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The origins and effects of role-playing games

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The Origins and Effects of Role-Playing Games.

By Christopher Sundberg

Readers

Professor R. McAulay and Professor M. Mark

Thesis Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a
major in the Program in Science, Technology and Society (STS)

Introduction

Section 1 - p.5

Terminology and Definitions of RPGS

Section 2 - p.11

History of the Modern Role-Playing Game

Section 3 - p.17

Theatre and Imagination

Section 4 - p.31

Evolutionary History of War Games

Conclusion - p.38

Bibliography - p.40

Introduction -

The small group has been hunting down the kidnapper for days, under orders from the Duke. The outlaws have made camp for the night, and the rescuers had finally caught up and prepared an attack plan. An expert archer would come up first, and take out the leader from a distance before the armored warriors came in and took advantage of the disarray.

There is a twang from the bow as the arrow flies through the air and connects with the enemy captain's back, sending him tumbling down off his horse. As the bandits try to figure out where the arrow came from, the rest of the heroes advance. They wipe out the remaining bandits with no problem and rescue the kidnapped men and women.

- - -

If this sounds like a story from some high adventure book, you are almost correct. This is one of the opening scenarios to the *Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition* adventure *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*. The players are sent after a dragon attack to rescue the

citizens of a village in return for gold. This story is designed draw them into a larger adventure through interactions with new characters, incentives to protect a kingdom, and building your strength and skills which culminates in fighting the evil Dragon Queen herself and saving the world. This is just one of many examples of the modern-day Role Playing Game.

Role-Playing Games, or RPGs, are a form of collaborative storytelling, where a group of people come together to create their own fantastical scenarios. They usually include battling some kind of enemy, gaining power or items that help them achieve their goals, and completing quests for rewards. These games take place across countless worlds, where the people take on the roles of whoever they please. To the casual onlooker, it might seem like little more than playing pretend with rules. But it is becoming an extremely popular pastime, with one survey tallied up nearly 5.5 million individual players for one game alone.¹

My belief is that RPGs are the sophisticated results of behaviors that are based in human neurology and sociobiology. The main goal

¹ Waters

of this thesis is to examine the social history that lead up to RPGs and what sort of effect they have today. In each part, I will trace the line of social practices and their possible evolutionary sources that lead up to the birth of the modern RPG; including war games, storytelling, and theatre.

After breaking down the possible timeline of these practices and how they are tied together, I will show what kind of psychological effects playing these games have on the players, from neurologic stimulation to social conditioning.

Section 1 – Terminology and definitions of RPGs

There is a language among RPG players that allows them to talk among themselves. The development of slang is a common trend in subcultures than help the members of the community connect with each other. ²Before I proceed, I will lay out my definitions as to what counts as an RPG and it's colloquialisms.

An RPG is, as its name should hint at, a role-playing game. It is an interactive game where someone takes on the role of someone other than themselves in order to face challenges. I am using the definition outlines by Sarah Lynne Bowman in order to narrow my scope. In her book, she defines an RPG if it includes three elements to it. Those three elements are:

"...some sense of community through a ritualized, shared storytelling experience amongst multiple players...[Secondly it] involves form of game system (rules) which provide a framework for the enactment of specific scenarios and [problem solving].

² Dumas

Finally...the players must, on some level, alter their primary sense of identity.”³

This framework eliminates popular ‘Massive-Multiplayer Role-Playing Games’ Such as *World of Warcraft* and other online role-playing games, as it is not necessary to change your perceived identity in order to play them. This excludes most digital forms, except for games that only use the internet as a form of communication rather than the medium for game-play. The appropriate term for these kinds of games are ‘Table Top Role-playing games’ as they are traditionally played around a table or map instead of a computer screen.

There are dozens of different types of RPGs, with sub groupings and unique elements to all of them. But most RPGs fall under three main genres: Horror, Science Fiction, and Fantasy.

