THE ROLE-PLAYING GAME FACT CHECKER

provided by The Escapist – **www.theescapist.com**

This pamphlet is a quick guide to the facts, myths, and misunderstandings about role-playing games. It is provided as a helpful reference for anyone who is writing any story - fact or fiction - about RPGs.

This document covers the very basic concepts of the hobby - for more detailed information, visit The Escapist (**www.theescapist.com**) and look for the "Facts and Fictions About Roleplaying Games" pamphlet at **www.theescapist.com/facts-and-fictions-about-RPGs.pdf**

If you find that you have questions that are not addressed here, feel free to email the author of this document at RPGadvocate@gmail.com

BASIC FACTS ABOUT ROLEPLAYING GAMES

▶ **A roleplaying game is a form of collaborative storytelling.** Players create characters that they portray in a story that is developed by themselves and a referee. Dice are usually used to resolve conflicts of any sort, such as whether a character can climb a wall, convince a guard to let them enter, or hit an opponent in combat.

▶ **The referee of a roleplaying game is called a Dungeon Master or DM (for *D&D*) or Game Master or GM (for most other games).** Other RPGs besides *D&D* often have a unique name for their game master, but to avoid confusion, it would be acceptable to simply use GM.

The GM of a role-playing game often prepares the story beforehand, describes the events of the story to the players, and roleplays the other characters and antagonists that the characters encounter.

The GM is not a master over the players and doesn't tell them what to do in real life. GM is not a "level" in the game, like a Black Belt in karate. Anyone that wants to guide a story in an RPG can be a GM - in fact, most gaming groups will allow many players to have a turn at GMing. The GM is not necessarily the most experienced player in the group, and there is no requirement that someone must fulfill to become a GM.

▶ **Unlike most common types of games, there are no winners or losers in a roleplaying game.** A player does not 'win' when their character achieves a goal, nor do they 'lose' when their character fails or dies. The goal of any role-playing game is usually to create a satisfying story for all participants.

▶ **RPGs are played around a table, or in some other comfortable place, usually indoors.** Players do not typically dress as their characters or whack each other with swords or other weapons. That sort of activity is often described as LARPing, or Live Action Role-Playing, which is a hobby that is closely related to traditional RPGs, but commonly with fewer rules and more physical activity. (As an added note, many LARPs do not involve physical contact of any sort whatsoever. Those that do are often called "Boffer LARPs" after the padded weapons, or "boffers," that are used. For more information on LARPing, visit **www.larpaweb.net** and **www.nero.com**)

▶ **Roleplaying games do not normally use cards.** *Magic: the Gathering* and other collectible card games contain many different cards with fantasy characters, monsters, and spells on them. Games such as these are frequently mistaken as roleplaying games, or *Dungeons & Dragons* in particular. There are a few RPGs that use special cards, or regular playing cards, but they are uncommon.

▶ **Roleplaying games are not board games.** Some RPGs can use a map with miniature figures on it, but this is almost always optional. *Dungeons & Dragons* can be played with miniatures, but most other RPGs do not use them. There are board games that have a *Dungeons & Dragons* theme (such as the *Ravenloft* board game), but these are not the same sort of game.

▶ **The frequently heard statement that "A game does not end when the players leave the table, and an RPG session could last months or years," is mostly true, but what it sometimes implies is not true.** This is sort of like saying "a television series does not end when an episode is over, but could last for months or years." A gaming group can continue playing together using the same characters with the same GM for a long time, but this is not a requirement of the game at all. It is just as common for a group to enjoy a "one-shot" adventure that doesn't continue longer than a single night.

The implication that a game that carries over for months or years is still being played when the players are away from the table, carrying over into their real lives day and night, is false. Just as an actor or actress does not continue playing a character between taping episodes of a television show, so does a player in a roleplaying game drop character between game sessions.

