

SLAYING DRAGONS: THE THERAPEUTIC VALUE OF TABLETOP GAMING

by

KIMBERLY BROWN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Counselling (MC)

City University of Seattle

Vancouver BC, Canada site

May 01, 2018

APPROVED BY

Christine Dennstedt, M.A., R.C.C., Thesis Supervisor, Counsellor Education Faculty

Deborah Mater, Ph.D., R.C.C., Faculty Reader, Counsellor Education Faculty

Division of Arts and Sciences

### **ABSTRACT**

Tabletop role-playing games is a dynamic hobby in which players take on the mantle of a character they have created and collaborate with a game master to create adventure. The game itself offers a multitude of personal and social benefits to all players involved, which may enrich their lives long after they have left the table. It provides socialization and recreational enjoyment, improves role negotiation and impression management, allows players to experience elements that are beyond their reality, creates a safe space to test new elements of identity, promotes creative problem solving and builds critical thinking. Gaming is an environment where these skills can be tested and explored with minimal risk. I argue in this thesis that it can and should be used in a therapeutic setting.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This project would not have been possible without the support of many people. Many thanks to my advisor, Christine Dennstedt, who was patient and supportive in this process. Also thanks to Deborah Mater who was the second reader, who provided insightful feedback. Thanks to City University of Canada for providing me with three of the best years in my life. And finally, thanks to my family, my friends, and the women of Cohort ID10 who always offered love and support.

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to Zora Kulenov, the ever noble paladin and loyal leader of the party with incredible fashion sense, to Liefannilan Galanodel, the quick-footed ranger with deadly aim, and all the other members of the Heroes for Hire Guild. I cherish every moment we have created these stories together. Our friendship is what inspired this work. This work is also dedicated to my mother who has always been my hero, who has always loved me unconditionally and been a constant support in this journey.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

PREFACE.....	iv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	3
1.1 Dungeons & Dragons: A History.....	10
1.2 Who Plays Dungeons & Dragons?.....	13
1.3 The Makings of a Hero.....	14
1.4 The Creator of Worlds.....	16
CHAPTER 2: BUILDING CHARACTER.....	18
CHAPTER 3: CREATING A COMMUNITY.....	29
3.1 Satan's Game.....	31
3.2 Nerd Culture: It's Hip to be Square.....	31
3.3 Bringing People Together.....	34
3.4 Tribe Mentality.....	38
3.5 Weathering the Storm: Conflict Resolution.....	42
3.6 Escaping Reality: D&D in the Prison System.....	45
CHAPTER 4: THERAPEUTIC APPLICATION.....	49
4.1 Express Yourself: History and Theory of Expressive Therapies.....	50
4.2 All the World's a Stage: Drama Therapy.....	53
4.3 Come out and Play: Adlerian Play Therapy.....	58
4.4 Dungeons & Dragons as a Counselling Intervention.....	61
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....	67
5.1 Limitations.....	71
5.2 Future Research.....	73

Running head: SLAYING DRAGONS 2

REFERENCES.....76

APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....83

APPENDIX B: EXAMPLE OF A CHARACTER SHEET.....89

### Chapter 1: Introduction

*“He held up a book then. “I’m going to read it to you for relax.”*

*“Does it have any sports in it?”*

*“Fencing. Fighting. Torture. Poison. True Love. Hate. Revenge. Giants. Hunters. Bad men. Good men. Beautifullest Ladies. Snakes. Spiders... Pain. Death. Brave men. Cowardly men. Strongest men. Chases. Escapes. Lies. Truths. Passion. Miracles.”*

*“Sounds okay,” I said and I kind of closed my eyes.”*

*— William Goldman, The Princess Bride*

Everyone has wanted to be the hero of a story. Whether we have fantasized of being Superman flying over Metropolis fighting crime and evil villains that threaten the safety of the citizens, of being Harry Potter, the Boy who Lived, on his way to Hogwarts to study magic, or of being Katniss Everdeen, the champion of District 12 and the leader of the rebellion against the Capitol, we have all wanted to immerse ourselves in the worlds of fantasy. As children, many of us will tie blankets and towels around our necks and run around neighbourhoods and living rooms to mimic superhero flight, picking up sticks as swords or wands to do battle with dragons, many of us allowed our imaginations to run wild. But, somewhere along the way this sense of wonder, this craving to play in the realm of fantasy is lost. Instead of being the hero in the stories, we find ourselves in the role of the passive observer consuming the narratives played out before us upon the screen, or taking on the role of a character already developed within the pages of a book. We are either asked to experience the stories that are told to us, or to accept the role of someone else – but what if there was a way to be able to see through the eyes of a character that we have created and experience a story entirely of our making?

A role-playing game (RPG) is a game in which players assume the roles of characters in a fictional setting. These characters band together and embark upon imaginary adventures with the guidance of a storyteller. Together they solve dilemmas, engage in battles, and gather treasures and knowledge. Players take responsibility for acting out these roles within a narrative, through a process of structured decision-making or character development. Actions within the game succeed or fail in accordance to a formal system of rules and guidelines. Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPG) are a form

of RPG in which participants describe their actions only through speech, not unlike a radio drama. Similarly to the narrator of those dramas, a TTRPG has a storyteller whose role is to describe the world around them, take on the role of its inhabitants and monsters and to create and guide players through a narrative storyline.

Tabletop role-playing games are collaborative in nature. Participants take on the role of their characters and work together as a team to accomplish goals, support and challenge each other both within the fantasy setting, but also as players involved in the game. This is not so unlike the dynamics found within group therapy. As defined by Bradender et al. (2004), group therapy is a treatment modality involving a small group of members and one or more therapists. It is designed to promote psychological growth and ameliorate psychological problems through the cognitive and affective exploration of the interactions among members, and between members and the therapist. Similarly to a therapeutic group session, players are guided to explore aspects of themselves and struggles of the past while building a deep bond and connection with the other members of the group through the providing of feedback, challenging distorted thoughts and behaviours and providing support and encouragement.

Sullivan (1953) saw the yearning to form secure relationships with others as a fundamental motivational base of human behaviour. He believed that early in life the child will accentuate the behaviours in their repertoire that bring acceptance and approbation by the important figures in their life and will de-emphasize those that appear to be negatively received. Sullivan (1953) believed through this process personality is formed and suggested that later in life an adult may perceive the environment in a way

that is consistent with the past but inconsistent with present realities – what he labelled: *parataxic distortions*. The behaviours that proceed from these distortions are ones that may lead to satisfaction or avoidance of discomfort in the past but are unlikely to be effective in the present because they are out of synchrony. Participants in tabletop role-playing games create a character who is often a reflection of themselves in some way, either enhancing personal strengths or aspects of themselves they wish to improve on, or qualities they admire in others. Taking on the role of someone else creates a safe distance from ourselves which may give players an opportunity to better examine the distortions created by behaviour as described by Sullivan (1953).

In addition to being provided an opportunity to examine thoughts, feelings and behaviours through the lens of their character rather than directly through the self, players are witness to how certain actions they take can have consequences within the fantasy world, but also within the relationship of the members of the group. Yalom (1993) believes that the therapy group is the ideal environment for the modification of dated assumptions about the self in relation to others. Unlike in individual counselling where interactions are limited to one other person, in a group there is a range of personalities – both between the members and then with the therapist. Because of the diversity of relationships present, the group provides a microcosm of members' social worlds outside the group. In this microcosm, members' typical ways of seeing themselves in relation to others, and the behaviours that are integrally connected to these perceptions, will be revealed. Through a process of interpersonal learning, members can obtain feedback on the positive and negative aspects of these perceptions and behaviours. This feedback is

instrumental for the change in members' relational styles (Bradender et al., 2004). The interpersonal approach to group counselling compliments tabletop role-playing games because through their characters it offers a space in which members may experiment with new behaviours associated with more accurate perceptions of themselves and in which they have the opportunity to receive feedback on these behaviours.

As there are hundreds of different tabletop role-playing games, each of them featuring their own unique world (from classic science fiction, horror and modern day settings), this paper will only reference the most recognizable tabletop game to date: Dungeons & Dragons (Riggs, 2017). This is done for two parts. The first is an acknowledgement that many who will be reading this paper will not be familiar with tabletop gaming and this is a means to avoid confusion by pulling from too many different sources and secondly, because when stripped down, all tabletop games feature the same key elements that will be discussed moving forward

### **Dungeons & Dragons: A History**

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) was developed by Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax in the early 1970s and first published in 1974 (Riggs, 2017). Both men had been members of a local gaming organization and came together after feeling dissatisfied with their current gaming experiences. While board games have recently surged in popularity in the last 10 years, accumulating 450 million in retail in North America in 2013 ('Hobby Games', 2014), featuring intricate rules and a level of strategy and skill, at the time of D&D's creation, gaming was limited to the likes of Risk (Lamorisse, 1957), Monopoly (Darrow & Magie, 1935) and Candy Land (Abbott, 1948) and detailed, open-world video

games like Skyrim (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), The Witcher (CD Projekt Red, 2007) and World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, Inc., 2004) were far from the point of conception. There was nothing in existence that could bring the world of fantasy from the pages of a book into fully immersive experience. Gygax and Arneson (1974) created D&D as a way to personalize the exploits of individual heroes rather than the general focus of wargames, which tend to be massive battles. Lord of the Rings would not have the degree of popularity that it does so many years after being published had they only concentrated on the Battle of Helm's Deep, it is the connection we have to the characters, the band of heroes that makes the story so compelling (Tolkien, 1954). It is for the very same reason that Dungeons & Dragons has maintained a consistent level of popularity for the last 40 years (Riggs, 2017).

When D&D was first released, it was a set of three instructional booklets in a box that cost \$10, which is the equivalent to about \$50 today (Riggs, 2017). The instructions included had the rules on how-to-play for both the players and the Dungeon Master (DM) as well as a basic adventure to get started. It only included four races: human, dwarf, gnome and elf and three character classes (professions): fighter, magic-user and cleric, which somewhat limited the creativity of character creation.

The second edition, Advanced Dungeons & Dragons was released in 1979 (Gygax, 1979). The game rules were re-organized across three hardcover rulebooks written by Gygax: The Player's Handbook, the Dungeon Master's Guide and the Monster Manual. Major changes to the rules included an expansion of classes including: assassins, druids, monks, thief and paladin (we will explore the character creation process later).

The follow up to the first edition sold just as quickly, thousands of gaming groups gathering in local stores and in basements (Riggs, 2017). A community of people who wanted to tell and share stories through the adventures of the characters created was established and has yet to slow down ('Hobby Games', 2014).

As the role-playing community grew in popularity, it became connected to a story of 16-year old boy who disappeared the same year as the release of the second edition ('The Great 1980s', 2014). James Dallas Egbert III had attempted to commit suicide in the utility tunnels beneath a University campus before hiding out at a friend's house for an entire month ('The Great 1980s', 2014). The private investigator, who was hired by James' parents to find him, William Dear, speculated to the press that the disappearance was connected to role-playing games, stating that James had gotten lost in the tunnels during a live action role-playing session. Interest in the case was significant and even inspired a story called '*Mazes and Monsters*' (Raffe, 1981), which exaggerated the incident, suggesting that games like Dungeons & Dragons caused players to experience a psychotic episode where they lose touch with reality ('The Great 1980s', 2014). The book was adapted into a made-for-television movie, which starred Tom Hanks and only heightened concern and unease regarding role-playing games (McDermott, 1982). Several other movies followed, one that depicted D&D as the tool of the Devil, transforming a young man into a serial killer ('The Great 1980s', 2014). Several televangelists spoke of the game as a gateway to Satanism, the occult and witchcraft, inciting the Satanic Panic of the 1980s ('The Great 1980s', 2014). Patricia Pulling, an anti-occult campaigner even founded an advocacy group dedicated to the elimination of

D&D called Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons (BADD) ('The Great 1980s', 2014). BADD was founded in 1982 after Pulling's son committed suicide, claiming it was a D&D curse that killed him, going so far as to publish pamphlets to promote her belief that role-playing games encouraged rape, suicide and a litany of immoral practices. The impact this Satanic craze had on the role-playing community was so severe that the rulebooks were edited to omit any mention of demons, devils and other supernatural creatures just to distance the game from the accusations of its negative influence on teenagers and young adults ('The Great 1980s', 2014).

Since the 1980s, there have been six other editions of Dungeons & Dragons, each version adapting and changing the rules as a means to maintain their current players and draw new players into the fold (Riggs, 2017). Hundreds of companion books have been published, adding new realms (gothic, steampunk, desert, even outer space) to the cannon along with new character classes, races and monsters. There is much debate as to which edition is the best, many liking the simplified version that was most recently released while diehard roleplayers prefer the more complex system of game mechanics.

