**9 The Impact of Role-playing Games on Culture**

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# Introduction

There is a distressing lack of history knowledge in the gaming community. Tabletop role-players seem entirely disconnected from the miniature wargaming community that spawned Dungeons & Dragons. MUD coders don’t understand where their Dungeons & Dragons-themed rules and assumptions came from. MMORPG developers almost unilaterally ignored what made MUDs successful, making the same mistakes that MUDs made a decade before. Computer role-playing games tout “innovations” that were implemented long before by tabletop gamers and MUD developers.

(Tresca 2011:3)

Role-playing games (RPGs) are an essential element of gaming culture. They have not only played a core role in the development of games, but have a wider currency in popular culture where they are often used as a catch-all reference for gaming habits, behaviours and players. Terms developed via RPG games (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Role-playing\_game\_terms), or the iconic image of a group of players sitting around a table with pens, paper, dice and small figures (Fig 9.1) are now common shorthand for more general gaming experiences or actions. The role-playing gamer has also become a representation of the gamer in general, depicted through television series such as *The Big Bang Theory*, *Community* and *Stranger Things*.

**[Figure 9.1 here]**

This chapter charts the influence of RPGs on other games and media products, as well as their representation in popular culture. It examines the cultural impact of specific role-playing aspects that have caused a ‘drop down’ effect, whereby RPGs feed upon common themes and tropes to impact gaming as a whole. Whilst core texts such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) established now familiar tropes, they have been followed by games that continue to sustain and evolve these ideas. The migration of pivotal members of RPG development and design to other popular media (including other types of gaming) solidified these influences. The chapter concludes by examining how specific representations of RPGs and their players have spread and changed throughout popular media. Subcultures and fandom, another core aspect of this cultural spread, are the subject of chapter 21.

# Role-Playing Games in Game Culture

The launch of D&D heralded the birth of interactive entertainment, long before computer and video games. Nowadays the concept of personalised player-characters who exist in a virtual world is commonplace.

(Livingstone 2008)

## The Influence of D&D

*D&D* is, for better or worse, considered the founder of RPGs **(see Chapter 4).** It is also often used as a generic term to refer for all RPGs. *D&D*’s co-creator Gary Gygax’s death in March 2008 was noted around the world in obituaries and reflective news items. The New York Times stated that Gygax “wielded a cultural influence far broader than his relatively narrow fame among hard-core game enthusiasts.” In a follow-up piece published a few days later it was claimed that we all live in a universe Gygax built, as journalist Adam Rogers (2008) traced not just MORPGs and the popularity of the fantasy genre back to *D&D*, but also claimed that by creating a rule-system for social interactions, Gygax paved the way for role and avatar performances everywhere, including social media websites like Facebook. The BBC highlighted the social aspects of role-playing games and hailed *D&D* for gathering geeks together:

Dungeons & Dragons had a number of effects. It brought so-called geeks together in a social setting as a matter of course, it quickly spread out into the mainstream, and it signalled that money could be made out of catering for previously niche audiences. The game has also left a legacy of subcultures like live action role-play and online gaming, where there is a pronounced social element. The world we live in now, where "gaining friends" on social networking sites is regarded as a totally reasonable pastime, is a very different world to that in which Dungeons & Dragons made its debut in 1974.

(BBC 2008)

Regardless of the veracity of this observation, a major news outlet crediting *D&D* in this manner is indicative of its recognized cultural standing. *D&D* has integrated itself in popular culture through cartoon series, spin-off novels, games within other genres such as card, video and boardgames, and also fantasy art.

# Tropes and Terms

Terminology from RPGs is now a vital part of gaming language. Words and phrases (for example ‘level up’,‘epic’, ‘tanking’ and ‘ganking’), commonly understood amongst RPG gamers have lead to an universalization (and sometimes a subsequent internalization) of gaming language (Masters 1994: 57-74, Barry 2013, Ensslin 2014: 126-137, Manninen 2003). This terminology, and the behaviors they often refer to, form a background to the establishment of RPGs cultures, linking players through a shared discourse. This discourse often extends in use beyond the context of games. For example, players might joke that a socially-inept person has “low charisma” or that they have been practicing in order to “raise their climbing skill”. Similarly, a player may celebrate that she got a “critical hit” when something lucky happens, or that she “failed a saving throw” when unlucky.

