

The Use and Importance of Gaming and Roleplay in Identity Negotiation

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Abstract

This paper presents roleplaying games as a safe and effective venue for self-expression that can help to mitigate the effect of societal pressures when exploring identity. Interviews with 11 participants from the roleplaying game community demonstrate how roleplay can help facilitate the creation of safe spaces and foster creativity and inclusivity. A thematic analysis revealed roleplaying games contribute to the creation of safe spaces, opportunities for self-expression and individual agency, and steps towards greater self-actualization. This study builds upon existing research into identity adaptation theory, queer theory, symbolic convergence theory, organizational communication theory, and the performance of identity.

Games have been used for decades as a venue for exploration of complex ideas and stories both by their developers and players. “Video games” commonly refer to interactive activity controlled via electronic input, often including a multiplayer or communal component, whereas tabletop or “traditional” games tend to forego any kind of digital component and are played using pen and paper, or completely in the players’ minds. While there is an increasingly prevalent interest in the field of game studies and how it relates to communication, this essay highlights several specific areas of interest regarding communication within and around gaming and roleplay. Numerous studies exist regarding the stories and rituals around video games and the individuals who perform them (see Banks & Martey, 2018; Delwiche & Henderson, 2013). Research also has begun to explore the collaborative interaction within games and how these interactions shape the way individuals interact in the real world (Flueggen et al., 2018; Gee et al.,

2017). Of particular interest is the scholarly attention given to the genesis of both personal identity and culture through roleplay enabled by both traditional and video games (Harvey, 2017).

In this paper, we explore new research generated through interviews with 11 members of the roleplay community. We investigate the potential of roleplaying games to offer players opportunities to experiment with or perform new or emerging identities. These interviews help to demonstrate how roleplay can be leveraged as a tool for the exploration of identity, and the creation of safe spaces for the performance of new and existing identities.

Ritual and Collaboration

The connection between ritual and collaboration is a good starting point for this discussion. Gee et al. (2017) explained “any routine can become a ritual if it takes on a symbolic meaning” (p. 477). The social nature of gaming and the specific emphasis on prosocial interaction even within violent games (Passmore & Holder, 2014) serves as a platform to create shared rituals between gamers and between observers of games.

While the playing of games can be a shared ritual activity, so too can the observation of games played by others, regardless of the subject matter of the game itself. Twitch.tv is a social media platform developed to provide opportunities for exactly this type of interaction. A Twitch channel run by an individual gamer can reach thousands of individuals at a time around the globe, and allows for multiple channels of communication simultaneously. Johnson and Woodcock (2019) noted a Twitch channel can include:

...a webcam that displays the player’s face (and therefore emotions and expressions), a chat box to interact with viewers, pop-up notifications of donations or ‘subscriptions’

(when viewers agree to give monthly financial support to the streamer), animations or pictures, hyperlinks to their presences on other social media sites. (p. 337)

These interactions often become rituals as users regularly appear to view and participate in streams as a way of checking in with their favorite streamers, or when they make a point to renew their subscription along with a comment encouraging the streamer.

Such types of shared experiences can lead to the formation of identities through ritual activity. Ritual is seen as an important element of family and community bonding, and rituals that exist within spaces created through gaming can emphasize social interaction and the performance of identity, even when not all parties are actively engaged in the game. Harvey (2017) recounted a memory of a collaborative performance between himself and his father, facilitated by video games:

Operating my computer, situated in the fug of a family living room in which my disabled father chain-smoked cigarettes, was a live performance. The computer couldn't remember, meaning we had to. Together these were such issues that I lobbied my parents for the next generation of the same computer, replete with 64K and a disc drive, knowing this would open up a vast array of new gaming opportunities, while also allowing me to save my own creativity. The recall of this itself lingers, as one of my most powerful memories of my late father. (p. 13)

Harvey's discussion of the interaction between himself, a gamer, and his father, an observer, is a significant representation of how he identified with his father. The ritual of gaming and observation served to help define and grow their relationship and create a shared social space where Harvey and his father were both granted agency to perform individual identity.