### **Who Plays Dungeons & Dragons?**

There is a misconception about the people who play tabletop role-playing games. They are viewed by society as the unwashed, the socially awkward, those unable to get a date and the people who live in the basement of their parents' home (Hill, 2017). While stereotypes are based off of a societal truth, the community of people actively playing Dungeons & Dragons has changed drastically as geek culture has become embraced. What may not be known is that comedians Stephen Colbert (*Late Night with Colbert*),

Mike Meyers (*SNL*, *Austin Powers*), Matt Groening (creator of *The Simpsons*) and the late Robin Williams (*Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Patch Adams*) all grew up playing the game.

George R. R. Martin, the creator *Game of Thrones* has stated that Dungeons & Dragons as a major inspiration to the multi-volume book series and so also, the successful HBO television series (Benioff & Weiss, 2011). There is no denying that the interactive storytelling and exploration of the character and 'self' that comes with the epic adventures of Dungeons & Dragons has influenced the work of these successful writers, actors, and comedians (Miozzi, 2014).

### **The Makings of a Hero**

I was introduced to D&D with the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Second Edition (Cook, 1989) books. My eldest brother and a group of his friends had started a campaign and played around our coffee table. Being the nosy little sister that I was, I would find any excuse to make my way into the space so that I could investigate what they were doing. I had grown up with books, our family members are avid readers and the shared storytelling that was happening in my house was fascinating. I begged and pleaded with my brother to let me join and he did, but as he made it known very clearly, it was only because the adventuring party needed a rogue to pick locks and check for traps.

And so, my first character, Raven Drakkenburg, was born. The dark haired and purple eyed thief had once been a former pirate but lost her ship in a game of cards and was land-bound from then on. She met the party in a tavern and demanded payment to join them on their quest. In my mind, she was quick witted and silver tongued, but being

the only girl and five years everyone's junior often just left me tongue tied. Nevertheless, I enjoyed every moment—until poor Raven contracted leprosy and died. Raven was the first of dozens of characters I have created and played in the 25 years I have been a member of the role-playing community. While I have trouble remembering all of the details of Raven's heroic background or personality, I do recall how it made me feel to slide into the skin of someone else for a few hours and it is that which has brought me back to tabletop role-playing over and over again. Role-playing games are important because they create space for players to explore the ideas of the 'self' and of the 'other' (Rogers, 1959) and explore the space between them and to discover how much space actually exists.

The rules around character creation can be complicated, but they are essentially broken down into two key elements: the mechanical and the narrative. The mechanical is a physical representation of the game rules—a character sheet that features their race, class, level skills, abilities, and attributes. A character class determines what abilities the character possesses. These classes are based on the typical fantasy archetypes: wizard, fighter, rogue (thief) and cleric. Level is an indicator of character progression within their class (how good they are at their job). A low level character may be a squire who has started his training with a sword and may struggle to handle a small band of Orcs, whereas a high level character is likely a knight who can slay dragons.

The narrative aspect of the character comes from their history, personality and beliefs. While there are suggestions and examples within the rulebooks, this is largely determined by the player. Who do you want to be? What part of yourself do you want to

explore? This is an opportunity to be different versions of themselves or to take on the role of something else entirely. More commonly, players will find a happy medium between the two, choosing to heighten an aspect of themselves. For instance, someone with a strong sense of honour may choose to play a righteous paladin who only sees things in black and white or someone with a rebellious streak but who had never been able to indulge it due to societal expectations, may take on the role of a thief and steal, lie and cheat whenever the opportunity presents itself. The fluidity of the narrative aspect also allows for character growth and development. As choices are made and interactions have taken place, a character's personality and belief system may shift, just as ours do in the real world.

### **The Creator of Worlds**

For heroes to go on an adventure there needs to be a world for them to explore. This is the role of the Dungeon Master (DM). Rather than taking on the role of one of the characters in the party, they are the cobblestone they walk upon, the heat and light radiating from the sun, the food they eat and the people they meet. The DM is the world and creates the stories within it and either can be as complex or as simplistic as the DM chooses. The Dungeon Master describes the world, provides adversaries and challenges for the players to overcome and often provide the bulk of the plot, though the decisions and input of the characters can drastically change the direction of the story. Moser and Fang (2015) describe this as narrative branching, which is the framework that underlies and dictates the order and manner through which stories are presented. There are two interdependent narrative conditions: embedded and emergent. Embedded is the storyline

created by the DM, the overarching narrative that leads to an ending and emergent are those that present themselves from the choices the players make along the way (Moser & Fang, 2015).

For example: a party of heroes is walking through a forest on their way to town following the successful completion of a quest. As they approach the town there is a bridge and sitting in front of it is a hideous troll. The DM has described the scene and now pauses, looking to the players to see what their characters would do. Unlike video games and other board games, there are endless possibilities on how the heroes might choose to handle the situation and it is the job of the DM to be prepared for as many possible scenarios as they can. The party of heroes may charge in and fight, in which case the DM will need to know or have access to the character sheet for the troll or they may choose to approach the troll and engage it in conversation to see if it will simply get out of their way - maybe with some gold coins? With this option, the DM will have to think and react quickly to take on the role of the troll to exchange dialogue with the players. The troll and other monsters, the blacksmith and tavern owner are all given life by the DM and these are referred to as non-player characters (NPCs). The embedded narrative is that the characters have been recruited by the local establishment to remove the troll and in doing so, they will be awarded gold coins. An example of an emergent narrative would be that instead of killing the troll, which seems to be the most obvious of directions to take, they befriend him and later choose to call upon him for help when another challenge presents itself down the line.

As suggested above, the initial story can take strange twists and turns based on the decisions of the characters. It is important for the DM to let things evolve organically rather than to force or guide the players too strongly in one direction. This allows for a level of casual agency – the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of those choices – in which the players feel that the decisions they make matter (Moser & Fang, 2015). I have taken on the role of Dungeon Master several times and I remember an interaction where a simple stable boy (an NPC) was in the proximity of a practical joke between characters that involved magic and the exposure caused him to become so obsessed with magic that he left his town to train as a wizard and eventually became the main villain of the storyline.

These types of interactions are a reflection of the decisions we are forced to make every day, only the lack of real consequences gives us the opportunity to make alternative choices and see what can happen. If someone insults you in a bar and you go up and punch them, chances are you will be charged with a crime. In the fantasy world, you may choose to be brave and stand up to the bully and even if you are sent to jail, there are always ways to get out through crafty storytelling.

In addition to the endless possibilities in deciding how to proceed through the story, there is an element of randomness and chance through the use of dice. Several polyhedral dice are used in combination with the skills, attributes and abilities of the character (located on the character sheet) to determine success or failure of most actions. Returning to the example of the troll, if the fighter wanted to charge it with his sword, he would make a combat roll to see if he first hits the creature and then again to see how

much damage the sword inflicts. Again, this is an aspect of the real world that is played out in the fantasy. We may have university degrees or black belts in martial arts but even in being an “expert” in any field, there is always the potential to mess things up. This is the purpose of the dice. The steadiest hand may still snap a bow string; the most beautiful voice may still crack when singing and so this amplifies the element of risk.

Chapter one provided a detail history and explanation for how D&D is played as well as the purpose and intentions of this thesis. Chapter two will explore the personal benefits of playing Dungeons & Dragons, how it creates a safe environment for identity to be explored, choosing their race, gender and sexual orientation and being given the freedom to play something other than themselves. This creates a level of empathy and opens the mind to differing perspectives as the player may become more aware of the pressures to take on certain social roles (Fein, 2015). Additionally, the players are able to enhance or minimize certain aspects of themselves and choose to enact feelings and emotions that they may have found too frightening or threatening to express directly in their day-to-day lives (Fein, 2015).

Chapter three examines the benefits of being a member of the tabletop community. While role-playing has grown in popularity in recent years, there is still a negative stereotype attached to those who enjoy the hobby: the socially awkward outcast (Hill, 2016). It may be true that there are some who struggle to create and maintain friendships, but as role-playing is a game that is reliant on social exchanges due to stories being created with words alone, it may be the ideal environment for those 'outcasts' to interact and make meaningful connection. Role-playing, because it mirrors the group

therapy experience, is a way to develop intimacy between players and establish a safe and secure relationship context between players, signifying acceptance and validation (Yalom, 1993), facilitate effective communication, reduce and resolve conflict (Sullivan, 2004), promote unconventional and flexible thinking and induce feelings of excitement and positive affect which can relieve stress.

Chapter four will provide a history of expressive arts and how storytelling and drama have been a part of history for centuries and that it has been beneficial to mental health and healing (Malchiodi, 2005). Additionally, this chapter will parallel Dungeons & Dragons and other forms of tabletop role-playing games to drama therapy and how the members of a role-playing game are similar to a group partaking in drama therapy by utilizing the five distinct phases of drama therapy (Emunah, 2007). Finally, it will draw upon Adlerian play therapy and the underlying assumptions of Adlerian counselling therapy which suggests that people are inherently goal-driven, creative and socially embedded (Kottman, 1995) and how Dungeons & Dragons supports and promotes each of these assumptions. Chapter five will conclude with a reflection on the limitations and suggests for further research.

## Chapter 2

### **Building Character: The Impact of Tabletop Gaming on the Self**

*“Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle.”*

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

While tabletop role-playing gaming is a form of leisurely entertainment, it is unique in that it is not competitive, has no time limits, is not scored and has no definitions of winning or losing. Unlike card games, board games, video games, or organized sports role-playing have nothing to do with winning. Instead goals of the game are to survive as a party and character and ultimately player development. D&D is a platform in which players are encouraged to explore identity, identity performance and to better understand their personal interactions.

Who do you want to be: an altruistic fighter whose lifelong goal is to seek out the villain who murdered his family and burned down his hometown or the charismatic and impulsive wizard who uses his magic without hesitation? Tabletop role-playing games invite players to create any type of character they could want to portray, the only limitation is their imagination. The choices are broad and allow for the players to explore different races, professions, gender and sexual orientation. In our reality, we are formalized into societal roles that we are expected to fulfill and often we are juggling several different roles at the same time. We are one role at work and another at home, with our friends and with our coworkers or romantic partners. Jacobsen & Kristainsen, (2015) describe how in social encounters, individuals project an image of themselves, and from that protection the self emerges. This is done collectively through a performance involving actors and an audience. Mitchell (1985) compares this concept to that of the masks worn by characters in Greek tragedies as the mask is used as a tool of impersonation and a convention that separates the actor from a particularized communal identity in order to become the symbolic image of a more universal condition.

Participants in everyday-life encounters or performances need to confirm the self-conception inner self-understanding and the external, socially confirmed identity. The self as a social identity is the mask the individual wears in social situations, but is also the human being behind the mask who decides which mask to wear. *Role distance* is then when the person acknowledges who they are when the layers have been peeled off and able to display to others how they really are (Jacobsen & Kristainsen, 2015). Dungeons & Dragons and other role-playing games provide an escape from the expectations and pressures of social roles and allow players an opportunity to not only peel off the mask and be themselves, but try on new roles within the fantasy world of the game that might not otherwise have been available to them in the 'real world'.

One of the most challenging aspects of D&D is the character creation. This process can happen long before sitting down with the rule book and writing in numbers associated with attributes and skills when the player is considering what kind of character they want to bring into the adventurer. More importantly, the question for players is how much of themselves do they want to bring into the world of fantasy? For some, and this is common among young or new players, they will often use a character from popular fiction as their inspiration. This can be as simple as adopting a knight from King Arthur's mythology as their mantle or perhaps the dexterous elf, Legolas from the Lord of the Rings trilogy (Tolkien, 1954).

Others will use themselves or a character as a framework but then amplify or soften certain traits, tweak enough details to put their own or a different spin on it. Most interestingly is when a player will make a character who possesses traits that they want to

challenge or want to explore. For instance, a player who has a bad temper may adopt that trait or play the opposite, giving them the opportunity to work out their anger issues or to see how much it can impact the people around them. Traits they may want to explore could include being charismatic, a natural leader or being seductive. These traits are often viewed as aspirational, how the player would like to be in the real world, so the fantasy realm is a safe environment for them to practice these qualities.

Deciding the type of character the player wants to portray is only part of the process. Within that comes several details including: gender, race, and class. There are few avenues where we can safely shed our biological bodies and adopt other genders. Video games will generally provide varying male or female avatars to choose from, but tabletop role-playing games are not as limiting. Players are able to play a woman or a man or now as gender has become more fluid, they can be any variation in between the two more static options. One of my friends who identifies as and was biologically born male only plays as female characters because he enjoys being able to explore his more feminine qualities without fear of judgement. Tabletop role-playing also provides an outlet for players to explore sexual orientations that may differ from their own. Playing with gender and sexual orientation gives permission to players to delve into aspects of themselves that they may otherwise not have explored. This breaks away from the pressures presented in social role theory, particularly gender role beliefs, which arise because people observe female and male behaviour and infer that the sexes possess corresponding dispositions (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This comes from the viewpoint that sex is in essence, biological makeup where gender is socially constructed, affected by

environment and culture. A person may choose to behave however they wish, but will be judged by society's sex categories, which can often create conflict with gender identities between the individual and the culture they are in (O'Neal, 2011). The role-playing experience provides an environment to gain insight on societal norms through the experience of a character who may be vastly different than who they are in the 'real world'. Gender, sex, orientation and race may not hold the same level of stigma or taboo in a fantastical world filled with monsters and magic.

