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**Building Character by Building Characters:
A Literature Review Examining the Efficacy of Tabletop Roleplay
as a Creative Intervention for Developing Social Skills in Adolescents**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 3, 2022

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Expressive Arts Therapy

Jena Leake, Ph.D., REAT

Abstract

In the realm of tabletop roleplay games, Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) earned a reputation as the most prolific franchise within the genre and has since prevailed as a popular bonding activity for peer groups of all ages and backgrounds. Among the player base in the D&D community are those that gleaned its potential to offer a conducive space for personal growth, particularly in the realm of psychosocial development, given that D&D sessions facilitated dynamic social interactions among the members. The emphasis on imagination in D&D nurtures the tenets of intermodal expression, as players are encouraged to explore their creativity through the embodiment of their character in addition to engaging in the fictional play-space, which appeals to such concepts in expressive arts therapy as in expanding the range of play by decentering into an alternative reality or alternative world experience. This literature review desired to address the gap in literature analyzing D&D as a creative tool for social skills development, especially for adolescents who are in the process of cultivating their unique personalities. Recommendations for utilizing this method in a therapeutic setting were provided in addition to a fully conceptualized outline for a ten-week group curriculum which may act as a springboard for inspiring future endeavors in incorporating D&D roleplay with the selected population.

Keywords: adolescent development, Dungeons & Dragons, group therapy, intermodal expressive arts therapy, roleplay, social skills development

The author of this capstone thesis is a female-identifying Filipino with a background in psychology who was born and raised in the Philippines.

Building Character by Building Characters:

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Introduction

Roleplay “has been found to facilitate attitudinal change” and also assists with “increasing self-esteem and relational attitudes” most especially for adolescents who are still developing their personalities and identities (Gorman et al., 1990, as cited in Henrich & Worthington, 2021, p. 3). Daniau (2016) recognized the capacity of the popular tabletop roleplaying game, *Dungeons & Dragons*, to assist in the development of individuals’ social skills, especially for those who struggle with social interaction due to anxiety or depression (Ben-Ezra et al., 2018). Gutierrez (2017) supported this by emphasizing the importance of asking processing questions while engaging in a roleplay, spurning the following discourse:

Whether these behaviors are positive or negative, the client will be able to see the direct consequences of their actions...then once you have these moments, you go back to that like you would any individual session and ask the participant “well what happened in there? What did your character experience? Does that relate to your goals? Would you have handled that differently?” Once the client has been able to test how a particular action went, this then opens up the possibility of processing with the client and identifying what their perspective on the situation is. (p. 27-28)

Though tabletop roleplay games as a creative intervention can be considered a pioneering topic in existing literature, the subject lends itself to discussions about roleplaying and fictional storytelling. These creative methods of play can take place on multiple platforms, such as online, and not only on-stage, rendering them versatile and adaptable forms of therapeutic intervention, particularly in the emerging teletherapy space.

Furthermore, roleplay can be considered a form of intermodal expressive arts therapy, or the

multimedia approach to creative expression, which encourages the integration of two or more forms of art in a facilitated therapeutic experience (Davis et al., 2018), by allowing individuals to develop attributes of their fictional characters such as appearance, manner of speech, and behaviors, through storytelling, visual arts, and even movement and drama.

The anticipated outcome for this literature review is to offer a cohesive resource that bolsters the perspectives supporting the use of fictional storytelling and tabletop roleplay in facilitating counseling endeavors with adolescents, especially with those struggling with anxiety and/or depression, and specifically in terms of developing and honing their social skills and ability to function within normal limits in social situations. This review of related literature seeks to produce a body of work that can contribute to the growing pool of knowledge relative to adolescent social skills development by addressing the gap in research concerned with establishing creative interventions, specifically in terms of analyzing approaches utilizing tabletop roleplay as an intermodal expressive arts therapy medium. Concluding this thesis is a fully conceptualized ten-week curriculum catering to this endeavor, which possesses a framework that may be utilized when executing concrete storylines, should interested parties desire to utilize the tabletop approach to facilitating therapy sessions with adolescents in their professional practice.

