

# The Rise of the Use of TTRPGs and RPGs in Therapeutic Endeavors

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**Abstract:** Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) is a popular fantasy tabletop role-playing game (RPG) that has been enjoyed by millions of players since its creation in the 1970s. The game is played by a group of players, each of whom takes on the role of a character in a fantasy world. The players work together to complete quests, overcome obstacles, and defeat monsters while a "Dungeon Master" (DM) manages the story and controls the non-player characters (NPCs). In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in using D&D and other tabletop RPGs as a form of mental health therapy. This is because the game can provide a safe and supportive environment for players to explore and express their emotions, work on personal issues, and build social skills. Tabletop RPGs can help foster personal growth in several ways: Problem-solving, Decision-Making, Emotional Intelligence, Communication, Creativity, Self-Esteem, and even Confidence. Mental health professionals have begun incorporating Tabletop RPGs into their sessions as a way to engage their clients in a fun and interactive way and it should be used in conjunction with other forms of treatment.

**Keywords:** Dungeons and Dragons, TTRPGs, D&D in Therapy, Therapeutic Game Master, RPGs, RPGs in Therapy, TTRPGs in Therapy.

## INTRODUCTION

One evening four clients shuffle into the group room for the first session of their 12-week group therapy. Once everyone has been seated and introduced themselves the therapist sits down behind a cardboard screen and says,

“After the Unholy Wars decimated our world, survivors struggled to settle in the remnants. The most powerful survivors formed factions and used strong magicks to stake their claim on the cities. The cunning took to the forests, the brave locked in never-ending battles, and the rest of us strive for survival.

You all have scraped by as a Hero-for-Hire, taking side work from people too powerful or too weak for questing. Your most recent venture completed, you head to a nearby village for new jobs, and are directed to a local adventuring guild. As you approach two orcs storm out the door carrying a small chest and eyeing you suspiciously.

Inside the dingy guild hall, you spot a few gruff looking individuals. At the back of the hall a slab of pine crudely nailed to the wall functions as the Job Board. Upon the Board hangs a parcel with

a single pull tab dangling from the bottom. You step by a halfling on your way toward the Job Board and notice a gaggle of adventure-looking types sitting at one of the booths; they each have a pull tab in hand.”

With a flourish you pull out a slab of pine with small tabs attached to it and have each member of the group take one. On the tabs they read;

**Will pay 50 gold to each member of the adventuring party willing to clear out the dungeon recently found on my property and return items that were stolen and believed to be stored there.**

“Can each of you please describe your characters, tell us all what your character looks like sitting at this table?”

**Player 1 (14-year-old male, diagnosed with ADHD and specific learning disorder with impairment in reading).** “My character is a large half-giant, he has a scraggly beard, his clothing is torn and stained, with a lot of blood, and he does not look, or smell like he has cleaned himself in months. Ohhh and he has a large sword strapped to his back!”

**Player 2 (15-year-old female, diagnosed with anxiety and adjustment disorder).** “My character is a half-elf with brown hair and purple eyes. Her clothing is clean, well cared for but worn. She has a bow on her back and a short sword on her belt. She does not appear to like sitting next to the smelly half-giant.”

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**Player 3 (14-year-old female, diagnosed with social anxiety).** She looks down and speaks quietly. “My character is dressed in dark colors and keeps a hood over her head. You can see a bit of dark hair peeking out.”

**Player 4 (14-year-old male, diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and anxiety).** “My character is in heavy armor. His armor is clean and shiny. He has a shield with a symbol of a sun in the center and also wears an amulet of a sun over his armor. He is clean shaven and has a mace hanging from his belt. He also smells faintly of healing herbs.”

“Wonderful as you all are sitting around the table a greasy looking individual approaches you all. They give you a sneering look and you hear them mumble ‘well this will be interesting’ before they say more clearly ‘I see you all are interested in my leige’s offer, well then follow me.’ They leave the table, what do you all do?”

The above is an example of how a therapy group using a table-top role playing game (TTRPG) might open. Across the world more and more therapists are starting to use TTRPGs such as Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) to help their clients meet their behavioral goals (Abbott, Stauss, & Burnett, 2022; Bean, 2022; Connell, 2023; Raghuraman, 2000). What are these games and how can one utilize them to help meet the diverse needs of their clients?

## WHAT ARE TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

TTRPGs are a storytelling game in which two or more players take on the persona of characters within the world of the game. Often one player will act as the narrator, or story teller in the world, this role is often referred to as the Game Master (Abbott, Stauss, & Burnett, 2022; Arenas, Viduani, & Araujo, 2022; Connell, 2023; Elms, 1966; Lasley, 2020; Waskul, 2006). The remaining players take on the role of characters that exist within the world of the game. The players will work together to complete quests, overcome obstacles, and defeat monsters. Individual games, called sessions, will last anywhere from one to four hours on average, while the whole telling of a story, called a campaign, can last months or even years.

