

An Overview of the History and Potential Therapeutic Value of Role-playing Gaming

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Role-playing gaming (RPGing) has its roots as far back as ancient history with the development of war-gaming. War-gaming is the simulation of combat strategies and tactics represented in reduced scale with various rules, often with some sort of randomizing agent such as dice or cards to add an element of “realistic” unpredictability. As long as there has been organized warfare, there appears to have been some form of war-gaming in every culture throughout history. Chess and the Chinese game Go both are very much based on war-gaming, but considered lacking by some because of the lack of unpredictability offered by “true” war-gaming using some degree of randomization.

H.G. Wells was renowned during the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a novelist, journalist, sociologist, and historian. Some of his most famous novels include *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Invisible Man* (1897), and *The War Of The Worlds* (1898). He revolutionized war-gaming with his publication of *Little Wars* (1913). Previously war-gaming was mostly the domain of the military and wealthy elite, his book made it easily understandable and available to everyone that could read.

In the 1960s, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* hit the literary world en masse, and inspired the minds and hearts of generations. Book sales in the USA were said by some to be second only to the bible. War-gamers and many others were inspired by Tolkien's works, and began working on ways to modify war-gaming so that statistics,

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including fanciful creatures, magic, and individuals characters were included, not just whole army units.

Chain Mail provided war-gaming rules with extra features such as magic and mythological creatures, it was released in 1968 by Gary Gygax, and would later evolve during the 1970s into the now famous (and infamous) *Dungeons & Dragons*.

The 1980s were the “Golden Age” years of role-playing games in the United States. In the 1990s hybrid RPG games using cards started a shift to simpler rules, and that shift to cards was completed with the creation of *Magic: The Gathering*, which is a Collectible Card Card (CCG) and still very popular world-wide.

The role-playing game (RPG) industry continues to grow and is now a multi-billion dollar industry. The fledgling company Tactical (TSR) that started D&D was long ago absorbed through various mergers by Wizards of the Coast, owned by the parent company Hasbro. The industry has diversified from just “paper and dice” games to now also include hybrid collectible card games (CCGs), computer RPG games, massive multi-player online role playing games (MMORPGs), persistent online worlds, and multi-user dungeons (MUDs). There are also worldwide Live Action role-playing (LARP) groups for many different genres.

Thousands of different genres, systems, and settings abound. A very brief summary includes:

Fantasy/Medieval:

- Dungeons & Dragons
- Runequest
- Robin Hood
- Amber (Based on Roger Zelazny's Amber series, diceless game, uses cards)
- Pendragon (King Arthur)
- Conan
- Tolkien-based: Middle-earth role-playing, Lord of the Rings, The One Ring

Science Fiction

- Star Wars
- Star Trek
- Traveller
- Doctor Who
- RIFTS (Multiple universes/dimensions of reality)
- Babylon 5
- Robotech/Battletech
- Aliens
- Firefly/Serenity
- Battlestar Galactica

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Horror/Suspense/Gothica:

- HP Lovecraft's Call of Cthulu
- Vampire: The Masquerade (inspired tv short tv series, Kindred: The Embraced)

Mystery/Paranormal:

- X-Files
- Noir (Sam Spade and Mickey Spillane type detective mysteries)

Action/Adventure:

- James Bond
- Indiana jones

Military (but not war games)

- Twilight 2000/2013
- GURPS World War II

Oriental:

- Bushido (feudal Japan)
- Oriental Adventures (greater mythical Asia)

Old West:

- Boot Hill
- Deadlands

Comic book heroes (Such X-men, Batman, Spiderman, etc.):

- Heroes
- Champions

Humorous:

- Ghostbusters
- Paranoia
- Toons

It is amazing that an entirely new hobby industry has developed from non-existence to so much variety in just about 30 years! The actual number of role-playing gamers is unknown, but sales estimates by various companies place the number of paper and dice role-playing gamers around tens of millions world-wide.

There are those who take role-playing gaming even further than sitting around a table and using paper and dice. These participants, mostly adults, participate in reenactments or Live Action role-playing (LARP). The SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism) is not exactly a LARP organization, but they do encourage participants to create a "character" while attempting to reenact various time periods (medieval Europe,

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feudal Japan, Tzarist Russia, etc.) in historically accurate ways, while including combat in armor with various refereed and “on your honor” rules for contact, as well as many rules for correct chivalry dealing with “class” such as nobility, serfdom, peasantry, etc. Only the fighters generally compete in combat, the majority of members act out other roles, many in costume, of diverse “supporting characters”, such as minstrels, servants, courtesans, royalty, merchants, tradesmen, etc. SCA members are frequently used as extras in movies and television shows, and many are used as consultants to make certain that scenes, costumes, dialog, etc., are historically authentic to the periods depicted in various media.

In the early to mid 1980s some individuals began a campaign against role-playing gaming and organized a group called Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons (BADD) to slander and try to ban all forms of role-playing games. Their goal was to convince law enforcements, legislators and the general public into believing that participating in RPGs would lead to suicide, murder, occultism, anti-social behavior, and other negative traits. Some schools, churches, and communities believed the tracts and publicity and so banned role-playing games during this time. Even after all these claims have been disproved, decades later there are still organizations and individual perpetuating these anti-RPG beliefs.

