



100.000 SWORDS CAN'T BE SILENCED

A short introduction on Live Action Role Playing for children

Text: Claus Raasted - Pictures: Christina Molbech / David Trood

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So, you want to save the world with violence?

It sounds like a joke, but though we always ask it and smile, there's something behind the words. The next couple of pages are meant to give you, dear reader, an introduction to what Live Action Role Playing for children is and why it's something to be interested in. So sit back and let me take you on a tour through one of the playgrounds of the imagination.

What's the fuss about?

Live Action Role Playing (larp) is a world-spanning hobby, with people doing larp ("larping") in all parts of the world. It's a phenomenon that started in the UK in the 80's and has since spread to places as diverse as Israel, Brazil and New Zealand.

Almost all European countries are known to have people who larp as a hobby, and while larp is more widespread in the Nordic countries than in the rest of Europe, it's something that's growing almost everywhere. But what is larping exactly?

Playing House... a simple children's larp

One of the earliest games of which children come into contact is "Let's pretend". A popular Let's Pretend game is called "Playing House". In Denmark, it's known as "Father, Mother and Children", and my guess is that each country has its own name for it. The idea is the same, though, and almost laughably simple. In a game of Playing House, one child takes on the role of the father, one of the mother and the rest usually pretend to be children.

And for a period of time - sometimes pre-defined, sometimes just decided on-the-fly - these kids pretend to be other people than they are. The father may complain about having to do all the cooking, the mother can scold the children for not doing their homework and the play-siblings maybe tease each other over something silly. Whatever happens during the game, the object of it is not to win - it is to have fun. A game of Playing House doesn't have winning conditions, set rules or a tightly-defined structure. The game is an organized form of play, but less structured than, say, a football game or a card game.

Larp is like this - organized play. No more. No less. Organized play.

But playing is just playing, right?

Both yes and no. Countless studies and books have been authored on what play is and how it helps us grow as humans, but I'm not going to go down that road. If you're interested in that sort of thing, there is plenty of material out there - Johan Huizinga's work *Homo Ludens* from 1938 is a good example of the fact that the nature of playing has been discussed for a long time. No, what I'm here to tell you about is playing the way we do it - what we call larp.

Cops and Robbers

In the 80's when I grew up, we'd often run around pretending to be cops and robbers chasing each other and getting into gunfights in backyards and schoolyards. There'd be some simple story that everyone agreed upon - "The robbers have just stolen two million dollars from the bank and now the police are chasing hem down an alley!" - and a loose set of playing guidelines to ensure that conflicts didn't arise too often. And then we'd start playing. Some would be cops, valiantly trying to catch the blasted miscreants, while others would be robbers on the run.

Often things would end in spectacular make-believe gunfights full of kids yelling "Bang! You're dead!" at the top of their lungs and crazy dives behind whatever cover was available to avoid getting hit by imaginary bullets. Sometimes the robbers would cut a deal with the cops and would fork over some of their ill-begotten gains for a crack at freedom. Sometimes the robbers would betray each other. We all knew where it started, but no-one knew where it was going to end. Variations of this kind of action-oriented "pretend-shoot" games included "Cowboys and Indians", "War" and more surreal concepts like "Kill the Mutant Zombies".

The sword is mightier than the gun

This kind of play has of course been going in one form or the other for as long as humankind has been civilized. In the post-war years, kids played "Resistance Fighters and Nazis" and taking wooden swords out into the woods and whacking each other to senselessness while pretending to be Vikings has also been popular for a long time. What changed the name of the game was the soft weapons that were introduced into the mix in the 80's and the influence from tabletop roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Because while wooden swords are fun to fight with, they're more fun hitting with than being hit by. And though the imaginary guns of the cops and robbers were fun, they made conflicts about who's been "hit" and who hasn't inevitable and usually demanded a very high degree of common understanding to work well. Then along came the *Dungeons & Dragons* crowd with their "boffer" weapons. And everything changed.



Dungeons & Dragons?

The legendary roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons*, originally published in 1974, is a game most people have heard mentioned, but not everyone is aware what happens during actual game play. Essentially, *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) is a storytelling game where one person takes on the role of a storyteller and a couple of others take on the roles of the main characters in the story being told. In the original *D&D*, the stories were about heroes, dragons and – not suprisingly – dungeons.

Magical universes inspired by J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* were used as settings for grand and amazing adventures, where gangly, 15-year old kids could suddenly be powerful warriors, magicians and prophets for an evening, struggling through dark labyrinths in search of treasure, fame and justice. To resolve conflicts in the stories, elaborate rules systems were developed and dice were used to give the game an element of randomness.

