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## Gaming Intentionally: A Literature Review of the Viability of Role-Playing Games as Drama-Therapy-Informed Interventions

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**Gaming Intentionally: A Literature Review of the Viability of Role-Playing Games as  
Drama-Therapy-Informed Interventions**

Literature Review

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 4, 2020

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Clinical Mental Health Counseling w/ Specialization in Drama Therapy

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### Abstract

Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGS) and live-action role-playing (LARP) games have recently risen in popularity in the cultural zeitgeist with the advent of popular gaming shows like *Critical Roll* and *The Adventure Zone*, as well as popular media like *Community* and *Stranger Things*. While some literature exists linking the concepts of roleplaying to theater and psychotherapy in the pursuit of deeper game design, little exists that attempts to bridge the gap by examining the potential of role-playing games (RPGs) as therapeutic tools informed by drama therapy practices and theories. This literature review provides a brief overview of basic RPG terminology, styles, and similarities to psychodrama and theater. It also demonstrates a basic analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of four TTRPGs and LARPs as therapeutic tools through the lens of drama therapy. This literature review is in service of future research into the application of drama therapy practices to role-playing gaming, as well as into clinical game design based in therapeutic goals and structure.

*Keywords:* bleed, character projection, dramatic reality, LARP, player character, therapeutic gaming, TRPG, TTRPG

## **Gaming Intentionally: A Literature Review of the Viability of Role-Playing Games as Drama-Therapy-Informed Interventions**

### **Introduction**

*It is late evening on a spring Saturday, down by the Cape. Four friends sit around a table; half-finished ciders dot the wooden surface, as do four sets of colored sets of dice. I sit back in my chair, obscured partially by a folding screen standing upright, as one of my players raises his voice. “You rush headlong into everything without thinking about it!” says Brandan Morrigan, a centuries-old scion of an Irish goddess, chastising his charge: the newest representative of an ancient and powerful dragon, and the latest to be Her voice in the mortal world. Brandan has the unenviable responsibility of accompanying this headstrong, impulsive twenty-one-year-old neophyte and keeping her out of harm’s way. Brandan’s player speaks in a voice tinged with frustration, a tone the man himself rarely uses in present company. “I am just asking you to sit down and listen for once-”*

*The player across the table from him stiffens; I note the change and sit up straighter: ready to intervene if necessary, but not quite yet. Her voice and mannerisms shift suddenly from an insecure, uncomfortable air she held merely moments ago; her voice flares with a sudden anger; it shakes as she struggles to remain calm. She locks eyes with Brandan’s player, leans forward, never breaking eye contact, and suddenly Britta Dhawan, Envoy of the Dragon, is at the table with us. “I am sick and tired of sitting,” she retorts. The other players stop dead. They know Britta’s backstory in the game; prior to the current sessions, she had spent months after a horrible accident in a wheelchair and in physical therapy, with very little progress. Only recently had she recovered thanks to her draconic mentor. The other players are silent, and Britta Dhawan fades out of the space, her declaration hanging in the air, leaving only her player.*

*“Shit,” Brandan’s player says, and the group laughs. I smile and let them continue.*

## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

In my time as a player, designer, and game master (GM), I have seen numerous scenarios like the one above where the liminal space of role-playing transcends the simple idea of pencils, paper, and dice. That Saturday evening on the Cape, I could feel a shift in the way we played: where the boundaries between player and character broke down, where characters ceased to be intellectual constructs in a purely authorial sense and obtained a level of embodied experience that spoke of something deeper and more profoundly linked to their player. A character's disability and desire to rise above it can appear, at first, to be nothing more than a fun story beat, but perhaps it is more than that to the player and thus more in turn to the "audience": to the other players gathered around the table, or even to an actual audience. I've heard many people talk about how games gave them a space to try something new, to be someone else for a time, and to explore facets of their lives in ways they felt they couldn't in other situations. I've seen many others resonate with characters on games filmed or streamed for entertainment.

As a gamer who initially approached graduate school programs with the desire to investigate the potential use of role-playing games (RPGs) as therapeutic tools, I was initially stymied by a lack of cohesive linking of existing drama therapy principles and theories to their counterparts in role-playing studies. I had no shortage of anecdotes about how RPGs had helped many of the gamers I had met on my own journey as a gamer - self-discovery/growth, parsing trauma, the chance to try out new things, and the discovery of a community – or of meaningful experiences and moments of intimacy experienced in a scene, like the one I related above. Yet I found that wealth of experience reflected at me only tangentially in the literature of drama therapy. In contrast, I found that plenty of RPG-design literature, especially in the field of live-action role-playing (LARP) games, looked to the same practices of theater, acting, embodied experience, and even psychodrama that I was studying in my classes.

## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

The structure of tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), LARPs, and theater-based forms of therapy – such as psychodrama, role method, and the field of drama therapy as a whole – are speculated to have converged at similar epistemological origin points. Michael Tresca asserts that Moreno himself “used the LARP format for psychotherapeutic purposes, calling it psychodrama” (Tresca, 2011, p. 182), and recent LARP literature (Fatland, 2016; Hamada et al., 2019; Montola & Stenros, 2014) credits the influence of psychodrama and sociometry on recent directions and schools of thought in modern LARP design. Given the relatively siloed nature of the two fields, the existing research often comes close to such a linkage in a tangential way but provides no attempts at a cohesive blending of the lenses used by either discipline. Yet there has been little research literature written on the experience of those engaging in hobbyist role-play from a clinical perspective, and almost none on how principles of drama therapy might align with therapeutic design using RPGs as an intervention modality.

Published literature touches on the effectiveness of basic theater and drama therapy adaptations for roleplaying (Blackmon, 1994; Enfield, 2006; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Zayas & Lewis, 1986), as well as the study of RPGs through other lenses of study (Adams, 2013; Daniau, 2016; Waskul & Lust, 2004) and their potential as academic/educational tools (Hally & Randolph, 2018; Howard, 2018; McConville et al, 2017; Orazi & Cruz, 2019). Recent multidisciplinary research on RPGs (Betz, 2011; Blackstock, 2016; Bowman, 2007, 2012, 2013; Cox, 2016; Lankoski & Järvelä, 2012; Schrier, 2017) as well as emergent student research on therapeutic applications of RPGs (Brown, 2018; Funyak, 2019; Gutierrez, 2017; Spinelli, 2018) indicates a growing interest in, and the potential for, the application of a drama therapy theoretical lens. In addition, work like Koren’s (2018) work in LARP as a drama therapist speaks to the independent employment of this sub-modality in the field of working drama therapists.

## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

The purpose of this literature review is to add a synthesis of these two topics to the pool of research around RPG design and therapeutic role-playing gaming. To do so, this thesis begins by providing a working definition of what a TTRPG or LARP is, as well as its historical context as a format and in the mental health field. It then examines the existing literature around game design philosophies, then links those design concepts to the core processes of drama therapy and existing clinical research to propose a mapping of drama therapy goals and processes to aspects of game design. The clinical lens is then applied to several examples of TTRPGs andLARPs currently available to provide suggestions on how to assess the therapeutic strengths and weaknesses of different games in terms of embodiment, aesthetic buy-in, and level of anxiety.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Defining Terms**

##### ***The Role-Playing Game (RPG)***

To provide the necessary context to discuss the medium of TTRPGs andLARPs as a therapeutic tool, it is necessary to define these concepts. Game designer John Wick offers the following working definition: “a game in which the players are rewarded for making choices that are consistent with the character’s motivations or further the plot of the story” (Wick, 2014, para 36). He also cites developer Robin Laws as saying “A roleplaying game is the only genre where the audience and the author are the same person” (Wick, 2014, para 51). Designer Rob Justice argues that “the author and audience are *not* the same person... [everyone] involved in the game is an author, but their audience is everyone else... Your fellow players are your audience.” (Justice, 2014, para. 22). Clearly Justice and Wick do not arrive at a consensus as to what the role of the player truly is, though Justice later advocates for a principle of being “a fan of the characters,” and to “stand aside [to] see what [other players] do next” (Justice, 2014, para. 22)

## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

However, synthesis of the two leads to the following working definition: at its core, a role-playing game is a type of game in which players make choices consistent with the motivations and personalities of the characters they have chosen to play, or further the plot of the overarching story they have come together to tell, share, and experience through simultaneous roles of actor, author, and audience (Justice 2014, Wick 2014). Both the TTRPG and LARP formats of role-playing have this guiding principle at the heart of their construction, differing only in the level of structure, acting demand, and immersive quality of experience in general. The major difference between the two formats can be boiled down to an overarching umbrella using the show, don't tell rule.LARPs, like theater, film, or television, excel at showing the story by emphasizing character dialogue, embodied action, and immersive experience, whereas TTRPGs excel at telling the story through description, narration, and lower pressure to perform.

### ***Tabletop Roleplaying Game (TTRPG – or TRPG)***

A TTRPG – often called a pen-and-paper RPG (though neither are strictly necessary) to distinguish it from computer-based RPGs (such as *World of Warcraft*, *Mass Effect*, or *Skyrim*) – is a form of RPG where the participants primarily describe their characters actions and dialogue through speech. In this aspect, the TTRPG is similar in format to a radio drama (it is even often called the theater of the mind) though the acting may not always be as overt.” Players will often describe the intent of their characters actions and dialogue, rather than speaking exclusively in character (Cover, 2010), though many players do speak in character. Like a radio drama – where the only medium of communication is sound and dialogue – more theatrical components are optional, not necessary; costume, props, and makeup aren't necessary to the role-playing inherent in a TTRPG. Often, players will simply narrate their characters actions when speaking, though some games push into more embodied and physical aspects of acting the character.



## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

The success of character actions is determined by set rules: many of the most popular games use dice, but games have used elements such as playing cards, lit candles, and even pulls on a *Jenga* tower to determine the outcomes of character actions. There are even some games that rely entirely on group consensus for most of the game, choosing the outcomes and results of player scenes and actions through silent acknowledgement of a success or the judgment of a failure (Morningstar, 2009). Suffice to say that there are many varieties of conflict or action resolution in the TTRPG industry, ranging on a spectrum from heavily gamified to highly freeform, improvisational storytelling.

### ***Live-Action Roleplaying (LARP)***

A LARP, on the other hand, is a form of RPG where participants are expected to physically embody and portray their characters through the use of speech, costume, and physicality, and thus frames the game world as one represented by physical constructions in the real world (Tychsen et al., 2006). This places LARP, by design, closely adjacent to something like improvisational theater (Kilgallon et al., 2001). Though there is no traditional audience component, many of the mainstays of a traditional theater production remain: players often will dress as their character – the amalgamation of costume, accessories, and props is often referred to as a LARPer’s “kit” (Falk & Davenport, 2001, p. 131) – and very often the venue will include decorations, furniture, and aesthetic dressing to resemble or represent the setting of the LARP’s story.LARPs can range from one-off events to a long-running series of events in the same setting called a “campaign” or a “chronicle” (Tychsen et al. 2006, p. 259), and can range in size from two players in a room together to thousands at a time (p. 258). It is important to note, however, the distinction between purely improvisational theater LARPs – which often have minimal rules and play like guided improv – and combat/conflict-heavy mechanics games.

## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

Combat-heavy LARPs, like many TTRPGs, rely on systems to ensure that combat is fair, though combat itself can take many forms. The two most common form of combat systems are “live combat or “simulated” combat (Young, 2003, p. 7-8). Live combat requires players to engage in actual physical action; prop weapons – usually padded with foam – and relatively safe firearms like NERF guns are used as stand-ins, requiring actual prowess on the part of the players; your skill in martial arts, marksmanship, or athletics directly translates to your combat abilities in a live combat LARP. In some cases, these requirements go even further; military simulations, or “MilSims,” are large-scale simulated warfare scenarios provided recreationally to the civilian sector. (Dusseault & Shanks, 2014). Players use high-velocity firearms – like airsoft or paintball guns – and focus on deeply embedding into a conflict as soldiers, revolutionaries, doctors, journalists, or other roles. Notably, veterans have been known to supplement – or even substitute – mental health care for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or reintegration with civilian life with MilSim events; for those who need it, MilSims can serve as a “ladder leading up to war and a ladder for coming back down” (Dusseault & Shanks, 2014).

