

Weekly

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special section



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Philip Caodillo, 12, and other players in the Palo Alto Junior LARP League, charge the field while playing in the battle league at Mitchell Park.

Amid the groups of young kids playing soccer, the couple napping under a tree and the seniors practicing tai chi class, a battle was raging on at Mitchell Park.

On one side of a grassy bluff, flanked with foam javelins, long swords and crossbows, the high elves of Andianion prepared to defend their lands from the invading human army of Temnor. With the call of "Game On!" the elves and humans charged at one another, swinging their swords and clubs as the wounded dropped to one knee and were brought to the ground.

In a matter of minutes the battle was over. The high elves had been defeated.

To passersby, the action resembled a game of freeze tag by players wielding foam weapons, ranging in age from 8 to 20. But the community of players, parents and organizers of the Palo Alto junior Live Action Role Playing (LARP) league say that the action is far more than play. It is an exercise in critical thinking, improvisation, decision making and flexing one's imagination. Within a given scenario, role-players confront problems together, analyze options, make choices, affect outcomes and, overall, learn and practice real-life skills, disguised as fun.

"It's hard to see what it's all about on the surface. You have people walking by, and all they see is all of the swords and all of the running around like that, and they don't see the deeper level," said Kim Taylor, 20. "But there's this whole world that I can participate in and I can change things, and I have the power to do

More than just fantasy

Local LARP league offers kids a chance to explore their imaginations

Photos and story by
Veronica Weber

something and defend something that I want to save."

Live Action Role Playing, or LARPing as it is most commonly known, involves role-playing games in which participants can choose to play a character in a fantastical- or historical-themed imaginary world, often led by a "game master" who determines the rules and leads the various missions and quests the players must fulfill.

Many players compare the game play as being similar to the table-top-based role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons or video games such as World of Warcraft — only in LARP, players can physically act out their characters' thoughts and actions.

People who LARP can pretend to be a ferocious werewolf or bloodthirsty vampire, Roman senator or Samurai warrior in feudal Japan or whatever they can think up. Hundreds of LARP leagues exist in the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia and many other countries around the world.

Anthony Melville, one of the co-founders of Fantasy Warplay (FanWar), a company based in Ukiah, Calif., which leads LARP-based events for children and adults, describes it as the "antidote to video games." People build their own foam weaponry and can choose to wear a costume but are left to their own imaginations with everything else.

"This is like a video game, but we're going to go out and imagine it and play on the field. It allows kids to have the ability to imagine themselves what that world is like. Like a book," he said.

Player Kate Matheson, 17, who also does drama, said it has similarities to playing a character in theater but "instead of in drama where you have to do it all within an hour and a half, this (LARP) spans over years, and there's tiny little things you can put into your characters," she said. "And with the plot you don't know where it's going, and it can take all these twists and turns so it keeps you much more on your toes



Sarah Ward, left, helps her sister Michelle exit the field during a battle. The league enforces a strict rule called "fumbling": When a player is hit too hard or hurt, the striker must sit out the game with the injured player.

than in acting."

In Palo Alto, children ages 8 to 17 (as well as a few adults) can play in the fantasy-based junior league. The league was founded in 2004 by parent Kara Shafer, who wanted to help her kids stay active and establish a closer community of parents and kids who were homeschooling at the time.

"Having that sense of community is a big piece of this," Shafer said.

Now the group has grown to almost 200 families (including kids from public and home schools) from Palo Alto and cities as far away as San Francisco, Morgan Hill, Novato, San Rafael and San Juan Bautista. They come to Mitchell Park about twice a month year-round as well as to overnight LARP camping events around the Bay Area. Some parents take on the roles of NPCs (non-player characters) and act as the "monsters" of the story to help move it along.

Shafer said one of the main benefits is that it is another way for parents and kids to spend time together.

Parent David Matheson agreed: "What do a 50-year-old dad and a 17-year-old daughter really have in common? Not a whole lot. The list is short, but this is something that we do together."

'But there's this whole world that I can participate in and I can change things, and I have the power to do something and defend something that I want to save.'

— Kim Taylor, 20



LARP players Kim Taylor, left, and Thomas Hogan survey the scene before their next battle at Mitchell Park.



FanWar game master Christopher Melville explains the rules and guidelines of their next battle to players of the Palo Alto Junior LARP League.

Children who prefer the more physical sword-fighting aspect of the game can join the Battle League. Others who are more drawn to plot and the creation of characters usually join the Quest or Character league. All of the action is set in the imaginary world of Roekron, created by FanWar founder Chris Melville, who first began developing the world during his childhood.

Melville, a full-time teacher at a public Montessori charter school in Ukiah, and Shafer worked together to create a child-centered style of LARPing, which integrates many of the educational lessons from Melville's classroom but is disguised as play. Over the course of the last seven years working in Palo Alto, he has expanded it into a complex world filled with numerous riddles and difficult challenges that players must work to solve.

