

Role-playing Games Used as Educational and Therapeutic Tools for Youth and Adults

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Role-playing gaming (RPGing) is a cooperative recreational activity with many variants. There was a considerable amount of negative press in the 1980's about a specific fantasy role-playing game (RPG) called Dungeons & Dragons. This controversy created a stigma that contributed in part to significantly slowing the adoption, acceptance, and growth of the role-playing games (RPGs) by the general public. Despite this stigma there is slowly increasing use of RPGs in educational and therapeutic settings. There are strong indications from dozens of scientific studies that role-playing gaming can benefit many, if not most, population groups from children to elderly, from learning disabled to physically disabled, and even for help with some forms of mental illness.

Role-playing games are cooperative, improvisational, structured, and free form “interactive stories” (Phillips) that take place in the participants' imagination, usually seated around a table and using paper and pencil to keep track of events and persona of note. Typically one of the participants is chosen to act as the narrator, or referee, of this non-competitive recreational experience, known variously as the Game Master (GM) or Dungeon Master (DM). The GM creates or modifies the settings in which the other participants, the Player Characters (PCs), will interact with each other and various Non-Player Characters (NPCs) under the control of the GM. The group of participants then dynamically unfold a series of social interactions and events for an improvisational-theater-like experience, but generally, except in the case of live action role-playing (LARP), without physically acting out any of the activities of their characters.

There are a nearly limitless number of settings available for these games, ranging across all

Role-playing Games Used as Educational and Therapeutic Tools for Youth and Adults

genres from medieval fantasy to science fiction, “Wild West”, horror and suspense, mysteries, historical recreations, military settings and more. If there has been a scenario of interest to people expressed through writing, visual arts, movies, audio, legend, folklore, history, or other medium, there is likely a role-playing game to fit that setting.

Unlike most social games that are frequently competitive in nature, most role-playing gaming is cooperative, with no clearly defined winners or losers and potentially no defined end to the game. Instead the goal is for a mutually rewarding experience for as long as the participants wish.

Just as it is very difficult for anyone to really understand the experience of performing in a live theater, concert, skydiving, or racing, without having participated in the activities, many people find it difficult to understand exactly what role-playing gaming is like without experiencing it firsthand. However a small taste of the experience can be hinted at by taking the time to illustrate a sample game session. In his unpublished psychological study *Looking Through the Glass: An Exploration of the Interplay Between Player and Character Selves in Role-Playing Games*, Nicholas Yee phrased the overall feeling of RPG participants very aptly when he stated that “RPG’s are not just a game; they are an experience.”

It is already well established within the therapeutic and psychological industries that role-playing, sans the gaming aspect, can be a very powerful therapeutic tool (Tietel). There are already a variety of well established therapeutic role-playing-related modalities including Gestalt (Perls) and psychodrama (Bell). The Therapeutic Recreation industry, represented by organizations such as the American Therapeutic Recreation Association (ATRA), has established for decades that recreational activities, and specifically games, have very strong therapeutic benefits (Austin and Crawford 203-204).

