says.

“Plus, playing a Japanese character also allows me to actually wear my modest collection of kimonos.”

“One of the big attractions for me is that it is a very social hobby because you are in a room with friends,” Fenwick adds.

“We play a lot in pub. You turn up, have a meal and a drink before the game, have a chat and then play for three or four hours and have a drink afterwards. While Fenwick is an IT support officer, the LARP community is not, as commonly perceived, the exclusive domain of geeks.
Zounds!
A new generation is reinventing role-playing games. Sarah Harris surveys the scene from a very cool dirigible.

“There are a few IT people. It does cross the computer gaming community a little bit, but it attracts all sorts,” says Fenwick. “A friend of mine moved to Canberra and he is a role-playing game now with an army officer, an ambassador and someone who is senior legal counsel.”

For most LARPers costume is secondary to character and story, but to one subset the outfit is everything.

Cosplayers set out to suspend belief by presenting themselves as either specific characters or the embodiment of ideas commonly drawn from manga, anime, comic books, video games and films.

The Madmen National Cosplay Championship showcases the very best of these performance artists and with a two-week trip to Japan as the prize the stakes are high.

This year Victoria will be represented by two housemates from Hume. Alysee Nicole and Giorgia Santacaterina claimed the state title with their recreation of the characters Oscar Francois de Jarjayes and Queen Marie Antoinette from the classic Japanese graphic novel The Rose of Versailles.

“Cosplay is mainly about the costume itself and being able to showcase your skills to make it,” Giorgia explains.

“There is months and months of work in every costume. I look up history books and study historical fashions to learn how to make bodices and bumrolls.

“But while it is fun to occasionally don a different costume and look like a completely different person, at the end of the day I am not trying to live an alternate life.”

Less clear is the line between where Sunbury’s Simon Hoad ends and Baron Hanbal al Barbari begins.

Simon and his partner Judith Gray (Baroness Ute von Tangermunde) are long-time members of the Society of Creative Anachronism – an international living history group dedicated to recreating the arts and skills of pre-17th century Europe.

Together they reign over Stormhold – a barony of about 70 people across Melbourne’s central and western suburbs, which forms part of the Australia and New Zealand-wide kingdom of Lochac.

“The main thing we have jobs for is so we can play the game,” Gray says.

Simon, a solar subject expert for Origin, cheerfully admits his created character lives a far more exciting life, full of feasts and tournaments accompanied by a fanfare of trumpets.

“The thing about Simon is that there are too many of them to begin with. Simon through school was this fairly nerdy, fairly short person who was not a leader, not able to control things.

“I came across the SCA at a sort of turning point in my life where I became more confident so the two are intertwined.

“Hanbal is the real me - what started as a persona within the SCA has now almost completely consumed the original me that was out there.”

Almost but not quite.
Should Hanbal one day be successful in the quest to become King of Lochac, Simon of Sunbury will still come in very handy to pay the bills and put the garbage out.