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The Personality of Fantasy Game Players

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Players of a fantasy Play-By-Mail game were compared with matched controls on personality measures of decision-making style, sex-role, extraversion, neuroticism, empathy, leisure interests and personality type. Most players were male. On the Bem Sex-Role Inventory the players were less feminine and less androgynous than controls. They were more introverted, showed lower scores on the scale of empathic concern, and were more likely to describe themselves as “scientific”, and to include “playing with computers” and “reading” amongst their leisure interests than controls.

Fantasy-Role Playing Games (FRPGs) have become increasingly popular over the past 20 years, following the creation in 1974 of the game *Dungeons and Dragons* (Butterfield, Parker & Honigmann, [1982](#); Gygax, [1979](#)). Games are characterized by a set of fantastic individuals, often derived from quasi-medieval myths, whose personalities are adopted by the players. The gods, demons and other superhuman beings compete for power, influence and resources. Players control one or more characters which interact with other players' characters, precise rules deciding the outcome of interactions. The advent of home computers in the early 1980s extended these games with the appearance of Play-By-Mail-games (PBMs) in which the players send orders to a games controller with a home computer, who implements the orders simultaneously and returns the resultant positions to players, who resubmit further orders a week or two later. Games are often run on a commercial basis, with players paying to take part and the games controller taking a portion of the entrance fees. Fantasy games often use computers extensively, and it is therefore not surprising that players tend to be male since “computer addiction” (Shotton, [1989](#)) is primarily a male preserve (Hudson & Jacot, [1991](#)).

FRPGs can be very time-consuming, taking several or more hours per week. Who therefore chooses to play such games, and do they have particular personality types? Fantasies derived from television violence (Heath, Bresolin & Rinaldi, [1990](#); Hoberman, [1990](#)) and pornography (Bourget, Gagnon & Bradford, [1988](#); Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, [1970](#); Donnerstein, Linz & Penrod, [1989](#); Gubar & Hoff, [1990](#); Kutichinsky, [1991](#); Surgeon-General's Workshop Report, [1986](#)) have been subjected to psychological research, particularly because of their possible relationship to violence in general, and to sexual crimes such as rape, in particular. More recently evidence has been presented that fantasy elements in video games, particularly aggressive components, can become incorporated into the subsequent play of children (Schutte, Malouff, Post-Gorden & Rodasta, [1988](#)). Excessive fantasy has also raised concern because of links between quasi-mythical, quasi-theological components and concepts such as satanism (Bourget *et al.*, [1988](#)). Despite being played for many years, FRPGs have been studied very little; the sole exception in the literature is a study which assessed feelings of alienation in games players (DeRenard & Kline, [1990](#)).

Method

In this study we compared the personality of players of a PBM FRPG, *Serim Ral*, with controls matched for age, sex and educational level.

Subjects

A total of 52 players were contacted via the game's controller, who distributed questionnaires to participants. Thirty-eight players (73 per cent) responded, 35 male (92 per cent) and three female (8 per cent), with average age 21.5 years (SD 4.5; range 14-34). The small number of female players precluded any worthwhile analysis of sex differences. Five players had education to O-level, 16 to A-level, and 17 were at university or intended to go to university. Matched control subjects were chosen from school students, university students and hospital patients. As well as playing this PBM FRPG, 32 players also played other FRPGs, whereas none of the controls did so; 27 players regularly played computer games, compared with 12 controls. Players devoted 11.4 hours a week to games playing (SD 6.2 hours), compared with 2.5 hours for controls.

Procedure and materials

Subjects completed four standardized personality questionnaires described below and two unpublished self-typing measures (perceived personality type and preferred activities).

Bem Sex-Role Inventory. Since players typically are male we assessed whether self-perceptions of male and female sex-roles differed from controls, using the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) (Bem, [1974](#)).

Decision-Making Questionnaire. Games typically require players to make and enjoy making an extended series of complex decisions. Differences in preferred ways of processing information were assessed using the Royal Holloway and Bedford Decision-Making Questionnaire (DMQ: French, West, Elander & Wilding, [1992](#); West, [1988](#); West, Elander & French, [1992](#)), in which decision-making style is scored on seven different scales, entitled thoroughness, control, hesitancy, social resistance, perfectionism, idealism and instinctiveness.

