

Walking into Ms. Roman's classroom, you'll notice her classroom differs than the typical English class:- desks are not aligned in neat rows. Instead they're pushed into uneven groups, their combined surfaces serving to hold up hexagon-shaped cards that form a craggy mountain pass. The students occupying the seats hover over the map, rolling dice, groaning at the results, and listening intently to Ms. Roman describe their journey. They are playing Dungeons and Dragons, the "king of tabletop role-playing games." (Herard) Ms. Roman's classes are not alone; teachers are finding that D&D can be used to teach their students in a new way. But it's not just teachers: therapists and other professionals are finding Dungeons and Dragons can offer insight into and improve symptoms of those suffering from mental issues and illnesses. Despite the results however, there is still opposition to the movement of therapeutic and educational role-playing. The effects of Satanic Panic of the 1980s still lingers around the game, and some view "playing games" as counter-intuitive to learning. Dungeons and Dragons can be and has been an effective tool in education and in therapy, but only if society can overcome the negative stigma it carries first.

Dungeons and Dragons is a game. But it is not a video game nor is it exactly a board game, although it has been adapted to virtual and physical interfaces. Some groups may use maps and tokens, but it is not required for play. Rather, the best way to describe a session of D&D is "collaborative storytelling." (Leland) A group of players, usually four to six, sit down with a Dungeon Master (DM), who is the main storyteller of the game. This DM "...decides to build the world from scratch using the supplemental books or... uses a generated adventure already published." (Kreb) The DM creates the plot and world of the adventure. They set up

problems, fill the role on narrator and voice characters. The success of players relies on chance, a set of seven polyhedral dice determines outcomes. The d20 - a twenty-sided die - is the most used die, being used for skill checks and attacks.

Dungeons and Dragons teaches skills that are useful to students, one of which is teamwork. A well balanced team has characters of different classes, jobs like wizards, paladins, rogues and fighters. Different fantasy races like dwarves, tieflings, elves and orcs along with the standard humans fit better into different classes due to “racial bonuses,” or improvements and impediments to ability scores. A character’s ability scores (often referred to as “stats” by players) can be calculated in different ways, but traditionally creating a character involves rolling four six-sided dice, discarding the lowest roll and then assigning that number to an ability. The abilities include strength, constitution, dexterity, intelligence, wisdom and charisma. (*Player’s Handbook*) These scores factor into skills, specific rolls a Dungeon Master may ask a player to make. For example, playing an orc grants you two extra points in the strength category, but also takes away two intelligence points. (*Player’s Handbook*) Therefore, an orc would not be very successful at Investigation or Nature skills, but would excel at Strength checks. In other cases, “...a person playing as a rogue may choose to put skill points into hide, move silently, and climb which would focus on the strengths of the rogue – to be stealthy and agile.” (Krebs) But this doesn’t mean a player cannot create a character that has a conflicting race and class.

In *Dice Camera Action*, a popular show in which four internet personalities play Dungeons and Dragons, YouTube personality and game reviewer Jared Knabenbauer plays Diath Woodrow, a human rogue. Rogues rely heavily on dexterity, the ability to perform swift movements and escape from tough situations, as well as perform sleight of hand actions such as

swiping keys off of enemies. As such, Diath has a strength score of only 8, compared to his dexterity score of 20. This leads to audible groaning from Knabenbauer whenever he is required to make a strength based check, since any rolls would suffer a penalty and be lower than they actually show (Episode 15 - The Defeat of Wintersplinter). However, Diath's high dexterity and wisdom scores allows him to constantly succeed on acrobatic and perception checks, allowing him to assist his party. Contrasted to Diath is Evelyn Marthain, a paladin played by E-sports commentator and former Miss Oregon, Anna Prosser Robinson. Paladins rely on their strength, constitution and charisma scores (*Player's Handbook*). Evelyn has a constitution of 22, but her wisdom score is much lower, resulting in Robinson jokingly explaining "Evelyn is busy cleaning her axe," as her perception rolls are low (Episode 15 - The Defeat of Wintersplinter). Diath is better at being stealthy and perceptive, but without Evelyn's healing magic or heavy attacks, he would die. As such, they have to work alongside the other members of their group, learning teamwork.