Fantasy includes ‘fantastical’ elements, commonly associated with magic and monsters. Most of these games are less about social

³ Bowman

struggle and lean more towards the 'Hero's Quest' archetypes of defeating evil and overcoming personal challenges. The most prolific of the three genres, it draws much of its inspiration from Tolkien and epic fantasy writers of the 20th-21st century. The Fantasy genre is rife with magic and superstitions rather than scientific fact and relies on the supernatural to get the plot moving. Popular Games of this type include *D&D*, *Pathfinder*, and *RuneQuest*.

Science Fiction games are speculative games usually centered around space-travel or advanced technology. Unlike Fantasy games, Science Fiction has some basis in reality, even if it is technology that does not exist. Even if it includes elements of the world that seem fantastical, science fiction will try to follow similar rules that our current physics and engineering will allow. Common themes in these games usually revolve around fighting against establishment and often include critiques of social norms at the time of the games creation. Games in this vein include *Cyberpunk* and *Cyberpunk 2020*, *Ex-Machina*, and the Star-Wars RPGs.

Finally, Horror games include monsters and uncertainty in much the same way of Fantasy. But Horror is unique in that its rules are

designed to take agency away from the players. The players are usually at a disadvantage, and have to fight each other or with creatures that they can not openly defeat in combat. There are always stronger monsters or more dangerous enemies that will win, and it is more important for the players to survive than to win. Horror games include *Call of Cthulhu*, *Dread*, and the World of Darkness Series.

There is a minor fourth genre, 'Realism', which is most often just a subgroup of the others. It has more lean towards real life scenarios and situations, trying to set up characters that could exist in our world and what they go through. The setting can range from historical reenactments to near future, but Realism has to be just that, realistic. Because they are so close to reality, these games tend to be less popular as entertainment, but they do have other uses that I will touch on later in Section 3.

Now that we have a definition and scope of the games, we can get into the terminology. The following is a chart that has common terms that may be used in this paper, and also shows the vernacular of RPG Players.

GM (Game Master) – Also known as a Dungeon Master or Referee, this is the player that is responsible for keeping the rules and maintaining a cohesive narrative. This player plans the scenario that the other players must work through, and acts out all the incidental characters and enemies that they interact with in the same way that the players act as their own characters. The GM will play every role, from simple shopkeepers to the villains while simultaneously making sure all the rules are followed. This player is vital, as they are the creator of the shared world that the other players navigate and has to make appropriate challenges for them to overcome. The GM is in charge of the game, and are the be-all and end-all for any rules, plot, or characters that the players must contend with.

NPCs (Non-Player Characters) - These are characters that the Game Master plays as in order to get a response from the characters. Every single character, whether helpful or antagonistic, that is not played by another real player is an NPC. The GM literally acts these characters out, taking on the different mannerisms and motives to decide how they would react to the player's actions.

PCs (Player Characters) – The personas that are created by the non-GM players. These are the core of the game, and are usually granted some sort of important characteristic that distinguishes them from the rest of the characters in the world. In literature, these people would be the main characters, the ones that must overcome the odds and defeat the antagonists. The PCs take on these personas and navigate the world that the GM has created and, by working with each other and the GM, create a collaborative story.

Section 2– History of the Modern Role-Playing Game

The history of the modern RPG arguably starts in 1915, where H.G. Wells published *Little Wars*, a compendium for amateur players to get involved with war games.⁴ War games had existed as a niche entertainment scene, mostly for older men with a fascination with history and strategy games.

War games were, as the name would suggest, games meant to recreate wartime strategies. These games introduced a lot of the same elements that would be used in their next incarnation. Units had Health that could be lowered by wounds or weather conditions, terrain that could affect how the Units moved, and certain degrees of random chance through coin flips and dice rolls. Though this interested many young men, it was a very complicated game. No uniform rules existed, so learning mainly depended on the people that were already playing to teach their version of the rules to new players.