There are many types of TTRPGs that are referred to as *gaming systems*. The most widely played TTRPG gaming system is D&D (Abyeta, 1991; Arenas, Viduani, & Araujo, 2022; Weinberger, 2021). As D&D is the

most commonly played system it tends to be the most commonly used system for therapeutic use. While D&D is the most popular it is not necessarily the ‘best’ gaming system for therapeutic use. Other systems that are commonly used in applied gaming include Kids on Bikes, the Cypher System, Masks, and No Thank You Evil.

The stories told in TTRPGs most commonly are medieval fantasy but some are science fiction, some use themes of horror, others steampunk, and still others attempt to be hyper realistic. The frame of the story is set before the players and the actions they take shape the outcome of the story. The same story frame can be used with multiple groups and have different outcomes each time (Abyeta, 1991; Arenas, Viduani, & Araujo, 2022; Baker, Turner & Kotera, 2022).

To understand how these games can be used as a tool for therapy lets us explore more into the narrative structure and rules of TTRPGs.

## THE BIRTH OF A CAMPAIGN FOR STORYTELLING

At their heart TTRPGs are a way of telling a communal story. Every player gets to add to the narrative, and while the GM has control of setting out the challenges, the other players, often referred to as the party, choose how they will react and interact with the challenges placed before them (Carter & Lester, 1998; Chung, 2012). As the party moves through the story their characters will learn new skills and abilities, obtain items and gear, and gain reputations with the gaming world. There are a variety of popular TTRPGs systems that many players love including Warhammer, Pathfinder, and Call of Cthulhu, but we will primarily examine the genre by focusing on D&D. However, the concepts covered can be easily applied to all RPGs. TTRPGs such as D&D use unique character builds, chance mechanics such as dice rolls, and storytelling in make-believe worlds to determine the direction of their campaigns. A campaign is the continuous storyline or set of adventures within the game (Blackmon, 1994; Deterding, 2018). A D&D campaign requires at least two players, taking on the roles defined below:

**Game Master (GM):** The GM (or Dungeon Master, DM, or Story Teller, ST) acts as both the author and the narrator for the game’s overarching story. They use books that are specific to the gaming system that they are using, to help them create the world of the story they will be telling with their players. The GM can build stories using well-known gaming elements, world mythologies, and other storytelling scenarios (Cargoe,

2015; Crookall, 2010). For example, a GM could narrate the popular Storm King's Thunder storyline, in which players fight against giant clans in a wintry mountain region, or perhaps build a campaign around the Greek Labyrinth to defeat Minotaur, or even guide adventurers to battle a team of supervillains from well-known comic series (Wizards RPG Team, 2016). The GM determines the general plot structure, but they must have strong improvisation skills too as the players' choices ultimately dictate the campaign's direction. Typically in applied games the clinician takes on the role of an applied GM.

During the telling of the story the GM will often also take on the role of non-playable characters, or NPCs. These imaginary characters fill out the fictional world around the players. In terms of the Hero's Journey, NPCs can act as threshold guardians, tricksters, mentors, or enemies. The more depth of character NPCs have, the more immersive and enjoyable the game becomes for the players.

**Playable Characters (PCs):** One or more players other than the GM create playable characters (PCs) to navigate the GM's world. Each player defines their character with a combination of fighting class, fantasy race, equipment, attributes, and personality. In the world of D&D, the PCs are often referred to as "adventurers."

Every character creation choice yields strengths and weaknesses. The rogue may be dexterous enough to pickpocket enemies, but is rarely strong enough to defeat them alone. The barbarian might be strong enough to take on three foes at once, but is not intelligent enough to craft healing potions for their wounds. The wizard may be intelligent enough to cast complex spells, but lacks the stamina to scale castle walls. No character can be built to master everything, requiring collaboration, companionship, communication, and clever thinking for players to overcome obstacles in the storyline.

In our opening monologue, the GM asks the players to choose their character's next action. The player's choice is motivated by their character's wants and needs as well as their unique build. After choosing an action, the player may be asked by the GM to roll dice to determine if their action has a successful outcome. For example a character built for stealth might try to eavesdrop on other adventurers, while a character with high charisma might try to charm their way into a conversation. No character can succeed every time they act, but players can consider characters' strengths

and weaknesses to improve their chances of accomplishing their goals.

