

(The idea brings to mind old school readers with grade-appropriate facts thinly coated with story.) But I do play, and my playing reflects and expands on everything else I'm doing with my life.

My early stories grew out of fantasies enacted with toys; when the stories I was playing became so fascinating that I didn't want to forget them, I wrote them down. Gradually the toys themselves became less and less important; my seashell collection became a nation of seals when I needed one, and a bag of marbles became a huge herd of horses in an enchanted canyon. By the time I was 11 I no longer felt the need to act my stories out, but while I was doing other things my characters would banter, argue, and tell stories with one another in my mind. These dialogues didn't actually get written into the stories I was working on, but they gave me a clearer sense of my characters.

When I wrote a story about a minstrel, I decided to read up on medieval England to give it a background; even after I abandoned the story as immature, the period fascinated me, and now another story is arising from my research. Work? Play? Study? Art? Maybe it doesn't matter what I call this.

I still do play in other ways. My younger brother and I have always acted out stories set in worlds that we read about in books. We never acted out the stories as they were written, but we took characters from the book-world and acted out other adventures that could have happened on the way. As we kept playing, the worlds mixed, and we came up with new lands and characters of our own. Now he is 12 and I am 16, and while the stories we play have grown more complex, they are still based in some of the same places and are still satisfying. We play simply because we enjoy it, although I think it satisfies several needs. We get to try on all kinds of roles and personalities. Our characters can argue furiously without either one of us being offended. We can explore questions like: What do you do when the world isn't really the way it looks to you? How do you know whom to trust? Is more knowledge always better? Bits of our formal studies also trickle in. Once we made a wagon from a plastic building set, draped a sheet over it and were pioneers. We played Politics for years, usually Senate, where we each played several Senators from different parties and with ties to various special interests, including wild duck protectors, chocolate producers and metalware manufacturers. As we watched debates and read about legislation we adopted parliamentary procedure and adopted rhetorical styles that sounded interesting. Now that we are learning Latin, in our play there are cryptic oracles who speak only that language. (Given our very limited fluency, we can't help but be cryptic!)

Playing for Fun, But Still Learning

From Zachary Hoyt (ME):

When my family and I play games we do not play them because they are educational. We play them because we like to. But we still learn things quite often at the same time. For instance, when we play Anagrams we learn new words all the time, and when we play Balderdash (a

dictionary game) we learn new words in almost every round. My grandmother says that all the games we play are educational, not just fun, but we actually enjoy doing them very much (her favorite game is Yahtzee).

Although all the games I have mentioned so far could be considered educational, we do play some games that definitely are not educational (Clue, Dutch Blitz etc.), and we enjoy them too. I used to have trouble with Clue and for a very long time I had a hard time with it because I would keep crossing off the wrong things and getting frustrated. Now I have gotten somewhat better at it.

The Value of Role-Playing Games

Peter Collopy of Ohio writes:

Five friends and I get together once a week to play role-playing games. A role-playing game is a game in which the players control characters, usually in a fantasy or science fiction setting. One player, called the gamemaster, controls all of the external effects on the players' characters, including other characters, monsters, animals, and even the weather. The other players each control one or more player characters who, in almost all role-playing games, go through various adventures.

The best-known role-playing game is Dungeons and Dragons. D & D was the first role-playing game and established many basic ideas and terms about role-playing. After D & D, many other fantasy role-playing games were created and, a few years later, the first science fiction games started coming out.

Combat between characters is resolved using dice. Although combat is an important part of the games, without interesting background they would be boring. This means that the gamemaster often designs a setting, which involves making maps and designing other parts of the world, including adventures, non-player characters, and various weapons and other equipment. Fantasy games often involve medieval language, especially in the names of weapons and clothing.

I think role-playing games are interesting because I get to be in someone else's world. This is similar to reading a book, but you have more control over what happens. When I read a book, I often wish that a character had done something different. In a role-playing game, you can take the story where you want. Although the gamemaster has ultimate control, characters often have much more control over the game world than their players have in the real world. This gives players a setting they can change and even at times reign over.

I find designing locations for adventures particularly interesting. Perhaps what we learn from this is similar to architecture. I designed, on graph paper, the home of one of my characters. It included a stable, and I had to research what the width of stalls should be to make it realistic.

Additionally, some players design their own games. For example, I recently designed a 20-page role-playing game based on C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*. This involved writing and determining what skills characters could use. It

also involved writing short descriptions of each of the different races (humans, animals, supernatural creatures, etc.) in the *Chronicles*. I put it on a web page.

