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## Experiences of Dungeons & Dragons Players

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# Experiences of Dungeons & Dragons Players

## Abstract

This was a qualitative study of the experiences of Dungeons & Dragons players at the Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) club at a private university in the Western United States. Previous research has shown that the benefits of playing Tabletop Roleplaying Games (TTRPGs) include developing social skills, developing empathy, and finding respite from reality. The goal of this research was to identify how role-players perceive they are affected by TTRPGs and what is appealing about TTRPGs. The participants in this study identified that, as a result of playing TTRPGs, they learned to develop better social skills and empathy. Their top reasons for playing were engaging in prosocial behaviors, finding respite from reality, being able to express themselves and find acceptance, and finding personal enjoyment engaging in the game.

The majority of these results followed the already existing research into the effects of TTRPGs. Areas that were not as readily represented in the literature were the prosocial behaviors that role-players engaged in that motivated them to play, finding respite from reality, and finding personal enjoyment with the game.

Further research could continue to identify the effects that role-players experience over time, a longitudinal study to see what personal material role-players bring to their games, and any negative effects that come from TTRPGs.

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DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

BY  
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## **Abstract**

This was a qualitative study of the experiences of Dungeons & Dragons players at the Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) club at a private university in the Western United States. Previous research has shown that the benefits of playing Tabletop Roleplaying Games (TTRPGs) include developing social skills, developing empathy, and finding respite from reality. The goal of this research was to identify how role-players perceive they are affected by TTRPGs and what is appealing about TTRPGs. The participants in this study identified that, as a result of playing TTRPGs, they learned to develop better social skills and empathy. Their top reasons for playing were engaging in prosocial behaviors, finding respite from reality, being able to express themselves and find acceptance, and finding personal enjoyment engaging in the game.

The majority of these results followed the already existing research into the effects of TTRPGs. Areas that were not as readily represented in the literature were the prosocial behaviors that role-players engaged in that motivated them to play, finding respite from reality, and finding personal enjoyment with the game.

Further research could continue to identify the effects that role-players experience over time, a longitudinal study to see what personal material role-players bring to their games, and any negative effects that come from TTRPGs.

## **Introduction**

### **What are Tabletop Roleplaying Games?**

TTRPGs are played in small groups where one person takes on the role of Game Master (GM) whose job is to facilitate the fantasy world that is jointly created by the GM and the rest of the group who are called the players (Crawford, 2014). TTRPG players participate in the game by bringing a character of their own creation that includes how the character looks, how they function in the narrative world, as well as the player's unconscious drives (Hand, 2023). This shared world is based on relationships present between the players, GM, and the in-fiction characters and necessitates social interaction and negotiation which creates fertile ground for a multitude of benefits. "RPGs are, at heart, exercises in forming and exploring relationships: between the players, between the characters, and between the players and the characters" (Hand, 2023, p. 6).

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) has long been one of the most popular TTRPGs and it boasts tens of thousands of players every year (Roll20, 2021). This year, in fact, it celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary since inception which is a testament to how well it has stood the test of time (Arneson & Gygax, 1974).

### **Psychodrama, Empathy, and Social Skills**

Roleplaying has long been established as a therapeutic modality in the form of psychodrama (Moreno, 1934). Psychodrama is the dramatization of an interpersonal or intrapersonal conflict, typically in the context of group therapy where participants act out or see their conflicts acted out by others. The goals of psychodrama are to increase empathy and allow the person who brought the conflict to the group to take a different perspective on it by seeing the conflict from a different role.

Tabletop Roleplaying Games (TTRPGs) bring together groups of people who act out interpersonal situations as different characters which is a common technique of psychodrama (Bain, 2013). In the technique called mirroring, the protagonist (i.e., the person sharing their experience) watches their conflict being enacted by other group members and is encouraged to comment on what is happening or to re-enter the enactment (Bain, 2013). In this way, the protagonist sees their conflict from a different point of view which changes the way they experience it and allows them more cognitive flexibility in changing their response to it.

