

Information For Parents About Role Playing Games

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What are Role Playing Games?

Role Playing Games (RPGs) are games in which players simulate or cooperate in telling a story. One player leads the group and is called by a name designated in the game system (including Game Master, Dungeon Master, Storyteller, Referee or Judge). This player creates the adventures (including the background, enemies and minor characters). Other players each have characters which they have created and they control. The Game Master describes the situation, the players describe what they do, the Game Master describes the results, and so on. Wherever there might be a controversy over what the result of a situation would be, the game provides rules to determine what happens. For example: one character wants to break down a door. Instead of simply deciding whether this succeeds, the Game Master refers to a formula in the book. This formula might take in to account the physical attributes of the character, the strength of the door and luck (as represented by a dice roll).

This is what part of a game session might sound like:

GM: You all wake up lying on the cold concrete floor in a basement. The floor and walls are completely bare, except for old water stains. A bare light-bulb shines above you. There is only one way out of the basement: a wooden door. You have no idea how you got there.

Player 1: I listen at the door.

GM: You hear nothing.

Player 1: I try the door.

GM: It's locked.

Player 2: I'm going to try to bust the door open.

GM: Make a strength roll.

Player 2 (after rolling some dice): I got 27.

GM: The door falls down...

One or more game books will contain the rules, the procedure for creating characters, and a description of the game universe. The Game Master is the one with the most need for books, but other players may want or need books as well.

Game sessions might also include maps and painted figurines to help the players visualize the situation.

A lot of a game session is also taken up by non-game conversation. Players chat and joke (as would be expected with a group of friends sitting around playing any type of game).

What are the games about?

There are hundreds of games available. Some games are based on popular movies, TV shows or novels. Some games are based on particular periods in history or on myths. Some games are based on a general "genre" of fiction (like cyberpunk, western, high fantasy or spy thriller). Some are something completely new, created by the game writers (usually by taking a well known genre and twisting it in some interesting way). In addition to published games, many players create their own "home brewed" systems and settings.

Most published games have a "target audience." Some are written specifically for kids and some are written specifically for adults. The majority are written to appeal to adolescents, teenagers and young adults. Some games have themes that a parent may find questionable and some do not. Game publishers are very conscientious about labeling products that have questionable themes (you can usually find some sort of warning on the front or back cover of a book or in the first few pages).

The player who leads the game (the Game Master) has the final say as to what elements appear in the game. Just because a game book contains themes or elements does not mean that the Game Master must bring them in to play. Likewise, a Game Master may include elements in the game that are contained nowhere in the game book.

For instance, a Game Master may choose not to ever let players' characters die, even though there are rules for death in the books. Or, a Game Master may introduce sex and romance in to a game, even though there is no mention of it in the books.

The best way to find out what goes on in a game is to ask the players. Players are often quite proud of the fictional adventures they've created and participated in. They are usually happy to describe the game. Another option is to sit in on a game as an observer.

Potential Concerns for Parents

Questionable Themes: A few games contain themes like sex, drugs and the occult, though most do not. Almost all games contain violence in some form or another (though some games encourage players to seek non-violent solutions to problems). As noted earlier, the only way to know what themes are covered is to ask players or sit-in on a session. A good question to ask yourself is: *would I let my child read a novel that contained these elements?*

Obsession: Role Playing Games are no more likely to cause obsession than other entertainment activities. However, like other forms of entertainment, there is the possibility that a child will spend time role playing or preparing for role playing at expense of other activities (such as homework). Most of the time, people who play role playing games do not become strongly attached to their characters. Occasionally, players do become strongly attached to their characters, and may be sad if a character dies. The sadness they experience is no greater than if a favorite character on a TV show died.

Peer Group: Role players tend to be intelligent and creative people who enjoy reading, thinking and telling stories. This is no guarantee that a group of role players is the right peer group for your child, and you may want to investigate a role playing group just like any other group of people your child might spend time with.