

Why LARP?

“I parry with my short sword and Expert Disarm his Axe with my long sword to have it land in front of Daltark whose sword just got shattered.”

“Okay, make a Dexterity roll and then roll your two attacks with the appropriate minuses.”

“Okay, made them all.”

“Wow! Nice going.”

“Hey, no problem.”

For all of us who have played the table top RPG's the above scenario is painfully familiar. In various forms and permutations, characters do the unimaginable all with the roll of a dice. Unfortunately many table top RPG's tend to focus in the area that they are the least equipped to simulate: combat. No matter what the system, from the downright simple to the epically cinematic formats, there is always something missing. No one has to actually swing a sword, block arrows, parry and run. It is this characteristically real aspect of LARP, the bridging of disciplines and real life experience that sets it apart and ultimately makes it an incredible medium for not only fun but positive social change.



Ultimately, RPG's are fun to a point but they are only as interesting as the imaginations of those involved and tend to

encourage the kind of disassociation with reality that characterizes so many games. It is one thing to say,

“We stand our ground and attack the thirty Orks as they rush down the hill at us. Their just Orks, they can't even hit us at our level.”

It is quite another thing to be staring up a hill at thirty individuals all bent on attacking you with various weapons. It is quite different to feel the earth shake as they thunder down the hill, yelling and screaming and pummeling you and still manage to

survive! Those who have been in such a situation in a LARP can attest to the power of such an event to change ones views about warfare; modern and medieval.

Many articles have been written that explain the merits of the RPG and point out the many intellectual skills and life lessons learned through table top RPG's (see the Lost Grimoure by David A Hargrave). It is true that gamers learn a great deal of world history, geography, science, math, language and social skills through RPG's. Roll playing games are an incredible tool for education and as a teacher I have used them in numerous situations to bring a concept to life for my students and broaden the learning scope. But LARP transcends the confines of conceptual learning and passes into the realm of what Dr. Christine M. Cress calls, Transformational Learning. Transformational learning is when you do not just understand a new concept, but the concept changes the way you see the world. This can happen in many different ways, from incremental change to a sudden "ah ha!" but in all cases it is not simple factual data that is retained but rather a new way of viewing the world, a new understanding of the way things work.



While I have heard of situations in RPG that have done this for people, I have rarely experienced it myself with RPG. In the world of LARP, however, I witness it in some form at every event from watching how roll playing the murderous gangs causes players to serious reevaluate their belief systems and understanding about pain, suffering and fear, to seeing the newfound sense of competence brighten a young mans face who suddenly discovers he is holding his own with a sword! Every event is not just a practice in thinking about philosophy but in putting it on and walking around in it. LARP is the place where roll playing becomes more than skilled discourse and blends with theater arts, sports and real life experience.

No where is this transformed world view more apparent than in the way players' views towards combat are altered. LARP never fails to bring those involved a much more sober view of war and violence. Contrary to popular behaviorist theory which ascribes the "monkey see, monkey do" theory to children's acquisition of violent

behavior, LARP actually decreases the amount of violent behavior in its participants. Children need to act out violence and war as Gerard Jones points out in his book Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes and Make Believe Violence. While this may seem counter intuitive, it has been well documented by philosophers and psychologist such as Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow, Bruno Beitelhiem and Francis G. Wicks that acting out violence and war serves not only to help vent pent up aggression that might otherwise explode uncontrollably, but also as a means of processing the violence and war that has been a plague in our culture. To be sure, war and violence are a cultural phenomenon, not a biological need of humans, as renowned author Alfie Kohn points out in his book, The Brighter Side of Human Nature. But aggression is natural and unless focused appropriately may become violence. Furthermore, violence is so prevalent in our culture that to simply pretend it does not exist and ban violent play is an exercise in denial and only serves to make the banned behavior into a taboo to be intensified in the form of gangs and bullying. LARP offers the opportunity for children and adults alike to play at war, rather than really becoming violent, and allows the participants to take on the roll of the violent gang member, but also the roll of those who are picked on, in a very real way without a script or safety net, and thus approximates a more real life experience of all these concepts.



Unlike war based video games which are so prevalent these days, LARP requires real human interaction, social skills, physical activity, and interaction with the natural world. Many RPG's have gone computerized, as having a computer run an adventure offers the maximum amount of control and freedom for both the designer and the player. But while computers do allow for a more complete and fool-proof form of combat, they are more akin to watching a movie of a battle than actually being in one. Video games actually take people away from the human aspect of war and violence, creating anti-social, inactive gamers. LARPs bring people together, face to face, in nature, an entirely



different experience than the computerized forest on the screen. The simple act of walking through the woods and observing nature with a band of friends at your side is transformative in and of itself. LARP forces people to play together as people, in a real setting, not a simulated one, and as such offers a precious opportunity for real human understanding in a tech support world.

Unfortunately, LARP gets a bad name from extremists who strive for “real combat” and “historical accuracy.” These groups are not trueLARPs but are more of a martial arts offshoot, emphasizing the heavy hitting and sparing of a traditional contact sport. These poor approximations of LARP are the flip side of the RPG, bringing combat to life but missing the critical link of roll playing that gives the combat meaning. Real LARP is not extremist and can be quite casual. While there are those who get deeply involved in costuming and combat to fully experience the roll, there are those of us who come straight from work and battle our way in jeans and a t-shirt. LARP is not about costumes and real combat, but action and roll playing and thus the true LARPer only needs the critical elements to bring their character to life, just as any skilled actor needs only a single prop to portray their character. GoodLARPs are not rigid and power dominated, but fluid, casual and fun; as involving as each participant chooses to make it.

Live Action Roll Play is an entirely different experience than normal RPG’s, and draws people from all areas of expertise because of its unique holistic approach. Unlike



the traditional RPG, LARP draws athletes, intellectuals, actors, engineers, craftsmen and writers who all meet and interact together towards a common goal. This cross discipline phenomenon benefits all those involved, as those who would not otherwise be

physical are pushed to their bodies limits as they battle to save their lives and those who normally don't give situations a moment's thought, carefully consider their next choice and combination of skills for maximum effect. LARP is the manifestation of learning through doing, active rather than passive interaction with the real, natural world, with real face to face interactions; in a time of war and human struggle, it is catharsis for the cultures soul.