⁴ Costikyan

But after H.G. Wells published his book, the field began to change across the Western World. Now, anyone could reenact simple scenarios, living out the battles of Julius Caesar or Napoleon. All the way up to the 1960's and 70's, war games saw a rise in popularity. Many young men were eager to get their hands on small figurines or paper pieces and test out their skill against their friends. Any time there was a large armed conflict, some group would begin building suitable units and try their hand at commanding their forces against their friends to see who was the better tactician. But something would come to foster a different kind of imagination, and would eventually combine with this love of strategy to birth the modern RPG. That thing was J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy, the *Lord of the Rings*.

After the release of Lord of the Ring in 1966, the scape of fantasy was also changing. People were becoming invested in the idea of what kind of monsters could be imagined and what they could do to fight them. Though Science Fiction existed as either a frivolous entertainment genre or intense social critique, before the Lord of the Ring there had been a bit of a dying flame in the world of magic.⁵ The idea 'Escapist Fiction' was seen as dangerous anything beyond casual enjoyment in 'make-believe' was seen as a fault by the

⁵ Prickett

mainstream. Most of the stories that have been retroactively classified as early fantasy were either aimed at children (*Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, etc.) or were of a very dark tone that alienated them from 'sensible society' (The Lovecraft Mythos, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, etc.)⁶ Much of this was driven by Christian establishments that saw the pervasive imagery of escaping reality and evil figures like dragons and demons as a threat to wholesome morals.⁷ But after Tolkien, people became more invested in this make-believe. Tolkien's writing had a perfect blend of old world literature style, contemporary metaphor, and fantastical wonder that would solidify it as a literary classic. A modern book about dragons, monsters, and wizards that could be enjoyed as a sophisticated piece of literature. It wasn't just entertainment, it was academic.

Young men, the target demographic to play war games in the early 70's, were soon interested in applying their rules to the fantasy world that Tolkien and his contemporaries had created. Applying their own rules to magic, monsters, orcs, and dragons. It is one of these fusions that would eventually evolve into the first ever RPG.

⁶ Bainbridge

⁷ Laycock

In the late 1960's, two game designers were working on their own version of war games. Devised with help from their friends at a local hobby shop, which heavily catered to war gaming crowds, Gary Gygax and his friends released Chainmail, a medieval war game that included light elements of magic that mimicked medieval folklore. Though much of the game was still heavily based in real life swordplay, the added elements of mysticism was new to the players. It was through this group and these new games that Gygax would meet his future business partner, David Arneson.

Arneson was another member of their local wargaming group, the Castles and Crusaders Society. During one of their war games, the GM, a man named Dave Wesley, introduced the first seed of role-playing into their game. Other than their larger goal of winning the day, each player was also given personal goals and encouraged to try to complete their personal mission as well as lead their army to victory.

People were interested in this style of personal game, and would continue to have personal investments in battles for many of their future re-enactments. Before this, games were played from a more

technical standpoint. Rather than personal investment, the units were just pieces on the boards to be moved around as best fit the needs of the players. But afterwards, people were more cautious about how they played, trying to act more like a king leading real people than just men sitting in a hobby store.

Arneson and Gygax played around with the idea of making the human element even more important, and Gygax brought up his own experimental rules about including a magical element to his Chainmail games. They decided to play a game together with several friends, but instead of just being commanders, they would take on the roles of actual knights and would interact as though they were those people. Everyone was assigned characters with unique personalities, and were told to pretend that they were those people. This game would turn out to be the first RPG game of this depth.

The players loved it, and Arneson and Gygax decided to go into business together. Arneson would organize a game similar to the ones that were played before, but when the players arrived, they discovered that they were not going across Poland to recapture a

rogue fiefdom, but were instead knights sent to explore a forgotten dungeon deep below the earth.

After playtesting and perfecting the rules, and the two would go into business together and print the very first edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* through Gygax's printing company. D&D would forever change the way that people viewed games. It would become a cultural icon that, for good or ill, is solidified into the public consciousness.

