Therapeutic Applications of Tabletop Role-Playing Games

by

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to every child who feels lost and unloved.

Abstract

Tabletop role-playing games have existed for decades and, despite the advent of technology and some bad press in the 1980's, has seen a resurgence in recent years thanks to popular culture. Though there has been some interest in sociological and ethnographic research in the broader realm of role-playing games as a whole, minimal research exists specifically examining the therapeutic applications of tabletop role-playing games (*e.g.*, Dungeons & Dragons). The purpose of this capstone is to examine the limited existing research on therapeutic applications of tabletop role-playing games, to ground the use of this intervention in other, well-established modalities, and to make links with related areas of research such as in education and learning and the field of simulation training. Further, this paper seeks to understand reasons why therapeutically applied tabletop role-playing games remain widely under-researched in academia, and to identify possible barriers to access. The final purpose of this paper is to discuss ways to lower and eliminate barriers to access, as well as to suggest a possible outreach program to educate adult gatekeepers for youth engagement in therapeutically applied tabletop role-playing game programs, as improving social skills in youth has been demonstrated to be a positive outcome of this intervention.

Keywords: therapeutically applied tabletop role-playing games (TA-RPGs), tabletop role-playing games (TRPG), Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), youth group therapy, frame theory

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Chapter 1: Introduction

You are strutting down the street grooving to "Heart of Glass", the latest Blondie single, on your state-of-the-art Sony Walkman, making your way down to the cinema to watch *Rocky II* (1979) starring a 33 year-old Sylvester Stallone. Hopes for your future are higher than your suede platform shoes which are almost, but not quite, concealed by your best bell bottom pants. Life is groovy.

This is the era in which the first tabletop role-playing game (TRPG), Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), was introduced to basement tabletops in homes across North America. To put it in perspective, D&D (and subsequent TRPGs after it) was made commercially available in a time before personal computers, cell phones, the Internet – even before portable CD players were available. In a time when Netflix existed only in one's imagination, D&D grew in popularity and swept the western world, inspiring a generation of game masters (GMs). However, in the 1980's, D&D inadvertently became the emblem for a mass hysteria event referred to as "satanic panic" (BBC News, 2014; Riggs, 2016). Between this damaging public relations issue and the advent of consumer technology, analog TRPGs quickly took a back seat to video games and other forms of microchip-fueled, in-home entertainment. However, instead of becoming an obsolete fad along with pet rocks, TRPGs survived, albeit outside the mainstream, until making a spectacular come back in recent years thanks to, ironically, technology.

As the popularity of TRPGs (and the broader genre of role-playing games as a whole) has grown over the years, so has interest in researching them. From ethnographic queries about why people play TRPGs (Coe, 2017), who plays TRPGs (Carter & Lester, 1998), and what kind of conflicts emerge in the RPG community (Bowman, 2013), to explorations into the transformative potential of RPGs (Daniau, 2016) and how live action RPGs effectively engage youth on the

autism spectrum (Fein, 2015), contemporary studies into the efficacy and potential ability to harness RPGs for growth and learning are growing in quantity. As the idea of applying RPGs continues to propagate, so too does the concept of utilizing therapeutically applied TRPGs grow. This paper will compile and explore research on RPGs in general, applications of RPGs, and areas of study related to applications of TRPGs (*e.g.:* education and simulation training). This capstone will ultimately culminate to support the use of TRPGs in therapeutic settings.

Overview of Therapeutic Applications of Tabletop Role-Playing Games

TRPGs remain relatively under researched, especially in applied contexts. Even though there is a lack of research on its benefits in a therapeutically applied setting, tabletop role-playing games have been used increasingly in clinical settings to support a wide range of populations and presenting issues. Such populations include, but are not limited to, youth and adults who want to work on social skills, creativity, and collaborative problem solving (Game to Grow, n.d.); neurodiverse children (Autism Nova Scotia, n.d.); and U.S. veterans suffering from PTSD (Battles & Quinlan, 2021). Though this type of intervention has not been thoroughly researched, these therapeutic groups are grounded in existing empirical research from areas such as group psychotherapy, narrative therapy, psychodrama, play therapy, and acceptance and commitment therapy, to name a few. Furthermore, although limited, the currently available research on applied role-playing games demonstrates positive benefits (Blackmon, 1994; Fein, 2015; Kilmer, 2021; LeClaire, 2020; Raghuraman, 2000).

It is curious then, that tabletop role-playing games have been available for decades, and contemporary research has shown promising results regarding the therapeutic application of role-playing games, yet there has been a scarcity of research in this field. Though there is no definitive answer, Barlow et al. (2000) asserted that there is, in general, a delay between research

on individual therapies and group therapies. Tabletop role-playing games are inherently a group intervention, therefore this could be a factor in explaining the interlude between the introduction of tabletop role-playing games and research into its therapeutic uses. Additionally, this lag in formally researching the benefits of applied role-playing games could be the result of the social stigma surrounding tabletop role-playing games. In the 1980's, tabletop role-playing games – Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) in particular – became the centerpiece of a time dubbed "satanic panic" (BBC News, 2014; Riggs, 2016) which is generally regarded to have ended in the 1990's (Romano, 2012). During this time, mass hysteria swept through America (and influenced the rest of the western world), fallaciously asserting a causal relationship between D&D and criminality, suicidality, and immoral satanic worship (BBC News, 2014). Although media outlets are no longer focused on reporting the satanic influences of D&D and studies by recognized health authorities including the American Association of Suicidology, the US Centres for Disease Control, and Health and Welfare Canada have dispelled such erroneous claims, the collective fear that this event stirred in the western world still haunts D&D today.

Regardless of the reason why there has been, until recent years, scant academic interest in formally researching the benefits of applying TRPGs therapeutically, it is still used in therapeutic settings, yielding promising, probative outcomes. Because of this increasing proliferation of use, it is important to further the discourse and research around applied role-playing games. In doing so, this therapeutic technique can hopefully move into the mainstream and shed the specious social stigma that beleaguers tabletop role-playing games in contemporary times. The hope is this capstone will contribute to this movement.

As this paper is a broad examination of a young, fragmented area of study, there is no focus on a specific population or presenting issue; however, the workshop presented in chapter

three will focus on describing an outreach program to increase awareness amongst adults who act as gatekeepers to youth engagement. The hope is that by allaying common misconceptions about tabletop role-playing games and providing a guided exploration into the therapeutic foundations that support the use of applied role-playing games, awareness of this intervention and its benefits will increase across the field of counselling, and social services as a whole, thereby lowering barriers of access for future participants. Specifically, I am interested in exploring therapeutic applications of TRPGs because I believe in their potential to provide an alternative approach to more direct means of therapeutic intervention, and my hope is that by the end of this paper, I will have demonstrated the utility of this intervention.

Why I Chose This Topic and Positionality

I never grew up playing Dungeons & Dragons or other forms of tabletop role-playing games (TRPG), but I did grow up in the era of video games and had a penchant for fantasy novels and movies. Had I been introduced to D&D in my teenage years, I am certain I would've taken to the hobby quickly. Despite not actively participating in TRPGs myself, D&D was always something that I was aware of in my periphery. So, when I read an article in an introductory psychology class during my undergrad years that spoke of potential benefits of using D&D in therapeutic settings, my interest was piqued. This was the seed for the idea of my capstone project.

Although I did not work in the mental health field after graduating university, I do have over a decade of experience working with youth in my role as a private tutor. Through this work, I became comfortable relating to youth of all ages, ranging from as young as five all the way through early adulthood. Because of this tutoring experience, I knew I wanted to work with youth when I became a counsellor, and what better way to work with children than through the

medium of games? So, that article I read years ago about applied TRPGs came to mind and I took the opportunity to do an experiential project about this topic (with a willing and collaborative classmate) in my group psychotherapy class. This was the germination period for my capstone.

In researching for this class project, I came across an organization called Game to Grow, based in Seattle, Washington. Although my group psychotherapy project was finished, I continued looking into Game to Grow and decided to start their training program for mental health practitioners looking to apply TRPGs in therapeutic contexts. Since then, I have completed all three training modules, participated in an introductory game master (GM) workshop, and volunteered to moderate other trainings. I also found their database of research related to therapeutically applied RPGs incredibly helpful for starting my literature review for this project. Through engaging with Game to Grow and learning about all the ways that applied TRPGs can help clients struggling with a variety of mental health challenges, my desire to write my capstone paper on this topic took root.

When I first embarked on this year-long project with my advisor, Dr. Laura Farres, she asked me to provide a metaphor for the journey. I replied that I thought of it as the life cycle of a plant. In keeping with that metaphor, my hope for this paper is to spread the word about the benefits of applied RPGs in therapy. I hope to help this idea pollinate and inspire other therapists to consider this intervention or even to apply it in their own practices. I also intend to offer my own therapeutic groups utilizing D&D (and possibly other TRPG systems) after graduation.

Despite reports of positive benefits, there is a social stigma that surrounds D&D (and by association, other TRPGs) and can create barriers for access. In addition to the satanic panic controversy that marred D&D, adults who play TRPGs are generally thought of as being socially

incompetent males who are labelled “geeks” and “nerds” (Ben-Ezra et al., 2017; Dashiell, 2021; Samman & Porzenheim, 2019; Vermeulen et al., 2017). However, recently released statistics by Wizards of the Coast (WotC), the company who owns D&D, showed that self-identified female players make up nearly half of their player demographic (Wieland, 2021). Despite this, a culture of sexism, homophobia, racism, and toxic masculinity continue to simmer in the TRPG community (Dashiell, 2021; Trammell & Crenshaw, 2021). Some of this bigotry is inherent in the game’s rules and language; indeed, this game is steeped in outdated views of gender norms and racial prejudices dating back to the 1970’s, the era of D&D’s inception. Another contributing factor to this intolerance of “others” includes the domination of middle-class, white men in TRPG communities (Dashiell, 2021). The present paper will delve deeper into these issues in chapter two, however it is important to note these instances of bias and discrimination in this discussion of my intersectionality.

I am not a straight, white, cis-gender, male. Being a woman of colour makes me one of the least likely demographics to come to mind when society thinks of D&D. I wonder how this will affect my credibility when pitching this group to potential clients and what assumptions will be made about me when I talk about these groups. Will I be seen as unprofessional and will my future practice as a therapist be put into question because I offer this type of intervention? Furthermore, within the group itself, if I am working with adolescent males who are struggling with social anxiety, will my presence as a female cause them more distress than if I were male? If I offer this group to adult males, will my identity as a woman of colour lead to less respect within the group itself? These are the questions I have about how my practice will be affected be the current social climate. But what about how I can enact change? I may practice from a place of inclusivity and non-judgement, but is that enough to help marginalized populations feel safe

coming to me? Research shows that even before initial contact is made, marginalized clients are less likely to engage in therapeutic services if they see that websites and intake forms lack cultural sensitivity and diversity-related questions (Liang & Shepherd, 2020). Furthermore, early termination of service has been shown to be correlated with minority status (Kilmer et al., 2019). This tells me that if I want to combat racism, sexism, and homophobia in the TRPG community, I must work intentionally to overtly support and recruit marginalized populations in my practice and model inclusivity through my work as a therapeutic game master (T-GM).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this paper is to continue the budding conversation around therapeutically applied tabletop role-playing games, given the utility users are seeing. Though still a nascent therapeutic intervention, the present paper will include an examination of the current available literature on the topic and explore possible resistance to its implementation as well as future directions for research and opportunities for decreasing barriers to access. From a more personal stance, I want to explore this topic because there is no such thing as one-size-fits-all therapy. Through introducing new, creative means of therapy, we as an industry can increase our reach and our efficacy in treating clients. I write this paper with the hope of dispelling stigmas and preconceived notions about TRPGs (particularly D&D) and shining a spotlight on the benefits of this approach, to an audience of peers working in mental health. Throughout this paper, I will seek to ground therapeutic roleplaying games (TA-RPGs) in established research from existing therapeutic modalities as well as research from across other domains such as education and simulation training.

Conceptual Framework

The therapeutic framework I will be analyzing this topic through is an integrative lens combining elements of narrative therapy, play therapy (and other expressive therapies), experiential therapy, and social constructionist theory. Playing a TRPG is essentially telling a collaborative story with all the other players and the GM. For this reason, narrative therapy fits naturally with this intervention. In a typical game, players are given free rein to move the story in whatever direction they choose, and it is the role of the GM to facilitate this process. In a therapeutic setting, that same agency can be allotted to participants and a good T-GM can gently nudge and guide participants in a direction that suits their skill development from within the narrative.