Literature Review

This literature review employed a mind mapping method for organizing the acquired literature (Crowe & Sheppard, 2012; Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2019). Mind mapping is acknowledged as a spontaneous approach to collating research points, given that it presents information in a manner similar to a growing lattice or “web”. The creation of a visual map allows the researcher to quickly note the links between topics, finding relationships in each point of interest which can then be traced back to the core theme of the research, typically located at the center of the map. The organic shape of the mind map contributes to a working,

process-oriented manner of thinking, given that it is convenient to add or subtract links between or among topics within the web without compromising the general body of research. Buzan and Abbot 2005 (as cited in Crowe & Sheppard, 2012) also noted the lack of strict formats or rules in the creation of a mind map, and that imagination is a significant, if not the most crucial aspect of this approach. Mind mapping encourages creativity in the gathering and interpretation of data, rendering it appropriate for arts-based research.

The inspiration behind the chosen topic of this thesis stemmed from a curiosity about the implied therapeutic benefits of tabletop roleplay, given that personal experiences witnessed its ability to provide opportunities for interacting with peers in a closely monitored yet entertaining space. Among the initial keywords and key phrases that were pursued within an online library database were such terms as “D&D adolescents,” “art therapy D&D,” and “roleplay social skills.” Then, from the body of literature generated by this search criteria, the more specific aspects of the roleplay-as-therapy concept were examined, such as understanding the psychology associated with embodying a fictional character and interacting within an imaginative space and investigating the potential of tabletop roleplay to offer spaces where individuals, in this case, adolescents, can practice socializing with peers.

As the mind mapping approach to organizing research excels in its capacity to assist in the early brainstorming phase by logically establishing connections among keywords and related fragments of thought rather than concerning itself with assembling deep and critical analyses, this free-flowing technique to concept development was deemed the most complementary to the research process, in terms of effectively structuring the gathered literature, rather than the more linear approach to data organization initiated by flowcharts or number outlines. The insight gained from examining the “therapeutic utility” (Henrich & Worthington, 2021), of immersive fictional roleplay, prompted research into the field of expressive therapies noting theories and practices that exist to support roleplay as a viable

form of therapy, as tabletop roleplay interactions can be classified as a form of intermodal expressive arts therapy, with particular emphasis on elements that are significant in drama therapy or psychodrama. As psychodrama explorations tend to invite vulnerability along with authenticity, the methods of ensuring safety within the fictional play space were also deemed necessary to investigate. Finally, it was deemed prudent to take into consideration the effects of real-world occurrences on the tabletop roleplay landscape, as the collective migration of meetings among peer groups from in-person to online was a universal phenomenon. In this vein, the impact of the 2020 coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (Katella, 2021) on the tabletop roleplay community was investigated, along with the role of escapism as a popular means of coping during this historical event.

On Growing and Growing Up

Adolescence is the transitional phase of life wherein a child grows into adulthood. It is acknowledged as a unique period of formative experiences, occurring approximately between the ages of 10 to 19 years old, that are crucial to the development of an individual's emerging personality (World Health Organization, 2021). This phase is responsible for addressing many pertinent aspects of a growing child's identity, such as behavior, cognition, and even their ability to connect with peers while navigating various social structures and environments (McFarland et al., 2014; Sanders, 2013).

Roughly three stages exist within the phase of adolescence, categorized into the following age range estimates: early adolescence (10-13 years old), middle adolescence (14-17 years old), and late adolescence (18-19 years old) (Salmela-Aro, 2011; Sanders, 2013). In each stage, the adolescent undergoes a degree of cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional development that will ultimately shape the manner in which they will think, act, and react as they transition into adulthood. In terms of the development of thinking processes, Sanders (2013) acknowledged three main areas of cognition that are addressed in adolescence. First,

is the demonstration of advanced reasoning skills, which reflects in the adolescent's ability to comprehend hypothetical thought and be inquisitive and discerning by exploring a range of possibilities to initiate and follow a logical thought process when engaging in a discussion. Developing the capacity for critical thinking allows adolescents to engage more deeply in conversations to productively assert their own opinions as well as make sense of the opinions of others. Second, the demonstration of abstract reasoning ability whereby adolescents can shift their thinking from concrete to theoretical, enabling them to familiarize themselves with otherwise intangible concepts such as politics and spirituality, further facilitating an understanding that moral decisions can be informed by societal conventions on a situational basis (Napolitano et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2020).