**[Box Insert 9.1 here]**

RPG terminology is also often value-laden in ways that are complicated. For example, the word ‘Race’ often has little to do with the complex mix of cultural upbringing, color, parentage or geographical origins. Instead, ‘races’ within RPGs are often not human but rather entirely different evolutionary groups with distinctive physical, cultural, and psychological attributes. The *Player’s Handbook* for the 4th Edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* describes the race of as “a natural humanoid race…Dwarves are a short race, as their name implies, standing from 4’ 3” – 4’ 9… What Dwarves lack in height, they make up for in bulk; they are, on average, about as heavy as humans” (Heinsoo, Collins & Wyatt 2008: 37). In a sense, ‘Race’ in RPGs has become shorthand for a combination of stereotypical behaviors and statistical attributes: the taciturn dwarf who is strong and can take a beating or the dexterous elven archer who is sensitive and appreciates beauty.

## The Bestiary

As the pre-eminent taxonomy of monsters of our time, *D&D* and its *Monster Manual* has also proved hugely influential. In a sense *D&D* participates in a broader phenomenon Michael Saler calls the modern enchantment (2012). Saler sees the creation of coherent mythologies with consistent worlds populated with peoples and creatures, depicted in maps, and with functioning cosmologies and languages as a modern project. According to him, the worlds of Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythos and J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle-Earth were key pioneers in this development. These worlds continue to exist beyond the initial efforts of their creators through the addition of new creators (e.g. August Derleth for Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythos) or their adaptation to other forms and media. Booth (2016) argues that these paratexts continuously draw upon and feed back into the original worlds.

From this perspective, *D&D* and the *Monster Manual* have served as the basis of a form of meta-world. In *Playing at the World* (2012: 140-157) Jon Peterson explores how the bestiary of *D&D*, systematized in the numerous different editions of the *Monster Manual*, was built, and provided a systematization and categorization of monsters that became a canonical elements of worldbuilding. According to Peterson, Gygax expanded on the creatures, races, and monsters depicted by J.R.R. Tolkien and his contemporaries in fantasy literature by turning to sources outside fiction such as European bestiaries of fantastic creatures. Of course, some of the monsters depicted in *D&D* are original creations, but most have a basis in literature or myth. Before *D&D*, descriptions of monsters could shift from source to source, if they were described at all. Peterson notes that *D&D* “carefully distinguishes orcs from goblins, trolls from ogres, skeletons from ghouls from wights from wraiths from spectres, as well as defining several categories of giants and dragons.” (2012: 157). In the taxonomy the monsters, their capabilities and typical behaviors were described in text, depicted in images, and given comparable statistical values for game mechanics. As a result *D&D* “extended and ultimately surpassed the efforts of medieval bestiary authors” (ibid). The *Monster Manual* now became the basis from which fantasy literature and other worldbuilders in general could draw from.

The creation of rulebooks like the *Monster Manual* (Gygax: 1977) also created a form of aesthetic desire to accompany the cataloguing of rules, creatures and character abilities. David Ewalt argues that ‘The Monster Manual succeeded not just as a game supplement, but by elevating the D&D rules book to fetish object’ (138)

This gave the game, and the books, a wider currency beyond simple gameplay; demonstrated by the continued collectability of early books, and the nostalgia that surrounds them. The website GeekDad contains the following eulogisation of the Monster Manual (MM) by James Floyd Kelly:

The Monster Manual was a great source of inspiration for many adventures — I’d pick the right Big Bad, create a dungeon or castle or other location, and then scatter lesser creatures around as needed. When I reached for the MM, my players knew something was coming… or around the corner… or hidden just beneath the water’s surface.

(Kelly: 2014)

# Designers and Developers

The Role-playing game industry has always been small and reasonably self-contained. Over time, however, it has become far more diffuse, drawing from multiple media genres and blending into other forms of entertainment. As part of this natural process, some of its members, including important and influential ones, have migrated to other industries and through this caused cross-pollination of ideas and concepts. So, RPGs have also impacted culture via the role-playing concepts and ideas that its industry members have pollinated other media genres with. The closest influence has in many cases been towards the computer or videogame industry, and it comes as no surprise that there are several examples of people becoming core influencers in this respect.

Warren Spector provides one example of this. Starting out an editor-in-chief at Steve Jackson Games, he helped develop tabletop role-playing (TRPG) games such as Toon (1984) and GURPS (1986). He later worked on *Send in the Clones* (Varney and Spector: 1985) for TRPG *Paranoia* at West End Games and the rulebook for the 2nd edition of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (Cook: 1989). This experience gave him good insights into several of the most influential companies producing TRPGs. After this he transitioned into computer role-playing (CRPG) games by working on *Ultima VI* (1990) at Origins. While CRPGs like games in the *Ultima* series are still RPGs, it was an initial step that would later lead to broader impacts on non-CRPG videogames. Some of Warren Spector’s later videogame projects such as *System Shock* (1984), and the *Deus Ex* (2000-3) and *Thief* series (1998-2004) have been hailed as innovate computer games through their introduction of role-playing elements. Spector’s work trajectory is symptomatic of the cross-pollination that tends to happen as a result of transmedial movement.

