The Potential Benefits and Deficits of Role Playing Gaming

by W.A. Hawkes-Robinson

April 10, 2007

Copyright (c) 2007

The Potential Benefits and Deficits of Role Playing Gaming

Role playing gaming, originally grew as an offshoot from war-gaming going back thousands of years and has developed, at best, a mixed reputation since the successful commercial introduction in 1974 of Dungeons & Dragons. Detractors of role playing gaming claim serious risks to life, limb, mind, and spirit for those who engage in this endeavor. Advocates claim little, to no risk, and a lengthy list of benefits for those who participate in this recreational activity.

Studies that have been run by both sides of the debate, as well as neutral parties, have provided some interesting data. Most of the data when valid and verifiable, has either been correlative rather than causal, or been on such a small scale in either the number test subjects or duration, that it is difficult from a scientific perspective to clearly ascertain exactly what exact characteristics of role playing gaming have the claimed positive or negative impact.

The emphasis of this document is on the verb "role playing gaming" as opposed to the noun "Role Playing Games". Live Action Role Playing known as LARP, which is a physical enactment of role playing, is not be included in this essay due to the significant differences from paper and dice role playing gaming. For the purposes of this document, the perspective that this topic is being approached with is that role playing games are merely neutral tools as a collection of paper, rules and dice that are inert and have no causal influence on anyone until they are actually used by players to participate in role playing gaming sessions. As an example corollary, a shovel inherently has neither a positive, nor negative influence when it is sitting in the storage shed on the wall. Only when someone uses the shovel to dig a ditch for drainage, or as a weapon to assault someone, does the potential for assessing positive or negative aspects manifest.

Role playing gaming can be summed up as "interactive storytelling". The participants create on paper imaginary characters in a story run by the "game master" or "narrator" who acts as writer, director and referee of this imaginary, verbal-only play. The activity is similar to childhood "let's

pretend" games such as "cops and robbers" or "treasure hunt", but with some key differences. The players are sitting around a table using their imagination and verbally describing their character's actions to each other, rather than physically acting out the scenes, and there are clearly defined rules with a moderator, the GM, to keep the game flowing.

Some of those who are opposed to role playing gaming focus their concerns on specific genres, such as fantasy, or specific products such as "Dungeons & Dragons". Others express concerns about all role playing gaming in general, which has a nearly limitless range of genres from fantasy and science fiction to horror, historical, bible-based, mystery, espionage and modern.

Those who oppose the manufacture and use of role playing games in general, and "Dungeons & Dragons" specifically, have gone so far as attempting to have laws passed outlawing their use. One effort was to get the Federal Trade Commission, then subsequently the Consumer Product Safety Commission, to mandate putting warning labels on gaming materials that they "were hazardous and could cause suicide" (Cardwell, Jr., Paul. 1994). The organization Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons, B.A.D.D., widely distributed pamphlets for use in interrogating children for potential links to satanism included role playing gaming as one of the "danger signs" to check for during interrogation (Stackpole, A., Michael, 1990). These organizations take a zero tolerance stance that all forms of role playing games must be prohibited. A section of a tract distributed by the "Daughters of St. Paul" clearly spells out their stance as:

> "*Thus more families must become informed of the hazards of Dungeons and Dragons in order to prevent it's introduction into the home, neighborhood, and school. An absolute prohibition of the game must be maintained.*" (Games Unsuspecting People Play, 1984).

Prior to 1979, there does not appear to be any publicized detractors of role playing gaming. Then in 1979 a 16 year old "genius" student at Michigan State University named Dallas Egbert III

suddenly disappeared. Egbert's uncle hired a private investigator named William Dear to find out what happened . Mr. Dear stated several possible reasons for Egbert's disappearance, listing one of them as possibly overly identifying with a D&D character that he believed he was this character. This became the inspiration for books and tv movies for the next 15 years, as well as a misstated example by role playing gaming protagonists when listing evidence of the potential pitfalls. It turned out that Egbert had attempted suicide in the steam tunnels because of his mother being dissatisfied with him not receiving a 4.0 on his grades, and hidden under the campus steam tunnels. After failing in his drug overdose suicide attempt he hid at a friend's house for approximately a month. A year later he committed suicide with a gun. The media did not retract the earlier D&D related statements. Mr. Dear revealed five years later that he found that Dallas Egbert had not played D&D much at all, and never participated in "Live Action Role Playing" at all.

Detractors first started stating that role playing greatly increased the risk of suicide. (Pulling, Radecki, BADD, & NCTV). These claims were later shown to be based on incorrect data. Later correlative research actually seemed to indicate that role playing gamers were at less than one tenth the risk of the general population for suicide. (Cardwell, Jr., Paul 1994). The overturning of supposed "proof" about the dangers of role playing games has been a common theme.

Later the the opponents of role playing gaming claimed that participants were at a risk of increased antisocial behavior such as kidnappings, robberies and assault, leading even to the development of homicidal tendencies. (Radecki and Pulling). Research in the following years determined these claims to be mistaken as well (Cardwell, Jr., Paul. 1994).

Then those in the religious components that were supporting the fight against role playing gaming 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 (Dungeons and Dragons,

Only A Game? 1986). This was strongly refuted by a number of scientific studies that indicated there was no such correlative statistical link, and also showed a distinct difference in personality from those admittedly involved in satanism and those who were role playing gamers (Leeds, Stuart. 1995).

