FACTS AND FICTIONS ABOUT ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

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Role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* have been around for over thirty years now. Yet, there are still many people who know little about them - or worse - believe the rumors and legends that they are a dangerous activity that can lead to terrible things.

What are *Dungeons & Dragons* and other role-playing games? Many people use terms like *interactive fiction* and *organized make-believe* to describe what a role-playing game is, but these don't really paint a complete picture.

Think of some of your favorite board games that you like to play, now or when you were younger - popular games like *Monopoly, Battleship, Clue, Stratego,* or *Risk.* Now try to imagine playing one of those games while stepping into the role of a shrewd businessperson, a Navy captain, a master detective, or Army General. Now, instead of just rolling dice, drawing cards, and moving pieces around the board, you're acting out that role, interacting with the other players who are doing the same thing, and creating a story as well as playing a game.

A role-playing game lies somewhere between there and the games of cops & robbers or cowboys & indians that many of us played as children. They are an organized form of make-believe or play-acting, with rules for what a character can and cannot do, and a referee (often called a game master or GM) to help interpret and enforce those rules and set the stage for the characters to play on.

What's with all of the funny dice and little figures? In most of these games, dice are used to generate random numbers to resolve certain events (such as whether a character can climb a slippery wall, or if an attempt to fast talk a guard will work). These dice come in an array of shapes and sizes; a common set of dice includes 4-, 6-, 8-, 10-, 12-, and 20-sided dice. Some games, like *Dungeons & Dragons*, use a complete set of these dice, while others may only use one particular kind. In others, dice are replaced with other randomizers such as cards, or in some cases, removed altogether in what is often called a "diceless" system.

Miniature plastic or metal figures are used in some games, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, to help the players visualize where their characters are in a scene. They aren't used in many RPGs, however, so you frequently will not see them at a game session. There are also strategy wargames that use the same or similar figures – these games are also a lot of fun, but are not the same thing as a role-playing game.

Do you have to run around in a goofy costume to play these games? Not really. RPGs are usually played in a comfortable area with a table where everyone can relax while they play and have somewhere to put their books, notes, and dice. There is a "sister" hobby to RPGs called Live Action Role Playing (or LARP for short) where players dress as their characters and occasionally use props and/or foam weapons during the game. These are also a lot of fun – to find out more about LARPing, visit *www.nero.org*

Aren't there tons of rulebooks and a million complex rules to these games? Again, not really. Many people see the large amount of books – some of them very thick - that are available for a role-playing game and assume that every page is filled with rules. The truth is, most of the material found in any RPG book is background material for the setting – the characters, locations, and history of the game world in which it is played. The backgrounds of many RPGs are more detailed than those of the average sci-fi or fantasy movie or television series, and this can make the books very enjoyable to read.

There are some RPGs that have rules that can be complex - *Dungeons & Dragons* would be a perfect example. But the trend in recent years has been towards games that have simple rules, and are quick and easy to learn and play.

How did these games get such a bad reputation? It all started with one little white lie told in 1979 by a private investigator named William Dear. Dear was trying to find the whereabouts of James Dallas Egbert, a young college student who had disappeared from his dormitory. During the investigation, Dear considered a theory that Egbert was playing some sort of game in the steam tunnels beneath the dormitory – a theory that was very popular with news reporters, who found it to make very exciting headlines.

But when Dear found out the truth about Egbert – that he was running away from some very serious problems, and *not* playing a game – he didn't correct the story until the release of his book in 1985, to protect the reputation of the Egbert family from the dark, secret life of James. In those five years, the "D&D made him do it" myth had spread very far.

The legend was furthered when a young boy named Irving Pulling killed himself in 1981 and his mother, Patricia Pulling, discovered *Dungeons & Dragons* books in his bedroom. Inspired by the urban legend begun by Dear, Pulling began a campaign to ban the game from schools and encourage the Federal Trade Commission to put suicide warnings on the cover of all RPG books.

Since that time, any crime or tragedy involving an RPG player has been 'blamed' on the games – even in cases when the *victim* of a crime was a gamer.

What sort of RPGs are available besides *Dungeons & Dragons*? *D&D* gets a lot of talk, as it is the oldest and

most popular RPG, but there are many different types for different tastes: RPGs based on superheroes, spy or action heroes, historical periods, popular movies and TV shows, and even cartoons.

Are there any benefits to playing role-playing games? There are many, and a thorough discussion of them would never fit on this single page.

But to summarize: role-playing games…

▸ are a social activity
▸ help to build basic math skills
▸ promote literacy and build vocabulary
▸ promote teamwork, problem solving, and resource management.
▸ help develop spatial-temporal reasoning, or "thinking in pictures," by encouraging players to visualize a situation with their imagination

Games set in historical or contemporary settings can build knowledge and interest in history and world cultures, and many players hone their artistic and creative skills by drawing pictures of their characters or mapping out locations and floorplans for buildings. Educators can use RPGs as a tool for teaching history, geography, world cultures, science, or most any other subject they can imagine.
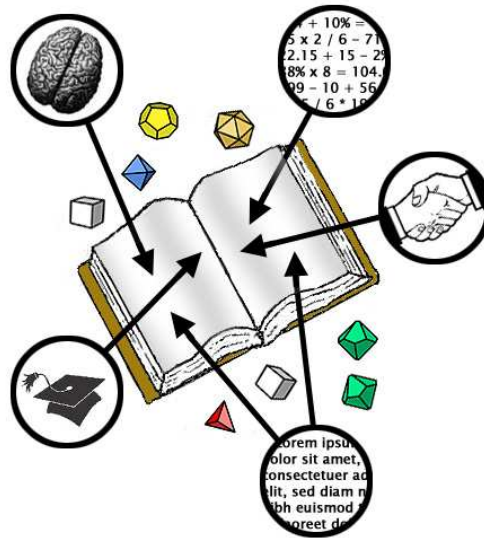
What studies have been done about them? There have been a few, but not nearly as many as there should be. Some of the more favorable studies include:

▸ 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.

As for the unfavorable studies on RPGs - there are none. When someone mentions studies that show role-players to be violent or dangerous, you should always ask for specifics on them. Don't expect to get an answer,

however. More information on RPG-related studies can be found at www.rpgstudies.net

What about the violence and spell-casting found in RPGs? Isn't that harmful for children? At their core, role-playing games are about telling stories by acting out the roles of characters that interact with each other in various ways. As in real life, one of those methods of interaction is combat. Combat in most games is quick, unrealistic, and mostly bloodless; in fact, it could be compared best to the swashbuckling styles of an Errol Flynn movie.

No one ever seems to be overly concerned when their children play cops & robbers or cowboys & indians - games that many of today's parents grew up on. With a mature and alert GM, a role-playing game could become a lesson against senseless violence – making the player's characters have to cope with the consequences of their actions. As with any activity, a parent needs to supervise what their child is doing, and ensure at all times that they approve of what is going on.

Magical spells only exist in games that support such a thing in their game world; in other words, *Dungeons & Dragons* has spells that can be cast by the characters, but an RPG based on the Wild West or international spies would not, because characters in those settings do not normally have magical powers.

Spells in a game are not something that can be used in real life, *by any stretch of the imagination.* Instead, they are tools that the characters (not the players) use to perform some sort of action. One spell may open locks, allowing a character to free a trapped ally, while another may allow the character to fly or heal the wounds of others. Just as a player cannot learn horseback riding or blacksmithing from playing these games, they also cannot learn how to throw fireballs around.

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