

An Enriching Escape: 8 Real-World Benefits of Role-Playing Games

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Before we discuss the benefits of role-playing games, we need to answer an essential question: what exactly is a role-playing game? And what is role-play? Remember when you played make believe as a kid? Role-playing games are essentially the same thing. Players create a character, pretend to be that character, and then work with other characters to go on wild adventures, much like a play. Unlike a play, however, there is no script, no set, and no audience. While there is a narrative frame and specific setting, there is no prewritten story; PCs must embody their characters and role play through scenarios moment by moment, creating a story collaboratively. The story and plot of this narrative is created through collaboration among game masters (GMs) who create or support the rule systems, the plot frame, and the settings; non-player characters (NPCs) who act as supporting characters for (or played by) the GMs in the world to initiate plots and take on roles needed for the narrative; and player characters (PCs) who act as protagonists embodying the story and driving the narrative. Players can create characters of different genders, races (like elves, orcs, or halflings in fantasy games), and ages, with the only limits being the boundaries of themselves and the other players. Players can engage in a wide spectrum of playing styles, ranging from performing a setting-specific (for example, medieval fantasy) version of their real-world self to taking on a completely different personality. RPGs, unlike books, allow readers to live, create, and shape stories that are usually confined to the pages of books or manuscripts, performing and becoming the characters of their dreams.



The Author's D&D Gear

There are hundreds of kinds of role-playing games that take in a variety of time periods and settings. In *Honey Heist* (Grant Howitt) for example, the rules are contained on one printed page and you play as a bear trying to steal honey. In *Dungeons & Dragons* (Wizards of the Coast), on the other hand, the rules and options for play are contained in multiple volumes of handbooks. There are massive-multiplayer online RPGs (MMORPGs) like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard) or *Elder Scrolls Online* (Bethesda), where players create virtual avatars and interact in an online world with hundreds or thousands of others. There are even live-action role-playing games, where players dress up and pretend to be their characters in real life settings. There's a game type and playing style for everyone, whether you actually enjoy role-playing or not.

Tabletop roleplaying games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, and others, are starting to resurge in popularity among young people. Some adults and parents have expressed concerns about RPGs, suggesting that young adults will not be able to distinguish between reality and the world of the games they play, or be seduced into cults, dangerous occult beliefs, or madness (for an entertaining and confusing example, look up the Satanic Panic triggered by D&D in the 1980s). However, many academics, writers, and psychologists have noted that RPGs often have the opposite effect. Rather than separating players from reality, they provide a safe space for people to build skills, explore relationships, and express themselves. RPGs allow young people to collaborate in building a world and narrative that is entirely their own, allowing them to escape reality while simultaneously building real-world skills and relationships. Here are some ways that D&D and other RPGs directly impact real world skills and development for young adults and other players!

1. They Build Social, Emotional, and Self Awareness!

RPGs are social games where players, especially young adults, can practice their social skills. You can try on different personas, experiment with identities and personalities, and try out emotional responses to situations that may or may not happen in real life. You may not ever come face-to-face with the goddess of death, for example, but you may have to deal with negative thoughts or depression. Role-playing games also build empathy; they allow you to interact with other personalities and understand where they are coming from. RPGs have two benefits regarding social awareness; they allow young adults to practice engaging with each other socially, and they provide a space that is both separate from and a part of reality to do so. They interact with other young adults in real life to play, but they also interact with each other on a fictional level. They can see the consequences of their actions in the game, and take responsibility for their actions and their character's actions in a safe and contained space. This gives young adults freedom to try, fail, and try again, allowing them to build their skills over time. Many RPGs require speaking and communicating! Players can practice these skills week after week and month after month, and like anything you do, you get better with practice.