Section 3 - Theatre and Imagination.

As soon as everyone had arrived, everyone at the table pulled out a character sheet. The group was just starting out, but they had spent plenty of time building their characters. One person, a shy kid, decided to make an Orc Barbarian. The kid knew the rules well enough, but he has trouble acting the part. When his character would be trying to start bar fights or challenge the other players to a duel, he would sit quietly in the corner and only speak up when it was his turn. Outside of fights, he hardly did anything.

But over time, and a few sessions, he starts to learn his part. He could see one girl act like an elderly wizard, and another guy who could go from a pleasant teenager to a sleazy middle aged con artist. Eventually, his confidence grew, and the kid started having his character interact with the rest of the group.

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Every culture in human history has some form of storytelling. Oral traditions, paintings and facsimiles, and theatre are some of the

most common ones that are an ever present undercurrent in civilization. These days, we have films and books that are used as entertainment, often not dissecting how unique to the human race this attribute is. Other animals have facsimiles of the world, fake fighting or using signals to warn others about the dangers in certain areas. But as far as we know, no other species constructs such deep and complicated worlds as humans do, telling stories with little basis in reality to get across points that more realistic worlds could get across just as well. Theatre, as well as all art, is a use for time and resources that, on the surface, do not have immediate survival advantages. While some have called art "cheesecake of the mind...technology for pressing our pleasure buttons" ⁸ That does not explain how it can be so widespread. If it was only mindless entertainment, how was it come to to be considered a hallmark of human civilization? Because theatre provides more than just a few hours entertainment, it is an adaptive tool that serves a discrete evolutionary purpose.

⁸ Pinker 1997 p.528

Theatre is a collaborative process where performers communicate a narrative, tone, or theme to an audience through actors and scenery.⁹ It is often seen as an extended use of storytelling to help teach a message and expand upon the vision of the writers or directors. So why am I focusing on theatre specifically instead of storytelling in general? Especially since fictional literature directly lead to the creation of the first RPG?

Theatre has an element to it that other forms of art don't have, and that is the ritual of performance. Whenever someone produces a book, or makes a work of art, it has a certain distance to it. Even if hand written books and painstaking pieces of art where hand crafted and put on display, it is still separate from its creator. But theatre demands interaction and performers. Whether it is a classical production of *Hamlet* to a modern production of *Rent*, there is still someone at the helm that is intentionally making something to be observed. It is meant to be seen, and for specific morals or thoughts to be evoked in the audience.

To tie this back to RPGs, a core difference between an RPG and other things like video games is the community and ritual that

⁹ Carlson

surrounds it. It is an interactive experience where the players both perform and observes, acts and interacts. Just like in theatre. In Theatre there is the rising of the curtains, the bells sounding, the chorus giving the introduction. Theatre and RPGs both have a performative element that has to set the tone and prepare the audience to enter their world. Though some may differ, even attempt to defy convention, any performance that has been seen and can be talked about requires a new world to be created in the mind of the audience at the hands of the actors. All performances require this, because we can not just enter a fantasy world, but we must be led there. "We respond to [performers] not only because of their actions and intentions, but because of them as individuals and their personal [qualities]...we respond individually to artists as individuals." ¹⁰

Both theatre and RPGs also contain a narrative element, and a sense of disassociation. The audience isn't meant to appreciate the actor as doing a very good character, but by bringing the character to life and how they interact with each other and their separate world. The most common thing that separates conventionally good and bad actors is when the audience does not believe that the actor can portray the character, even if the character never has and never

¹⁰ Boyd p.350

will exist outside the play. But RPGs are an extreme version of this combination of narrative and dissociation, combining the escapism that each field offers to a much more potent outcome.