Players in a TTRPG campaign are responsible for role-playing as their characters (Daniau, 2016; Derenard, 1990). In a TTRPG role-playing is quite different from how most players play RPG video games. In a video game players often will do what is strategically best, whereas in a TTRPG players are encouraged to do what their character would want to do, even if it is not the most optimal decision. Many TTRPG gaming sessions include characters talking to one another in character. These conversations might involve the players speaking in different voices, or using unique mannerisms that they typically do not do, or it might be the players speaking in their normal voice but from the perspective of their character.

### GAMEPLAY: THE THREE PILLARS

When building a story in a TTRPG there are three pillars of play that you should attend to: exploration, social interaction, and combat (Bean, 2022; Mearls & Crawford, 2014). When the three pillars are well-balanced, you can craft the most enjoyable games that allow for a wide range of opportunities and experiences.

**Exploration:** This pillar refers to characters' interaction with the world throughout the campaign. Exploration means players can discover hidden clues and treasures, venture down branching paths, and learn about the history and culture of the fantasy world. GMs can help players feel connected to the world through maps and other props that represent the environment they explore.

**Social interaction:** The depth of interaction between NPCs and PCs is known as social interaction. GMs can bolster this pillar by including a dialogue-rich NPC as an early ally, having the players watch an interaction between two NPCs voiced by the GM, or by writing deep backstories to flesh out NPCs' likes, dislikes, and attitudes. They can also include puzzles in dungeons that require intimate knowledge of each other's backstories to solve, encouraging the characters to get to know each other and form a bond.

**Combat:** In TTRPGs, combat is a turn-based event that combines PC builds, NPC builds, the environment, and dice rolls to determine outcomes. Vivid descriptions of enemies and their environments help players feel connected to their choices in combat. For example, the GM might strengthen this pillar by

mentioning a precarious chandelier in the foyer so players can choose to drop on their foes. Or, they could color a highway robber as weak and nervous, clueing in players to the possibility of peaceful resolution instead of a violent one. A wide range of options can discourage repetitive fights and encourage creative solutions. In one group players were fighting a snow monster and elected to set some of their gear on fire as they believed it might be weak to fire. Though there were no specific rules for doing this the GM was able to create some guidelines for this and rewarded the players for their creativity by allowing the plan to go forward and give them a benefit in combat.

### **DEMAND & DOORWAYS**

The first TTRPGs used elements such as pen-and-paper character sheets, heavy sets of dice, and maps drawn on hexagonal grids, but digitization has helped TTRPGs reach a wider audience. Online tools such as Roll20, Fantasy Grounds, or Foundry Virtual Tabletop, allow players to digitally store their character sheets, reference the campaigns' rules and elements with a click, and roll virtual dice that automatically calculate the outcomes of every action.

Platforms like Roll20 and Foundry can be helpful for clinicians and clients diving into TTRPGs for the first time. Online services allow new players to explore TTRPGs such as D&D without investing in physical books, and the built-in glossaries are great for quick answers as beginners learn the D&D mechanics.

Other doorways into the world of TTRPGs started cropping up in the late 2010s. There are dozens of podcasts where comedians, voice actors, and other TTRPG enthusiasts get together and play through a campaign to entertain an audience. Shows such as Dimension 20 and Dungeons & Daddies provide exciting stories to their listeners while demonstrating the game's flow and rules (Garcia, 2017; Goodall & Truon, 2021; Henrich & Worthington, 2021; Kapitany, Hampejs, & Goldstein, 2022).

The most popular liveplay TTRPG game is Critical Role. Critical Role aired their first live-recorded episode in March 2015, their 100<sup>th</sup> episode in June 2017, and became the top-grossing channel on live-streaming platform Twitch.tv by 2020. The cast is a group of friends who have careers as voice actors. Each episode of Critical Role is around four hours in length and is broadcasted on a weekly basis on Twitch.tv/criticalrole. Tens of thousands of viewers watch the livestream every week, and the recorded

episodes published on YouTube have hundreds of thousands of views each. Liveplay shows such as Critical Roll show viewers what a TTRPG session looks like, gives them ideas on how the rules are used and what to expect in a gaming session.

Another entrance into the world of TTRPGs can be found in popular culture. Shows like The Simpsons, Futurama, South Park, Big Bang Theory, and Adventure Time have all featured episodes based on D&D. In Netflix's hit series Stranger Things, characters play D&D in scenes together, while the plot of each season operates on the framework of a D&D campaign. These shows' references to D&D both acknowledge and bolster TTRPGs' place in pop culture canon.