▶ **"RPG" is a term that has a couple of different meanings, which can cause some confusion.** RPG is now a term used to describe "pen and paper" or "tabletop" games (such as the subject of this list, which are games played with books and dice around a table) and also video games that have the elements of a tabletop RPG (such as *World of Warcraft*). Some of the latter may even have been based on a tabletop RPG (*D&D*, for example), and there even exist tabletop RPGs that have been based on computer RPGs (such as *Everquest*). Sometimes, you will see the distinction "CRPG" (computer RPG) or "MMORPG" (massively multiplayer online RPG) for the digital versions, but not always. If you're confused about which category a particular game falls into, check with some of your sources or email the author of this document at RPGadvocate@gmail.com.

▶ **Roleplaying games are not as complex as is commonly believed.** Many people look at the size of the rulebook to a roleplaying game and make two incorrect assumptions - first, that all of the contents of the book are rules for the game, and second, that all of those rules must be memorized by the players in order to play.

The truth is that in most cases, the books you see contain more than just rules. A game such as *D&D,* for example, has many thick books in its product line, but much of that material is descriptions of different places, people, magic, and monsters. Also, unlike board and card games, it is not necessary to memorize all of the rules in a rulebook. Many of the rules are used for handling certain situations, and can be referenced when needed. You can play most roleplaying games with a passing knowledge of the basic rules, and any good RPG group will help you along the way with any rules that you don't remember.

▶ **Roleplaying games are still very popular, and are played by millions of people all over the world.** They are not a lost relic of the 1980s. In fact, the recent new editions of *D&D* (released in 2000, 2003, and 2008) have been very instrumental in bringing many new players to the hobby. There are hundreds of roleplaying games on the market currently, produced by a variety of professional publishers as well as a thriving independent gaming community.

▶ **Roleplaying games come in many flavors.** Not all RPGs have a Tolkienesque, heroic fantasy theme. There are many different genres of RPGs - superheroes, science fiction, horror, espionage, historical, anime, cartoons, and fairy tales, to name just a few. There are even RPGs that cross two or more genres to create a whole new flavor, such as fantasy/science fiction, or horror/wild west.

▶ **Roleplaying games bestow many benefits to the players, and have been used by educators as a teaching tool.** RPGs help improve reading, writing, comprehension, and basic math skills, and can promote creativity, strategy, teamwork, problem solving, social skills, and spatial reasoning. They can inspire interest in history, art, science, world cultures, or practically any other subject. Because of this, many educators have used RPGs in schools, either in the gifted and talented program, or as a direct teaching tool.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

▶ *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D* for short) is the most recognized and oldest known commercially available role-playing game. It was first published in 1974, and has been in print, in one form or another, ever since.

▶ *D&D* was co-created by E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson as an offshoot of traditional wargames - games played with miniature figures on a tabletop, with extensive rules for movement and combat.

▶ The official spelling is *Dungeons & Dragons*, or *D&D*, with an ampersand in the middle and not an "and." (This isn't really a nitpick, just an acknowledgement that journalists like to get every little detail correct).

HISTORY OF THE HOBBY

▶ Roleplaying games began in the early 1970s as a "spin-off" of traditional wargames, when E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson began to develop a new form of wargame that focused on individual units instead of whole troops.

▶ The hobby flourished during the 1980s and 1990s. In 1991, game publisher White Wolf released *Vampire: The Masquerade,* which started a new renaissance in story-focused RPGs.

MYTHS

▶ **Not all roleplayers are male.** According to a 2000 study by Wizards of the Coast, an estimated 35% of *Dungeons & Dragons* players are female. It is hard to find other good statistical data on the gender breakdown, but it is easy to observe that many other RPGs, such as *Vampire,* attract a much larger percentage of female participants, and the ratio of women to men is greater in some countries outside of the United States.

▶ **Not all roleplayers are pre-teens or teenagers.** According to the same survey listed above, 59% of the people surveyed were 19 years of age or older. The average age in the international game research network CAR-PGa is over 35, and three members of the group are in their 70s. At most any game convention, you can expect to meet roleplayers in a wide range of ages.

▶ **Most gamers do not live in their parent's basements, and many of them have actually kissed a girl (or boy) before.** Some have even gone farther than that and managed to bring children into the world. The stereotype of the unwashed, socially-maladjusted geek with taped glasses and a pocket protector is just that - a stereotype. It exists in reality, but it is not the prime example of your typical gamer. There are gamers who are teachers, doctors, lawyers, clergy, engineers, computer programmers, actors & actresses, public servants, and more.

