Mind Games: The Circular Path of Hobbies and Personality in Live Action Role Play

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Abstract

In looking at hobbies and personality one can see a definite possibility of correlation between the development of the two. In this paper, we examine how these two subjects are possibly related and what that might look like in a real world setting. Using a four-month observation period the study looked at three groups of children which in total ranged from 11-18 as well as a small group of adults who participate in a program for live action role playing.

Introduction

Hobbies and personality seem to be intrinsically related. A person's behavior and pattern of thinking is likely to lead them to specific interests and actions, while a chosen activity seems to teach skills and traits that impact these very behaviors. The hobby of live action role playing serves as a good example of this interplay, as personalities influence character making and event plots enforce creativity, strategy, and self-awareness.

Personality

The American Psychological Association defines personality as being the "individual differences in characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving" (American Psychological Association, n.d.). In an attempt to explain these differences, theorists have looked at traits, family systems, internal systems, personal history, natural drives, and the unconscious as building blocks for the personality as a whole. In addition to this, psychologists look at genetics and developmental environment as equal factors in the evolution of an individual's personality.

Many are familiar with the Myers Briggs levels of personality: introversion-extroversion, sensing-intuition, thinking-feeling, and judging-perceiving. This inventory applies Jungian theory to identify preferences in the behavior of individuals by how they perceive and draw conclusions (The Myers & Briggs Foundation, n.d.). The various combinations of these characteristics are meant to analyze the way each type of personality generally functions. Similar to Cattell and Allport's trait theories, these qualifiers are meant to create a model for understanding the behaviors which define common types of personality. The assessment of such types is helpful in identifying other aspects of human conduct like creativity, social needs, and individual differences.

In addition to its applications in individual analysis, personality is also a prevalent part of the discussion concerning group dynamics. In looking at participation, socialization, and team work, individual preferences and behavior come into play as interpersonal relations and group interactions combine different backgrounds and personality structures. As different sets of people come together, personality inherently impacts their interactions and ecosystems.

Hobbies

For the terms of this paper, hobbies can be defined as any activity done regularly for self-interest. Individual pursuits and activities are some of the main forums for self expression and development. In the modern era, many of these activities come in the form of hobbies and extra-curriculars- sports, crafts, clubs, music, art, and so on. As teenagers enter what Erikson distinguished as the conflict between "identity versus role confusion," they seek to learn who they are while defining themselves and looking to role models to understand where to go (Fleming 2004). Hobbies often act as a way to establish this, children and young adults choosing interests as a temporary way to define themselves when asked 'who are you?'

Beyond that, the creation and adoption of hobbies provides youth and adults with the opportunity to participate in a community and find connections based on shared interests. These interests also open up individuals to mentorship from those who have greater experience, be that someone in their own age sector or another.

The Interaction Between Personality and Hobbies

Personalities are a defining factor in how an individual will interact with subjects and environments. When confronted with different activities, individuals must adapt to find an approach which allows them to complete this task. For those who dabble in acting, the same undertaking can be approached in a multitude of ways. A dominantly 'thinking' person would

likely approach an acting role by researching their background and looking at the part more logically. On the other side of the spectrum, a dominantly 'feeling' person would be more likely to look at the part from a people-oriented perspective, immersing themselves in the emotions and mannerisms that make their character feel real to them. In other aspects of theater and other such hobbies, one would find that the temperaments and interests of those involved push them towards different roles, be that acting, lighting, or stage production. As personality changes how an individual interacts with a pastime, it simultaneously influences their preferences inside the hobbies they choose to embrace.

In a circular process, the adoption of a hobby is also influential on an individual's personalities. As people sort through and try on different roles and attempt to put together their identities, the communities and subcultures they explore can have a big impact on their environment and influence their viewpoints. When taking on a new pastime, individuals take in new experiences which teach them things like strategy, creativity, control, and curiosity which impact their behavior and the way they already think. As interests shift, hobbies allow them to specialize their skills and solidify or remodel their patterns of thinking and acting.

Research into the topic has suggested various correlations between personal characteristics and recreation. Wolfradt and Pretz used hobbies as a tool to examine the levels of college students' creativity in 2001. In addition to other variables, the study sought to look at how individual differences related to a single participant's abilities and inclinations in a specific domain. Their measurements showed a link between pastimes and defining qualities in different individuals. In 2011, Lankveld, Spronck, Herik, and Arntz found that games could be used for personality profiling based on the examination of the behavior an individual takes when playing

a video game. In other words, the actions a player makes during video games can be used to define and analyze their personalities.