In fantasy tabletop role-playing games there are generally several different races to choose from which can include: Humans, Dwarves, Gnomes, Elves and even half-dragons and half-demons known as Dragonborns and Tieflings respectively (Cook, Tweet & Williams, 2003). Each of these races has benefits in regards to statistics, offering bonuses to certain attributes or skill sets. For instance, because Elves are generally described as beautiful, ethereal creatures, they have a bonus to the Charisma attribute, meaning that they can more easily influence others with their charm. Because of their lithe stature, they are also known to be more flexible and swift, which provides a bonus to the Dexterity attribute. While each race has their benefits, most also come with a disadvantage. For example, a Dragonborn can breath fire, ice or lightning out of their mouth once a day, but to most townfolks and villagers they can be viewed as monsters and so interacting in city settings can be more challenging.

Classes are the professions the characters have adopted as an adventurer. Similarly to the character's race, there are inherent benefits to the class that a player chooses. A wizard or any other magical class has access to spells that can cause large

amounts of damage to the enemies while a thief is nimble and quick on their feet and can often get several attacks in one turn or can find traps and secret passages more easily than others. There are also disadvantages to the class chosen. Spellcasters do not have the fortitude of a fighter and are more susceptible to damage, meaning that they are at greater risk of harm and death on the battlefield.

There is a synergistic quality to the race and class as players will often choose a race that is complimentary to the class they are interested in playing, or vice versa. If a player wanted to play a barbarian, for instance, choosing Half-Orc as a race would be beneficial as they receive bonuses to combat related attributes and skills (Cook, Tweet & Williams, 2003) (Appendix B). For some players the game is a mathematical game of trying to find the best combinations for the most optimized character. Often times this is called min-maxing, which is minimizing the deficits and maximizing a character for optimal efficiency and there are groups of players who would describe this as cheating or taking away some of the challenge from the game, making it about numbers rather than the experience. Those who attempt to create the most efficient character would argue that they are simply attempting to make the most useful member of the party that they can, so that they can play their role within the group to the best of their abilities. The downside to min-maxing a character is that it does severely limit what they can do. If you create a fighter who excels at using a sword and shield in combat and is incredibly strong, what will happen when their weapons break or they are expected to do something that does not need strength to be successful, say dancing at the queen's ball or attempting to socialize with local nobility?

While min-maxing is common, most players will choose a class that is complimentary to the rest of the group. An adventuring party of bards might be incredibly entertaining but when everyone shares similar skills and abilities, it limits what can be accomplished. Generally speaking, a party is composed of front-line fighters (barbarians, fighters, and paladins), a healer (cleric or druid), stealth or range based fighters (ranger, rogue, assassin, bard) and magic-users (wizard, sorcerer, warlock). This dynamic allows for everyone to take on a role and be individually useful to the rest of the team. For example, the party of my current Dungeons & Dragons campaign is comprised of a noble paladin, a forest ranger, a military fighter, a devote cleric, a sly monk and we are about to introduce a half-orc bard into the game. Each take on their role in combat, fighting, healing and using magic to protect the party or harm enemies. Dominguez, Cardona-Rivera, Vance and Roberts (2016) delved into the relationship between the role players adopt when creating a character and the depth and level to which they interact with the narrative fantasy world. They describe this as the *mimesis effect* and found that when players were able to select their role (create their own character rather than be given one) they were more invested in the storytelling and would role-play their characters without being asked to and made decisions that were more consistent with their role.

When it comes to a character being successful in combat or the act of persuasion, the character sheet is important. The statistics combine with the game's mechanics determine whether or not this is possible. And while the rolling of dice and slaying the monster is important, a character is much more than numbers on a sheet. The way to add depth to the character, to flesh out its personality and motivations is by writing a

character background. For many players this can be a guide, a few simple notations made that explain where the character is from, what their childhood/adulthood looked like, why they chose the profession they are in (class) and why they decided to become an adventurer. For others, backgrounds can be incredibly detailed, pages upon pages of historical and psychological information for the character which could include their morals and motivations to what they do as well as to all of the people that have been notable and important in their life. It seems for the majority, they appreciate having a loose idea of who the character is and seeing how it adapts and develops when interacting with other members of the party. A player may not realize how impulsive their character is until they are placed in a situation where that presents itself. As a personal choice, when I was a player rather than a DM, I liked having a rough outline of what I was hoping to portray, especially if I was playing a character that would think, act or feel differently than I did in certain situations. In one campaign, I played a paladin who worshiped a just and goodly God and my character believed strongly in obeying the law. This rigid viewpoint is quite different than my own, so I had notes on the sheet that I would reference when I struggled between what I would do and what I believed my character would do.

Mead (1934) states that the self is developed through taking on 'the role of the other' with increasing degrees of sophistication that are mastered and sometimes literal and other times metaphorical play and gaming activities. Children will play imaginary roles and in the process develop the capacity to see themselves as others might – to see themselves as both object and subject while an adult acquires new self through a process

akin to that of children – imaginary roles are evoked and these sentiments provide a structure and meaning for playing at a self that has not yet emerged from the person (Mead, 1934). Characters are distinctly separate from the player, but also closely connected. There are three aspects of the self to be considered when participating in a role-playing game. Dominguez, Cardona-Rivera et al. (2016) describe the persona-player-person boundaries. The participant involved in the role-playing game is at the same time: a) a person, with their own identity, beliefs, desires intentions and so on, b) a player, who is part of a social group embedded in the culture and conventions of gaming and c) the persona, a narrative “self” that exists within the game, the character created. Participants must also establish symbolic boundaries between these three roles (person, player, persona) and assume the right role in the right condition—a condition that evokes border work ,which is most often used to examine the dynamics of interpersonal relations (Huizinga & Ludens, 2004).

Rosset and Stauffer (2013) utilized role-playing games with a group of gifted children they found that there are four distinct opportunities to support players in the development of the self. Role-playing games first provides a unique opportunity for players to take on different characters and explore and integrate various aspects of themselves and experience the negative consequences in a safe environment which allows them to build their identity little by little (Rosset & Stauffer 2013). For instance, if a player wanted to create a rogue who enjoyed stealing from others because of the thrill that tickled at the back of the mind of the player when thinking of shoplifting, they could explore what that would look like in the fantasy world without fear of being arrested or

grounded. Here, the rogue could steal jewellery from a town's noble or pick the pocket of a burly drunk at the tavern with minimal risk. Seeing a character sent to jail or being physically assaulted from theft could detract the player from that desire not only in the game but in real life, just as getting away with it could encourage the player to attempt something similar in the real world.

The second and third possibilities for development of self is that the game provides a place where players may express their pent up emotions in a safe way for themselves and for others. This includes aspects of themselves that are both dark and virtuous and to see those aspects as external objects. This can be particularly powerful because of the role distance between the player and the character. Having that distance allows the player to enact feelings and emotions that they may have found too threatening if they expressed them directly (Rosselet & Stauffer 2013). In their research, Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) provide the example of Matthew, a young gifted boy, who participated in revenge seeking behaviours during role-playing sessions in which he would want to hurt or kill non-player characters in the game. For Matthew, there was a desperate need to 'get them' before they 'got him' and so he would attack others and this led to the members of his group being suspicious towards him and endangered the other characters in the town. Acting out this violence did not carry any real-life harm for anyone involved, but it allowed Matthew to see that his revenge goal was maladaptive in promoting friendship with the others and ineffective in advancing the party on their adventures. Lastly, role-playing games allow players to develop interpersonal competencies (Rosselet & Stauffer 2013). This is due to the fact that tabletop role-playing games are for the most part

constructed through verbal interactions and so players are forced to communicate with each other on every level of play – not just in dialogue shared between them but also in actions and strategies taken in accomplishing goals.

Being given the opportunity to wear different masks, to try on different roles creates a sense of creative freedom, which is only limited by the imagination. The fantasy world of Dungeons & Dragons is the perfect platform to learn about the self by enhancing or minimizing certain aspects of their personality they would like to practice or address. The distance between player and character allows for deep exploration that might otherwise be too threatening or frightening to do otherwise. Taking on the persona of someone who identifies as a differing gender, race or sexual orientation of the player allows them to see the world from the eyes of someone else, a means to develop better understanding, empathy and broadening their perspective on the world. Dungeons & Dragons is also a escapism from the expectations and pressures of social and gender roles.

The following chapter will examine the communal benefits of playing Dungeons & Dragons including: the building of bonds and friendships through a shared experience, how the group forms and develops, mirroring to the Tuckman's (1965) model of group formation and how those relationships can grow and strengthen through the rise of conflict.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Adventuring Together: Creating a Strong Community**

*“You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin – to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours – closer than you yourself keep it. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo. We are horribly afraid—but we are coming with you; or following you like hounds.”*

*— J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring*

Nerds, geeks, and dorks are often categorized as social outcasts (Hill, 2016). They are usually described as highly intelligent people with bad hygiene and zero interpersonal skills who live in their parent's basement. For decades this is how those who enjoyed video games, comic books, board games and tabletop role-playing games have been stereotyped (Hill, 2016). Participating in any of these hobbies was shameful and their enjoyment would become a target for teasing and bullying. Being ridiculed and ostracized by peers can lead to isolation. Marshall and Crampton (2015) suggest that loneliness and social interaction are harmful to our health. Through a survey that was conducted with a large population of people, they found that lack of social connection is a contributing risk factor to early death and has an overall effect on a person's health that is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes in a day and being an alcoholic. It is also worse than well-known risk factors like a lack of physical activity and obesity. Umberson and Montez (2010) discuss the importance of social support, which is often received through family, partners and friendships, and they refer to the hundreds of studies that support that these relationships provide physical and mental benefits, in particular, by reducing the impact of stress and fostering a sense of meaning and purpose.

This chapter will examine how Dungeons & Dragons is viewed from a historical societal perspective and how stereotypes shed a negative light on people who participate in role-playing games, but how through the last few years, there has been an increase in interest in D&D as demonstrated through popular media and culture (Hill, 2016). It will demonstrate that role-playing games are ultimately a positive experience by replicating

the therapeutic group dynamic and promoting communication and social skills, intimate friendships, working through conflict and team decision building (Brace, 2012).

### **Dungeons & Dragons: Satan's Game**

When Dungeons & Dragons was first created there was backlash from parenting organizations who were concerned that tabletop gaming was not only connected to Satanic and occult practices, but also increased the risk of suicide and antisocial behaviour such as kidnappings, robberies and assault and the development of homicidal tendencies (Hawkes-Robinson, 2007). The concerns were so prevalent that the Consumer Products and Safety Commission and the Federal Trade Commission were pressured into putting a warning labels on gaming materials that they deemed were hazardous and could cause suicide (Hawkes-Robinson, 2007). Unsurprisingly, the studies researched and examined to promote fear in the hobby were later discredited to be scaled inaccurately or simply false. What has been reported by those who participate in role-playing games is that having a community of peers with shared interests it is a source of regular social interaction, an opportunity to meet new people who enjoy the same hobbies as they do, which reduces loneliness and promotes a sense of belonging (Hawkes-Robinson, 2007).

### **Nerd Culture: It's Hip to be Square**

While the 'nerd, dork, geek' stereotype persists there has been a cultural shift in how the 'nerd community' is viewed. Thanks to the rise of fantasy novel series such as Harry Potter (Rowling, 1997-2007), The Hunger Games (Collins, 2008-2010) and the creation of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (Feige, 2008-Present), it is cool to be a nerd. I

remember growing up it was difficult to find others who were interested in the same hobbies as I was because it was not acceptable to wear a Captain America t-shirt or to walk around reading the latest instalment of the Game of Thrones series, whereas now everyone wears their fandoms loud and proud. Conventions used to be restricted to comic book readers and sci-fi enthusiasts, but now they are populated by all types of pop culture fans and feature major motion picture and television celebrities and voice actors and convention attendance is on the rise. San Diego Comic-Con (<https://www.comic-con.org>), the annual multi-genre entertainment and comic book convention has tripled its attendance since 2002.

Scrolling through Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr feeds reveal many dozens of television shows, movies, podcasts and lifestyle websites that are entirely dedicated to geek culture. Because it is seen and heard in nearly every type of artistic medium, there is likely to be an increase in the acceptance and interest in the culture. Television shows like *Big Bang Theory* (Lorre & Prady, 2007), *Freaks and Geeks* (Apatow, 1999), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon & Greenwalt, 1997) and *Community* (Foster & Krasnoff, 2000) all have had episodes dedicated in particular to Dungeons & Dragons. The 2016 Netflix show *Stranger Things* opens with a group of young boys playing Dungeons & Dragons in the basement, which intertwines into the brilliant sci-fi and horror inspired storyline for the first season (Gajdusek & Holland, 2016). The Nerdist (<https://thenerdists.com>) is a website dedicated to daily news about the most recent comic books, video games, and movies. Along with Nerdist News, they have sections dedicated to short comedy videos

about nerd culture and another that features podcasts of interviews with celebrities, conversations about politics, science and even reality television.

