

The Battle Over Role Playing Gaming

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War-gaming has been around for thousands of years in the military and elite levels of society. It was H.G. Wells' "Little Wars" that made it accessible to the general public in 1913. Role playing gaming (RPGing) originally grew as an offshoot from war-gaming in the 1960's and 1970's, and has grown significantly since 1974 with the publication of Dungeons & Dragons. This splitting off from classical war-gaming was due in some part to the popularity and influence of J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of Rings". Detractors of RPGing claim serious risks to life, limb, mind, and spirit for those who engage in this endeavor. Advocates claim little to no risk, and a lengthy list of benefits for those who participate in this recreational activity. Meanwhile the media has had an unbalanced bias on this topic.

Studies that have been run by both sides of the debate, as well as neutral parties, have provided some interesting data. Most of the data when valid and verifiable, has either been correlative rather than causal, or been on such a small scale in either the number test subjects or duration, that it is difficult from a scientific perspective to clearly ascertain exactly what exact characteristics of role playing gaming have the claimed positive or negative impact.

The emphasis of this document is on the verb "role playing gaming" as opposed to the noun "Role Playing Games". Live Action Role Playing known as LARP, which is a physical enactment of role playing, is not be included in this essay due to the significant differences from paper and dice role playing gaming. For the purposes of this document, the perspective that this topic is being approached with is that role playing games are merely neutral tools as a collection of paper, rules and dice that are inert and have no causal influence on anyone until they are actually used by players to participate in role playing gaming sessions. As an example corollary, a shovel inherently has neither a positive, nor negative influence when it is sitting in the storage shed on the wall. Only when someone uses the shovel to dig a ditch for drainage, or as a weapon to assault someone, does the potential for assessing positive or negative aspects manifest.

Role playing gaming can be summed up as "interactive storytelling". The participants create on paper imaginary characters in a story run by the "game master" or "narrator" who acts as writer, director and referee of this imaginary, verbal-only play. The activity is similar to childhood "let's pretend" games such as "cops and robbers" or "treasure hunt", but with some key differences; the players are sitting around a table using their

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imagination and verbally describing their character's actions to each other, rather than physically acting out the scenes. Additionally there are clearly defined rules with a moderator, the GM (Game Master), to keep the game flowing.

Some of those who are opposed to role playing gaming focus their concerns on entire genres, such as fantasy or horror. Others focus on specific products such as “Dungeons & Dragons”, “Harry Potter”, or “Call of Cthulu”. Still others express concerns about all role playing gaming in general, which has a nearly limitless range of genres, from fantasy and science fiction to horror, historical, bible-based, mystery, American “Old West, espionage and modern to name just a few.

Those who oppose the manufacture and use of role playing games in general, and “Dungeons & Dragons” specifically, have gone so far as attempting to have laws passed outlawing their use. One effort attempted to lobby the United States Federal Trade Commission, and then subsequently the Consumer Product Safety Commission, requesting a mandate to put warning labels on gaming materials that they “were hazardous and could cause suicide” (Cardwell, Jr., Paul. 1994).

The one woman organization , B.A.D.D. (Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons), widely distributed pamphlets to law enforcement agencies for use in interrogating children for potential links to satanism, included role playing gaming as one of the “danger signs” to check for during interrogation (Stackpole, A., Michael, 1990).

These organizations take a zero tolerance stance that all forms of role playing games must be prohibited. A section of a tract distributed by the “Daughters of St. Paul” clearly spells out their stance as:

“Thus more families must become informed of the hazards of Dungeons and Dragons in order to prevent it's introduction into the home, neighborhood, and school. An absolute prohibition of the game must be maintained.” (Games Unsuspecting People Play, 1984).

Prior to 1979, there does not appear to be any publicized detractors of role playing gaming. Then in 1979 a 16 year old “genius” student at Michigan State University named Dallas Egbert III suddenly disappeared. Egbert's uncle hired a private investigator named William Dear to find out what happened . Mr. Dear stated eleven possible reasons for Egbert's disappearance, conjecturing “#9 That Dallas had come to identify so much

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with his D&D character that he believed he was his character” (The Dungeon Master: The Disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III (Part I), 1991). This became the inspiration for books and television movies for the next fifteen years, as well as a misstated example by role playing gaming protagonists when listing evidence of the potential pitfalls. It turned out that Egbert had attempted suicide in the steam tunnels. His suicidal ideations had been building from his ongoing drug abuse and finally triggered by his mother being dissatisfied with him not receiving a 4.0 on his grades. He had run away and hidden under the campus steam tunnels. After failing in his drug overdose suicide attempt he hid at a friend's house for approximately a month, before finally “turning up”. A year later he finally committed suicide with a gun. The media did not retract the earlier focus on the D&D related statements. Mr. Dear revealed five years later that he found that Dallas Egbert had not played D&D much at all, and never participated in “Live Action Role Playing” at all.