My friends and I arrange everything about when we meet, and we rotate among our houses. We do everything except transportation and snacks. The gamemaster leads the adventure for that day. Some people like to be gamemaster and do so often; others prefer to just play. Cooperation is important and is often necessary to complete adventures.

Play Reinforces Experience

Carolyn Kroehler of Virginia writes:

One of my main reasons for not sending my children to school is so that they'll have more time to play. Everything they learn about seems to be somehow processed through play, and it's fascinating to see their play evolve as they grow (they're now 5 and 8). One thing I've seen many times is play serving to reinforce an experience; after a trip to a local history festival at which colonial militia reenactors were encamped, the kids used a bamboo pole and canvass tipi in our backyard to make their own soldier's tent. They equipped it with everything they had seen at the festival – bedrolls, candles, weapons, pans, etc. – and played militia for days. Likewise, seeing a local production of *The Sound of Music* led to weeks of making Austrian costumes for dolls, setting up scenes, and acting out variations on the show.

I've also seen play provide them with opportunities to try out new challenges. For example, composing and reciting poetry are not activities my children would embrace if I sat them down and directed them to do it. But in a dog show game they play, my daughter (the dog owner) makes up poems and teaches them to my son (the dog) to recite as part of his performance at the dog show.

And play definitely allows the children to work out their feelings about experiences, to come to terms with things that frighten them or make them sad or angry. Once we spent the day with the children of a friend who was transported out of her house on a stretcher for emergency medical care, and much of the children's play that day involved carrying dolls around on boards and careening around at ambulance speed.

These are all things that I suppose they might do if I suggested it to them. I might "trick" them into writing poetry by saying, "Why don't you make up a poem for your dog to recite at the dog show?" What amazes me about children's play, though, is that I don't suggest anything. They just do it. They listen to an interesting library book about dinosaur digs and then they play paleontologist, uncovering elaborate skeletons that they have created and covered. They see a bridge at a playground, and they play "Three Billy Goats Gruff," taking turns being the horrible troll and the victorious Biggest Billy Goat Gruff. They ask questions about why the von Trapps were leaving Austria, and then they devise schemes for capturing and killing Hitler.

Finally, writing and arithmetic have thus far been

presented almost entirely through play. Starting at a very low level at about age 5, my daughter would ask me how to spell things for signs she wanted to make for some game she was playing. As she got better at printing, she expanded to games that included party invitations, vet records, and other things she wrote herself. Similarly, she records temperature or blood pressure for her vet patients; she measures and records weights and lengths for various games; and sometimes the dog in the dog show has to bark out answers to simple addition and subtraction problems she poses for him. Learning all the time!

Playing with Letters; Playing to Prepare for Geography Bee

From Karen Raskin-Young (AZ):

At a recent homeschoolers' meeting, I described my children as being "bathed in language" from the time they were little, and I realized that may be one of the reasons we have never needed phonics or any other reading program. We read a lot, but we also play with words and letters and numbers and even colors from a really young age. We look at the words in books and we discuss the letters in alphabet books just as parents and young children often discuss the pictures in picture books. We notice and comment on letters as interesting events in themselves, as I would notice and comment about things happening down the street. I might say, "There's an F" in the same way I'd say "See the leaves blowing" or "Look at the kittens." Letters are just some of the things we see and talk about, without having to turn them into more complex reading lessons. As a result, Meredith now recognizes most letters, just as she recognizes kittens and leaves.

We sometimes bring out wooden letters and alphabet charts, but no more so than anything else we play with (except that reading books is a big chunk of our day because both children have asked for it). The point is that letters and words are part of our play from a very young age, not as lessons but as interesting parts of our world.

Another area in which play figured heavily was at the end of last year when we discovered with very little notice that Jeremy (13) would be participating in the first leg of the Geography Bee. Our homeschooling group had never participated in it before, and last year they only decided to do it perhaps a month before the bee, so none of the kids who chose to participate could prepare much in advance.

Geography was not an area Jeremy had studied extensively, and we had too little time to create a comprehensive study program. Instead, we whisked out every geography game we owned, including some we hadn't played in years and some we'd never yet made our way through. Either Jeremy alone or all of us together played these games in every spare minute. These fun two weeks (or "study program") were enough to earn a win at the local level and help him pass a difficult written test to qualify for the state bee, after which he did study more thoroughly (though still in a short period of time).