As with play therapy, using TRPGs in a therapeutic setting is symbolic, distanced work that reduces the risk of triggering the client and increases the level of safety because the client is not forced to address the challenge directly. Because TA-RPGs are games, the stakes are lowered, further encouraging participants to try new behaviours, and giving the T-GM opportunity to reinforce and reward positive behaviours. Expressive therapy integration can also come into play because players will be *role-playing* and *improvising*, thereby providing opportunities for implementing tools from drama therapy and experiential therapy. Additionally, some participants may find that engaging in the art aspect of TRPGs contributes to their ability to process certain events. For example, artistic participants may draw art depicting their character and favourite moments in the game, or they may wish to design and paint a miniature of their character to use throughout the game.

Outline of Capstone Chapters

Specifically, this present paper delves into a literature review that will: introduce the history and background of tabletop role-playing games; discuss the current status of the field of

applied tabletop role-playing games and relevant research to date; examine theoretical foundations that underpin this intervention including play therapy, frame theory, and related fields such as learning and simulation training; discuss future directions for research; and highlight issues related to ethics, diversity, and inclusion. The third chapter of this capstone will outline considerations and learning goals for a potential outreach workshop meant to empower and educate adults who work with youth (*e.g.:* therapists, teachers, youth workers) with accurate information on the benefits of TA-RPGs for youth. The overall purpose of this capstone paper is to introduce readers to the realm of applied tabletop role-playing games and to spark a discussion around its use in therapeutic settings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following chapter will establish a foundation for exploring TA-RPGs by providing a brief history of recreational TRPGs, outlining the process of gaming, and emphasizing the importance of play on development as well as discussing conditions of appropriate play for adults. Next, it will offer a thorough peregrination of the existing research on therapeutically applied tabletop role-playing games, specifically, as well as related areas of research such as applied role-playing games as a whole and the field of education and learning. This section will end on recommendations for future research and opportunities for lowering barriers to access, including diversity and inclusion considerations.

In the world of roleplaying games, many acronyms are used. A glossary is provided in the appendix for quick reference (see Appendix A), which will include definitions of key terms.

The History of TRPGs

Dungeons and Dragons (*D&D*) is the original TRPG. Created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in the early 1970's, *D&D* was a new gaming system born out of Gygax's and Arneson's love of tabletop wargames (Armstrong, 2017; Peterson, n.d.). Today, there are many more TRPG systems such as: *Call of Cthulhu*; *Pathfinder*; and *Vampire: The Masquerade* (Lasley, 2020). Additionally, there are numerous independently-produced—or "indie"—gaming systems entering the market every year, and many now rely on Kickstarter [1]campaigns to fund production. Some of these indie TRPGs leverage licensed franchises but use existing rules and mechanics, such as the upcoming *Avatar Legends: The Role-playing Game*, which uses the *Powered by the Apocalypse* system (Magpie Games, 2021) which is an alternative system to *D&D*. Others are completely different frameworks with their own rules and mechanics like

[1] Kickstarter is a platform for creators to raise public funds to bring artistic projects like films, games, and music albums to life (Kickstarter, 2021).

Paranoia, wherein players assume the identity of Troubleshooters living in Alpha Complex, a dystopian, futuristic city run by an omnipotent, central artificial intelligence construct called "the Friend Computer" (Mongoose Publishing, n.d.). While many of these systems come with player handbooks and additional modules with hundreds of pages of instructions and rules (and a price tag to match), some systems' rules are much more streamlined and compact, such as the wildly popular single-page TRPG, *Honey Heist*, which is also completely free (gshowitt, n.d.). Despite the saturation of choices and systems on the market, D&D remains the most popular system as of 2021 (Weinberger, 2021), and is therefore also the most commonly used TRPG system in current TA-RPG programs. However, it is worth noting that a TA-RPG program can use any TRPG system, therefore, the following research is applicable to TA-RPGs using any system.

The Magic Circle: Understanding Games

When players sit down to play a board game, there is an unseen process that happens which causes every person at the table to silently and independently agree to adopt a set of rules that would not make sense outside the context of the game. For example, someone playing "The Game of Life" would wait for their "turn" to whirl the spinner to determine how far they move their brightly coloured, plastic car along the printed game track. In real life, that same person would not wait until others around them have moved before twisting the spinner to determine how far they walk. This phenomenon is explained by Johan Huizinga's (1938/2000) *magic circle*, which is a mutually agreed upon fantasy realm wherein play is considered socially "appropriate" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Drawing on the works of poet and philosopher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Murray (2013) asserts that because this new world exists beyond the bounds of daily reality, it demands the voluntary "suspension of disbelief". As such, the participants willingly accept events that certainly would not and could not occur in reality, in

exchange for the opportunity to engage in fantastical narratives and dramatic outcomes (Murray, 2013). Suspension of disbelief is an important desired outcome in high fidelity simulation training (Cook et al., 2013). A high fidelity simulation can be defined as a simulation that encompasses many factors involved in the activity ranging from sensory inputs, the realism of the tasks, and any other elements that contribute to the overall likeness to reality (Cook et al., 2013). A role-playing game (RPG) then, is any game where the players assume roles of imaginary characters, often in fantastical worlds, wherein they can exert a certain degree of freedom and choice within this imaginary environment (Lortz, 1979, as cited in Fine, 1981).

Under the umbrella of RPGs, there also exists live action RPGs, known as LARPs, video or electronic RPGs, abbreviated as VRPGs and ERPGs respectively, and of course, TRPGs for analogue, tabletop role-playing games. LARPs represent a fuzzy boundary between the magic circle and reality, where the fantasy role-playing aspect of RPGs meets the live action aspect of sports (LeClaire, 2020). In other words, the fantasy realm becomes rooted in reality. Recent ethnographic research into LARPing communities has shown that immersion in LARP games has been subjectively and qualitatively linked to improved insight and exploration of the self, personal growth, identity formation, and improved social skills along with an increased sense of community and belonging (Fein, 2015; LeClaire, 2020). Examples of VRPGs typically encompass video games (including online games) but can also include simulations for non-recreational purposes, such as the *Participatory Chinatown* game: a three-dimensional, multiplayer game, designed for urban community planning purposes in Boston, Massachusetts (Gordon & Schirra, 2011).

Play Therapy and TA-RPGs

Given that TA-RPGs are games, it stands to reason that theoretical foundations of play therapy apply to TA-RPGs. This is relevant because while there is minimal research on TA-RPGs specifically, examining how they may be rooted in existing, accepted, well-researched modalities can not only help guide future research, but also grants a modicum of acceptability to the use TA-RPGs until they can be further researched. Returning to Johan Huizinga's (1938/2000) seminal book on play, he defined play as "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly" (Huizinga, 1938, p.13). Similarly, Burghardt (2005) summarized his five criteria for identifying play as "repeated, incompletely functional behavior differing from more serious versions structurally, contextually, or ontogenetically, and initiated voluntarily when the animal is in a relaxed or low-stress setting" (p. 82). While Burghardt's five criteria encompassed Huizinga's (1938/2000) definition, Clark and Miller (1998) offered criteria for play that differs slightly from Burghardt's; play is defined as being non-literal, purely hedonic, ludic in nature, and flexible in its involvement of play objects and the process itself (as cited in VanFleet et al., 2010). Though the phenomenon of play has fascinated researchers across many fields, there is no single, universally agreed upon definition (VanFleet et al., 2010). However, Sutton-Smith (1997) identified seven themes across differing definitions of play: play is a developmental adaptation; play is functional in developing skills and/or establishing hierarchy; play balances negativity and pessimism; play is an exercise in pretence and acting out imaginary scenarios; play is an expression and exploration of the self; play builds social bonds; and play is fun (as cited in VanFleet et al., 2010). Distilled even further, play can be seen as an intrinsically-motivated, intentional, and voluntary activity that is inherently enjoyable, builds participants' skills and social bonds, and involves varying degrees of make-believe, harkening back to Huizinga's

(1938/2000) *magic circle*. It is important to make this connection because through understanding the phenomena present in TRPGs, facilitators utilizing TA-RPGs can leverage such phenomena to catalyze change in participants.

Developmental Role and Benefits of Play

One of the commonalities between various definitions of play across diverse fields and spanning throughout decades of research, is the utilitarian and developmental purpose of play. Humans, as with many animals, developed play in childhood as a means of developing social bonds and skills through simulation (Sutton-Smith, 1997; VanFleet et al., 2010). Play also exists on a spectrum of fantasy with all play being made-up – in other words, the stakes are not real (as with simulation training) – with some scenarios being based on possible real-world encounters (such as play fighting to prepare children to become hunters or nurturing dolls to prepare children to become caretakers), and others being completely based in a fantasy realm (such as pretending to defeat dragons or becoming wizards who can cast spells). This developmentally-driven purpose of play correlates to stages four and five in Erik Erikson's (1982) eight stages of psychosocial development. These two stages are the *industry versus inferiority* and *identity versus role confusion* stages, occurring approximately during ages six to 11 and 10 to 20, respectively (Davis & Johns, 2020; Erikson, 1982).

Erikson's Stages of Development and D&D

During the industry versus inferiority stage, children acquire and work towards mastering new skills (Davis & Johns, 2020; McLeod, 2018). It is also during this stage that children begin to understand that they are more skilled at some things and less skilled at others (Davis & Johns, 2020). They will begin to develop a sense of pride and industriousness (competence) when they succeed and a sense of inferiority when they fail (Davis & Johns, 2020; McLeod, 2018). This

stage aligns well with inherent mechanics of TRPGs because players step into characters who are proficient in certain areas and who can experience many successes in-game that reinforce the feeling of industry in participants (Davis & Johns, 2020). However, no matter how skilled a character is at any particular activity, they can still experience failure from time to time, as determined by chance (*i.e.,* dice rolls). These moments are opportunities to build "frustration tolerance" (Game to Grow, 2021) because occasional failure models for players, regardless of how skilled someone is at a particular activity, that failure can always happen due to mistakes or just run-of-the-mill bad luck. While this represents inferiority in Erikson's (1982) fourth stage, some failure is necessary to develop modesty (McLeod, 2018) and is ultimately far outweighed by successes in a TA-RPG. Furthermore, a good T-GM can make failures funny, colourful, and overall, more engaging, than successes in-game. This can help foster a positive reaction to failure in participants which has been shown to be correlated with mastery orientation in gamers (Anderson, et al., 2019). This relates to what Dweck termed a "growth mindset" as opposed to a "fixed mindset" (Mindset Works, 2017). This theory of intelligence stems from research in education (Mindset Works, 2017) and states that in a growth mindset, learners believe that they are equipped with the necessary skills to overcome a challenge through intentional practice and constructive feedback (Anderson, et al., 2019; Game to Grow, 2021c). Indeed, growth mindset mechanics have been shown to increase the persistence of players in gaming environments (O'Rourke et al., 2014). A growth mindset and increased frustration tolerance help players build industry and therefore, develop new skills.

Identity versus role confusion, Erikson's fifth stage, represents a transition from childhood to adulthood wherein youth become increasingly more independent and yearn for individuation and a clear sense of identity (McLeod, 2018). It is during this stage when youth

begin to explore all aspects of their lives from their personality to sexuality, and occupational to morality identity (Davis & Johns, 2020; McLeod, 2018). Ultimately, the fifth stage culminates in the solidification and reintegration of the self and the multiple roles an individual will occupy in their life (Bee, 1992; McLeod, 2018). This search for oneself can be enacted in TRPGs as players choose what fantasy creature and class they wish to embody (Davis & Johns, 2020). For example, a player can create an aspirational character with attributes they wish to possess, or they can select a character who personifies aspects of the player's hidden self, in order to explore new identity facets (Game to Grow, 2021d). This latter process can be particularly impactful for adolescents and youth grappling with gender identity because TRPGs afford enough emotional space (referred to as "aesthetic distance" which will be covered shortly) between the player's self and the player's persona that they can safely attempt to try new gender identities and pronouns without the fear of real-world prejudice (Game to Grow, 2021). With a skilled therapeutic GM to scaffold, encourage, and safely support skill acquisition and identity exploration, participants engaging in this form of play are well-supported in navigating these developmental stages.