Ken Rolston and Sandy Peterson are other examples of people moving from the tabletop role-playing industry to the computer game industry. Ken Rolston worked across a broad spectrum of RPG franchises including *D&D*, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *Paranoia*, and *RuneQuest* later moved into CRPGs with Bethesda in 2002. Sandy Petersen also began working in TRPG design, he is most famous for being the main creator of the hugely successful *Call of Cthulhu* before taking on design responsibilities on videogame hits such as the first-person shooter *Doom* and real-time strategy games in the *Age of Empires* series. Steve Jackson, on the other hand, has taken RPG tropes and jokes from TRPGs and brought them into the domain of card and boardgames via his long running cardgame series *Munchkin* (2001).

In 1976, in the United Kingdom, Ian Livingstone and a different Steve Jackson (native to the UK, rather than the US) founded the game retailer, developer and publishing company Games Workshop. They became the first distributors of *D&D* in Europe and participated actively in the promotion of commercialization of TRPG games. In 1980, Penguin Books commissioned the two to write a book introducing readers to role-playing games. Instead, the pair created the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebook series (1982-1995). These gamebooks, often referred to as “choose-your-own-adventure” (CYOA) or branching narrative books, “are texts whose story is experienced by reading through a series of numbered sections” (Zagal and Lewis 2015). At the end of each section the reader is offered a choice, and then based on that choice, moves to the next corresponding section (Costikyan 2007). The series was incredibly successful and has sold over 17 million copies in 30 languages and has also been adapted into a series of video games (Green 2014).

Ian Livingstone moved to the videogame industry in 1993, and formed Eidos Interactive in 1995. The company was responsible for the *Tomb Raider* games. He is now a spokesperson for teaching videogame design and computer programming in early stage education, and co-authored the Livingstone-Hope Skills Review for the UK government in 2010. Similarly, Steve Jackson moved into the videogame industry founding Lionhead Studios that among other titles, created the *Fable* series, he is now an honorary professor at Brunel University and lectures in games design.

Richard Bartle is also a professor at the University of Essex. Curiously, he was one of the first people in the UK to buy a copy of *D&D* from Games Workshop (Stuart 2014). He developed MUD, the first Multiuser Dungeon in 1978 with Roy Trubshaw. Online multi-user environments emerged from a desire to play networked role-playing games, and were the precursor to MORPGs **(see chapter 7)**.

The interconnectedness of the RPG industry shows how thought influencers move across gaming cultures and adapt their ideas (and products) to each market. The flexibility of the core elements at the heart of RPGs helps create an underlying discourse that flows and mutates in accordance with the demands of each media. Links with educational establishments and governmental practice help further the impact of RPGs through their dissemination via codes of practice and new generations of students.

# RPGs in Popular Culture

This section examines the cultural impact of role-playing games through their dissemination as a thematic genre, and discusses their representation in three other popular media; literature, film and television. Role-playing games have affected both the composition of other texts, and generated their own cultural products. Regarding the texts as ‘gaming capital’; i.e. artifacts that are in flux according to the needs and desires of players, industry and popular media (Consalvo 2009: 3-6); can help us understand how the dissemination of RPG tropes; most specifically of players and gaming narratives, has led to a broader appreciation of RPGs as cultural artifacts. Different understandings of the ‘RPG’ and the ‘role-player’; as a literary device, as a description of a specific type of game genre and game playing person, and as a phenomenon that creates specific types of behaviour, have formed a notion of both RPGs and the RPG player within a wider cultural sphere.

## Literature and Written Texts

Role-playing games lend themselves well to fiction writing simply because of the formulaic manner in which campaigns, events and games are structured. Often tracking versions of Joseph Campbell’s Monomyth (1949), RPG campaigns can form the basis of stories, or encourage derivative texts. RPG games and character role-play influence other genres stylistically, as well as dovetailing with other forms of production, such as long haul television series, fantasy literature and art. As before, terms and tropes also help support these narratives and constructions by building from a shared understanding of the RPG game and its conventional forms.