TTRPGs require players to take on a different point of view by playing a character that is often different from themselves and being responsible for that character and their actions. Meriläinen found in their study of role-players that it is very common for players to play a character who is very different from themselves (2012). These differences ranged from simple physical changes to playing a character of a different gender or even playing characters who the player reported bears no resemblance to them morally, mentally, or socially. Another interesting point is that Meriläinen found that players were also likely to play characters whose personality the player aspired to (2012). Meriläinen's research indicates that role-players are likely to try many kinds of roles and take many kinds of perspectives. From a psychodrama perspective, TTRPGs are an ideal situation where therapeutic work can take place as players take on roles that are often different from their own.

This kind of imaginative perspective taking also fits well into Batson's, Lishner's, & Stocks's definition of empathy and their research into the Empathic-Altruism hypothesis (2015). They define empathy as, among other things, "imagining how one would think and feel in another's place" and "imagining how another thinks and feels" (Batson, Lishner, & Stocks, 2015, p. 2). These are literally what role-players do to play in TTRPGs. Adding to this, the

Empathic-Altruism hypothesis puts forth that empathy produces an altruistic response that motivates an individual to act if they believe they can help (Batson, Lishner, & Stocks, 2015).

The Empathy-Altruism hypothesis explains how empathy increases prosocial behavior. Prosocial behaviors are behaviors that are intended to benefit others (Schroeder et al., 1995). Research in this area has determined that prosocial behaviors can increase empathy (Dovidio & Banfield, 2015) indicating that the link between prosocial behaviors and empathy is likely bidirectional. This research also posited that the amount of social interaction that a person engages in can affect the different kinds of people that they can have empathy for. When applying this finding to the interactions in TTRPGs, players work together in a prosocial manner to solve problems that face the group. Social interaction is also an important part of the game as players are constantly interacting with each other and with the GM.

D&D can be viewed as an imaginary playground in which role-players can try on different roles and perspectives. Based on the body of literature on empathy and prosocial behaviors, it is likely that the perspective-taking involved in D&D facilitates the development of both empathy and prosocial behaviors.

### **Previous Research into TTRPGs**

Research has already indicated that there is a relationship between playing TTRPGs and the development of empathy (Wickramasekera, 2007; Hand, 2023; Meriläinen, 2012), increased social skills (Abbott, Stauss, & Burnett, 2022; Blackmon, 1994; Causo & Quinlan, 2020; Meriläinen, 2012; Slaughter & Orth, 2023), and finding respite from reality (Causo & Quinlan, 2020; Flood, 2006; Bowman, 2012).

### *Developing Empathy*

Empathy is a significant part of TTRPGs as playing in one requires perspective taking and understanding how another person, albeit fictional, understands events and the world around them. Wickramasekera conducted a study on role players and found that the role-players scored higher on an administered scale of empathy than a control group (2007). Wickramasekera posits that this may be related to the consistent need to take another person's perspective as part of role-playing (2007).

Hand, in their guide to therapeutic application of TTRPGs states that empathy is a part of the mechanism of action in therapeutic gaming (2023). Hand points out the concept of "bleed", a common experience of emotionally affecting movies or books that almost everyone can relate to the idea of identifying with a character's emotions and experiencing those emotions (2023). This "bleed" that a participant feels with their character facilitates the growth of a participant's perspective and develops their empathetic skills (Hand, 2023).

Meriläinen performed a survey of 161 role-players to assess what they felt the impact of playing TTRPGs had on them (2012). The most reported answer was the development of social skills and then the development of empathy or perspective taking.

### *Increased Social Skills*

D&D has also recently been adapted to treat groups of people that feel they would struggle in more traditional forms of group therapy (Abbott, Stauss, & Burnett, 2022). Participants engaged in a year-long D&D group for people with social anxiety as an alternative to group therapy. This qualitative study indicated that participants came away from the group with increased confidence in their decision-making ability, better confrontational skills, better emotion regulation, and feeling as if all these skills were transferred into the real world.



The development of social skills is further supported by Blackmon's hypothesis about his case study (1994) in which a patient displaced their emotional experience into roleplaying and was able to bring it to therapy as well as develop social skills and relationships.

Blackmon reported that the client had no friends or social contacts until the client joined a D&D group. The client, feeling uncomfortable with talking about himself, talked about his character and Blackmon realized that there were clear parallels between what the client was feeling and what he reported the character was feeling.