In simulated combat, combat is resolved through more abstract simulations; these LARPs often use high-accessibility games such as rock-paper-scissors (Young, 2003) or drawing cards from a deck and comparing higher values. Often these mechanics are used to resolve non-combat social or role-play conflicts as well. While most LARPs tend to fall in one of the two categories of live or simulated, there is often some intentional crossover. A low/no combat Western-themed LARP may use playing card hands to resolve most mechanics but ritualize high-noon style showdowns with NERF guns to specifically resolve actual duels. In a similar manner, a high-combat LARP may use certain simulations to represent physically impossible abilities – a specific color of ribbon tied around someone’s arm to denote invisibility, for example.

## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

Like TTRPGs, LARPs can run the gamut from highly systematic games with a facilitating GM, to rules-light affairs with only a few guidelines and no facilitator at all (Tyschen et al., 2006, p. 255). What they have in common, however, is at the heart of this thesis: using a gamified scaffolding to support role-play, LARPs and TTRPGs encourage their players to step outside themselves and into the role of a character, to explore a world through eyes different from and yet not entirely removed from their own, to learn and practice skills that can translate to everyday life, to expand their role repertoire and enrich their identity, to support their fellow players in this process, and to have fun – they are, after all, *games*. While one should be careful not to confuse these *therapeutic aspects of gaming* with *actual therapy*, that these elements often exist independently of a focused therapeutic experience bodes well for such intentional use.

### **The History of RPGs and Mental Health**

As early as the late 1970s, RPGs have been the subject of moral scrutiny and religious outcry. Early panic, fueled by the 1979 disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III from Michigan State University, cited William Dear – the private investigator whom Egbert’s family hired to find their son. Dear, who had discovered that Egbert played *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) and knew little about the game, confused TTRPGs with LARPs, and speculated that Egbert could have gotten lost or injured in the utility tunnels beneath the campus during a LARP session (Dear, 1984). Though Dear (1984) would later ascribe other factors as the pressing causes of Egbert’s disappearance, subsequent incidents – like the 1982 suicide of Irving Bink Pulling II and the murder of Lieth Von Stein in 1988 – and a surge in religious condemnation of D&D as Satanic recruitment propaganda (Waldron, 2005) led many to blame D&D as having had influence in immoral thoughts and activities. In part due to this public outcry, RPGs garnered a stigma that, while decreasing, can still exist today (Sidhu & Carter, 2020).

## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

Given the explosive popularity of RPGs in the 1980s, it is no surprise that some of the earliest research we have comes from this time period – though it is worth noting that “role-playing” as a term has been in the academic literature as early as 1943 (Lippit, 1943). The earliest example of clinical research centered specifically around role-playing games that this author found was a 1984 dissertation study by Kallam, who used games to work with a group of mildly handicapped students with various degrees of learning, emotional, or developmental challenges (Kallam, 1984). Several other interventions (Enfield, 2006; Kato & Fujino, 2015; Kato et al., 2012; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013, Zayas & Lewis, 1986) have specifically looked at using TTRPG interventions for children with special needs, with psychiatrists and case workers noting an increase in self-efficacy, communication, and ability to come to a consensus through logical discussion over simple majority voting (Kato et al., 2012).

While the influence of the satanic panic among the general population hasn't been studied to a scientifically significant degree, several pilot studies have explored the prevalence of stereotypes and perceptions around the relationship between role-playing games and psychopathology. While many of these studies are limited in scope and exploratory in nature (Ben-Ezra et al., 2018; Lis et al, 2015; Lis et al., 2016), they all have several key similarities: they show that only a minority of practitioners believe that engagement in RPGs marks a sign of psycho-pathology, and that familiarity with the games in question leads to a reduced probability of that belief. Ben-Ezra et al. (2018) specifically note that a willingness to become familiar with RPGs may be a direct result of good therapeutic training, in that practitioners who are inclined to become “more acquainted with the clients’ culture, viewpoints, and explanatory model” can handle clients who engage in RPGs in a more culturally-sensitive and competent manner (Ben-Ezra et al., 2018, p. 217).

## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

Studies using role-playing games are relatively rare, though three noteworthy cases exist in the literature that demonstrate several key points in the implementation of this modality. Ascherman (1993) introduced unsupervised D&D play as an activity for a ward under his direction; he comments on how the games drew together a resistance to therapy and as an avenue of escape, even noting that patients began to see the ward as a dungeon from which escape was the clear and obvious goal. He notes that the rules appeared to be too complex and lengthy for the staff to understand, and therefore at no point was an attempt made to present the games as a therapeutic tool rather than a form of recreation (Ascherman, 1993). Ascherman's work brings up two salient points: 1) merely allowing clients to play D&D without therapeutic supervision can result in degradation of structure and desired outcomes due to the lack of oversight, and 2) for such an intervention to be useful, staff must undergo the same training and knowledge-building process as any intervention in order to become familiar and comfortable with its use.

Blackmon (1994), however, takes a step closer to the ideal of role-playing games therapy. In the treatment of Fred – “a 19-year-old, single white college student” male presenting with “obsessional, schizoid personality” (Blackmon, 1993, p. 624) – Blackmon encountered stories of Fred's time spent playing D&D. While Blackmon noted an initial hesitance in allowing such stories into therapy – as he believed it constituted resistance – he eventually made the choice to encourage Fred to tell these stories. Eventually, Blackmon came to notice the use of D&D almost as self-therapy; he specifically notes that Fred played a character that enabled him to have an outlet for working through emotions in a “safe, displaced way” (Blackmon, 1994, p. 628). He ultimately interprets D&D as a “group-related, organized, controlled waking fantasy” that has “all the elements of free fantasy and encourages free fantasy” (Blackmon, 1994, p. 629).

## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

Blackmon's work provides several theoretical starting points for engaging with role-playing games as a therapeutic model. He specifically notes that, in stark contrast to the freedom encouraged by the game, D&D contains an ever-present system of rules that shape "*how* one is to fantasize. This further offers the reassurance that when needed, there are rules to provide structure for the wanderings of one's imagination" (Blackmon, 1994, p. 629). Important here, is the imposition of structure on fantasy: not to constrict, but to reduce anxiety and enable. It is of interest to note, however that Blackmon never engaged with play himself; he makes several conceptual mistakes that many unfamiliar with D&D make, indicating a passing understanding at best. While this lends credence to the second point gleaned from Ascherman's (1994) work, it brings up another salient point: simply engaging with a client's fantastical stories in an open, accepting, and listening way can foster trust, familiarity, and the therapeutic relationship.

Rosslet & Stauffer (2013) represent the furthest step taken in mental health counseling as it relates to RPGs. Using frameworks such as Goffman's social roles and embracing/distancing, along with play therapy concepts from Adlerian theory, Rosslet and Stauffer used D&D, specifically, to formulate a series of interventions based in weekend RPG camps. Their familiarity and understanding of the game allowed them to utilize the game mechanics themselves as therapeutic tools to create a sandbox of experimentation for social behaviors. In the specifics of their case study, they note that they were able to challenge a client's maladaptive social behaviors in such a way as to not necessarily refute the base drive – what they speculated to be a protective instinct – but to show how the specific manifestation of that instinct drew unwarranted attention to the group in such a way as to be detrimental. Specifically, they were able to encourage the reframing of violent, impulsive behavior in the context of the consequences it would have for the character and the rest of the group.

## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

This is the role-playing game as therapy taken to its logical conclusion: the ability to create a shared reality consensus among a group is predicated on the very idea that this space is a place for exploration, trial, error, and success. In this way, Rosslet & Stauffer demonstrate the three important necessities for the use of RPGs as therapeutic tool: 1) any successful tool must be directed with intention the same as any other intervention; 2) the staff must have the same training and familiarity with the RPG as they would with any other intervention; and 3) the group must have the liminal space in which they have the freedom to act, explore, and express themselves with minimal real-life consequences. It is worth noting, however, that one of their client's behaviors – specifically that of wanting to “to start a fight with patrons there and kill them all” (Rosslet & Stauffer, 2013, p. 186) – is a common issue in *Dungeons & Dragons*, one that will be addressed in a following section on that specific game as a therapeutic tool.

### **RPGs and the Drama Therapy Core Processes**

As noted above, the field of RPG studies is often aware of the existing bodies of literature around the field of mental health and roleplaying as a concept (Bowman, 2007; Lankoski & Järvelä, 2012; Leonard & Thurman, 2018). And while many have approached RPGs as therapeutic tools in other disciplines such as play therapy, social skills groups, and embodied cognition, very little exists in the realm of drama therapy. Bridging the two fields from the drama therapy side requires framing the role-playing game as a *therapeutic tool with theatrical elements*: one that can be examined for its effectiveness in meeting clinical goals, same as any other drama therapy intervention. Drawing on the necessities from the proceeding section, the next step is to develop a framework in which game design principles and philosophies can be contextualized through the core processes of drama therapy. This provides a basic grounding for gauging the therapeutic value of RPG systems as drama-therapy-informed tools/interventions.

## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

At its heart, drama therapy is the intentional use of drama and theater to fulfill and achieve therapeutic goals, focusing on the active and embodied experiences of the practitioner and client (NADTA, 2019). Through the use of several core processes – dramatic projection, play, role-play, empathy, distancing, witnessing, embodiment, and the linked processes of performance and improvisation (Jones 2007; NADTA, 2019) – a client is encouraged to explore the connection between the drama unfolding on the proverbial stage and events in their real life, and transform the narrative within the theatrical space. Though much of the literature of drama therapy is couched in the convention of the theater from which it was born, there are several concepts that map to the RPG directly: dramatic projection, play, role-play, embodiment, empathy, distancing, and improvisation. The remainder – witnessing and performance, require some additional nuance, but can be applied just as easily.

### **Bleed and the Core Processes**

The concept of bleed (Atwater, 2016; Bowman, 2015; Hook, 2012; Leonard & Thurman, 2018; Muroke, 2018) in roleplaying studies is a term analogous to the principles of projection in drama therapy (Jones, 2007) and embodied cognition in cognitive psychology (Lankoski & Järvelä, 2012). It is the mixing of emotional response and motivation between the player and the character; or, as Jones (2007) writes, the relationship and interplay between internalized emotion and external presences: “the process by which clients project aspects of themselves of their experiences into theatrical or dramatic materials or into enactment, and thereby externalize inner conflicts” (Jones, 2007, 84). Atwater (2016) notes that bleed is neither inherently positive nor negative, but the correlated effect of intense emotional content and experience, while Lankoski & Järvelä (2012) argue that bleed will always occur in RPGs, as there is always a component of player worldview built into “the character as a simulator” (Lankoski & Järvelä, 2012, p. 27).



## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

Looking more broadly at existing research, bleed is often framed as something to be handled. Atwater specifically refers to this blurring of the emotional line in the context of the necessity to recontextualize the player at the end of the game (Atwater, 2016). This is a similar sentiment shared by Baily & Dickinson (2016) in discussing the lack of de-roling practices in other theatrical fields. Drama therapists have specifically looked at handling bleed under the auspices of maintaining aesthetic distance, the emotional state that exists on a spectrum between two polar points: under-distanced, an “over-abundance of emotion” which facilitates “neither relief nor insight” (Ali et al., 2018, p. 157); and over-distanced, an emotional detachment that prioritizes rationality and safety over empathy and connection (Ali et al., 2018). The concept maps well to the delicate balance of embodied vs cognitive play, with embodied being too fully immersed in character, and cognitive playing only as an authorial entity with no embodiment.

### **Discussion**

In reviewing the existing research on the viability of therapeutic gaming, I’ve found that much exists in the realm of the consideration of games as therapy, but through the lens of other theories and schools of therapeutic intervention. In the following sections, I aim to synthesize the existing literature through the lens of drama therapy, focusing on several key basics: The role-playing game structure as it maps to the therapeutic intervention, the analogue of the RPG character as acted role, the gamification of liminality and its facilitation of reduced anxiety in role-playing, and the consideration of different systems through the lens of intervention design. Drawing upon the core processes of drama therapy, research into the manifestations of the core processes through theater, and the existing game design research, we find that the overlap of terminology from theater to table provides a strong impetus for further exploration. Recommendations for future research directions are covered after these key basics.

## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

Splitting the conventions of the “role-playing game” into its namesake components – that is to say, role-playing and game – based on Montola’s (2008) framework of external, internal, and narrative conventions results in three main categories. The external framework is the meta-level processes of “the game”: rules discussions, rules changes, the incorporation of popular culture and references to establish a shared frame of reference. It is, functionally, the crafting of the liminal space; it is the process by which the shared consensus is built and maintained. The internal framework is the consistency of action within “the game”: actions have rules, rules have mechanical resolutions. The narrative framework is the description and story of what happens: the playing of the role, the co-authoring of a shared story. It is worth noting that the same actions can be both internal and narrative. A player can solely declare a mechanical option, or role-play their character doing the same: it amounts to the same thing in an RPG.

Mapping this to the structure of an intervention, the role-playing game translates into a drama therapy intervention by focusing on the pieces in which the core processes appear. The external framework is the “theater,” the stage we understand to exist around the table. While many players will have preferences as to the connection between the physical reality and liminal reality – props, costumes, and their varying degree of realism (metal vs. latex, accurate to history vs. informed and inspired by history), etc. – the stage is still set, regardless. The internal framework is the structure of the game – the mid-point of Moreno’s anxiety-spontaneity spectrum (Moreno, 1955) – where the mechanics serve as scaffolding to provide the reassurance that the facilitator can account for what the player brings to the table. The narrative framework is the result, where anxiety is lowered to the point where the player can play without *needing* to actively consider the mechanics: narrate what you do, and the game will tell you what to roll.

## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

The vehicle of the player character (PC) – a character actively played by a player in a role-playing game (as opposed to the non-player character, or NPC, who is often played by the facilitator of the game) – is the closest analogue to that of the stage character, with one crucial detail: while there may be a pre-determined set of backstory contrivances or plots, there is usually no pre-written script. Unlike the scripted character of a play or film, the PC is, for the most part, an improvisational character dreamed up by the player in question. They may use the scaffolding of setting, plot, or genre to create a character, much in the same way theater exercises such as “bus stop” use a narrative convention – in this case, characters waiting for a bus at the titular stop – but like similar theater exercises they have a large spectrum in which to place their characters. The player character does not overtly exist independently – though it can be informed by elements like tropes – and relies on real-time imagining and embodiment (Lankoski & Järvelä, 2012); it is akin to a mask made and worn by the player for the duration of the game.

The dramatic reality of the situation – the liminal space between fantasy and reality where such games reside – can aid in facilitating a sense of distance, where the player is both the character and not the character, where they are simultaneously themselves and the mask of the character they wear. This aids in the embodied experience; the player is the one doing and speaking, and thus experiences their character’s experience in real time. At the same time, while the character may be informed by the player, the tacit understanding that the character in and of itself does not fully equate to the player explicitly codifies the idea of dramatic projection – the impression of aspects of a client’s life and experiences into the fictional material or persona (Jones, 2007) – into the idea of the fantastical narrative through the vehicle of a character observable in real time. A choice to slaughter all the patrons in a tavern may be fueled by an internally consistent logic but carries consequences that will play out immediately.

## GAMING INTENTIONALLY

At the same time, the successes and failures of the character are experienced as player and character simultaneously; the player may be happy or unhappy with the outcomes of random chance – many RPG players, including myself, can often find delight in the failure of an action and the narrative consequences it may bring – but the character must respond to the consequences in a way that is truthful to the role in that moment. If – as Montola (2008) posits – taking the role of a character is the defining feature of role-playing, then the juxtaposition of contradictory goals from both character and player is a unique element to it; just as the audience can enjoy “tragical experience brought to her by actors on the stage, a role-player enjoys creating one for herself” (Montola, 2008, p. 25). The catharsis of a fully completed story – the “performance,” if one will – contains “the pleasure of enjoying the wholeness implicit in a finished work” for both performer *and* audience in the role-playing game. (Casson, 1997, p. 53).

Bowman (2015) writes that “Externalizing the experiences in a linear fashion... seems to help immensely by allowing players the chance to reframe their story in a manageable way” in the context of live-action roleplaying and game design (Bowman, 2015, para. 23). This touches upon the principles of projection and transformation in much the same way as Narradrama, a form of drama therapy with the goal of finding alternate stories to bypass a stagnant internal narrative and expand the repertoire of roles one can envision themselves taking on (Dunne, 2009). Much in the same vein as the catharsis of the finished performance (Casson, 1997), the spotlighting of one’s individual story in the context of a group narrative encourages the player to present their story as part of the whole: undiminished in its sharing, and celebrated together as part of the shared triumph of the liminal world. This emphasis on the group, the understanding that each story is valued as both an individual narrative and as part of a larger, group narrative, helps reinforce the role of the player as both actor and audience, of player and witness.

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Emotional reactions and distress ideally remain offset – distanced – by the internal awareness of the responsibility of the role-player’s dual role as both participant and witness (Furman, 1988, p. 248). By their nature, role-playing games ask participants to come together inside a shared marble of liminal fantasy. It is made clear that the player-audience’s responsibility includes the upholding of that liminal lie, the shared objective of maintaining what Pendzik calls the “microcosmic quality” (Pendzik, 1994, p. 28): the liminal space where the audience experiences *something*: sculpted by the choice of aesthetic and design within the piece, but highly individual. When intentionally ritualized and maintained, the theater of the mind can be as much a therapeutic space as the activities room, therapist’s office, or stage, capable of holding and containing the overlapping roles it asks its participants to hold.

This paradox of the player as actor and narrative agent is the tension that holds the dramatic projection: the internal understanding a player brings to what a character means to them vs. the external expression of that role in the situation (Jones, 2007). Harking back to Justice’s (2014) earlier assertion that the roles of author and audience overlap in the role-playing game tradition, and that the game is best facilitated when all involved are fans of each other’s stories, the implication we can take from that notion is that the players should, to some degree, be invested in each other: whether through common cause or anticipation of what will come next. In traditional forms of theater, the audience waits with bated breath: anticipating, but unable to influence. The strength of the role-playing game is that the ideal audience is one invited to blur the line: to step into the marble of reality. Thus, like the audience members seething at the fool who picks up their phone during a performance, the players, as audience, notice when the liminal marble begins to break, as it is the breaking of their own work. Personification and embodiment are maintained by the reactions of the group to the incongruity of out-of-character moments.

