

## ALIENATION AND THE GAME DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS<sup>1</sup>

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*Summary.*—The media has speculated about negative effects of the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons on players of the game. This study examined differences in feelings of alienation between 35 active players and 35 nonplayers. Fewer players expressed feelings of meaninglessness and more players expressed feelings of cultural estrangement than nonplayers. Other feelings of alienation between players and nonplayers were not different. Also, more committed players—those who spent more money on the game and played the game more frequently—expressed greater feelings of alienation.

Dungeons and Dragons (D & D) is an extremely popular role-playing game in which players adopt an alter ego within a medieval setting. The roll of dice sets levels of strength, intelligence, wisdom, dexterity, constitution, and charisma of the chosen alter ego. The alter ego is further classified into a particular race and class (i.e., druid, fighter, magic user, assassin, or thief). After these classifications are decided, the alter ego is given an alignment which establishes the value the alter ego places on human life and how it views the world. Players increase their experience, wealth, power, and status as they achieve certain levels of playing (levels range from 1 to 26). Once a player has reached the highest level of playing, the player then qualifies to become a Dungeon Master whose responsibilities include refereeing the game and creating adventure campaigns for the players (Gygax, 1978).

Both the media and some groups of lay people have speculated about possible harmful effects of Dungeons and Dragons on players. For instance, teen suicides and homicides have been attributed to playing (Adler & Doherty, 1985; Walker, 1988). The popular national television show, *60 Minutes*, raised the question of harmful effects of the game at length in 1985. In addition, it has been charged by the media that the game causes its players to become detached and alienated from family, friends, and society in general (Walker, 1988). However, there is very little evidence to support or refute such claims. Simón (1987) investigated the relationship between the number of years people had played the game and emotional stability (using Factor C of the 16 PF). He did not find a significant correlation between numbers of years people had played the game and emotional stability or any other significant correlations between the number of years people had played the game and other factors on the 16 PF.

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The present study sought to investigate further the potential negative effects of Dungeons and Dragons on players. Specifically, this study examined differences in alienation of players and nonplayers. Alienation is the feeling of being separated from one's environment or social world and is a motivation for innovative responses in social life (Nash, 1985). If the media speculations are valid, one could predict that the players would report greater feelings of alienation than nonplayers. Commitment or intensity of playing the game was also assessed. Based on media speculations, it was hypothesized that players who were more committed to the game or played the game with more intensity (e.g., spent more money on the game, played the game more frequently, etc.) would report more feelings of alienation.

#### METHOD

##### *Subjects*

Subjects were 70 fully informed college students who volunteered for the project. Thirty-five subjects (25 men and 10 women) were students in General Psychology who reported they had never played Dungeons and Dragons and were motivated to participate in the study by receiving additional credit for their course. The mean age of these students was 20.3 yr. ( $SD = 5.8$ ). The remaining 35 subjects (30 men and 5 women) were active players recruited from a campus role-playing club. The mean age of this group of subjects was 21.2 yr. ( $SD = 5.0$ ).

##### *Procedure*

Subjects completed the questionnaire in groups. Background information requested on the questionnaire included sex of the subject, age of the subject, and information indicating commitment to Dungeons and Dragons (i.e., frequency of playing the game, number of years playing the game, number of hours playing the game in one setting, length of time playing a particular character, level achieved in playing, and amount of money spent on game materials). The questionnaire contained the Anomia Scale (Srole, 1956) to measure general alienation. This scale had five statements and five filler statements. The questionnaire also contained the Alienation Scale (Middleton, 1963) which measured six types of alienation (powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, cultural estrangement, social estrangement, and estrangement from work). There were six statements and 10 filler statements on which subjects indicated agreement or disagreement. The potential range of scores for the Anomia Scale was whole numbers from zero to five, and the potential score for each of the six types of alienation on the Alienation Scale was zero or one. Subjects also completed Rotter's Internal-External Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Several chi-squared analyses examined differences in alienation between subjects who had never played Dungeons and Dragons and those subjects who had. A reliable difference in feelings of meaninglessness ( $\chi^2 = 5.37$ ,  $p < .05$ ) was observed. Contrary to the hypothesized differences in alienation, fewer subjects who had played the game (17%,  $n = 6$ ) reported feelings of meaninglessness than those who had never played (46%,  $n = 16$ ). Meaninglessness, in the present context, was an indication of the lack of a sense of purpose (Robertson, 1977). It is possible that this finding reflects the way subjects were selected for this study. Players of Dungeons and Dragons were members of a campus role-playing club. Belonging to a group of people with similar interests could increase one's sense of purpose. In support of predicted differences in alienation, was a reliable difference in cultural estrangement ( $\chi^2 = 3.98$ ,  $p < .05$ ). More subjects who had played the game (49%,  $n = 17$ ) expressed feelings of cultural estrangement than those who had never played (23%,  $n = 8$ ). In the present study, cultural estrangement was narrowly focused on interest in media forms such as television programs, movies, and magazines. Fewer players expressed interest in the media than non-players. Players might have less interest in the media because they spent time playing the game. This would leave less time available for media interests. No reliable differences were found on general alienation, powerlessness, normlessness, social estrangement, and estrangement from work. An analysis of variance examined differences in locus of control between subjects who had never played Dungeons and Dragons and those who had. No reliable differences were found. Over-all, these results offer minimal support for an hypothesis that more players would report feelings of alienation than non-players. These results, along with those of Simón (1987), suggest that media speculations on the harmful effects of the game still lack empirical support.

Spearman rank-order correlations examined relationships between measures of commitment to Dungeons and Dragons (for those subjects who had played the game) and measures of alienation. The means and standard deviations underlying the significant correlations are shown in Table 1. The amount of money spent on game materials was positively correlated with feelings of general alienation ( $r = .47$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and with feelings of meaninglessness ( $r = .61$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Frequency of playing the game was also positively correlated with feelings of meaninglessness ( $r = .42$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In addition, level achieved in playing was positively correlated with feelings of meaninglessness ( $r = .45$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These findings generally support the hypothesis that players who are committed to the game or play the game with more intensity report more feelings of alienation. It is recommended that research on this, as well as other games and leisure activities, continue to examine commitment or intensity of play. Research can explore whether intense play-

ing of Dungeons and Dragons causes players to become alienated or whether intense players were alienated prior to playing and chose to play the game in hopes that it would provide them with a sense of purpose. Perhaps the feelings expressed by the committed players in this study are no different than feelings of other individuals who are intensely committed to other recreational activities. This idea should be explored.

TABLE 1  
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF ALIENATION MEASURES AND  
COMMITMENT TO PLAY DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Alienation Measures		
General Alienation <sup>a</sup>	1.66	1.35
Meaninglessness <sup>b</sup>	0.17	0.38
Commitment Measures		
Money Spent On Game <sup>c</sup>	5.33	2.89
Frequency of Play <sup>d</sup>	2.13	1.02
Level of Play Achieved <sup>e</sup>	14.06	7.93

<sup>a</sup>Potential range is 0 to 5.

<sup>b</sup>Potential range is 0 to 1.

<sup>c</sup>Indicates dollars spent each week.

<sup>d</sup>Indicates number of times per week.

<sup>e</sup>Potential range is 1 to 26.

In summary, the present study yields few differences between players of Dungeons and Dragons and nonplayers. This suggests that negative effects of playing the game are still unknown and perhaps nonexistent. Also, players who were more committed to playing the game expressed greater feelings of alienation. Research should examine whether the feelings of alienation of committed players are similar to those of other individuals who are committed to other leisure activities.

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