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# Dungeons and Dragons and literacy: The role tabletop role-playing games can play in developing teenagers' literacy skills and reading interests

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# Dungeons and Dragons and literacy: The role tabletop role-playing games can play in developing teenagers' literacy skills and reading interests

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore the role that tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) play in developing the literacy skills and leisure reading interests of teenagers who play them. Additionally, this study sought to determine what role or roles educators should play in developing the gaming culture of teenage students. In order to answer these questions, seven people who played TRPGs as teenagers were interviewed about their past and current TRPG interests, past and current leisure reading habits, and the effects that playing TRPGs had on their literacy skills. This study revealed that all participants felt that playing TRPGs improved at least one literacy skill and that greater depth and breadth of TRPG experience helped some participants to surmount real or perceived difficulties with reading or speaking; TRPGs also helped participants improve listening skills. In most cases, playing TRPGs also led to a greater quantity of leisure reading. However, TRPGs did not appear to influence which genres participants read; some who previously read fantasy appreciated the connections they saw in TRPGs; yet others did not see TRPGs relating to their reading interests. While some participants saw their schooling and TRPG interests overlap, none saw a need for educators to take an active role in encouraging TRPG gaming among students.

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS AND LITERACY: THE ROLE TABLETOP ROLE-  
PLAYING GAMES CAN PLAY IN DEVELOPING TEENAGERS' LITERACY  
SKILLS AND READING INTERESTS

A Graduate Research Paper  
Submitted to the  
Division of School Library Studies  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by  
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Titled: Dungeons and Dragons and Literacy: The Role Tabletop Role-Playing Games can  
Play in Developing Teenagers' Literacy Skills and Reading Interests

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the role that tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) play in developing the literacy skills and leisure reading interests of teenagers who play them. Additionally, this study sought to determine what role or roles educators should play in developing the gaming culture of teenage students. In order to answer these questions, seven people who played TRPGs as teenagers were interviewed about their past and current TRPG interests, past and current leisure reading habits, and the effects that playing TRPGs had on their literacy skills. This study revealed that all participants felt that playing TRPGs improved at least one literacy skill and that greater depth and breadth of TRPG experience helped some participants to surmount real or perceived difficulties with reading or speaking; TRPGs also helped participants improve listening skills. In most cases, playing TRPGs also led to a greater quantity of leisure reading. However, TRPGs did not appear to influence which genres participants read; some who previously read fantasy appreciated the connections they saw in TRPGs; yet others did not see TRPGs relating to their reading interests. While some participants saw their schooling and TRPG interests overlap, none saw a need for educators to take an active role in encouraging TRPG gaming among students.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*The suit of armor springs to life and immediately reaches out to punch Riswynn, the dwarf who awoke it. Riswynn ducks and swings out with her greataxe, leaving a large dent in the left thigh, but the armor's movement appears to be unhindered by this damage. Its wrath is focused on the wood elf Aramil.*

*"I'm going to attack with my scimitar."*

*"Roll for attack."*

*"15."*

*"Okay, you hit the armor; roll for damage."*

*"Ugh, 2. Hold up, my favored enemy type is constructs, so I get a bonus. Let me check... it's plus 2. So, 4."*

*"Aramil draws his scimitar and slashes out at the suit of armor, slicing off its right hand and revealing, as he suspected, that there is no body inside the armor. As the metal clangs to the floor, Daar takes action."*

*"Will my poison breath do damage to an animated suit of armor?"*

*"Do an intelligence check."*

*"9."*

*"You're not real sure, but you're leaning towards no."*

Scenes like this and countless others are played out all around the world as players of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder* work together to explore fantasy worlds, defeat enemies, and solve mysteries using their scimitars, greataxes, powers of deception, knowledge of ancient magic, handfuls of many-sided dice, and books that detail how to do everything from determine if a plant is poisonous to cast healing spells. Though many public and school libraries allow the use of their space for gaming groups such as these, the educational potential present in TRPGs remains a generally unstudied phenomenon. As schools are increasingly transforming their libraries to include makerspaces and digital media hubs, gaming is yet another valuable but often unconsidered use of library space. As Mike Mearls, one of the lead designers to the 5th edition of the *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook* (2014) describes, "Countless writers, artists, and other creators can trace their

beginnings to a few pages of D&D notes, a handful of dice, and a kitchen table” (p. 4). More specifically, Black and Castellucci (2009) note that National Book Award-winning author M.T. Anderson acted as a dungeon master (DM) for *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns as a teenager. A DM is a member of a TRPG group who sets up the story that the players engage in; their role is similar to the narrator of a *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel, where they describe settings, conflicts, and the like, but where readers/players decide what direction the story takes. Anderson later said that these experiences running games “taught him most of what he knows about creating narratives” (p. 138). Launching writers, artists, and creators is much of what libraries are about, and those budding creators can just as easily begin with their notes and dice around a library table.

### **Problem Statement**

Reading is a necessary skill for success in k-12 education and beyond. The American Association of School Librarians [AASL] describes reading as, “a foundational skill for learning, personal growth, and enjoyment...a key indicator of success in school and in life, [and] a lifelong learning skill” (AASL, 2009a, p. 12). Among other specific benefits, reading helps students build a mature vocabulary and write more skillfully; it prepares them for the world of work, arms them against oppression (Gallagher, 2003) and teaches spelling at least as effectively as direct instruction (AASL, 2009b). Reading at the secondary level prepares students who enter post-secondary institutions for the approximately 200-600 pages they will have to read each week in order to be successful in college (Kittle, 2013, p. 20).

While many variables and techniques have been shown to improve students' reading skills, common factors include the amount of time spent reading (National Endowment for the Arts [NEA], 2007) regardless of text quality (Krashen & Ujiie, 2005), access to high-interest reading material (Gallagher, 2003), and the intrinsic motivation to read (Wigfield, Gladstone, & Turci, 2016). However, despite both mountains of research (NEA 2007; Scammaca et al., 2014) and educators' best intentions, many struggling and disinterested readers continue to struggle and remain disinterested in reading (Gallagher, 2009; Kittle, 2013). In recent years, researchers have explored using alternative texts, such as graphic novels, to interest students with much success (Snowball, 2005). The alternative texts and oral storytelling forms found in tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) can also be used to develop the reading interests of and teach literacy skills to otherwise struggling or reluctant readers (Kestrel, 2005).