Blackmon stated he believed D&D was "a vehicle for the safe emergence of feeling within the context of organizing rules" (p. 628, 1994). He reported that the client was able to express these emotions in a displaced way through fantasy, and then gradually learned to become more comfortable in therapy until he was able to fully attribute them to himself and express them in a healthy way. This had positive effects for the client, including the development of social skills, relationships, and self-esteem.

Another study at a forensic hospital implemented D&D as a form of group therapy for the patients to help them develop communication skills (Slaughter & Orth, 2023). The results of this study indicated that the participants perceived that they developed better communication skills as well as better relationships with the people that they played with.

### *Finding Respite from Reality*

Causo and Quinlan conducted a qualitative study of D&D players and found that, among other effects, the participants identified a theme of finding respite from their mental health symptoms and day-to-day experiences (2020). "When I'm playing D&D I don't have to worry about all the stresses of life, [they] don't affect me. I just really- just get into character, get into

the game, get into the campaign or the one-shot or whatever we're playing" (Causo & Quinlan, 2020, p. 260).

Flood states that role-playing games can serve as a way for players to remove themselves from their daily experience and find respite from the stress of daily life. "Role-playing games allow the participants to escape from the conflict, frustrations, disappointments, stresses, and the various other minor horrors of daily life. It is the doorway through which another world can be reached. A world in which anything is possible and the unsolvable can be solved" (Flood, 2006, P. 40).

In addition, Bowman (2012) explains how Jungian concepts apply to TTRPGs. Bowman describes the process of transitioning to new roles in TTRPGs, which necessitates leaving behind old roles and participation in the construction of a new reality as defined in the rules of TTRPGs. Through these processes, players find themselves easing the stress found in their public persona and exploring the content of their unconscious minds. As a result, Bowman posits that players are likely to experience increased self-awareness and empathy.

## **Method**

The question that this project sought to answer was "what effects do people who play TTRPGs perceive they experience?" and "what is appealing about TTRPGs?" Based on the previously discussed theories and research it's hypothesized that the participants in this study will report feeling they have developed social skills and empathy, and that they find respite from reality while playing TTRPGs.

### *Research Design*

This question was approached in the form of a qualitative study in which participants were recruited from the university's D&D club and interviewed for approximately one hour

using an interview guide to direct the interviews. These interviews were recorded and then transcribed and inputted into nVivo 14, a qualitative data analysis software program, to analyze common themes. This study was approved by the institution's IRB.

A qualitative research design was appropriate to answer this question as the breadth of experiences in TTRPGs is wide and far reaching. Open-ended interviews were appropriate to collect data because they allow for the identification of themes that may be omitted by quantitative measures (Engel & Schutt, 2003).

### *Interview Guide*

The interview guide (Appendix A) was created iteratively with input from the advisors on this project. The goal of the interview guide was to, first, gather demographic information. After that questions were written to understand how the participant was introduced to TTRPGs and what their personal pattern of play is. From there, the questions aimed to understand how the participant feels they have been affected by TTRPGs and if that impact has been sustained over time. The questions on the interview guide then explored how TTRPGS had affected the participant socially. Finally, there were four scaling questions to assess how much TTRPGs had helped the participant develop social skills and confidence in relationships as well as an indication of overall change.

The questions were written intentionally open ended with the hope that a wide variety of data and experiences could be captured and then refined through analysis. Some inspiration for the questions came from the extant research including the development of social skills which resulted in questions that asked about how playing TTRPGs had affected how the participant interacts with others.

It should be noted here that the nomenclature of TTRPGs includes other games than D&D. While the club that was selected for this project was named after that university's specific D&D club, it is possible that other TTRPGs besides D&D were engaged in through the club. It was unclear if that was the only TTRPG played in this club. During the interview if the participant seemed to have more experience with other TTRPGs the questions were adapted to fit TTRPGs in general and not just D&D.

### *Sample*

Participants were sampled from the D&D club at a major private university in the Western United States. Participation in the club was limited to students, so all participants were enrolled at the university. The club met on Friday nights from 6pm until midnight. A call for participants was given in the general announcements at one of their club meetings. Eight subjects volunteered, and all completed the interview. Participants were provided a \$20 gift card for engaging in an interview that lasted approximately one hour.

The eight subjects ranged in age from 18 to 21 years, and the group was evenly split between men and women. The participants also varied in how long they had been playing D&D, spanning from 2 years up to 15 years. A full demographic table can be found in Appendix C.