Finally, there is the demonstration of a formal operational thinking characteristic as adolescents "develop the capacity to think about what they are feeling and how others perceive them" (Sanders, 2013, p. 355). The development of this thinking process influences an emerging sense of empathy (Malin et al., 2014) which is key to the formation of meaningful relationships and peer groups. Yet, the capacity for this meta-cognition can also invite challenging cognitive dilemmas wherein adolescents cultivate an "imaginary audience" from this awareness, which can influence them to operate on the belief that they are being constantly perceived by other people (Sanders, 2013, p. 354). As such, the manner in which they navigate this stage of life will affect the quality of their presentation in adulthood.

Orben et al. (2020) recognized the adolescent stage as "a period of heightened vulnerability to mental health problems" (p. 635). Nooner et al. (2012) noted that with the magnitude and frequency of new experiences that adolescents experience during this stage of life, in addition to biological changes, as in puberty, they are rendered more susceptible to experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) compared to other stages. If such traumatic experiences are left unmanaged or are managed poorly, these could later have

detrimental effects on one's development. Bor et al. (2014) further observed that depression and anxiety are among, if not the most, common mental health concerns present within this population, with many of the symptoms attributed to internalizing and externalizing issues that stem predominantly from difficulty in traversing academic and social environments (Sanders, 2013). Yet, such interactions are necessary for an adolescent, given that this is the stage wherein one tackles a dilemma known as identity vs. role confusion, which is one of many psychological crises featured in Erikson's (1982, as cited in Sacco, 2013) framework of psychosocial development.

The psychological dilemma of identity vs. role confusion is characterized by a process of self-discovery typically facilitated by exploring elements associated with the development of a personality, such as habits or tendencies, likes and dislikes, hobbies, fashion sense, peer groups, and even future aspirations, whether career-oriented or otherwise. Ideally, these explorations are meant to assist the adolescent in understanding their role in society, which in turn helps to bolster their self-image and self-esteem. Conversely, poor self-esteem in late adolescence and even adulthood can be associated with an inadequate formation of an identity akin to an identity crisis, or a misunderstanding of their role in society, resulting in role confusion.

While the formation of an identity is an ongoing process, in adolescence, there is an element of autonomy that seeks to be established as the growing child eventually entertains a desire to be perceived as their own person who is independent of their caretakers, or people whom they had been associated with since birth (Sanders, 2013). Noting that these sensations are experienced in tandem with the strong inclination to form lasting relationships with peers, the adolescent is challenged to balance conformity and peer pressure and can become particularly susceptible to the influences of the latter given that it accommodates and even

encourages the rebellious behavior against parents or authority figures (Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013; Sanders, 2013).

Adolescent experiences that are addressed inadequately can harm a growing child's development. In the same manner, experiences that are addressed positively can be beneficial to the adolescent, entailing constructive growth and the development of resilience in adulthood. To quote Breslau et al. (2004, as cited in Nooner et al., 2012), "Adolescence is a developmental period where exposure to trauma reaches its peak and as such it is a critical time for interventions aimed at preventing PTSD and curtailing sequelae" (p. 161). Existing literature names one such effective intervention as the popular tabletop roleplaying game, *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D), especially in the development of adolescents' social and interpersonal skills (Daniau, 2016; Henrich & Worthington, 2021).

The ABCs of D&D

The idea for a unique tabletop roleplaying game (TRPG) was first conceived in 1967 in a convention known as the International Federation of Wargaming (IFW) (Peterson, n.d.), spearheaded by American game designer, Gary Gygax. After conceptualizing the game's mechanics in full, Gygax went on to publish a set of three booklets in 1974 in collaboration with his colleague, Dave Arneson, which contained detailed lore and system guides about an imaginary yet fully functioning universe known as *Dungeons & Dragons*, commonly abbreviated as DND or D&D.