Similarly, Geeks and Sundry (<https://geekandsundry.com>) is a website at the epicenter of gaming and lifestyle for pop culture fans with a focus on bringing people together. They accomplish this by providing instructional videos on how-to-play board games and demonstrations of tabletop gaming systems. Having access to information on board games, role-playing games and other aspects of geek culture sends out an invitation to those who might be intimidated to play to give it a try. Online forums provided by Geeks and Sundry provide a space for people to talk about what they enjoy and connect with one another, possibly even inspiring them to try a game together. One of the most popular features of Geeks and Sundry is the weekly Dungeons & Dragons campaign being played out every week called Critical Role. It was created and developed by voice actor Matt Mercer who acts as the campaign's Dungeon Master and the players are people that he knows from the industry. It has been playing live on Youtube and Twitch.tv for nearly three years and has aired some 117 episodes. The first campaign recently ended and they are three episodes into the newest instalment.

Another notable D&D experience is The Adventure Zone (TAZ) (McElroy, 2014): a role-playing based podcast created by the McElroy brothers, who are well-known podcasters in the nerd community. The first TAZ campaign, called 'Balance' recently ended and featured Griffin, the youngest sibling as the Dungeon Master while his brothers Travis and Justin and their father Clint each took on the role of a character. Through their storytelling, they explore several different subject matters including sexual

orientation, gender identity, death, grief and connection. While their characters are deeply invested in this epic journey, it is also an opportunity for the family to gather, even if only through voice chat on the Internet, and spend time with one another. It has also created an opportunity for each member to take on the role of Game Master as now that the 'Balance' arc has completed, each of the McElroys are taking a turn as the game master to decide what will be their next campaign. While both Critical Role and TAZ are D&D campaigns for people to listen to and enjoy, rather than experience, their popularity among nerd culture has inspired and encouraged others to start their own adventures.

The social acceptance of geek culture could be attributed to the Internet and how since its conception it has been instrumental in allowing people to connect with others who share similar interests and from these connections, communities with like-minded individuals have been established. Brace (2012) offers another reason for this shift from viewing nerds as losers to now embracing them. He discusses at length how people who were those social outcasts in the 1970s and 80s have now graduated college and entered the workforce and they are applying their knowledge and skills gained through role-playing in unique ways. He also states that because of their interest in all things related to geek culture, their children are growing up around it and have welcomed this culture into their own lives. The influence of Clint on the McElroy brothers is clear in listening to them spend time together as he was a radio host and a self-proclaimed giant nerd for most of his life.

### **Bringing People Together**

Actress Mayim Bialik of *Blossom* and *The Big Bang Theory* fame has also passed on her nerd culture to her children, most recently by participating in a Dungeons & Dragons campaign with them. In a Youtube video (Bialik, 2018), she states that she had always wanted to play, but felt intimidated by her friends, but now as a parent she wanted to explore the gaming experience with her children. She states that in addition to creating a sense of togetherness with her two sons, the game creates a forum to discuss and solve problems, critical thinking and the beauty of conquest as a party of adventurers. She emphasizes that the experience has created a deeper relationship with her children that would not otherwise exist without Dungeons & Dragons.

Brace (2012) discusses the depth of the relationship between players who participate in tabletop gaming. He states that as a gaming group spends time together, each participant's fantasy frame subtly changes to be more compatible with those of the other participants. Over time as players interact more and more with one another, they learn each other's rhythm and this creates a smoother flow of the game which in turn allows more for time to actually game with one another than be distracted by rules, creating a much more engrossing experience. The McElroy family talks about this at length in several of their podcasts for the Adventure Zone, about how even while they are brothers, they still needed to find a pacing to share rather than each episode be about who can talk over who the most or the loudest (McElroy, 2014).

The phenomenon of connecting to this level is observable in convention settings where total strangers interact with each other in a tabletop gaming session. In the beginning there are some bumps and the flow might be choppy due to frequent stops to

clarify scenes or debate rule interpretations but as the game progresses everyone begins to have a feel for the others involved. In a professional setting, this would be comparable to a team of co-workers feeling as though they are on the same page, or in 'the zone' when everything seems to fall together and everyone knows their role (Brace, 2012). When everyone is in sync there is greater potential for deeper storytelling, character development and growing bonds as trusting one another becomes second nature rather than something that needs to be practiced.

Drawing from Bruce Tuckman's theory of group formation (1965), a Dungeons & Dragons party (both from the character and the player perspectives) can be broken down into the model's five phases. The first phase is that of 'forming', this is where the members of the group are uncertain and will monitor what is going on around them in the group. This is where they get to know one another. In the above mentioned examples, this is where they may not feel synchronized to one another, trying to find reasons for the characters in the adventuring party to travel together and connect, and to see which one will step out as the party's leader. The same level of unknowing would be present in the players (particularly in the example of strangers at a convention), learning who will be dominant and take charge, who shares similar views and simply not being sure how they should act or react (Bussman, 2014).

The second phase is that of the power struggle or 'storming' where every member clears up their position within the group and where members try to force their points and search for others who would agree with them. Rivalry and competitiveness are part of the interactions in this phase of the group and there can be possible rebellion against the

leadership (Bussman, 2014). Often times conflict will arise and this will be elaborated upon later.

The third and fourth phases, 'norming' and 'performing' are that of familiarity where the uncertainty from the first phase has become a certain group spirit that puts reliability over the members of the group (Bussman, 2014). Problems may arise but more often than not members of the group will speak out to address it. In this phase, everyone is aware of their role within the group dynamic and uses their abilities to fulfill their duties. This is not so dissimilar to the makeup of the role-playing group in which each class has an essential role within the party.

This deeper level of collaborative storytelling and exploration of a world beyond our reality creates long lasting bonds among those who have participated. This is not unlike the real life experience of shared travel between a group of friends, of units of soldiers, or students in a degree program. Role-playing serves as a way to develop intimacy between players, signifying acceptance and validation of player partners.

In high school, I connected with my fellow band and drama nerds and we became inseparable. Our time spent together involved playing board games, watching anime and playing Magic: The Gathering until I introduced Dungeons & Dragons to them and they were all eager to try it. Our collective narrative, the epic journey of their characters battling vampire lords, smiting Orcs and appeasing a pantheon of gods brought us closer together and we spent most of our free time sharing stories of those epic tales and planning future adventures. Through D&D, we became better friends. Kociatkiewicz (2000) compares tabletop gaming to traditional shared storytelling and states “it brings

people together and gives them a sense of identity, being a civilizational foundation for the whole social organizing (p. 71).”

### **The Tribe Mentality**

Badrinarayanan (2014) proposes that gaming communities are not so dissimilar to primitive tribes in that they act as a social and cultural entity, they are organized more by threats than by political or social structure which is based on Sahlin's segmentary lineage theory (1961). Considering how much nerds, geeks, and dorks are ostracized, it seems appropriate that they would find themselves connected as those threatened, by others and brought closer because of the threats that are directed towards their culture and community. Badrinarayanan (2014) states that gaming community members may be similar in terms of their behaviours to tribal behaviour in that primitive tribes have fundamental traits of kinship, social structure, and sense of community. Sahlins (1961) posits that there are four dimensions of primitive tribes that make up brand tribalism, which is defined as a community or subculture of consumers formed through an emotional bond to a product or brand—in this case, tabletop role-playing games. The first is segmentary lineage, the kinship or thread that binds tribal segments together. Second is social structure, the oneness that the tribe shares as the synergies needed to achieve the game objective within a tabletop role-playing game. Third is sense of community, in which there is an ability to coexist in harmony. Last, defense of the tribe, suggests that when in competition or when under threat, the tribe will band together to oppose them.

When the gaming group is examined, the dimensions described above present themselves. Dungeons & Dragons is what brings the group together, the segmentary

lineage as it is what they consume and enjoy together, the second dimension of social structure is as Brace (2012) mentions when a group of players synchronize to one another and the third dimension is them being able to act as a unit together in solving problems and completing adventures. The fourth dimension is less visible as groups of players do not necessary act against stronger or opposing tribes, but do seem to bond together all the more closely because of the judgement or threat of others.

This tribe mentality of bonding and connecting with others through the shared experience of role-playing games has been researched (Fein, 2006; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013) in relation to children and young adults who are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and these studies have discovered that it promotes and encourages relationships but also creates a space of safety and relief for children to practice social skills. Some of the defining characteristics of ASD are the lack of appropriate social skills, lack of appropriate responses during a conversation, and limited social interactions outside of school or work that include phone calls or face-to-face interactions (Gallup, Duff, Serianni & Gallup, 2016).

There is an increasing number of individuals being diagnosed with ASD with a current estimate indicating that 1:68 individuals have some form of ASD in North America (Center for Disease Control, 2014). ASD is a complex disorder of the nervous system, which varies in the degree of challenges from mild to severe impairments. It is categorized by deficits in social interactions and communication skills as well as the presence of repetitive behaviours. According to Gallup et al. (2016), most of the current research is on the impact of early interventions, which leaves adolescents with minimal

strategies of support. Adolescents with ASD are less likely to see friends outside of school or to be invited to activities. They are also less likely to participate in community activities with peers. As they transition into adulthood, most still live at home with a family member, half have graduated from high school and only some attend post-secondary education, leaving them to make the lowest wage amongst all other disability categories. Despite a desire for friendship and opportunities to socialize, individuals with ASD fail to recognize and accurately interpret social cues or verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

Tabletop role-playing provides individuals with ASD a unique opportunity to engage socially without the risk and challenges of face-to-face situations and allows participant to develop social connections. Role-playing allows participants to step into someone else's shoes and act and talk as the character would and bracket their own reactions and make decisions as the character would. Being given the opportunity to play someone who does not have the same social limitations as the player can be a freeing experience. Pair this with a world that has an entire system of rules to use as a guide. The safe environment allows the players to make mistakes without the consequences of real life and the immense pressure to behave the way the rest of society does. Imagine having the opportunity to play a character that has never before existed, a Half-Orc fighter where you can develop and create your own culture around socialization. For a player who is shy or unsure, maybe her or his character uses grunting and pointing as a way to communicate at first but slowly learns how to talk in the common tongue because of the

other members of the party and for the player, stepping outside of his or her comfort zone because of the trust built between the other players of the game.

Autism Nova Scotia (n.d.) has begun running a D&D group where individuals with autism are able to meet and enjoy the game together while practicing their social and communication skills. There is no pressure to be perfect all of the time and mistakes made do no result consequences that are taken back into the real world when the game is over. Fein (2016) explored a unique gaming experience with young adults diagnosed with ASD called Journeyfolk where over a weekend these individuals would play a game in which they created a character and participated in collaborative storytelling with a narrator. One of the players, named Christy, discussed that she had an anger issue and that when she was around large crowds of people and felt swarmed, she felt overwhelmed and her world would disintegrate into chaos (Fein, 2016). When she was in these moments of psychological fragmentation, she would strike out against people and feel totally out of control. In the game, Christy created Aura Dragonsblood, a magic user and half-demon whose greatest fear was when the demon aspect of herself took over and she lost control (Fein, 2016). Through Aura Dragonsblood she was able to identify something within herself that caused her great discomfort and through the playing of that character she was able to work towards finding ways to balance the 14-year old girl and the anger that she stated was always bubbling just below the surface. The co-existence of strength and vulnerability within these character narratives provided an opportunity to bring together these different elements of the autism spectrum experience and provide a meaning-making system within which they could both co-exist (Fein, 2016).

Being that individuals diagnosed with ASD often struggle with social interactions, bullying and are often acutely aware of their challenges and differences, tabletop role-playing seems an ideal avenue for them to practice communication skills and interacting with other people as well as it being a space where friendships and bonds with people who are similar (interested in D&D and diagnosed with ASD) can be formed. It is a place where barriers can be overcome to support them to be able to 'successfully' interact with others and develop an awareness of self.

### **Weathering the Storm: Conflict Resolution**

Tabletop role-playing games also provide the opportunity to explore conflict resolution and team building (Bowman, 2016). As a party of adventurers with their own distinct personalities there is bound to be some disagreement when making decisions on how to tackle the presented obstacle. The fierce fighter may want to handle situations by using her sword, while the charismatic wizard may think that the best way to proceed is through conversational manipulation. Bowman (2016) refers to these circumstances as creative agenda differences between players. In addition to this type of in game conflict there is also conflict that occurs outside of the game amongst the players and the Dungeon Master such as power differential and the phenomenon of bleed-in (bringing outside world matters into the game) and bleed-out (taking in-game matters into the outside world) (Bowman, 2016). Sullivan (2004) suggests that growth and development comes from learning and enhancing interpersonal relationship skills and acquiring mutually accepting and affirming attitudes about and with other people and that this is achievable through what they refer to as 'desirable conflict'. Conflict as an expression of

differences should be welcomed, though is often dreaded. It signifies a willingness on the part of a member to disagree openly or to explore their attitudes and understandings even when such expression often provokes discomfort and anger of the other members (Sullivan, 2004).