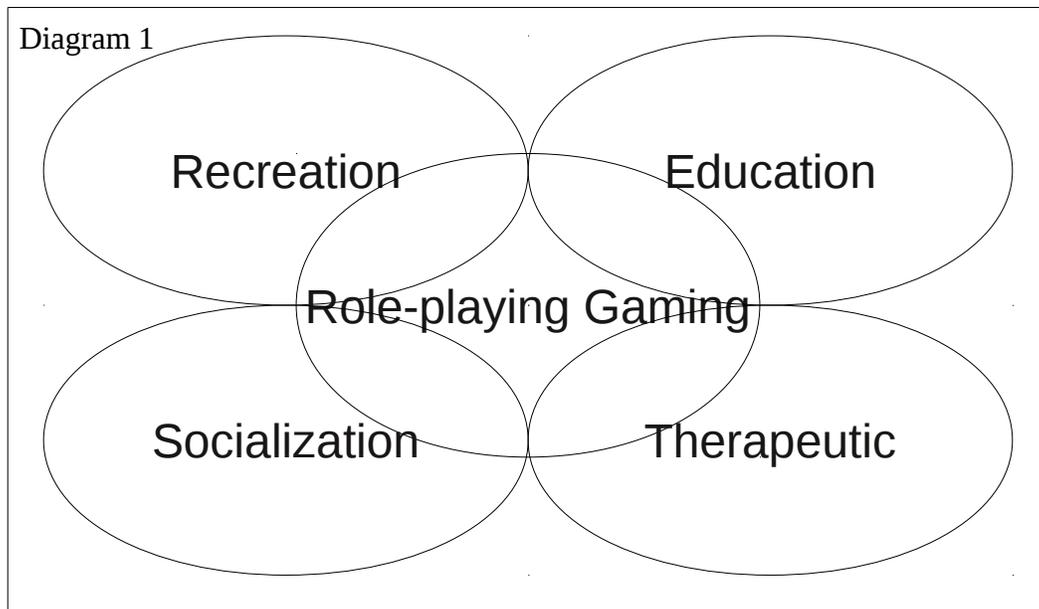
There is a steadily growing movement in recent years to use non-RPG games for education

Role-playing Games Used as Educational and Therapeutic Tools for Youth and Adults

(Moursand 6) and therapy . Oddly, the various branches of the psychotherapy world have not yet significantly delved into the bridge of these modalities, namely the current separation of role-playing as therapy, and games as therapy which would then be united together as role-playing game therapy.

This resistance could be due to the ongoing stigma caused by the controversial publicity of role-playing gaming in the 1980s (Walton), but there is no clear indication as of yet why RPGs would not be logically included in the tool set of modalities for recreation therapy specialists at the very least, and for consideration by more generalized psychotherapists looking for alternative modalities.

RPGing overlaps with a number of other domains' benefits, specifically recreation, education, therapeutic, and socialization, as illustrated in the Venn diagram below.



In reaction to the strong negative publicity of the 1980s, there have been dozens of research studies performed to prove or disprove the negative claims made against role-playing games. It is possible that this much publicized controversy has been the contributing factor in delaying the adoption of role-playing games by the psychotherapy community. The end result is that a large number

Role-playing Games Used as Educational and Therapeutic Tools for Youth and Adults

of people have avoided or even banned role-playing gaming and the related books and components due to their being “fearful of the kind of influence that they may bring with them”(Walton). Over the years there were incidents of schools and stores removing and banning the books, and forbidding the activity after school. “A hobby that entertains millions has become the subject of scorn;” (Walton). This debate is covered in more detail in the RPG Research document *The Defamation of role-playing Games and Gamers*. Further discussion on this debate is beyond the scope of this document.

In spite of the aforementioned stigma, there does at least appear to be some traction gaining in some educational settings using role-playing games to enhance the learning experience in classroom settings. This started with a handful of instructors and schools trying “alternative” approaches to teaching a class here and there using role-playing games to enhance a particular subject such as social studies (Haddad). In recent years role-playing gaming as a part of the curriculum has grown to be more widely accepted in more main stream academic settings for all ages from elementary and middle-to-high school through college level (Haddad;Cruz;McClain 1;Phillips). These courses cover a broad range of disciplines, ranging across the spectrum including language arts (McClain 1), mathematics and statistics (Walton), social studies (Haddad), history (Cruz), and English as a second language.

“Because RPGs are language-centered communication games, they have a definite positive effect on student socialization skills [and language development] which are central to RPGs”(Phillips).

Since even the simpler role-playing games are typically written for at least for an eighth grade reading level, and many are at a more challenging level, role-playing games strongly encourage and enhance reading skills. Another benefit for those who participate in role playing gaming, is that they are often inspired to learn to research in specific areas of knowledge such as history, language,

Role-playing Games Used as Educational and Therapeutic Tools for Youth and Adults

politics, demographics, craftsmanship, geography, sciences, literature, and many other aspects that they feel will enhance their experience in future game sessions.

