

Prisoner of the Parasitic Rectangles:
Making Analog Gaming Relevant to Digital Natives

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Since the days of my youth, I have fought many an ogre and slain many a dragon. I, like many of my old travelling companions, hope to share my tales with the young people in my life, and inspire in them aspirations of the same sort of heroism and intrigue. However, there is a more fearsome sort of demon than any I have ever faced, that threatens to put an end to our legacy. They grow stronger and more numerous every day. You probably carry one in your pocket at this very moment, foolishly thinking that you have it under your control. They may appear in slightly varying forms, but they share the same sinister purpose. My party has come to call them the Parasitic Rectangles. You may know them by their preferred moniker: the Smartphones.

If we do not change our strategy, a day may come in the near future where our sort of adventures come to a sad end. In order to preserve our noble ways of old, we must adapt, ally ourselves with these so-called Smartphones, and allow them to act as proxies in our communications with our children who have become so enraptured by their alluring glow. We have so many more stories to tell, and so do our sons and daughters! It is imperative that we, as fathers and fantasy gamers, incorporate social media into analog gaming experiences with our children in order to provide them with the unique educational benefits of the platform and to bridge the technological generation gap between gamers.

Fantasy role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, despite occasional cries to the contrary, have been attributed to social, emotional, and academic growth in adolescents. YouTube video-blogger aFistfulOfDice (2013), who has personally benefitted greatly from playing *Dungeons & Dragons* with his family, makes a few notable observations as to how the

game works and the ways in which it functions as an effective teaching tool. He explains that the stories told in-game are told by way of simple addition and subtraction using dice and numerically-valued character traits such as intelligence and charisma. A firm grasp of basic math skills can be cultivated in this way, making the learning process fun and relevant to children who would otherwise be disinterested in the subject. A combination of this number-based system and the human element of the Dungeon Master (the moderator who controls the setting and all non-player characters) results in structured play with limitless possibilities and outcomes. There are opportunities for learning other important life skills such as critical thinking, creative problem-solving, working in teams, and understanding and anticipating the emotions of others. Mike Rugnetta of *PBS Idea Channel* (2012) indicates that because of the opportunity to practice creative problem solving, communication, and cooperation within the game's setting, role-playing has the added benefit of building a person's everyday confidence. This is in stark contrast to allegations of players' propensities towards social withdrawal, suicidality, and violence (Lancaster, 1994).

We know for ourselves of the benefits that gaming has had in our own lives, which is why many of us feel inspired to share our love of fantasy role-playing with our children. It is easy for us to intuitively know the value of doing so, but there is also much scholarly evidence to indicate the lasting benefit of a father's involvement in the leisure activities of their children. According to Buswell, Zabriskie, Lundberg and Hawkins (2012), father involvement in family leisure activities creates a strong sense of connectedness for both father and child and enriches the social and emotional wellbeing of both. This bond has lasting effects into a child's adulthood, resulting in better family stability and better workplace ethics.

If only we could turn our children's attention to the ultimate form of educational entertainment encapsulated in fantasy role-play, our lives and theirs would be indelibly enriched well into their adult years. Remember those parasitic rectangles, though? They've made themselves such an inextricable part of daily life that unsullied face to face interaction with other human beings is quickly becoming a thing of legend. This is where my proposed strategy comes in to play: This is not a foe you can defeat in the usual manner. You must play according to its rules. You must allow it to believe that it has won. You may be asking, how and why must I do this? Simply put, our children communicate differently than we did in our youth. A telephone was once a privilege, and not a staple accessory. Our books used to be made of paper, instead of light. According to the *Halifax Insurance Digital Home Index* conducted by Lloyds Banking Group (2014), nine in ten children between the ages of twelve and fourteen own a mobile phone, and over a third of children aged seven to seventeen years old use technology to communicate with others within the same house. Our parents used to tell us to not shout to each other from different corners of the house if we needed something. A solution to that dilemma has come in the form of hardly speaking at all.

You may have learned through your adventures the importance of creative methods of communication and the value of gaining new languages. This is one of those times. Consider this: A private family Facebook group to house your character sheets. In-character Twitter accounts to keep the fun going here and there throughout the week in between game time. Use a Minecraft map as your playing field instead of miniatures. These are the languages you should learn if you want to keep playing. Further efforts to engage your family in fantasy gaming could be made according to your children's age, level of technological aptitude, schedule, and personal interests. You may wish to encourage your older and more technically savvy children to create

and administer your campaign's internet presence. Allow them to invite a friend to play. Run your game entirely online via Roll20.net for the most enthralled technology user or for children away at college.

I believe that the legacy of analog gaming does not have to end with us. I know that our children will press forward as mirrors of the hale crusaders that we were in our day. As we struggle to keep up with newer and more advanced editions of the rules of our mundane lives, there is great comfort in knowing that there's a brave warrior inside of each of us. It's up to us as fathers to be the heroes that inspire our children to embark on their own adventures, and show them that they have the resources and inner strength to endure all that comes their way.

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