In the same way, the interactions between gamers are an important factor in constituting identity within the gaming space. Delwiche and Henderson (2013) outlined how older gamers in particular were more focused on social dimensions of games than on things like in-game achievements or combat. These social dimensions spread outside of games through the conversations and interactions that surround them. Most games occur within a social context (Passmore & Holder, 2014) and massively multiplayer online games in particular “have evolved into places for people to meet up, find romantic partners and maintain relationships” (Huynh et al., 2013, p. 1).

The existence of a wide array of collectible gaming peripherals such as controllers, headsets, and other related media generate important social spaces where individuals can come together through a shared interest in ritual activity. In a study on the collecting of obscure game peripherals, Mora-Cantalops and Bergillos (2018) linked this act of collecting to identity in the same way. Just as antique car collectors gather and connect via their shared interests and the ritual act of collecting, so too can collectors of gaming related artifacts.

The Performance and Exploration of Identity

Often our real-world identities cross over into gaming and gaming-adjacent spaces. Many gamers come to closely identify with characters or character traits exhibited in games. Further, games which allow for character customization and creation provide a blank canvas for any kind of self-expression the player desires. In these ways, video games give their players a greater freedom to create idealized versions of themselves, and to explore identities they may not be comfortable expressing in “real” spaces. For example, a male player with gender dysphoria may be more comfortable playing a game using a female avatar. While the exploration of identity may be financially or socially taxing outside of games, within them a simple selection

offers an opportunity to experiment with a different identity. As a result, the different ways in which we play games can be expressions of our individuality. Even if the in-game goals of players may be similar (Flueggen et al., 2018), the ways in which we achieve the goals and explore spaces are not. Navarro-Remesal (2018) explained, in some cases, in-game identities are formed based on our real-world identities long before “play” even begins. In this way, games in which the player customizes their avatar allow for the performance of specific genders, sex, and body identities.

This freedom of identity expression has significance beyond just the in-game context. In fact, “individuals are highly motivated to make important aspects of their online identity a ‘social reality’ and achieved this by migrating their in-game identities into real life” (Huynh et al., 2013, p. 8). These identity performances create new meaningful cultures specific to the games and gaming communities within which they are first explored. “They allow individuals to be themselves and find groups that accept them the way they are” (Flueggen et al., 2018, p. 8). Through these self-representations, players find new ways of relating to the games and to each other (Gonzalo-Iglesia et al., 2018, p. 156).

Games like Dungeons and Dragons, which encourage players to create identities from scratch, with few prompts or guidelines, take this a step further. Players are free in this space to create any character or identity that seems interesting and are afforded opportunities to interact within the game world in a variety of ways unique to pen-and-paper gaming. In many instances, gamers are encouraged by their fellow players to adopt voices, mannerisms, and perspectives not their own and these affectations provide a unique glimpse into a life they may otherwise have limited exposure to. In this way tabletop gaming provides a versatile platform for the exploration of identity.

Linguistic Convergence and Intertextuality

Even when games are not constitutive of new identities, they are platforms for the formation of communities based on already existing cultures and identities. Within these communities we see formation of new language and cultural norms (Banks & Martey, 2018). These new linguistic concepts are shared among members of relevant groups and soon become normalized parts of video game-connected and adjacent cultures. An example is the nicknames given to the original Xbox controller due to its large size: “Fatty,” and later: “the Duke” (Kocurek, 2018). This terminology is exposed to gamers and retail workers in electronics stores, family or friends of gamers, etc. These new semantic tools give individuals and groups new ways of communicating specific to the communities to which they belong and allow interaction with the world in unique ways. They also give game players the ability to spread their culture to non-natives.