2. They Use Interpersonal Communication Skills and Teamwork!

RPGs are all, at their core, about collaboration. Players have to work together to fight enemies, communicate with NPCs, fight monsters, and achieve their goals. This requires a lot of talking and planning. Players need to respect others, listen, and collaborate or the game simply doesn't work. Players may try to go at it alone, but it is literally impossible to kill a dragon by yourself. Gameplay and roleplaying within RPGs will develop social awareness, communication skills, conflict resolution, and relationship building. Young adults have to cooperate and talk with each other to navigate the world and situations in the game, resolve conflicts, and respect each other's opinions, ideas, and space. Young adults can learn to work with each other to resolve conflicts both in the game and out of the game. They will learn to determine which game encounters can be resolved peacefully and what kinds of situations they need to tackle in different or creative ways. Plus, it builds a sense of shared pride to know that you took down a huge obstacle as a group, especially if it's a giant monster.

3. They Encourage Critical Thinking!

Characters in RPGs are constantly running into problems, traps, and enemies. In order to overcome these obstacles, players have to create solutions and figure out ways to solve puzzles, strategize for battles, or figure out a way to sneak past a group of guards. They will make plans that inevitably fall apart, face the consequences of their decisions, and learn from their mistakes. Sometimes, there's no one right decision or perfect solution, much like real life. Young adults have to navigate the social and strategic world of the game and collaborate with each other to plan and make decisions that impact the characters and their story. Games like D&D also include math puzzles and adding up numbers on dice, so it can actually benefit mental math skills without kids even knowing!

4. They Help in Identity Formation!

By making up characters, young adults can try on new identities and perhaps get more comfortable with themselves. For example, I have social anxiety disorder, but I recently started playing a flamboyant and confident bard character in a new campaign in order to get more comfortable pretending I know what I'm doing; the amount it has helped in my academic life is actually ridiculous. On a more serious note, RPGs can allow young adults to try on identities that they may not be "allowed" to play in real life. For members of LGBTQ2SIA+ communities, for example, who may be limited in how they can behave and express themselves in mainstream society or unsafe home environments, RPGs can offer a life-changing and cathartic experience: a chance to be themselves. By playing RPGs, young adults can get a better sense of who they are and who they want to be.

5. They Boost Confidence!

By embodying characters, players can have agency and control over the stories they play in. Their actions and interactions can change the course of the narrative and impact the world. Their characters, and by extension themselves, have the power to change their fictional worlds. This sense of control and confidence allows young adults to gain confidence and feel more comfortable in their own characters and skins; many scholars have noted that these feelings of confidence can translate into their real-world personalities. By faking it till they make it, young adults have the chance to become more confident in their real lives.

6. They Foster Creativity!

RPGs combine narrative storytelling, acting, and gameplay into an interactive and creative experience. Some games take place entirely in the imaginations of the players, requiring them to see layouts, settings, and battle maps in their minds. While others may have physical limitations like computer generated land formations or more rigid play rules, players still need to creatively make use of their abilities, ideas, and teammates. Young adults can also write backstories, paint miniatures, draw pictures of their characters, or create maps of their worlds. They may read handbooks, write fanfiction, or perhaps even build entire worlds to run their own games. The creative possibilities are quite literally endless! This creative outlet will also build social, mental, and reading/writing literacy.

7. They Form Lasting Friendships!

RPGs, especially tabletop RPGs, allow young adults to find like-minded peers who enjoy the same things they do. Joining a role-playing game group, whether in-person or over the internet, allows young adults to find and play alongside like-minded peers with similar interests. This often leads to long lasting friendships and points of social contact that allow young adults to feel a sense of belonging and community. Overcoming obstacles together builds character and a sense of communal pride, much like team sports do. Many RPG communities and games become like second families to the people who play them.

8. They're Fun!

One of the most important benefits of RPGs is that they provide a fun escape from reality. Players dive into completely new worlds, interact with new people, and do things that they would probably never get to do in real life, like fight a dragon, duel a sorcerer with magic, or find treasure in a dungeon full of skeletons. RPGs allow players to become somebody completely different, whether a warrior, a minstrel, or a wizard, allowing young adults to express themselves in new and creative ways. They allow young adults to express themselves, be creative, think critically, and make friends in a safe space.

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