While the game itself faced a steady decline in popularity from 2004 to 2012, the succeeding years witnessed an upsurge of interest that was further bolstered by the release of the latest D&D handbook, the *5e Edition*, in 2014 (Camp, 2019). A running member count of the D&D community estimates that there are around 13.7 million active players as of 2017 (Camp, 2019). Among the likely contributors to the population's brisk reemergence of interest in tabletop roleplay is the effect of many influential figures in media promoting it as

an immersive experience that audiences can engage in without necessarily playing the game themselves, done commonly by broadcasting their campaigns in the form of podcasts or live streams. One such group of creatives is *Critical Role*, which began in 2012 as a casual D&D “campaign” or game session among friends and has since transformed into a creator-owned media company that produces content centered around the storyline and its ensemble cast, featuring them in comic books, art books, and even in an animated series inspired by the campaign itself, *The Legend of Vox Machina* (Critical Role, n.d.).

Parties, Players, and Campaign Flavors

D&D was well-received for its ability to facilitate teamwork and social connectedness through problem-solving and cooperative play, while the spontaneous storytelling angle enriched creativity, imagination, and critical thinking (Abbot et al., 2021; Chaplan-Hoang, 2021; Morgan & Turner, 2021). The game was also relatively quick to become invested in as it operated on a minimalistic playstyle that required little else in the realm of required props, save for a few key materials, such as accomplished character sheets and a set of dice or several (Wizards of the Coast LLC, n.d.).

D&D character sheets functioned similarly to role descriptions that actors are given for shows and movies. Typically filled out by the players themselves, these sheets act as references containing relevant information about a character, such as their name, physique, skills, personality, inventory, and even moral alignment. Dice, on the other hand, are utilized in evaluating the consequences of a player’s actions, which are determined through dice rolls in tandem with how the campaign storyline is narrated (Skull Splitter Dice, n.d.). In terms of the actual method of play, the D&D “party,” which could consist of anywhere from the standard three-person-party to an ensemble cast of ten or more players, would converge at a common time in a common space and take turns navigating the storyline, interacting with the plot under the guidance of the game’s primary handler known as the Dungeon Master (DM)

or Game Master (GM) (Eldadres, 2018; Wizards of the Coast LLC, n.d.). Ideally a player with prior experience in navigating the game itself who is well-versed in the rules and mechanics, the DM is key in ensuring a productive and enjoyable D&D gameplay experience. They are expected to fulfill a wide range of tasks; from overseeing the logistics of actions that players choose to execute in the game, to ensuring player safety by enforcing gameplay rules and resolving disputes, to maintaining an unbiased moderation of the narrative by respecting player input and offering feedback that is curious instead of critical. Given these responsibilities, one can infer that the role of the DM shares a similar role designation with the facilitator of a group setting, whether therapeutic or otherwise (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013).

Depending on how the DM guides the story, D&D campaigns could adopt an entirely spontaneous approach led solely by the narrative prowess of the party or follow pre-written storylines with set plots accompanied by interactions with non-playable characters or NPCs, which are especially helpful in forwarding the story, acting as plot devices while offering more immersion into the fictional world. While the default gameplay aesthetic of D&D was primarily categorized as a fantasy adventure game experience occurring within a fictional medieval period, with pre-made character classes and races to choose from, many modern-day iterations termed "homebrews" have innovated the game to span across other favored genres (Seikaly, n.d.). These encompass a vast thematic variety, featuring settings that draw inspiration from science-fiction, Lovecraftian horror, and even the 21st-century. Each of these homebrews is comprised of distinct and creative characters that are, once again, typically customized according to the tastes of the DM.

Regardless of the technique and genre, D&D campaigns across all iterations were similar in that they were free-flowing and lacked a strict time limit or requirement. Shorter sessions are known as "one-shots" could take place over the course of a few hours, while full

campaigns lasted anywhere from a few weeks to a few months, to even a few years (Eldadres, 2018). The longest-running campaign began in 1982, and sessions were reportedly still ongoing as of 2021 (King, 2021).