▶ **No one has ever killed themselves or anyone else "because" of a role-playing game.** Of all of the attempts to use the "*D&D* defense" in court, every one has failed, and the majority of the defendants in those cases have gone on to attempt other methods of legal defense, showing that this was just a tactic to remove the defendant
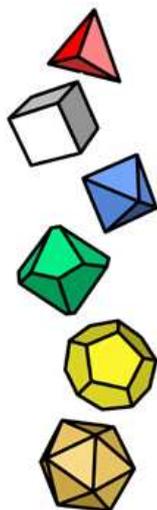
from culpability – a tactic that relies on people's misunderstanding of what RPGs are all about.

According to data compiled by the Committee for the Advancement of Role-Playing Games (CAR-PGa: **www.car-pga.org**), one out of every five reported "game-related crimes" involves someone who was never involved in role-playing games in the first place. The Columbine killers are possibly the most famous example of this.

▶ **RPGs are not dangerous.** The urban legend that RPGs are dangerous and people have died because of them stems from a single "little white lie" told by a private investigator in the late 70s. During his search for James Dallas Egbert, investigator William Dear suggested that Egbert had hidden in the steam tunnels beneath his college dorm to play *D&D* - but when the truth about Egbert's disappearance (and his secret lifestyle) came out, Dear waited five years before publicly correcting his statements, in order to protect the family's reputation. In those five years, the "*D&D* is dangerous" legend gained a lot of ground with religious groups and the mass media. For more information on that story and others, visit **www.theescapist.com/basic_gaming_faq.htm**

No substantiated connection between roleplaying and suicide or homicide exists, despite investigations by the Center for Disease Control, American Department of Suicidology, and Health and Welfare Canada. Any persons claiming to know of studies to the contrary should always be asked for their source.

The following are just an example of the positive studies on roleplaying games. You can find more at **www.rpgstudies.org**

> ▶ Abeyta, Suzanne & Forest, James (1991). Relationship of Role-Playing Games to Self-Reported Criminal Behaviour. *Psychological Reports,* 69, 1187-1192. Gamers are lower in criminal tendencies than rest of population.

> ▶ Simón, Armando (October 1987). Emotional stability pertaining to the game of Dungeons & Dragons. *Psychology in the Schools,* pp 329-332. A clinical psychologist uses the Cattell 16 PF test to show gamers are perfectly normal emotionally, comparing new and veteran gamers.

> ▶ Zayas, Luis H. and Lewis, Bradford H. (1986, Spring). Fantasy role-playing for mutual aid in children's group: a case illustration. *Social Work with Groups,* 53-66. A study of the use of RPG in treating disruptive-behavior problems by the cooperation required in playing.

> ▶ Hübner, Martina (1995). Fantasy-Rollenspiel - ein kreative Medium zur Gewaltprävention? München: Aktion Jungendschutz. The use of RPG in preventing violence in youth, by a sociologist. (In German.)

> ▶ Matelly, Jean-Hugues (1997). Jeu de Rôle. Toulon: Presses du Midi. Matelly is commandant of the research section of the Gendarmerie de Nîmes. (In French.)

> ▶ Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs (year?). Roleplaying as Recreation. A report by an agency of the Swedish government defending roleplaying games and pointing out the benefits they provide to youths. (In Swedish).

▶ **RPGs are not occultic or Satanic.** The claims that RPGs contain authentic occultic rituals that players can perform in real life and get real results are ridiculous. Many RPGs contain lists of spells, mental abilities, and/or superpowers that are used to help describe what sorts of things their characters can accomplish in the context of the game. Claiming that these game rules can bestow real powers to real people is akin to trying to spend *Monopoly* money, or murder someone with the little revolver from a *Clue* set. (For a humorous take on this claim, see **www.theescapist.com/spells**)

The claims that D&D is a tool of Satan aimed at teaching kids witchcraft and damning their souls is a by-product of the widespread paranoia generated by misunderstanding, and a true relic of the 1980s, an era of heightened "Satanic panic." This claim has been propagated, in no small part, by the religious tract *Dark Dungeons*, published by Chick Publications, and available for viewing online at **www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0046/0046_01.asp**

CULTURAL REFERENCES

Roleplaying games have become ingrained in our popular culture, and many (usually *Dungeons & Dragons* or a fabricated copy of it) have made appearances in numerous films and television shows.