First, it is necessary to provide some definitions. *Struggling readers* refers to students who have difficulty with the mechanics of reading: for instance, they may struggle to decode words, read fluently, or comprehend texts at their grade level (Tankersley, 2005). *Reluctant readers* refers to students who dislike reading for various reasons (Young Adult Library Services Association [YALSA]). Both types of non-reading students face challenges throughout their k-12 schooling including difficulty in Language Arts classes, difficulty learning in other subjects when reading is required, low self-esteem, increased difficulty with spelling and mechanics in writing, and increased behavior problems (Tankersley, 2005). Additionally, struggling readers may also be at greater risk for mental health problems (Boyes, Leitao, Claessen, Badcock, & Nayton, 2016), and reluctant readers have the potential to become struggling readers if they do not

read enough to maintain or grow the reading skills they have as texts become more complex (Snowball, 2005). As students age and leave high school, low reading skills are directly correlated with greater likelihood of dropping out, lower wages, diminished likelihood of voting, and higher rates of both unemployment and incarceration (NEA, 2007). Additional terms that will be used frequently throughout this paper include *reading interests*, which includes both the degree and range of interest an individual has in reading and *literacy skills*, which by Common Core definition (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010) includes reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language skills.

One persistent gap between students who are good readers and those who are struggling or reluctant readers comes with gender. Boys tend to spend less time reading, read less fluently, read exclusively for information, have fewer male role models whom they see reading, believe themselves to be less competent readers, and are generally less motivated to read than their female counterparts (AASL, 2009b; Boltz 2007; Wigfield et al., 2016). As the effects of these differences compound over years of schooling, boys are more likely to experience the negative effects of being a struggling or reluctant reader. A separate body of research has demonstrated a gender divide in TRPG gaming, indicating that, while women are playing TRPGs at a higher rate than in the past, TRPG gamers are still predominantly men (Foster, 2000).

One of the greatest motivating factors to encourage both struggling and reluctant readers is students having the freedom to choose reading material that fits their interests, often referred to as free voluntary reading (Kittle, 2013; Krashen, 2004). In choosing their own reading material, many struggling and reluctant readers prefer texts that are not

what adults (like teachers or parents) might consider quality reading material. This may include nonfiction books, comics, teen romance novels, magazines, newspapers, and websites (Boltz, 2007; Krashen & Ujiie, 2005). Despite many adults' views that such texts are not sufficiently complex or lack literary merit, research demonstrates that reading these media not only leads to gains in reading skills on their own but often serves as a bridge to more complex literary texts (Kittle, 2013; Krashen & Ujiie, 2005).

Despite a body of research that demonstrates what engages struggling and reluctant readers, many such students are still disengaged when it comes to reading, leaving many educators to look for fresh, new ways to reach these students. Tabletop role-playing games present one such possibility. Role-playing games (RPGs) are games commonly found in popular culture where participants take on the roles of fictional characters in order to complete tasks. Murder-mystery dinners are a well-known type of RPG. Tabletop RPGs (TRPGs) are a specific type of RPG where players (typically sitting around a table) narrate their actions, and a moderator describes reactions, often with players utilizing rule books and dice to make clear determinations. TRPGs combine reading for information with action and fantasy storylines (some of the most commonly cited reading interests of boys) (AASL, 2009b). The texts used for gameplay seldom look like or read like traditional novels; and the cooperative oral storytelling format engages players in turning the words they read into a real story in which they take an active part. By understanding the possibilities that TRPGs present for reaching reluctant readers as well as connecting struggling and high-ability readers with one another, teachers and librarians will have another tool in their literacy toolbox.

While much research has been done on what types of texts and activities interest struggling and reluctant readers (Gallagher, 2003; Kittle, 2013; Krashen, 2004; Krashen & Ujiiie, 2005), and several educators who are also TRPG gamers have noted overlaps between education and gaming (Kestrel, 2005; Petty, 2002), little research has been undertaken regarding TRPGs as an educational tool. The research that has been conducted is primarily related to their use in Language Arts classrooms.

### **Summary of Problem Statement**

Despite much research done on the importance of reading and a growing body of research into what makes struggling and reluctant readers more interested in reading, many such readers remain disinterested. Educators need fresh ideas to reach these students.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore the role that tabletop role-playing games play in developing the reading interests and literacy skills of high school students who play them.

### **Research Questions**

- 1) How do TRPGs support the development of literacy skills?
- 2) How do TRPGs develop the reading interests of players?
- 3) What role(s) should educators play in the gaming culture of students?

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

One significant assumption behind this study is that TRPGs have educational value and that playing TRPGs affects the reading habits of those who play them. This

study is limited to teenagers and adults in central Iowa who play or played TRPGs as teenagers and is biased by the fact the researcher is a TRPG gamer.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this study is to explore the role that TRPGs play in developing the reading interests and literacy skills of high schoolers who play them. Prior research conducted in related areas includes research into the use of TRPGs in Language Arts classrooms, research into the use of texts other than traditional fiction and nonfiction books to teach literacy skills, and research into the leisure reading interests of adolescents.

#### **TRPGs in Language Arts Classes**

In a search for innovative approaches to teaching creative writing at the college level, Hergenrader (2011) turned to TRPGs. A primary goal of this approach was to encourage students to focus more closely on characters and technique rather than trying to create deep, philosophical meaning in their fiction stories. To test this approach, Hergenrader held a semester-long creative writing course structured around RPGs. After gaining familiarity with both post-apocalyptic fiction and digital RPGs, students built their own post-apocalyptic Milwaukee (including a map) in a group wiki. In that fictional setting, students created player characters using a combination of TRPG character sheets and creative writing prompts. Finally, students formed gaming parties and played out stories with their characters in this setting, writing vignettes of the characters' experiences. Hergenrader observed students' progress as their professor and also collected surveys about their experiences in this course compared to prior creative writing courses. As an observer, he noted extraordinary enthusiasm from the students, including perfect attendance and high participation among students typically hesitant to share.



