

The Defamation of Role-playing Gaming and Gamers.

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Original Version 2008-11-20
Version 2 2008-12-06
Version 3 2011-12-09

Many people have at least heard of role-playing gaming since its inception in 1974, though usually in the form of negative press or related word-of-mouth rumors about *Dungeons & Dragons*. With less than 3% of the mainstream media and press reports providing even remotely positive coverage, it is not surprising that the general public has so many misconceptions about this cooperative recreational activity (Cardwell 158). The dwindling but tenacious numbers of active detractors have continued to make unsubstantiated, and discredited, claims that those who participate in role-playing games have an increased likelihood of suicide (Pulling, Devil's 9), violent behavior, homicidal tendencies (60 Minutes), antisocial behavior, criminal activities (Pulling, B.A.D.D. 14), detached from reality (Greenberg), and/or more likely to participate in occultism or "satanism" (Gribble and Legako 298). Some individuals and groups still react with outright ignorance-based fear and hatred, still continuing their attempts to have role-playing gaming banned and the books burned (Schnoebelen, Christian). There is an increasing body of scientific evidence developing that not only completely discredits these accusations, but indicates strong benefits from participating in role-playing games that could be developed for use as a powerful tool in education (Phillips) and/or therapeutic environments (Therapeutic 3-4). Some of the key personalities behind the organizations that drove these attacks against role-playing games were later found to have been making very questionable and even fraudulent statements (Cardwell 159), but

unfortunately the media only rarely follows up on such refutations. It will likely take another decade or more of more of research studies showing the positive benefits, and a push for the media to report on such information, before the public perception is turned around.

Role-playing gaming (RPGing) is a direct descendant of the ancient activity known as "war-gaming". War-gaming has been around for hundreds of years in the military and elite levels of society. It was H.G. Wells' 1913 book titled Little Wars: A Game for Boys from Twelve Years to One Hundred and Fifty and for That More Intelligent Sort of Girl Who Likes Games and Books that made it accessible to the public as a hobbyist activity. Ironically the pacifist author offered this books in the hopes it would reduce aggressive behavior in the "real" world by providing an imaginary outlet instead of acting out. Wells' book made this activity accessible to the general public by offering simple rules and methods for entertaining recreation and re-creation of historic and imaginary conflicts. This would usually include paper and pencil drawings and often also includes miniature representative figurines and landscaping. War-gaming is still very much a popular activity for military officer training, as well as hobbyists (Gray).

Role-playing gaming originally grew as an offshoot from war-gaming in the 1960s and 1970s. The popularity of role-playing games (RPGs) grew exponentially in the 1970s and early 1980s with the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974, with tens of millions of avid participants during the peak years.

What exactly is role-playing gaming?

There is a lot of misunderstanding, misinformation, and confusion

on the part of the general public, and the media, regarding this topic. Role-playing gaming can be summed up as interactive and cooperative storytelling. The participants in a role-playing game (RPG) session create imaginary characters on paper in a story run by the GM, "game master" a.k.a. Dungeon Master (DM) or "narrator", who acts as the writer, director, and referee of this creative verbal-only play. The activity is similar to children's "let's pretend" games such as "cops and robbers" or "treasure hunt", but with some pre-established, clearly defined, rules to help keep game play flowing as smoothly as possible. In the case of "classic" pen and paper role-playing games, the players sit around a table using their imagination and verbally describe their pretend characters' actions to each other. Paper and dice role-playing gaming differs from live-action role-playing (LARP) which consists of physically acting out the scenes. Classic RPGs are also different from computer-based RPGs which takes place interacting in a "cyber" environment.

With classic RPGing paper notes are used to keep track of the developing characters. Dice, cards, or other items are used to add some element of chance to imagined actions taken throughout the course of a game session. Players work together to overcome imagined challenges and achieve various goals.

RPGing is by design a cooperative past time. Jessica Statsky, author of the essay "Children Need to Play, Not Compete", expressed her concern about the over-competitive attitude towards other types of play, and lack of cooperation-based activities by stating, "Their goals should be having fun, learning, and being with friends" (157).

In 1979, just five years after the first *Dungeons & Dragons* book was released, the first negative press event occurred blaming *D&D* for being the cause of an unfortunate situation. The disappearance of sixteen

year old Dallas Egbert III from Michigan State University. The private investigator, William Dear, was hired by the family to find their son. Dear listed one of the possible reasons for for Egbert's disappearance as his possibly over-identifying with a D&D character and getting lost in the campus steam tunnels.

It turned out that Egbert, who used and made illegal drugs among other hobbies, had attempted suicide in the steam tunnels, and after failing in his drug overdose attempt, ran away until he decided to show up quite some time later. The private investigator admitted five years later in his book The Dungeon Master that he saw no link between *D&D* and the missing student. Dear also clearly stated that he felt the media had seriously misrepresented the steam tunnel incident (Dear 13). The media never followed up or corrected the severely distorted statements despite Dear's and other's requests to do so. These distorted events were further distorted and reinforced in the public's collective memory by the TV movie Mazes and Monsters starring Tom Hanks.