Research on TA-RPGs

Although TRPGs have been commercially available since the 1970's (Peterson, n.d.), their therapeutic applications are only just becoming the focus of more research. However, there are a number of key studies conducted before the 2010's that helped lay the foundation for researchers in this emerging field. According to contemporary TA-RPG researchers, Gary Alan Fine's groundbreaking study on D&D players in 1982 is still considered the most in-depth study on TRPGs to date (Connell et al., 2020). In this seminal piece, Fine (1982) observed that TRPG participants played from three perspectives, or "frames", which culminated in his development of

frame theory. The following sections will examine Fine's Frame Theory and cover recent additions to this framework.

Fine's Frame Theory

Fine's (1983) Frame theory builds on sociological and philosophical works recognizing "the existence of 'various orders of reality' grounded in the paramount reality of the 'world of 'Practical Realities'" (James, 1890/1950; as cited in Fine, 1983, p. 181). Fine recognized that games, fantasy RPGs in particular, contained clear examples of multiple "frames" or, different bounded realities in which varying social rules are contained (Fine, 1983). Fine (1983) recognized that individuals can freely and consciously migrate between these frames of social reality, differentiating them from involuntary, often illogical, and non-structured "realities" like dreams and madness. This is similar to Goffman's (1983) interaction order framework which stipulates that humans occupy roles within *frames* that specify socially-acceptable norms and behaviours. The difference between Goffmanian frames and Fine's frames is that Fine's are specific to the context of fantasy RPGs.

Fine identified three frames: the individual as a person; the individual as a player abiding by the rules and mechanics of the game; and the individual's character, or persona (Fine, 1983; Connell et al., 2020). The first frame refers to the real-world reality and the personality, thoughts, and actions of the person playing the game (Connell et al., 2020; Fine, 1983). This frame contains who the player is as an individual, sitting at the table (or online) in the here-and-now, synchronously with the other players (and the GM) (Connell et al., 2020; Fine, 1983). The second frame represents the game rules and mechanics that govern the fantasy reality of the game (Connell et al., 2020; Fine, 1983). It is important that these rules are mutually agreed upon and understood—without such agreement, the game would lack meaning (Riezler, 1941; as cited

in Fine, 1983) and be impossible to play (Connell et al., 2020). Once these communal rules are established, through theatre-of-the-mind, players may transport themselves to far-away, fantastical places, thereby entering Huizinga's (1938/2000) *magic circle*, or, Fine's (1983) third frame. Within this frame, players need to submit to voluntary suspension of disbelief in order to fully immerse themselves in the fantasy realm (Fine, 1983). In this frame, players assume their characters' personas and engage in play (Fine, 1983; Connell et al., 2020).

It is important to note that these frames are discrete and distinct from each other, meaning that the character in the third frame is not aware of the person "playing" them nor the rules of the game (Connell et al., 2020). Existence in the third frame is reminiscent of Bishop George Berkeley's principle, *esse is percipi (percipere)*, meaning "to be is to be perceived (or to perceive)" (as cited in Downing, 2021). That is, existence is contingent on being perceived. Without the players in the first frame abiding by the rules of the second frame, the characters in the third frame cease to exist. The second frame contains echoes of *social construction theory* (Gergen, 1985); reality is subjective and mediated through language in the space between individuals (Hoffman, 1992). In a therapeutic context, social construction theory tells us that the client is the expert and that the goal of the therapist is not to dictate the right solutions, but rather to ask the right *questions* (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). In other words, the therapeutic discourse is co-created. Similarly in TA-RPGs, the therapist GM co-creates the narrative with the participants, mirroring this bottom-up, client-centered therapeutic approach.

Frames become important because they provide the context through which participants (and facilitators) are operating and communicating within the game (Connell et al., 2020; Fine, 1983). When players are communicating from different frames, this is referred to as *frame confusion*. For example, if character A critiques character B's idea, but *player* B hears this as a

personal affront from *player* A, then player B has just experienced frame confusion. When affect due to frame confusion in one frame translates and exists in a new frame, this is referred to as *frame bleed*. Returning to the previous example, player B may now harbour ill feelings towards player A which now affects how they interact with this individual outside the bounds of the game. The following section will delve into the effects of frame confusion and frame bleed in more detail.

Frame confusion is defined as a situation when players communicate and perceive events through different frames (Connell et al., 2020; Fine, 1983). A very common instance is confusion between frames one and three, the player's self and the player's character. This frame confusion can cause interpersonal conflict and tension between players and their characters (Connell et al., 2020). When a player confuses how other players' characters feel about their character with how the other player feels about them as a person, they are experiencing frame bleed (Connell et al., 2020). The distinction between frame confusion and bleed is that the former refers to blurred boundaries whereas bleed is the emotional transference between a player and their character, and vice versa (Bowman, 2013; Connell et al., 2020).

While the example of frame bleed provided above may seem unwanted and detrimental to the growth goals of the group (*e.g.,* building social skills), bleed itself is not inherently unwelcome; in fact, positive frame bleed is a powerful phenomenon for T-GMs to leverage to assist participants in moving towards their goals (Boccamazzo & Connell, 2019; Kilmer & Kilmer, 2019, as cited in Connel et al., 2020). Indeed, bleed can be a double-edged sword in that players can experience *bleed out* or *bleed in*. The former is when frame three impacts frame one (that is, feelings and skill-acquisition in-game translate to life outside the game) and the latter is

when frame one impacts frame three (when the player's affect and knowledge outside the game influences their character's decisions).

The Fourth Frame. The fourth frame is a therapeutic frame unique to TA-RPGs (Connell & Kelly, 2021). For example, players having sidebar conversations with each other to talk about their characters' relationship while in the middle of a D&D session, or breaking the fourth wall to encourage perspective-taking in TA-RPG participants (*e.g.*, asking "who can tell me what this NPC is thinking? What feelings might they be feeling?") (Connell & Kelly, 2021). This breaking of the fourth wall is reminiscent of a Game to Grow method tool concocted by Adam Davis called "zipping in". To use this tool, a T-GM will verbally announce, and physically indicate, that they are interrupting gameplay by pantomiming the act of unzipping an invisible seal between themselves and the rest of the players at the table (Game to Grow, 2021a). The purpose of this is to intentionally shift players from the third to the first frame in order to have the therapist (not the GM) intervene during a tense moment. It is also a rich opportunity for therapist-facilitators to utilize modelling and reflection to encourage player agency in their own growth. This frame is evolving and still in an embryonic stage of development, hence a lack of information on this frame. As TA-RPGs become more widely used, researched, and accepted as a viable therapeutic intervention, it will likely become more formalized and discussed in published works.

Frame Shifts & Aesthetic Distance. When there is no frame confusion or frame bleed, Fine (1983) referred to this as a *frame shift*. He asserted that frames have varying levels of stability and that banal frame shifts occur when demands of the real world interrupt the flow of the fantasy world (Fine, 1983). An example of this might be a player's cell phone ringing during a game, interrupting play temporarily, or the GM needing to excuse herself to use the bathroom.

Fine goes on to express that the intensity of the experience in each frame can be modulated up and down, both intentionally and unintentionally. This keying up and down in intensity and immersion can also be described as *aesthetic distance*, which is the intangible, psychological space between a player's self and psyche, and that of their character (Game to Grow, 2021a).

Aesthetic distance is an important tool for T-GMs because it can be leveraged to increase buy-in to the fantasy realm, thereby increasing engagement and supporting positive bleed-out experiences (Connell et al., 2020; Game to Grow, 2021a). Aesthetic distance can also be utilized in helping participants ease in and out of the characters through the use of pronouns. For example, at the start of each group session and during check-ins, T-GMs may refer to the participants by their names and their pronouns, but when the game session starts, T-GM's can begin referring to players by the character names. In this way, T-GMs are keying up the experience for players in frame three. If a T-GM begins noticing tension, frame confusion, or bleed-in, they can proactively key down by referring to the players by their real-life names and pronouns in an attempt to de-escalate the situation. Additional skills and tools a T-GM can use to modulate aesthetic distance include the use of the narrative, vocal tone, prosody, and affect. For example, some GM's employ changes in vocal tone, accents, body language, and even occasional props and costumes to help distinguish and amplify the personalities of their NPCs, thereby increasing players' immersion, and hopefully their engagement, in the fantasy world. It is important for players to engage in this fantasy world because this aesthetic distance increases the level of safety within the game for players. This lowers the stakes and can encourage them to be able to try new behaviours. For example, T-GM's currently providing TA-RPG groups cite examples of aesthetic distance providing participants with enough space and safety to experiment with gender expression and changes in pronouns. Some therapeutic modalities that inherently

utilize aesthetic distance include: Acceptance and commitment therapy and viewing the self-as-context (Yu, Norton, & McCracken, 2017); the empty chair technique from Gestalt therapy (Brownell, 2016); addressing and externalizing maladaptive thoughts and experimenting with new behaviours in cognitive behavioural therapy (Connell et al., 2020); child-centered play therapy; expressive therapies such as art or sand tray therapy; and graded phobia confrontation in exposure therapy.

Contemporary Research on TA-RPGs

Following Fine's (1983) frame theory, there have been several writings published on other psychological and sociological aspects of TRPGs, such as Carter and Lester's (1998) analysis on the personalities of D&D players, Waskul's (2006) chapter on social reality in TRPGs, and an exploration into social workers' perception of the association between individuals who engage in TRPGs and psychopathy (Ben-Ezra et al., 2017). Additionally, there have been various articles published researching other applications of RPGs, such as Edu-RPGs and Rec-RPGs, as well as other formats of RPGs other than just TRPGs (*e.g.*, LARPs). Examples of such publications include: Fein's (2015) analysis on LARPing subcultures within a summer camp for teenagers on the autism spectrum; Steadman et al.'s (2014) query into the use of commercial video games in therapy with children and adolescents; and LeClaire's (2020) research findings that LARPing can be a conduit for growth in participants. Despite this influx of publications focusing on A-RPGs in the realm of social sciences over the past few decades, few researchers have tackled the exploration of how TRPGs can be harnessed specifically for therapeutic benefit. The following section will review the literature to date that explicitly seeks to understand therapeutic applications of TRPGs.

Case Studies on TA-RPGs. Two of the earliest, most notable studies related specifically to the use of TRPGs in a therapeutic setting are Ascherman's (1993) qualitative analysis on the impact of D&D on an inpatient unit for American, male adolescents aged 15-18 and Blackmon's (1994) case study on a 19-year-old, American male with schizoid tendencies.

In the former, Ascherman (1993) concluded that the introduction of fantasy role-playing games like D&D in a stable inpatient setting was highly detrimental to treatment. The author cited empowerment of narcissistic and antisocial behaviours, increased acrimony between staff and patients, promotion of paranoia, increased resistance to treatment, and normalization of violence (Ascherman, 1993). At first glance, this appears as a damning account of the dangers of D&D, reminiscent of its "satanic panic" years in the 1980's. However, there are a number of points to consider before dismissing TRPGs as viable therapeutic tools based solely on Ascherman's account. First, the therapist did not take the role of DM in the game, and instead, the participants were simply given permission to play amongst themselves. The challenge here is that the entire premise of utilizing TRPGs for therapeutic use is contingent on having a therapist-led experience. As with any other therapeutic tool or modality, it requires the guidance of an experienced therapist to ensure safety tools are in place and that the tool is being applied properly; that is the distinction between a social TRPG and a therapeutically-applied TRPG. In Ascherman's case, he allowed inpatients to engage in social TRPGs but there was no attempt to make it "therapeutic" through practitioner involvement. Furthermore, the client population in Ascherman's study consisted of individuals with severe psychiatric difficulties and highly oppositional behavioural challenges, with many of them displaying borderline, narcissistic, and/or antisocial tendencies. These kinds of psychiatric challenges that hinder perspective-taking

and theory of mind are challenging to navigate, even with an experienced therapist acting as a GM in a TA-RPG campaign.

