ROLE PLAY SUCCESS

"Everything else out there, videogames, TV, even some books, feel like they're just shouting ideas at you and they expect you to just listen quietly. It feels nice to be the one with the ideas for a change." This sentiment, put passionately to me by an otherwise passive teenager, is at the heart of the growing popularity of tabletop role playing. Once the domain of a minority of social misfits, the interactive nature of role playing, and the way in which it is structured as a form of collaborative story telling is connecting with the creative zeitgeist of a new generation.

Role playing is an act of imagination. In each game, a group of players operate as the main characters of a story, while a Game Master will provide the setting and plot, providing their players a framework for their imaginations, challenges to overcome, and worlds to explore. Some games accomplish this with a board and models to represent the characters and played like an open world board game. Others will do away with any props and focus on the actual craft of story-telling. One thing all role playing games have in common, however, is a character sheet on which the players create the person they wish to represent.

This structured creativity fits seamlessly with youth notions of content creation. For many younger independent artists in almost all fields, content is produced and given out for (next to) nothing due to a sense of self-expression. It is the group collaborating for the direct enjoyment of the group, simultaneously generating and consuming content as the story evolves into a unique experience tailored for them. Players will spend a lot of effort to make their characters seem 'real': from learning to draw just so they can illustrate them to writing comprehensive backstories to justify the character's role in the story. One girl I met was a theatre student and treated the game as if it were a stage and she was given full permission to ad lib. I even met someone who would compose leitmotifs for his characters and bring his guitar into the session, playing the motif every time the character made a grand entrance.

What value does this bring to libraries? It can easily be argued that library is a place for fostering the imagination, and that's a sentiment that role playing fits perfectly into. At my library, the role playing has brought in kids and teens who would otherwise never have stepped foot inside our doors, and, once in, they realise what we have to offer and stay. In that sense it's one way of appealing to an otherwise notoriously fickle demographic.

The USA has had role play in libraries across the country for a couple of years now and it's still going strong, while on a more anecdotal note, I've personally seen all ages embrace role playing. If you've ever spent any time around an eight-year-old boy, he may have described that time he 'totally slew that monster under the bed', so the appeal is obvious. For youth and older players, the appeal is similar; the fantasy is just more age appropriate. In one game I was involved in, an older player got herself neck deep in a story of political intrigue and overthrew a despot through careful manipulation and understanding of politics (she even brought a copy of Machiavelli's *The Prince* to the table). One of the youths playing fashioned herself a 'Mad Scientist/Baker' character, carrying with her medicinal pastries and exploding cakes because she found it funny.

Pick a theme, pick a setting; there's a game for that. World of Darkness series offers a horror story where the theme is personal horror: One of the books deals with the existential horror of being a vampire and the loss of humanity tied to it. On a more light-hearted note, Dungeons and Dragons is essentially a love letter to Tolkien, and Savage Worlds pays homage to the entire genre of pulp fiction as it has rules for James Bond-esque superspies, mad scientists with death rays, and comic book superheroes.

It was well received in my library, to the extent where the players wanted more sessions and for them to run longer. They wanted to keep going and keep creating their own fun, projecting their own imaginations onto this world that had been given to them.

After all, what's not to love about riding into battle on dragon-back?

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