Socializing While Social-Distancing

During the COVID-19 outbreak of 2020, the total market sales for D&D materials, such as books and box starter sets, increased significantly by 33% (Whitten, 2021). This spike in the industry suggested an influx in the number of curious players, among which were individuals who were either entirely new to the game and were eager to learn, or who had played it in the past, and were then prompted by recent events to delve into it once again with newfound investment, then introducing it to members of their household.

Not only did the increase in sales evidence the game's ability to pique the interest of a diverse range of people across generations, but also suggested that players had been engaging with the game even amidst the constraints of social distancing and community lockdown, implying that campaigns were being facilitated remotely. Whether these were conducted similarly to voice and video calls similar to remote learning, or by way of online platforms tailored specifically for D&D, such as *Roll20* or *Foundry Virtual Tabletop*, the key takeaway concludes that the game's purely imagination-driven approach to storytelling and plot construction had allowed it to offer immersive adventuring experiences that were unfettered by the need for its players to be in a physical space (Tabari, 2022).

Research by Orben et al. (2020) asserted findings on a neurological level, noting that activity in the *substantia nigra*, or the region of the brain responsible for the production of dopamine, was similar among people who experienced acute social deprivation or individuals who were starving for nourishment. Therefore, while the landscape of hosting D&D gatherings through virtual means demands a degree of adjustment in transitioning from in-person sessions, the implication that peer group meetings prevailed despite the limitations

brought upon by COVID-19 lockdowns remains a salient point in reinforcing the game's social support faculty, which is significant, considering the crucial role that social interaction plays for adolescents' personality development.

Individuals in the adolescent stage of life notably spend more time with their friends or peer groups, with the intent to establish an identity that is independent of their parents (Sanders, 2013). Yet, the role that family plays in adolescent development must not be dismissed, especially in the context of cultural influences (Malin et al., 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic sparked a unique historical shift in the trend of adolescent psychosocial development given that the aforementioned lockdown and social distancing policies implied that children would have to spend more time at home. It was noted that adolescents who were able to connect with members of their family while at home reported lower depression and loneliness during the pandemic compared to those who relied solely on virtual interactions with peers (Wray-Lake et al., 2022). Recognizing that D&D gained popularity within households during the pandemic suggests that the game harbors a capacity to be an effective social bonding experience for friends and family members alike (Whitten, 2021).

Fiction and Its Escapist Allure

Many of the predicted outcomes of prolonged social isolation during COVID-19 were predominantly stress-based. Fears had developed around the likelihood of contracting the virus itself, the eventual inability to meet physiological needs or provide for the family, or the unstable reliability of the job market to offer long-term financial stability (Brooks et al., 2020, as cited in Wulf et al., 2021). Deolmi and Pisani (2020) highlighted a prevalence of anxiety and depressive symptoms among the youth as responses to navigating an online learning environment after the widespread closure of schools. In line with these observations, research that analyzed the psychological impacts of the lockdown identified a positive correlation between psychosocial distress and time spent online, especially on social media

(Kırcaburun & Griffiths, 2019). This is a poignant dynamic that has prevailed across studies acknowledging the therapeutic utility of various types of media as coping strategies during the pandemic (Paul et al., 2022; Zhu, 2020). One can consider the aforementioned importance of cultivating and staying connected to social supports, especially amidst adversity, as a contributory factor to increased internet presence. However, the discourse surrounding this topic appears to reference a more profound craving, attributing this otherwise comfort-seeking desire as a manifestation of escapist tendency (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Subudhi et al., 2020; Wulf et al., 2021).

With the aforementioned significant relationship between an increased online presence and its impact on mental health, the negative connotations surrounding escapism, as a concept, are inevitable in current research. Fernandes et al. (2020) highlighted a cyclic interaction that dominated the trends in adolescent media consumption during the pandemic, wherein depression and loneliness had fed into the development of a gaming addiction, which in turn acted as a catalyst for engaging in poor self-care habits (i.e., sleeping late, compulsive internet use). Subudhi et al. (2020) reinforced these assertions, terming it as “Internet Disorder syndrome” or “Digital Escapism,” (p. 42) which was described as an elaborate pattern of addiction that stemmed from excessive internet usage, leading to eventual neglect of basic physiological needs.