However, some research has shown that when TRPGs are structured and managed appropriately, participants who struggle with theory of mind and differentiating between reality and fantasy can actually develop skills in those areas (Fein, 2015; Hawkes-Robinson, 2011). In Ascherman's study, individuals with narcissistic and schizotypal personalities were given free rein to act as Game Master and control the fates of all the players' characters in-game. Naturally, this power in-game acted as a sort of currency out of game, and led to frame bleed, similarly to the phenomenon Zimbardo et al. (1971) documented in the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment. Unsurprisingly, Ascherman (1993) concluded that TRPGs can threaten the stability of an inpatient treatment program like his own and advised other clinicians to thoroughly consider the risks of introducing such games and examine potential changes in group dynamics both within participants and between participants and therapist(s).

Conversely, only a year later, Blackmon (1994) recounted an improvised, modified form of play therapy used to treat a schizoid, suicidal, 19-year-old Caucasian male. For the first year of their work together, Blackmon reported that his client had no friends or meaningful social contact outside of therapy, but in their second year of treatment, the client began telling Blackmon about his D&D group. While hesitant at first to encourage the client to bring material from these games, Blackmon quickly saw how important these games were for the client. Upon realizing this, Blackmon began asking for game episode summaries and inquired about experiences, feelings, and motivations of the characters. During this time, the client even returned to his post-secondary studies. While the client initially struggled to verbalize his own feelings, by asking him to speak about D&D characters' feelings, Blackmon was able to

transition the client away from needing to speak through D&D characters. That is, over the course of six months of treatment incorporating D&D, Blackmon's client was able to verbalize his own feelings freely without the use of D&D as a displaced medium. This is therapeutic benefit is a product of what Fine (1982) described as *frame bleed* and the utilization of aesthetic distance for increased emotional safety.

Similarly, Raghuraman (2000) also documented a client case where success was found in leveraging the client's passion for D&D. Raghuraman's case detailed clinical work with a 14-year-old male of Native American descent. The client had been diagnosed with Type I diabetes at five years of age and, due to repeated hospital visits for diabetic ketoacidosis (caused by a lack of insulin in the body), the client was removed from his family home on the grounds of parental neglect. Additionally, the client had a family history of psychiatric disorders and though he was placed in various foster homes and residential facilities, he was ultimately admitted to hospital on a psychiatric hold where he began treatment with Dr. Raghuraman for six months. By his second session, the client had already started to reveal this passion for D&D in his art therapy sessions. As with Blackmon (1994), Raghuraman leaned into the client's desire to engage via activities involving D&D. In this case, the client drew dragons, molded a clay pot in the visage of a dragon, and visibly smiled while discussing D&D. As with all forms of expressive therapy, art therapy was the conduit through which he could confront and process his pain in a symbolic, emotionally safe way (yet another example of aesthetic distance in action). Indeed, of the goals initially established at the start of treatment, Raghuraman (2000) documented his success in using art therapy as an appropriate outlet for the client's emotions, and offering the client a sense of autonomy, control, and mastery in a life otherwise rife with oppression. Raghuraman also

emphasized that an effective therapist needs to remain open-minded and flexible, in order to meet the client where they are at (in this case, through the use of D&D themed art therapy).

These studies highlighted the potential of social games to leave either a positive or negative impact on participants, and though Ascherman's report (1993) is not flattering, it is important to keep in mind that his anecdotal case study did not utilize a key component of TA-RPGs: an intentional DM. This is akin to running a therapy group without any intervention or moderation from a trained group facilitator. As Yalom and Leszcz (2005) wrote in their definitive text on group psychotherapy, the group leader is responsible for being both the technical expert and the model-setting participant, which in turn establishes and shapes the norms of the group. Without an effective, therapeutically-minded leader acting as facilitator, the group runs the risk of devolving into chaos, as experienced and documented by Ascherman. However, while his article does not focus specifically on *therapeutic* applications of TRPGs, his findings are still important to the field because they provide an account of how not to introduce TRPGs to a therapeutic setting and what some of the signs and pitfalls are of not taking proper care in planning and facilitating a TA-RPG group.

Recent Pilot Research. At Game to Grow, Dr. Elizabeth Kilmer (2021) has spearheaded a research initiative to examine participant-reported benefits of TA-RPGs. This pilot study was approved for the University of North Texas Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was conducted in accordance with America Psychological Association (APA) ethics principles. The study participants were parent/participant dyads, a subset of Game to Grow participants, and were recruited via email. Of the parent/participant dyads, 13 participants completed post-surveys (10 of whom had completed pre-surveys) and 24 parents completed post-surveys (15 of whom completed pre-surveys). The participant pool included youth aged 11-17 with a mean age of

13.31 and a gender distribution of 11 males, one female, and one transgender individual. Additionally, over 50% of the participants had been enrolled in Game to Grow groups for over a year at the time of the study. In terms of participant perceptions, 100% of respondents agreed with the statements “this group helped me work on my social skills” and “this group helped me feel better about myself” by indicating either “somewhat true” or “certainly true” on Likert scales. Looking at the parental half of the parent/participant dyads, when asked to rank how true the following statements were “I think this group was helpful for my child” and “I believe this group helped my child with their social skills”, 100% of respondents replied in the true direction.

A major goal of this study was to guide future research into TA-RPGs by determining how best to research them in the future (Kilmer, 2021). Therefore, the post-survey sought to understand what skills parents and participants perceived as being practiced in the group the most. Interestingly, parents tended to select skills related to interpersonal interactions like social skills, self-confidence, cooperation, and communication, but skills like problem-solving were not as frequently selected. Comparatively, the participants themselves reported actively practicing making friends, cooperation skills, communication skills, and problem-solving skills. Noticeably, both participants and parents ranked some form of interpersonal skills at the top of the list, yet chose different wording; the slight variation in diction may allude to differences in how parents and participants conceptualize the purpose or benefit of the group, differences in expectations, and/or differences in priorities. Furthermore, problem-solving was a skill that participants ranked fourth on their list of skills actively worked on during group, whereas parents ranked problem-solving ninth on their list. Again, this contrast may indicate differences in participant expectations versus parental expectations and desired outcomes, or it may be evidence of the different experiences and perceptions participants versus parents have of the group. In other

words, it maybe something participants feel is an active goal or practiced skill because they are in session, solving riddles and puzzles collaboratively, whereas from a more macro level, parents see the group as encouraging collaboration regardless of the task at hand.

In addition to the aforementioned survey, parents and participants were also asked to complete the strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ) (Kilmer, 2021). The SDQ is a self-reported and observer-reported measure that examines multiple domains of functioning including prosocial behaviour, peer relationship problems, emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity and inattention, total difficulties (i.e., intensity of distress experienced across domains), and impact of said difficulties across domains (e.g.: school, home, and leisure activities). While there were no significant differences in the parent report, Dr. Kilmer reported two significant differences in the participant report: First, there was a significant decrease in self-reported peer relationship problems; second, there was a significant decrease in self-reported impact of challenges in multiple domains of functioning – home, school, friendships, and leisure activities. This survey was selected due to its brevity, thereby decreasing survey fatigue and potentially participant attrition.

Of course in Kilmer's pilot study (2021), the small sample size and lack of diversity of participants, namely with respect to gender identification, are limitations. The small sample size may have also contributed to the lack of significant findings in the parent reported SDQ. Additionally, participants were self-selected and half of them had already been engaging in GTG services for over a year. However, these findings indicate preliminary findings that certainly merit future exploration focusing on larger, more diverse samples, testing with different age groups, and amongst participants who are newer to TA-RPGs. Future research should also focus on other measures that may be more accurate in measuring personal growth and symptom

reduction in TA-RPG participants. Another potential confound is sampling participants who have engaged in the service for over a year. This is because they may have already maximized benefit from the intervention given the principle of diminishing returns. Ultimately, Dr. Kilmer's pilot study at GTG shows promising potential for future research to empirically support the belief that TA-RPGs may reduce overall symptom related stress and improve skills related to social interactions

Related Areas of Research

In contrast to the exiguous research available on therapeutic applications of TRPGs, there is a comparable wealth of research in related fields such as simulation training, play and education, and expressive therapies that can lend support to the argument for the utility of applied TRPGs. For example, it is reasonable to look to therapeutic benefits of A-RPGs delivered through other mediums such as V-RPGs and LARPs and generalize findings across all A-RPGs. The following section will explore such research.

Applied RPG Research

While there is a dearth of research specifically on therapeutic applications of TRPG's, there is a much richer pool of research on RPG's and A-RPGs in general, particularly with respect to learning and education. Indeed, contemporary researchers have contributed 75% of the available literature on RPG's within the last 15 years (Daniau, 2014; Daniau, 2016). Despite a paucity of research specific to therapeutic applications of TRPG's, there is a high level of transferability between the existing body of research and therapeutic applications of TRPG's. For example, forms of role-playing (e.g.: LARP vs. TRPG vs. VRPG) are not mutually exclusive (Daniau, 2016) and the goals and outcomes for various RPG research are similar if not the same as therapeutically applied TRPG's. Furthermore, educational role-playing games (Edu-RPG's),

like TA-RPGs, have pre-defined educational outcomes and encourage students and participants to learn new skills and work towards personal development through play (Bowman, 2014; Daniau, 2016). What Daniau (2016) refers to as "Transformative role-playing games" or, TF-RPG's, overlap significantly with the goals and processes of TA-RPG's. Namely, Daniau's TF-RPG is a marriage between ludic engagement in a facilitator-led TRPG, and an intentional, formal group debriefing after the game, led by a trained facilitator (Daniau, 2016; Rogers, 1969). For the duration of this paper, Daniau's (2014, 2016) "TF-RPG" will be used synonymously with TA-RPG given their significant overlap, however the term TF-RPG will not be replaced with TA-RPGs to respect and preserve the original author's intent. Additionally, because of these shared goals and features of Edu-RPG's, TF-RPG's and therapeutically applied TRPG's, the present paper will consider research in such related fields as relevant and applicable to this discussion on A-RPG's as a whole.

Level Up: TRPGs and Skill Acquisition

Bélanger and Daniau (2009) posited that TF-RPGs are best used for acquiring knowledge, improving fundamental skills (e.g.: writing, reading, basic mathematics, and critical thinking/problem solving), practicing social skills, and encouraging discovery and personal development. Indeed, Chung (2012) showed that TRPGs may promote creativity in participants; in their study, TRPG players scored higher than non-TRPG players across all measures of creativity utilized in the study (Chung, 2021). This process of skill acquisition and development can be attributed, in part, to simulation theory.

Research across many fields including education, healthcare, and military training solidify the argument that simulation training with specific, pre-determined goals consistently leads to improved outcomes versus training that does not include simulation training (Alinier et

al., 2006; Cook et al., 2011; Hays et al., 1992). The feedback from participants who have engaged in simulation training in the medical field has been overwhelmingly positive (Alinier et al., 2006). The benefits cited by participants include being exposed to a variety of scenarios in a relatively short timeframe and being able to observe peers in the same scenario (Alinier et al., 2006). The latter benefit is in line with research in the counselling realm that finds that using reflecting teams is a valuable tool for novice counsellors to practice, observe, and learn new therapeutic skills (Losey & Norman, 2016).

An important parameter of simulation training is fidelity. Defined as a "complex concept including both physical and functional similarity" (Hays et al., 1992, p. 64) with respect to the activity it is simulating. Fidelity can be simplified to be understood as how accurately the simulation represents a real-life situation. In this way, TRPG's can be used to create simulated situations to give participants an opportunity to practice and acquire a new skill. For example, a T-GM may design an interaction in game that forces a shy participant to engage socially, or they may introduce a puzzle that cannot be solved until at least the third attempt, in order to give participants an opportunity to practice frustration tolerance. Finally, the concept of Huizinga's magic circle and voluntary suspension of disbelief are key in increasing the so-called fidelity of a simulated situation within a TRPG environment.

Skill Deficits. DeMatteo et al. (2012, as cited in David & Johns, 2020) outline three types of deficits TA-RPG participants can experience: Knowledge deficit, performance deficit, and fluency deficit. A knowledge deficit is when an individual does not know the skill and needs to be taught. According to Davis and Johns (2020) a child who is learning a new skill in response to a knowledge deficit will likely then experience performance and/or fluency deficits as well. A performance deficit is where the player knows the skill but chooses not to use it; in this case,

they need to be incentivized to use the skill and rewarded for the use of it, regardless of how well it is applied. Performance deficits can arise from a player's past experiences when applying the skill was ineffective or possibly even cause for punishment. Performance deficits can also arise from a client's lack of belief in their own ability to apply the skill effectively. Finally, a fluency deficit is where a participant has and uses the skill, however it is done ineffectively. To address this third deficit, a T-GM would want to give that player ample opportunity to practice the skill with constructive feedback and repetition (Davis & Johns, 2020).

