



BY SYLVAN PEREZ

*“Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing.”*

— Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*

As children, we are natural players. We forge a sense of meaning and order from the bewildering world we’re thrust into by pretending. A stick becomes a sword. A blanket becomes a cape. The floor is lava, and the hallway is a haunted forest. These aren’t just fictions—they become facts, shared by consensus, perhaps the most human of decision-making methods.

Play is not frivolous. It’s how we process, test, and create a sense of self in relation to a chaotic, overwhelming, and often frightening world. It’s how we learn courage, negotiation, pattern recognition—and perhaps most crucially, consequence. Not the punitive consequences dictated by doctrine, but natural ones—play-tested in low-stakes, supportive environments. Play teaches us how to believe, how to fail, how to recover. In many ways, the state of being in play is one of the purest modes a modern human can enter.

Johan Huizinga argued in *Homo Ludens* that play is more than a cultural artifact—it is a foundation beneath culture itself. He writes, “In play, there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action.” If play predates culture, then it must reside at the very root of who we are. It is a primal, creative act that underlies both ritual and art, war and peace. And for all its seeming lightness, it is profoundly serious business. Huizinga gives weight to the notion that it is not merely thinking “*sapiens*” that defines our humanity, but the act of play—“*Homo Ludens*”.

And yet, somewhere along the path to adulthood, we are asked—subtly or bluntly—to give up that freedom. We are taught to prioritize control, productivity, linear thinking, and conformity. Imagination, once a tool for survival, gets shunted off as a “childish thing,” alongside its companion, curiosity. Play becomes suspect. Frivolous. Dangerous, even. We trade it for performance, for utility, for the right to be taken seriously. But the longing doesn’t go away.

Adults, long inoculated against creative play by an education system that promotes rote learning and intellectual conformity, seek its echo in risk—gambling, anonymous sex, addictive consumption, the vicarious thrill of watching other people compete. These behaviors mimic play, but lack its essence: collaborative meaning-making. They are, at best, hollow echoes. Like fast food, they offer a form of satisfaction while starving the deeper appetite.

Enter roleplaying games (RPG): a vessel into which adults (and children, and entire communities) pour that exiled part of themselves. RPGs allow us to access our original mode of meaning-making—not by regressing, but by evolving play into something structured, cooperative, and transcendent.

In a roleplaying game, the stakes are not money or accolades, but story, choice, change. The imagination isn't infantilized—it is re-sanctified. The table becomes a place where we can take off the armor of adulthood—not to retreat from the world, but to re-approach it with clarity and intention. Instead we arm and armor ourselves with something more fundamental to human nature. Our own limitless possibility.

Through roleplaying, we can confront danger again—this time with allies. We can explore power safely. We can delve into frontiers in a world which claims to be bereft of them. We can shape narrative rather than merely endure it. The dragons on the map are metaphors for the ones we face in real life: addiction, shame, fear, failure, injustice. And when we defeat them—or even just face them—we grow. We re-integrate. We remember something we didn't know we'd forgotten.

Roleplaying is not just a personal pursuit—it is a cultural practice quietly re-teaching us how to be together. At its heart, the RPG table is a kind of social hearth, a place where people gather not to consume but to co-create. Where story becomes shared labor, and identity becomes collaborative clay. Unlike passive entertainment, RPGs demand we engage fully—with imagination, empathy, and flexibility. We listen, adapt, and improvise. We are asked, again and again, to consider the other, to hold multiple perspectives, to experiment with who we are and who we might be.



This is one of the quiet, radical gifts of roleplay: it teaches us to hold two seemingly contradictory truths in the same hand. That the world is brutal, and still full of wonder. That we can be brave and afraid. That we are not our failures, and yet those failures shape us. Good players become adept at juggling nuance, not because they were taught to in school or in society—but because the game demanded it. You can't defeat the dragon without a team that believes in both the fiction and the friendship. There is nothing more satisfying than snatching victory from the jaws of defeat but doing it together with others is transcendent.

Before I ever rolled a die or cracked open a Player's Handbook, I learned something essential just by watching animals at play. A dog's relentless pursuit of a thrown ball or stick. Two cats mock-fighting with all the seriousness of a Greek tragedy. Crows sliding down snowy roofs, over and over again, for the sheer delight of it.

None of them were doing it for reward. Or approval. Or survival. They were doing it because something in them—something instinctive, sacred—knew that play is life in rehearsal. It is joy without justification. And it is, somehow, a rehearsal for being more fully alive.

Losing the stigma of play—letting it back into my adult life, not as nostalgia but as practice—has changed me. It's made me a better communicator. A better collaborator. A better friend. Because when I'm at the table, telling stories with others, I don't need to pretend. I don't need the mask. I can be the weird, curious, deeply feeling person I've always been.

And once you've been that person for four hours around a table, why not be them at brunch? Or in a staff meeting? Or holding someone's hand when they're falling apart?

That's the hidden treasure of roleplaying. We go into these imagined worlds to try on heroism, to test our convictions, to explore identity and consequence—and sometimes we bring a little of that back. A bit more bravery. A bit more wonder. A bit more fluency in our own contradictions.

Because being human is contradictory. And those of us who can hold paradox without breaking—who can laugh and lead, fall and rise, play and be present—might just be better equipped to meet the absurd, beautiful, fragile world we live in.

And if you're someone who's never played, or who always thought it was someone else's thing—some adolescent pastime for nerds in basements—I want to tell you: It's not too late.

You've been playing your whole life. You just maybe forgot. You played when you made up songs in the backseat. You played when you talked to your pets in voices. You played when you pretended not to be scared, or made a stranger laugh, or whispered your dreams into the dark. You played when you built pillow forts, turned dinner napkins into pirate hats, made finger puppets from paper scraps, or imagined your bike was a spaceship. You played when you danced alone in your room, or gave your houseplants names, or composed silent stories about the people passing you on the street.

Roleplaying is just a formal way to keep doing what you've always done: imagining yourself into being. And whether you pick up dice or not, that's sacred work. So if someone invites you to the table, consider saying yes. Or better yet—set one yourself. You don't need to know the rules.

You just need to be willing to play.