Among many responses, students noted that this method of learning made them better able to step into characters' heads, allowed for a more personal connection to the setting, and created an open and encouraging learning environment. Additionally, students noted that actual gameplay was the most helpful aspect in teaching them about writing fiction.

Inspired in part by Hergenrader (2011), Glazer (2015) sought to utilize TRPGs to teach literature at the high school level. Glazer saw a similar lack of innovation in literature education and thought that student-created TRPGs could engage students in literature. Glazer also sought to discover whether a pedagogical model shaped around TRPG construction would work as well as or better than current methods. Glazer piloted this method with students reading *Beowulf* and formally studied it with two sections reading *Fahrenheit 451* and one section reading *The Importance of Being Ernest*. As they read the texts, students created gameboards based on the settings and created characters (both textual and imagined) for play. Additionally, students created imagined adventures based on the texts. Finally, students created game rules based on rules for the TRPG *Dungeons & Dragons* and played the games they had created. Glazer collected a wide variety of data, including evidence of students' critical thinking, literacy development, and attitude towards literature. Among a wide array of findings, Glazer found that students studying *Fahrenheit 451* with this method frequently expressed enjoyment with the tasks, utilized critical thinking throughout, and scored as well as or better on a traditional post-test than a control class studying the same book without TRPG use. Students studying *The Importance of Being Ernest* demonstrated critical thinking about both the text and the rules of gameplay, frequently did more work than required, and

demonstrated significant enough content knowledge during gameplay that final gameplay was sufficient to be used in place of a test or other traditional assessment.

Zalka (2012), was also interested in the application of TRPGs to high school literature classes, but focused on designing a template for teachers to create TRPGs for their classrooms. Zalka specifically aimed to have teachers utilize TRPGs to address literature and Social Studies standards. To do this, Zalka created three games based around Greek mythology, Arthurian legend, and folktale. Each game was playtested with high school or college students. Zalka recorded the sessions, took notes as a participant observer, and received feedback through post-game discussions and anonymous responses from players. While Zalka was able to develop the template, with all games aligned to Language Arts and/or Social Studies standards, the responses of the players are more pertinent to this current study. In playing the TRPGs, Zalka noted that players were engaged, used creative thinking, expressed curiosity about the original story or legend, drew on background knowledge to make choices, and discovered solutions while playing that were similar to the original story or legend. In total, these studies demonstrate that TRPGs have generally untapped educational potential. Whether they're being used to teach creative writing (Hergenrader, 2011), literature already present in the curriculum (Glazer, 2015), or literature and Social Studies standards (Zalka, 2012), teachers who utilize TRPGs find that students are building their literacy skills by playing them.

### **Teaching Literacy Skills with Non-Traditional Texts**

Turner (2012) observed a middle school productions class to determine the extent to which integrating a research project with Hip Hop production encouraged growth of learning and literacy. Among several goals, Turner wanted to determine which

developments in literacy could be directly attributed to the students' Hip Hop productions. In addition to observing the pre-existing course, Turner surveyed several of the students before and after the course, met with staff members, interviewed students, and analyzed student products. Turner found that in students' early work, they were primarily reproducing ideas and conventions they had heard from popular rap and R&B music; however, as the semester progressed, their work showed, "critical engagement with issues" (p. 505). Students' writings and productions not only challenged community anti-education norms, but also dealt with deeper themes like racial justice and inequality in urban education, and even played with the conventions of Hip Hop. Despite Hip Hop being a literary form not commonly studied in school, it became a valuable tool for students to develop their literacy skills through reading, writing, performing, and critically engaging with the realities of their community.

Rather than Hip Hop, Hughes, King, Perkins, and Fuke (2011) looked at graphic novels as a means to teaching literacy skills. Their goal was to examine the development of literacy skills as well as the convergence of text, image, and sound (in text) for teens when reading and writing graphic novel style stories. This case study involved 12 teens in at-risk programs who generally perceived themselves as poor readers and writers, had experienced previous failures with literacy learning, and disliked reading in general. To begin, students read graphic novels and/or manga. After reading, discussing, and analyzing the texts, students wrote their own stories using computer software for creating comics. Throughout the time spent studying the graphic novels, students demonstrated use of reading strategies, especially visualizing, connecting, and predicting. In their own creations, the content of the stories showed awareness of the world, and the formatting of

the stories demonstrated students' engagement with a variety of storytelling techniques, including symbolism, juxtaposition, and slowing or speeding time. By bringing graphic novels into the classroom, these students were able to experience literary success rather than the failure they had experienced previously.

Gavigan and Albright (2015) also set out to engage teenagers in literacy through use of graphic novels; in this case the students were a group of incarcerated teen boys. They wanted to understand both how incarcerated students responded to the graphic novel format as well as how the process of creating a graphic novel influenced the literary lives of the students. Over the course of eight weeks in a Language Arts classroom at a juvenile justice facility, two classes of boys ages 15 to 18 (averaging 10 students per class) created a graphic novel about HIV/AIDS. Students learned about HIV/AIDS in their Science and Social Studies classes, then, in Language Arts, students worked together to determine the basic premise of the story and spent time with a graphic illustrator to determine the art style. From there, students developed the plot, characters, and dialogue through storyboarding. The graphic illustrator provided drafts of the graphic novel, and students gave feedback, culminating in a complete text. Gavigan and Albright observed the students throughout the process and performed interviews after completion of the graphic novel. During the writing and storyboarding process, students utilized multiple literacies and improved their writing skills, particularly with sentence structure, plot, and flow of the story, leading to improved confidence in students' writing skills. Students also improved their discussion skills by working collaboratively. After completion of the project, students expressed interest in reading additional graphic novels, as well as writing more graphic novels in Science and Social Studies classes, or

around other social issues. Students involved in the project eagerly shared the graphic novel with family members and younger students. Whether the focus is on writing a graphic novel collectively (Gavigan & Albright, 2015), reading and writing graphic novels independently (Hughes et al., 2011), or writing and producing Hip Hop music (Turner, 2012), this research demonstrates that reading novels and writing essays are not the only ways to teach literacy skills.