Other studies have looked at modern strategic board games as ways of examining computational thinking in collaborative gameplay (Berland & Lee, 2011). By looking at the structure of participant behavior, this study found that learning and internalizing rules and strategies provides a site for "conditional logic, algorithm building, simulation, and distributed computation" (Berland & Lee, 2011). Their findings showed that playing board games acted as a means for the development of logistical thinking, which exercises individual and collective strategy-making. A study in 2013 examined possible associations between personality traits and activity "across the lifespan" (Stephan, Boiché, Canada, & Terracciano). Measuring physical, social, and mental activities using things like leisure activities, games, and writing, the study established yet another connection between personality and activity by considering these behaviors in relation to personality traits, finding that some were more likely to correlate with an active life.

Live Action Role Play

For the purposes of this discussion, we consider the hobby of live action role play, or larp for short. This enactment of fiction began in medieval times and continues today, taking gaming from tabletop and consoles to the physical world. Integrating elements of play and athleticism, larp events range anywhere from renaissance festivals and reenactments to futuristic space play and wizardry. Groups form as players' characters shift from theoretical backgrounds to physical interactions. While players in tabletop RPGs (role playing games), like Dungeons and Dragons, use strategy and wit to navigate circumstances and obstacles placed before them, larpers must also use a mind-body connection to work through stories in the physical world.

Not only do players have to interact with each other and accommodate to new personalities, they also engage non-playing characters that exist as part of the stage, or world, they are set in. These characters introduce new conflicts and plot elements which keep players on their toes and immerse them in the story they have chosen to enter. With rules for how to pause a game and how to initiate spells and out-of-world physics, larp creates systems and structure for those who choose it as a hobby. These fantasy events make communities which are supportive and fulfill social needs, allowing participants to experiment and act out internal conflicts and curiosities. A study in Finland showed that a sample of role-playing gamers reported finding that the hobby "provided them with a good platform for experimenting with different personalities and social roles" (Meriläinen).

As a pastime, larp can be used as a social and educational tool (Mochoki), functioning as different mechanisms in the development of a variety of personalities and ages. Players must be aware of each other's imaginations and creations, improvise to adapt to their environment, and creatively push the limits of the rules and hierarchy of the game system. Bringing elements of their own personalities to the game, participants create the world along with the game creators (known fondly as the game masters).

Based on personality, different players will take different approaches to the larp hobby. An extrovert can engage other characters and gather favors, while an introvert might collect friends here and there, learning bits and pieces through sleuthing. As a character playing a mage takes the position of leader in a newly founded group of explorers, their inclination to plan tasks out and have decisions already made may lead them to play the character as one who thinks ahead and leads by control. Role playing also offers the opportunity for the same individual to explore the idea of behaving in a more perceiving manner- leading in a manner which is open to new

information as it comes along and leaving things to spontaneity instead of attempting order. Based on circumstance, participation in this hobby allows for both the exploration of different traits and the continuation of preferred behaviors.

As players engage the fabricated world around them, they begin to absorb the experience into their own perception so that the line between reality and fiction gets blurred. The International Journal of Role Play released an article which attempted to explain the phenomena of being impacted by a fictional character or story by applying the theory of embodiment and grounded cognition theory (Lankoski & Jarvëlä). Taking role-play as a form of pretense-play, the article proposed that the experience of immersion is a form of simulation which the participant absorbs into their own self, with self-processing bleeding the experience between fictive and non-fictive. This bleed can make gameplay more impactful, leaving the player with some of the same epiphanies as their characters when the story is said and done.

The creation of narratives in game play is particularly of interest when considering the theory of narrative psychology, a social constructionist approach to understanding identity which says that "the reality of human experience can be characterized as one which has… a story telling character" (Crossley, 2000). Based on the principle that narrative is an "organizing principle for human action" this theory proposes that people inherently use stories to relate experience and self-interpretation (Crossley, 2000). Live action role play takes that to another level, creating stories and experiences which build upon the concepts of identity and self-exploration.

In order to examine these ideas in a real life setting, this discussion extended to a program which sponsors this hobby for youth in the Greater Boston area. After careful observation, it was

concluded that the avocation of live action role play can provide impactful effects on the

personalities of those who participate in it.

The Larp Adventure Program

In early 2000 a group of passionate people founded a community geared toward an

interdisciplinary art curriculum to provide a space for youth to learn and grow through live

action role play and its modalities. Encompassing arts-based learning, and teaching everything

from martial arts to creating complex foam weapons and writing events, the curriculum shows

the ins and outs of larping. Now in 2016, the program holds various classes, youth events, adult

events, and summer experiences which combine the components of role play.

The classes which are held year-round utilize an afterschool setting to bring in concepts

from philosophy, crafting, multiple-intelligence based learning, leadership, and the arts (LAP,

n.d). For three years students work towards self-awareness and development, beginning their

training in martial arts, which they later apply to in-game fighting, as well as learn the basics of

prop creation and weapon making. After they have completed this stage of the course, they move

from internal maturation to spend another three years with a focus on their role in community.