Most, though not all, role-playing games typically use dice as a means of representing the uncontrollable randomness of circumstances in determining whether a player's character succeeds in various actions. This constant use of variables means participants will frequently be immersed in mathematics, statistical analysis, and algebraic calculations.

Despite the negative clichés to the contrary, RPGs are inherently a social, and social skills developing, activity. Participants frequently develop life long friendships, and others learn to work with people they normally would have nothing else in common with.

On the therapeutic side of the RPG coin, there are a large number of other benefits for those who engage in role-playing gaming. There have been several dozen official scientific studies related to RPGs since the 1980s. Most of these studies have been correlative rather than causal in their data acquisition and comparison. This means that two, or more, sets of data are compared to determine if there are any trends in the data that match or overlap. When a strong matching pattern is found, then there is a direct, positive correlation. Sometimes there are inverse, negative correlations as well. Most of these studies have been very small in the number of test subjects, the scope of variables tracked, and the time periods observed, so only a few causal aspects have been somewhat defined. This leaves the possibility of a high bias in data due to the limited selection size of the populations studied, and the lack of single, double, or triple blind study methodologies. This leaves a significant gap still waiting to be filled. The RPG Research project intends to fill many of these gaps over time.

Despite the notable paucity of well-funded research on the therapeutic aspects of RPGing, what research there is has been for the most part very promising in indicating the great potential for role-playing gaming being a powerful therapeutic modality for many population groups.

Role-playing Games Used as Educational and Therapeutic Tools for Youth and Adults

Studies have shown significant benefits in allaying depression. As Wayne Blackmon colorfully stated in a 1994 case study on the effects of allowing a suicidally depressed 19 year old to use D&D as an outlet and emotional development tool, “The use of this game as an adjunct to therapy can allow patients an opportunity to explore their mental dungeons and slay their psychic dragons” (Psychotherapeutic 624).

One of the key tenants of the Therapeutic Recreation profession is finding the balance between too much challenge and boredom, to achieve, maintain, and maximize the state of awareness known as “flow” (Austin and Crawford 99-100). Many a gamer can attest to being taunted by non-gaming peers, or scolded by parents, for those times when a great game session had them so caught up, that one moment it was 6:00 pm, and the next time they looked at the clock it was 2:00 am. This was humorously well illustrated in the docu-comedy RPG video movie *The Gamers II: Dorkness Rising* (Gentlemen 2008).

Though this loss of time is generally a positive thing, as with any other activity, it is possible for anyone in any enjoyable activity to become obsessive and let things get out of balance. It is important not to let responsibilities such as work, school, or relationships begin to experience a negative impact from getting carried away for a prolonged period. Fortunately, since communication is the primary implement of role-playing gaming, having healthy communication is usually very productive in helping keep “real life” and gaming balanced. For parents with gamers, it can help reduce their concern considerably if they make the effort to understand, communicate, and learn about their child's recreational activities.

There has generally been the assumption, even among gamers, that since RPGing is escape-oriented, the last person you want to participate regularly would be someone suffering from various dissociative disorders such as schizophrenia. Though the jury is still out on this, there have been

Role-playing Games Used as Educational and Therapeutic Tools for Youth and Adults

several studies done with this population, and surprisingly only one study, involving long term inpatient adolescents and taking an “unstructured” approach, had to be terminated because it was reinforcing negative pathologies (Ascherman 335). However, the other related studies actually contradicted the popular media and public assumptions (DeRenard and Kline), showing that, when *structured and properly managed*, the participants benefited significantly by actually improving their ability to differentiate between reality and dissociative events, as well as develop their ability to relate to others and self more effectively (Hughes;Blackmon).

There is currently estimated to have been at least 20 million players of the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons since 1974, the game that started the entire genre. The creators thought it might sell 50,000 copies. There have been many millions more playing other RPGs besides D&D over the decades. As the generations that grew up with this activity become doctors and scientists, it is not surprising that there is an increasing momentum for ongoing research on the the benefits of role-playing games for enhancing education and as a potential therapy tool. In the thirty five years since the inception of role-playing games, the studies have just reached the tip of the iceberg, the potential benefits indicated so far, seem to hint at something that could be very beneficial to many populations in the next thirty years of research.