### **Reading Interests of Adolescents**

Merga and Moon (2016) set out to detail the state of reading for Western Australian teenagers. This included questions about the frequency and volume of teens' recreational reading, attitudes of teens towards recreational reading, and influence of parents, friends, and peers on those attitudes. Called the West Australian Study in Adolescent Bookreading, 520 8th and 10th grade students at 20 high schools in Western Australia completed a 41-question survey surrounding their reading habits and attitudes. Questions were both qualitative and quantitative in nature. Respondents were aged 13-16, 53% were female and 47% were male; 21% of respondents were immigrants to Australia. Among a wide range of findings, Merga and Moon discovered that 64% of respondents read books recreationally at least once per month, 49% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I like reading books in my free time" (only 27% disagreed or strongly disagreed). There was significant positive correlation between parents' and teens' reading frequency and attitudes, moderate positive correlation between boys' attitudes towards leisure reading and their perceived friends' attitudes, and low positive correlation between girls' attitudes and their perceived friends' attitudes. These understandings of

why teens read in general informs the more specific understanding of how certain factors can encourage or discourage leisure reading.

Rather than looking at a wide range of teens, Love and Hamston (2003) focused specifically on boys who had been labeled reluctant readers and how they chose or chose not to adopt their family's leisure reading habits. A questionnaire was distributed to 75 teen boys at a private and expensive high school; all boys were academically successful and capable readers, effectively eliminating social class and reading disability as variables. Following the questionnaires, the researchers selected seven boys and their families who represented a range of the voices they saw in the questionnaires and interviewed them in depth. They learned that not only did most boys see value in reading outside of academic contexts, but most did engage in leisure reading. This leisure reading was almost exclusively outside of books and included computer magazines, sports commentaries, newspaper articles, and online communication with friends.

Looking further at magazines as teen leisure reading, Gabriel, Allington, and Billen (2012) investigated the role that magazines play in developing teens' reading habits. They had 197 students from nine middle schools complete a survey of their recreational reading habits; approximately half of those students were randomly chosen to receive two free magazine subscriptions of their choosing. Magazines were delivered to their home address for two years; during and after this time, the students were interviewed about how, when, and why they read their magazines. Through these interviews they discovered that the participants tended to choose magazines about topics they were very familiar with and that both boys and girls enjoyed reading their magazines for both information and entertainment. The information they gained from reading the

magazines often made its way into conversations they had with friends. While not a stated purpose of their study, the researchers also learned that these magazines gave students practice using literacy skills: students used metacognitive strategies as they read, they were willing to tackle new jargon, and the varied grade levels of reading difficulty within each magazine allowed for internal scaffolding, much the way that a book series does. By understanding the reading interests of teenagers (Gabriel et al., 2012), including what motivates them to read (Merga & Moon, 2016) and the texts they prefer (Love & Hamston, 2003), educators are better able to build on students' preferences to help them grow as readers.

### **Summary**

Studies conducted regarding the choices teenagers make in their independent reading demonstrate that while most are reading books in some capacity (Merga & Moon, 2016) many of the texts they choose to read are not those used in a traditional Language Arts classrooms (Gabriel et al., 2012; Love & Hamilton, 2003). When non-traditional texts like graphic novels (Gavigan & Albright, 2015; Hughes et al., 2011) or Hip Hop music (Turner, 2012) are brought into the classroom, the research shows that they can teach literacy skills to students who otherwise may not engage with traditional pieces . Furthermore, when the non-traditional teaching methods found in tabletop role-playing games are utilized by classroom teachers, research has shown that students engage with literacy skills at least as effectively as with traditional learning methods (Glazer, 2015; Hergenrader, 2011; Zalka, 2012). The current study will examine the intersections of these three areas. Many students choose to play TRPGs in their leisure time, and the texts utilized to play TRPGs, like magazines and graphic novels, are not traditionally used to

teach literacy skills. This study will examine how the reading and activities during leisure TRPG gaming influence the leisure reading interests as well as literacy skills of players.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to explore the role that tabletop role-playing games play in developing the reading interests and literacy skills of high school students who play them. Alongside the questions of how TRPGs support the development of literacy skills and reading interests of players, this study will also explore what role(s) educators should play in the gaming culture of students.

#### **Research Design**

Semi-structured interviews were utilized in this qualitative study. Qualitative studies utilize, “a systematic subjective approach” in order to “gain insight, explore the depth, richness, and complexity inherent in the phenomenon” (Lindquist, n.d.). As Luo and Wildemuth (2009) explain, semistructured interviews are a type of interview which, “give the interviewer considerable freedom to adjust the questions as the interview goes on and to probe far beyond a particular respondent’s answers to the predetermined questions” (p. 233). This method worked well for this study because of the multifaceted nature of TRPGs, reading interests, and literacy skills. Because the causes and effects in play here varied considerably from person to person, no rigidly structured interview or survey instrument could reliably gain that information, and unstructured interviews may have lacked a means to relate each interview to a focus on literacy skills. Semistructured interviews fit neatly into this gap.

#### **Participants**

Seven individuals were interviewed. Interviewees were selected using purposive sampling to provide an illustrative sample, described by Wildemuth and Cao (2009) as a

sample that “vividly illustrates particular aspects of the phenomena under study” (p. 130). Given the purpose of this study, interviewees included both teenagers who play TRPGs and adults who played TRPGs as teenagers. Adult TRPG gamers who started after high school graduation, and gamers of any age who do not play TRPGs were not included.

## **Procedures**

### **Data Sources**

Participants were interviewed in one-on-one settings using a list of questions (see Appendix A); interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. Participants were drawn from a local high school’s tabletop gaming club, TRPG players known personally to the researcher, and other TRPG gamers known to the initial interviewees. All interviews took place one-on-one, in person, and were recorded with an audio recorder. Interviewees were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities and responses.