### Fiction

Fiction based around *D&D* has been published since 1978, beginning with Andre Norton’s Quag Keep (1978). In 1985 *D&D*’s publisher TSR formally began publishing D&D titles with Weis and Hickman’s *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* (1984) (see Langford 2002: 92), the first title of the *Dragonlance* series. This practice has continued over the years with other games and companies. Wizards of the Coast, the current publisher of *D&D*, is still considered a major force in fantasy literature with hundreds of official titles. It’s most well-known fantasy franchises are the *Forgotten Realms* and *Dragonlance* series. The novels directly relate to *D&D* drawing from the worlds, characters, and lore created within the manuals, and also adhering to the basic rules laid out in them. Conversely, new histories, characters, and situations from the novels have become official elements within source books and games. For example, the *Forgotten Realms: Hall of Heroes* supplement for the 2nd edition of *D&D* (TSR: 1989) has a section providing details and character statistics for the character Drizzt Do’Urden, protagonist of, and first seen in, the novel *The Crystal Shard* (Salvatore: 1988).

The formulaic nature of an RPG game – a diverse party of adventurers, a series of quests and trials, and the potential for individual and group heroism (or failure) – lends itself well to science-fiction and fantasy writing, where this structure is an established formula. In series like *The Dresden Files* (Butcher 2000-present) and Jen Williams’ *Copper Cat* books (Williams 2014, 2105), this is clearly apparent. Each series is long and episodic; characters resemble RPG archetypes intended to be familiar to a reader, and they ‘level up’ throughout the course of each book, becoming stronger, gaining powerful items or suffering setbacks that impinge on their characters in some way. For example, in *The Iron Ghost* (Williams 2015), the character Wyrnn gains a mount in the form of a golem-wolf; ironically commenting that all of the other characters in her party have already managed to gain one (62) and in the *Dresden Files*, Harry Dresden often refers to items such as his staff and a shield bracelet, which he imbues with strength and vitality between books. In the latter case, when it appears that Dresden is becoming too powerful, he suffers a significant wound (a debilitating burn to his left hand). The Dresden Files resembles an RPG adventure so much, in fact, that a subsequent role-playing game using the FUDGE rule system was created in 2011. Although it would be completely disingenuous to imply that all fantasy and science fiction have been impacted by RPG covenants, there is certainly a familiarity in these stories that is appreciated by readers; for example Richard Webb’s review of *The Copper Promise* (Williams: 2014), notes favourably that ‘even the trio of central characters bear the hallmarks of a tabletop fantasy RPG’ (Webb: 2014).

### Campaign Notes

Campaign notes and reportage are also an established part of RPG gaming, with players recording their own journeys or documenting them on behalf of the groups they play with. The obviously narrative nature of these accounts has sometimes lead to their expansion into published versions; beginning with H.G. Wells’ explanation of the rules for *Little Wars* (1913) in his discursive example ‘The Battle of Hook’s Farm’ (63-87), and extending to popular fantasy authors who have used games in which they have taken part as a basis for subsequent fiction.

The narratives generated through role-playing games, which might result in unpredictable outcomes (via dice rolling or other mechanics) lend themselves well to modern pulp fiction writing. In particular, standard formulas of adventure writing are echoed in role-playing narratives and vice versa. Plot devices such as cliffhangers or twists are a common part of role-playing games and can happen either through planning or random chance. Taking or recording notes within games is an established means of keeping track of a game, and players often produce narratised versions of events (for example, storytelling and singing competitions often form part of SCA and Larp events, where past tales of previous events are recreated).

This has proved fertile territory for writers, who have directly lifted events from games they have taken part in. The most famous example is the aforementioned *Dragonlance Chronicles* (Weis and Hickman 1984-5). The fantasy world of Dragonlance was initially conceived by Tracy and Laura Hickman, played as a campaign between friends and co-workers at TSR, and then developed into a series of game products and later novels that featured the characters refereed and played by the Hickman’s and co-author / series editor Margaret Weis and their friends and colleagues. Similarly, George R. R. Martin’s *Wildcards* series of edited stories (1987- present) originated in a game of *Superworld* (1983) that Martin ran. A wider cultural impact might be seen in the way that this type of storytelling also transforms well to other media – for example Martin’s campaign style long form fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996 - present) has become HBOs most popular TV series to date; *Game of Thrones* (Benioff & Weiss: 2011 – 2017). *The Expanse* epic space opera series (both in book and TV format) provides another example; it has in an interview been documented as first being conceived as a setting for a MORPG only to mature into a narrative through two RPG campaigns and then be turned into first a book and then a TV series (Liptak:2015).