In other situations, players find ways to create group identities by creating labels for themselves. A group of players in Dungeons and Dragons may refer to themselves, both in and out of game, as an “adventuring party,” or by their roles within that party. Players who have nurturing personalities outside of game may choose to adopt roles like “healer,” “cleric,” or “druid,” to reflect their interest in supporting others. However, the roles chosen by players may also exist in contrast to their personalities, and a player may choose to play a “villainous” role, out of sheer curiosity or as an outlet to explore concepts difficult to explore in the real world. No matter the role played, these experiences push players to ask questions about themselves and the world around them, and force them to adapt linguistic tendencies to accurately communicate choices made in game.

While the language used by players within games may often be abstract, the language used by games to communicate has a lot in common with other forms of media. Often games, in a similar way to films, music, etc., will make “intertextual references by naming well-known people and stories in the source culture” (Pettini, 2015, p. 281). In this way, games communicate to a wide audience and have an influence beyond just the individuals interacting with them directly. The use of cultural touchstones in gaming rely on and enhance their meanings by connecting them to new networks of stories and consumers.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

Though the academic language surrounding video games points to them as a significant venue for cultural growth and performance of individual identity, there is little research into specific individuals’ actualization of gaming-borne identities in the real world, or the connection between identities and the ritual activity of group roleplay and gaming. In particular, roleplay provides a safe venue for the exploration of gender and sexual identities, among others, however few case studies show individuals who have had such experiences. Therefore, a need exists to address whether roleplaying games actually are a viable platform for the negotiation and exploration of individual or group identities. Further, we seek out stories from individuals who successfully translate identities explored and developed through roleplay into the real world, and determine what factors allowed them to do so successfully. Further research into this topic, and the mainstream acceptance of roleplaying games as a viable method of identity exploration can help create safer spaces for marginalized individuals and groups to perform their identities and begin to live their in-game experiences in the real world. To that end, we posed the following research questions to guide this inquiry:

RQ1: How do roleplaying games provide a viable platform for the negotiation and exploration of identity?

RQ2: How do role-players translate their in-game identities into the real world?

Methods

Participants

We engaged in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Qualitative interviewing was an appropriate approach for this project because it allows participants to “provide accounts – or rationales, explanations, and justifications for their actions and opinions” (Tracy, 2013, p. 132). Following IRB-approved protocols, participants were recruited through a call shared on the first author’s personal Twitter account. Participants were sourced via an open call on twitter for individuals from the roleplay community willing to talk about their roleplaying experiences. A total of 11 members of the roleplaying and gaming communities agreed to be interviewed for the study. Participants were asked to share demographic identifications, and they represented a range of gender and sexual identities, including: cisgender, transgender, and non-binary persons; heterosexual, gay, and asexual participants. Participants were primarily in their 20s, though some participants had been playing roleplaying games for up to 30 years. Interviewees agreed to share their experiences with the understanding that the information is confidential.

Procedures

Participants were provided with an informed consent form and an invitation to complete an interview. Interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom or, when Zoom was not a possibility, through an equivalent teleconferencing platform. Interviews followed a semi-formal schedule which consisted of 25 questions regarding the interviewees’ experiences with roleplay and their own analyses of their personal identities (e.g., “have you tried to perform an identity

outside of the roleplaying community after having explored it through roleplay?"; "talk about a time when you've felt free to do something in this community that you would have been afraid to attempt outside of it"), and lasted between 60-90 minutes. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed using Zoom's automated live transcription services when possible. For interviews not conducted through Zoom, Google Documents' voice to text service was utilized to generate transcripts.

Data Analysis

After interview transcription, interpretive themes were identified based on two primary criteria: (1) repetition, and (2) emphasis. Following Owen's (1984) suggestions, repetition was observed when a key word, phrase, or concept was discussed by multiple participants across multiple interviews. For example, in response to questions about whether this community contains "safe spaces," participants consistently responded affirmatively, and tended to identify a space as "safe" by addressing their level of "comfort," their "familiarity," or the "lack of social pressure." Emphasis—or what Owen refers to as "forcefulness" (p. 275)—was determined through the identification of shifts in vocal inflection, volume, expressed interest, and how willing participants were to discuss specific concepts. Attention was also paid to the amount of time spent answering each question, with note being made when a question was answered hurriedly or with little embellishment. Possible themes were first recorded by hand live during interviews, using strategies of initial coding as outlined by Charmaz (2006). Following the initial coding cycle, we engaged in focused coding to "synthesize and explain larger segments of data" and generate themes to best explain the experiences of participants (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57).

