

I Haven't Stopped Playing: How Childhood Play Can Make Your Work Life Better

When I was young, I would spend hours upon hours fighting battles.

Granted, they were imaginary battles. But to me and my friends, these were life and death affairs. We would perform feats of courage battling orcs and Sith lords other monsters (and occasionally, each other) while ranging all over my family's farm.

I could spend a whole afternoon engaged in that world. That play defined my childhood and gave me those rare, exalted moments of sweet exhaustion you get from a fully used-up mind and body.

I stopped playing when I became a teenager. I got "serious" and tried to "grow up," which mostly meant bowing to social conformity while simultaneously becoming more cynical about everything around me. I had thought life was about the heroic, but my teenage years were anything but.

Today, things are different.

Today, I'm an adult, with bills and obligations and reputation and opportunity. But, surprisingly enough, I've gotten my orcs and monsters and battles back.

Granted, my "enemies" are now support tickets, emails, slide decks, blog posts, PR crises, and office politics. You won't find me LARPing in the local park (though I've heard it's great fun), though you may find me at my desk late on a Friday night. But I still play out a metaphorical battle in my work with the same verve I had in playing out the imaginary battles of my younger days.

I haven't stopped playing.

The mindset of imagination and the taste for epic battles I had at 10 are far more useful for me today than the cynicism and "worldly wisdom" I gained as a teenager.

All my play and all my imitation of my fictional heroes ironically prepared me for the sober reality of the working world. They taught me the value of being brave. They taught me how to put up with pain with a sense of humor and resilience. They showed me how to find creative solutions, tell stories, and inspire people.

It's no surprise: play is the most powerful learning mechanism we have. And the game is the set of rules and expectations and self-imposed challenges that gives an activity meaning.

If you don't have both, you're lost. The idea that play is "just for children" is born in schools, which is predictably where most ingenuity, independence, and grit goes to die.

I know you know what I'm talking about. But only you know the game you play every day when you show up for work. Maybe you should be more conscious about it.

Of course, you may not be like me. Treating your workday like a battle from *Game of Thrones* or *The Lord of the Rings* may not do it for you like it does it for me.

That's fine. Ask yourself these questions, though. What was it that you could play for hours when you were a child? What was the model, and what were the rules? **How could you resurrect that playful, game-based mentality today?**