But to put it in simple terms, what *D&D* was all about was getting to pretend to be heroes and villains adventuring in mystical universes – and it all took place in the minds of the players. *Dungeons & Dragons* had no maps, no little figures and no game board. Everything was explained in words – or at best acted out in theatre-like manner. So when kids playing *D&D* proudly told their parents that they'd stolen a priceless gem from an evil tyrant today, it was all a matter of relating a story that had been imagined between the players and the storyteller, who is called the “Dungeon Master” in *D&D*.

Playing was usually done at living room tables in private homes or at similar locations. Playing a game in this way was called “Roleplaying”. Though *Dungeons & Dragons* started it all, it didn't take long for tabletop roleplaying to branch out into other genres. When it's all in the imagination, there's no reason that you can't play a space pirate just as easily as you can play an elven prince. Or maybe even a futuristic cowboy on a rocket bike.



But what does this have to do with "boffer" weapons?

Everything. Because in the mid-80's, some industrious youngsters in the UK decided that it would be fun to take their role playing adventures a step further and pretend to play them in real life. This of course didn't mean that they went out and invested in steel swords and started chopping each other to pieces, but instead meant that they wanted to make the game more physical. Their belief was that it would be more fun to actually chase the orcs than to say "I chase the orcs" and then roll some dice to decide the outcome. Similarly, this was Cops & Robbers where you could actually tell if someone had hit or missed!

So soft weapons were constructed out of improvised materials, some costumes were thrown together and the first outdoor roleplaying games were played. Someone coined the term "Live Action Role Playing" (larp) to make it clear that this was not ordinary roleplaying - what we today call tabletop roleplaying - and the idea spread. Because even though larp in those days was something of a hit-and-miss experience, many still felt drawn to it. Sure, the production values were low and the weapons looked more like overgrown duct-tape popsicles than actual swords and the orcs were just teenagers painted green with facepaint, but the adrenaline and the emotions were real. Larp had come and it had come to stay.

Ideas that work get spread around

It was painfully obvious right from the beginning that the idea of taking the roleplaying games out "into the real world" was something that worked. Soon, enthusiasts in other countries were trying out the thrills of bashing each other with over-sized "boffer" weapons and gaming clubs and organizations devoted to this new hobby sprang up around the continent.

The oldest larps that we know of took place in the mid-80's and in the Nordic countries, things were in full swing by the turn of the decade. But though larp had spread, it was still a subcultural thing with only very few practitioners in each country. I, myself, stumbled upon larp in 1993 and at the time we were maybe a thousand larpers nationwide.

Much has changed since then.



100.000 kids can't be wrong...

At the time of this writing, Denmark is the only country in the world where larp has gone mainstream, with numbers of active players having gone up from the 1000+ range in 1993 to 100.000+ in 2011. Larp has exploded in our small nation and is now bigger than tennis and basketball combined. The reason?

Organized play has a great potential for many benefits. I will discuss these in detail later in this text, but for now let the mind boggle a bit and wrap itself around the fact that larp in Denmark is a *big* thing and that it became possible five years ago to buy larp swords in supermarkets.

Larp swords?

To be truthful about it, larp doesn't necessarily involve swords of any kind, but when doing games with kids, swords are popular, just like Cops & Robbers without imaginary guns wasn't as much fun for most kids. In theory, larp is just organized play and that means it can be about anything, but in reality, most larps are fantasy stories featuring warriors beating each other up with rubber swords for one reason or another.

Why? Because hitting someone with a rubber sword is just as fun as hitting them with a wooden sword, and unlike the wooden ones, the soft rubber swords don't hurt very much. What started out as ungainly - and often quite dangerous - "boffer" weapons back in the 80's has since turned into professionally produced latex-rubber weaponry that is both soft, durable and visually impressive. And yes, some Danish supermarkets introduced these in 2006 next to toilet paper and cat food.

LARP IN DENMARK BY NUMBERS

Population: 5,5 million

Larpers: 100.000+

Larpers under age 15 : 90.000+

Larp organizations: 50-60 volunteer organizations, plus 1000+ schools, daycare institutions, youth schools, etc. using larp as part of their curriculum.





Hmm... but what actually goes on?

So far I've taken you through a short piece of history leading up to the present day. But now it's time to explain exactly what happens at a typical larp and from there on I'll talk more of why it's of interest to you, me and everyone else. So let your imagination bring you to a stretch of forest and fill that forest with happy, enthusiastic children. Dress them properly in simple (or detailed) costumes that help to show everyone what they're playing.