### Other Fiction

The extensive cross-pollination between these novels, source books, and modules, and their intertextual nature has laid a basis for subsequent forms of RPG writing, whereby a connected whole is formed across various transmedial platforms. The expectation that RPG tropes and signifiers can move in this way has also led to experimentation beyond linear narratives.

We can identify an early form of RPG writing in the gamebook genre, mentioned earlier, perhaps best exemplified by *Fighting Fantasy* series’ addition of RPG rules (a game system) to the form of the branching narrative previously popularized by books in the *Choose-Your-Own-Adventure* series (Zagal and Lewis 2015). In terms of cultural dissemination, subsequent role-playing games where players choose a pathway by selecting a conversational or narrative pathway, make a choice or solve a puzzle, or gather items which can be used in specific circumstances later, can be seen in games by companies such as LucasArts (*The Monkey Island Series* (1990-2010)), BioWare (*Mass Effect* (2007-17) and *Dragon Age* series (2009-14) and Telltale Games (*The Walking Dead* series (2012-present), all of which have made games whereby ‘dialogue trees’ and collecting items for later use are an important element in their narrative and worldbuilding.

### Non Fiction and Autobiographies

Memoirs with RPGs as a focus have also been published with authors describing the role or importance that such games had for them growing up. These autobiographies tend in general to depict role-playing games as taking place during a formative part of the author’s teenage years - usually in a relatively negative context that presents role-playing games (specifically, tabletop games) as stunting their emotional growth and keeping them away from supposedly more healthy occupations such as going out and having hearty heterosexual relationships. Mark Barrowcliffe notes in The Elfish Gene (2007, 2-3): “I can’t imagine a woman picking up a 1977 copy of The Monster Manual as I did the other day and actually stroking it, hugging it.” In Ethan Gilsdorf’s (2009) *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks*, a midlife crisis causes these author to retrace his childhood interests, expanding this into other areas of role-playing such as larp. Ewalt’s *Of Dice and Men* (2013), while ostensibly a history of *D&D*, is interwoven with the authors retellings of his own gameplaying experiences.

*Confessions of a Part Time Sorceress* (Mazzanoble 2007), is a rather overblown ‘*Girl’s Guide to the Dungeons & Dragons ® Game*’. The author is an employee of Wizards of the Coast, and the book is written as an enthusiastic entry point for female (or ‘die curious’) players. Although laudable, this can at times be rather cringe-worthy in its presentation, including pink call out boxes, presumably designed to marry more stereotypical feminine pastimes with gaming culture: “If you haven’t figured it out yet, spit, blow, shake, or whisper sweet nothings to them. Do whatever it takes to get those dice to roll high” (Mazzanoble 2007: 34). The overall tone of this book is unusual however, as unlike her male counterparts, Mazzanoble avoids the presentation of role-playing as embarrassing or shameful, and although more commercial, in this respect the book is much closer to its Nordic counterparts described below.

Mike Pohjola’s *Ihmisen Poika* (2011) and Sofia Nordin’s *Natthimmel* (2009) are both prose novels written by role-players. Both tie live action role-playing into a coming of age narrative, the first one detailing the life of a boy who thought he was the second coming of Christ and the second relating a sexual awakening. Lizzie Stark’s *Leaving Mundania* (2012) bridges the geographic and cultural divide by addressing both American and Nordic larp experience. It is however a journalistic exploration of geek culture, rather than a childish pastime revisited.

Collectively, these books point to two very different cultural patterns emerging. For the Nordic titles, role-playing is seen in a largely positive light, and perhaps points to a greater cultural acceptance that links to the dissemination and support for role-playing within each country (see for example, Chapter 5). In the American and UK accounts, however, more cultural shame is attached to role-playing, where it is treated more as a juvenile, subcultural activity.

A number of guides and histories also exist. These vary hugely in tone. *Heroic Worlds* (Schick 1991) and *Dungeons & Designers* (Appelcline 2015) attempt to exhaustively catalogue the systems and history of role-playing games. The *Fantasy Roleplaying Gamer’s Bible* (1999) is a good example of a laypersons’ guide to playing, complete with illustrations by popular RPG comic strip *Dork Tower* artist John Kovalic, and there are of course a growing number of academic texts (see Section III).

There are considerable differences between literature published in the UK and US, and those published in the Nordic countries, demonstrating the differing cultural impact of RPGs around the world. Collectively, these books all set a rather disparate tone for role-playing reading, as it is obvious in several cases that the authors are not quite sure whether to write to an audience familiar with RPGs, or to explain RPGs in detail to outsiders.

### Television and Films

‘When will young people learn that Dungeons & Dragons won’t make you cool!?!’