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That is not to say that character *itself* must be rigidly held to prior standards; improvisation, after all, is a key point of role-playing. From the perspective of embodiment, it is nigh-impossible to draw a clear line between player and character (Lankoski & Järvelä, 2012). What LARP scholars refer to as bleed therefore becomes not a phenomenon to be fought against, per say, but a desirable goal in the constructing of a therapeutic intervention couched in the principles of projection and transformation. The challenge of behavior as such is both a challenge to the character and to the player: “I thought your character was a charming, persuasive person! Yelling angrily at everyone isn’t either of those things!”

### **The Projective Mask of Character**

Characters encounter adversity, challenges, and problems which require creative thought and improvisation depending on the situation. By trying different solutions to real-world problems present in the game (a stubborn guard, a corrupt monarch, a bullied sidekick), players learn how the world of the play space reacts to them, and can glean new ways to navigate their own problems, which they can recursively try in the safety of the game. This taking on of roles - that may differ in no small measure to their “real” selves outside the game - affords clients the opportunity to play with and embody their own characters in the moment: feeling frustration, vindication, and a spectrum of emotions in real time within the game. This can be further amplified by the therapeutic game master tailoring encounters to the client’s work.

As created characters possess specific, player-created skill sets, there exists an inherent possibility for a player’s character to be proficient in and actively take different courses of action than the “real” self would within the framework of the dramatic reality. One of the overt connections and possibilities for this transformation comes from a well-used phrase in the gaming mental health field: “What Would Your Character Do” (WWYCD), and is a mantra

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aimed at encouraging players to take on positive aspects of their characters. (Davis et al., 2018). In the vernacular of role theory, this focus on character and role provides a scaffolding for the client to think outside of their own personal box and expand their internal role repertoire (Doyle, 1998). Allowing clients to interact with NPCs who are struggling with problems like their own provides a chance for the client to play the guide and share wisdom and coping skills they have learned through their own process (Davis et al., 2018). Playing characters – and the opportunity to see their own problems through the eyes of their characters in the guise of NPCs – provides the opportunity for distanced empathy; clients are *not* their characters, but can experience emotions both in their own bodies, and at a distance through their character. It is similarly important to impress upon clients that *character* failings are not *personal* failings: the dice are cast and sometimes, just as in life, they roll numbers we're not fond of seeing.

### **Mechanics as Facilitators of Liminality**

It is here where theater practitioner/activist Augusto Boal's theater of the oppressed finds the spect-actor – or, in this case, the spect-player – who can not only see the narrative course of action, but guide it, shape it, and change it if necessary (Choy, 2004). RPGs codify the dramatic mirror: one that is both participating in the story, and at the whim of the roll of the dice can change it. These game mechanics, in fact, conceal the mechanisms of what Boal sought:

“Without the active awareness of the need to defeat the actor-audience dichotomy... the simplest RPG creates a game world where players are spect-actors from the outset: the players observe themselves as their characters and are aware that they are able to affect the game world and change it.” (Choy, 2004, p. 57).

Like the curtains that conceal the Wizard of Oz, the mechanisms of almost all RPGs lend themselves to priming players to think in the liminal: to be player and audience simultaneously.

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Of course, just as all theater is neither therapeutic nor Boal's vision of the theater of the oppressed, not *every* game will take full advantage of the systems in place. It is arguable that this is a *good* thing for the player who does not wish to participate in well-meaning but misguided attempts at amateur therapy at their weekly Friday night game. Used in the appropriate setting, therapeutic GMs can intentionally draw upon these benefits; the key, however, is *the appropriate setting*: under a therapeutic contract and within the therapeutic GM's scope of practice.

### **Choosing Systems & System Familiarity**

A deciding factor in the ability of the drama therapist to create interventions using the above principles – aside from core competencies in drama therapy – is, of course, familiarity with RPG systems. While education to the point of clinical competency in the various games available is outside the scope of this thesis, the following section uses four specific systems to note some factors and goals to consider when intentionally choosing a therapeutic game.

#### ***Dungeons & Dragons, Fifth Edition (TTRPG)***

The fifth edition of the *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) RPG is perhaps one of the most popular RPGs on the market today, with the game's *Player's Handbook* appearing in every annual Amazon Books Top 100 Best Sellers list since 2016 (Schmidt, 2019). It brings to the table a breadth of scaffolding for almost any action a character might want to take, along with a robust mathematical engine to handle combat, social interaction, exploration, and character advancement. A wide variety of skills and abilities gives the player and DM shared mechanical language, and allows the mapping of role-play actions to mechanical solutions, e.g. "I want to lie to the guard that I'm the soldier coming to relieve his shift," maps to the Deception skill, and can be rolled appropriately. This works just as well for embodied role-play: "I'm the guard coming to relieve your shift. Didn't you get the new orders?" still maps to Deception.



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What it has in structure, however, it lacks in inherently encouraging role-play; the section devoted to explaining what role-playing is barely covers one page and comes a little over halfway through the book (Mearls et al., 2014b). While the pieces are there, it is entirely possible to play the game without role-playing at all; in the rules-as-written (RAW), a conversation can be as simple as “I roll to Deceive the guard.” The section on role-playing does bring up what *D&D* refers to as “descriptive” versus “active” role-playing (Mearls et al., 2014b, p. 185-186) – which map relatively well to cognitive versus embodied experiences of acting, respectively – but touches only briefly on this topic. Furthermore, *D&D*’s RAW heavily favors the hack-and-slash approach to adventures; experience points (XP), which measure the character’s progress and level, are awarded primarily based on a formula calculated based on the number of monsters slain at the end of a combat encounter (Mearls et al., 2014a). There are alternative systems offered, but much of the default game is written with slain-monsters-as-XP at its core.