On the other hand, Eden et al. (2020, as cited in Wulf et al., 2021) contested the positive correlation between stress and the frequency of media consumption, having identified the relationship as an indicator of dysfunctional coping in an individual rather than the sole universal effect of prolonged exposure to immersive media. What is important to note is that conversations around this active pursuit of “psychological shelter” (Wulf et al., 2021, p. 2), ultimately view it as a stress management strategy that facilitates behaviors that

are ambivalent in their distinction, meaning these can be interpreted as either healthy or deregulatory, depending on the setting and manner in which these are exhibited.

Young et al. (2017) comprehensively defined escapism as "a behavior employed to distract oneself from real-life problems" (p. 25), which implies that escapism does not necessarily insinuate the retreat into an online realm, *per se*. Rather, suggests the human tendency to seek momentary respite in the form of pleasurable experiences, when faced with an uncomfortable reality. Because these experiences are often fleeting, it is not uncommon for the frequency at which these are sought out to increase depending on the level of discomfort felt in daily life. Evans (2001, as cited in Subudhi et al., 2020) categorized these experiences into four types:

1. Evasive activities are those that demand a deep immersion or full engagement to effectively tune out current stressors, ultimately with the desire to dismiss or ignore them (e.g., immersing oneself in the virtual world over confronting reality).
2. Passive activities, which require less cognitive investment and can be dabbled in briefly to offer temporary respite from current stressors, but not at the expense of neglecting them, and at times, may even be engaged with while tackling the stressor (e.g., listening to music, engaging in arts and crafts).
3. Active pursuits for escapist activities, which Evans (2001, as cited in Subudhi et al., 2020) described as "when an escapist gives [their] actual input for escapism" (p. 38), connoting an active involvement and awareness of the activities that can act as temporary distractions from current stressors, and the purposeful decision to engage in them while remaining mindful of the temporal and often dreamlike aspect of the escapist activity (e.g. the moderated consumption of media in-between work or chores).

4. Extreme activities, which are admittedly responsible for cultivating the negative perceptions surrounding escapism as a concept, given that this category denotes an excessive active engagement in the escapist activity, often leading to addiction (e.g., excessive consumption of pornographic content, excessive substance use).

The degree of respite gained from escapist activities is subject to the discernment of the individual engaging in them, given that one can find “escape” in nearly any activity, regardless of its impact on personal wellbeing: entertaining vices, catering to hobbies, watching television series and movies, reading books, and playing video games. The lattermost, in particular, was especially prominent during the pandemic, witnessing a collective attraction to fictional or simulated spaces that instilled a sense of control over the immediate environment, whether in the form of customizable landscapes or characters and grounding players in a virtual reprieve made further captivating by an element of instant gratification and a sense of accomplishment achieved through a system of receiving in-game rewards for the successful fulfillment of various tasks (Gaetan et al., 2016; Paul et al., 2022). This gravitation towards a fictional escape was observed in the popularity boom of *Animal Crossing*, a whimsical video game series that drew players in with its romanticized simulacrum of day-to-day living, further complemented by leisurely self-paced gameplay patterned around the capricious goal of building a community and assuming an active role in its development (Zhu, 2020).

Animal Crossing's gameplay concept was relatively simple, making it easy for individuals of all ages to grasp. Players interacted with the world by creating an avatar, which they would use to manipulate and directly influence the setting in a multitude of ways: landscaping and building infrastructure with the use of tools that the players could craft in the game, engaging in mundane hobbies like fishing, catching bugs, or harvesting fruit, or

showcasing their creativity through fully customizable elements such as the layout of each town, the apparel sold in the shops, and even the town song and town flags.

The *Animal Crossing* franchise was first introduced in 2001 and has since garnered a reputation for being not only entertaining but also healing, given its ability to generate a friendly and calming atmosphere through aesthetically pleasing visuals and ambient background music (Lara, 2020). And when the latest installment, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH), witnessed an opportune release in March 2020 during COVID-19, recognition for the game's therapeutic utility was further propagated among those who sought it as a means of escape from stressors that were either evoked or heightened by the effects of the pandemic (Comerford, 2020; Lewis et al., 2021; Pearce et al., 2021; Zhu, 2020). Comerford (2020) considered ACNH a refreshing platform of “routine substitution” (p. 102) since it offered a sense of agency through self-determined decision-making; the choices players made throughout the game inherently had a direct effect on the progression of the world, which was especially inviting to those who were struggling to navigate the uncontrollable reality of life amidst the pandemic.