Detractors first started stating that role playing greatly increased the risk of suicide. (Pulling, Radecki, BADD, & NCTV). Using the list of supposedly D&D related suicides, the claims were later shown to be based on incorrect data and later correlative research based on those numbers possibly indicates that role playing gamers may be at a less than one tenth the risk of the general population for suicide if based on the numbers of supposed suicides posited by the BADD & NCTV organizations (Cardwell, Jr., Paul 1994). The overturning of supposed “proof” about the dangers of role playing games has been a common theme.

The the opponents of role playing gaming later claimed that participants were at a risk of increased antisocial behavior such as kidnappings, robbery, assault and even homicide (Radecki and Pulling). Research in the following years determined these claims to be completely mistaken as well (Cardwell, Jr., Paul. 1994).

Those in the religious camp that were supporting the fight against role playing gaming, focused on stating that role playing gaming led participants down the path of occultism and satanism because of magic being a topic included in some role playing games (Dungeons and Dragons, Only A Game? 1986). This was strongly refuted by a number of scientific studies that indicated there was no such correlative statistical link, and also showed a distinct difference in personality from those admittedly involved in satanism and those who were role playing gamers (Leeds, Stuart. 1995).

Lastly the religious portion of those against role playing gaming quit trying to create or use “scientific”

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data that kept getting overturned, and were no longer able to capitalize on the wave of “satanic panic” that was popular in the 1980s. They instead consolidated their focus on the general “risk” of straying from a “one true god” by playing games that included non-monotheistic deities, using many citations from the bible as “proof”. Ironically there is a very strong and large group of devout Christians who are avid role playing gamers, known as the “Christian Gamers Guild”, who refute what the other groups state are the risks. This has led to a considerable amount of “name calling” and rifts between the different religious organizations (Should A Christian Play Dungeons & Dragons?, 2001).

The media has not by any means been a neutral bystander in this controversy. A study published in the *Skeptical Inquirer* on the media and its potential bias on reporting on this debate indicated:

“The Associated Press and United Press International, between 1979 and 1992, carried 111 stories mentioning role-playing games... Almost all named only Dungeons & Dragons, even though there are several hundred such games on the market...Of the 111 stories, 80 were anti-game, 19 had no majority, 9 were neutral, and only 3 were pro-game. Those three pro-game stories were all from UPI, which is a considerably smaller wire service than AP.” (Cardwell, Jr., Paul 1994).

The supporters both refute the detractors “evidence” by providing a large body of scientific research indicating potential benefits ranging from lower criminal and social risks (Cardwell, Jr., Paul. 1994), to more rapidly developing foreign language skills (Phillips, D. Brian. PhD, C.H. 1993). Many cite the benefits for developing stronger skills in reading, mathematics, creative thinking, cooperative play, history and many other cognitive and creative skills as well as potential therapeutic benefits (Kestrel, 2005).

Role playing gaming is by design a cooperative past time, which in and of itself may have significant benefits in the world where everything is becoming competitive at all ages and levels of society. There are very few social table-top recreation activities available that are cooperative rather than competitive in nature. Jessica Statsky, author of the essay *Children Need to Play, Not Compete*, expressed her concern about the over-competitive attitude towards play, and the lack of cooperation-based activities by stating:

“Their goals should be having fun, learning, and being with friends. Although winning does add to the fun, too many adults lose sight of what matters and make winning the most important goal.” (157).

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In recent years, there has been a revivalism of some of the old issues, including exact reprints of pamphlets on the topic from more than 20 years ago that have already been refuted. Additionally, as role playing gaming has begun to spread throughout other countries, some are going through the same or similar debates, including somewhat surprisingly, the Israeli Defense Force as recently as 2005 , though they have come up with a new twist, and denying higher level security clearances for anyone found to have participated in role playing gaming at any point in their lives (Army Frowns on Dungeons and Dragons).

As of 1998, there had been more than seventy four research projects related to various aspects of role playing gaming (RPG Studies.net, 1998). Over 30 years there is now a a large body of correlative scientific work, as well as smaller causal studies, refuting the anti-RPGing parties' claims, pointing to potentially very powerful positive therapeutic benefits to role playing gaming in social, intellectual and creative areas.

There is not yet a sufficient body of long term, large scale, causal scientific work detailing which components of RPGing are key to optimizing potential therapeutic benefits for the most efficient implementation as a therapy modality. Such an endeavor would require a properly designed, funded, and implemented long term project spanning ten to twenty years. It should use the key requirements of truly scientific research study, including being triple-blind, with multiple types of control groups and tracking of multiple variables, with a number of test subjects in the thousands. There is such an effort current in it's early stages at the RPG Research Project (<http://www.rpgresearch.com>). Until such an overwhelming body of evidence is clearly developed, the debate on the pro's and con's of role playing gaming will continue to flare up periodically. Meanwhile the millions of role playing gamers will keep playing despite the stigma, while many millions more potential participants will avoid or be denied the benefits from role playing gaming because of the misconceptions and misinformation propagated by misguided individuals and organizations, extremist religious groups, the press and the misinformed general public.

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