Bearing these criteria in mind, this study specifically identifies and addresses four broadly applicable themes: (1) the creation of safe spaces, (2) self-expression and individual

agency, (3) self-actualization, and (4) recontextualization of trauma. These themes allow us to understand the commonalities in experience from one participant to the next and highlight several theoretically significant trends within the roleplay community. They allow us to see the benefits taking part in this community can offer to its members.

Findings

Creation of Safe Spaces

A safe space is broadly defined, for the purposes of this study, as a physical or non-physical “space” wherein the participants experience little social pressure from others and enjoy the agency to act without fear of discrimination or retaliation. It is important to include the concept of non-physical safe spaces in this definition, as often roleplay will happen asynchronously via online mediums such as skype, zoom, message boards etc. While most participants had a roleplay background in Dungeons and Dragons, there was also discussion of roleplay through other pen-and-paper-based systems, through video games, through live action roleplay, and through independent writing and storytelling. We note the “safety” of a particular space may be measured differently by different individuals. Interpretations of safety may be based solely on the criteria defined here, or by different parameters entirely due to the personal experiences of the role-players questioned.

Creation of safe spaces was discussed by participants as involving the curation of who is allowed into a space. One participant, Aelx, who shared they had negative experiences with sexual assault as a feature in a past roleplay setting, discussed their method of curation by not allowing cissexual men into some groups due to a pattern of similar bad experiences:

...and playing tabletop I have had the complete opposite [experience] where we refuse to have sexual assault in our games. We even have a rule with my current team where we

don't allow cis men into the group just on principle of every last one of us has had really bad experiences playing with cis men.

Safe spaces require rules regarding what types of topics can be explored, with emphasis placed on avoiding “triggers” and exploration of concepts that may carry significant traumatic weight for those involved. Triggers may be related to roleplay but are typically associated with “real-world” experiences that many members of the roleplay community turn to roleplay to temporarily seek refuge from. For example, Cosmic explained:

... in our groups, we have a tab that we list everybody's triggers and then when me and the other DM are writing stuff for the next week, we have to consult the trigger list.

We're like, ok, we're not hitting any of these, or if we are we have to change it, or we have to consult the person and be like, under this context would this be ok? If they say “yes” we approach it as carefully as possible, but within [only] that context.

In the appropriate contexts, careful navigation of topics can be helpful for individuals who have past traumas associated with them, however the foundation for this type of discussion is the establishment of a safe place from which to explore.

While for some individuals this safety requires the filtering of certain individuals or topics, for others the location where roleplay is performed is an important part of a feeling of comfortability within a space. Many role-players take their experiences online because face-to-face interactions can be less comfortable than in-person meetups. Individuals who experience even mild levels of social anxiety or introversion have found opportunities to interact with others through roleplay in a context more accommodating to their individual needs. For example, Dom explained:

[The] online community allows me to actually just be myself and not really be afraid of expressing myself, or showing people what I'm all about, or sharing with people.

Some participants even expressed that they were afforded financial safety through membership in this community, making a living out of their work creating art for other role-players to utilize in their games and stories. This type of security unsurprisingly goes a long way towards encouraging others to engage in the community. Ultimately the security, be it social, financial, or otherwise, that is available through roleplay, is a foundation for the facilitation of self-expression and the freedom to act.