Addressing Skill Deficits. A therapeutic GM running a game meant to help develop players' social skills may introduce a situation wherein players need to negotiate with an NPC through a conversation in order to advance the story or reach their goal. Additionally, because these games are co-created and exist as a shared fantasy between players and GM, there is no fixed action or outcome. This gives the GM flexibility to improvise and meet the participants where they are at by scaffolding appropriately for each player to achieve optimized challenge (more on this shortly). For a player with a knowledge deficit, the GM may demonstrate appropriate social interaction by leading the negotiation with the player. As an example, if there is a relatively mixed group of players, the GM may even encourage another player with more advanced skills to demonstrate and model the skill. For a participant with a performance deficit, the GM may tie a tempting reward to the negotiation, such as desirable loot in the form of a weapon or valuable gems or a key piece of information to move the narrative along.

According to Davis and Johns (2020), not only can TRPGs be mindfully applied to help participants explore, learn, and develop new skills (such as social skills, critical thinking, and problem solving), but they can also be used to facilitate basic math and literature skills, as well as a fundamental understanding of statistics. This is because first and foremost, players will need

to be able to read and understand their character sheets as well as the rulebook. Some rules are vague and require conversation with other players and the GM to discuss whether a proposed application should be allowed in-game. Furthermore, in a situation like this, a GM can always accept modifications to the standard rules as a reward for participants engaging socially and effectively with the GM. The only caveat here is to be aware of maintaining an appropriate game balance (for instance, a therapeutic GM wouldn't want to allow a player to make a rule modification that would allow the player to decimate all foes within one turn). Furthermore, players will be asked by the GM at various points throughout the game to make dice rolls to determine the outcome of a certain action, order of initiative in an encounter, or to make a saving throw against a foe's action on a player character. Additionally, when loot is awarded, some basic calculations may be necessary to determine how much of an item players receive. All of these instances build subitizing skills and mental math skills. Finally, a player may even apply knowledge of basic statistics in order to help determine if she wants to follow through with a particular action.

Daniau (2016) builds on this notion, showing that RPG's can certainly be harnessed to help develop tangible skills such as historical information, or even more advanced math skills. For instance, not only could an intentional GM ask that no calculators or cell phones are used in game so that participants must exercise their mental math skills, but she may even opt to include more advanced mathematics problems through puzzles. For example, say a player character chooses to fire a bow at a foe from a distance of 30 feet. Rather than simply asking the player to roll for an attack, adding any relevant modifiers, a GM aiming to teach participants about parabolic equations and/or kinematics may challenge the player to solve for the initial velocity required for the arrow to hit.

Problem-Based Learning & Scaffolding.

Research in the field of problem-based learning (PBL) indicates that learner-centered scaffolding systems (LSS) can help educators optimize challenge for K-12 students (Kim et al., 2019). This is important because learners who are optimally challenged experience increased intrinsic motivation, interest, and success in learning activities (Renninger & Hidi, 2015). The optimal level of challenge lies at the intersection between the level of difficulty of the task and the learner's own ability (Kim et al., 2019; Renninger & Hidi, 2015). However, the ability level of a student is not entirely up to the teacher or facilitator to measure; optimal challenge is also influenced by the learner's perception of both the difficulty of the task and their mastery of a skill (Durik, et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2019). Therefore, success in a PBL curriculum depends not only on a student's ability to seek a sufficient amount of appropriate and personalized support, but also whether or not they believe they can succeed with said support (Smith & Cook, 2012). This is where scaffolding comes into play.

Scaffolding is an important piece of the puzzle in successfully implementing PBL (Kim et al., 2019), and the extemporaneous nature of TA-RPGs lend themselves well to scaffolding and PBL. PBL was first conceived in medical schools (Barrows, 1996) and success in PBL is moderated by students' own perceptions of the challenge and of their own abilities. Because of this relationship between perception and success in PBL, scaffolding is a key ingredient in supporting self-efficacy in learners (Kim et al., 2019). With theoretical origins in Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Verenikina, 2003 as cited in Kim et al., 2019), scaffolding can be defined as the support provided by experts (such as a T-GM), or even knowledgeable peers, which then empowers the learner to engage in and develop skills by overcoming challenges that would otherwise be outside their current skill level (Wood et al.,

1976). In addition to helping students with challenges around knowledge transfer and level of motivation, scaffolding can also help learners with knowledge acquisition (Schmidt et al., 2011; Simons & Klein, 2007), which is the prescribed strategy for addressing knowledge deficits (Davis & Johns, 2020).

Some critics argue that PBL is an ineffective approach (Kirschner et al., 2006). However, other researchers expostulate that these findings are based on incorrectly implemented PBL curricula and that when applied correctly with ample scaffolding for student support, PBL is highly effective (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). Indeed, Schmidt et al. (2011) found considerable support for their hypothesis that PBL is effective in learning environments thanks to an activation-elaboration action. Activation-elaboration occurs because PBL encourages the activation of antecedent knowledge, and then provides a rich environment in which students can elaborate on said knowledge. Schmidt et al. (2011) also found that situational interest (e.g.: intrinsic motivation) facilitated by socially and cognitively matched interpersonal supports (i.e.: a facilitator or peers in a small group), prevent attrition and increase overall learning. This aligns with Kim et al.'s (2019) findings that because PBL originated in medical schools where students are more mature, motivated, and have a more homogenous knowledge base (Barrows, 1996), scaffolding is a necessary ingredient in creating optimal challenge for students.

Future Directions for Research

Research on TA-RPGs is still in an abecedarian stage, as evidenced by a lack of agreement on nomenclature and formal research on the topic. Despite this, various organizations have already been utilizing this intervention and reaping its benefits across Canada and the United States including Game to Grow in Seattle, the Minneapolis and North Texas Veterans Affairs Healthcare Systems, and Autism Nova Scotia, to name a few. As the use of RPGs in

therapy continues to grow more salient, it also becomes more necessary to identify markers of therapeutic growth and measures to understand the efficacy of the intervention, as indicated by Dr. Kilmer's (2021) preliminary research discussed previously. It is also important for future research to focus on and formalize writing on the fourth frame, a therapeutic addendum to Fine's original frame theory.

Shechtman and Leichtentritt (2009) found that research in group psychotherapy was lacking in data examining the relationship between process variables and outcomes in group thearpy, specifically with children and adolescents. In general, group research tends to lag behind research on individual therapy (Barlow et al., 2000) and therefore, often draws on measures from individual therapy research rather than discerning or creating novel measures specific to group psychotherapy (Shechtman & Leichtentritt, 2009). Furthermore, of the body of research that exists on group therapy, there are limited papers on process research in children's therapeutic groups (Shechtman & Leichtentritt, 2009), which becomes highly relevant when considering organizations like Game to Grow and Autism Nova Scotia who offer TA-RPG groups predominantly to children and youth.

This distinction is important because the current, albeit sparse, process research that exists on child therapeutic groups indicate that a child's alliance with the facilitator therapist as well as a child's social bonds with their groupmates, are strong predictors of both process and positive outcomes (Shechtman & Leichtentritt, 2009). Additionally, Shechtman & Leichtentritt (2009) found that a child's bonding with the group therapist led to improved group functioning (*i.e.,* the child's engagement and active participation in the group) and reduced anxiety which then led to improved social competence and behaviour. They found that this can be achieved through encouragement, interpretation, and self-disclosure by the therapist (Shechtman &

Leichtentritt, 2009). Conversely, the research on adult therapeutic groups shows that the relationships between participants are more important than individual bonds with the counsellor in promoting therapeutic change (Piper et al., 2005). This indicates that the focus on relationship development and therapeutic alliance needs to be moderated depending on whether the group is designed for children and adolescents or adults.

There are, however, limitations to Shechtman and Leichtentritt's (2009) study. Researchers only examined four outcome variables and they were all self-reported; the ages of children in the groups had a wide range from 10-18 years old and lacked even distribution between male and female participants; the study lacked a control group; and finally, process variables were limited to group functioning and therapist behaviour. Future research on youth therapeutic group process should try to include control groups and more homogenous test groups in order to detect any subtleties between demographics such as a narrower age range and gender identity. On the topic of gender identity, diversity, and inclusion is an important topic to examine in future TA-RPG research in general.

Barriers to Adoption of TA-RPGs

Though more practical limitations may exist, the following section will explore two broad, societal barriers to popularizing the use and research of TA-RPGs.

Satanic Panic

Although D&D has become increasingly more popular in recent years (Sanman & Porzenheim, 2019; Weinberger, 2021), its early years were marred with controversy. In the 1980's, within the first decade of D&D's existence, D&D became the scapegoat for the disappearance of 16-year-old Michigan State University (MSU) sophomore, James Dallas Egbert III, which catapulted the game into the centre of what was dubbed the "satanic panic" (BBC

News, 2014; Riggs, 2016). Egbert suffered from severe mental health challenges, including depression and drug addiction, and had gone into hiding in the utility tunnels under the MSU campus. His parents hired a private investigator, William Dear, to find Egbert. Dear blamed D&D as the catalyst for Egbert's disappearance; Dear believed the game advocated and encouraged violent behaviour and departure from reality. Ultimately, Egbert died by suicide, which further fueled the satanic panic movement, spurred the publication of a number of fictitious novels on the topic, and eventually, culminated in the TV-movie, *Mazes and Monsters* (1982), starring a young Tom Hanks.

Shortly after Egbert's suicide, and coincidentally in the same year as the release of *Mazes and Monsters* (1982), a high school student in Virginia named Lee Pulling died by suicide, after which the press commented on his social struggle to fit in (BBC News, 2014). Pulling's mother, Patricia, believed his suicide was caused by D&D. However, others who knew Lee, as with Egbert, were aware that there were underlying mental health factors present (BBC News, 2014). After failing to sue Lee's school principal, Pulling attempted to sue TSR Inc., the publishers of D&D (BBC News, 2014). Though both cases were dismissed, Pulling created the anti-D&D group, Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons, or BADD, the year following her son's suicide. With the assistance of conservative Christian groups, Pulling and BADD launched a mainstream media campaign that heightened satanic panic in the Western world, with the mass hysteria even reaching across the proverbial pond to the United Kingdom. Though these false, *post hoc* claims about the causal link between D&D and suicide were debunked by, among other organizations, the American Association of Suicidology, the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and Health and Welfare Canada, the damage to D&D's reputation from the satanic panic era left lasting scars well into the twenty-first century.

For example, in 2010, the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit ruled to uphold a ban from 2004 on D&D within Waupun Correctional Institution (BBC News, 2014). Key testimony leading to this verdict was provided by the prison's gang expert, Captain Muraski. Muraski stated that games like D&D mimicked gang organization and could therefore lead to the development of gangs within prison. Though research was presented showing that RPGs can actually have positive effects on prisoner rehabilitation, the ban was upheld because the appellant could not definitively prove that D&D did not lead to gang activity. Additionally, the court cited escapism in a correctional environment as fostering hostility, violence, and ultimately endangering public and the prison's safety.

Social Stigma: Alibis for Play

Even outside of the courtroom and into present day, there is significant social stigma that haunts D&D and other TRPGs. Because TRPGs are games, society tends to think of them as an activity for children (Deterding, 2018), and that when adults engage in these "intellectually lazy" and "sedating" games (Battles & Quinlan, 2021) they are typically antisocial, male "nerds" and "geeks" who are socially incompetent (Ben-Ezra et al., 2017; Samman & Porzenheim, 2019). This prejudice is so pervasive that D&D players themselves often internalize this shame and hide their passion for the game (Armstrong, 2017). More alarmingly, this stigma can lead to pathologizing players, even on the front lines of the mental health field (Ben-Ezra et al., 2017). In a pilot study exploring Canadian psychiatrists' perceptions of role-playing games, Lis et al. (2015) found that while a majority of their 48 respondents did not associate TRPGs with psychopathology (i.e.: a diagnosis per the DSM-IV-TR), 22% reported believing that there is an association between psychopathology and TRPGs. While this number is not a majority, it is not a negligible percentage either; 22% of respondents believing something that has been categorically

disproven is somewhat concerning given that psychiatrists have years of post-secondary education and should be able to discern social bias from fact. However, it is important to note that these findings may not be representative of a larger perception across all psychiatrists in Canada (and beyond)— these are preliminary numbers from a pilot study with a small sample size. Additionally, respondents were self-selected through an online questionnaire emailed to only six hospitals in one university network, therefore, results may not be applicable to less computer-literate psychiatrists or psychiatrists across all of Canada (Lis et al., 2015).