### *Self-Report Data*

The participants were interviewed over a telehealth platform with video and audio enabled. Self-report data has inherent limitations such as the underreporting of nonnormative types of behavior such as crime and substance use, especially in interviews (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). However, there is also evidence that normative or prosocial behavior is also more likely to be overreported in interviews as well (Holbrook, & Krosnick, 2010). Further research into this area shows that people are likely to report based on their identity and how they want to be perceived (Brenner, & DeLamater, 2016). This clearly creates an issue for this project as the

theoretical base pulls from a theory on the motivations and effects of prosocial behavior which has been shown to be something that interview participants overreport. However, because this is a qualitative assessment of the data, if there are themes that significantly stand out from the data, it will be apparent in the data analysis.

Research has shown that self-administered questionnaires tend to result in less skew of the data related to social desirability (Kreuter, Presser, & Tourangeau, 2008). This study could have implemented some self-administered questionnaires; however, interviews were more appropriate as questionnaires can be limiting and lacking in richness of data (Engel & Schutt, 2003).

### *Data Analysis*

This qualitative analysis employed the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). The constant comparative method continuously compares the data gathered through the study with the categories that have already been established by previous data. Data from one interview is compared to data in a second interview to see if the insights or observations that can be gleaned are comparable. If so, a category is established. Then data from another interview is compared to that existing category to see if that data fits into the category or if a new one needs to be created. This process is repeated for all the data until all the data across all the interviews is categorized and is consistent across participants. Once all the data is categorized, the categories are grouped into overarching themes that generally describe all the data.

Nvivo is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (Dhakal, 2022). It assists researchers by providing a structured way for the researcher to view and sort data into relevant categories. Nvivo is a common qualitative research tool which made it an appropriate pick for this project (Dhakal, 2022). Nvivo does have an artificial intelligence feature that codes the data

for the researcher. However, this was not used in this project due to potential concerns around inaccurate coding that can be produced by these features.

Nvivo was used to individually code parts of the transcripts into different themes. For example, if a participant reported they felt an increase in their ability to use social skills this was coded into the social skills theme. This process was repeated for everything that each participant said in their interview until every line in each interview was coded.

Participants were assigned a number to track their data in Nvivo. That number was assigned in the order that the interviews were completed. The participants were not aware of where they were in the order of interviews so the number cannot be used as an identifier.

### *Classification of Data*

The initial coding of themes held the previous research as a light framework for the data. The interviews were reviewed using the constant comparative method and many general themes were pulled from the data with the intent that the themes themselves would then also be reviewed to see if larger overarching themes could then be compiled to better describe the data. The initial coding process produced 54 individual codes.

This number of codes was unwieldy in its current form for further analysis. The codes were then refined into larger themes by reviewing the initial wave of themes and categorizing those themes into more encompassing codes. These new overarching codes were more informed by the previous data since things like developing social skills, developing empathy, and finding respite from reality were expected to be found in the data. With that in mind while the data was being reviewed there was also an intent to be critical of the data and its comparison to the literature to make sure no new themes or information was being overlooked.

An example of combining codes, two codes that had been produced for why people played TTRPGs were *Spending Time with Friends* and *Making New Friends*. This clearly fell into a larger theme of prosocial behaviors and these codes were combined under that larger code. After reviewing the 54 codes, they were collected into 5 larger themes found in the data. As this process occurred, a clear split in the data was established. The responses fell into one of two camps, the first being the perceived impacts of playing TTRPGs and the second being reasons for playing TTRPGs. This split provided clear answers to the research questions.

The final themes were *Developing Social Skills*, *Developing Empathy*, *Finding Respite from Reality*, *Prosocial Behaviors*, *Self-Expression and Acceptance*, and *Personal Enjoyment*.

## Results

The data yielded several themes that were relevant to the effects that TTRPG players perceived they experienced. The most common themes were around developing social skills, developing empathy, and finding respite from reality. All the participants reported a perceived increase in developing social skills and empathy. They also all reported that at least part of the reason they played TTRPGs was to find respite from stressful things in their realities. There were also additional themes present around engaging in prosocial behaviors, finding acceptance in TTRPG groups, and finding personal enjoyment in engaging with the rules of the game.

Below is a table of the number of codes and the aggregated percentage of the codes in each category.