Self-Expression and Individual Agency

While some participants said they enjoy some level of agency and control over their lives in “real-world” settings, many shared obstacles like social pressure or financial restrictions prevent them from finding ways to fully express themselves. This freedom of self-expression is an important component of individual agency and control and is the reason many of our participants turn to roleplay. For example, Mitch explained:

... I identify as a male, I am bisexual. I... in the community and space itself, and myself as an individual I've found that I can explore myself. Right? I can be more myself in [a way] that society won't allow. That you feel like you can't . . . I think the key to roleplaying is you kind of explore the book before you have to be a part of it.

This participant's testimony highlights how even those from privileged backgrounds, in this instance being a white male, may sometimes experience pushback when exploring specific co-identities in certain social settings. While some aspects of their identity may be explored freely, others are more taxing to perform openly. The expectations placed upon us to act in certain ways based on our outward appearance can be a significant deterrence against healthy self-expression.

Roleplay, for this individual in particular, is a way to escape societal pressure and push the boundaries of their identity and ability to express themselves.

In contrast, other participants admitted to experiencing very little privilege outside of the roleplay community and rely on roleplay as the primary outlet to explore their various personal identities. Specifically, participants who identified as members of particularly marginalized communities such as the trans community, and neurodivergent persons admitted having experienced greater societal pushback against the performance of these identities in “real-world” settings. The power dynamics between individuals of different backgrounds can discourage openness of communication. Even between well-meaning individuals, tacit and subconscious biases impact the ability to communicate and freely perform identity. Some participants preferred to play only with members of similar levels of social privilege in an attempt to maintain a neutral power dynamic through roleplaying groups.

Many participants stated they don’t feel as though they are understood outside of the roleplay community and their ability to express themselves is limited. Such limitations contrast their experiences within the gaming community, which is comprised of individuals with similar interests and life experiences who are, as Sebs explained, “more aware and understanding.” They shared how the linguistic tools utilized broadly within the community helped find ways of accurately expressing themselves:

... people seem to be just so much more aware and understanding because my identity, I very much came to understand it from being in this community. There’s a podcast called “Bitches and Liches” and they would ask people (their listeners) what to call them because they obviously didn’t want to be called “bitches” and they said folx with the “x”

and it was the first time I had ever seen it, and I don't know what it was about it specifically but it really rang true to me, and really seemed to make sense.

Until joining this community, some members lacked these tools and may have found it difficult to express themselves in ways that fully reflect their own complex perceptions of self. These tools influence both the way members perceive each other, and how members perform in response to these perceptions. Even on a very basic level this is the case, with minor details like the names given to characters, and the traits attributed to them, enabling a deeper understanding of the real-world identities that inform role-players actions in game. For example, Cosmic explained:

... It is a lot easier to sort of be myself in the roleplaying community because again, with touching on dissociative identity disorder I already kind of go through phases of different personalities in the first place. It's easier for them to understand, maybe they can't quantify what's happening, but they understand me and it's a lot easier to be like, I just got out of a session where I had to play Vixen for like six hours because we were doing a huge boss fight. So uhh, I'm feeling pretty Vic today and they're like "gotcha!" Like it's cool, it's not something I have to sit there and over-explain and feel embarrassed about. It's something that they on some level understand and they're not going to make me feel like a freak over it.

Formation of linguistic artifacts is, for many, the first steps towards translating identities and concepts explored in-game into the real world.

Self-Actualization

Many role-players are highly motivated to find ways of translating their in-game identities to the real-world, and vice versa. Given the relative ease of exploring a new identity in

roleplay settings, participants used roleplaying as a sort of “proving ground” for the expression of real-world identities. For example, Cosmic discussed their inclination towards roleplaying characters with transformative abilities, who could shift between being a man or a woman:

... I have had two instances where I have had characters who can shapeshift freely.

Vixen had the ability to instantly switch his gender presentation, with my group I got to experiment with him going fully cis man, he had an alternate identity like a disguise, we called him Captain Scott.