### **PICKING UP A NEW SKILL**

With the growing rise in popularity of TTRPGs many therapists have taken note. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in using D&D, RPGs, or other TTRPGs as a form of mental health therapy. The game can provide a safe and supportive environment for players to explore and express their emotions, work on personal issues, and build social skills. This is not to say the game itself is therapy, more that the game can act as a conduit through which the applied GM can teach therapeutic skills. This is much in the same way as music is used in music therapy, and art is used in art therapy (Connell, 2023). Furthermore, therapeutically oriented GMs can craft the story to help their clients address issues or practice skills that they are learning in therapy (Kato, 2019; Lancaster, 1994; Lis *et al.*, 2015).

Participating in these groups can help individuals with mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. For example, the game can provide a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem boost when the players succeed in completing a quest or defeating a monster. It also provides a way for players to safely explore and express emotions by role-playing their characters (Rosset & Stauffer, 2013; Segrin, 2019; Segrin, McNelis, & Swiatkowski, 2016). Additionally, TTRPGs require teamwork and communication, which can help improve social skills, form resilience, and build relationships.

Therapists and mental health professionals have begun incorporating D&D into their sessions as a way to engage their clients in a fun and interactive way. It can also be used as a tool to explore and work through

personal issues, such as trauma, self-esteem, and other mood disorders.

For example consider the following encounter in a group where the focus of the group was on assertiveness skills and building positive peer relationships. Becky struggled with depression and social anxiety and worried that no one in the group liked her. The party had just entered a new town and gotten rooms in an inn. They wanted to have their characters go down to the common room to meet the locals and see if they could find information about their quest. Then the following conversation between the party and the NPCs (voiced by the GM) occurred:

*Becky: My character gets under the covers and hides.*

*Sara: My character is going to stay with Becky's character*

*Becky: I don't talk to your character*

*Sara: It's okay I'll just pass her character one of the flowers I picked today.*

*Becky: I push it back out to her*

*Sara: I pass it back*

*GM: Sara what is your character trying to communicate to Becky's character by passing the flower.*

*Sara: That they are not alone and as much as they might try to isolate themselves we are here for them. We know they are hurting and think it's best if they stay away but we like them, and are glad they are here. I want them to know we are here.*

*GM: Becky, what is that like for your character, knowing that the group wants them around?*

*Becky: It's nice but also difficult to believe. It's really hard for her to trust that they want her around.*

*GM: What do you think would help them believe the message that Sara's character is trying to convey?*

*Becky: I think what they are doing would work. It likely would just take some time.*

*Sara: I'm patient and so is my character. They will wait and stay by your character's side.*

*Becky: After like another ten minutes my character would come out from under the covers.*

Through role-playing a character Becky was given an opportunity to reflect on how others might be trying to show support and kindness towards her. As the group went on Becky was able to ask for more of what her character needed. At one point she said that her character was feeling insecure and wanted company the other players were happy to oblige. Becky also reported feeling more comfortable asking for what she wanted in her day to day life from her friends and family. This intervention likely played a part in giving her a safe space to practice the skill without fear of real world consequences.

## PREVALENCE OF USE

Since the release of the first TTRPG, Dungeons and Dragons in 1974, the genera has grown in both depth and breath (Peterson, 2012). Though not as well studied as video games TTRPGs are played more now than ever before in their history (Bean, 2022). The most widely played TTRPG remains Dungeons and Dragons (Weinberger, 2021). Over the last five years the number of people playing TTRPGs has grown considerably. Indeed a thriving market of events such as D&D in a castle, tabletop gaming conventions, and merchandise such as dice, gaming tables, and other accessories has grown.

A unique aspect of TTRPGs is how they seem to lower inhibitions for players for trying new behaviors during role playing (Estes, 2020; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Segrin, 2019; Segrin, McNelis, & Swiatkowski, 2016). Indeed many players of TTRPGs note how therapeutic simply playing can be. Therapists across several disciplines have also noted the potential therapeutic benefits of playing and utilizing TTRPGs in therapy. All across the globe providers are using TTRPGs as tools to help clients achieve therapeutic goals. Such play is referred to as *applied gaming*. The role of the GM in such a game is referred to as an *applied GM* (Connell, 2023).

In applied gaming the game is used much in the same way music is used in music therapy, or art is used in art therapy. The purpose of the game is to act as a conduit for the therapeutic intervention (Connell, 2023; W.B. Davis *et al.*, 2008; Wood, 2022). Though playing TTRPGs on their own can be therapeutic, much in the same way playing music or creating art can be therapeutic, unless an applied GM is running a TTRPG in such a way to achieve behavioral goals it is not therapy. Running a specific module is no more therapy than is performing an emotionally laden song. The

applied use of gaming relies heavily upon the skills and abilities of the GM and their storytelling ability.