In addition, building a successful character, and thus a successful team, "exercises a person's reading skills because of the complexity of character creation" (Krebs). In order to create a character that isn't boring or one dimensional, some "backstory" or motivations must be created for them. "This character biography helps players flex their creative writing muscles and builds a bond between player and character." (Krebs) Ninth grade English teacher Kade Wells, who uses Dungeons and Dragons to teach his students, reported that "kids don't read anymore, but Dungeons and Dragons got them interested in doing just that." (Tito) There's extensive lore for the world of Dungeons and Dragons, from the basic *Player's Handbook*, to book series set in the world. There's even a podcast produced by Wizards of the Coast called "Lore you should

know.” Players can use this lore to create meaningful characters. In the example of *Dice Camera Action*, the Sorceress character Strix is motivated primarily by her ties to her friends. Strix is a tiefling, a race characterized by horns and fangs, and while many tieflings are not evil, they face discrimination for their appearances. (*Player’s Handbook*) Strix remarks “Diath found me in the trash!” He was the first person “to be nice to her” and brought her food when he didn’t even have enough for himself. (Episode 73 - Turtle Recall) The connections to their characters is so strong, that during the exposition-heavy episode, three of the players found themselves crying during the game. (Episode 73 - Turtle Recall)

One of the largest mechanics of playing Dungeons and Dragons is roleplaying. While some people who hear the word “generally assume it is sexual in nature, or else... some weird thing that people who aren't well-adjusted socially might participate in,” roleplaying is used in education far more than one might expect. (Leland) For example, a kindergarten teacher playing the 911 operator, teenagers practicing how to “Just Say No” to situations, a friend pretending to be the boss in a mock job interview to help their friend practice. In the world of Dungeons and Dragons, roleplaying involves problem solving. A particularly timid NPC (non-player character, one controlled by the DM) may require moral support to assist the group. Many encounters with monsters or bandits can be avoided by convincing them they will meet no harm. Persuasion checks are particularly useful if a player wishes to go the route of diplomacy. (*Player’s Handbook*) In *Dice Camera Action*, Paultin, the charismatic bard, roleplays as preferring to avoid combat, talking enemies into becoming friends, casting invisibility during conflicts, and generally trying to avoid getting hurt. During the fight with Wintersplinter, a huge tree monster, Paultin used a special ability to make it vulnerable to fire damage in order to maximize the

damage his teammates could do. (*The Defeat of Wintersplinter*) “These problem solving and social skills are essential to developing people, especially if the players are in their early and mid-teens,” as learning how to collaborate and problem solve in school leads to productive adults well suited for the rest of their lives. (Krebs)

This connection is one that Adam Davis seeks to utilize to improve the social skills of his players. Wheelhouse Workshop, a D&D therapy group he co-founded, seeks to get shy or depressed children to “open up.” Roleplaying, a major aspect in the game, is less intimidating to a child than “sitting in a boring therapist’s office.” (Bayle) In Dungeons and Dragons, the players can become someone else, even becoming something the player is not: “someone who is nervous around people could easily play a charismatic rogue...” (Herard), or a reserved child can be a “rambunctious dwarven barbarian.” (Bayle) If this dwarven barbarian could speak, what might he say? That’s the sort of question that Davis asks his young players, the ones that jumpstart the therapy process. Autism Nova Scotia, a Canadian therapy group, runs D&D games in order to help the participants improve their empathy and social skills. (Burke) In the Public Speaking class of Joshua Leland, he encourages his students to create a character. That is to say, put some distance between the persona that wrote the speech and the persona that will deliver it. “But that is incredibly difficult to do...” He admits. “It is less difficult, however, when you are able to *pretend that you are someone else entirely* when you are giving your speech, because it allows you to experiment with different rhetorical strategies without any threat to your own identity.” (Leland)

In an article for *Odyssey Online*, Jack Herard claims that “Many students in schools find themselves believing they cannot write, or that they just aren't creative enough to be able to tell

stories.” This was the case for some of 9th grade English teacher Kade Wells’ students, who lamented “kids don’t write anymore.” (Tito) By implementing a D&D campaign in his classroom, his students completed free-writing exercises about their character and the events that transpired in-game. The process of creating a character, and subsequently analyzing their behavior relative to the player assisted a therapist treating a young woman who played Dungeons and Dragons. The therapist noted that when she talked about her game, that she played a male character, despite gender having “no effect on ability scores.” (*Player’s Handbook*) It was revealed that this young woman “...felt weak and useless in her real life...” and so she portrayed a male in order to learn to express traditionally masculine traits. (Hawkes-Robinson.) In another case, a young gay man portrayed a straight female character, even though four of his nine teammates “...identified as gay and were generally accepting towards each other in terms of diverse gender identities.” (Adams) Several explanations could be drawn from this choice, whether “....to enact traditional feminine roles and responsibilities or simply experience the world from a gender identity different than his own.” (Adams) Regardless of this player’s reasoning, he was able to connect and relate to a character different from his own situation.