(Futurama: Bender’s Game: 2008)

The conflicting cultural perceptions towards role-playing games in general and D&D specifically can be seen from a series of films and shows between 1981-3. Arguably, role-playing completed its journey into the cultural mainstream at this point, when the game was first shown in Steven Spielberg’s 1982 science fiction blockbuster film *E.T. - the Extra Terrestrial* as a quotidian youth activity that did not need to be explained to the audience, but responses towards it were not always so positive. That same year, TRPGs were the subject of a moral panic-inducing made-for-TV film about players confusing fiction and reality in *Mazes and Monsters* (based on the book by Rona Jaffe from 1981). Whereas *E.T.* showed role-playing as an unremarkable pastime for teenage boys in a dimly-lit room, *Mazes and Monsters* sought to play up the deviancy of the practice as ‘play becomes real’. The *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon, which started the next year and ran for three seasons, did not really feature role-playing, but told the story of a group of human children (and role-players), transported to a fantastic land and given the powers of their characters. Each episode revolved around their attempts to get home, and was therefore reminiscent of Norton’s Quag Keep (1978), the first novelisation based on *D&D*.

**[Box insert 9.2 here]**

**[Box insert 9.3 here]**

Since those early movies, multiple films, television series, and more, have features role-playing games. There is a clear line differentiation here between mainstream drama and that which is more niche; potentially aimed at a more ‘knowing’ audience familiar with gaming culture. In media directed at a general audience, when role-playing is mentioned it tends to be in a broad context, without much background knowledge. In many cases, the games portrayed are idealised or loosely sketched versions of RPGs that often do not exist and serve to provide moral indicators or plot points for the characters engaging with them. A conflation between ‘wargame’ and ‘role-playing’ game is used as a cultural signifier (both positive and negative) for the genre, rather than to accurately depict a specific game or its players. Media tropes of gamers interfere with these depictions, presenting role-players as socially inept (despite appearing in groups!) deviant or morally bankrupt. In *The IT Crowd* episode ‘Jen the Fredo’ (Linehan and Boden: 2010, 4.1), the character Moss tries to teach several office colleagues how to play a tabletop game in order for the script writers to demonstrate both his poor social skills and *D&D* as a geek subculture. During the *CSI: New York* episode ‘Fare Game’, a larp-like alternate reality game called WaterGun Wars is used to portray a series of suspects who are seen as greedy, paranoid, and oblivious to cultural norms, and the ‘Big Bad’ (central villains) *of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Series 6 are seen hatching their plans over games of *D&D* (Whedon 2001). The website TV Tropes provides a list of further examples (TvTropes 2016) which rehash this archetype across a broad range of television, film and literature examples, from *The Simpsons* to Jack Chick’s iconic *Dark Dungeons* (1984).

**[box insert 9.3]**

However, these types of negative representations are changing. After the release of the *Dungeons & Dragons* feature film in 2000, the number of media relating to RPGs have increased rapidly. *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre and Prady: 2007 – present) shows that a series with a majority of geek characters can be successful. *Community* demonstrated a *D&D* game being used as a healing process for a character with low self esteem (Russo, 2.14 2011). Movies like *Knights of Badassdom* (Lynch 2013) and *Futurama: Bender’s Tale* (Carey-Hill 2008) provide more lighthearted, knowing portrayals of the genre by knowledgeable fan producers (Matt Hills’ ‘Big Name Fans’) (Hills 2002). In addition there are films based on RPG products (*Warcraft*, Jones 2016), webseries of people playing tabletop and live action role-playing games (*High Rollers*, *The Yogscast* 2016-present, *Tabletop*, *Geek and Sundry* 2012 - present), documentaries of larps (*Treasure Trapped*, Taylor 2014), participant-created documentation of specific larps (*Fairweather Manor*, Maciejro 2015), and episodes of television shows exploring role-play (Dara O’Braian’s *Tough Gig* 2007). The Netflix series *Stranger Things* (Duffer, Duffer & Doble 2016) is an affectionate parody of 1980s American culture and horror movies. The series is bookended by the central characters playing *Dungeons & Dragons* together, and they name the monster terrorising them throughout the series after the *D&D* monster that they fail to beat in the opening scene – a demi-gorgon. With *Stranger Things*, the nerdy role-player trope is reclaimed by the central protagonists, who are ‘regular’ American pre-teens. Similarly, Geek and Sundry’s webcast *Tabletop* is hosted by geek celebrity Wil Wheaton. The show demonstrates various tabletop and boardgames, with a remit to make gaming more accessible and the slogan ‘Play More Games!’. The series has featured full playthroughs of TRPGs *Fiasco* (Morningstar 2009), *FATE* (Hicks and Donoghue 2013) and *Dragon Age* (Green Ronin, 2015). Overall, these texts demonstrate the pervasive nature of RPGs within popular culture, and their continued role within it.