Various training programs for applied gaming have been developed across the globe. While there is not yet a governing body of therapeutically gaming there are some standards that most applied GMs utilize such as creating specific goals, tracking behavioral changes and creating encounters to allow players the opportunity to practice skills they are learning in therapy (Geek Therapeutics, 2023; Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008, Thorhauge, 2013).

### **DIAGNOSTIC CONCERNS REGARDING TTRPGS**

TTRPGs are not as well studied as video games (Ascherman, 1993; Begy, 2017; Daniau, 2016; Cassone, 2017; Jones, 2012; Weninger, 2006). D&D was surrounded by anxiety after its debut and is one of the most well-known examples of a moral panic from recent history. It was dubbed the Satanic Panic, and it arose in the 1980s as parents, politicians, and parishioners espoused conspiracies about Satanic worship taking place in secret, and many pointed fingers at D&D. In 1985, psychiatrist Thomas Radecki and anti-occult activist Patricia Pulling formed B.A.D.D. (Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons). These two believed D&D was a gateway into the world of the occult for children. B.A.D.D. representatives gave speeches across the country, making claims about the evil lurking within the game.

Many parents heeded the speeches from B.A.D.D. and feared Dungeons & Dragons would expose their kids to real-world evil and tempt them to act out. Pastor Jon Quigley of Lakeview Full Gospel Fellowship claimed, "the game is an occult tool that opens up young people to influence or possession by demons." Many schools, clubs, and organizations banned D&D outright, despite the lack of reputable evidence to prove the game had an adverse effect on children.

D&D's reputation never fully recovered from the Satanic Panic, but today we have better research. Dozens of case studies, and pilot programs have shown the benefits of TTRPGs on developing minds, particularly when the GM is familiar with the game's rules and its therapeutic potential.

Wayne D. Blackmon, M.D. documented a case of psychotherapeutic treatment and how it enabled a patients' experience with ongoing games of D&D. In this case, role playing served as a safe space for his patient to explore their emotions, work with those

feelings, and eventually gain mastery over problematic moods (Blackmon, 1994).

Dr. Blackmon discovered role-play can reveal actual characteristics of the players. This means troubling traits can be exacerbated by the game, but a trained GM and therapist can use the waking fantasy to help patients identify emotions, work through issues, and build self-efficacy. Say a player revealed their temper during a frustrating conversation with an NPC. The GM can help the player explore different ways to approach their temper through the NPC's response. The NPC could refuse to help the player's character, leaving them stuck on in the middle of their quest. Then, the GM might discuss how the player could apologize to the NPC and patch up the relationship. This allows the player to explore and improve their own characteristics in a make-believe, low-consequence environment (Blackmon, 1994).

### **GROWTH THROUGH GROUP THERAPY**

Like video games, TTRPGs allow players to take on the role of the hero and become powerful enough to defeat strong, formidable foes. TTRPGs uses the player's choice and agency even further than video games can as the GM can fully allow the players to experience the consequences of their character's actions. Players can even choose to play their character in such a way that they become a villain.

Characters are built with **alignments**, which explain their morality and personal attitudes toward society and order. Many GMs do not allow their players to play characters with Evil alignments. They are concerned evil actions from one party member might ruin gameplay for the other players. Letting players choose any alignment they want may be difficult, but it becomes the GM's responsibility to rein them in when they make nefarious choices.

Players who make evil choices in the game are going to experience consequences for their actions. If an evil character decides to steal, they might be arrested and have to spend time in jail. If they kill an NPC or another player character without justification, they might become a target themselves. Either way, they risk upsetting other players. Emotional and physical consequences trigger character growth when the character (and the player) is forced to reconcile with their choices. That growth can spark an entire transformation (Bean, 2022; Wright, Weissglass & Casey, 2017).

When clients play TTRPGs, the Therapeutic Game Master can see the transformation within them. Let's use an example of working with a kid, Billy, with severe ADHD and impulse control behaviors issues. During the first session, Billy kept interrupting other players.

"You're not playing that character right," he moaned, trying to usurp power from the GM, "You can't make that NPC chaotic evil, the game doesn't allow you to do that."

He kept reaching across the table to snag dice from other players. He argued with the GM about minute details in the setting, plot, and different rules. Billy's impulsive behavior and disruptions derailed the GM several times, interrupting the flow of the game for the other players. The GM had to step in to prevent the situation from escalating with a firm, yet important reminder to the player (Bean, 2022; Wright, Weissglass & Casey, 2017).