This tension between rollplay and roleplay (Ciechanowski, 2008) is one that has been present throughout *D&D*’s earlier editions. Forays into the debates of the online community of *D&D* players even reveal the so-called Stormwind Fallacy, a proposed logical fallacy shorthand that refutes the idea that players seeking to build the most optimal mechanical characters do so because they can’t role-play, and vice versa (Stormwind, 2006); this fallacy has been the subject of debate in the RPG community to this day (Johnson, 2019; Litherland, 2015). While the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of *D&D* has streamlined many of the mechanics from previous editions, as previously shown most of the design space is devoted to the resolution of its various mechanical pieces. This causes a reliance on the desire of the player in question and the facilitation of the Dungeon Master (DM) – the game’s arbitrator and referee – in supporting and encourage role-playing at the gaming table, which can have varying degrees of success based on the group.

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Ergo most therapeutic benefits of *D&D* come more from its familiarity, wide-spread popularity and scaffolding, more than any inherent strengths of the system itself in exploring emotional content. Its highly structured system can serve to reduce the anxiety of choice paralysis by reducing the number of choices (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000) and highlighting the strengths and mechanical options available to the character. Funiyak (2019) draws attention to the fact that *D&D* explicitly states that role-playing and imagination are major pieces of a character, in addition to the statistics and abilities available at character creation and present in the mechanics; while the system and writing of the game may fall short in emphasizing those factors, there are plenty of pop culture examples to serve as narrative and embodied role-play modeling, such as *Critical Role*, a show where several actors play *D&D* live for an audience. Knowledge of the role-playing in such shows can help offset tendencies to rely solely on mechanics, and modeling by the facilitator can assist in setting expectations and tone for the game.

### ***Powered by the Apocalypse System (TTRPG)***

The Powered by the Apocalypse (PbtA) System is not a self-contained game, per say, but a name for various games using the 2010 RPG *Apocalypse World's* engine. The hallmark of the PbtA game is that each one is built specifically around a genre or setting convention: examples include *Masks: The New Generation*, a game about teenage superheroes struggling with their identity and navigating the expectations of the adults around them (Conway, 2016); *Monsterhearts*, a game that uses monstrosity as a vehicle for exploring puberty, queerness, and the socioemotional life of teenagers (Alder, 2017); and *City of Mist*, a game about people trying to live ordinary lives while also being the reincarnations of myths and legends (Moshe & Aviram, 2017). These genre settings help narrow down the aesthetic and feel of games run using their respective systems and increase the buy-in by being quite upfront about their premises.

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Therapeutically, PbtA games mirror many of the drama therapy activities using monologues or plays to explore client content; aside from the gaming-group-as-theater/improv-cast parallel, PbtA games often drive their players to playing with very specific concepts via the use of “playbooks”: options based around specific themes, aesthetics, and drawbacks. In *Masks*, for example, one of the playbooks is “The Janus,” a character archetype that has to balance being a civilian stuck in the grinding gears of society with being a superhero who hides their mundane identity (Conway, 2016); their big narrative moves are based around that balance. PbtA games also emphasize building relationships in the group via questions that connect the players to the each other. The Janus has two connections: a person who knew them in their mundane life first, and a person they refused to reveal their secret identity to. This sets up two very different aesthetics: the former may not know that the Janus is the person they know outside of their superhero alter-ego, and the latter may think that the Janus doesn’t trust them.

PbtA games also differentiate themselves from *D&D* in one key aspect: the way your character advances and grows. In *D&D*, by default you gain experience points (XP) by succeeding: every monster you kill gives XP. In PbtA games, you only advance through failure; a failed roll awards you an advancement, which you can spend to acquire bonuses to your stats or a new mechanical ability (Conway, 2016; Alder, 2017). In contrast, succeeding grants no such advancements. This drives character advancement through failure – rewarding risks taken through either the narrative boon from succeeding, or the mechanical boon from failing. This encourages players to think about failure as an opportunity to grow and learn – failing forward – which maps well with a transformation of the concept of failure from a static black-white binary to a more flexible grey opportunity. By treating failure as the impetus for gaining mechanical bonuses and advantages, PbtA mechanically highlights the benefits of resilience and tolerance.

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What PbtA games lose in mechanical structure – their narrative moves and skills are much more flexible and open to interpretation than something like *D&D* – they make up for in flexibility and narrative focus. However, there are some pitfalls to be cognizant of that may appear due to this trade-off. The greater narrative freedom can increase the anxiety for players expecting a more structured game – the facilitator can expect some resistance, anxiety, and/or need for more overt modeling as players adjust (Emunah, 1994). There is also the issue of narrative buy-in; PbtA games often require every member of the group to be on-board with the premise. Some games lend themselves better to certain group goals – *Monsterhearts* was explicitly designed to be a vehicle for exploration of queerness, sexuality, and teenage life (Alder, 2017) – but many games overlap in theme, if not in execution: *Masks* approaches teenage identity by framing it against the backdrop of adult and mentor expectations, while *City of Mist* explores the struggle to balance a higher calling with the demands of everyday life. Care must be taken to match the narrative to the therapeutic goals as necessary.

### ***Here is My Power Button* (LARP)**

*Here is my Power Button* is a rules-light, free-form LARP with a recommended capacity of six to sixteen players. Set against the backdrop of a near-future world where artificial intelligence (AI) technology is on the cusp of becoming commonplace, players play either as humans testing a new AI research project as part of a focus group, or as the AIs themselves. Each player forms a dyad with a member of the other camp – a player and an AI, and vice versa – and are paired as consumer and AI for the duration of the game. The consumer is responsible for directing the way the AI develops – with only brief moments in the respective groups for the AIs to learn from each other – but, if unsatisfied with the direction their AI takes, can choose to reset it at any time. The game plays out in twelve scenes – six group, six dyad – over three-four hours.

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This game is included as an example of the highly ritualized components of a LARP intentionally designed to handle emotional content well. *Here is my Power Button* follows a strict escalation of buy-in and trust designed to help players get comfortable and ready for the game's progression. It begins with warm-ups and general icebreakers, using role-play exercises to explain its safety mechanics and practice them. The play dyads are assigned largely via spectrograms; players line up to indicate their interest in playing humans or AI, as well as their interest in how emotional or intellectual (embodied or cognitive, harking back to the preceding section on bleed) they want the experience to be. The scenes are timed, highly ritualized, and guided by the game facilitators – there are two, one each for the human player group and the AI player group – and cued in with music to provide ambience. At the conclusion of the game, there is time set aside for debrief: closure and a chance to talk about the experience with the group.