Though this controlled dissociation has many healthy elements, and room for growth as a more defined tool for therapy and social integration, this has also led to one of RPGs most vocal criticisms. Stemming from the same evangelical movement that dissuaded popular fantasy, the lens was turned on RPGs as tools of evil or moral corruption. The claim was often that RPGs didn't just have you imagine you were in another world, but would actively encourage people to abandon the real world for the fictional. The origin of the claim ranged from simple 'psychiatric studies' to 'tools of Lucifer'.¹¹ But the core was the same. Escapism is bad and will lead to people losing themselves in the gameworlds. While the jury is still out on video games and other *solitary* forms of fictional narratives, the cooperative nature of RPGs and their demand at 'sharing' a world with others guards them from many of these accusations.

¹¹ Chick

There is not currently extensive literature into the mental and social effects of RPGs that does not have an obvious bias and intention to vilify the players. The research that does exist arises from the same fundamental evangelicals that were afraid of books with demons or dragons on the cover, even if those creatures were meant to be the villain and were to be destroyed by the PCs. There are some books and articles, but the bulk of them deal more in the outcomes of RPGs rather than their cause. So in order to trace the causes of RPGs more closely, I will have to continue to prove the connection between RPGs and Theatre and apply biosocial theories of the later onto the former.

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There is nothing new to be said for saying that theatre and fantasy are ways to escape the world. ¹² From fantasy books to reality TV shows, it is nothing special to say that investing yourself in situations that is radically different from yourself can be entertain. But there is actually evidence that these sort of activities are actually beneficial to social interaction and make groups work together better, especially in the post industrial world.

¹² Dutton

Boyd, in his book *The Origin of Stories* claims at one point that fiction has an advantage in that it helps humans understand the culture they have been born in. Marking that human children nearly universally engage in pretend play, children construct complex narratives that are for themselves alone. The children present these narratives to others, and though there may be conflict from other children or adults with competing stories or ideas, the mere act of play provides huge benefits to children's language and social skills.¹³

Students that reported participating in Drama Classes and Theatre Extracurriculars had higher GPAs and lower dropout rates than students that did not or could not participate.¹⁴ While more research has to be done to find a solid causal link, it still hints to there be some sort of benefit that theatre is indicative of. One of the prevalent theories is that the driving force behind theatre, and RPGs, is actually a survival mechanism that has evolved in most animals. And that tool is imagination.

¹³ Boyd. 179

¹⁴ Ruppert

When we talk about imagination, the same images that are stereotyped into RPGs arises, the idea of a bunch of people in silly costumes playing make-believe. But imagination serves a practical purpose in the animal kingdom that is widely documented.¹⁵ Imagined scenarios provide a low-cost, low-risk replacement for activities that others have done. Constructing a scenario allows for someone to act out different results and lets them imagine an outcome and apply that to the real world as they see fit. Animals often do this by engaging in faux-social and physical behaviors that mimic the real world. Rats will play with each other to recreate social intimacies that will help them when they mate, and dogs will bite and nip at each other and their young to establish how their future pack-dynamic will fall.¹⁶

The neurology behind human imagination is also fascinating and provides a clearer picture still. When humans engage in storytelling, we activate nearly every region of our brains. When describing the scent or taste of something, the appropriate regions of the brain that

¹⁵ Allen

¹⁶ Sutton-Smith

are attached to those memories and reactions activate.¹⁷ The brain is able to recreate those experiences on a sub-cognitive level. Essentially, being told about a delicious dinner triggers the brain almost as much as seeing it put out in front of you for the first time. Humans can empathise with other people's experiences to an incredibly high degree, literally imagining themselves in those same positions as others without even realizing it.

Theatre acts as a refined form of this process, letting people see the activities of heroes and villains, monsters and average citizens engage with each other and what outcome arises in certain conditions. Theatre is imagination brought to life, and it is this draw towards imagination that very probably made theatrics so appealing to early man.¹⁸ When Romeo drinks the poison, we learn that if he had just been patient or less rash, he and Juliet would have had a 'happier' ending. Much like Aesop's Fables, they can give people new perspective on the world or warn them away from dangers and the theatre goers leave with a bit more knowledge about how things work that they can take with them into real life. Theatre is the refinement of imagination.