### **Data Analysis**

Audio recorded interviews were transcribed, and transcriptions were coded to find common themes and then analyzed using qualitative content analysis methods “designed to condense raw data into categories or themes based on valid inference and interpretation [allowing] themes and categories [to] emerge from the data through the researcher’s careful examination and constant comparison” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 309). Because of a number of pre-existing categories, including literacy areas (i.e. writing, listening) and book genres (i.e. nonfiction, fantasy), coding was completed primarily by deductive methods. However, other unforeseen categories of information emerged inductively during analysis. The findings of this study provided insight into the roles TRPGs play in the literary lives of their players.

### **Limitations**

All participants in this study were residents of central Iowa. Though participants of all genders were sought, all participants who completed the interview process self-identified as male. Both of these factors limit the ability to generalize more globally from the data. As with all qualitative methods, data gained and analyzed is subject to researcher interpretation and bias. With this particular study, the researcher is a TRPG gamer who began playing as an adult.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Despite a wealth of research regarding the importance of reading, as well as a growing body of research into what makes struggling and reluctant readers more interested in reading, many readers remain disinterested. Because of this, educators need fresh ideas to reach these students. This study explored the role that tabletop role-playing games play in developing the reading interests and literacy skills of high school students who play them.

The population of this study consisted of seven TRPG players from central Iowa, two of whom were high school students and five of whom were adults who had played TRPGs as high school students. All seven participants had played *Dungeons & Dragons*, six participants had played *Pathfinder*, and five participants had played other TRPGs (a total of 17 other games were named). Interviews took place in a one-on-one setting and ranged from 8.5 minutes to 56 minutes; the average interview length was 26 minutes.

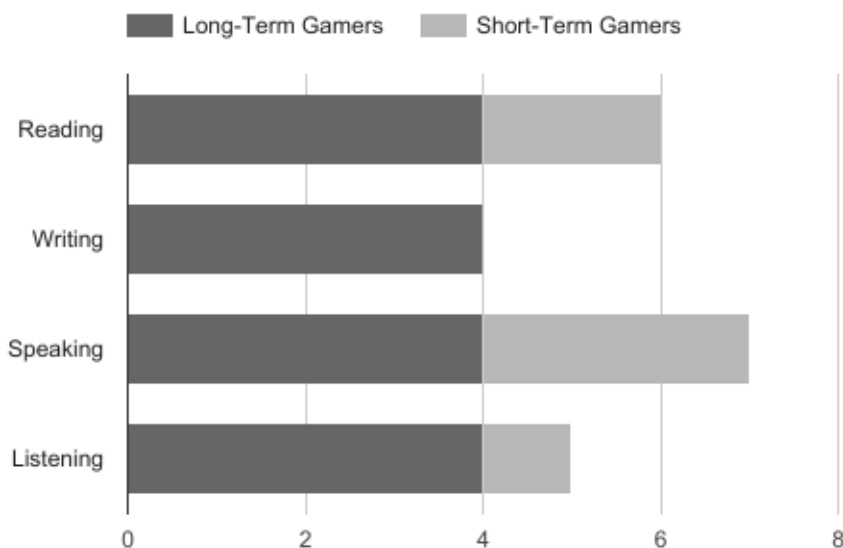
To best understand the findings, it is helpful to divide these participants into two groups based on the length of their experience playing TRPGs. Three participants are classified as short-term TRPG gamers; these participants had played TRPGs for 2 to 3 years, with an average of 2.3 years experience. Four participants are classified as long-term TRPG gamers; these participants had played TRPGs for 9 to 35 years, with an average of 17.5 years experience.

#### **TRPGs' Influence on Literacy Skills**

In interviews, participants elaborated on the ways that they felt their TRPG gaming had influenced the four areas of literacy: reading, writing, listening, and

speaking. Overall, playing TRPGs had a neutral to positive affect on the literacy skills of players, and the longer an individual had been playing TRPGs, the greater breadth and depth of influence the games had on their literacy skills. There was no single common thread between participants' experiences, likely because, as Participant A put it, "People are capable of getting different things out of it [playing Dungeons & Dragons]."

All participants named at least one literacy skill area that had been positively impacted by TRPG gaming. Figure 1 shows the responses of the participants regarding each area.



*Figure 1.* Impact on Individual Literacy Skills

All participants named speaking as a literacy skill positively impacted by TRPG playing. Reading was the next most commonly impacted skill, with six of seven participants stating that gaming had positively impacted their reading skills, followed by listening with five participants and writing with four participants. All of the long-term TRPG gamers saw a positive influence in all four literacy areas, suggesting that more experience with TRPGs means more experience utilizing and growing each of these

skills. Among short-term TRPG gamers, all three participants saw a positive influence on speaking, two on reading, one on listening, and zero on writing.

### **Reading**

The most profound connection between reading and TRPG playing noted in this study came from Participant F who described himself as dyslexic. When he entered high school he had poor reading skills and little interest in improving them; during ninth grade he was introduced to *Dungeons & Dragons* and was hooked on the fun he could have with it. His love of the game motivated him to read the rulebooks, which in turn improved his ability to read. As he said, “That’s what D&D did for me. I was invested. I needed to learn these rules in order to play the game, so I had to sit there with a 60-page book and read it.” However, other participants who described themselves as good readers still noted the positive role that TRPG gaming had played in their reading skill development, including a better ability to use reading strategies like visualization and prediction, use context clues to define unknown words, and distinguish essential and non-essential details in a text. Participants noted that some parts of a rulebook or module read like a sweeping epic while other parts are highly technical. This means that players who put their best effort into making sure they comprehend each part of the text are immediately rewarded with an improved ability to play the game, motivating players to improve their ability to read a variety of styles both quickly and accurately thereby improving both fluency and comprehension.

### **Writing**

Participant A showcases the clearest connections between TRPG gaming and writing. He began playing *Dungeons & Dragons* in high school and later became more

interested in writing, particularly television screenplays. He directly credits his years spent playing TRPGs with his ability to do so. As he puts it:

Playing the game puts you immediately into the perspective of a character that's not you and lets you think a little easier about what motivates people, how they make decisions, and what all they're capable of doing within a role in the story... I'd also definitely recommend [*Dungeons & Dragons*] to writers looking at how to understand characters more and be able to craft an effective story.