Maybe the elves wear green, the orcs all have brown facepaint and the dwarfs have fake beards bought in a prank shop. Some have costumes that would impress an actor in *Lord of the Rings* while others are dressed in just a simple coloured tunic that covers most of their regular clothes. Let your imagination come up with a story that these kids are playing out and you'll almost be there. Maybe the forest is The Enchanted Forest of Darkness in the game and the elves and orcs are fighting for mastery of it, while the dwarfs are undecided neutrals being wooed by both sides.

Maybe the kid playing the Orc King has decided that his subjects must cleanse the forest of all others. For whatever reason, everyone in the story has a role to play – and as with the cops and robbers from before, no-one knows where the story will end, just where it begins. Maybe the kids will play for an hour, maybe they'll play for a day. If they're slightly older kids, the larp might go on for an entire weekend, with the Orcs and Elves sleeping in tents brought especially for the game and food being prepared as part of the experience. The important thing is that while the game is being played, everybody does their best to stay "in character" and keep up the illusion.

But who wins?

In a larp, nobody really wins. Sure, the elves in our example from before might feel that they've won if they defend their wooded homeland from the evil orcs. Then again, the orcs might feel they've won just by having a good time and by being particularly "orcy", and the dwarfs may feel that victory is theirs if they just stay out of the whole thing. As in life, what it means to "win" is not necessarily the same for everyone, and unlike a sports match, it's possible for everyone at a larp to win at the same time.

In the end, everyone who's had a good experience has won. When larp is at its best, you feel like you're one of the characters in a book or a film – except you get to help write the story while it's happening! In a modern world where interactive media is the new black, larp is the flagship of interactivity. While an internet website might let you choose which links to press and a "You-are-the-hero-of-this-story" book might let you choose between alternate paths and endings, larp is a simulation of reality where all your senses are activated.

Books let you read about heroes and movies let you watch and hear them. Tabletop roleplaying games and computer games let you dictate their actions – either on a screen or through your imagination.

Larp lets you BE the hero – if only for a short while.



Sounds fun. But many things are fun.

The world in which we live has an inexhaustible amount of interesting things for us to do in our leisure time and all of them have beneficial qualities. Running is good for getting into shape, chess is excellent for strengthening analytical abilities and painting stimulates the creative regions of the mind.

In the following section, I'll give you an idea why larp is beneficial and why we feel it's an activity that not be underestimated or remain undiscussed.

ØSTERSKOV EFTERSKOLE



Østerskov Efterskole (Østerskov Boarding School) is a boarding school for 14-16 year old students that teaches strictly by using larp and roleplaying techniques. Students learn cross-subject disciplines by playing out different scenarios (i.e. American Presidential Election, Cruise Ship Crew, World War II Submarine Command).

And it works. Test scores on standardized tests are above the national average - and that's just the top of the iceberg.

Beating up your friends is good exercise

One of the most easily explainable positive effects of larp is that it's a physical activity that uses the entire body and appeals to the same kids who'd rather spend a whole day in front of a game console exploring imaginary worlds online. Larp doesn't have to be about fighting with rubber swords or tromping around in the forests, but most larps are – and these larps are wonderful for getting kids out and about.

In Denmark, one of the most common compliments larp organizers receive from enthusiastic parents is that the kids suddenly have found something physical that interests them. This is not to say that soccer kids don't like larp or that larpers don't like soccer, but for the vast number of kids who don't feel comfortable with more common physical sports, finding a rough-and-tumble physical activity like fantasy action larp is a blessing that makes parents smile and shake their heads in wonder.

Improvisation is the cornerstone of creativity

Larp is not theatre, though it has many similarities. In theatre, the important thing is learning your lines and being believable as the character you are portraying. The audience doesn't care if, in actuality, you are thinking about your grocery shopping while on stage, as long as they feel that you ARE Count Dracula - if that's what the play is about. In larp it's different. The important part is what goes on in your head, and you don't have a script to follow, just a role to play.

When kids larp, they constantly have to think "What would my character do in this situation?" and then try to act it out. Often the situations they end up in are unexpected and unplanned, and the level of improvisation required is high. It's a lot easier improvising a scene when you know the overall lines than simply improvising with no idea of what's going to happen next. Needless to say, this skill is quite useful in everyday life, as we often end up in places where we don't really know what to do next. Training improvisation helps. Larp offers a way to train improvisation, helping players learn how to adapt to new things.



