



## Breaking the Dice

*The Nuances of Dungeons & Dragons, (Self) Discovery, and (Social) Development*

KALEP GLANDON

In this in-depth synthesis of scholarly research and popular discussion, Kalep Glandon draws on diverse scholarship in game studies, pop-cultural studies, and psychology to configure the table-top role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) as a valuable tool for knowing oneself and cultivating vital social skills in a welcoming environment. This essay was written for Writing II with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

**D**UNGEONS & DRAGONS, the versatile, conceptual, and experiential tabletop role-playing game (RPG), may provide a bit more to its players than just fun. A common theme in the realm of *D&D* and the scholarly research done on the game is the idea that *D&D* is much more than just entertainment. Gaming scholar Aubrie Adams, for example, highlights the idea that cooperation meets “real-world needs”: “[T]he emotions, camaraderie, and accomplishments experienced in the game are real; thus suggesting that real-world needs are met through communication in socially constructed RPG scenarios” (70). Continuing her argument, Adams suggests the notion that “needs are met through RPGs is evidenced by the multitude of play-time hours accrued by groups as well as the ways that players bond, construct inside jokes, and revel in retelling

specific adventures.” Further explaining the usefulness of *D&D*, psychiatrist Wayne D. Blackmon writes about a 19-year-old patient who made a “methodical attempt at suicide” but was later introduced to the game (624). Blackmon details the rehabilitation of his patient through *D&D*: “By introducing fantasy and play, Dungeons and Dragons appears to have been the vehicle that allowed the patient described in this paper to enhance ego development” (630-31). Further, Nathan Shank’s article “Productive Violence and Poststructural Play in the Dungeons and Dragons Narrative” posits that violence in a productive setting like an RPG can help separate the player from their player character (PC) to further the narrative of a campaign, thus furthering camaraderie between its players: “The best part of adventures for many PCs is not in playing out the plotline of its script but instead is found in the individualized choices made during the adventure, those which give it unique shape and identity” (192-3). In sum, *D&D* can be used beneficially for self-improvement and developing social skills: “Some of the cognitive benefits of RPGs include the ability to experience other perspectives, practice visualization, escape social pressure, increase personal control, improve social skills . . . , and release unconscious fantasies” (Adams 70). Various studies all seem to settle in a similar vicinity and indicate the prospect of self-betterment through *D&D*.

Separation from yourself to improve lacking or weak qualities is a recurring subject among studies of *D&D*. Filling a fictional character’s shoes detaches your real abilities from your characters abilities and allows you become comfortable in your own skin and mind: “For the patient, the game served as an organized vehicle to become familiar with his own unconscious. The use of this material in therapy, the questioning of motives and emotions allowed these underlying unconscious thoughts to come to awareness and be worked through” (Blackmon 628). Blackmon used this to help his patient to feel safe so their problems could surface, and they could work to address them: “The vehicle to reach these feelings quickly and safely

was through the use of projections and displacements of the fantasies onto the Dungeons and Dragons game” (628). Of course, you can’t have an RPG games or games in general without stigmas, since “movies and television demonstrate that RPG-players are stereotyped as socially inept and often suffering from psychiatric disorders” (Lis et al. 381-82). Eric Lis, Carl Chiniara, Robert Biskin, and Richard Monotero tackle these stigmas to determine the belief among psychiatrists: “This study represents the first data collected on psychiatrists’ perceptions of RPGs, a significant cultural phenomenon associated with stereotypes related to mental health. Our results suggest that psychiatrists do not assume that RPG-players are at higher risk of psychopathology” (383). These stigmas contrast with the truth that games do help cognitive functions and have positive effects for their players” “Research on digital games has shown that they contribute to higher levels of well-being, less depression, and less negative affect. . . . On the whole, game-play may contribute to a variety of positive effects that researchers have only recently begun to understand” (Adams 70). Games, and tabletop RPGs in particular, have positive effects and can help develop social skills during play. Learning to strengthen a lacking skill through a character you made, and then acting through that character, frees you from current responsibility and allows open play and a training space for these skills.