This tendency towards characters with transformative abilities was shared by multiple participants. The ability to control one’s physical presentation and influence others’ perceptions seems to be of great importance to many members of this community. These experiences, when validated by others within the gaming community, can act as a launching point towards more effective real-world navigation of issues like gender dysphoria, or reconciling physical or mental traits others may not understand or even desire.

Minty referred to roleplay as a “lightbulb moment” regarding their own experiences with feeling out of place in their own body. Tieflings, a “monstrous” race of horned, colorful, demon-like humanoids, are often feared and misunderstood according to official Dungeons and Dragons lore. For this reason, some gamers who feel ostracized outside of game come to closely identify with Tiefling characters. Attempting to reconcile these feelings of rejection with one’s own sense of self-worth can be difficult, and several participants expressed that playing these types of marginalized characters helped them to come to terms with aspects of their own identity and realities. As Minty explained,

... My characters are reflections and elements of myself. . . . [by] being true to yourself but being true to the character, in spite of all the things sort of going on around you, I

think that I've kind of gained some confidence, having tried some of these stronger or more convicted people.

Other players reported being able to express their identities in new ways through gaming, and subsequently feeling empowered to embrace their identity outside of the gaming context. Several participants shared stories of players coming out at their tables or beginning to come to terms with their sexual and gender identities in meaningful ways as a result of their explorations of these identities. Even participants who admitted to feeling comfortable performing identity in the real world acknowledged roleplay still provides ample opportunity for growth. For example, Sovereign explained:

... I think the roleplay community just allows you to be ugly and it's definitely given my chaos it's much need breathing space. Like, on this platform I've probably spoken more about issues and morality and philosophy and psychology than on any others, and not just in terms of characters but also about sexuality, spirituality, and personal traumas. I think that emotional awareness and intelligence is definitely a skill that is honed within that environment.

They continued to say "I acknowledge the many people that I am, and the many people that I have been, and continue to grow and learn from that." For many individuals, the type of growth enabled by roleplay is not limited to simply personal identity, and manifests as the adoption of new skills, new perceptions, and new ways of thinking.

Recontextualizing Trauma

The final theme identified through the analysis of these interviews involves how individuals who live with memories of trauma or experience trauma actively use roleplay as a way to understand their individual traumas and find healthy ways of processing. The types of

trauma discussed by participants in this study included emotional or physical abuse, acceptance by friends or family members, feelings of rejection, feelings of fear and confusion, or feelings of regret. Most participants agreed their traumas occasionally influenced the characters they choose to create and roleplay, and how those characters interact with the imagined worlds they inhabit. While some players use this opportunity to work through issues holding them back in real life, others find ways to escape their trauma by creating a world where the issues they face in the real world don't exist.

In some instances, these traumas cannot be addressed directly, however their long-term effects can be managed. For example, Sebs shared that because of past traumas they became harsh and impatient. Roleplay provided them with a platform to see the consequences of their actions, and work through multiple approaches to problem solving and interacting with others in a safe environment:

... I've learned that I used to be kind of an almost bully of a person. It was dealing with a lot of trauma, dealing with PTSD and neglectful parents, all kinds of stuff kind of turned me into an asshole. Through roleplaying I've definitely learned that I do have the capacity to be more patient and forgiving than I thought I did. And that I have the ability to make people feel emotions which, as an artist, was really important to me. Um, I learned that I just have a certain capacity for kindness and understanding that I didn't think I was ever going to have, that I thought I was always going to be lonely for.

Many participants shared similar stories of learning to grow past trauma and utilize roleplay as a coping mechanism, but also just to deal with the issues happening in the world around them. For example, Sigma explained: "If we feel weird about something going on in the world, we'll always explore it our games, through characters or NPCs." Issues relating to world events and

politics are translated into the game space and dealt with in ways that most individuals would lack the resources to carry out in real life.