¹⁷Bressler

¹⁸Dutton

RPGs go beyond even that in its ties to its roots in imagination, having the audience now become a participant in their own decisions, but still servants to the narrative. Though they can choose who to talk to and how they accomplish their goals, they are still bound by certain rules and they are still in a world that they are not in complete control of. Humans do not enjoy plays with boring protagonists that have no drama or action in them. There is no entertainment to be found in sitting and watching a man file taxes or a woman stacking wood for an hour. Humans will more easily latch onto tales about hunters, or average citizens overcoming adversity. Without tension, stories are boring and can't easily convey information. As Steven Pinker said "Fictional Narratives supply us with a mental catalogue of the fatal conundrums we might face someday and the outcomes of strategies [we use]¹⁹".

Another theory of the benefits of theatre and RPGs is the moral reflection that stories provide. Stories are moments of entertaining education. Moments where people can draw attention to conflict and walk away with a new perspective or a reinforcement of old morals.

¹⁹Pinker

More than just teaching empathy, they are tools for social action. They can showcase or criticize the world that people live in and can either reinforce norms or try to show an alternative. Stories can help define people's place in the world, or how the people that experience the story believe the world should be. Some of the longest surviving stories are reflective of the world that they were made in and had a 'lesson' that was relevant to the people at the time. Dante's Inferno warned about sinning in medieval Italy and corruption in the church. The Iliad and Odyssey were just as much a view on the moral stance of the Greek Warriors and their righteous journeys to complete their quests after being wronged as the battles. And the plights of Gilgamesh were more than just a man's quest for immortality, but about coming to terms with a cruel world. All of these elements were major social pushes at the time, and remained important to future societies. This is why those stories survived the ages while others fell into obscurity. An especially potent example of this is stories told to children, which are often laced with overt moral lessons, such as Aesop's Fables and Classic Fairy Tales

GMs can't always just throw monsters at the players, otherwise the mindless violence would get repetitive. RPG guides universally promote greater dilemmas that challenge the player's understanding

of the world, but the scenarios are crafted by someone in the immediate social circle of the players. Players will pick up on their shared bias and that will influence the kinds of stories that are made. A group of poor kids playing in the library in Idaho will have a very different idea of the world than wealthy adults in France. And the players, with their own biased restriction and the freedom to do whatever they wish in the world, get to navigate it. They CAN play an evil character, someone who only wants to commit terrible crimes. But the character will have real world obstacles to contend with, because that is what is expected. The town guards won't just let the mass murderer that killed the king leave without a fight. Conversely, if the players helped the king and saved the town from some other evil, the guards will be very helpful and even assist the characters if they get in trouble.

This leads back into the titular characteristic of Role-Playing Games; a game where you play a role. We can only use our imagination by inserting things that do not exist, whether that is a conversation or a whole life that needs to be planned out. Imagination can be an invaluable tool for describing people's lives

and actions and motivating people to figure out the intricacies of the social hierarchies that humans are biologically predisposed to.

In Psychology, the practice of playing a different mode of identity is called 'psychodrama' and is a useful tool to develop empathy and to come to terms with past trauma. The professional can take on the role of a director and engages in fictional scenarios that the patient reacts to in another mindset. Many parts of psychodrama therapy take their roles from theatre, with the director guiding the 'protagonist' through 'acts' and then discussing the conclusion. It has been a valuable psychological tool to help young children deal with emotional trauma, as children are naturally disposed to pretend play to help them conceptualize the world around them.²⁰ It can also help people of all ages who suffer from PTSD and other triggered emotional disorders by providing a space to relive and explore the trauma in a guided way and with much less risk of endangering themselves or others.