Miss Roman’s English classes also strive to form connections with their characters. Through a process she described as “immersive text based learning,” her students create their own heroes to follow the example of Beowulf, the hero of an old English epic poem. (Roman) Outside of class, the students have the responsibility to complete the assigned reading, synthesize the information and use it to complete their heroes’ quest. There are consequences for the students that do not complete the reading. When a group did not obtain the sword necessary to kill Grendel’s mother, Ms. Roman cheerfully claims she “must’ve killed at least seven of them.”

It's the connection to their characters that keeps the students engaged. There are real consequences to their actions, and real stakes. Her students feel they're learning things and remembering things better "...than if they had just read the book, it's like... they're really there." (Roman) They have creative freedoms in their worlds, as well. By performing well in class, they can unlock "upgrades for their towns, sort of like World of Warcraft." (Roman) When they defeat monsters (only possible if they've read the assigned reading) they can go back to their towns, and craft items to assist them later. Ms. Roman doesn't neglect to teach her students topics like grammar, sentence structure or literary devices, though. She utilizes the creative medium to teach these as well, recalling with a laugh that "for personification... I was a talking lamppost." (Roman)

Despite the success of therapeutic and educational D&D, there are roadblocks that halt the progress of expanding the field, availability and negative stigma. The Satanic Panic of the 1980s, a time period in which groups like BADD (Bothered About Dungeon and Dragons) claimed that the game encouraged young people to summon demons and devils. Even though "...It's been 40 years — no one has summoned a demon yet," (Burke) the lasting effects of these claims still lingers. In a study of public library databases, it was found that "it can safely be estimated that the average library location in the United States has no role-playing game materials." This is because although "...the groups that opposed these games primarily focused on warning parents, efforts were also made to keep these materials out of schools and libraries." (Schneider) As a result, the opportunity for new players to learn about the game from their local library is not viable. However, the Player's Handbook is available as a free PDF on the Wizards of the Coast website. The handbook does suggest using the *Dungeon Master's Guide* as well, but

much of the material inside, as well as materials from supplemental books such as *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*, *One Grung Above*, *Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide*, and others are collected in online compendiums for easy access. These supplemental rulebooks provide new spells, subclasses and races to play, but aren't available in physical form in many libraries. Another hindrance is the negative stigma of those who play D&D persisting through the years. The idea of players being "nerds in the basement" (Tito) has lasted, even as celebrity players proclaim their love of the game. Several Dungeons and Dragons podcasts and shows are populated by celebrity DMs and players, including the aforementioned *Dice Camera Action*. The McElroy family of entertainers, known for their comedy advice podcast *My Brother, My Brother and Me* began *The Adventure Zone* in 2014. The show was described as "three lovable dummies set loose in a classic fantasy adventure," and has become extremely popular, reaching millions of listeners each week and spawning their own graphic novelization. ("The Adventure Zone | First Second Books.") In *Critical Role*, Matthew Mercer (the voice of cowboy McCree in the 2016 hit FPS *Overwatch*, as well as other notable roles in cinema,) DMs a team of fellow voice actors through an adventure. Actor Vin Diesel played a game with some of the cast members of *Critical Role* to promote a film in 2015. "Diesel is known to be a huge *D&D* fan, having written the foreword to the commemorative book *30 Years of Adventure: A Celebration of Dungeons & Dragons*." (Shepherd) Patrick Rothfuss, author of *The Name of the Wind*, *A Wise Man's Fear* and other fantasy books, plays the swashbuckling rogue Viari on *Acquisitions Incorporated*, a long-running show DMed by the aforementioned Chris Perkins, the senior producer at Wizards of the Coast. Rothfuss isn't the only writer who has cited D&D as an inspiration: "Countless writers have cited games like *Dungeons and Dragons* as one of their early inspirations for

writing, some even giving back to the series by writing one of the franchise books.” (Herard)

Even actor Dylan Sprouse has guest starred on *Force Grey*, showing that it’s not only fantasy writers that enjoy the game. Successful people are playing Dungeons and Dragons.

Dungeons and Dragons is a different kind of game. There are no winners and losers, but there are no participation badges either. It is a different kind of experience, one that puts the player into a customizable, first hand view of a journey. Teachers like Sarah Roman and Kade Wells report higher student engagement and comprehension. (Tito, Roman) Psychologists and therapists are making breakthroughs with people who may not open up another way. Dungeons and Dragons teaches skills and abilities that can lead to successful members of society. But if said society creates stereotypes and conclusions on faulty evidence and ideas, they lose the chance to realize what the game can offer.

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