In the 1980s some individuals and groups had such an extreme abhorrence about role-playing gaming they went so far as attempting to convince the police to profile and arrest gamers and impound their gaming material (Interviewing 14-15), and even tried to persuade the United States federal government to pass laws making role-playing gaming illegal in any schools, libraries, or publicly-funded locations, or at least require all game books be labeled "use of this product will encourage suicidal or homicidal behavior" (Cardwell 162). These petitions were made to the Federal Trade Commission, Consumer Products Safety Commission, and members of Congress (Waldron). All of these petitions were rejected once the evidence was reviewed (Cardwell 161).

Organized detractors first started out stating that role-playing

greatly increased the risk of suicide (Pulling 9). These claims were later completely discounted, and correlative research actually indicated that role-playing gamers were at less than one tenth the risk of the general population for suicide (Cardwell 163). The opponents of RPGing then claimed that participants were at a risk of increased antisocial behavior such as kidnapping, robbery, assault and homicide. Multiple research projects in the following years determined these claims to also be completely false (Cardwell 159). There have been instances of people blaming *D&D* for committing murders (Hughes), but those statements have continually been rejected by every court in which it has arisen (Hines). Enough people have tried to use this, that there is now a short hand term for this approach known as the "D&D Defense". Attackers also tried to take the game manufacturing companies to court, but the lawsuits were subsequently thrown out in every instance (Watters).

Those in the religious camp that were supporting the fight against role-playing games 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 (Molitor 1). A number of studies completely disproved those claims and personality tests clearly showed a distinct difference in personality from those admittedly involved in satanism versus role-playing gamers (Leeds).

There are still a handful of religious fundamentalists acting against RPGing who have quit trying to find or falsely generate ambiguous "scientific" data that kept easily being discredited. These groups also are no longer able to capitalize on the wave of "satanic panic" (Brunvand 368) that was popular in the 1980s. They have now consolidated their focus on the far less tangible and less measurable general claimed "risk" of straying from a "one true god", using many citations from the bible

(Schnoebelen, Christian).

Ironically, or maybe because of the demand by some that no Christian gamers should participate in role-playing games (Schnoebelen, Christian), there is a very strong and large group of devout Christians who are avid role-playing gamers known as the "Christian Gamers Guild". This guild refutes what the anti-RPG groups state are the risks, and tout the many benefits (Guild) of role-playing gaming. This has led to a considerable amount of name calling and rifts between the different religious organizations (Schnoebelen, Christian).

The media deserves its fair share of the blame for the stigma against gamers. A study published in the journal *The Skeptical Inquirer* on the media and potential bias in reporting on this debate from 1979 through 1992 indicated that "Of the 111 stories, 80 were anti-game, 19 had no majority, 9 were neutral, and only 3 were pro-game." (Cardwell 157).

The RPG supporters refute the detractors "evidence" by providing a large body of scientific research indicating benefits ranging from lower criminal and social risks (Cardwell 157), to more rapidly developing foreign language skills (Phillips), to improved child behavior and attitudes (Bay-Hinitz). Many cite the benefits for developing stronger skills in reading, mathematics, creative thinking, cooperative play, social skills (DeRenard), and many other skills, including potentially significant therapeutic benefits (Kestrel). Far more information on these benefits are detailed and updated by the RPG Research Project at <http://www.rpgresearch.com>.

The decades long onslaught of negative press has created a lasting though slowly diminishing stigma, which in turn has created a suppressive negative feedback loop slowing the adoption of role-playing gaming in

areas impacted by those opposing this cooperative social recreational activity. This means that many people who might otherwise have enjoyed and benefited from role-playing gaming, have avoided it for fear of being socially ostracized and labeled a "gamer geek" or worse (UberGoober).

There have been more than 70 studies performed related to the psychological relationships between role-playing gaming and gamers (Kim). Most people do not realize that more and more studies are pointing towards very strong evidence indicating significant positive benefits for those who participate regularly in role-playing gaming (RPG Research).

The detractors appear to have pretty much run out of new ideas for their attacks, so they have been republishing, many times verbatim, the same pamphlets, tracts, statements, and false claims that were published originally in the 1980's and early 1990's, but with new dates and covers.

There *is* a legacy of more than a decade of false claims and negative press to overcome, but in the face of this, there is increased effort by a growing number of individuals and organizations to develop role-playing gaming as a powerful tool to use for educational (RPG Studies) and therapeutic benefits (RPG Research). As is quite strongly represented in the "man in the streets" section of the quasi-documentary movie *Über Goober*, despite the many studies over the past three decades showing scientific proof discrediting the negative claims, many people, who have an opinion on the topic, usually look down on those who participate in role-playing games (*Über Goober*). It is likely going to take a number of years, with a significant amount of time, money, and published research, to undo the far-reaching damage that was done in previous years.

There have been more than 74 research projects specifically related to various therapeutic and educational aspects of fantasy role-playing

(RPG Studies.net). Over a nearly thirty year time span there is a growing body of correlative scientific work, as well as smaller causal studies, refuting the anti-RPGing parties' claims and pointing to 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 in place detailing which components of RPGing are key to optimizing potential therapeutic benefits for the most efficient implementation as a therapeutic modality (RPG Research). Until such an overwhelming body of evidence is developed, the debate on the pro's and con's of RPGing will continue to flare up, and the many millions of role-playing gamers will keep on playing, despite the stigma, while millions more will avoid or be denied the joy and benefits from role-playing gaming because of misconceptions and misinformation.

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