Furthermore, Ben-Ezra et al. (2017) found that of 130 registered social workers surveyed, one third of respondents stated belief in a relationship between RPGs and psychopathology (defined as a diagnosis in the DSM-IV-TR). While, not the majority, it is interesting that roughly 33% of respondents believed in the relationship between RPGs and psychopathology, especially given the peer-reviewed research that has been published negating false claims stemming from moral panic and mass hysteria. An important point to note here is that this study was conducted in Israel, where TRPGs are less popular than in North America, therefore this may have contributed to the results. Despite being conducted in Israel, the article was published in Psychiatric Quarterly, published by Springer Science+Business Media, which is headquartered in Berlin. There were some limitations to this study such as: an uneven distribution of female to male respondents (83.8% to 16.2%); limited generalizability to other countries or cultures outside of Israel; use of a convenience sample; and possible selection bias, again due to the use of a convenience sample and the method of distribution of the questionnaire (electronic means) (Ben-Ezra et al., 2017). Limitations aside, this study did find an inverse relationship between higher knowledge of RPGs and a belief that playing RPGs cause psychopathology. Additionally, those who associated RPGs with psychopathology were also more likely to believe it important

for social workers to learn about RPGs. Ben-Ezra et al. (2017) speculated that this could be because social work training and education emphasizes cultural sensitivity through increased familiarity of the client's culture. However, other explanations are possible as well, such as a desire for social workers to have a deeper understanding of what they believe is an etiology of psychopathology.

Not Just for Kids: Conditions for Adult Play. The era of satanic panic has tarnished D&D's, and subsequently all TRPGs by association, reputation. It is logical to assume that this narrative has created a barrier to further research on TA-RPGs as well as adoption of the intervention. This assertion may explain the results from studies conducted by Ben-Ezra et al. (2017) and Lis et al. (2015) on social workers' and psychiatrists' perceptions of role-playing games, showing that nearly one third of each population believe in the association between psychopathology and role-playing games. But, even without this bad press, TA-RPGs for adult clients face a significant barrier in the social stigma around adult play.

According to Deterding (2018), the societal definition of play is in direct opposition with the societal expectations of "being an adult". He goes on to explain that by adulthood, humans are expected to competently enact designated social roles, and are compelled to do so by both fear of direct repercussions, but also by fear of social embarrassment. Borrowing from the work of Erving Goffman (1967) Deterding (2018) defined embarrassment as "a social emotion that internalizes the imagined devaluation of oneself by others over incompetent or inappropriate acts" (p. 261). However, Deterding (2018) also identified instances and conditions during which adult play is acceptable, legitimized, and non-embarrassing: during child-care, to complete professional duties, for creative expression, and for one's health. He refers to these instances of permissible adult play as "alibis" for play.

Despite the stigma surrounding TRPGs, many adults balk at the idea of engaging in TA-RPGs. However, Doctors Allison Battles and Thomas Quinlan (2021) of the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs (VA) Health Care System use TA-RPGs regularly in their work with veterans. Through these groups, they have seen TA-RPGs simulate new learning, encourage exploration of social roles and norms, and facilitate connection and cooperation in adult participants. Furthermore, they cite using ACT, CBT, and interpersonal process as evidence-based foundations for their TA-RPGs. They also rely on established TA-RPG approaches, such as the Game to Grow method, which itself is grounded in many of the same modalities and leverages techniques from other therapies such as externalization in narrative therapy. This integration means that TA-RPGs do not inherently align with one single approach, and therefore, practitioners are gifted with the flexibility to infuse any modality they choose into their work. This is incredibly helpful for tailoring therapeutic games in order to meet the needs and address the goals of individual participants and unique participant compositions. While TRPGs themselves are not inherently therapeutic, they carry a lot of potential benefits, and when a skill T-GM can synthesize gameplay with therapeutic techniques, they can unlock these benefits and catalyze positive growth (Kilmer & Davis, 2021). Therefore, although TRPGs are seen as games which are meant for children, TA-RPGs can actually be used with adult clients and indeed they are, as discussed above. Yet, it is often the case that adults are not "allowed" to play games according to social norms and expectations.

Goffman's (1983) *interaction order* framework stipulates that there are set rules and expectations for members of a group which support reliable interactions and are fuelled by social emotions, such as embarrassment. A central tenant of this framework is that these rule sets and expectations shift depending on the situation one believes they are in—in other words, depending

on the *frames* in which they are operating (Deterding, 2018). Goffman identified frames as invisible, implicit, social situations that allow individuals to act differently given different roles in different scenarios. Within said frames, there are a set of roles which can be occupied by the individuals in the group, who must abide by unspoken rules (or else face social embarrassment). These roles and rules are internalized by children as they develop and socialize (*e.g.:* how a "student" should act when at "school" versus how a "sibling" acts at "home"). Embarrassment, then, occurs when an individual's self-concept (or expected role) within a frame is disconfirmed. Furthermore, this disconfirmation then impedes smooth social interactions which causes all others in the group to become self-conscious and, if left in this state of disarray, can lead to embarrassment for others in the group as well. Embarrassment becomes viewed as something to be avoided at all costs because not only is it uncomfortable, but it also lowers one's social currency and therefore, social standing. Indeed, there is a plethora of research available showing that adults abstain from playing with toys and even interactive public installations and museum exhibits (Deterding, 2018; Heljakka, 2013; Scott et al., 2013; Wouters et al., 2016).

Opportunities to Lower Barriers to Accessing TA-RPGs

Although playing games is diametrically opposed to the social definition of a well-adjusted adult in society, we still see adults playing unabashedly in public (Deterding, 2018) (*e.g.*, adult sport leagues, video games, and playing board games). Why is this? The answer lies in Goffman's interaction order frames; within some frames, there are certain, specific conditions for which adult play can be non-embarrassing, and in fact, it would be incongruent to *not* engage in play within such frames. For example, imagine the reaction others might have at witnessing a father rebuking and denying a child's request to play catch. Deterding identified two broad categories wherein adult play is legitimized: it is acceptable—nay, necessary—for adults to

engage in play in certain professional and social roles including being a parent, a counsellor, a teacher, or an actor. In these cases, play is legitimized because it is clearly sanctioned as work, which is acceptable in today's capitalist society.

The second type of frames wherein adult play is acceptable is during leisurely recreation. In these frames, adults are afforded a visa to temporarily abscond their adult roles and responsibilities in order to recuperate and rejuvenate from what society agrees is a taxing job: conforming to social expectations of a responsible adult. Some examples of these types of frames include hobbies, travel, and festivals (*e.g.*, Mardi Gras). Ultimately though, "appropriate" adult play is limited to certain frames. This becomes important for therapists hoping to utilize TA-RPGs in their practice because it is necessary to establish a frame wherein adult play is non embarrassing.

Deterding (2018) offered some strategies for minimizing embarrassment in adult play, as even in frames where adult play is legitimized, embarrassment and self-consciousness may still cause individuals to feel reticent. These strategies include finding alibis, or excuses, for play and "keying", or reframing the situation to be an acceptable one for adult play. Examples alibis to reduce embarrassment include citing cognitive and social benefits of engaging in TRPGs, reducing stress through art therapy, and purchasing toys and collectibles as a financial investment. Examples of keying include admitting to engaging in embarrassing play (running into a cold body of water in nothing but a speedo in the dead of winter) for a noble cause (to raise money for charity). Another example is for humorous or ironic reasons- this makes the breach of social rules intentional but also clearly not reflective of the individual's true self (*e.g.*, dramatically and intentionally singing off-key to a popular song during karaoke night to get a

laugh out of others). For a therapist-GM then, it may be necessary to magnify these alibis and re-frames to make adult engagement in TA-RPGs acceptable.

Diversity and Inclusion in TRPGs

Although society generally assumes that TRPGs are childish games not meant for responsible adults (Deterding, 2018) Wizards of the Coast (WotC) the company who owns D&D, recently released information stating that 2020 was their seventh consecutive growth year, 47th year of leading the TRPG genre, and that their overall sales of D&D spiked 33% since 2019 (Wieland, 2021). Is all this sustained growth thanks to doting parents purchasing D&D products for their children and teenage summer job money? I would suggest not. Along with growth and sales statistics, WotC also released demographic information showing that only 12% of their players fall between the 15-19 age range, whereas their largest age segment is the 20-24 range at 24%, followed by 25-29 and 30-34 at 18% each (Wieland, 2021). Further to the erroneous societal perception that TRPGs are only for children, the general population tends to view adults who do play TRPGs as socially inept males using labels like "nerd" and "geek" with a derogatory intention (Ben-Ezra et al., 2017; Dashiell, 2021; Samman & Porzenheim, 2019; Vermeulen et al., 2017). However, WotC's recent release indicated that in fact, self-identified females make up 40% of their users with the other 60% being self-identified males, and a small sliver of non-binary individuals were represented at under one percent. However, despite nearly half of all TRPG players are women[2], there is still a covert culture of sexism, homophobia, racism, and toxic masculinity prevalent in TRPG communities (Dashiell, 2021; Trammell & Crenshaw, 2021).

[2] The present author has extrapolated WotC's data and assumed similar demographic distribution across TRPGs as a whole, given that D&D is the most popular TRPG system and has been for decades.

Before TSR Inc. was bought out by WotC, early editions of the D&D player's handbook indicate maximum strength caps on female characters (Gygax, 1978). This inherent misogyny is further fueled by the "beauty" attribute in the original D&D players handbook, which is substituted for "charisma" in female characters (Peterson, 2014). The most current edition (fifth edition) of the D&D rulebook does not have such sexist limitations on a character's gender, but it does lack explicit acknowledgement of other gender identities. However, since there are no effects to character attributes or skills based on gender, players can assign non-binary gender identities to their characters, and a GM working from a social justice lens can easily create a diverse population of NPC in their games. For example, immensely popular web-series, Critical Role (2021), has highlighted this issue of consent at least twice in the last year during their live-stream D&D games. One instance was during a short campaign under the banner of "Exandria Unlimited" GM'd by Aabria Iyengar, wherein one player announced she would jump on the back of another character to chase down an enemy, but before allowing this to happen, Iyengar checked for consent from the other player, even though they were both on the same time, attempting to achieve the same goal (Critical Role, 2021). A second instance was when Henry Crabgrass, an anthropomorphized conglomerate of crabgrass, was introduced during campaign two. Henry instantly became a beloved NPC, despite only appearing in one episode for a brief conversation, for his motto, "consent, please" when the player characters attempted to pet Henry (Critical Role, 2020). Furthermore, Critical Role has been conscientious of including non-binary, gender-fluid, and LGBTQ2S+ characters in their campaign worlds.

Despite the ability to include diverse gender identities and efforts by popular streamers like Critical Role to eliminate misogyny and sexism in D&D games, many self-identified women and LGBTQ2S+ individuals still face extreme prejudice in the D&D community. Dashiell (2021)

posited that this may be attributed to the domination of middle-class, White men in TRPG communities. Dashiell supported this claim with research by Dunning (1986) which discussed the concept of male preserves and how certain subcultures can lionize behaviour and verbiage that embodies the male form and is skewed towards the male experience. This systemic, hegemonic masculinity in TRPGs – and even more broadly, "geek" spaces as a whole – leaves fertile soil for sexism to germinate.

Further to sexist and gender-based prejudice, TRPGs and their communities have also been criticized for inherent racism (D'Anastasio, 2021). Within a fantasy-based TRPG like D&D, there are specific "races" of creatures such as elves, gnomes, and dwarves, and classes such as wizards, clerics, and barbarians. While terms like "race" and "barbarian" are overtly problematic on their own, a quieter form of racism has been highlighted in recent years, specific to how creatures called orcs are portrayed (D'Anastasio, 2021). Science fiction writer, N. K. Jemisin wrote a scathing account of how orcs are represented in fictional words. Jemisin (2013) wrote that "orcs are humans that can be slaughtered without conscience or apology" (para 6.) and that orcs have also been depicted as "sexually perverse" (para. 6).