▶ In the classic sci-fi film *ET*, Eliot's older brother and his friends are seen playing *D&D* around the family's dinner table. There have been references to RPGs and *Dungeons & Dragons* in many other films, including *Airheads, The 40 Year Old Virgin, Hedwig and the Angry Inch, SLC Punk,* and *Spiderman.*

▶ Gaming references have appeared in shows like *Community, Dexter's Laboratory, The Family Guy, Freaks and Geeks, Futurama, Scrubs, That 70s Show, The Simpsons, Spongebob Squarepants,* and *The X-Files*. Late night talk show host Conan O'Brien makes frequent jokes about *D&D* players during his monologues, and Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report* once added his old *D&D* dice to his wall of fame. The series finale of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* featured many members of the cast playing an unnamed role-playing game.

▶ *Dungeons & Dragons* had its own Saturday morning cartoon series during the mid 1980s, which is currently available on DVD. The game has also had two films based on it - one theatrical release and one direct-to-video

release, with two more on the way - as well as an animated *Dragonlance* film. *Vampire: The Masquerade*, another popular RPG, had a short-lived television series based on it during the mid-90s, entitled *Kindred: The Embraced.*

▶ Roleplaying has also been featured in several independent films and series, such as *The Gamers, The Gamers: Dorkness Rising, Geekin', Fellowship of the Dice, Uber Goober,* and *Darkon*, a documentary on a popular LARP based in Baltimore, Maryland.

▶ Authorized RPGs based on movies, television, and books have been printed, including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Ghostbusters, Men in Black, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Star Trek,* and *Star Wars.* (Fans have also created their own 'unauthorized' rules for properties that don't already have them, such as *Harry Potter* and *The Matrix*.)

▶ Many celebrities have played RPGs, and many still do. This list includes Vin Diesel, Mike Myers, Wil Wheaton, Elijah Wood, Matthew Lillard, Stephen Colbert, members of Weezer, System of a Down, the Barenaked Ladies, My Chemical Romance, Slipknot, and many more.

> "Playing *D&D* was a training ground for our imaginations and an opportunity to explore our own identities. I started acting when I was seven, and this game was a constant exercise in developing voices and characters," - Vin Diesel

> "...while playing *D&D*, I pretended so often to have courage and strength that I learned how to display courage and strength in my real life." - Sherman Alexie, poet and novelist

> "My interest in filmmaking was totally driven by *D&D*." - James Merendino, writer and director of *SLC Punk*

> "*Dungeons & Dragons* is one of the few oral traditions remaining in the modern world." [It] has produced an entire generation of players who are out there now, in all walks of life. They are particularly heavy on the ground in the entertainment world, using all those same lessons I picked up along the way." - John Rogers, writer of over ten feature films

> "...in this day and age, imagination is a dwindling resource, and social interaction on the decline. Playing *Dungeons & Dragons* can be a whetstone that sharpens both imagination and creativity, a workshop on team interaction and heroism." - Ed Castillo, president of Liquid Entertainment

> "...it seems clear to me that *D&D* invented or, at the very least, legitimized a type of creative play that helped build mental muscles in an entire generation of future fantasy scribes, screenwriters,

and filmmakers." - Marc Haimes, production executive, Dreamworks S.K.G.

(All quotes taken from *30 Years of Adventure: A Celebration of Dungeons & Dragons*, published by Wizards of the Coast.)

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information on role-playing games, visit the following sites:

> **www.theescapist.com** - The Escapist – Lots of information on the myths and benefits of role-playing games, including sections on using RPGs in education and library programs.
> **www.car-pga.org** - The official site for the Committee for the Advancement of Role-Playing Games
> **gamesampersandeducation.blogspot.com** - The blog of David Millians, a Georgia teacher who teaches history with role-playing games.
> **www.wizards.com/dnd** - Home page for the *Dungeons & Dragons* roleplaying game.
> **en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_role-playing_games** - Wikipedia's history of roleplaying games

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