"Hey, we appreciate the information and we're going to take it under consideration," The GM responded without shaming him or trying to stop him. "We've designed this campaign differently, so we're going to play it this way. It's okay if it breaks the rules a little."

Rather than shut down his more impulsive actions, the GM allowed the group to play out the current situation as an opportunity for growth and then just as quickly continued on with the session. This can be done the same when it comes to in-game impulses, behaviors, and outbursts:

"I don't like this person," Billy would say. "I'm going to push them down the well."

"Okay," the GM could respond, "but remember there's always consequences for our behaviors." The GM could also prompt the other players, saying, "How does the group feel about this action, does anyone wish to intervene?" Thus the GM provided options for the other players to participate, help them grow as well, and possibly intervene.

Taking the example even further, if Billy's character pushed the person, he could have started a full-on brawl in a peaceful part of town and landed in the town's jail. The GM could use it as an opportunity to reflect on his actions.

"Oh man, you got locked up in jail," the GM could tell Billy. "Now the rest of the crew has to bail you out. What is that like for the group to have to stop their quest and go get your character out of jail, because

they made a choice that was not appreciated by other people?"

This brings in the ability to have a small break to process the content that is transpiring in the game; which is a common occurrence when therapeutically processing difficult content, themes, and events in an RPG storyline aimed at personal growth, perseverance, group cohesion, and resilience. It is important to have group discussions about how Billy's actions can affect the rest of the party - this is where the personal growth for Billy (and the group) can come into play with the rest of the party and GM offering supportive roles for problematic behaviors at the TTRPG table. Billy may be able to develop insight into his behavioral role and the party can build up courage to speak out about the impact upon them focusing on growing their own personal voice.

"You know," the other players may say, "it really took away from what we could have been doing instead. We could have been making progress toward discovering why there is magical energy coming from the mountain."

Billy could potentially retreat, feeling shameful, and tell them to leave him in jail if their quest was so important. At this point, it would be time for an insight aimed intervention. It was time for the group to rally behind him and show him how important he was to them.

"You're part of the group, so what happens with you also happens with us," they could say. "We're not going to leave you behind, man. We're not going to let you separate yourself. We don't split the group."

Overall, these TTRPG sessions can produce amazing, touching, emotional moments between players fostering problem solving, decision making, emotional intelligence, communication, creativity, confidence, and even resilience. Most players feel a sense of community and pride in their accomplishments together (Daniau, 2016; Garcia, 2017).

Billy's story is one of many in which kids use D&D as an opportunity to grow through their characters. Billy was introduced to the negative consequences of his character's negative actions when he upset the party. In the sample above, he also realized positive consequences when he worked together with his party to complete the campaign. The non-scripted nature of the game allowed him to express himself naturally as

he would in real life and he learned the natural outcomes. Under the supervision of a trained therapist, he was able to develop new ways to interact with others to benefit both his D&D character and his impulse control. Other clients might not have ADHD or impulsive behaviors like Billy, but a Therapeutic Game Master can analyze patterns in their RPG experiences to help the players hone their real-life characters into a positive growth opportunity.

### **WORKING THERAPEUTICALLY WITH TABLETOP GAMERS**

TTRPG characters can provide insights about the players behind them. Further, we can use the TTRPG environment therapeutically to help our clients grow. An understanding of psychosocial development theory helps parents identify which concepts our clients might be developing and how TTRPGs can intersect with them. The two of Erikson's psychosocial development stages most applicable to TTRPG gameplay are stage four, Industry versus Inferiority (ages 6-11), and stage five, Identity versus Role Confusion (ages 10-20; Erikson, 1982).

According to Erikson's 1982 psychosocial development theory, children ages six to eleven are commonly in the Industry vs. Inferiority stage, meaning they are discovering their potential to be good and bad at different tasks. They feel good accomplishing tasks they excel at, and feel bad when they are unable to succeed in other areas. Internalizing their successes can lead to an industrious, go-getting attitude whereas failures can manifest a sense of inferiority. TTRPGs are a great tool for clients to explore these feelings because no character can master every skill. Each one has its own share of strengths and weaknesses.

Role-playing as a hero in TTRPGs, clients can feel strong, capable, and resilient, using their strengths to overcome challenges. Players are excited to upgrade their characters, learn new skills, and conquer formidable foes. As the player experiences success in TTRPGs, they can bolster their self-image as industrious rather than inferior, encouraging them to continue to take risks and attempt new skills within and without the game (Arenas, Viduani, & Araujo, 2022; Blackmon, 1994).