Outside of clinical purposes, counselors and conflict resolution specialists will often ask people to 'see things from the other person's

²⁰ Baim

perspective'. These sorts of tactics can help reduce interpersonal conflict and increase the development of empathy. Even just asking people to attach emotion to fictional characters that they know aren't real leads to increased activity in parts of their brains that are associated with interpersonal communication. A study in 2009 found a relation between higher capacity to empathy and more activity in those regions of the brain responsible for categorizing social interaction in people that regularly read fictional books.²¹ These effects are amplified in RPGs, as the PCs literally take on a separate mind set and engage with other roles that they have never seen before.

But the theatrics are only one half of the fun of an RPG. Though creating a scenario is fun, there has to be a conflict, something to overcome to make it interesting. And the rules for these conflict come from a different arena of the mind, the parts of the brain that crave puzzles and victory. This leads us into the history of war games.

²¹ Paul

Section 4 - Evolutionary History of War Games

"First of all, any given party is either going to examine everything carefully or they're not. If they're not...they're going to die horribly and not have any fun doing it. The assumption of Tomb of Horrors is unmitigated complex deadliness. This is part of what makes it awesome."

"It engages them on the level of fiction and on the level of mechanics unheard of anywhere else....Tomb of Horrors isn't for everyone."

"But it isn't your build or your strength that will beat it. It's your playstyle. If you don't play smart, you're dead."

-Anonymous reviews of *The Tomb of Horrors*, one of the most difficult and deadly adventures ever made for a Dungeons and Dragons wide release.

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Domestic dogs, when entering a new group of canines, will often engage in activities that resemble fighting. They will lightly bite, tumble, and even pin other dogs down, but never for pure aggression. Though fights can break out, it is often just 'play fighting'. These fights serve a two-fold purpose in establishing and reaffirming social standing without actually fighting, but they also

have a much more practical purpose. This sort of activity prepares dogs in case they need to protect themselves.

Many different animals are taught by siblings or parents how to fight by using play fighting. Another good example is large cats in the wild, where the cubs will try to attack each other or their parents when they don't have claws or teeth to cause harm. This sort of seemingly purposeless activity is reported across hundreds of species of animals, not just humans. Evolutionary psychologists believe play is so universal is because it is a safe space where the animals can learn the skills from each other. Anything from learning to escape predators, to hunting prey, to learning how to act when in the presence of others. ²²

Humans also engage in these activities, though some branches have seemingly become much more sophisticated tools than basic play fighting. These activities that adults use are most commonly referred to as war-games. War-games are meant to replicate battle, either on an individual or a widespread scale. Most people in the world, especially in the western world, do not need to learn any

²²Henig

combat skills. But even people that are never planning on going to war take part in these sort of activities. They are intrinsically linked to the human psyche and the deep recesses of human culture that formed the foundation of our modern world. As Gary Allen Fine puts it, in his book *Shared Fantasy* "...[wargaming] represents [coveted] social positions, rather than people..."²³ In war simulations, it is focused around this concept of glory and victory that has been a hallmark of fitness in Western Culture for millennia.

Many human cultures have prestige attached to feats of strength. The ability to run, or wrestle, or fight. Heroes in myths are often the ones that can perform miraculous feats of strength. Hercules completed his twelve trials, Krishna lifted a mountain while he was only a child, and Maui ensnared the sun to make sure it didn't go too fast. Culture heroes reflect their culture, but since most of humanity has been disposed to war at one time or another, fighting is always tied into the stories that people tell.

²³Fine, p. 11

But, on the other side, it is not only individual strength but the qualities of leadership that are often valued in human culture. Wars are never waged by the common soldier, only fought by them. The generals and kings, usually from the upper echelons of society where the lines of succession was often most heavily weighted by heredity.²⁴ Children of kings would often engage in war games to learn the basics of leading armies before they would ever see a battlefield. Even soldiers would engage in these games for the same reason that people engaged in any form of imaginative play; it was very low risk and it help prepare for future encounters.