Another popular feature of the game was the ability to interact with the denizens of the world collectively known across the franchise as “villagers” (Lara, 2020, para. 3). The presence of these quirky, colorful caricatures of real-life animals helped to simulate an animated community as they milled about their daily routines in the background. Each villager was programmed with a unique personality and dialogue that resulted in interactions that felt more organic and humanlike. Zagalo (2019) remarked that the process of utilizing character dialogue to convey a story in a video game was similar to that in film. However, it was in video games that a new dimension of immersion was explored, precisely due to the involvement of direct player input, allowing for enjoyment of the narrative from a more

involved role. “The differences become clear, movies serve to produce vicarious experiences, while videogames produce enactive ones” (Zagalo, 2019, p. 90).

Though the villagers in ACNH could not be controlled by the players themselves, Jin and Li (2017, as cited in Lewis et al., 2021) asserted that engaging with these non-playable characters, or NPCs, would still influence a positive effect on psychosocial wellbeing. The game further facilitated this productive social experience by enabling players to visit other players’ worlds regardless of physical distance, provided that both parties had access to the internet, promoting the collaborative play aspect which has proven to inspire prosocial behavior, especially among the youth, while also providing a conducive space to gain exposure to a plethora of different communities and cultures (Abbot et al., 2021; Chaplan-Hoang, 2021; Wiederhold, 2021).

Through the visiting feature, people could interact with the villagers of their friends’ worlds, purchase items from their shops, assist with land renovations, and even visit the in-game museum, café, and town hall, which served as effective proxies for real-world get-togethers (Pearce et al., 2021). Zhu (2020) even noted that this substitutional approach to in-person gatherings was convenient to the point that some players opted to utilize the platform to celebrate birthdays and holidays with faraway friends and family, while some long-distance romantics enjoyed simulating date nights, anniversaries, and even weddings.

D&D as Expressive Arts Therapy

ACNH is classified as an “open-ended life simulation” video game (Lara, 2020, para. 1). The emphasis on simulation connotes the immersion of oneself into a fictional reality. Similarly, D&D was touted as a roleplaying game, already heralding an association with playing a make-believe role from its conception (Seikaly, n.d.). These forms of entertainment are based on different platforms in the gaming industry, yet their concepts are synonymous by way of the manner in which players interact with their respective worlds: through the

imagination. Imagination is often strongly associated with visual imagery due to the *image* component of the word. Knill et al. (2005) challenged this notion by asserting the innately intermodal characteristic of imagination that is demonstrated through the engagement of the senses, whereby “intermodal denotes the interweaving of two or more of the arts together in a therapeutic context to facilitate positive change” (Davis et al., 2018, p. 69). This assertion is depicted in the following excerpt on dreams: “In remembering dreams, we may sense the movement of swimming, hear a voice sing or speak words, experience the act of killing, see the beautiful image of a city, or listen to the sound and rhythm of music” (Knill et al., 2005, p. 121).

The subtle yet poignant shift from movement, to narration, to drama, to imagery, to music, markedly complements the framework of intermodal exploration that is present in expressive arts therapy and its integrative theoretical approach to tailoring therapeutic interventions (Atkins et al., 2011). In addition, the act of immersing oneself in the imagination contributes to the concept of “decentering” which Knill et al. (2005, p. 83) framed as the process of exiting from a narrow or restrictive situation, oftentimes the true reality, and entering an alternative reality or “alternative world experience” (p. 85) in order to decompress or de-stress from overwhelming feelings. These alternative realities can also be considered “liminal spaces” (Knill et al., 2005, p. 191) or controlled environments intended to inspire personal growth through facilitated experiences. Yet, despite being a liminal space, the imagination is not limited and serves to expand the range of play for an individual, given that it is not constrained by the tangible reality. One can note this phenomenon, especially in play with developing children, who can envision wooden sticks as swords, rocks as vehicles, and trees as various infrastructures.

