

RPGs Play a Positive Role in Public Libraries

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General Interest

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What RPGs Are Not

I've been running a roleplaying program at our library for almost three years now, and I have to say it has been a learning experience for everyone involved. I've seen and experienced growth from managing our small but dedicated group of players.

Roleplaying games have been around for decades, and of course the grandfather of them all would be Dungeons and Dragons. When I started thinking on the subject of roleplaying as it pertains to intellectual freedom, my first thought was to write about the lasting stigma that roleplaying games still have today. Dungeons and Dragons is, for some folks, still misconstrued as some kind of occult initiation, and because of that, roleplaying games in general might be perceived the same way. I did all kinds of research. I listened to and read arguments from several perspectives arguing against this idea that roleplaying games have a bad influence or are even downright evil.



Challenges

Then of course there is the issue of gaming in libraries, which may have been our only real challenge here at Decatur (Texas) Public Library. There are libraries that have collections and events for gaming, but for some members of our library board, gaming was off the table, pardon the pun. Without informing the library board, we started our roleplaying program, and when it had generated successful interest and attendance, gaming was no longer the pariah that it had been for so long.

In my time running the library's roleplaying program, I have never had a single challenge from a patron against the legitimacy of the program. There has been only one player in our group who came from a family where Dungeons and Dragons is still considered taboo. Even then, after the experiences he's had and the stories he's shared with us, he has continued to attend and participate. It is a simple case of letting the user make their own judgment about the value of RPGs, and that judgment has been positive. The conclusion I've come to is that it would be redundant for me to continue this argument of why roleplaying games are not negative or evil and are, therefore, undeserving of censorship. Plenty of other folks have done so more effectively and comprehensively than I ever could. Furthermore, roleplaying games are probably more widely accepted now than ever. So rather than redundancy, I would prefer to focus on the positive experiences playing roleplaying games.

Accentuate the Positive

The group I host every second Saturday of the month is ideologically diverse. I've got folks from various political, spiritual, and ideological leanings. Yet once a month, all of these folks come together in one place to pretend to be someone else and overcome peril, defeat enemies, and save the day.

Don't misunderstand me. This is indeed a volatile mixture of individuals. As is common, especially in large groups, players get off the rails with discussions that don't pertain to the adventure on the table. Sometimes this is as trivial as whether Batman or Superman is a better superhero. Sometimes they get onto more touchy topics like politics

and religion. I discourage all of these discussions during our games as they are a huge distraction (if you ever get a chance to be a game master for a table of eight or more, you'll understand right away) and can wait until the session has ended. Nonetheless, I have seen some heated disagreements.

Yet in spite of it all, the group members remain courteous to each other. No matter what their personal differences may be, they are all united in their efforts to overcome the trials and challenges of the adventure. That said, they don't always agree on the best way to do that either. However, these are excellent times for players to exercise group problem solving and sort out disagreements in a safe environment.

I've seen players in my group grow throughout the years, and truth be told I have grown with them. In my experience with roleplaying, I have made friends that I would not have made otherwise and experienced a lot of interesting interactions with a variety of players. Sometimes my players drive me a little crazy, but I'm always impressed when everybody comes back for more every month, not the least bit discouraged by their differences.

So while I've never received a challenge about having roleplaying games at the library, I know what I would do and what I would recommend to anyone else faced with such a challenge: Before arguing to convince someone what roleplaying games are not, emphasize what is true, good and positive about roleplaying games foremost. Let the positive speak for itself!



Chris Shenkir has worked at the Decatur Public Library for more than 10 years, performing a wide variety of tasks ranging from customer service to hosting events like the library's monthly table top roleplaying program. He received his bachelor's degree in English Literature from the University of North Texas. A lover of storytelling in all its forms, he aspires to write professionally (or at least semi-professionally) someday. You can reach him cshenkir@decatortx.org.