These negative incidents received a disproportionate amount of misguided media and press coverage on and off for nearly ten years during the 1980's. They attempted a number of lawsuits, and tried to pressure lawmakers into passing legislation banning role-playing at any government-funded facilities such as schools and libraries, the primary location for many role-playing gamers at the time. Fortunately for role-players all these attempts eventually failed. These efforts persisted sporadically until around the early 1990s when official reports on studies about role-playing games countered the claims and the accusations of BADD and similar entities, even proving some of the group's claims falsified, and techniques of coercion for false testimonies that were very suspect. There are still some extremist groups evidently obsessed with the idea that role-playing gaming is just a means of occultism or other antisocial behavior, despite the research now available.

There is no doubt that someone already extremely unstable, can go overboard with a role-playing game, just as they can with gambling, extreme sports, overeating, drinking, escaping into reading books obsessively and not living life, doing drugs, or any of a number of other “escapist” activities. Gaming is a recreational activity like any other, that can be overused and abused. However the vast majority of role-playing gamers benefit from the diverse positive aspects that provide an unprecedented range of benefits for a recreational activity, some of these are:

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Social

- Cooperation with diverse people/cultures/backgrounds
- Leadership
- Walking in others shoes/experiences
- Exposure to other cultures, religions, histories, belief systems, etc.
- Languages/Linguistics
- Multicultural mythologies
- Learning/following the rules but also “thinking outside of the box when needed”

Intellectual

- Mathematics
- Statistics
- Researching
- Problem solving (e.g. puzzles, riddles, mazes, etc.)
- Reading/writing (technical)
- History
- Geography
- Cartography
- Geology
- Economics
- Government systems
- Politics
- Ecology
- Metallurgy
- Meteorology
- Astronomy
- Physics
- Demographics
- Warfare tactics and strategies
- Technologies past and present
- Architecture

Creative

- Theatrics/acting
- Improvisation
- Reading/writing (creative)
- Artwork (drawing, painting lead figures, etc.)
- Music
- Poetry

What other cooperative recreational activities can provide so rich and fulfilling an experience as in the preceding list?

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A very basic and quick example of a role-playing process follows...

The game referee, sometimes known as the Game Master (GM) meets with the players in a comfortable setting around a table, or anywhere else they find comfortable, and begins with a description of a setting or situation:

“You and your friends have just walked into the courtyard of an ancient building. The courtyard is approximately forty feet square. The walls, built of a tan colored stone material apparently indigenous to the area, aligned with the points of the compass. They are about thirty feet high. You entered from an opening in the south wall. You see the north wall has some stairs leading up along the outside of the inner wall, and the east wall on your right has what appears to be a solid metal door hanging open on rusted hinges. The walls are crumbling in places, and much is overgrown with ivy and weeds. In the center is a large fountain about fifteen feet high in what appears to be the form of a series of three successively smaller flower-like terraces. Surprisingly, the fountain is currently spouting clear and cool looking water. Peering at the water, you are more acutely aware of how dry your mouths are after the long day's hike through the surrounding desert, with no water previously in sight.

The wind is picking up as a storm from the south, with lightning and dark clouds gathering, quickly approaches. The temperature is quickly dropping by the minute...

What do you do?”

At this point, those playing in the game each take turns telling the GM and the other players what actions their character will take. Some will have mundane results, others could have surprising consequences. Dice are frequently used to simulate the random events that can occur in life, and make it unknown in advance, even to the narrator/GM, what exactly will happen next. For example, someone may decide to climb the stairs, where there are some loose steps, and depending on how agile the player's character is, with a roll of the dice, that character may leap to the top unscathed, or may have a bit of a fall to deal with. Of course, there also could be trouble in the form of ill-intentioned bandits lurking within the entrance of the rusted door....

I began role-playing gaming around 1979 at 9 years old, and have continued on and off since. My three sons began learning to play these games as young as 4 years old. They of their own volition, and despite my mild protests, have been sucked into the collecting craze of Yu Gi Oh, Pok-e-man, Magic the Gathering, and similar collectible card games, but after introducing them to role-playing gaming, they regularly comment on how much more satisfying role-playing gaming is compared to other recreational activities.

Many kids are spending so many relatively anti-social hours on computer games, and failing to develop many important skills, other than quick fine motor skill reflexes. Role-playing gaming offers a means to engage their ample imaginations with so many

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other benefits. Role-playing gaming can help develop invaluable social, creative, intellectual, and leadership skills that can benefit them throughout their lives. People of all ages can benefit from using such activities in their leisure time. It encompasses diverse interests, covering fantasy and medieval, to science fiction, horror, gothic, mystery, comic book heroes, cartoons, anime, and any other setting one could imagine. Who hasn't wanted at some time in their life, to pretend to be a favorite character from a book or movie or television show, or famous historical person or event? Role-playing game makes that, and so much more, possible with a vast array of benefits.