**Table 1**

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	# of codes	% of total codes	% of total codes
			per category

1. Perceived Impacts			
a. Developing Social Skills	108	73.0%	32.3%
b. Developing Empathy	40	27.0%	11.9%
2. Reasons for Playing			
a. Prosocial Behaviors	72	38.7%	21.6%
b. Respite from Reality	46	24.7%	13.8%
c. Personal Enjoyment	36	19.4%	10.8%
d. Self-Expression and Acceptance	32	17.2%	9.6%
3. Summary of All Codes	334	100%	100%

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The table shows the total number of codes for each code, and then the percentage of codes per overarching category (Perceived Impacts and Reasons for Playing) and the percentage of total codes.

### **Developing Social Skills**

Development of social skills was clearly the most coded category from all the data. Participants indicated that, because of playing D&D, they had learned to become more nuanced in their communication with others. Almost all the participants reported that they had at least one negative experience while playing TTRPGs. This negative experience often took the form of another player causing discord in the group. The reaction to these problematic players was largely to either address it with the player or to enlist the help of others in the group so it could be addressed by multiple people. This required sensitively addressing the issues that the other players were bringing to the table for the enjoyment of all players.

*I played with a group of people last year.... they came to the table with some ideas about how the game was going to go and those didn't quite line up I think with what they were expecting and so they kind of tried to force their thoughts*



*and, like, sort of agenda and do the game in a way that I think was detrimental to myself and to the other people at the table. And we did have to end up asking them to, like, leave and not come back.*

Increased communication skills also came because of positive experiences. Participants reported that feeling accepted in their group allowed them to become more extroverted and comfortable in sharing their experiences. They also reported feeling more connected to their groups as the game continued and feeling freer to express how they were feeling.

*Yes, to a small extent, every session I go to is to kind of, uh, to interact with people in like a fun way...through the guise of role-playing... that kind of makes it easier to meet people because there's a lot less pressure.*

The interview guide also included quantitative scaling questions to try and quantify some of the effects that the participants believed they experienced. One of the questions asked participants how much they thought D&D had helped them develop better interpersonal skills and another asked how much D&D had given them more confidence in their relationships with people. Both questions relate to developing social skills and confidence and they were both highly rated indicating that the participants felt these were both areas they perceived had been affected by playing TTRPGs, which also coincides with the qualitative data. The full quantitative results of these questions can be found in Appendix B.

### **Developing Empathy**

Related to this, the data also reflected the theme of developing empathy for other players. All the participants touched upon TTRPGs as being an avenue to learn about and understand others better. There were also themes around being able to take other people's perspectives and being forced to see things differently by playing a character in the game. One participant

reported that, by observing the traits that a player brought to their character, they learned more about the player as a person. Some of this perspective-taking was also acted out in the game. Participants reported several times that, when conflicts happened in the game between characters, they often had to use perspective-taking to work out the conflict between characters.

*So if I'm, like, arguing with one of my friends that I'm in a session with... and the argument doesn't resolve...sometimes we'll play a session [of D&D] and stuff will happen in there...They'll help me understand their point of view better...*

As an additional link to the theme of empathy, several participants reported interacting with more and varied kinds of people than they would have without D&D. They reported that, because of those interactions, they developed a better understanding of the people around them, which seemed to result in strengthened empathic responses.

*So you get more depth than you kind of realize...I can't really judge people because that's, like, not fair, you know? and stuff like that so. I think it, like, has helped me be like understanding of a lot of people...I think it's made me be open to, like, a lot of different people and...throw away the stuff that, like, society has, like kind of programmed into my brain to be like they're, like, an 'other'...*

### **Inhabiting a Character**

The data also revealed the theme of inhabiting a character as a reason for playing. In role-playing games, there is the opportunity to take on new roles in the form of characters. Participants identified that one of the draws of playing D&D was that they got to inhabit a character that was different from themselves.

*I play, like, a barbarian which is, you know, like, very Hulk smash and I love it...*

*I mean, as a person, I don't like violence and I'm not completely ripped; however, in the game I'm like, 'I can just smash this door'*

Participants also reported a desire to avoid negative experiences in their real lives by escaping into their character. These negative experiences included feeling overwhelmed with the state of the world and dealing with real-world problems. Participants reported that they viewed D&D as a way to take a break from these real-world issues.