Conflict is full of meaning and usefulness in group work. It can certainly destroy a group if too much pain or stress is involved or it can be a vehicle to help move the group towards a greater sense of wholeness, and to help advance the social development of individual members (Sullivan, 2004). Role-playing is unique in this because often times the conflict arises between characters, so there is a depersonalization or disembodiment of the differences so that the entire group can look at the issue from a distance and explore possible solutions.

Schisms are not uncommon in the gaming community. While there is a shared enjoyment in the hobby, much like the fighter and wizard, everyone brings their personality to the table and sometimes they simply do not click. This has happened several times in my experiences as being a Dungeon Master. Most recently, I was running a campaign for a group of friends and one of the regular players routinely created conflict among the party members by having his character arguing with them about how to complete tasks, dividing the treasure from a job well done or outright stealing from the other members of the party. While he was true to the character he had created, there was a growing tension as it was disruptive to the progression of the story and did not add to the element of team building and overall enjoyment. When he decided to leave the game

there was an immediate shift in the dynamics and the players and characters are getting along better than they ever have in the past.

Even with disruptive members in the party or players who are unwilling to participate within a team dynamic, there is conflict. Within the gaming sessions arguments and disagreements can lead to a better understanding of the character. For example: The party is given the choice to take the long way to a city or climb their way up the side of the mountain to get there more quickly. The rogue of the party refuses, listing off reasons for not going and throwing a temper tantrum. An argument ensues that results in a vote being cast and the decision being made to climb. The rogue then reveals that they are afraid of heights and so rather than being on the end of the anger or resentment, the party has now gained some empathy and understanding. It provides an opportunity to bond to a deeper level. As in the example above, Sullivan (2004) expresses that these explorations of the issue begins with providing an opportunity for the perceived 'offender' to clarify their meaning, and to explain the basis for the position expressed. Sullivan (2004) states that a positive result of conflict resolution may be that some of those wrong assumptions of differences are dispelled, that people gain awareness of commonalities that unite them rather than divide them.

Other types of conflict can come up between players and the Dungeon Master, particularly when it comes to the rules. When rules are unfairly imposed a rule is reinterpreted in a way that might favour one player, but disadvantage another. This not only disrupts the narrative of the story, but also creates an unnecessary tension between the DM and the players and even among the players themselves. This sort of preferential

or punitive treatment can be the result of bleed-in, when the out-of-game factors affect the player's experience. Perhaps a player and the DM had an argument the week before the game session and there is some harbouring resentment. It is possible that the DM would use their power as the world creator to punish that player within the realm of fantasy. This can be especially common when couples or sexual relationships develop between players or a player and the DM (Bowman, 2016). Because collaborative storytelling can create lasting intense emotional moments, bleed out is also possible. That is a situation in-game that continues to linger and impact the life of a player outside of the game. For instance, the death of a character or non-player character with whom the party is very close can be devastating, not so unlike the passing of a favourite character in a book or movie. Even these instances provide opportunities to explore the thoughts and feelings associated with these events. When a party member dies or a player leaves the group, the remaining members can come together and talk about it outside of the game as players and the characters within the game can learn and explore the difficulties associated with grief.

### **Escaping Reality: D&D in the Prison System**

Dungeons & Dragons is also a form of escapist entertainment. There are few joys comparable to rolling a natural twenty on an attack roll against the minotaur at the center of the maze or casting fireball and cascading a field filled with Orcs ablaze, to saving the local village from a hill giant or uncovering the mystery of an ancient tome. For many, being able to inject yourself into the body of a hero and go on epic journeys itself is a therapeutic release. Role-playing games provide individuals with a reason to come

together to share a story and to laugh when in their reality there are not many reasons to laugh. In the United States there is an increase in prison inmates who play tabletop role-playing games. In the Youtube video 'Escaping Prison with Dungeons & Dragons' (Vice, 2018), inmates discuss their experience in playing the popular game with others who are serving their sentence. For someone who has only ever been told that they are a criminal or will not amount to very much, tabletop gaming is a way to escape the harsh reality and play out the person they had always wanted to be, or could have been had circumstances been different. Interviewed inmates talk about how life in prison is difficult, that there is a constant stream of violence and aggression and playing Dungeons & Dragons is a way to temporarily get reprieve. Sterling Correctional Facility is a maximum security prison that houses murderers, bank robbers and even a few serial killers and yet, every afternoon half a dozen or so inmates gather around tables in the common area to play Dungeons & Dragons (de Kleer, 2017). One of the inmates, Melvin Woolley-Bey, who has spent most of his adulthood in jail once had the aspiration to become a playwright. When he first arrived in Sterling, he noticed inmates playing D&D and paralleled the game to the theatre and asked if he could join. He described his experience as a way to shed the hardened persona that had helped him survive on the streets (de Kleer, 2017). Bey plays a female Halfling, which could be seen as threatening in a prison setting, he responded by saying that so much in prison is dependent upon bravado and being a threat to others, so to sit down and play a game that already includes words like 'faerie' takes a certain amount of confidence and he believes that demands respect (de Kleer, 2017).

Aaron Klug is Bey's DM and has been playing Dungeons & Dragons his entire life – in and out of prison. He recounts how when he first started to play in prison that the groups gathered did not get along and often came at the cost of character death (de Kleer, 2017). He states that they lacked teamwork and played competitively when presented with shared goals and did what they could to maximize their own profits, rather than what was best for the party. Years after playing together, Klug reports that they have gotten better and are working as a team (de Kleer, 2017). He also suggests that D&D is the only safe space available in prison to be introspective and gives him the opportunity to look inward and engage in the kind of problem-solving where analytic introverts shine.

Unfortunately, D&D is considered a threat to prison safety and promotes gang-like behaviour according to the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, who have officially banned role-playing games in Winconsin's Waupun Correctional Institute (Pinchefsky, 2015). In other prisons, gaming materials are being confiscated much for the same reason. It is believed that D&D can foster an inmate's obsession with escape from the real life, correctional environment, fostering hostility, violence and escape behaviour which can compromise the inmates' rehabilitation and effects of positive programming, endanger the public and jeopardize the safety and security of the institution (Pinchefsky, 2015). As this paper and other research suggests, there are several benefits to engaging in role-playing games, so it is difficult to comprehend why a group of men who are attempting to engage with one another in a positive way and escape their otherwise difficult existence would be denied such a small pleasure. While the interference and denial of D&D in prison could be misinterpreted as an attempt to control inmates, it can

also be viewed as an opportunity to advocate and educate others on the inherent therapeutic benefits of the game.

Dungeons & Dragons has increased in popularity over the last few decades in part because of role-playing podcasts and YouTube channels such as The Adventure Zone and Critical Role. All things related to nerd culture: comic books, video games, sci-fi and fantasy books, television and film have largely been embraced by society, allowing for people to fully enjoy their hobbies without fear of being ostracized and ridiculed. Dungeons & Dragons brings people together not only because of shared interests, but participating in the same activity with the same people does promote a level of intimacy and a deeper bond of friendship. This type of relationship is similar to the group therapy dynamic, which often includes conflict and its resolution, bring the group closer together. Personal and communal benefits have been explored in previous chapters, emphasizing the creation of our self-concept and how to build strong, long-lasting friendships, but how would a therapist utilize Dungeon & Dragons in a therapeutic way? Chapter four will expand on the therapeutic models that role-playing games demonstrates within and outside of the game format and how to develop and present a Dungeons & Dragons campaign to small groups of clients.

#### **Chapter 4**

##### **A Successful Storytelling Session: Applying D&D to Therapy**

*“You may tell a tale that takes up residence in someone's soul, becomes their blood and self and purpose. That tale will move them and drive them and who knows that they might do because of it, because of your words. That is your role, your gift.”*

*— Erin Morgenstern, The Night Circus*

### **Express Yourself: History and Theory of Expressive Therapies**

The creative arts in all its forms have a lasting impact in each individual's life, whether they are the creators or those who experience it (Malchiodi, 2005). People will often comment on songs that remind them of an event or a person, or how a particular album by a favourite musician helped them get through a difficult period in life (Malchiodi, 2005). Similarly, visual works of art such as painting, sculptures and drama (in play or film) may evoke feelings within the observer, images, and performances make an impact not because of the intensity of the emotions brought forward, but often because it summons a memory or experience (Malchiodi, 2005). McNiff (1992) proposes that arts have consistently been part of life as well as healing throughout the history of humankind: The Egyptians are reported to have encouraged people with mental illness to engage in artistic activity (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981) and the Greeks used drama and music for its reparative properties (Gladding, 1992). Malchiodi (2005) defines expressive therapies as art, music, dance/movement, drama, poetry/creative writing, play and sandtray within the context of psychotherapy, counselling, rehabilitation, or health care. According to the National Coalition of Creative Arts Therapies Association (NCCATA) they are also often referred to as 'creative arts therapies' or when used in combination in treatment, they are called 'integrative approaches'. Knill et al. (as cited in Malchiodi, 2005) observes that while expressive therapies include action, each are distinctly different. For instance, visual expressive art is conducive to more private, isolated work while music taps into feelings and can lead to socialization when people collaborate in song or simultaneously playing instruments. Each form of expressive therapy has its

unique properties and roles in therapeutic work depending on its application, practitioner, client, setting, and objectives. According to Malchiodi (2005), when a therapist is able to include various expressive capacities into her or his work with clients, the client may more fully enhance her or his abilities to communicate effectively and authentically. Similarly to counselling or psychotherapy, an expressive therapies session may open with a discussion on the individual's, family's, or group's goals, concerns, or current problems. In contrast to therapists who explore these issues through talking, expressive therapists encourage individuals to use an expressive form of communication as a means for further exploration and Malchiodi (2005) suggests that more than one type of expressive therapy could be used in a session. For example, a drama therapy session may involve role play, but what may be integrated with that is movement or perhaps the session could start with some creative writing to stimulate or inspire the invention of a story (Malchiodi, 2005).

Malchiodi (2005) suggests that this integrative approach to expressive therapies adds a unique dimension to psychotherapy and counselling because it has several specific characteristics not always found in strictly verbal therapies, including, but not limited to: self-expression, active participation, imagination and mind-body connection. Self expression is used as a container for feelings and perceptions that may deepen into greater self-understanding or may be transformed, resulting in emotional reparation, resolution of conflicts and a sense of well-being (Malchiodi, 2005). Gladding (as cited in Malchiodi, 2005) notes that using arts in counselling may speed up the process of self-exploration and that expressive modalities allow people to experience themselves differently because individuals are able to exhibit and practice novel and adaptive

behaviours. Some individuals may prefer to tell a story through expressive modalities as they can 'experience' their story, allowing the therapist to capitalize on the clients' discoveries and use the activity to help broaden the clients' understanding. Malchiodi (2005) suggests that active participation gives the client the experience of doing, making, and creating which can energize individuals and redirect attention and focus, and alleviate emotional stress, allowing the clients to fully concentration on issues, goals, and behaviours. Imagination within expressive therapy is described Malchiodi (2005) as being the central concept, which informs understanding of the use of arts and play therapy. Imaginative thinking is also needed to make drawings, create a movement or manipulate figures in a sandtray – it offers the space to try out inventive solutions and transformation (Malchiodi, 2005). Mind-body interventions are designed to facilitate the mind's capacity to influence bodily functions and symptoms. Many expressive therapies are considered to be mind-body therapies because they capitalize on the use of senses to effect change (Malchiodi, 2005). The advances of neuroscience and neurodevelopment have drawn attention to the potential of expressive therapies in regard to mind-body interventions, particularly in the areas of mood disorders, stress disorders, and physical illness (Malchiodi, 2005). For example, art, drama and play therapies show promise in the amelioration of post-traumatic stress and the expression of traumatic memories (Malchiodi, 2005). Carey (2006) states that expressive arts can help children access, process and integrate traumatic material in a manner that allows for appropriate resolution. After re-enacting abusive events or some aspect of them, a child or adolescent

often begin to develop a more organized, less impulsive-driven behavior response to those events.

### **All the World's a Stage: Drama Therapy**

Drama therapy is the systematic and intentional use of drama/theatre processes, products, and associations to achieve the therapeutic goals of symptom relief, emotional, physical integration, and personal growth (Emunah, 1997). It is an active approach that helps the client tell his or her story to solve a problem, achieve catharsis, extend the depth and breadth of inner experience, understand the meaning of images and strengthen the ability to observe personal roles while increasing flexibility between roles (Malchiodi, 2005).