"I think of it as stealth learning. They're not aware that they're doing something extremely educational, and so they let it in. For kids who have more barriers about learning, LARP is a great medium," he said.

Sometimes, if a child is very shy or too im-

pulsive, Shafer and Melville will use role-playing to help the child developmentally, with the parent's support.

Melville's brother Anthony also runs games and has seen how it can affect behaviors.

"I've seen kids who are really quiet and book-worm types who come out of their shell. I've seen kids who've had issues with anger management go through amazing transformations over the years because of the ability to learn how to manage their impulses and take on a role," he said.

Chris Melville uses elements of Dungeons and Dragons, Arduin, Magic the Gathering, mythology and Jungian archetypes in his world. He likes to design problems in the game that correlate to real events to foster critical thinking in children and help them grasp deeper concepts.

"There's a reason why fairy tales have been around for so long," Melville said. "Fantasy has an access point where it allows kids to pretend ... and it challenges them to imagine things that

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Rowan Artemoff-Meyerson, left, Wyatt Dunkerly and Lucas Tabachnick prepare to enter into battle at Mitchell Park on Oct. 5.

LARP league

(continued from page 31)

are beyond the scope of what they can just take in readily about history. Fantasy sort of forces people to think outside of the simple possibility of things and think in a more creative mode."

Some recent story lines in the game have included a covert group of evil vampires who have craftily infiltrated the land's government; a super powerful weapon that was found that has the possibility to destroy whole civilizations; and a xenophobic clan of elves trying to isolate

themselves from the lesser species. What may be disguised as fantasy could actually be an allegory to social and political events happening in the nation and world today. Melville said that when players are discussing the problems that occur in the game it often resembles a political science class.

"They're not necessarily aware that they are dealing with something that is a real-world phenomenon. It's a way to explore evil or cultural relativism. If you ask them in the real world, they don't have to think much ... because they have been taught how to answer," Melville said. "When we put them in a situation and now they

actually have to think about it — and it's not them, it's their characters — ... now they're actually really debating it."

Another element of the league is that every action that players choose to take in the game has potential ramifications to alter the world for better or worse.

"I like them to see that problems just don't go away if you ignore them. You have to deal with the problems that you face in life or they are just going to come back and haunt you," Melville said.

Parent Robin Carillo said she especially likes the aspect of the game in which kids are held responsible for how hard they hit other players during battle simulations and also how decisions they make can have real consequences compared to video games that might offer infinite lives.



Richard Callan, who has been a LARP player for more than six years, talks with newcomers during a break in play.

'Fantasy sort of forces people to think outside of the simple possibility of things and think in a more creative mode.'

— Chris Melville, founder of FanWar

"If they're just playing video games all day, some of these games are quite morbid and whatever they're doing (in the game) doesn't have a real impact on anybody," Carillo said. "I really do think kids get anesthetized to violence if they're just doing video games and it gets more violent and more violent and more violent and there's no consequence for it."

Melville also said he believes it is important to bring more girls into a game that is often dominated by male-centered images of sword



Children and adults act out a battle scene between the high elves of Andianion (in purple) and the humans of Temnor (in orange) while playing in the Palo Alto Junior LARP League at Mitchell Park.

fighting and violence in order to balance the game and teach girls what they are capable of.

"One of my more subtle messages (that) I guess I have is about the way our culture kind of teaches girls that they aren't powerful and that they should not assert their power, and so I try

to do the opposite," he said. "My game world is designed around the idea that women are far more powerful than they are usually perceived or allow themselves to see themselves, and that once they tap into that they are far more powerful than any of the men in the world."

But as the league's community has been gaining popularity, it hasn't been free of criticism or doubt. Players say that many of their classmates in school don't understand the concept, and peers often vocalize that the game seems "geeky or nerdy." Other misconceptions are that the game is centered around violence or that people who play must have social issues. But LARPer seem to take pride in knowing their subculture is unique and that everyone might not "get it" at first.

"It takes a lot of guts to be a LARPer because you have to be out in the park doing something that maybe other people don't understand, but you do and your group does, and you're having a good time doing it," Melville said.

Parent David Matheson recalled a recent conversation he had with another father during a LARP battle. The men had noticed eight boys seated around a table at the park with their heads down fully immersed in the video games they were playing on their phones, barely talking to one another. Then Matheson turned around to look at the group of fellow LARPer and remarked: "We may be a little odd, but it could be so much worse."

The Palo Alto LARP league website is at www.larpleague.org. ■

Staff Photographer Veronica Weber can be emailed at vweber@pawebkly.com.

On the cover: Hayes Delezene, 10, races down a hill at Mitchell Park during a battle between elves and humans while playing in the LARP League at Mitchell Park on Oct. 5.

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healthlogicllc.com

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