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Personality, Fantasy, and Spirituality: Comparing Analog Role-players to Other Populations

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Analog role-playing games (RPGs) require a remarkable amount of spontaneous co-creative play compared to many other types of games, where the vast majority of the game occurs in the playground of the mind. Even in live action role-playing games (larps) that feature a 360 degree illusion (Koljonen 2008) or indexical realism (Pettersson 2018), in which the environment is almost exactly like reality, play itself occurs within each player's imagination, called subjective diegesis (Montola 2003, 2012).

This ability to shift into a different character and project fantasy onto reality has historically been considered suspect. In the nineteenth century, because they enact alternate roles, actors were assumed to be untrustworthy, dangerous, and even criminal (Bates 1988; Bowman 2015). Similar labels are sometimes placed on role-players. Since the advent of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), role-players have been accused of escapist behavior. Such accusations have led to moral panics, e.g., the Satanic Panic (Stark 2012; Laycock 2015), exemplified in the film *Mazes and Monsters* (1982) as well as academic research claiming that RPGs have negative psychological impacts on players (Ascherman 1993). Such concerns are also echoed in larger discourses on the supposedly negative psychological impacts of video games on players (e.g., Anderson et al. 2010, Gentile et al., 2004), and other forms of antisocial behavior (Happ et al. 2013).

Meanwhile, academic studies emphasizing the positive psychological and social benefits of analog role-playing games have become relatively pervasive in recent years (e.g. Daniau 2016). The educational potential of role-playing games in non-formal, formal, and informal applications is also being widely explored (Garcia 2016; Geneuss 2021; Baird 2022; Cullinan & Genova 2023; Westborg 2023). Mental health professionals increasingly are using tabletop role-playing games in therapeutic practice to improve social skills (Abbott et al. 2021; Varrette et al. 2023) and psychological well being (Gutierrez 2017; Atanasio 2020). Three literature reviews on

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the academic discourse have been conducted in recent years with positive findings about the therapeutic value of these games (Arenas et al. 2022; Henrich et al. 2021; Baker et al. 2022) and two books on therapeutic game-mastering were released by academic publishers (Connell 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023). In the wider field of game studies researchers have shown that playing games and identifying as a gamer lead to new friendships in school (Eklund and Roman 2019) and how gaming supports friendship formation (Kowert et al. 2014; Molyneux et al. 2015).

While analog role-playing gamers have been studied along different personality dimensions (e.g. Douse and McManus 1993; Wilson 2007; Carter and Lester 1998; and Lorenz et al. 2022), the results tend to be inconclusive. Also of interest is the degree to which role-players tend to experience mysticism, greater creativity, and/or beliefs in the paranormal. Do certain psychological tendencies exist in people drawn to engage in spontaneous adult pretend play, or pretensive shared imagination (Kapitany et al. 2022) with regard to personality, fantasy, and spiritual experience? Are tendencies toward neuroticism and/or psychoticism correlated with role-playing experience?

Our study addresses these questions by conducting online quantitative surveys of gamers and members of related subcultures in a two-stage process. The first stage involved participants taking surveys on their personality traits with the Big Five Inventory (BFI-20; Gouvia et al., 2021); perspective taking and empathy with the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis 1980); and attachment styles with the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) scale. The second stage measured absorption, fantasy proneness and other characteristics through the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire Short Form (MPS) absorption scale (Patrick et al. 2002) and sensitivity to psychological material either in the unconscious and/or the external environment (Thalbourne and Maltby 2008) with the Revised Transliminality Scale (Lange et al. 2000). Participants were asked to identify their degree of participation in a number of different types of play activities, as well as related subcultural activities.

The study was approved by the The Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2023-04552-02) before data collection. Participants reviewed a consent form before beginning study, and received a password, as well as email reminders to participate in Part II. The survey was sent to several relevant groups on Facebook (convenience sample) and shared in a snowball method, including with groups focused on analog role-playing games. In addition the survey was also shared with students in Game Design and Psychology at Uppsala University, posted on game related forums on Reddit, as well as shared via the DiGRA mailing list.

Our survey gathered data from 332 respondents, of which 214 self-defined as “gamer” and 118 self-identified as “non-gamer”. At the time of writing, we have just started to clean and analyze the large datasets gathered, and the time frame has only allowed us to focus primarily on correlations.

An initial analysis of our data found that live action role-players (larpers) that had been participated in at least one game in the last year, showed higher scores than players who had not larped in the last year in:

- Openness to experience

- Extraversion,
- Neuroticism
- Avoidant attachment style
- Absorption, and
- Transliminality

Furthermore, in looking at respondents who reported that they enjoy playing any type of analog role-playing game vs. those who did not report enjoying any analog role-playing game, we found:

- Higher openness to experience in those who enjoy
- Higher neuroticism in those who enjoy
- Higher absorption in those who enjoy, and
- Higher transliminality in those who enjoy

When we looked at the scores of self-identified “gamers” and “non-gamers” we found significant differences.

Non-gamers showed:

- Higher conscientiousness
- Higher agreeableness
- Higher perspective taking

Gamers showed:

- Higher fantasy-proneness (subscale of absorption).

Connections with Previous Findings

According to Rense Lange, the originator of the transliminality scale, ours is the first study that uses the scale to specifically study gamers. Furthermore, to our knowledge, attachment styles in RPG players has not been the focus of previous studies.

Openness to experience:

Lorenz et al. (2022) reported finding that analog role-players showed higher scores in openness.

Neuroticism:

Lorenz et al. (2022) reported finding that analog role-players showed lower scores in neuroticism. While using the Eysenck Personality Inventory, Douse and Mcmanus (1993) and Carter and Lester (1998) found no difference in neuroticism between role-players and control groups.

Extraversion:

Lawson (2007) found that role-players scored significantly higher for introversion on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Douse and Mcmanus (1993) reported similar findings, but Lorenz et al. (2022) reported a similar significant result for extraversion.

Empathic Concern: Douse and McManus (1993) found that role-players scored significantly lower on empathic concern than non-players. Rivers et al. (2016) found that role-players scored significantly higher on empathic concern.

Absorption: Whereas Rivers et al. (2016) only looked at analog role-players, and did not compare to non-players, they found a significant positive correlation between empathic concern and absorption levels.

Limitations

332 respondents are on the smaller side, and we would have liked to gather more data. Our dataset seems to also be skewed towards analog role-players, which we believe might be a result of the convenience sample. Since our survey consisted of two parts, this also led to some attrition in participant numbers between phase 1 and 2.

Furthermore, we did not ask questions about longevity of play, i.e. “how long have you played,” which we in retrospect believe might have added valuable insights. We believe that we in our future work should further analyze data related to different types of role-players, e.g., MMORPGs, tabletop, larp, CRPGs, etc.

Finally, this study only covers English speaking players and as such is not able to be globally representative of all gamers, role-players, and “non-gamers.” Other important data such as gender, ethnicity, neurodiversity, etc. has not been included here but will be analyzed and reported later. Statistical scores will be reported in later work after final data analysis is complete.

Keywords

Role-playing games, psychology of play, absorption, transliminality, empathy, perspective taking, personality, attachment

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