However, inhabiting a character was not just related to wanting a different experience. Several participants identified that the events taking place in the game impacted them emotionally. One player reported that they felt a real, significant emotional impact after their character sacrificed themselves to save something that was important to the character. The other participants voiced similar experiences when something negative happened to either their character or another player's character.

*a couple weeks ago my character... [was] taken over by the bad guy sort of thing and [had] this curse. And like I got him back, he's OK now. He got better, but like, I was pretty sad about that, like, for a while, which is weird because it's a thing I chose to do. But, like- also it's, like, in that situation...I don't know how he would do something other than that. You know what I mean? But, like, I was actually pretty sad.*

## **Prosocial Behaviors**

All the participants made some report around the social nature of the game being part of its appeal. There was a clear theme that TTRPGs were being used to create and develop social connections. Along with that, there were also reports of using D&D to connect with people

outside of the participants' TTRPG groups. Participants reported that they were either able to connect with people outside of their groups by talking about D&D in media or talking about their D&D games with the other players outside of their designated gaming time. This data indicates that, at the very least, there is value in TTRPGs for connecting to others in a prosocial manner.

*It's a way to make a lot of new friends. It's a way for me to, like, get my social outlet.*

### **Self-Expression and Acceptance**

Participants also reported enjoying the ability to express themselves via TTRPGs. This theme of comfort around self-expression was identified by the participants in a variety of ways. Other participants reported that playing TTRPGs had made them less worried about criticism of their creative endeavors, stating that they felt encouraged to bring out sides of themselves that they didn't feel comfortable sharing in other places. Participants also reported that they felt their groups were accepting of them and others who identified as nonconforming, especially when it came to gender identity.

*You know, it feels pretty comfortable when you go there... because like, you know, like you're going to be accepted and I think... there's a lot of people...who, like, maybe feel... excluded from things sometimes.*

### **Personal Enjoyment**

All the participants identified different reasons for playing D&D that seemed to be related to personal enjoyment. Some participants reported enjoying the creative aspects of the game, including the act of creating stories as part of the game or doing art that related to the game. Others enjoyed engaging with the mechanics of the game in a way that felt positive, such as being good at the combat parts of the game or using their characters' skills in the game to

solve a mystery. A unifying theme did not coalesce here, except for the broad category of personal fulfillment, as this sense of personal fulfillment seemed to take different forms for each participant.

*...having something that you can- once it's wrapped up, you can look back on it and just see how cool it was. The fact you got to build a cool story that's really just in the minds of you and your friends.*

### **Quantitative Data**

As part of the interview, participants were asked to rate themselves on four scales about their experiences playing D&D. The goal of these questions was to provide more quantitative insight into how the participants felt they were affected by playing TTRPGs. These scales can be found at the end of the attached interview guide in Appendix A. The full ratings can be found in a table in Appendix B.

The sample from this assessment isn't large enough to produce any conclusive results. However, the quantitative data supports what is seen in the qualitative data. The participants rated highly the impact they thought TTRPGs had on their interpersonal skills and on their confidence in relationships. This is reflected in the qualitative data by participants reporting a perceived impact on their social skills and feeling more comfortable and accepted by their TTRPG groups.

When asked to rate themselves on how much they enjoyed D&D, the participants rated themselves very highly with an average response of 9 out of 10. This makes sense given that the club meets on Friday night, which is anecdotally a night that people value spending time with others. By choosing to spend this night playing TTRPGs that could indicate how much the social aspect of TTRPGs means to these participants.

*I heard there was the D&D club [at this university], and I asked my other top choices, 'Hey, do you have D&D club?' And they said, 'No, but we have a frat.' This place had D&D and I said okay.*

The participants were also asked how much they thought D&D had affected them overall either positively or negatively. All of them reported that it had affected them positively and the participants' reports had some variation in the quantitative value. The values ranged from 5-10 which indicates that not all the participants thought the effect was as significant. It is possible that participants' length of time playing D&D affected their perception of its impact, but these trends were not consistent across participants. For example, one participant reported that he had started playing TTRPGs 14-15 years ago and he reported a 9 out of 10 on the scale of how significantly D&D had affected him. This could be attributed to the fact that the respondent was only 19 at the time and had been playing TTRPGs since his formative years so TTRPGs were possibly entrenched in his sense of self. Another participant reported that she had only been playing for the last 4 years but rated herself a 10 out of 10 on the same scale. These results show that there is variation in how people interact with TTRPGs and how they perceive they are affected by them.