While not every TRPG player will turn out to be an author, other participants noted other improved writing skills, including improved ability to elaborate on a thought or description, distinguish between what information requires elaboration and what does not, and understand and anticipate the needs of an audience, including pacing a story effectively. Writing was the literacy skill noted the least by this study's participants, possibly because of how much this can vary from group to group. As Participant C noted, a group where players craft all of their own settings and where players are encouraged to develop elaborate histories of their characters will require more writing skill from players than a group that plays exclusively using pre-written modules and where players need little more than a character name and list of equipment.

### **Speaking**

Speaking was the only literacy skill that all participants felt had been improved by their TRPG playing. During a round of gameplay, players are constantly speaking to communicate with one another to move the story forward, whether it's a game master describing the layout of a room or a player convincing her teammates that she can trick an orc instead of killing him. Participant G noted how all of the talking in-game led to an improved ability to hold one-on-one conversations, saying, "D&D really helped... I can actually socialize with people I don't really know." However, the speaking involved in

TRPGs goes beyond just simple conversation. As Participant B explained, as a player “[when] you’re talking as a character, you’re essentially acting, even if you’re not doing it that well.” Participant E explained how he does similar things when he is the game master for a group, “I like to try and be an NPC character so that you can interact with the other characters in a storytelling mode.” (NPC is an abbreviation for Non-Player Character, a character controlled by the game master who the player characters interact with during the story. This includes characters ranging from shopkeepers and dinner party guests to kings, ghosts, and wild animals). For some participants, these other forms of speaking utilized in TRPGs lead to an improved ability to speak comfortably and engagingly in front of large groups, including theater performances, class presentations, and in occupational contexts.

### **Listening**

Because so much speaking is required to play a TRPG, a large amount of listening is required as well. As Participant C explained, “Listening goes a long ways towards making you a viable party member, really.” He went on to elaborate that if a player is constantly not paying attention when others talk and frequently asks others to repeat things they just said, the game play gets slowed down, and the inattentive player may find him- or herself disinvited from the group. This demonstrates how playing TRPGs encourages the growth of basic listening skills. Additionally, Participant C also explained how playing TRPGs helped to develop more complex listening skills: “Listening to what other people are getting at when they have a viewpoint that’s contradictory or different from your own actually goes a long way [when] you have conflicts in the group.” Because groups don’t always agree on the best course of action



(Take the ferry, or hike the trail? Kill the goblins individually, or poison their feast?) players have to listen to one another to come to a solution that everyone can abide by. Individuals or groups that fail to take on this listening responsibility tend to find the game less fun. . As with reading, a greater effort put into listening in gameplay leads to immediate rewards of a more enjoyable game, which encourages players to develop their basic attentive listening as well as their more advanced listening through conflicts.

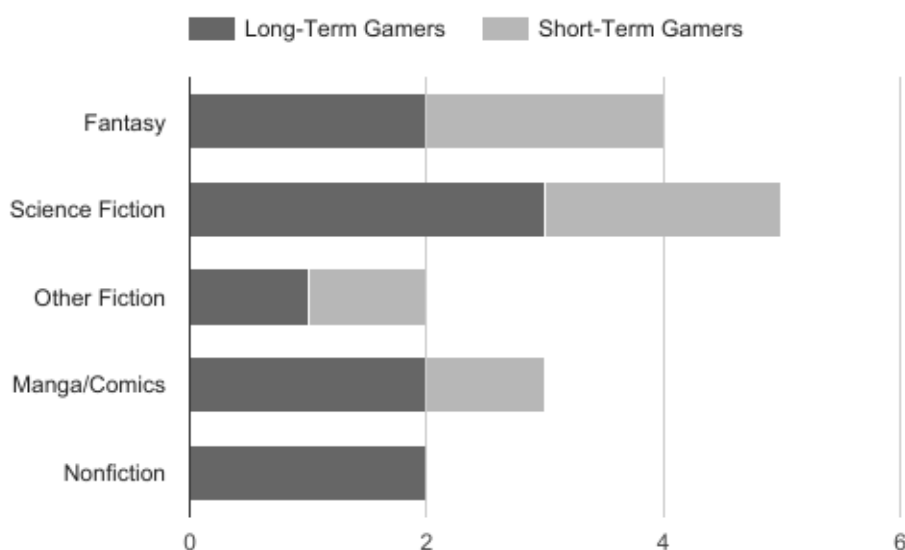
### **TRPG's Influence on Reading Interests**

The connections between TRPG playing and reading interests were extremely varied. Of the participants interviewed, three read for fun as elementary students and four did not. All of the participants in this study were introduced to TRPGs with *Dungeons & Dragons*, and for some of those participants, a pre-existing interest in reading fantasy novels is part of what they found so engaging about the game. Instead of just reading *The Hobbit*, or *Harry Potter*, or *Dragonlance*, they could be their own character in a similar setting. As Participant C explained it, “[*Dungeons & Dragons*] was warriors and rangers and wizards and dragons and quests to save the world and that’s what I enjoyed reading.” In other cases, playing *Dungeons & Dragons* got them interested in reading fantasy novels, which led to a greater interest in reading in general.

For most participants playing TRPGs has led to a greater quantity of reading; as adults, six of the participants read for fun frequently or occasionally, and only one never reads for fun. Participant E explained this, stating, “[Playing TRPGs] just kept me reading at a time when I might’ve started playing video games all the time.” However, it was not always a straightforward case of TRPGs leading directly to more reading. For one participant, playing TRPGs had lead to less leisure reading because it got him more

interested in writing, and for two participants, one who reads frequently, and one who never reads, their TRPG gaming and their reading habits had no connection at all.

Beyond whether or not they read for fun, participants also described what kinds of books they like to read in their leisure time. All participants who read for fun frequently or occasionally named more than one genre of interest. Figure 5 shows the frequency of participants' interests in different genres.



*Figure 2. Reading Interests by Genre*

The most popular genre among participants was science fiction, with five participants stating that they enjoyed reading it. The next most popular genres were fantasy and manga/comics, with four and three participants, respectively, stating that they enjoyed reading them. Other fiction and nonfiction both had two participants who stated that they enjoyed reading them.