There are two distinct types of therapy that involve acting: psychodrama and drama therapy and while there are key differences, the two have a great deal of similarities. Developed by Jacob Moreno (1923), psychodrama facilitates insight, personal growth, and integration on cognitive, affective, and behavioural levels. It clarifies issues, increases physical and emotional well-being, enhances learning and develops new skills. Psychodrama is often conducted on a stage and props are used. It will often involve the re-enactment of real-life, past situations or inner mental processes, acting them out in present time. Clients have the opportunity to evaluate their behaviour, reflect on how the past incident is getting played out in the present and more deeply understand particular situations in their life (Emunah, 1997). Drama therapy also draws on the power of creativity, spontaneity, role and interaction, but will often use more improvisation of fictional scenes with the belief that engaging in the world of make-

believe offers not only a healthy sense of freedom but also the disguise of self-revelation. Drama therapy in comparison tends to be more playful than psychodrama, which is more intense and self-disclosing. This could be because psychodrama, even in a group setting, focuses on one person at a time and the work is rooted in real life dilemmas and unresolved conflict. Drama therapy in a group setting tends to focus more on the work of the process and interaction of the group rather than just on one single person (Emunah, 1997).

It is suggested that should a therapist who wishes to implement drama therapy in their practice have a theatre background, most therapists who choose to take on an integrated approach are not required to master all forms of expressive arts and do not necessarily need to have certification (Emunah, 1997). As with many different therapeutic models, tools and strategies can be adopted and employed by therapists to best suit the needs of their clients. Maslow is famously quoted for stating that “If the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem starts to look like a nail” (as cited in Malchiodi, 2005), suggesting that therapists should be encouraged to fill their tool boxes with a wide variety of different techniques from different theories and modalities, that being too rigid is not beneficial to the people therapists serve. Gladding (2005) and Carson and Becker (2004) state that expressive therapies are simply a part of larger realm of creativity in counselling and that flexibility and open-mindedness are key in being effective. It is suggested by Machiodi (2005) that should a therapist choose to use drama therapy or other expressive therapies as a primary focus of her or his work, then she or he should seek out some formal training, but more often than not, it is used as a way to

complement a wide range of psychotherapy and counselling theories, including: psychoanalytic, object relations, cognitive-behavioural, humanistic, transpersonal and many others.

Emunah (1997) states that the therapeutic process within the creative drama mode is liberating, enabling clients to experience a sense of freedom from the constraints of everyday life and from engrained patterns. The engagement in the fictional realm also circumvents the tendency to rehash predictable, familiar life issues immediately. Over time these fictional scenes and one's real life lead to a more direct working through of real-life issues, but from a fresh, often unexpected, perspective. The fictional realm is protective and at the same time it enables self-revelation in a safe and distanced manner. In drama therapy, the client's creativity, expressiveness, spontaneity, playfulness and imagination are all accessed – qualities that enhance self-esteem and self-image. Emunah (1997) suggests that when someone is able to locate and experience their own strength and have other witness the process, the client would then feel freer at a later time to disclose and grapple other aspects of the self that are frightening, shameful and painful.

Dungeons & Dragons and other role-playing games embody very much the same characteristics as psychodrama and drama therapy mentioned above. In creating a character, the client takes on the role of someone else and within the fantasy world described by the Dungeon Master, they are distanced from the real-world and the everyday patterns that may contribute to the presenting problems. Players are both given the opportunity to make different choices than they would in their own life and reflect on how those decisions could be implemented in their every day life. The real-time process

of the game encourages creative and spontaneous decision making and due to the fantasy aspect without the real-world consequences, players are more likely to step beyond their comfort zone to try something new, which results in seeing the benefits or consequences of those decisions (Rosselet & Stauffer 2013).

Emunah (1997) states that there are five distinct phases in drama therapy, but note that the process is not strictly linear and there is much overlap throughout each phase, while each phase builds on the elements of the stage before it. The initial phase is that of the 'warm-up' and it tends to be more interactive and playful, but it is goal driven and serves the purpose of selecting a protagonist and preparing the group for the psychodramatic enactment (Emunah, 1997). Drawing comparison to a Dungeons & Dragons campaign, this phase would be the initial meeting of the players, which could include the character creation, an explanation of the world they are about to explore and an overview of the rules and expectations within the game itself.

The first and second phases of drama therapy focus on fostering interrelationship and trust among the participants and towards the therapist (Emunah, 1997). They use dramatic play as a means of facilitating interaction and generating spontaneity. The improvised play and structured dramatic processes in these phases gradually progress to sustained dramatic scenes, composed of developed roles and characters (Emunah, 1997). These scenes are typically fictional, but through acting, clients express strong and varied emotions and exhibit both familiar and unfamiliar aspects of themselves. The first few phases tend to be more metaphorical, symbolic or fictional. The metaphoric realm enables the expression of emotions, themes and issues that the client might not be able to

tolerate directly. In these phases, clients may experience a sense of freedom and permission to be and act in new ways. At this time, the therapist's main focus is to maintain a level of safety and safeguard the freedom and avoid any cognitive processes that might inhibit the sense of liberation that acting offers (Emunah, 1997). This is not dissimilar to the first campaign of any adventuring group. The players have taken on a role and are ready to interact with the fantasy world. This is where they might encounter a desperate city official who wants them to remove some unsavoury bandits, or be recruited by a wizard to retrieve a magical artifact. A common goal for all members involved where they are encouraged to work together, be quick on their feet and collaborate. There is a danger for the DM in the first few sessions and initial quests to not create a space for the players to make mistakes and experience that freedom, or to be too quick to deny actions because they may not agree with them, this can immediately cause players to shrink away, denying them the liberation that role-playing games are supposed to encourage and promote.

Emunah (1997) states that the third and fourth phase deal more directly with current issues, dilemmas, relationship dynamics, core issues and long-term themes and will access more intense and often times, primal emotions. By the time the clients reach this stage of self-disclosure and self-examination, there is a high level of cohesion, trust and intimacy among the group (Emunah, 1997). This may occur after a few sessions or quests have taken place and the group of role-players have settled into their unique roles within the party. The primary role of a DM at this stage would be to draw upon information gathered about each individual player and write in some of the challenges

they experience in their real life into the story. For example, in preparation for a therapeutic role-playing group, the therapist may have asked some questions around phobias and then chooses to explore these within the game. The adventuring party could come across a spirit who overtakes them and forces them to face their worst nightmare. These visions are shared with the other members of their party and they must talk their compatriot free from the draw of evil. It is through the support of their teammates that they can then work through what they fear most and face up against it.

The final phase revolves around closure, review and integration of the entire journey. This could be done at the end of every session, or at the end of a campaign, depending on the desired length of the role-playing experience. The fifth phase grants an opportunity to talk openly about the process and bring the group to a close. It is important to note that the therapist's role throughout is to observe and support the natural progression of the group and tailor the process and interventions accordingly. Emunah (1997) states that some groups will gravitate towards or seem the most in need of certain phases and that the therapist needs to respect and acknowledge this need. Similarly, in Dungeons & Dragons, the DM needs to be aware of what they players enjoy and how they engage in the sessions. Some players prefer endless amounts of combat, while others enjoy the solving of puzzles and mysteries, so there is a need to find a balance between the wants of the players so that participation continues.

Emunah (1997) discusses the importance of group cohesion and states that because of the nature of drama therapy, a closed group is ideal with the expectation for regular attendance and a firm commitment to the group. As each member of the

adventuring party has a distinct role, be it cleric or rogue, each person becomes an integral part of the group and the process and experiences a strong attachment to the group.

### **Come out and Play: Adlerian Play Therapy**

People are indivisible, social, decision-making beings whose actions and psychological movement have purpose – this is the underlying assumption to Adlerian counselling theory. Each person is seen as an individual within a social setting, with the capacity to decide and to choose. From this assumption, there are four key principles to Adler's theory: people are socially embedded, goal directed, subjective and are creative which means they must be viewed from a holistic perspective (Kottman, 1995). Adlerians believe that all human beings are holistic in that they behave, perceive, feel, become and strive for meaning in their interpersonal relationships and must be understood as an indivisible whole (Parsons & Zhang, 2014). Life has no significance in and of itself, so individuals' intrinsic subjective experience is reciprocally shaped and influenced by their encounters with the real world (Parsons & Zhang, 2014).

Adler also believed that people are not motivated by instincts or formed only by experience, heredity or environment, and believed that the primary motivating force in human life is the movement towards various life goals. Behaviour can be observed and the therapist can then explore the goal of that behaviour and when the client and the therapist can understand the purpose of the behaviour, they have a way to help the client decide if they want to continue to strive towards that goal and if they want to retain that particular behaviour in their repertoire. Role-playing allows for the client to see the direct

impact of those behaviours at a safe distance from themselves (Kottman, 1995). In Chapter 2, a young boy named Matthew was described as using revenge-seeking behaviour and through role-playing, he was able to see the consequences of that behaviour in his character and the way that those around him withdrew because of the behaviour. This is a clear example of how the basic assumptions of Adler's theory can be applied in a therapeutic role-playing setting.

Adlerian theory is based on a phenomenological perspective, which means that it believes that people make decisions based on their subjective interpretation of facts rather than on the actual facts (Kottman, 1995). People learn by acquiring new information through their sensory organs, perceive it and store it in their brain (Kottman, 1995). When new information is perceived, it is matched to what they have already stored and in the process new attitudes are formed towards events and attitudes which can colour their view of the new information (Kottman, 1995). Role-playing creates an opportunity to see both the facts as well as the perceived facts through a different lens as character and player are separated. This can provide a unique opportunity to challenge the way that information is perceived and store, limiting and challenging bias.

According to Kottman (1995), people are creative. All people are unique and their uniqueness is seen to be the expression of fundamental, mysterious creativity that is innate in each person. Creativity is what takes the givens of life and interprets them, modifies them, expresses them in purely subjective and surprisingly personal ways (Kottman, 1995). The focus here is to narrow in on the special and wonderful qualities of each individual and help the client see their assets, their life-styles, their goals and

behaviours. The assumption that people are inherently creative suggests that role-playing games would be a beneficial therapeutic tool to utilize when working with a small group of clients because they embody several expressive therapies.

### **Dungeons & Dragons as a Counselling Intervention**

To create a role-playing game in an outpatient therapy group setting that would be helpful for clients to improve communication, social skills, problem-solving, and bring attention to challenging behaviours, the therapist could draw on Alder's counselling theory and implement some of the techniques explained in expressive therapies, particularly that of drama therapy. The focus of the group would be to develop and improve on the skills mentioned above through the adventures of the character that they have created and through the interactions between the players themselves.

Prior to any sessions taking place, the therapist would need to familiarize themselves with the core rules of the game. Most rulebooks are accessible online or at local hobby and game stores. No previous experience is needed to be able to run a D&D game, similarly to what Emunah (1997) says about implementing drama therapy, no formal training is needed, only an interest and enthusiasm to learn. In addition to becoming familiar with the rules, the therapist needs to develop a campaign – the primary narrative for the players to explore. For example, in Tolkien's (1954) *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the destruction of the 'one ring' was the ultimate quest of Frodo and his merry band of adventures. This singular task took three books to accomplish due to complications and challenges that arose along the way. Similarly, in a Dungeons & Dragons, the party will face obstacles that hinder or derail their progress towards the

main objective. This could include needing to complete a task for a pirate to gain passage on her ship, or learning city secrets for a band of assassins to obtain the map to a hidden treasure. These examples of minor storylines generally will tie into the larger narrative, but at times they are created organically from the decisions made by the adventuring party. It is for this reason that it is important for the facilitating therapist to be flexible and draw inspiration from the involvement of the group. This would best be done through the formation of a formal group. Kearney and Lavin (2008) state that the leader of the group needs to be able to establish a structure that will promote an effective working relationship, be responsible for securing the meeting space, setting up ahead of time and orientating the members to the group. Similarly, in a tabletop role-playing game, the DM often organizes the time and place where the game is played, needs to spend time prior to the game preparing and often needing the most time to set up and is the one who should be familiar with all of the rules to be able to answer questions and orientate players.

Once a campaign has been developed and the therapist has an understanding of the rule systems, it would be advised for them to meet with the players individually to discuss the presenting issues and what they would like to accomplish with therapeutic group. This would be an opportunity to address any concerns, questions or apprehensions they might be experiencing before meeting the other members of the group. Resources about the game itself should be provided at this point so that each individual member can read over and process the core concepts of the game at their own pacing.

The first group session would involve review of the rules and an explanation of the campaign setting – the world in which they will be exploring. Ideally, this session

would include the character creation process for a few reasons. First, with the group gathered, the members can discuss which character class they would like to play to avoid any duplication. Characters sharing a profession is not against the rules, but each class brings unique and individual talents to the party, so each player would have a specific role within the group. This is an opportunity for the therapist to observe the players interact with each other directly and begin building a therapeutic alliance. The shared experience of the character creation process is beneficial because it allows players who may have experience playing tabletop role-playing games to support the other members of the group, and it allows them the chance to engage with each other before the game begins.

In the character creation session, the players would develop their character, choosing their race, class and writing a background, which could include their family history, why they sought out to be an adventurer and what goals they may have for their character. As mentioned previously, many players will often use aspects of themselves in the character creation process, and so enhanced strengths or characteristics they find unfavourable may be emphasized in the character's personality. This is where the therapist would find most of the information for what to include and develop in the sessions for the group, but as the game begins, more will reveal itself, particularly with how the members of the group interact with one another.