Empathy Questionnaire. Games require players to empathize with the needs of certain personality characters, and to take into account the effects upon other players of their actions. Differences in empathy were assessed with the empathy questionnaire of Davis ([1980](#), [1983](#)) which is scored on four orthogonal dimensions.

Eysenck Personality Inventory (Eysenck & Eysenck, [1964](#)). Extraversion, neuroticism and social acquiescence (the lie scale) were assessed using an abbreviated version of the Eysenck Personality Inventory with 29 questions.

Results

BSRI

Players and controls did not differ significantly on the measure of masculinity, but players were significantly less feminine and less androgynous than controls (Table 1).

Table 1. Mean scores of the subjects and controls on the Bem Sex-Role Inventory and on measures of empathy (SDs in parentheses)

Measure	Players	Control	Significance
<i>Bem Sex-Role Inventory</i>			
Masculinity	4.724 (.778)	4.559 (.870)	$t(74) = .87$ n.s.
Femininity	4.096 (.595)	4.546 (.700)	$t(74) = -3.02$ $p = .003$
Androgyny	-0.628 (1.004)	-0.132 (1.202)	$t(74) = -2.42$ $p = .018$
<i>Empathy scales</i>			
Fantasy	20.3 (4.08)	18.8 (3.83)	$t(74) = 1.65$ n.s.
Perspective-taking	17.9 (3.21)	18.2 (3.34)	$t(74) = -.35$ n.s.
Empathic concern	18.9 (3.91)	21.2 (3.11)	$t(74) = -2.79$ $p = .007$
Personal distress	14.4 (3.55)	15.2 (2.96)	$t(74) = -1.05$ n.s.

DMQ

Players did not differ significantly from controls on any of the measures.

Empathy

Although players and controls did not differ significantly on fantasy, perspective-taking or personal distress, the players showed significantly lower scores than controls on the measure of empathic concern (see [Table 1](#)), which assesses “‘other-oriented’ feelings of sympathy and concern for unfortunate others.” (Davis, [1983](#)).

Extraversion, neuroticism and social acquiescence

Games players might be more introverted than controls because of the inward-looking nature of the games themselves, which are essentially solitary activities. Players and controls did not differ on neuroticism or social acquiescence, but players were significantly more introverted than controls ($t(74) = 2.03, p = .46$).

Perceived personality type

Subjects chose which of six personality vignettes best described them and least well described them. Players were more likely to describe themselves as “scientific” ($t(74) = 2.63, p = .010$), but there were no differences from controls in their use of the other five types (“studious”, “sporty”, “cultured”, “party-goer” and “political”).

Preferred activities

Players ranked nine different activities in order of preference. Players rated “playing with

computers” ($t(74) = 4.43, p < .001$) and “reading” ($t(74) = 4.36, p < .001$) as significantly more preferred; “going to cinema, theatre or concerts” ($t(74) = 2.50, p = .015$) and “going to parties” ($t(74) = 2.12, p = .037$) as significantly less preferred; and there was no difference between subjects and controls on “talking with your friends”, “meeting new people”, “making things, e.g. clothes, objects, mending machines”, “playing a musical instrument” and “watching TV and videos”.

Discussion

Players of FRPGs show clear personality differences from controls, although the differences are not as extreme as some stereotypical descriptions might have suggested. Players tend to be male, of high educational level, and sharing common interests in FRPGs and PBMs and in computer games in general. Time spent on the games is often considerable, particularly when allied with pastimes such as reading, which anecdotal reports suggest is often science fiction or science fantasy (which itself inspired the creators of the games (Gygax, [1979](#))).

FRPG players are significantly more introverted, less feminine, less androgynous, and showed less empathic concern than controls, a pattern similar to that of the shy, introverted intellectual who is drawn to the computer (Shotton, [1989](#)). It is noteworthy that high scores on empathic concern are reported as “prone to anxiety and shyness” (Davis, [1983](#)). The fact that most players are male (a finding reported in other studies (Braun, Goupil, Giroux & Chagnon, [1986](#); Griffiths, [1991](#); Kiesler & Sproull, [1985](#))) and have lessened empathic concern agrees with Hudson’s description of males forming emotional relations with objects and also treating persons as objects (Hudson & Jacot, [1991](#)).

Our data suggest that players of FRPGs and PBMs differ in personality from controls, although the differences are relatively small. To some extent individuals who are interested in any hobby or interest will differ from the population average, and these differences probably fit within that perspective.

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