Such interactions give role-players perspective, and new ways of understanding these issues as a result of being able to work through them via roleplay. Players have power in their games they don't otherwise possess, the power to be whoever they want to be, to change the world, and to change themselves. As Sigma explained:

... How do I take the human that I am, and shape it into something new? We are not one thing or another, we are just as fluid as the characters we create, we are in constant flux and change, and that's a very comforting thought for me.

These experiences can be helpful in providing role-players with tools to proactively deal with real-life obstacles and traumas. In particular, children seem receptive to learning through roleplay. Another participant shared a story about playing a game of Dungeons and Dragons with a 5-year-old, expressing that the child wanted to kill another player's pet goat, which made that character sad. This experience was used to demonstrate that there are consequences to our actions through an experience most children are unlikely to have in the real world, and in a safe place to do so.

Summary

Examination of the stories and experiences shared above illustrates that roleplay provides a valuable opportunity to explore identity in a safe environment free of consequences. By engaging in roleplay individuals are able to push past boundaries that would otherwise be socially or financially taxing to breach, and to learn and grow as individuals. Further, we've seen examples of role-players translating their identities into real-world spaces with a high level of efficacy. Roleplay facilitates the initial exploration of identity and can help individuals to

determine who they wish to be in the real world and functions as a safety net of sorts, while attempting to express identity in real-world settings. The roleplay community provides a safe space, a place to explore potential obstacles and reassess methods of identity performance outside of games.

Discussion

The initial focus of this study was to determine whether roleplaying games could be used as a platform to enhance the way we analyze the self, and how we explore and express identity. While reviewing prior research into this topic, it became apparent that while much information existed regarding the ways in which individuals interact with one another within gaming and roleplay contexts, there has been little discussion of how these games enable us to form new identities and manifest them in the real world. In particular, very little research existed regarding the exploration of how marginalized individuals can create spaces in the roleplay community where they have greater agency to perform and develop individual identity.

The new research conducted during the course of this project highlights how the societal expectations related to complex concepts like sex and gender can deter individuals from freely expressing themselves, and how roleplay can help to reduce the restrictions placed on marginalized individuals attempting to form and explore their own individual identities. This is significant as it shows how roleplay can provide everyone with the tools to more effectively understand one another, and help provide safe spaces to expand and challenge our understanding of who we are as individuals.

Implications

The main practical implication is simply how roleplaying games make us better communicators. Through roleplay we take part in experiences we would be highly unlikely to

take part in otherwise. We can leave the world of the “real” for a brief while and take a long walk in someone else’s shoes. Whether those shoes belong to a human, an orc, or an elf, this experience has the power to teach us something about ourselves and the world around us.

Through these shared experiences, we come to develop a shared understanding of each other, and our shared reality, and we develop empathy by exploring perspectives and experiences not our own, and in the end are brought closer together. Interaction Adaptation Theory outlines the ways in which we influence each other through our communication practices, and the way two individuals may begin to behave similarly, mirroring each other’s linguistic and social tendencies over time (Littlejohn et al., 2017, p. 71). Another useful approach is Symbolic Convergence Theory, which shows how “individuals in groups come to a shared reality through communication” (Littlejohn et al., 2017, p. 201), and how language evolves and develops based on its varied use. This type of linguistic convergence can foster group cohesion and give us new ways of understanding one another; it can help individuals to feel connected to both a community and to other individuals within a community.

In accordance with these ideas, this study showed examples of how traits attributed to a role-player’s characters could come to be used as a way of understanding how they were feeling and why they were feeling a certain way. The expression “I’m feeling pretty Vic today” would mean nothing to any random person outside of the very small roleplaying group in which it originated. However, to the individuals within that group, this linguistic artifact carries significant weight, and can be used as a substitution for what might otherwise be much more complicated conversation. This ease of communication is specifically made possible through roleplay because within that context we are given greater freedom to explore what “feeling pretty Vic” could potentially mean.