WoTC have released public statements committed to increasing the inclusivity of their games; recently WoTC (2020) released an article stating that they would tackle the prejudice towards certain fantasy races, including orcs, in newer books and continue to present all creatures equally as agentic and unique as human beings. The article goes on to announce reprints of previous D&D books to correct errors in judgement such as racially insensitive text; include sensitivity readers in the creative process; and proactively seek diverse talent to join the writing team (WoTC, 2020). Despite all these efforts by dominant voices in the TRPG

community, many unacceptable prejudices still exist within unmoderated spaces and private games, which present barriers to entry for female, LGBTQ2S+, and BIPOC individuals.

In the context of TA-RPGs, these prejudices can be combated by appropriate modelling by a T-GM operating from a social justice lens— however, the existing damage to TRPGs' image means that therapists offering TA-RPGs must work diligently to recruit diverse individuals who may feel hesitant to engage in an unsafe space or community. Indeed, research shows that early termination in therapy as a broad service has been linked to racial and ethnic minority status in clients (Kilmer et al., 2019). Furthermore, Liang and Shepherd (2020) found that intake forms and websites for therapeutic services lacking in cultural sensitivity and diversity-related questions deter LGBTQ2S+ and ethnic minorities from even engaging in therapeutic services in the first place. This further emphasizes the need for TA-RPG practitioners to conspicuously advertise and display their practice of and commitment to inclusivity and diversity-in other words, advocate for minorities to demonstrate safety and efforts to combat systemic oppression.

Conclusion

Drawing in elements of play, art, narrative, and experiential therapy, as well as infusing ideas from social constructionist theory and the field of philosophy, TA-RPGs present themselves as a flexible tool for addressing a myriad of social, emotional, and mental challenges in not only youth, but adults as well. As demonstrated by literature from the field of education and learning, TRPGs can be leveraged to scaffold learning to assist in knowledge and skill acquisition. This ability translates well to the use of TA-RPGs as the conduit for psychoeducation in therapeutic modalities like CBT and ACT. Despite their potential benefits (which has been demonstrated in practice), TA-RPGs remain relatively un-researched and un-

utilized in the field of therapy. Logical explanations for this include social stigma stemming from the satanic panic era in the ‘80s, as well as the general social frowning upon adults engaging in play. Though there are some opportunities to lower such barriers to access through strategically positioning TA-RPGs as an “alibi” for play, and by actively recruiting diverse participants in order to combat internalized racism, homophobia, and sexism (among other “isms”) present in the larger TRPG community, the question of how to disseminate this information remains. Chapter three of this capstone paper will seek to address the “how” by offering an outline for an outreach program targeted at parents, teachers, social workers, therapists, doctors, and other gatekeepers to youth involvement in group programs such as a TA-RPG group.

Chapter 3: Discussion

The goal of the present paper is to highlight the benefits of TA-RPGs by exploring the, albeit minimal, body of research on TA-RPGs, as well as by offering findings from related areas of research like simulation training and the field of education. After providing a sound rationale for why TA-RPGs are beneficial, the exploration in chapter two transformed into one around the barriers to access, followed by opportunities to combat such barriers. That narrative in chapter two has led to one question: how can one seize such opportunities to combat barriers to widespread adoption of TA-RPGs? Chapter three seeks to outline such a program that would work to provide outreach presentations to the community in an attempt to spark attitudinal shifts and provide information on the benefits of TA-RPGs.

Outreach Program

Between the bad press D&D suffered during the satanic panic era and the social stigma around what constitutes "appropriate" play, TRPGs (and subsequently, TA-RPGs) are suffering from something of a public relations crisis. While training for counsellors on how to run TA-RPGs would be helpful, and certainly already exist (Game to Grow, 2021a/b), the findings in this paper indicate that TA-RPGs need to be brought into the mainstream to become an "accepted" intervention. Therefore, this section will outline and describe outreach programming targeted at gatekeepers for youth enrolment: parents, teachers, social workers, therapists, doctors, and other social agencies that work with youth. While the present paper has made mention of TA-RPGs being useful with adult clients as well, the focus of this chapter will be specifically on educating and reaching out to youths' guardians. This chapter will be organized as follows: a broad description of what the program is, who it would be targeting, what the learning goals are, and

where outreach meetings may occur. Finally, this chapter will provide an outline for how an outreach presentation may be structured.

About the Outreach Program

The purpose of this outreach program is to increase awareness of this intervention in the community. It is also designed to provide psychoeducation around benefits of TA-RPGs to adults who could refer youth into such a program but who may currently hold negative preconceived notions about TRPGs. Such adults who could refer youth into a TA-RPG program include parents, guardians, teachers, youth workers, therapists and psychologists, doctors, and social workers. Of course, these demographics do not all work in the same building so a comprehensive outreach program would need to be designed, targeting each population with tailored messaging. In order to reach all of these groups, presentations would be targeted at: Schools; the Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD); agencies that work with youth and families; professional groups for therapists, psychologists, and pediatricians; and community centres.

Learning Objectives

While each presentation will be customized slightly for each demographic, the overall learning objectives and messaging will be identical:

1. Introduce the topic of therapeutically applied tabletop role-playing games (TA-RPGs)
2. Highlight the benefits of TA-RPGs for youth

- Improve social skills (perspective taking, collaboration, communication)
- Improve frustration tolerance and self-regulation
- Develop creative (and collaborative) problem-solving skills

3. How, why, and for whom TA-RPGs work

- Aesthetic distance, simulation training, and scaffolding

- Session structure
- Inclusion/exclusion criteria

4. Dispelling myths and addressing concerns

The following section will delve deeper into each learning objective.

Introducing TA-RPGs

This learning objective will be addressed first in an introduction based on the information provided in chapter one of the present paper. It will include a general introduction to TRPGs and then move into a discussion around TA-RPGs, including a clear definition of the T-GM's role as the group facilitator. The introduction to TRPGs will be brief, focused mainly on what they are popular examples of TRPGs and the general cycle of play. Transitioning into an introduction of TA-RPGs, participants will be primed with other examples of non-traditional, applied activities such as recreational therapy, animal-assisted therapy, and expressive therapies including play, art, and music therapy. After participants have an understanding of what a TA-RPG is, the presentation will move into an exploration of the benefits of TA-RPGs.

Benefits of TA-RPG.

Here, attendees will learn about the top three benefits of TA-RPGs: improvement of social skills, frustration tolerance/self-regulation, and creative problem-solving. Being a game, TRPGs are inherently social, thereby providing fertile ground for participants to practice and develop use of desired social skills. In addition to opportunities to practice, T-GMs can introduce specific types of interactions meant to encourage peer modelling of skills, opportunities to collaboratively and creatively problem solve, and encounters meant to develop frustration tolerance.

This section would rely on citing research from the literature review that show improvement of social skills, frustration tolerance, and creativity in RPGs. It would also rely on theories of child development (such as Erikson's model) and the role of play in psychosocial development, as well as psychoeducation around benefits of expressive therapies. Finally, it would cite specific instances where TA-RPGs are currently being used and what those facilitators are noticing (*i.e.:* Doctors Battles and Quinlan from Minneapolis Veterans Affairs, Doctors Kilmer and Kilmer from Game to Grow) as well as what their participants are reporting as benefits from TA-RPGs.

How TA-RPGs Work

TA-RPGs act as high-fidelity simulation training environments wherein a T-GM can scaffold skills learning and development for knowledge, performance, and fluency deficits. In an outreach presentation, this is the key takeaway for attendees that can be broken down step by step. First, the concept of aesthetic distance would be explained to establish a foundation for parents. Although discussed in the literature review, inclusion of Huizinga's magic circle would be omitted for brevity. Once attendees understand what aesthetic distance is, and more importantly, how it lowers the stakes and creates emotional safety for experimentation (Game to Grow, 2021a), a brief discussion of simulation training would follow. Here, evidence from the literature review around simulation training benefits from different industries such as medicine and education, will be reviewed. Furthermore, the importance of high-fidelity simulations will be discussed and linked back to TA-RPGs. In other words, the presentation will spell out how TA-RPGs are high-fidelity simulations due to the fact that they are happening in real time. While the encounters are loosely planned ahead of time, a T-GM will always need to be prepared to employ their own creative problem solving and flexible thinking skills in order to react

accordingly to players' responses. Furthermore, a T-GM cannot control the responses of other players, and while this may diverge from the intended outcome, a good T-GM will be able to utilize the opportunity to model social skills or scaffold a learning experience.

Once aesthetic distance and simulation training have been discussed, the topic of scaffolding will be introduced. Here, the facilitator will discuss the three types of learning deficits, knowledge, performance, and fluency, and how to address them. Furthermore, this section of the presentation would also introduce the idea of problem-based learning (PBL) and how learner-centered scaffolding is a key ingredient in successful PBL. Finally, some examples of common goals and how they might be addressed in a TA-RPG program would be provided and discussed. This is also a good opportunity for some experiential learning where the facilitator may describe a scenario and ask attendees to identify the deficit type and/or what steps a T-GM might take to address it. By doing this, not only does it solidify the learning for the attendees, but it also primes the attendees to believe in the benefits of TA-RPGs more readily. This section of an outreach presentation is also a good opportunity to discuss some of the similarities to and ability to integrate tools from empirically-supported therapy models such as CBT, ACT, narrative therapy, play therapy, and drama therapy. Finally, this section will provide an outline of TA-RPG programming offered by the facilitator (see Appendix B). This outline describes the intake process, from initial contact, through to the end of group sessions and the collection of post-group data. At this time, a brief divergence to discuss inclusion and exclusion criteria is appropriate.

Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria includes youth aged 10-18, though groups would be further organized by age group: 10-12, 12-14, 15-17, 16-18. These age groups contain overlap in ages to give

participants some flexibility in scheduling as well as to provide an opportunity to select a group they would be more comfortable in. The minimum age is set at 10 years old, as the mechanics of D&D can be somewhat complex. Though the T-GM can alter and simplify rules (indeed, the present author has done such simplification in previous groups), there is a limit to how far that simplification can go before the game ceases being "true" D&D. Furthermore, although any TRPG system can be utilized in TA-RPGs, as discussed in chapter two, the present chapter is focused solely on providing information on a TA-RPG group based exclusively on D&D. Therefore, participants need to be able to manage their own character sheets and have enough understanding of English to comprehend somewhat complex rules.

There is also a consideration around content and subject matter. Though D&D is flexible, and a pacificist game with no themes or instances of killing can be devised, combat is a large part of the D&D system and would still need to be involved to offer the full spectrum of growth and learning opportunities to participants. For example, waiting for one's turn during combat provides opportunity to work on frustration tolerance, waiting one's turn to speak, or even collaborative problem solving if the player whose turn it is asks for input. Having covered all of that, a particularly articulate and mature nine-year-old may be permitted to join, having gone through the screening process with the facilitator. Further inclusion criteria includes youth who have an interest in role-playing and fantasy genres, are experiencing social challenges, and who may have a diagnosis or suspected diagnosis of attention deficit disorder and/or autism spectrum disorder.

As mentioned earlier, fluency in English is necessary, as the facilitator in this scenario is unable to speak other languages fluently enough herself to offer non-English groups. Therefore, an exclusionary criterion is the inability to communicate in English fluently. The distinction to

use the word “communicate” versus “speak” is intentional because there are ways to increase accessibility for deaf or mute participants through the use of technology (*e.g.,* text to speech programs). Further exclusion criteria include diagnoses of oppositional defiance disorder, psychopathy, and other diagnoses that include psychosis –as evidenced by Ascherman’s 1993 findings that schizoid, narcissistic personality types are difficult to manage in a fantasy game (particularly when left to their own devices, without a T-GM to facilitate).