The goal of these scaling questions was to attempt to assign some quantitative data to the experiences of D&D players. While this data is correlational at best, it does begin to give a baseline for future research involving quantitative measures and provide support for the qualitative data that is already present.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study seem to align well with the existing body of research on TTRPGs. The aspect that was most emphasized by the participants in this study was the

increased social skills that resulted from playing TTRPGs. This was seen in Causo and Quinlan's study (2020), where participants reported feeling like they were building relationships, as well as Blackmon's case study (1994), which also highlighted social development because of playing D&D. Participants in Abbott, Stauss and Burnett's therapeutic D&D group also reported feeling like they had developed their social skills as well (2022). And the participants in Meriläinen's survey of role-players reported perceiving an increase in their social skills because of playing TTRPGs (2012).

One new aspect of the development of social skills is an additional mechanism of action that may help role-players develop those skills. All the participants reported at least one negative experience playing TTRPGs which was the result of a player in their group who was problematic or not adhering to the social contract in some way. All but one participant reported that they were part of intervening by either speaking to the GM or by speaking to the player directly. This type of social conflict requires finesse as well as practice in giving difficult feedback. This specific type of encounter was not found in the literature for this study and could be an important area of research in the future. While not explored in this study, this mechanism may also have facilitated the development of empathy as well as perspective taking is also important to consider in conflict resolution as well.

Participants in this study also reported they perceived an increase in empathy which matched the results from Wickramasekera's study (2007). Hand's guide to the use of role-playing in psychotherapy identified the concept of "bleed" or the experience of being able to relate to a character who is being emotionally affected as a mechanism of action in using TTRPGs in therapy (2023). Participants in this study reported feeling this with their characters and experiencing the emotions their character felt.

This study also found that role-players use TTRPGs to find respite from their day-to-day experiences. This was found in Causo and Quinlan's study of role-players who reported that being able to take a break from their daily stressors was a positive experience (2020). There was evidence in this study that Flood's theory that roleplaying allows participants to take a break from daily life and provide almost unlimited possibility to solve problems in a fantasy world (2006). The results of this study seemed to follow Bowman's Jungian interpretation of roleplaying and how it facilitates the leaving behind of public persona and potentially allows role-players to confront the more hidden aspects of themselves (2012).

This study's results followed what was found in the previously existing literature in terms of developing social skills, empathy, and finding respite from reality. Additionally, this research brought forth some new general themes. These included finding acceptance in TTRPG groups when participants didn't feel accepted in other spaces and finding enjoyment when engaging in the rules of the game. The quantitative data also provided a different kind of insight by having participants attempt to quantify how much they perceived TTRPGs to affect them.

Feeling accepted by the group and by the larger D&D club was another important theme that participants identified. This was not something identified in the previous research, but it clearly had a large effect on some of the participants. Feeling accepted is likely linked to prosocial behavior, more research is needed on this topic, and how accepted a person feels may affect their perception of the group and the effects D&D has on them.

This research followed much of the data that has already been established when it comes to the development of social skills, empathy, and finding respite from reality. It also found some new areas of potential interest when it comes to how role-players develop social skills and the effect on players feeling accepted.



## **Limitations**

There were some limitations to this study that need to be addressed. The results are based on self-report which, as discussed, is prone to either over or under reporting. This limits how much can be inferred from the data. Some evidence for this is that all the participants reported negative experiences with other players; however, none of them reported that they had ever caused a negative experience for other people. This could be the result of underreporting or social desirability affecting participants' reports or it could be that this question was not directly asked.

Additionally, this is a study of self-reported perceived impact which may or may not translate to actual interactions with others. Just because the participants perceived an impact doesn't necessarily mean there was one. To best assess a behavior change, including increased social skills and empathy, there must be objective observation of those things which is difficult to achieve.