During these three years, they can choose to begin the process of becoming an assistant

instructor, advancing the skills they gained. For those dedicated to the program, the rest of their

education goes into working to be a primary instructor, mastering the curriculum and drawing

upon the knowledge of their mentors in order to become one themselves.

For the purposes of this paper, a set of all three levels were observed, the students in each

class varying in the ages of their group, based in one of the sectors of the program. In addition to

this, the 4-month study also included observations from adult events which comprised of both

those with previous experience in larping and those with close to none.

As students complete each year of learning, they were given new responsibilities and trust, their accomplishment and efforts rewarding them with a sense of competency and autonomy as they are entrusted with tasks and are required to apply their skills to new material. Those taking a leadership path advance to the status of marshal and are required to assist with the teaching and set up of class, depended on to retain their knowledge from the previous 3-6 years. Gathering boffers (foam weapons), demonstrating martial arts and participating in mock games, these older students remain an essential part of the group while offering mentorship and exemplifying the higher ranks. Marshals and first-years alike must learn to use their voice in leading their peers through the curriculum, each personality coming out as they shout or calmly direct commands. Once they have gained a basis for their knowledge of larp and how it is structured and functions, students move out of the role of player to examine and experience the process of creating the modules that make up the event plots.

As students play-test their products, they must move from theoretical to practical and must adjust their ideas based on this. Sensing students seem to solidify their understanding of subjects through these hands-on experiences, testing the system they've written being a more concrete way to learn what the rules they are making do. For a naturally intuitive student, this process pulls them out of ideas and interpretation and places them in the physical reality and outcomes of their handiwork. Both sensing and intuition come into play as they navigate the intricacies of the larp system, fostering growth in these aspects of their personalities. However, as the students level through the curriculum, they are also likely to discover the niche of the hobby which suits their personality and specialize in that. Some decided that they aren't into weapon creation but enjoy strategy elements, filmography, or combat.

No matter the age, role playing in both larp events and tabletop games like Dungeons and Dragons resulted in personal exploration. For students in the high school program learning to create challenging plot devices, this meant enacting possible real-life crises and navigating ways to solve them. For the adults, it meant breaking the habit of staying within a comfort zone and avoiding risks in order to survive to truly enact a character's personality and likely actions. And for the younger middle-schoolers, this meant molding their personalities into heroes that could defeat monsters which had taken over a school for magic.

Similar to a school setting, students were able to explore and experiment in a safe and guided setting with instructors who seemed to have their best interests at heart. The first-year students modeled the positions and movements of their martial arts curriculum with the various guides and teachers intermingling as support, while the high school class went through guided visualizations in order to foster the same self-awareness. Each student was required to bring where they were and learn about their individual self in a group setting. The element of group work was clearly a large part of the hobby and program as all participants were forced to learn how to work with different personalities and skills, both in classes and at events. With live action role playing being flexible to its players, the idea of an interactive story seemed to require players and non-playing-characters to use the knowledge and backgrounds of every individual to create a collaborative narrative.

As the demands of larping can be physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausting, students and adults learn self-regulation, self-control, and self-awareness with each event. In addition to this internal experience, the program also followed a system of "leave no trace" in which players must leave the event site without any evidence of them having been there, further engendering a sense of accountability and awareness. Furthermore, the experiences players take

away from role playing are productive for seemingly unrelated 'in-real-life' situations whereby enduring the pain of a martial arts stance or fighting off demons can provide the necessary experience for dealing with heart break or a failed interview.

Lastly, the program develops not only the above skills, but the ability to improvise in any situation. From improv classes to simple panic at not knowing another character's politics, students were consistently challenged to adapt to obstacles thrown at them without warning. Though the game master and writers could guess at how the players might respond, they too had to change their plans on a moment's notice when an unexpected spell came into play or a player killed off the main enemy during a stand off. In addition, non-playing characters were required to be able to switch behaviors and personalities quickly, shifting from naïve android to heartless corporate father in no time at all. This skill to readjust and acclimate to changes is applicable in all worlds, staying with the players as they shift from fantasy to reality.

Conclusion

Based on observations and research, elements of personality and hobbies seem to interact with each other as individuals take up new interest and join new communities. Looking at the processes of narrative and simulation, it is clear that psychological theory poses ideas which link these two subjects and that there is room for further consideration of the correlation. In terms of the hobby considered, larping seems to be a strong candidate to teach a variety of skills and develop concepts of identity and awareness. Though the sample observed was limited and somewhat informal, a multitude of notes and inquiry into existing analysis point towards the validity of the findings above. The activity of larping can be seen meeting various needs on social, physical, mental, and personal domains and appears to clearly demonstrate the effects of personality and hobbies.

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