**[box insert 9.4]**

**[box insert 9.5]**

Culturally, television and films most clearly demonstrate the move from RPGs as something strange and unusual, to a pastime engaged with in multiple ways through many different avenues. RPGs and especially larps are a fertile target for episodes of television series and related films. The representations of role-players within these texts are diverse, ranging from films made by players, the films that show a decent knowledge of RPG cultures, all the way to the most worn out stereotypes being recreated. Overall however, this seems to suggest both a broader cultural acceptance of role-playing as a leisure activity emerging, as the various portrayals become more nuanced as time goes on, and an international difference, whereby countries with a higher mainstream integration of RPG activities tend to present more nuanced and sympathetic portrayals of events and characters. However, whilst early depictions of RPG games and culture contain many of the features that would over time become tropes in representing role-playing and role-players: the all-male gaming groups hunched around a table in dim lighting, poor grip on reality, and interest in childish fantastic content all these depictions show (perhaps unavoidably) that role-playing is social. This important aspect of each game means that even when RPGs are depicted as ‘different’ or ‘niche’, they are usually seen as a subculture, or culture, that demands collective activity.

**[box insert 9.6]**

# Darker Legacies, Brighter Futures

It would be disingenuous to say that the cultural impact of role-playing is always positive or benign. Consider for example moral panics (see Chapter 19), player events or activities that have caused offence, and other forms of transgressive play (see Chapter 24). The desire for some players to act out moments of transgression or deviance is also something that the media have focused on heavily, since role-playing (especially in the form of larp) is a form of visible difference, and science–fiction and fantasy culture is seen as a site of otherness – deliberately represented as ‘other’ than normal, expected behavior. So, racist representations and stereotyping through character creation and larp costuming, or commercial products with adult themes and/or potentially offensive content sometimes draw negative attention to role-playing and provide useful tabloid fodder.

So, for example, the *Dungeon Masters Guide* for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax 1979) contained a table for determining what players might run into when wandering around a city. The table included, among other things, bandits and city officials as well as guards and harlots. The ‘Harlot table’ (removed from later editions) on page 192 could then be used “to distinguish each encounter for what it is” (Gygax 1987). Players might run into a “Brazen strumpet”, a “Saucy tart”, a “Sly pimp” or an “Expensive doxy” who “in addition to the offering of the usual fare” might offer up valuable information or try to rob the players (Gygax, 1979).

In 2015 the RPG download store DriveThruRPG was involved in a controversy due its decision to sell a title called *Tournament of Rapists*. DriveThruRPG was initially criticized for its slow reaction to complaints about the offensiveness of the product (Wu 2015) and the product was eventually removed from the store. However, the title’s publisher also complained in a press that the title was being misrepresented (e.g. the rapists were the bad guys players had to kill) (Cathro 2015). Similarly, when the UK larp scene took steps in order to become a safe and welcoming community in 2014, it found that by doing so, a number of problematic elements and incidents were revealed that affected the safety of its individual members. Here, changing cultural values revealed unacceptable elements of play and the realization and that in a growing hobby, it was sometimes impossible to safeguard all members from harm. This has also been highlighted in articles like “Tabletop Gaming has a White Male Terrorism Problem” (Latining 2016), in which the author details a series of problematic encounters that they have experienced in their lifetime as a gamer. The toxicity of these incidents – and the response to the poster by some critics, who suggested the author was fabricating the accounts – are symptomatic of a wider cultural change in gaming; in short, that the mainstreaming of role-playing have also exposed it to a wider amount of people. This in turn has highlighted poor practices within the existing cultural framework and the need for change.

To be fair, the controversies surrounding these kinds of problems have also been met with positive responses. Once again however, this is not the final word. The 5th edition of *D&D* includes advice on creating alternate genders and non-gender specific language and represents a desire by developers to encourage greater inclusivity and diversity in RPG games, and by default, the gamer culture which surrounds it (Trice 2014). These changes reflect a growing awareness within RPG cultures that they need to change, but they also demonstrate that RPGs are not a niche subculture for a specific group of people – instead they have a broad reach throughout geek and leisure cultures, and therefore need to be mindful of the groups who participate in them.

