

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 at best, a mixed reputation since the successful commercial introduction in 1974 of Dungeons & Dragons. Detractors of role playing gaming 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.

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 of 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 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 wood ax inherently has neither a positive nor negative influence with it is sitting in the storage shed on the wall. Only when someone uses the ax as a tool to chop wood, 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 imagination and verbally describing their character's actions to each other, rather than the common

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misconception of physically acting out the scenes, and there are clearly defined rules with the GM as moderator to keep the game flowing.

Some of those who are opposed to role playing gaming focus their concerns on specific genres, such as fantasy, horror, or science fiction, or specific products such as “Dungeons & Dragons”. 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, espionage and modern.

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 banning their use. One effort, run by a combination effort of two individuals and their organizations (Pat Pulling of B.A.D.D. and Dr. Thomas Radecki of NCTV), was a petition to the Federal Trade Commission, then subsequently the Consumer Product Safety Commission, to mandate putting warning labels on gaming materials stating that they “were hazardous and could cause suicide” (Cardwell, Jr., Paul. 1994). The organization Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons, B.A.D.D., widely distributed pamphlets 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, touted by the press as a “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 several possible reasons for Egbert's disappearance, listing one of them as possibly overly identifying with a D&D character and that he believed he was this character, and thus went on an “adventure” in the steam tunnels under the campus and became lost. This became the inspiration for books and television movies for the next 15 years, as well as a misstated example by role playing gaming protagonists when listing

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evidence of potential pitfalls. It turned out that Egbert had attempted suicide in the steam tunnels because of his mother being dissatisfied with him not receiving a 4.0 on his grades, 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. A year later he committed suicide with a gun. The media did not retract the earlier D&D related statements. Mr. Dear revealed five years later that he saw no link between D&D and the missing student and furthermore found that Dallas Egbert had not played D&D much at all, and never participated in "Live Action Role Playing".

Organized detractors first started out stating that role playing greatly increased the risk of suicide. (Pulling, Radecki, BADD & NCTV). These claims were later shown to be based on completely invalid data. Later correlative research actually seemed to indicate that role playing gamers were at less than one tenth the risk of the general population for suicide. (Cardwell, Jr., Paul 1994). The overturning of supposed "proof" about the dangers of role playing games has been a common theme in the debate between opponents and proponents of role playing gaming.

Later the the opponents of role playing gaming claimed that participants were at an increased risk of developing antisocial behavior such as kidnappings, robberies and assault, leading even to the development of homicidal tendencies. (Radecki and Pulling). Research in the following years determined these claims to be mistaken as well (Cardwell, Jr., Paul. 1994).

Those in the religious camp that were supporting the fight against RPGing next 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). A number of studies completely disproved those claims. This was strongly refuted by 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 compared to those who were role playing gamers (Leeds, Stuart. 1995).

Lastly the extreme religious fundamentalist portion of those against role playing gaming have quit trying to create or use "scientific" 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 have now consolidated their focus on the far less tangible and measurable general "risk" of straying from a "one true god", using many citations from the bible. They

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claim that by playing games that include non-monotheistic deities, magic, demons, and any other forbidden “influences” even in a pretend setting, that participants will be lead astray. They also state in the same list as role playing gaming, music, television, books, and most other non-directly-religious activities as equally “corrupting”, but the press tends to focus on just the role playing gaming listing. Ironically there is a very strong and large group of devout Christians in the United States who are avid role playing gamers known as the “Christian Gamers Guild”, who refute what the other groups state are the risks, and tout the many benefits. This has lead to a considerable amount of “name calling” and rifts between the different branches of these 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 it's potential bias in 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).

RPGing supporters refute the detractors “evidence” by providing a large body of scientific research indicating benefits ranging from lower criminal and social risks, such as the research indicating one tenth the suicide rate for role playing gamers compared to that of the general population (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, and many other skills and potential therapeutic benefits (Kestrel, 2005).

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

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“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.” Role playing gaming allows cooperative play with common goals that can be seen as “winning” but as a group win, rather than at the cost of someone winning with someone having to lose. This fits the Stephen R. Covey “*7 Habits of Highly Effective People*” paradigm of “Habit 4” for looking for a “Win/Win” for everyone involved.

In recent years, there has been a revivalism of some of the old issues, including exact reprints of pamphlets and tracts on the topic from more than 20 years ago that have already been clearly refuted, but forgotten by the much of the current public and press. Additionally, as role playing gaming has begun to spread rapidly through other countries, some are going through the same or similar debates including, somewhat surprisingly, the Israeli Defense Force as recently as 2005 (Army Frowns on Dungeons and Dragons). The IDF has presented a new twist to the debate, by denying higher level security clearances to those who have participated in role playing gaming. They state gamers are too open minded and not rigid enough in their thinking, using the phrase “too susceptible to influence”. Further research will have to be performed to determine if the IDF's claims have any validity. Even if such claims were true, this would be in the unusual circumstances of a very rigid militaristic setting, which is not appropriate for normal societal interaction or value judgments. In fact, this may even be another indicator of positive benefits of role playing gaming, since overly “rigid thinking” is considered a significant component in many psychoses and disabilities (APA DSM-IV-TR – American Psychiatric Association: Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Version IV Text Revision, 2000).

As of 1998, there had been more than seventy four research projects related to various aspects of fantasy role playing gaming (RPG Studies.net, 1998). With almost three decades of research there is now a more than sufficient body of evidence disproving the claims opponents make against role playing gaming. The overall results would indicate that after almost 30 years of debate, there is now a sufficiently large body of correlative scientific work, as well as smaller causal studies, pointing to some significant indicators of 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 work detailing which components of

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role playing gaming are key to optimizing the therapeutic benefits for the most efficient implementation as a potential therapy modality. Such an endeavor would require a properly designed, funded, and implemented long term project spanning ten to twenty years, though this could conceivably be achieved in progressive smaller stages building to a larger complete body of work. Such an endeavor should use the key requirements of truly scientific research studies, including being triple-blind, with multiple types of control groups and tracking of multiple populations and variables, with a number of test subjects in the thousands to achieve the best credibility and impact on the currently entrenched misconceptions about role playing gaming. 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 millions more potential participants will avoid or be denied the benefits from role playing gaming because of the misconceptions and misinformation propagated by extremist religious organizations, the press, and the general public.

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