Lastly the religious portion of those against role playing gaming quit trying to create or use "scientific" data that kept getting overturned, and were no longer able to capitalize on the wave of "satanic panic" that was popular in the 1980s. They instead consolidated their focus on the general "risk" of straying from a "one true god", using many citations from the bible, by playing games that included non-monotheistic deities. Ironically there is a very strong, and large group of devout Christians who are avid role playing gamers known as the "Christian Gamers Guild", who refute what the other groups state are the risks. This has lead to a considerable amount of "name calling" and rifts between the different religious organizations (Should A Christian Play Dungeons & Dragons?, 2001).

The media has not by any means been a neutral bystander in this controversy. A study published in the Skeptical Inquirer on the media and it's potential bias on reporting on this debate indicated:

"The Associated Press and United Press International, between 1979 and 1992, carried 111 stories mentioning role-playing games... Almost all named only Dungeons & Dragons, even though there are several hundred such games on the market...Of the 111 stories, 80 were anti-game, 19 had no majority, 9 were neutral, and only 3 were pro-game. Those three pro-game stories were all from UPI, which is a considerably smaller wire service than AP. (Cardwell, Jr., Paul 1994).

The supporters both refute the detractors "evidence" and additionally provide a large body of research indicating potential benefits ranging from one tenth the suicide rate of the general population (Cardwell, Jr., Paul. 1994), to more rapidly developing foreign language skills (Phillips, D. Brian. PhD, C.H. 1993). Many site the fairly obvious benefits for developing stronger skills in reading,

mathematics, creative thinking, cooperative play, and other creative skills (Kestrel, 2005).

There are very few social table-top recreation activities available that are cooperative rather than competitive in nature. Role playing gaming is by design a cooperative past time, which in and of itself may have significant benefits in the world where everything is becoming competitive at all ages and levels of society. Jessica Statsky, author of the essay *Children Need to Play, Not Compete*, expressed her concern about the over-competitive attitude towards play, and lack of cooperation-based activities by stating:

"Their goals should be having fun, learning, and being with friends. Although winning does add to the fun, too many adults lose sight of what matters and make winning the most important goal."

In recent years, there has been a revivalism of some of the old issues, including exact reprints of pamphlets on the topic from more than 20 years ago that have already been refuted. Additionally, as role playing gaming has begun to spread through other countries, some are going through the same or similar debates, including, somewhat surprisingly, the Israeli Defense Force as recently as 2005 (Army Frowns on Dungeons and Dragons).

As of 1998, there had been more than seventy research projects related to various aspects of fantasy role playing gaming so far (RPG Studies.net, 1998). There is a more than sufficient body of evidence disproving the claims opponents to role playing gaming. The overall results would indicate that after almost 30 years of debate, there is now a sufficiently large body of correlative scientific work, as well as smaller causal studies, pointing to some significant indivators of very powerful positive therapeutic benefits to role playing.

There is not yet a sufficient body of long term, large scale causal work in place detailing which components of role playing gaming are key to optimizing the therapeutic benefit for the most efficient

implementation as a potential therapy modality. Such an endeavor would require a properly designed, funded, and implemented long term project spanning ten to twenty years. It should use the key requirements of truly scientific research study, including being triple-blind, with multiple types of control groups and tracking of multiple variables, with a number of test subjects in the thousands. Until such an overwhelming body of evidence is clearly developed, the debate on the pro's and con's of role playing gaming will continue to flare up periodically.

Citations (still have to clean up for MLA formatting):

The Attacks on Role-Playing Games, 1994

Paul Cardwell, Jr.

Skeptical Inquirer, Vol. 18, No. 2, Winter 1994, pp 157-165

http://www.rpgstudies.net/cardwell/attacks.html

"Personality, Belief in the Paranormal, and Involvement with Satanic Practices Among Young Adult Males: Dabblers Versus Gamers"

by Leeds, Stuart.

Cultic Studies Journal, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1995, pp. 148-165.

Pat Pulling, Dungeons and Dragons and Satanism.

Michael A. Stackpole

1990

http://www.tylwythteg.com/lawguide/pulling.html

Games Unsuspecting People Play: Dungeons & Dragons

by Louise Shanahan for The Daughters of St. Paul.

Catalog number: PM0798.

1984

The Potential Benefits and Deficits of Role Playing Gaming

Dungeons & Dragons, Only A Game?

by David Pratte

Original publication date unknown.

Reprinted in 1986, Australia.

http://www.espministries.com/topic_dungeons.htm

And leaflet through Pro-Famly Forum.

Should A Christian Play Dungeons & Dragons?

by William Schnoebelen

2001

http://www.chick.com/articles/frpg.asp

Army Frowns on Dungeons and Dragons

by Hanan Greenberg

February 28th, 2005.

Israel News

http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3052074,00.html

Studies About Fantasy Role-Playing Games

1998

http://www.rpgstudies.net/

The Potential Benefits and Deficits of Role Playing Gaming

Working Hard At Play

by Gwendolyn F.M. Kestrel

March 2005

http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/literacy/kestrel.htm

Role-Playing Games in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom.

by Brian David Phillips, Ph.D., C.H.

1993