Like the opening and rising of the curtain, *Here is My Power Button* capitalizes on the contrivances of theater and ritual to increase the immersive potential, while using the mechanics and facilitator instructions to remind players that this is a game, and that there is a story to be followed and explored. Within the context of that framework, however, there is a deep well of emotional content to work through. *Here is My Power Button* explicitly states themes of “wonder, loss, shared discover, loss, and the nature of sentience” (Atwater, 2019, p. 1); the consumers specifically tread in handling “growth, responsibility, and the objectification of closeness,” while AIs deal with “how one forms identity when everything is new and contoured by others’ experiences” (Atwater, 2019, p. 12) and the implied threat of casual erasure at the hands of a potentially disappointed consumer. These are all heavy topics with real-world parallels; *Here is My Power Button* is put together with that understanding, and intentionally uses a scaffold that mirrors intervention design in drama therapy.

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### ***Revived: A Support Group for the Partially Deceased (LARP)***

*Revived: A Support Group for the Partially Deceased* (henceforth *Revived*) is, like *Here is My Power Button*, a rules-light, free-form LARP for up to nine people. The players take on the roles of clients with Partially Deceased Syndrome, or PDS: in short, zombies – now cured and returned to sentience, but still very much not quite alive – dealing with the repercussions and the challenges of being undead, the prejudice they face from the public, their own process of rehabilitation, and any lingering guilt of what they may or may not have done in the feral, untreated state. The game plays out as two sessions of a support group for those with PDS: a “safe space of mutual respect and non-judgment... [to] build community and support” (K. Jones, 2015) over the course of approximately four hours.

*Revived* presents a unique strength as a LARP that quite literally is about therapeutic processes: the ability to demystify, to some extent, the processes of a support group or therapeutic safe space to a wider audience. While it is a dramatization – and the experience can vary wildly as the facilitators are also technically characters with their own goals and motivations – it differs from media portrayals in that the embodied experience of being in therapy can lead to understanding through the vehicle of the character. As a facilitator during a run of *Revived*, I had opted to use a facsimile of a therapist persona – I played a former PDS support group member who was further along in his rehabilitation but had no memory of who he was prior to his undeath, and thus latched on and copied the personality of the support group counselor from his own time in the program. As I had been invited to play the facilitator specifically because of my academic track, I had been cleared in pre-game to use some therapeutic techniques and exercises in the context of the game, with the characters; we’d agreed that the second half of the game is when I would take over leading for a short period.

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I used a variation of the empty chair from Gestalt therapy (Perls et al., 1951) – an exercise where people address an empty chair, using it as a stand-in for someone or something they didn't get to have a conversation with, or hadn't yet worked up the courage to talk to, etc. – by placing a chair in the center of the room, and turning the empty seat to face if/when a player decided to address it. Post-game, after our debrief and closing ritual, one of the players came up to ask me about whether the exercise I had guided the players through was an actual therapy technique; I responded that it was and asked why they wanted to know. They responded that they'd never thought talking to an empty chair could feel so fulfilling and wanted to see about using it in their own therapy. The embodied experience of a therapeutic intervention, but with enough distance and an aspect of fantastic liminality, allowed a player to realize that perhaps such a type of therapy might be useful to them outside of the context of a gaming experience.

*Revived* offered a vehicle for playing with the therapeutic process itself, for testing out a therapeutic process with minimal risk. The embodied learning experience is one that LARP (and other RPG formats) offer in advantageous ways, facilitating the learning and trying of experience in an environment with an element of safety and lessened risk (Cox, 2016). There is an aspect to note, however, as *Revived* deals with topics with some very present real-world connotations: PDS can be mapped to almost any chronic illness/condition, especially if the group opts to go with the dynamics of invisible vs visible illnesses (i.e., some clients with PDS look more human than zombie), and much of the prejudice and stigma can run up against real-world racism, prejudice, and bigotry. As such, there is an element of emotional tourism in both the support group aspect, as well as with playing a marginalized group with many intersectional concerns. If the structure of *Revived* is used, some flexibility in the character process might not be amiss, to allow for greater projective freedom and the encouraging of owning the character's narrative.

## Recommendations

While reviewing this body of literature shows a dearth of published research drama-therapy-oriented research into the therapeutic aspects of role-playing games, it does show several multi-disciplinary roads investigating the embodied experience of the player of role-playing games. The practices of role-playing gaming seem to be shifting in the direction of intentional emotional experiences; Robinson (2019) notes that even non-therapeutic participants seek out “forceful emotional experiences” (Robinson, 2019, para. 9) and designers already tie those to the sense of investment and use of the game as a social teaching tool. In addition, this review also reveals several independent dots of emergent field experience and research (Davis et al., 2018; Funyak, 2019; Koren, 2018) in the field of drama therapy surrounding therapeutic role-playing games, indicating a strong possibility in the uptick of research into this emergent area. Further research could involve the intentional mapping of drama therapy models into a solid criterion to map the therapeutic benefits of certain systems over others, qualitative research and/or case studies shoring up research in therapeutic role-playing games with more recent examples, and quantitative data on the efficacy of games in meeting specific therapeutic goals.

As both cultural zeitgeist and scholarly interest begins to include the aesthetics of the theaters of the mind/table with the theater of the proscenium, so should the research follow. In a world where we are constantly shaping and defining the idea of art, performance, and communication, not embracing these alternative theaters would be doing us the same disservice as not looking at the script we’ve been handed: the play will go on, but we will simply be woefully unprepared for it; lacking in the understanding of its motivations, timing, and language. The Bard once wrote that all the world’s a stage, and all the people in it merely players. Fitting that we might now, at the height of its popularity, see the role-playing gamers as players, too.



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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

**Thesis Advisor: Dr. Laura Wood, RDT/BCT**

***Laura L. Wood, Ph.D. 5.4.2020 12:50pm EST Electronic Signature***