The primary objective of the DM is to create and establish a fantasy world for the characters to explore and the narratives in which they can engage. The primary narrative is a means to keep the party working together (towards a common goal) while the minor

narratives are opportunities to engage with individual characters. Often times, minor storylines will emerge based on the decisions the characters make while in town or how they interact with others. This is an opportunity to explore character behaviours. With Matthew, as mentioned in Chapter 2, with how he treated the townsfolk in the local tavern, he was made aware of how his intimidating and often threatening behaviour created a sense of suspicion and concern in the NPCs of the town, but also with the members of his party.

To be an effective Dungeon Master, the therapist would have to be comfortable with the essential skills of a group therapist. Kearney and Lavin (2008) suggest that a group therapist needs to ensure the participation of all members and they need to encourage more introverted members and may need to limit those who seem to monopolize the group's time. Additionally, they need to strive for group cohesion, bringing the group together towards a common goal and purpose. As mentioned above, the DM is responsible for the narrative structure of the game and when one player takes up too much time, a minor storyline might be the way to shift the focus to the other players or to promote more engagement from a player who is more introverted. The common goal is the primary narrative – the main quest and objective for the adventuring characters. A cooperative and cohesive group will occur and endure when the therapist provides the positive, supportive and encouraging lead for the group (Kearney & Lavin, 2008).

Typically, a Dungeons & Dragons game session among friends will run anywhere between four to six hours in length. This is generally due to the difficulty that comes with

trying to schedule several adult professionals with different schedules to gather – so then taking advantage of the times when everyone is available. For the purpose of a therapeutic tabletop role-playing group, Game to Grow run weekly tabletop role-playing groups for children and adolescents that are approximately 90 minutes in length (Hawkins-Robinson, 2016). Brabender, Smolar and Fallon (2004) suggest that a typical group therapy sessions should not be longer than two hours. This is due to the intensity that often accompanies group therapy sessions and the ability for all members to be present and focused will begin to diminish after that amount of time (Brabender, Smolar & Fallon, 2004). Building off of the work of Game to Grow, a typical group session should be approximately two hours, 90 minutes for the role-playing experience and 30 minutes to be dedicated to discussing the session between the players. In her research with children and adolescents diagnosed with ASD, Fein (2015) ended the sessions with a check-in, where everyone was given an opportunity to explore and discuss what the session was like for each of them.

Materials to run a Dungeons & Dragons game are few and many resources are free and available online, including: character sheet templates, quest modules and the core rule books. Some Dungeon Masters will use graphed maps and painted figures that represent characters, while others will more heavily rely on the storytelling aspect, using words to represent the visuals to players. Dice are instrumental as the rolling of dice determines success and failure to the actions of the characters, but there are several apps for any smartphone that can act as a dice roller.

Dungeons & Dragons in a therapeutic setting draws heavily on expressive therapies, particularly that of drama therapy. Drama therapy is an interactive approach that explores an individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviours from a distance, which is something that talk therapy cannot provide (Emunah, 1997). As Adler suggests, people are viewed as inherently creative and utilizing the power of the imagination and play can strengthen the internal capacity to regulate behaviours as well as strengthen responsiveness to external pressures to act in a socially desirable way and this use of imagination can be facilitated through the engagement of symbolic representation (Kottman, 1995). Dungeons & Dragons is unique because it not only promotes work within the individual, but because it is a group activity, there is potential to do work within those who have gathered to play, not only focusing on thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of the past, but also in the present through interacting with others (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013).

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

*“Everything has to come to an end, sometime.”*

*— L. Frank Baum, The Marvellous Land of Oz*

Tabletop role-playing games have been around for nearly forty years, starting with the creation of Dungeons and Dragons by Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax (Riggs, 2017). As nerd culture is more fully embraced by society, its influence is found in hundreds of television shows, films, board games, video games comic books and novels (Hill, 2016). Table top role playing games were initially developed as a way for two friends to spend time together, to escape the 'real world' and engage in a cooperative experience, collaborating on stories through the characters that they created (Riggs, 2017). There was a time where it was criticized as being associated with the occult and promoting Satanic worship, but it managed to endure and become even more popular ('The Great 1980s', 2014).

Dungeons & Dragons is a form of role-playing game where participants create a character and describe their actions through speech. Participants determine the actions of their character based on their characterization and the actions are deemed a success or a failure by a set of rules and the roll of dice. The participants create a party of adventurers who explore a fantasy world and complete quests that are created and designed by the Dungeon Master. Together, the adventurers solve dilemmas, engage in battles and gather treasure and experience. It is a collaborative experience, where-in the DM creates the world and a primary narrative, but the actions and decisions of the party can change the direction at any given moment.

With the growing popularity and use of electronics, many kids are spending so many relatively anti-social hours on computer games, and failing to develop many important skills, other than quick fine motor skill reflexes (Hawkes-Robinson, 2007).

Role-play games offer participants a means to engage their ample imaginations with so many other benefits while avoiding the competitive nature of video games. Some of the benefits include: social, creative, intellectual, and leadership skills which can benefit them throughout their lives and this type of gaming can be used by people of all ages (Hawkes-Robinson, 2007). Role-playing games are collaborative, improvised storytelling. Players assume the roles of characters while the Dungeon Master controls all other aspects of the game. When played with an emphasis on role-playing, tabletop role-playing games necessitate cooperation, imagination, interaction, spontaneity and help develop skills such as acting, storytelling and problem solving (Sich, 2012).

Heroes often have a challenge or burden placed upon them which causes them to undertake a journey to explore or seek out the solution to these challenges. In the process, they are often changed in some way, through the course of their journey, their fundamental beliefs are altered – they are brought to a greater enlightenment (Lawrence, 2006). Taking on the role of a character in a role-playing game mimics these heroic quests, the participants create a hero and take them on adventures. Through their identification with the heroes they create and their epic quests, participants can venture beyond the everyday constraints and the mundane to vicariously act out alternate personality or interpersonal styles. As metaphors, these heroes can assist participants in accessing some of their own unconscious fears and desires, as well as experiment with the behaviours at the bounds of their comfort level or that of their defenses. In the role-playing game, the player and the character work together as allies to take control and work through their issues (Lawrence, 2006).

Heroes rarely travel alone. Jason had the Argonauts. Xena had Gabrielle. When those heroes were at the most stressful and felt as if they could not go on, it is with the support of their companions that encourage them forward. Brace (2012) describes how participants of role-playing games build a deep relationship together because as they interact with one another, they learn more about each other and can find the rhythm of one another. Being the part of something greater, not unlike a group of friends traveling together, creates a connection between those who participate through the collaborative storytelling experience. While the heroes may be completing quests, the players are directly involved and through the therapeutic process, conflicts are resolved, issues are explored and like the epic heroes of myths and legends, they are forever changed – enlightened.

Tabletop role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons can be used as a therapeutic technique in working with groups. According to Benson (2009) it provides an opportunity to explore the role of a behaviour of an individual in a domestic, leisure or work situation, practice a new skill, explore and resolve a current problem and replay a childhood scene or fantasy situation. In its simplest form, role-playing involves setting up a scene which represents some conflict, anxiety, or need to practice new roles, behaviours or skills. Role-playing is useful because it encourages involvement by introducing and legitimizing fun through an alternative way of exploring difficult issues. It encourages participation by group members and is an effective method of reducing tension and creating space to look at a problem. Role-play embraces awareness and understanding. Benson (2009) states that through role-play, participants report an increase in

understanding and empathy of others and deepens the cohesion and mutuality of the group. These findings are significant and legitimize role-playing games as a therapeutic tool. Role-playing games are an integrated approach, as they draw upon several different theories and practices: drama therapy (Emunah, 1997), Adlerian play therapy (Kottman, 1995), the influences of Yalom (1993) and Sullivan (1953) of interpersonal group counselling and Tuckman's (1965) model of group formation, and it is capable of applying these theories to support participants through their personal struggles and manage to do so in a way that is fun and interactive.

### **Limitations**

There are several benefits to role-playing games that are discussed throughout the earlier chapters such as: socialization and recreational enjoyment, improving role negotiation and impression management, allowing players to experience elements that are beyond their reality, creating a safe space to test new elements of identity, promoting creative problem solving, resolving conflict and building critical thinking, but there are also some limitations that should be considered should a therapist choose to use tabletop role-playing as a form of therapy. Resistance is described as when client is reluctant or unwilling to participate in a form of therapy. Role-playing games may be a popular hobby for adults, yet adolescents may be wary of participating because the game appears childish in nature. Emunah (1997) states that most young adults prefer to enact realistic scenarios, based on relevant themes and they often gravitate towards sociodramatic scenes they can identify with, rather than those that focus on individual concerns. It is suggested then that it is important for the therapist to dispel those fears by choosing age-

appropriate methods which make use of the participants' actual state of being, rather than asking them to play a character (Emunah, 1997). Role-playing games are not limited to fantasy worlds, there are several different settings that could be implemented to best cater to the age of the participants. For instance, if adolescents are reluctant or cannot identify with a fighter or wizard, there are tabletop role-playing games that take place in a high school or among 'regular' types of people so that the same benefits can be explored without resistance (Emunah, 1997). Resistance can also be explored therapeutically as a means to better understand where it is rooted (Emunah, 1997). It may be because a client does not want to look ridiculous or they might be shy, it could be from a lack of belief in their own ability to participate, feeling that they are not 'creative' and worry of being judged by others in the group.

Transference can occur between any client and therapist, but it can be affected more directly through the use of drama therapy (Emunah, 1997). Even when the therapist does little to no self-disclosure, their active involvement and interaction enables the clients to experience the therapist more fully as a fellow player, a fellow human being (Emunah, 1997). This is because the therapist will often take on the role in the client's drama – particularly in the tabletop role-playing setting, the therapist would be taking on the role of every NPC in the world that is created. Because of the therapist taking on the role of all the other characters within the fantasy world, the drama therapist needs to pay careful attention to the participant's responses, particularly after they engage in evocative role-playing. This could include the therapist taking on the role of the character's mother or other family member. Romantic feelings can always develop between members of the

group when an interaction between characters is romantically inclined. This can also occur between the therapist and the player should the therapist take on the role of an NPC with who the player may feel an attraction towards (Emunah, 1997). For instance, if the therapist were taking on the role of a generous and kind prince in the city and the party regularly interacted with him, one of the players may develop a 'crush' or similar romantic feelings towards the character and through them, the therapist directly. For this reason, it would be advisable to limit the intensity or level of romantic interactions as a practice of client safety and good ethics. As mentioned in Chapter 3, this is referred to as bleeding-in or bleeding-out, when a player brings the outside world into the game or when the game comes into the outside world. Emunah (1997) states that to prevent or minimize this transference, the therapist must establish clear boundaries between the dramatic scenes and real life, have a process for de-roling the participants and have methods of helping clients become conscious of their emotional responses to enactment. While transference can be complicated and create friction between players or with the therapist, there is an opportunity for reflection and awareness on the part of the person experiencing transference which can be incredibly therapeutic.

### **Future Research**

Fein (2015) and Rosselet & Stauffer (2013) have done a great deal of research into the integration of role-playing games with children and adolescents who are gifted and how it benefits them, particularly in socializing with others and recognizing challenging behaviours, but there seems to be little research into how it impacts adults. While role-playing games are rooted in the practice of drama therapy, there does not

seem to be a great deal of readings that specifically examine how tabletop role-playing games impact older populations (Benson, 2009). As someone who regularly engages in campaigns of Dungeons & Dragons with friends, it would be interesting to see how much of the benefits we share with the research related to children and adolescents. In preparing for this paper, I created a survey to make enquiries as to the experience of people who play D&D and do believe that it could be utilized in future research along with the direct examination of games by therapists.

Hawkins-Robinson (2016) describes an organization in Seattle, which has been running D&D with a variety of people for the last three years. Games to Grow ([www.gamestogrow.org](http://www.gamestogrow.org)) regularly host five different game sessions every week, each specifically designed to develop the social skills that each player is struggling with. Wheelhouse Workshops was created by Adam Davis and Adam Johns – both who identify as lifelong tabletop game players – when they realized that collaborative RPGs have an untapped potential for therapy (Hawkins-Robinson, 2016). The techniques they have developed encourages players to utilize the character they have created as a means to explore, identify and resolve issues that are present in their everyday lives (Hawkins-Robinson, 2016). This growing organization could be integral in the next wave of research into the role of tabletop role-playing games in a therapeutic setting.

Tabletop role-playing games have been an integral part of my life. Through the gaming experience I have explored aspects of myself that I was shy or hesitant to share, but also became aware of personal strengths that were unknown to me. Bialik (2018) shares similar thoughts, stating that she learned through the decisions of her character,

how patient and cautiousness she is and that she struggles with fear and logical thinking in how scared she gets in the face of danger and confused by puzzles left by the DM. Additionally, Dungeons & Dragons has been a unique and fun way for me to spend time with my friends. More than passively sitting around and watching movies, tabletop role-playing games promote togetherness and interaction as we all work towards a common goal.