# Summary

RPGs have had a pervasive, and ongoing impact on cultural practices and production. This includes the migration of tropes, concepts, types of storytelling and stereotypes intro broader culture, as well as through the work of RPG industry members who have moved into, and made significant impacts, in other areas – primarily the videogame industry. RPGs are seen as an important part of gaming culture – one which has made a widespread impact on other genres. Sometimes this is insidious – a reference to a core trope or idea within a different game. At other times it is reflective; blending elements of other genres or echoing similar ideas. There is certainly a strong element of give-and-take in popular culture more broadly – screenwriters and authors create works influenced by or inspired by their RPG experiences, and then these same works inspire or lead to new RPGs. Do modern representations used in fantasy and science-fiction borrow from RPGs, or are they so well established that we cannot help but see them in other cultural artifacts? Overall RPGs have transitioned from being a niche interest, with stigmatizing media representations of its players and fan, to becoming more mainstream – with representations downplaying RPGs as unusual. In fact, RPGs are currently often used as shorthand to represent all kinds of gamers in popular culture.

# Further Reading

DriveThruRPG.com http://www.drivethrurpg.com/

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# Image captions

Figure 9.1: “A screenshot from TableTop, ‘Dragon Age Part 1’ (Geek and Sundry: 2013 1.19.1)”

# Box inserts

##

## Box insert 9.1: RPG Terminology Example – Looting

‘Looting’ is both a term and an action that means to take treasure from a defeated character or monster. The expectation that this will happen is taken as a given; both that the player will loot from the body, and that defeated enemies will yield loot. This is one of the most typical ways of accumulating resources in an RPG game, and it would be considered peculiar if the player did not loot, or if the game did not allow for it. Looting is such an important part of RPGs that there are often informal rules about it. For example, players should establish a loot agreement detailing what to do with treasure they find (e.g. split equally? finders keepers?) (McEvoy 2016). Also, especially for CRPGs and MORPGs, changes in the rules may require explanations by the designers, such as an expansion for World of Warcraft that changed the process used by groups to divide their loot (Ghostcrawler 2012). Looting is so commonplace that in CRPGs and MORPGs, it often occurs automatically with treasure deposited in the player’s hypothetical ‘bags’ as soon as an enemy is defeated.

## Box insert 9.2: Notable Fiction Films about Role-playing games

*Mazes and Monsters*, 1982, Steven Hilliard Stern

*Astrópia*, 2007, Gunnar B. Gudmundsson

*The Wild Hunt*, 2010, Alexandre Franchi

*Role Models*, 2008, David Wain

*The Gamers* (trilogy), 2002-2013, Matt Vancil

**Box insert 9.3: Notable Films based on Role-playing Games**

*Dungeons & Dragons*, 2000, Courtney Solomon

*Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, 2001, Hironobu Sakaguchi

*Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, 2005, Tetsuya Nomura

*In the Name of the King*, 2007, Uwe Boll

*Dragonlance: Dragons of Autumn Twilight*, 2008, Will Meugniot

*Mutant Chronicles*, 2008, Simon Hunter

*UltraMarines: A Warhammer 40,000 Movie*, 2010, Martyn Pick

*.hack//The Movie*, 2012, Hiroshi Matsuyama

*Warcraft*, 2016, Duncan Jones

*Kingsglaive: Final Fantasy XV*, 2016, Takeshi Nozue

**Box insert 9.4: Notable Documentary Films about Role-playing Games**

*Darkon*, 2006, Luke Meyer & Andrew Neel

*Über Goober*, 2004, Steve Metze

*Vampyyrit*, 1997, Timo Järvi

*Die Herren Der Spiele*, 2012, Uta Bodenstein

*Wochenendkrieger*, 2013, Andreas Geiger

**Box insert 9.5: Notable Television Series Related to Role-Playing Games**

*Kindred: The Embraced*, 1996, John Leekley

*Dungeons & Dragons*, 1983-1985, John Gibbs

*Siamin tytöt*, 2001, Marjut Komulainen

*.hack//Sign*, 2002, Kōichi Mashimo

*Sanningen om Marika*, 2007, Martin Schmidt & Richard Jarnhed

*The Guild* (web series), 2007-2013, Felicia Day

**Box insert 9.6 Reality Television with Role-Playing Games or Role-Players**

*Beauty and the Geek (Season 4)*, USA

*FC Zulu (Seasons 1 and 2)*, 2004-2005, Denmark

*Barda – Et Rollespil*, 2006-2013, Denmark

*The Quest*, 2014, USA

# List of keywords defined in callouts at the end of the document

Free-list all keywords of your chapter you define.