As with literacy skills, there was no single common thread between all participants; in terms of genre, nearly all preferred science fiction and/or fantasy, but not every one. Most enjoyed reading outside of science fiction and/or fantasy, but not every

one. Regardless of when or what they read, most participants also noted that elements of books they read in their leisure reading ended up in their game play, including characteristics of their player characters, NPCs, or plot elements. The number of years spent playing TRPGs had little connection to any specific leisure reading habits, either in terms of quantity or genre of reading. These variations may be due to a number of factors including the wide variety of TRPGs available, the variety of reasons people engage with TRPGs when first introduced, the variations in reading interest between gaming groups, or the availability of engaging reading material to individuals.

### Role of Educators in Students' Gaming Culture

A third area of research dealt with the role that educators, such as teachers and librarians, play in developing or supporting teens' interest in TRPGs. Across all participants, schools and educators played very little, if any, role in students' gaming lives. Figure 3 demonstrates the roles that schools played in participants' gaming.

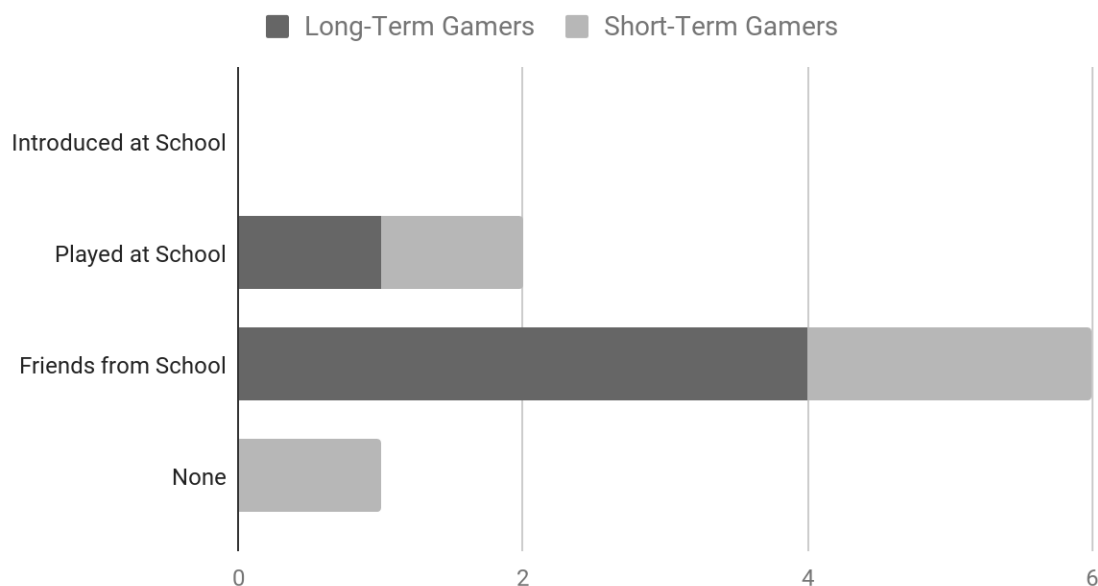


Figure 3. School and TRPG Connections

The most common connection to school was playing with friends from school; six gamers experienced this connection. Two participants played TRPGs at school with friends outside of instructional time; in both instances this involved teachers who allowed students to use their classroom for gaming during non-instructional time. One participant, a short-term gamer, had no connection between TRPGs and school because the friends he played with went to another school.

None of the participants were introduced to TRPGs at school or by adults at their schools; but did not indicate that this was a problem. They were introduced to the games by their friends or by older family members; their gaming sessions took place at friends' houses where they could play without watching how late it was; and they bought the game books from local stores or borrowed from others in the group. On the whole, educators played no role in students' gaming, but that was not an obstacle for players.

### **Other Skills and Connections**

TRPGs are intended to be games, not instructional tools, but beyond literary connections, many players noted a number of other cognitive and personal skills that they felt they gained or improved by playing TRPGs. The ability to think critically in order to strategize and solve problems was most commonly mentioned, a skill that Participant D explained was later useful when he went into the Army. He elaborated, "Even though it was a game, you still had to think and figure out, "Okay, if I have this much stuff here and they have more than I do... I have to figure out a way to either circumvent them... or get more to beat them." Other participants noted that they had to use a lot of critical thinking as game masters to try and prepare for all of the choices that the party might

want to make. Math was another skill many participants noted connections to, including mental math, probability, statistics, and reading tables.

Many participants mentioned TRPG gaming improved their social skills including self-confidence, empathy, flexible thinking, cooperation, and learning from mistakes, which may be why some therapists are utilizing Dungeons & Dragons as a therapy tool (D’Anastasio, 2017; Kibodeaux, 2017). Participant E summed up how these skills are used between players, saying, “You have to be cooperative and you have to sometimes do things your friends don’t want to do.” Participant A also explained how those skills are used in-game by giving a scenario where a character wants something from a king, “It teaches you about, ‘Well what does this king care about? How can I win him over through a persuasive dialogue or what lie do you think he might believe?’” Skills as diverse as creativity, memorization, art appreciation, thinking across gender lines, and connecting to a wider community were also named by some players as ways that playing TRPGs helped them grow, indicating that playing TRPGs has value beyond enjoyment and literacy.

### **Summary**

Overall, playing tabletop role-playing games had a positive influence on players’ literacy skills. For players who had played for more than a few years, those influences were especially strong, including all four literacy areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Long-term gamers were more likely to report that reading was easy, while short-term gamers’ reading skills were more mixed. In general, playing TRPGs also had a positive influence on how much players read in their leisure time, and this was true regardless of how long they had played TRPGs. The leisure reading interests of players

were primarily science fiction and fantasy oriented, but included other genres as well; there were no significant differences in genre preferences between long-term and short-term gamers. Educators and schools had very little, if any, impact on players' TRPG gaming, but this was not seen as an obstacle to becoming or remaining a gamer. Finally, a number of other personal, academic, and social skills were named as other ways that TRPGs had positively influenced the lives of gamers.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

Overall, playing TRPGs had a neutral to positive influence on the literary skills and interests of players. While some participants interviewed noted little connection at all between their literary interests or skills and their TRPG playing, others noted profound direct connections between the two. While few educators have tried to bring TRPGs into the classroom, those who have attempted to do so (Glazer, 2015; Hergenrader, 2011; Zalka 2012) have found TRPGs to be very beneficial in teaching and assessing a variety of literacy skills. This study looked at teenagers' leisure TRPG gaming to explore the roles that TRPG gaming has on teenagers' literacy skills and leisure reading habits.