Prior to conducting research for the purpose of my thesis, I was not aware that there were others in the field of counselling who held the same interest in tabletop role-playing games and wanted to include it in their work. Knowing that there are other researchers with whom I can connect with directly and share information and strategies in implementing a role-playing therapy group, has made me all the more determined to do so. Brace (2012) suggests that role-playing games have become increasingly popular because those who grew up playing and enjoying them are adults and are incorporating them into their chosen professions. Moving forward, I intend to be included as one of these adult professionals.

### References

- Abbott, E. (1948). *Candy land*. Springfield, MA: Milton Bradley Company.
- Apatow, J. (Executive Producer) (1999) *Freaks and geeks* [Television series]. Los Angeles, CA: Apatow Productions.
- Carson, D., & Becker, K. (2004). When lightning strikes: Reexamining creativity in psychotherapy. *Journal of Counselling and Development*, 82(1), 111–115.
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). *Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/ncddd/autism/facts/html>
- Badrinarayanan, V. A., Sierra, J. J. & Taute, H, A. (2014). Determinants and outcomes of online brand tribalism: Exploring communities of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGS). *Psychology and Marketing*, 31 (10), p. 853-870.
- Baum, F. L. (2013) *The marvellous land of oz*. London, United Kingdom: Hesperus Press.
- Benioff, D. & Weiss, D. B. (Executive Producers). (2011) *Game of thrones* [Television series]. New York City, NY: Home Box Office, Inc.
- Bialik, M. [Mayim Bialik]. (2018, January 11). *D&D therapy* [Video file]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mu1QT11DPKA>
- [Vice]. (2018, January 18). Escaping prison with dungeons & dragons [Video file]. Retrieved from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_kDseTCNGyA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kDseTCNGyA)

- Brace, C. S. (2012). *Of dice and men: An ethnography of contemporary gaming subculture* (Unpublished master dissertation). University of Arkansas, Fayette.
- Bussman, U. (2014). *Group dynamics: The nature of groups as well as dynamics of informal groups and dysfunctions*. Hamburg, Germany: Anchor Academic Publishing.
- Carroll, L. (2015). *Alice in wonderland*. New York, New York. Random House Inc.
- Carey, L. (2006). *Expressive and creative arts methods for trauma survivors*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). *Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/ncddd/autism/facts/html>
- Collins, S. (2008-2010). *The hunger games* [Book series]. New York: NY: Scholastic Corporation.
- Cook, D. (1989). *Advanced dungeons & dragons* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.) Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Inc.
- Cook M., Tweet, J. & Williams S. (2003). *Dungeons & dragons* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.) Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast.
- de Kleer (2017, July 24). *Dragons in the department of corrections*. Waypoint. Retrieved from: [https://waypoint.vice.com/en\\_us/article/yvwnpx/dragons-in-the-department-of-corrections](https://waypoint.vice.com/en_us/article/yvwnpx/dragons-in-the-department-of-corrections)
- Eagly, A. H., & Wood, W. (2012). *Handbook of theories of social psychology: Volume 2. Social role theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

- The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* [Video game]. (2011) Rockville, MA: Bethesda Game Studios.
- Fein, E. (2015). Making meaningful worlds: Role-playing subcultures and the autism spectrum. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 39, p. 299-321.
- Feige, K. (Executive Producer). (2008 - Present). *Marvel cinematic universe* [film series]. Burbank, CA: Marvel Studios.
- Fleishman, B., & Fryrear, J. (1981). *The arts in therapy*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Foster, G. & Krasnoff, R. (2009). *Community* [Television series]. Universal City, CA: Universal Television.
- Huizinga, J. & Ludens, H. (2004). Roles, play, and role-playing: Reality, imagination and fantasy. *Symbolic Interaction*, 27 (3), p. 338-356.
- [ICv2] (August, 2014). Hobby games market hits \$700M. *Icv2*. Retrieved from: <https://icv2.com/articles/games/view/29326/hobby-games-market-hits-700m>
- Gajdusek, K. & Holland, C. (2016). *Stranger things* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, Inc.
- Gladding, S. (1992). *Counseling as an art: The creative arts in counselling*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Goldman, W. (2007). *The princess bride: S. Morgenstern's classic tale of love and high adventure*. Orlando, Florida: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- The great 1980s dungeons & dragons. (2014, April 11). *BBC News*. Retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26328105>.

Gray, T. (2017, July). Lord of the rings spoke to 1960s college kids – and to united

artists. *Variety Magazine*. Retrieved from:

<http://variety.com/2017/vintage/features/tolkien-lord-of-the-rings-1202506533/>

Gygax, G. & Arneson, D. (1974). *Dungeons & Dragons*. Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Inc.

Gygax, G. (1979). *Dungeons & Dragons (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed)*. Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Inc.

Hawkes-Robinson, W. A. (2007). *The potential benefits and deficits of role-playing*

*gaming*. RPG Research Project Document ID: #RPGR-A0002-D-20120927.CC.

Hill, M. (2016, August). *Dungeons and dragons is not as weird as you think*. Odyssey.

Retrieved from: <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/dungeons-and-dragons>.

Jacobsen, M. H. & Kristiansen, S. (2015). *The social thought of Erving Goffman:*

*Goffman and the self*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Jaffe, R. (1981). *Mazes and monsters*. New York, NY: Dell Publishing.

Kearney, R., & Lavin, J. (2008). *Advancing your career path: Concepts in professional*

*nursing* (4<sup>th</sup> ed). Philadelphia, PA: F.A. Davis Company

Kociatkiewiwc, J. (2000). Dreams of time, times of dreams: Stories of creation from

role-playing game sessions. *Studies in Culture and Societies*, 6, p. 71-86.

Lamorisse, A. (1957). *Risk*. Pawtucket, RI. Hasbro, Inc. Board Game.

Lorre, C. & Prady, B. (Executive producers) (2007). *The big bang theory* [Television

series]. New York, NY: Columbia Broadcasting System.

- Martin, G. R. R. (1996-Present) *A song of fire and ice* [book series]. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Marshall, S. & Crampton, J. (2015). Making connections: Reducing loneliness and encouraging well-being. *Working with Older People*, 19 (4), p. 182-187.
- Magie, E. & Darrow, C. (1935). *Monopoly*. Pawtucket, RI. Hasbro, Inc. Board Game.
- McDermott, T. (Executive producer) (1982). *Mazes and monsters* [Film]. New York, NY: Procter & Gamble Productions.
- McElroy, G. (Producer). (2014). The adventure zone. [audio podcast]. Retrieved from: <http://www.maximumfun.org/shows/adventure-zone>
- McNiff, S. (1992). *Art and medicine*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- Mead, G. H., (1934). *Mind, Self, and Society*. Edited by C. Morris. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Miozzi, C. (2014, July). How dungeons & dragons has influenced successful writers. *The Escapist Magazine*. Retrieved from: <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/136152-How-Dungeons-Dragons-Has-Influenced-Successful-Writers>.
- Moreno, J. (1923). *Das Stegif Theater*. Berlin, Germany: Gustave Kiepenheuer
- Morgenstern, E. (2011). *The night circus*. New York, New York: Random House Inc.
- Moser, C. & Fang, X. (2015). *Narrative structure and player experience in role-playing games*. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interactions*, 31, p.146-156.
- O'Neal, R. (2011). Gender, identity and tabletop role-playing games (Unpublished master thesis). Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Illinois.

- Parsons, R. D. & Zhang, N. (2014). *F*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Pinchefsky, C. (2015, July 2). *Judge bans D&D in prison, rules it 'could lead to gang behavior'*. Syfy Wire. Retrieved from: <http://www.syfy.com/syfywire/judge-bans-dd-prison-rules-it-could-lead-gang-behavior>
- Riggs, B. (2017, December). *The story of d&d part one: The birth, death, and resurrection of Dungeons & Dragons*. Geek & Sundry. Retrieved from: <https://geekandsundry.com/the-story-of-dd-part-one-the-birth-death-and-resurrection-of-dungeons-dragons/>
- Rogers, C. R. (1959). *A theory of therapy, personality, and interpersonal relationships, as developed in the client-centered framework*. Psychology: A study of science. Study 1, Volume 3: Formulations of the person and the social context. Edited by S. Koch. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Rowling, J.K. (1998-2008). *Harry potter* [Book series]. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Sahlins, M. D. (1961). The Segmentary lineage and predatory expansion. *American Anthropologist*, 63, p. 322-345.
- Sullivan, N. (2004). *Conflict as an expression of differences: A desirable group dynamic in anti-oppression social work practice*. Carson, C., Lewis, E., & Fritz, A. (Ed.) Thames, UK: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. (1954). *Lord of the ring: The fellowship of the rings*. Crows Nest, South Wales: Allen & Unwin.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. (1954). *Lord of the ring: The two towers*. Crows Nest, South Wales:

Allen & Unwin.

Tuckman, B. W. (1965) Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63, 384-399

Umberson, D. & Montez, J. K. (2010). Social relationships and health: A flashpoint for health policy. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 51, p. 555-566

Whedon, J., Greenwalt, D. (1997). *Buffy: The vampire slayer* [Television series]. Los Angeles, CA: Mutant Enemy Productions.

*The Witcher* [Video game]. (2008). Warsaw, Poland: CD Projekt Red.

*World of Warcraft* [Video game]. (2004). Irvine, CA: Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

## APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Last year, Take This (<http://www.takethis.org>) wrote an article about Wheelhouse Workshops (now Game to Grow), where a therapist and social worker in Seattle were using D&D as a therapeutic tool in working with adolescents. I took an interest in their research and made the decision to explore the benefits and challenges of using tabletop gaming as a tool in therapy for my thesis. The purpose of this survey is to gather qualitative and quantitative data as well as the narrative experience of people who are currently or who have played tabletop gaming in their lives.

This survey specifically asks questions about Dungeons and Dragons because it is arguably the most popular tabletop roleplaying game. If you have never played, but have experience with other tabletop games, please feel free to contribute your information and simply make a notation of this in the last question.

By completing this survey, you accept that your information may be presented in the submitted copy of my thesis. Your name will not be included unless you consent to it. Some questions may seem unnecessary or invasive, and so there is an option for each to choose not to disclose. Additionally, most questions have an accompanying comment box for anything you would like to add about your experiences.

1. What is your age?

- 18 to 24
- 25 to 34
- 35 to 44
- 45 to 54
- 55 to 64
- 65 to 74
- 75 or older
- Prefer Not to Answer

2. To which gender identity do you most identify?

- Female
- Male
- Transgender Female
- Transgender Male
- Gender Variant/Non-Confirming
- Non-Binary
- Prefer Not to Answer
- Other (if not represented)

3. At what age did you first start playing Dungeons and Dragons?

- 12 and Under
- 13 to 18
- 19 to 25
- 26 to 31
- 32 to 37
- 38 to 43
- 44+
- Prefer not to Answer

4. What edition of D&D did you first learn to play with?

- Original D&D (OD&D)
- First Edition (AD&D)
- Second Edition (2eAD&D)
- Third Edition (3e)
- Third Edition, Revised (3.5)
- Fourth Edition (4e)
- Pathfinder
- Fifth Edition (5e)
- Other

5. What drew your interest to Dungeons and Dragons?

6. How do you choose your character's race?

7. How do you choose your character's class?

8. A detailed character background is important to me.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Space for Comments (Not Required)

9. Who was the first character you created/played? Share their story.

10. Who is the most recent character you created/played? Share their story.

11. My characters generally have similar flaws to my own.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Space for Comments (Not Required)

12. My characters generally have similar strengths to my own.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Space for Comments (Not Required)

13. Have you ever disagreed with a decision that your character has made? What were the circumstances? What did you learn from the situation and what did you struggle with?

14. What has taking on the role of these characters helped you learn about yourself?

15. Have you ever taken on the role of Dungeon Master (DM, Storyteller, GM)?

- Yes
- No
- No, but I would like to

16. What was the experience like for you? What are your favorite/least favorite aspects of the role?

17. What do you feel taking on the role helped you learn about yourself?

18. Have you ever played Dungeons and Dragons with a group of strangers?

- Yes
- No
- No, but I would like to

19. If Yes, what concerns did you have about playing with strangers?

20. If Yes, What were the benefits of playing with strangers?

21. Since I started playing D&D, I am more comfortable speaking up during a gaming session.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Space for Comments (Not Required)

22. Since I started playing D&D, I am more confident about expressing myself.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Space for Comments (Not Required)

23. Since I started playing D&D, I am better able to see situations from a point of view other than my own.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Space for Comments (Not Required)

24. Since I started playing D&D, I feel more connected to a community of people.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Space for Comments (Not Required)

25. Since I started playing D&D, I feel better capable of working with others.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Space for Comments (Not Required)

26. Since I started playing D&D, my problem solving skills have improved.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Space for Comments (Not Required)

27. Please use the space below to add any other information about your personal experiences playing D&D and what you feel it has contributed to your life.