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"Cooperative games: a way to modify aggressive and cooperative behaviors in young children." Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis 27.3 (1994): 433-446.

Abstract: 70 children, ages 4 to 5 years old, were involved in a behavioral comparison of competitive and cooperative games. The study found a direct correlation between increases in aggressive behavior during "free time play" after competitive games, and a directly correlative decrease in aggression after cooperative play. Suggests that increased use of cooperative games could significantly increase self-esteem and peer socialization.

- [2] Blackmon, Wayne D. "Dungeons and Dragons: The Use of a Fantasy Game in the Psychotherapeutic Treatment of a Young Adult." Journal of Psychotherapy 48.4 (1994): 624-632. 28 Nov. 2008

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Abstract: This is a case history of a depressive, suicide, schizoid personality 19 year old male that was not responding to traditional therapies. Using the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons as a bridge to help him develop a communication and rapport with the doctor, he began to increase in his openness, and ability to analyze the relationships in games, to increase his ability to become aware of relationships in "real" and improve his socialization, empathy, and communication skills. He was able to use it as an outlet for anger he

Role-playing Games Used as Educational and Therapeutic Tools for Youth and Adults

had towards his father, and then discuss those actions that were "in game" and begin developing skills of awareness and introspection that he was able to generalize in his every day life in a very productive fashion. The only caveat is to keep the hobby from becoming too all-consuming as with any other activity if it becomes out of balance and obsessive.

- [3] Cruz, Laura. "The Great War in the Classroom." Academic Exchange Quarterly 8.1 (2004):

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Abstract: A history professor wished to enhance the appreciation and experience of learning history, specifically the issues leading up to World War I, for her students through the use of a role-playing game scenario. She used a combination of mostly in-class interaction with some online enhancement. She had some issues with some students not carrying their fair share, but she developed creative means of tracking and "encouraging" them. There is some debate about whether allowing alternate outcomes really correctly teaches history, but the professor found that this approach engaged the students into really delving into the real facts and then have a much deeper understanding and appreciation of their study.

- [4] Haddad, Sam. "The Results of Playing The Game of Social Studies Knowledge in an Eighth Grade Classroom." Diss. Wayne State University of Michigan, 2003.

Abstract: A middle school instructor used a role-playing game to

Role-playing Games Used as Educational and Therapeutic Tools for Youth and Adults

enhance the participation, involvement, interest, and retention of his students in two different classes when teaching social studies course material. The students would participate in the game scenarios for 35 minutes of each class, and then spend the last 10 minutes in question and answer sessions and open discussion. The study ran for only 10 weeks, but notes a slight increase in knowledge retention and decrease in absences during the study compared to the baseline. The study would likely have shown even more improvement over a longer period. Allowing the students to chose their own teams rather than random assignment I believe was not as beneficial as random assignment. In my view this was a more competitive implementation than other typical role-playing game settings. As the study notes to some extent, a longer, and more cooperative, approach might have helped increase the overall class unity and results significantly.

- [5] Hughes, John. "Therapy is Fantasy: Role-playing, Healing, and the Construction of Symbolic Order." Unpublished Essay Australian National University, 1988

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Abstract: The writer interviewed several participants, and focused primarily on a single female participant who had a history of severe depression. It was noted that her depressive and psychosomatoform symptoms were suspended during times when she role played. As she continued to play, her fellow participants and the author encouraged her to analyze the distinctions of her (male) character, and note the

Role-playing Games Used as Educational and Therapeutic Tools for Youth and Adults

traits and contrasts between the pretend character and her own traits. As she became for cognizant, she was able to use role-playing gaming to help resolve a number of issues and improve her quality of life markedly.

