

The Benefits of Role-Playing Games

By Mark Cruz

In one of the opening scenes of the television series *Stranger Things*, we watch as four teenagers huddle excitedly around a table in a dingy basement in what becomes immediately apparent: they have reached at the climax of an epic *Dungeons and Dragons* campaign. The tabletop role-playing game seems to exist at the center of their friendship; they scream and cheer and beg a frustrated parent for just “20 more minutes” of play just as the fear-inspiring Demogorgon makes his appearance. As the series unfolds and the characters do battle with real monsters in their reality, we watch as they bring aspects of their imagined game to overcome real-world obstacles. The implication of *Stranger Things* is that imaginative role-playing experiences can have positive outcomes for teenagers; that the lessons and skills gained during the fantasy of a pen-and-paper role-playing game enable our four young heroes to work together and ultimately save the town (perhaps even the world).

This depiction of *Dungeons and Dragons* is not alone – it is indicative of a larger shift in cultural attitudes towards pen-and-paper role-playing games. Once an object of moral panic during the ‘satanic panic’ of the 1980s (Waldon, 2005) and a negative signifier of ‘geek culture,’ public opinion and the popular imagination have softened a great deal towards role-playing games; it is no longer considered socially deviant among young people to participate in games like *Dungeons and Dragons*. Such a shift is supported by an emerging body of research that runs counter to the narrative that role-playing games negatively affect young players (Waldon, 2005), but rather, that role-playing games can enable positive outcomes within participants.

This paper will briefly outline some of the ways in which table-top role-playing games can positively impact teen development and social wellness.

The Power of Imagination

Role-playing games are unique in their ability to get participants to *imagine*. Compared to the relatively strict player-agency of videogames, pen-and-paper role playing games can be liberating for their emphasis on choice and freedom within the game world. When a game master presents the adventuring party with a problem, their collective imagination is the only factor that limits what method they choose to solve it. For example, while a dragon can be slain the old-fashioned way with sword and board, creative players may overcome it via alternative means: a stealthy player may be able to sneak past and steal the treasure un-noticed; or a persuasive may be able to reason with it if their 'charisma' stat is high enough. In their qualitative report about what motivates young people to play role-playing games, Darrin Coe (2017) found that such experiences have the unique capacity to foster imaginative creativity that "[engages] their thinking and emotions in processes that allow for the non-linear networking of memory data... and [expanding] imagination and cognitive flexibility" (p. 2853). Young people with the capacity to imagine will be more equipped to innovate, influence change, and recognize their agency within the world they live in.

Teamwork and social interaction

A successful role-playing campaign is always dependent upon the presence of teamwork. The typical experience goes as follows: the 'game master' (DM) creates the world

and encounters, while players inhabit that world using character sheets, dice rolls, and their imaginations. Players must cooperate to navigate the challenges conjured up by the DM, with all actions in-game being accomplished through communication with one another. Role-playing games are not only inherently communal, but they require the participants to be *present and engaged* with the company of others in order to seek out victory in-game. In the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, spaces that foster togetherness seem fewer and far between for the average teenager today; social isolation and loneliness can be painful emotional experiences that carry significant risks to the social development of children and teenagers if not addressed (Margalit, 2010, p. 2). By emphasizing teamwork as a core tenet in their design, role-playing games can provide young players the chance to experience the intricacies of teamwork and social cooperation within the familiar environment of a fantasy game. In their study, Abbott et al. (2022) have found that role-playing game experiences “validated group cohesion, rehearsal of group-problem solving skills, and enhanced individual self-esteem through support from group members” (p. 18).

Empowerment

As the heroes of an imagined narrative, role-playing can be an empowering experience for teenagers. Intrinsic to the role-playing game is the positive power of fantasy that is associated with ‘leveling up’ and ‘loot,’ which refers to the experience points and treasure that is gained upon completing tasks within the game world. Participants get to have an active role in their character’s development, which is always a positive ascent in knowledge and power due to the design of the game: a barbarian grows stronger due to their controlling players actions and

ingenuity. Internalizing feelings of personal success is important to the healthy development of teens, especially if a teenager is considered under-performing within academic, athletic, or social contexts. The gameplay loop of role-playing games motivates participants “by teaching them about themselves through self-interaction” (Coe, 2857), and in-turn, has the ability to likewise see themselves as empowered within their own lives.

References

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