When your client inevitably comes across a challenge their character cannot overcome because of a weakness, they can learn to cope with inferiority and practice creative problem-solving. They could ask for

help from a teammate and discover all the benefits being in a party has to offer, or they could develop new ways to succeed in areas they would otherwise find challenging. A 1986 case study by Zayas and Lewis found that a group of early teen boys playing D&D at a local community center demonstrated social gains that their non D&D playing peers did not (Zayas & Lewis, 1986). Specifically this group of boys demonstrated improved conflict resolution and noted the importance of being in a group of people with a wide array of skill sets to accomplish tasks.

If we summarize stage four as the stage in which children discover the world, the fifth stage is where they discover their place in it. In Erikson's fifth stage, Identity versus Role Confusion, mostly occurs between ages ten through twenty. When a child develops their Identity, they gain a stronger sense of who they are. This can play out as learning what careers would be satisfying for them, or how they identify sexually. Role Confusion is when a child senses they are performing a role out of alignment with who they are. This could be a child who wants to be a star athlete at school but has to drop the football team to help out at home. Or it could be the child who values their independence, but is stuck feeling subordinate in their personal relationships. We can use TTRPGs to help children explore their identities and fulfill meaningful roles by evaluating how they create their characters (Henrich & Worthington, 2021).

Playing a character focused on healing and helping can help a player uncover their desire to pursue a nursing career, while role-playing as a different genders can help a player explore their sexual and gender identities. Playing characters of different fictional races can help characters understand their own racial identity and how to accept the identities of those with unfamiliar backgrounds. When we notice our client consistently playing as a furtive assassin class who moves in the shadows, we might ask if they prefer work behind the scenes in real life, or if they see themselves as someone who does not need much attention to be happy. If our client is attracted to a character with an engineering class who solves problems with brains over brawn, we might ask if they find intelligence highly valuable, or if they wish they were better at math and science in the classroom. Players can explore different roles by tinkering with the races, classes, and attributes of their character builds to better comprehend who they are and how they see themselves in the world (Garcia, 2017).

### PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF ALIGNMENTS

We can further evaluate identity through one of D&D’s most well-known artifacts: the Character Alignment Chart. This chart has become a meme and is applied to characters outside the world of D&D, inanimate objects, and other recognizable parts of everyday life. For example, the chart below includes an example based on types of coffee.

Alignments are a combination of two factors: morality and willingness to abide by societal rules. A chaotic good character disregards the laws, but always tries to fight for the greater good, even if their end goal hurts others. Robin Hood’s habit of robbing the rich to feed the poor is a popular example of a chaotic good character. A lawful evil character is the opposite: they follow laws to a T, but enjoy hurting others to get ahead. Crossroad demons, or characters who make dangerous deals with desperate people, fall under the lawful evil alignment.

We can apply the alignment chart to the real world to help us understand our client’s sense of morality and place in society. If your client chooses to play a chaotic good character, they might have good intentions, but feel too restricted by rules to accomplish their goals. We can observe players’ character creation choices to understand how they view the world and how they prefer to navigate it.

Use of the alignment chart with clients that struggle with more of a fixed mindset, typically those with

Autism Spectrum Disorder, can also create some problems (Kato, 2019; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). No person is one alignment all the time, just as no TTRPG character is one alignment all the time. Some players who have difficulty with theory of mind might follow the alignment chart, even when doing so does not make sense for their character in a given moment in the story. A trope that many who play TTRPGs do not like is the phrase “it’s what my character would do.” When using alignments it is important to help players understand when their character might choose an action that does not fit with their alignment. Such discussions can help promote theory of mind and psychological flexibility.

Using D&D alignments for personal growth can involve reflecting on one’s own beliefs and behavior and comparing them to the alignments in the game. This can help individuals gain insight into their own values and actions, and potentially identify areas where they would like to make changes.

Here are a few ways to use D&D alignments for growth:

**Self-Reflection:** Consider which alignment best describes your own beliefs and behavior. Reflect on how closely your actions align with your values, and consider how you can make changes to better align them.

**Role-playing:** Take on the persona of a character with a different alignment and explore how their beliefs

#### D&D Character Alignment Chart

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <p><b>Lawful Good</b><br/>Acts with duty and honor, follows all laws</p> <p><i>Latte</i></p>            | <p><b>Neutral Good</b><br/>Believes in the greater good, breaks some laws to achieve it</p> <p><i>Iced coffee</i></p>        | <p><b>Chaotic Good</b><br/>Does whatever it takes to achieve the greater good, often disorganized</p> <p><i>Frappuccino</i></p>              |
| <p><b>Lawful Neutral</b><br/>Follows personal code dutifully</p> <p><i>Espresso</i></p>                 | <p><b>True Neutral</b><br/>Acts in favor of personal interests, unaligned with right or wrong</p> <p><i>Black coffee</i></p> | <p><b>Chaotic Neutral</b><br/>Abandons all rules in favor of personal desires</p> <p><i>Red eye</i></p>                                      |
| <p><b>Lawful Evil</b><br/>Follows strict codes and laws in favor of evil</p> <p><i>Irish coffee</i></p> | <p><b>Neutral Evil</b><br/>Acts without order or passion, follows personal code</p> <p><i>Instant coffee</i></p>             | <p><b>Chaotic Evil</b><br/>No respect for laws or others, pursues chaos for chaos’ sake and often destroys for fun</p> <p><i>Redbull</i></p> |