Empathy is for everyone

There's an old saying that if you want to understand someone, you should try walking a mile in their shoes. When you larp, what you do is essentially walking in someone else's shoes, and while you're probably not going to gain a greater perspective on the lives of others by playing a bloodthirsty orc, spending two days as a homeless person at a social-realist larp is a different matter. Larp is an extremely powerful tool for creating empathy, because it is possible to create situations that underscore the point you're trying to make.

Letting a group of sixth-graders play a larp where only girls are allowed to speak will certainly give them a better feel for the right of everyone to be heard, and sending high school youngsters to play refugees in a relocation camp will, without a doubt, give them a deeper understanding of some of the challenges faced by people who have been forced to flee their country. Many institutions use larp-like methods for training personnel and for establishing routines, and in the 70's and 80's larp-reminiscent techniques were popular with psychologists. And no, of course playing a beggar for a day doesn't give you an understanding of how it feels to be a beggar in reality, but larp can provide a taste of a different reality, and often it is that glimmer of perception that makes empathy possible.

Rage can be tamed

Aggressive children pose a difficulty that's hard to ignore in modern society. Today, we don't accept non-sanctioned violence between adults - such as sports - and we don't accept it in our children either. For many kids, most of them boys but by no means all, this leads to frustration and conflicts, since the modern world is an immensely complex place, and if you're not allowed to hit other kids to make them understand, then what can you do?

Larp has been used as a tool for dealing with aggressive kids and youngsters for around a decade and with some impressive results. Just like martial arts and other physical disciplines can shape help establish patterns for controlling tempers and bursts of rage, so can larp. Violent kids who find that they need to learn discipline and restraint to be allowed access to the cherished rubber swords, often find new meaning in their playing when they learn that the more they play and the less they compete, the more fun they have. The biggest different between larp and physical sports is that larp is not a contest, though it may of course involve sportslike contests as part of the game. But there's a big difference between playing a larp about boxers and engaging in an actual boxing match. The benefits reaped from understanding when to get mad and when to calm down are just as great, though.





Adaptability

The list of the positive things to be gained by long years of larping is of course longer yet, but of the most important points, one rises above all others in my mind. In an ever-changing world being adaptable is a skill coming more and more into play everywhere. No-one could have predicted how mobile phones and the internet would change the way we communicate with each other. No-one could have seen what an impact one man's vision would have with Facebook. Who knows what's on the horizon in 10, 20 or 50 years?

One thing is certain, though. Learning how to not only cope, but also thrive, in shifting realities is a must for anyone born in the Western World these days. These kids will be growing up to a world, where the only things that can't be outsourced and slimmed down are innovation and human interaction. Giving them some experience in having their world turned upside down is probably not the worst of ideas. Even if it's just their imaginary world at first.

So what does the future hold?

This document is meant to be an eye-opener and an inspiration to grab the future by the horns and twist it as we like it. In Denmark, the growth of the larp generation happened somewhat by accident, and somewhat by design, but Denmark is still one of the small countries of the world, and though 2% of the population are active larpers (with the numbers among kids being more like 10-15%) the number of Danes in the world is still very small. Teaching the kids of tomorrow to play and to larp isn't going to save the world – but hopefully it's going to help. In 2008, a wise-sounding man said the following:

”Two of the biggest problems facing our society today have to do with intolerance and fanaticism. Intolerance is the lack of acceptance for other peoples’ stories. Fanaticism is the belief that only your story is the correct one. Larp is about deconstructing and dissolving stories and creating new ones instead.”

- Claus Raasted, 2008

And yes, of course I'm a crusader. That doesn't mean that I'm not on to something. And hopefully you'll give that something a try. For now, thank you for your time.

A QUOTE ABOUT CRIME PREVENTION

’Vi vurderer, at rollespil styrker børns indlæring ved at stimulere deres motoriske, sociale, sproglige, intellektuelle og følelsesmæssige færdigheder. Samlet set er det rådets erfaring at dette har en klar kriminalpræventiv virkning’

– Kriminalpræventivt Råd

“We find that larp strengthens the learning of children by stimulating their motor, social, verbal, intellectual and emotional skills. In conclusion, it is the experience of this council that this has a clear crime prevention effect.”

- The Council for Crime Prevention





ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Claus Raasted is 31, and has been a professional larper since 2002. He is the author of 6 books on the subject and has a seventh on the way. Raasted is considered the world's leading expert on children's larps and has been the driving force behind exporting the children's larp phenomenon to Norway, Germany and Greenland.

When he's not dressed up as an orc and beating up kids, he writes, lectures and is the editor of Denmark's national larp magazine - ROLLE | SPIL. He also has a past in reality TV, but who doesn't these days?

Contact: raasted@rollespilsakademiet.dk