Session Outline

Following the broad program structure, the presentation will zoom in to provide an overview of a typical session (see Appendix C). This section will break down how the 90 minutes of weekly session time are spent. Particular attention will be paid to the check in and check out process. The purpose of the check in process is twofold: first, to gauge the temperature of the room- is the group exuding high energy today or is the mood lower, and perhaps requiring a slower pace? Second, the check in is an opportunity to further bonds between participants and the facilitator, as well as amongst the participants, through ice-breaker questions (*e.g.*, if you could only eat one food for the rest of your life, what would it be?). This is a prime opportunity for the outreach presentation to offer an experiential component. Here, the facilitator may choose to ask some of these questions to the adult gatekeepers in the room in order to demonstrate how the activity can introduce brevity an encourage bond-building between everyone in the room. Following such a questions, players would then be asked the same question relative to their character (*e.g.*. if your character could only eat one food for the rest of their life, what would it be?). This offers an easing in to the role-play component of the game, and allows players to put on their personas in preparation to begin the session.

Dispelling Myths

Finally, having laid out all the benefits of TA-RPGs, this presentation will address the elephant in the room; it is likely that the attendees at the outreach presentations will remember the satanic panic era. While its recent renaissance and rise in popularity has helped with its image problems, it is still worth addressing the categorically false assertions that TA-RPGs cause suicidality, homicidal ideation, and are somehow linked to satanism. This is where evidence from recognized health authorities like the American Association of Suicidality, the US Centres for Disease Control, and Health and Welfare Canada would be presented. Finally, attendees will be given an opportunity to reflect on the presentation and ask questions in a format that is reflective of the check-out process in TA-RPG sessions which encourage introspection and integration of learning.

Conclusion

Although the information and the learning objectives would remain the same, the emphasis and delivery of such workshops would be tailored to suit the audience. For example, a presentation to parents would be focused on benefits for youth participants as well as what challenges this intervention is particularly suited to help address. A presentation to teachers and school administrators may emphasize cascading benefits such as improved social skills, improved social networks, increased mood, and less reactive behaviours in the classroom. To therapists, the presentation may take on a more technical focus with links to theories and modalities, as well as examples demonstrating how tools from CBT, for example, can be brought into a TA-RPG, narratively. In sum, each presentation would be like a TA-RPG group wherein the facilitator needs to be able to adapt, think flexibly, and adjust their demonstration based on a particular group’s interest and goals.

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Appendix A

Terminology

The following is a list of abbreviations used in this paper as well as a brief discussion regarding nomenclature within the field of TA-RPGs.

- **D&D:** Dungeons & Dragons
- **ERPG (electronic role-playing game):** see VRPG
- **GM:** game master
- **LARP (live action role-playing):** In LARP games, players physically step into the role of a made-up character or persona through elaborate costumes, make up, and other creative props like weapons (though these are decorative and not meant to induce harm on others) and then meet in groups to act out narratives (Snyder, 2018). LARPing exists on a spectrum where some subcultures emphasize the live action combat aspect of the former two letters of the acronym, whereas other subcultures emphasize the role-playing aspect of the latter two letters (LeClaire, 2020).
- **RPG (role-playing game):** Role-playing games can be defined as cooperative, recreational activities (Hawkes-Robinson, 2011) wherein players voluntarily enter "the magic circle" of play, stepping into a liminal role at the intersection of persona (the player's character or "role"), player, and person (Waskul & Lust, 2004).
- **T-GM:** therapeutic game master
- **TA-RPG:** therapeutically applied role-playing game
- **TRPG (tabletop role-playing game):** A TRPG, or tabletop role-playing game, is a subsection of a larger category of games referred to as RPGs, or role-playing games.

- **VRPG (video role-playing game):** VRPGs and ERPGs are any RPGs that are facilitated through electronic formats such as through consoles, computers, or even smartphones (Chung, 2012). For consistency, the present paper will use the term VRPG exclusively to include both VRPGs and ERPGs. Some popular commercial video and online games that fall under the banner of VRPGs are *Fable*, *The Elder Scrolls* franchise, *World of Warcraft*, *Diablo* (Steadman et al., 2014), *League of Legends*, and the *Fire Emblem* franchise. Games like *Fable* and *Three Houses* of the *Fire Emblem* franchise are typically played by a single player who assumes the role of a character within the game's universe (otherwise known as Huizinga's magic circle, as mentioned previously) to explore the environment and engage in various activities and tasks to further the game's narrative. In games like *League of Legends* and *World of Warcraft*, players are engaged in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) where they assume a persona and interact with a fantastical world and other players within it (Klemm & Pieters, 2017). The main distinction between a regular video game and an MMORPG is that the former is typically played individually whereas the latter, as hinted in its name, is played online and with millions of players from around the globe in real time (Klemm & Pieters, 2017). MMORPGs are the descendants of massively multiplayer text-based online RPGs affectionately called MUDs (which can stand for multi-user dungeon, multi-user dimension, or multi-user domain), that first came into existence alongside the advent of personal computers and the internet (Hahn, 1952; Koster, 2001). Perhaps unsurprisingly, MUDs were the electronic adaptations inspired by the original adventure game: pen-and-paper TRPGs.

RPG Nomenclature

As the field of research into applications of RPGs (including therapeutic applications of TRPGs) is still in its infancy, there exists a lack of agreement and consistency in the nomenclature. Colloquially, tabletop RPGs are often referred to as "TTRPGs". This is important to note because some researchers in the field of applied RPGs vehemently insist that, within academia at least, tabletop RPGs should be uniformly referred to as TRPGs, giving the argument that "tabletop" is one word (Robinson[3], 2019). Indeed, much of the research published within the last two decades referred to tabletop RPGs as "TRPGs" (Bowman & Lieberoth, 2018; Chung, 2012; Coe, 2017; Daniau, 2016), but there are other cases within the applied RPG industry and academia where the demotic "TTRPG" is currently being used (Game to Grow, 2021a; Mendoza, 2020). To add to the confusion, "RPG" on its own is often used to refer to *tabletop* RPGs (Bowman & Lieberoth, 2018) which, while technically not incorrect as TRPGs fall under the broader category of RPGs, lacks granularity (though authors often clarify contextually which type or types of RPGs they are referring to).

This capricious nomenclature is not a new occurrence within the realm of RPG research. Returning to Fine's (1983) seminal work on RPG research, he used the term "fantasy role-playing game", or "FPS", to refer to TRPGs such as *D&D*. While this term is obsolete in contemporary research, Fine remains a prominent progenitor in applied RPG research. Furthermore, even the word "role-play" is hotly debated online within the RPG research community (Robinson, 2018). Proponents for the use of the hyphenated form, as opposed to the singular, portmanteau "roleplay" or the sans-hyphen variant, "role play", argue that "role-play" is the correct spelling of the term because it is a compound modifier, meaning that two or more

[3] Same author as "Hawkes-Robinson" cited elsewhere

words are used together as a single descriptor or adjective, such as with “long-term contract”, “science-fiction novel”, or “one-way street” (Fate Flyer, 2009; Grammarly, n.d.). While this may seem like a frivolous debate, there are very real consequences to clarity and consistency in academic databases.

In addition to a lack of consensus on which acronym to use in reference to tabletop RPGs, there has recently been a change to the categorization of applied RPGs (Game to Grow, 2021b). According to Dr. Kilmer (2021b), rather than therapeutically applied RPGs (TA-RPGs) being a standalone category under RPGs, TA-RPGs now fall under the banner of “applied RPGs” or A-RPGs, along with Educational RPGs (Edu-RPGs) and Recreational RPGs (Rec-RPGs). A-RPG is a subordinate category of RPG, which is a subordinate category itself to games as a whole (Robinson, 2018). In sum, the field is still growing and negotiating its vernacular, while also navigating other challenges such as entering the mainstream, combating stigma, and gaining acceptance in the world of academia. For the purposes of the present paper, terminology used throughout will reflect the present, prevalent acronym, TRPG, along with what is currently the generally accepted categorization of A-RPGs.

Appendix B

TA-RPG Program Outline

First Contact	Facilitator contacts parent/guardian on waitlist to conduct a ten to 15-minute call to assess interest and fit of the youth. Additionally, parents/guardians are encouraged to ask any questions they may have about the program at this time. Finally, if both parties agree to proceed, an intake will be scheduled with the parents/guardians, facilitators, and youth (optional).
Intake	In this 15-to-30-minute intake, the facilitator will explore the goals of the youth and their parents/guardians in more detail. The facilitator will also seek to clarify: • mental health challenges • accessibility restraints • self-regulation strengths • hobbies and interests • experience with TRPGs Next, the facilitator will work with the parents/guardians to determine which group/s the youth would be best suited to join. Finally, the facilitator will cover any outstanding housekeeping topics (*e.g.:* fee schedule, cancellation policies, scheduling). Pre-Group surveys will be sent.
Session 0	This is the first session for participants. Session 0 will cover: • introductions and ice-breaker

	• what to expect, goals • policies/boundaries • general game rules and mechanics • address questions of the youth • determine characters
Sessions 1-9	The campaign.
Session 10	The final campaign session with a longer period of time dedicated to the check out for reflection and discussion of the whole campaign.
Total: 11 weeks excluding holidays)	Post group surveys sent.

Appendix C

Typical Session Outline

Check In	Here, the facilitator will demonstrate the check in activities: • mood rating/mood thermometer, to get a sense of where participants' emotional states are • peaks and valleys, to give everyone an opportunity to share their highlights and lowlights from the previous week and encourage perspective-taking and active/appropriate listening skills. • warm up questions to get the players into character and increase aesthetic distance • review of goals
Summary	The facilitator provides a brief summary from last week's session.
Campaign	The game is played (this includes a 10-15 minute break at the halfway point).
Check Out	The facilitator goes around and spotlights each player who is asked to share their highlights/lowlights from the session, offer predictions for next time, and share learnings from the session (*e.g.:* next time, I would…). This is also an opportunity for the facilitator to ask about specific moments in the game. The check out is important because it celebrates the strengths and successes of each player, consolidates learning, and promotes insight and self-reflection.

Appendix D

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

This appendix contains potential FAQs for adults who may be considering referring a youth, whether they are a parent, a teacher, a doctor, a therapist, or some other youth-related worker. Though in practicality, questions around pricing and logistics, such as where sessions are held and when, would be included, they are not included here as they have no relevance to the content design of the group.

Does D&D cause/encourage satanism and suicidality?

No. Many recognized health authorities such as the American Association of Suicidology, the US Centres for Disease Control, and Health and Welfare Canada have dispelled such erroneous claims.

Who does this group benefit and what are the benefits?

TA-RPGs have been shown to benefit both youth and adults, but our current groups are designed to help adolescents and youth develop social skills, creative problem solving, frustration tolerance, and collaboration. All of our groups are safe, inclusive spaces for individuals of all nationalities, genders, sexual orientations, and religions.

What makes this different from a social group?

In a social D&D game, you may have a very experienced GM but they are not a *T-GM*, even if they are a therapist in their day-to-day job. The difference is the intention and the focus on goals outlined in the intake versus a focus on fun. Additionally, in a therapeutic game, rules are not followed exactly as written; they are bent and adapted, within reason, for the purpose of helping participants reach their goals and to streamline the game so as not to get bogged down in technicalities and rules. For example, a T-GM may simplify combat or ability checks in order to

move the game along more quickly. In a recreational game, some groups prefer to adhere to the rules-as-written. Finally, you have heard (or experienced yourself) that D&D games can go for hours at a time, per session. This of course is not practical for T-A-RPGs and our games, like regular group therapy sessions, are kept to a manageable 1.5 hours per session.

Are there drawbacks to having shorter sessions?

No! The main reason recreational games go for so long is because players are having fun! The purpose of a TA-RPG is not to maximize fun (although rest assured, fun is to be had) but to help players work on their goals. This does not require long sessions, but rather, *effective* and *intentional* sessions, targeted at helping players move onward and upward.

Where can I find more information and research on TA-RPGs?

1. Game To Grow has a growing list of role-playing research here: https://gametogrow.org/resources/research/
2. International Journal of Role-Playing: http://ijrp.subcultures.nl/
3. Dr. Sarah Lynne Bowman: http://www.sarahlynnebowman.com/about/
4. Dr. Janina Scarlet of Superhero Therapy has a lot of useful resources for integrating geek culture into therapy: http://www.superhero-therapy.com/
5. Book: *Integrating Geek Culture Into Therapeutic Practice* (https://www.amazon.ca/Integrating-Geek-Culture-Therapeutic-Practice/dp/1734866020)