#### Conclusions

TRPGs are all about stories and storytelling; in short, they are narratives, which are an essential form of discourse, an “innate and indispensable...foundational mode of understanding” (Newkirk, 2014, p. 34). It is unsurprising, then, that playing TRPGs positively influences literacy skills. Many adults hear the word, “game” and assume that it’s a mindless kids’ activity, but in the case of TRPGs, that simply isn’t true. Given the wide variety of potential literacy benefits, educators should welcome tabletop role-playing gaming among students. This may be in ways as large as using TRPGs as teaching tools or as small as showing interest when a student brings up the subject in conversation. Teacher librarians in particular can help by providing access to the necessary reading material. The most recent edition of the *Dungeons & Dragons Player’s Handbook* has an MSRP of \$49.95, and the *Pathfinder Core Rulebook* has an MSRP of \$49.99, which may present a barrier to interested students from low-income families;

access to either book from the library can provide a starting point for an entire group of students.

By accepting, welcoming, and encouraging tabletop role-playing games, educators are not only encouraging cooperation, improved speaking skills, and a higher quantity of leisure reading, they are encouraging all the creativity and innovation that can come from them. In its ranking of the top RPGs of all time, video game magazine *Game Informer* included *Dungeons & Dragons* even though it is a tabletop (rather than digital) RPG, writing, “Dungeons & Dragons’ influence and impact is hard to overstate... Our ranking of RPGs is focused on video games, but it’s impossible to know if any of these games would exist without the root experience that D&D introduced” (Game Informer Staff, 2017, p. 67). While this study is extremely limited, it shows a slice of the myriad of positive effects that playing TRPGs can have. From the participants’ descriptions of building friendships to overcoming dyslexia to writing complete screenplays, there’s no way to predict how playing TRPGs will influence any one teenager’s life, but doing so should be welcomed and encouraged in schools.

### **Recommendations**

This study offers a small window into the potential benefits of playing TRPGs. As this study is purely exploratory in nature and extremely limited in size, definitive determinations are impossible to make, but it does suggest areas for future research. Further research is needed to accurately determine the impact that TRPG gaming has on an individual’s abilities to read, write, speak, and listen effectively. Research on a greater scale would also be able to better illuminate how TRPG gaming affects leisure reading habits and how educators can best encourage TRPG gaming among students. There has



been some research into the effects that leisure TRPG gaming has on players, particularly with regards to empathy (Rivers, Wickramasekera II, Pekala, & Rivers, 2016), but further research is also needed in understanding how TRPG playing impacts other areas of an individual's development.

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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### General:

- What is your age? If you are in school, what grade are you in?
- What gender do you identify as?

#### TRPG History:

- At what age did you first start playing TRPGs? Who introduced you? What game(s) did you play?
- What about TRPGs got you into it? (gameplay, characters, interactions with friends...?)
- How often did you play TRPGs as a k-12 student? Who did you play with? Where did you play?

#### TRPG Current:

- What TRPGs do you play now? If you're not currently playing, why not?
- What are some of your favorites (games, editions, character types, story types...) and why?
- How often do you currently play? Who do you play with? Where do you play?

#### TRPG Overall:

- Other than the mechanics of TRPGs, what things have you learned/gained from playing TRPGs?
- What are non-TRPGers missing out on by not playing TRPGs?
- What kinds of people do/would you recommend TRPGs to?
- What advantages/disadvantages do you see to learning TRPGs at the age you did? Are people who learn as adults missing out on something?

#### Reading History:

- As an elementary school student, did you read for fun? If so, what did you like to read (favorite genres, authors, series...)? If not, why not?
- As a middle/high school student, do/did you read for fun? If so, what did you like to read (favorite genres, authors, series...)? If not, why not?
- Were/are you a good reader through school? Was/is reading hard for you?
- If you were/are good at reading, what do you attribute that to? If reading was/is hard for you, what do you attribute that to?

#### Reading Current:

- Do you read for fun now? If so, what do you like to read (favorite genres, authors...)? If not, why not?
- For adults: What is your occupation? How much and what kind of reading do you do for your work?
- How much time per week do you spend reading for work? For fun?

#### TRPG-Reading Overlap:

- How did/does TRPGing influence you as a reader?
- How did/does reading influence you as a TRPGeR?

#### TRPG-Literacy

- How did/does TRPGing affect your interests/skills in other language arts areas (speaking, listening, writing, performing, critical thinking)?
- To what extent did/does your TRPG interests/skills overlap with school?
- For adults: To what extent does your TRPG interests/skills overlap with your occupation?

## APPENDIX B

## OUT OF CONTEXT QUOTES

In tabletop gaming in general, but *Dungeons & Dragons* in particular, there is a tradition of celebrating lines said in gameplay that make little sense out of context. In homage to that tradition, below are quotes from research interviews, taken out of context.

- “I was vicariously channeling Orlando Bloom throughout there.”
- “Unless reading anime subtitles counts.”
- “The only way out is the toilet.”
- “I could put on a blazer and do that shit myself.”
- “I’m a sucker for warlocks.”
- “That’s a tree gone and a fire started.”
- “You’ve got magic knights who have swords that shoot lightning.”
- “Mostly Ayn Rand. I don’t know what I was thinking.”
- “A whole big thing of Mountain Dew and Twizzlers and Starbursts.”
- “And the guy said, ‘We just wanted the barrel.’”
- “I’m trying to be an elf sorcerer right now, and you’re squabbling about prom.”
- “I knocked an old lady out of a window.”
- “Which is not to compare D&D to heroin.”
- “I was a halfling and I got turned into a quarterling, but that’s fine.”
- “You’re too young, but in the 80’s...”
- “I don’t really know football. That’s the point.”
- “This has gone on too long now, and I’m just kind of rambling.”