## **Areas for Further Research**

The quantitative aspect of this research revealed a potential new area for study. Among the participants, one had only been playing for 2 years and another had been playing for 14-15 years. The participant with only 2 years of experience reported TTRPGs had a larger impact on their social skills and confidence than the participant playing for 14-15 years did. Conversely, the participant who had been playing for 14-15 years reported that TTRPGs had a larger impact on them overall. This suggests that there were areas of change not covered by measuring perceived impact on social skills and confidence which could be a future area of research.

In Blackmon's case study (1994), the material about D&D that the client brought to therapy was a projection of how they felt towards others in their life. A longitudinal

ethnography of one D&D group could provide insight into the personal aspects D&D evokes by tracking the interactions and conflicts between the members across a campaign to identify what personal material is most often brought into the game. Interviews could then be done with group members individually to better understand the personal motivations and emotions that may be affecting the group's in-game behavior. The D&D club at this university starts a new 10-week campaign every academic quarter and may be perfectly poised to complete this kind of research.

Another area for further research is the negative experiences that were reported by participants. As mentioned above, all of the players reported at least one negative experience that required action to resolve. This could be a potential mechanism of action that is leading to the development of social skills or there could be negative effects of TTRPGs that were overlooked in this study.

### **Conclusion**

This was a qualitative study of the experiences of players at the D&D club at a private university in the Western United States. An hour-long interview was conducted with eight members of the club about their experiences and perceived effects of playing TTRPGs. After synthesizing the data, several themes emerged around the perceived benefits of playing D&D, which included developing social skills, developing empathy, and finding respite from daily stressors. These results fit with the existing body of research and uncovered a potential mechanism of action for the development of social skills by addressing negative experiences among role-players. Further research topics in this area were also discussed, including research on other TTRPG systems, how the length of play time may affect the perceived effects of D&D, and how personal experiences outside of the game may affect events in the game.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

1. Gather demographic information
  - a. Name
  - b. Age
  - c. Gender
2. Why did you start playing D&D (Or what drew you to start playing?)
3. How long have you been playing?
4. Altogether, approximately how many sessions have you played?
5. How many groups have you played with?
6. How long did each of those groups last?
7. What were your expectations of what D&D would be like before you started?
8. Have those expectations been met?
9. Was there anything you were hoping to accomplish by participating?
10. What do you enjoy about D&D?
11. Can you describe any impact D&D has had on you? Has that impact continued? If so, how?
12. Can you describe some specific experience or memory you have of D&D that you believe affected you?
13. Can you give me specific examples of how you have reacted or responded to a circumstance in your life in a different way because of what you have learned in D&D?
14. Has playing D&D changed how you related to the people you play with?
15. Has playing D&D affected how you interact with other people in your life?

16. What might you say to someone that is thinking about playing D&D?
17. Tell me about any unpleasant experiences you've had while playing. Why do you think that happened?
18. How has your experience with D&D affected how you see yourself?
19. Is there anything about your experience that I haven't asked about that would be important to know?
20. On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you enjoy playing D&D?
21. On a scale of 1 to 10, how much /Do you think that playing D&D has helped you develop better interpersonal skills?
22. On a scale of 1 to 10 how much do think/Do you think playing D&D given you more confidence in your relationships with people?
23. On a scale of -10 to 10, how much has D&D changed you (for the better or the worse)? In what ways?

Appendix A. The interview guide used in participant interviews.

Appendix B

<b>Participant</b>	<b>On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you enjoy playing D&amp;D?</b>	<b>On a scale of 1 to 10, how much /Do you think that playing D&amp;D has helped you develop better interpersonal skills?</b>	<b>On a scale of 1 to 10 how much do think/Do you think playing D&amp;D given you more confidence in your relationships with people?</b>	<b>On a scale of -10 to 10, how much has D&amp;D changed you (for the better or the worse)? In what ways?</b>
1	10	7	8	4
2	8	7	5	10
3	8	7	9	6
4	9	8	8	9
5	10	10	9	7
6	9	7	8	4
7	9	9	9	6
8	9	9	9	7
Average	9	8	8.125	6.625

Appendix B. Table of responses to scaling questions.



Appendix C

<b>Participant Number</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Length of Time Playing TTRPGs (years)</b>
1	21	Female	3
2	19	Female	4
3	20	Male	8-9
4	19	Male	14-15
5	20	Male	8-9
6	18	Male	4
7	21	Female	5
8	21	Female	2

Appendix C. Demographics table for study participants