and actions differ from your own. This can help you to understand different perspectives and develop empathy.

**Goal setting:** Use alignments as a guide for setting personal goals. For example, if you identify as lawful good, you might set a goal to always act in the best interest of others, even if it means sacrificing your own interests.

**Problem-solving:** Use alignments to help resolve conflicts or ethical dilemmas. Consider how each alignment would approach the problem and choose the solution that aligns best with your own beliefs and values.

It's important to note that alignments in D&D are fictional and not a real life moral compass. It's just a way to describe a character's moral and ethical beliefs and behavior, and should be used as a tool for personal growth and self-discovery, rather than as a label or judgment of oneself or others.

## THERAPEUTIC ENCOUNTERS

While TTRPGs offer many ways to be therapeutic as noted above the game itself is not therapeutic. Applied GMs create encounters for their players to practice therapeutic skills, or behaviors within the game. Such encounters are called *Therapeutic Encounters* (Connell, 2023). Therapeutic encounters are where the applied GM uses the mechanics of the game or the narrative pull of the story to give their players the opportunity to practice a desired skill set.

For example, if your client gets nervous meeting new people or presenting in front of the class, you might encourage them to rehearse social interactions in the low-consequence environment of a TTRPG. Perhaps you craft a gameplay situation that requires your client to give a rousing speech to fill their companions with courage before the big battle. Among a small group of trusted gamers, your client can test their performance in a social situation outside of their usual comfort zone. If they succeed and fill the characters' hearts with courage, they might bolster their public speaking skills in general. If they fail to muster up a powerful speech, they are in a safe space to try again with a different approach. Either way, TTRPGs provide fun opportunities to explore individual strengths and weaknesses for personal development.

When we also custom build quests around an individual's struggles. In the game they are free to

explore hardships in a more comfortable setting that is free of real world consequences. If a client is struggling with grief, we can build a campaign to explore their character's quest to scatter a loved one's ashes, like the video game *God of War* (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018). If they are experiencing anxiety in social situations, we can promote interactions with more NPCs so the player feels like they are succeeding at interacting with multiple people, even though they are only communicating with the GM in different roles. With a degree of separation and an entertaining backdrop, GMs can design TTRPG campaigns to confront specific issues without making the players feel too uncomfortable (Abbott, Stauss, & Burnett, 2022; Abyeta, 1991; Arenas, Viduani, & Araujo, 2022).

One incredibly important aspect of applied gaming is consent. Players who are participating in an applied game are providing their consent to be in a game that is focusing on building skills and abilities for them as a person. Further players are being given specific opportunities to practice such skills but they are not being forced to rise to the occasion within the game. Another way to think of this is the players have the opportunity for their character to say no. They might be asked to give a rousing speech, or to wait before changing in, but the player might not have their character rise to the occasion. Such incidents provide the applied GM with opportunities to have the group process the difficulties of change and to discuss how hard it can be to change.

Through use of storytelling, game mechanics, emotional distancing through use of the player character, TTRPGs seem to be an incredibly adaptable and powerful tool that more therapists should consider using. For individuals interested in learning more about using TTRPGs in therapeutic settings they can search online for "Therapeutic Game Master" training. When one is considering training in this area they should look to ensure that the certification is accredited nationally by multiple accrediting bodies (e.g. American Psychological Association (APA), National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC), Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), and even Association of Play Therapy (APT)) to guarantee efficacy, evidence based practices, and the training is appropriate for continuing education.

In summary, Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) is a popular fantasy role-playing game that has been found to be beneficial for mental health therapy if used by a trained professional. It can provide a safe and supportive environment for players to express their

emotions, work on personal issues, and build social skills. Mental health professionals have begun incorporating D&D into their sessions as a way to engage their clients in a fun and interactive way and it should be used in conjunction with other forms of treatment. However, it is cautioned that therapists and other GMs who aim to use this in a therapeutic endeavor require significant training in order not to harm the clients they seek to help.

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