[6] Lafferty, Mur. "D&D Therapy." The Escapist 29 Mar. 2006. 4 Dec. 2008

http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue_60/353-D-D-Therapy

Abstract: Covers role play, games in general, role-playing games, puzzles, and computer games, in their abilities to soothe, heal, develop hard skills such as math, speech therapy, problem solving, and reading, also soft skills such as socialization, intuition, and empathy. Provides example of severely brain damaged individual having an exceptional recovery very much attributed to participation in old fashioned role-playing games.

[7] McClain, Rachel. "Imagine That! Developing Fantasy Role-Play in the Language Arts Classroom." The New York Times Learning Network. 8 Dec. 2000.

<http://www.wbrschools.net/curriculum/reading7/imaginethat.pdf>.

Abstract: Using Dungeons & Dragons role-playing game as a talking point and illustration tool, this lesson plan outlines approaching role-playing gaming from various perspectives including participation in role-playing, self expression through related journal writing through the D&D character

Role-playing Games Used as Educational and Therapeutic Tools for Youth and Adults
personification, and critical thinking when analyzing an article
on the game.

- [8] Moursund, D.G. Introduction to Using Games in Education: A Guide for Teachers and Parents. 2007. Using Games in Education. 30 Jan. 2007. David Moursund. 1 Dec. 2008 <<http://uoregon.edu/~moursund/Books/Games/Games.pdf>>.

Abstract: This lengthy 155 page document is only about regular games (though briefly mentions MMORPG Runescape), not RPG's. But excellent for the bridging of gaming as a learning tool in both formal and informal settings.. Also, not the overlapping spheres diagram between education and games, This would be good to do the same with RPG and Therapy too in my own paper.

- [9] Papert, Seymour. "Does Easy Do It? Children, Games, and Learning". Game Developer Magazine. June 1998. <<http://www.papert.org/articles/Doeseasydoit.html>>

Abstract: This paper covers the convergence of "edutainment" and advises game designers to not be dishonest about "learning without knowing it" or making it too easy. He makes a great statement about most kids don't complain about school being too hard, but too boring. This focuses mostly on computer based games.

- [10] Phillips, Brian David. "Role-playing Games in the English as a Foreign

Role-playing Games Used as Educational and Therapeutic Tools for Youth and Adults

Language Classroom." Proceeding. Tenth National Conference on English Teaching and Learning in the Republic of China, Taipei: Crane Publishing, Ltd. 15 May 1994.

<<http://www.rpg.net/larp/papers/eflrpg.html>>

The professor of an English as a Second Language uses role-playing games of various genres, including D&D, to help accelerate and engage his students' learning and facility in communication and socialization.

[11] Tietel, Jay. "Wanna Play?" Psychology Today Aug. 1998. 28 Nov. 2008

<<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/index.php?term=19980701-000027&page=1>>

Abstract: The author covers a diverse range of games, including various manifestations of role-playing games, with historical, psychological, and social implications in many scenarios, used for more than just recreation. The author illustrates the many facets and benefits role-playing provides from recreation, education and social normalization, to therapeutic benefits.

[12] Walton, William. "Role-Playing Games: The Stigmas and Benefits." The Escapist Dec. 1995. 27 Nov. 2008

<<http://www.theescapist.com/rpgpaper.htm>>.

Abstract: This paper gives a fairly comprehensive coverage of the evolution and societal reactions to role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons. It provides a breakdown of the social dynamics that developed in the 1980s and the remaining stigma that has continued to impact

Role-playing Games Used as Educational and Therapeutic Tools for Youth and Adults

those who participate in RPGs. It also covers some of the aspects of RPGs and their beneficial use in educational facilities.

- [13] Yee, Nicholas. "Looking Through the Glass: An Exploration of the Interplay Between Player and Character Selves in Role-Playing Games" Unpublished Psychological Study Haverford College, 1999.

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Abstract: Great quote on RPGs being more than just a game, they are an experience. Comments on a considerable number of studies and their implications on role-playing gamers personalities. Analyses questionnaire data results that once again show positive traits in gamers in the face of the public misconceptions, but also continues to leave a lot of questions open between correlative versus causal benefits of role-playing or role-playing gamers.