Armies today still engage in scenarios, from classroom hypotheticals to full armed war-games that are organized across branches of the Armed Forces. And, though there is a stigma in the military towards calling them 'games' as opposed to 'simulations', they still share the characteristics of play that it serves in the animal kingdom. It is not real battle, and can be stopped at any time with little consequence. But, just like pretend play can serve practical functions, so do the war games.

²⁴ Pine

Other, ancient versions of war games do exist today for civilian consumption too. The most famous of these is Chess, which is descended from the older strategy game Chaturanga in India. Though they were mostly for fun, they did pose challenges for the people playing them and were often owned by princes and military officials to keep their minds sharp.²⁵ Even the term used to describe these games, strategy games, is a word of greek origin that translates to 'general-ship' or, the qualities needed by a general of an army. ²⁶Other examples of causal war-games include Go, Sho-gi, and even the pen and paper war simulations that inspired Gygax and Arneson over 40 years ago.

RPGs present the same sort of strategical challenge that has captured the mind of people, but gives them a platform to explore this that they may not have previously had. The stereotypical image of the RPG player is a non-athletic young adult that engages their fantasy for power in an imaginary world. And though I can't speak to the individual reason why anyone participates, the pull of glory is a very strong factor, whether it is seen or not.

²⁵ Murray

²⁶ Liddell

RPGs can be used as a pseudo-replacement for the victory that comes from battle and strategy without the risk of death. That rush of energy that comes from participating in an activity with stakes, but the safety of reality keeping the players from being hurt.

This drive for success is also believed to be biological, with the same system of problem solving and structure giving people a small high.²⁷ Human beings love solving problems, so it is not uncommon to have entertainment that requires solving problems and developing strategy. This same drive is what is believed to be tied to humans neurological predisposition for pattern recognition, in that humans are pushed towards recognizing problems and completing tasks. While it is still being debated, the evidence for the theory is still very strong.

As young children, we can exist in our own fantasy world. Children from around the age of 2 regularly engage in internal play, taking in information and developing a simple viewpoint. But as they age, they become more engaged with the outside world and more likely to notice detail. Humans begin to recognize the world around

²⁷Fraizer

them and the structure of the world and become adept at surviving it, which is helped largely to a problem solving ability and the need for social hierarchy. ²⁸

While there is no ingrained predisposition for violence, humans as social creatures come to terms with acts of aggression and nature that is out of their control. In order to survive, humans need to sharpen their advantages and learn how to assess risks and navigate their lives with safety. And the best place to sharpen those skills is engaging in intellectual problem solving, which can be provided by RPGs.

²⁸ Boyd

Conclusion

Humans are fascinating creatures, depending so deeply on other humans for nearly everything. Our survival depends on learning to trust others and others trusting us.

And these games of dungeons and monsters, heroes and villains, they are rooted in the heart of human behavior. Though the games themselves may not appeal to all, the threads that bind them do call out to something intrinsic to human beings. RPGs have manifested in a number of ways, from theatrical entertainment, to strategy game, to psychiatric tool. The opportunity to shift one's basic identity and create a new moral paradigm is one of the major elements as well as its greatest blessing. Role-playing encourages higher-level mental stimulation on top of the chance to explore the depths of their own empathy.

Beyond the many benefits and opportunities, they are just plain fun. Who wouldn't want the chance to wield a sword to rescue a kidnapped royal, or to fly a spaceship among the stars with their

closest friends? This thesis has provided a model of ways that RPGs challenge the mind, enhance the soul, and allow for deep connection between friends and peers. The goals of this thesis were two fold. First, to provide an introduction to the concept of a Role-Playing Game to unfamiliar readers so that they may gain a more complete insight into the game and its players. Secondly, it was to form a theory into the way that these games, and other similar activities are born from a rich cultural history. Ultimately, I believe that RPGs are one of the most fascinating collaborative tools that humanity has produced.

As William Bainbridge writes, "The Gameworlds...are culture writ small and art writ large...and in [artistic] context, they are among the grandest works of all."²⁹

²⁹Bainbridge

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