The opportunities for identity performance offered by roleplaying games are important for many reasons. For one, roleplaying helps foster a feeling of safety and closeness between individuals who may have very little else in common and allows for the expression of complex feelings in a simplified or less socially demanding way than other options. In short, a shared language creates shortcuts and backdoors for the communication of complex topics. Over time, and as these linguistic tendencies occur more frequently, they can come to take on ritual significance. As noted earlier, “any routine can become a ritual if it takes on a symbolic meaning” (Gee et al., 2017, p. 477), and the exclusivity of these rituals further strengthens the bonds between the individuals who partake in them.

The second practical implication is how roleplay can be therapeutic. Roleplay has been shown to be an effective way to work through past traumas, and to allow us to reframe the world we live in by experiencing it through new perspectives. Many participants said they had grown as individuals as a direct result of engaging in roleplay, and they found ways to understand and analyze their past traumas. Individuals with PTSD, who have experienced neglect, or who have been through difficult relationships can find ways to explore issues and work through projections of their real-life experiences in roleplay settings. These settings are helpful because they allow for this type of exploration in a safe and consequence free environment.

Some individuals use roleplay as a way of confronting trauma, whereas others utilize roleplay as a form of escapism. One of the primary benefits of roleplay is you have the power to be whoever you want, whenever and wherever you want. One participant of this study shared how they prefer to create worlds where real-life issues like race and gender politics simply aren't a concern. In their idealized universes obstacles like how to reconcile individual differences based around these concepts have been overcome, and its inhabitants enjoy a level of freedom

and security that may not be available in our own world. In this way, role-players find ways of relieving the emotional strain that may accompany addressing these issues and can choose to confront them in contexts that empower them to develop solutions that they may not otherwise have the ability to employ. Through this type of roleplay, individuals develop tools for dealing with, or avoiding, real-world issues.

This implication is particularly important to individuals who experience greater levels of societal pressure and prejudice in real-world settings, however, it is significant for role-players from all walks of life. Just as roleplay gives us a canvas on which to project our own experiences, it also gives us a lens through which to better understand the experiences of others. We are encouraged, through roleplay, to collaborate and help each other understand and overcome obstacles we may not face in our own lives, that those we roleplay with may be much more accustomed to.

Future Research

Future research into how group identity interacts with individual identity could be useful for understanding how individuals navigate roleplay spaces. While roleplay can be used to analyze ourselves, how does it affect our ability to analyze the groups to whom we attach ourselves? The roleplay and gaming communities are vast and are made up of many smaller more specific communities. Researching the interaction between individuals with differing interests and backgrounds within the gaming and roleplay communities could give us additional tools to analyze reasons why communication sometimes breaks down in roleplay scenarios.

Further, finding ways to measure the efficacy of the translation of identity into the real world is a valuable tool for individuals seeking to explore and develop their own identities. We currently lack the tools to explain and compare different methods of identity translation. Is

roleplay in a large-group setting more effective than roleplay in small groups or one-on-one settings? How do solo roleplaying games impact our ability to explore identity when we have no one to challenge our assumptions or actions?

Conclusion

This study, and the work that has come before, are clear and resounding testaments to the value of roleplay as a method of self-expression, and to the importance of developing new ways to understand and navigate the world we live in. This new research shows how roleplay gives us ways to protect one another through our actions, and our linguistic choices. The discussion of “triggering” concepts, and how roleplaying spaces are curated through the identification of both taboo topics, and potentially dangerous individuals, is a great example of the ways in which roleplay makes us more caring and empathetic individuals.

In this way, gaming and roleplay allow us to connect and grow, and safely push the boundaries of our shared reality. Through roleplay we can overcome our greatest obstacles, whether by swinging a mighty greatsword as an imposing orc barbarian, by burning them to the ground as a mysterious and skilled elven sorcerer, or by beguiling them with the sweet songs and honeyed words of a Tiedfling bard. Roleplay shows us ways to view the world and to solve its problems. Words like orc, elf, and Tiedfling mean nothing if we don’t use them as a foundation to build better, more inclusive spaces to explore what it means to be human, and how we can enable each other to do so.

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