Extending past traditional games, role-playing can fulfill the social needs of its players, allowing them to express themselves and complete their motivations: “[T]hrough observation of the talk and interaction, we can identify the needs and motivations of players; we can understand why they play and what fulfillment it creates for them” (Adams 83). In fulfilling one’s own goals, a player also achieves a common goal with the other players in the party. In the rule sets provided, the restraints of character creation help you bond with your character and help you identify with them furthering your development: “Play is only achieved when, under the flexibility but restrictiveness of the rules, characters do violence to their own

storylines in favor of the communal storyline” (Shank 195). Carrying on with the idea of “Productive Violence” Shank views violence in roleplay as a way of advancing the narrative. Violence in this light is paradoxical according to Shank: “Violence as an act of destruction, breaking, disequilibrium, or negation intuitively functions opposite to and along with acts of creation or production. But there is a paradox here, since violence produces even while negating” (192). The productiveness of violence enhances the narrative for the player, furthering their sense of self from their character while also engrossing more of themselves into the characters: “Violence as play provides us with a new approach to analyzing narrative and perhaps even informs the wide spectrum of human experience itself” (Shank 195). And in fact, it does so socially, growing your character and qualities to better form them and nourish your own. As John Arcadian says, “The most important aspect of these games, it’s that social one, the putting on the character and acting it out for your friends. It’s actually something that behavioral psychologists call social play, and they study it in kids is one of the primary ways we develop social skills.” You can evolve along with your character. As the party’s goals changes, the campaign’s narrative shifts and social growth is reinforced.

*D&D* allows its players to grow specific traits they want so they can embrace those traits in a free and social environment: “Kids who struggle to react appropriately in “regular” social situations often feel more at ease when interacting in a roleplaying setting because they are responding to others under the guise of their character rather than themselves” (Ashley). This freedom from consequence allows the player to express themselves freely and discover their desires. Blackmon’s patient, for instance, “first expressed them in a displaced way and got used to them in fantasy, he could feel safe with his feelings and begin to direct them more directly to another person” (628). The separation from the character, when coupled with the connection to who the character is and the ideals they hold, helps the players reach new aspects of themselves: “[T]his idea of

playing out a character to improve a personality trait actually comes from the work of a psychologist Alfred Adler. He has a role-playing therapy. . . . [Y]ou act as if you were somebody who you find more confident for a little bit each day. You put on that persona and bring that personality trait a little closer to the surface in yourself” (Arcadian). *D&D* catapults this idea into a full-fledged character, where you are not only acting as if you are this person, but you decide where this character goes and what they morally believe. Being socially developed is important in everyday life, and many people who aren’t developed socially in certain areas have nowhere to enhance these areas. According to Arcadian, “Now, we don’t have many spaces for practicing social skills in adult life, and that’s odd because practice is one of the ways we improve our skills” (Arcadian). RPGs, and more specifically *D&D*, can train these weak areas in an environment safe to explore morality scour up admirable qualities. Through little more than pretending and with others participating around you, you can escape and become who you want to be in an accepting environment.

*D&D* is a tool to develop and discover one’s lacking abilities can build confidence, inspire positivity, and craft your character: “Speculation here may suggest a psychological correlation between adolescence, social awkwardness, escapist fantasy, and a dubiously close bond with a non-human entity that forms this archetypical personality” (Adams 71-72). Much like choosing a spell or class in your character creation you can choose traits you want and mature them through play. *D&D* can become a creative outlet for many to develop themselves, to explore “their mental dungeons and slay their psychic dragons” (Blackmon 631).

#### ►► WORKS CITED

ADAMS, AUBRIE S. “Needs Met Through Role-Playing Games: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of Dungeons & Dragons.” *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research*, vol. 12, 2013, pp. 69-

86, [opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/kaleidoscope/vol12/iss1/6/](https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/kaleidoscope/vol12/iss1/6/). Accessed 18 April 2020.

ARCADIAN, JOHN. "Tabletop Roleplaying Games as Social Practice." *YouTube*, uploaded by TEDx Talks, 10 April 2018, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJwsWstaihI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJwsWstaihI).

ASHLEY, KENDALL. "Dungeons & Dragons As Therapy." *Geek and Sundry*, 18 May 2016, [geekandsundry.com/dungeons-dragons-as-therapy/](https://geekandsundry.com/dungeons-dragons-as-therapy/). Accessed 18 April 2020.

BLACKMON, WAYNE D. "Dungeons and Dragons: The Use of a Fantasy Game in the Psychotherapeutic Treatment of a Young Adult." *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, vol 48, no. 4, 1994, pp. 624-32.

LIS, ERIC, et al. "Psychiatrists' Perceptions of Role-Playing Games." *Psychiatric Quarterly*, vol. 86, 2015, pp. 381-84.

SHANK, NATHAN. "Productive Violence and Poststructural Play in the *Dungeons and Dragons* Narrative." *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2015, pp. 184-97.

#### ►► FURTHER READING

BEN-EZRA, MENACHEM, et al. "Social Workers' Perceptions of the Association Between Role Playing Games and Psychopathology." *The Psychiatric Quarterly*, vol. 89, no. 1, 2018, pp. 213-18.