Davis et al. (2018) observed that the decentering process was especially poignant in expressive arts therapy group engagements, as diving into the artmaking allowed the

members to step back from their present concerns by offering a space for them to play, relax, and gather their bearings in order for them to later confront the problem with newfound invigoration and a fresh perspective. Moreover, Knill et al. (2005) asserted that decentering through artistic mediums, in particular, offered a more engaging experience as it was in the arts that one could potentially materialize the elements of one's imagination. D&D and other such roleplaying games catered to this manifestation of intangible concepts, by encouraging players to learn about their campaign's fictional world and their characters, and further develop them as if these were truly existent in the present reality.

Playing Roles and Achieving Goals

Jin & Jin (2016) observed the positive influence of make-believe play, especially on the development of children, via its capacity to: 1) provide a safe environment for emotional exploration, 2) facilitate the learning and application of practical and social skills, 3) assist in cognitive development through problem-solving and confrontation of ethical dilemmas, 4) encourage creativity and inspires innovative thinking, and 5) promote patience and resilience as demonstrated in the delayed gratification of a reward for accomplishing a task. Silcox (2012) acknowledged that make-believe play has a reputation for serving as an intervention more fitting for youths, who tend to benefit from its free-flowing and non-directive approach. Yet, in the same vein, Silcox (2012) presented the historical evolution of this initial impression, which has since evolved to accommodate the belief that even adults could learn and grow through make-believe play.

Coincidentally, the values enumerated by Jin and Jin (2016) align with the mental health benefits of D&D outlined by Eisenman and Bernstein (2021) and Lear (2020) who affirm the strong overlap of the elements of recreation, education, socialization, and therapy, which are present in roleplaying games (Hawkes-Robinson, 2011). Evidence of this therapeutic utility is particularly present in the realm of psychodrama, as players are

encouraged to embody an avatar or persona to serve as a representative extension of themselves in the roleplay space, prompting the projection of the self onto a character (Jang et al., 2010; Mendoza, 2020), as well as a process of externalization, which is an underlying tenet of effective narrative therapy (Chan et al., 2012; Guterman & Martin, 2016).

The fictionality of this projected persona invites creative freedom that is perceptively unconstrained by the limits of reality, meaning that players could choose to portray themselves in ways that are vastly different from their real-life selves, whether in personality, appearance, or even names and pronouns. In D&D, these traits could be calibrated further in the realms of moral alignment, life purpose, and even historical background. Some notable personal accounts of such characters witnessed were: “Hrogarius,” a brawny mammoth of an orc who perhaps was a barbarian in one of his many past affairs, but opted for a quieter life in a bookshop as a librarian, “Nyesss,” a traveling bard of Draconic descent who roamed the deserts in search of a loving family, and “Fern,” a wood elf druid and estranged heiress to the throne of an island nation, with a penchant for having a small temper and a big appetite.

Concerning the psychological effects of character projection on players’ self-perception, common inquiries typically concerned themselves with investigating which factors were the most influential to behavior. Did players tend to project their true selves onto their avatar or character? Or was it more likely for the characteristics of these in-game personas to bleed into their real-life personality? To what degree could the interaction be conducive to one’s growth, and to what extent was it harmful? One perspective that was gleaned from investigating such queries deemed self-similarity as an effectual component in bettering player performance in roleplaying games (De Rooij et al., 2017; Jang et al., 2010). In other words, if players were legitimately able to witness their authentic, real-world selves in a character, particularly by way of noting physical traits that were reflective of their own (e.g., style of dress, body type, hair, and skin color, etc.) their overall performance in the

game itself would improve as a result, which in turn would assist in improving their self-efficacy.

On the other hand, Selinsky (2017) affirmed that the reverse was also true; people could benefit as well from embodying characters that were not immediately representative of their authentic selves, but instead, characters whom the person aspired to be. De Rooj et al.'s (2017) study makes a mutual observation of this interplay, attributing it to a phenomenon of creative ideation known as the Proetus effect. This effect can be succinctly defined as the priming of people or players by their character or avatar, brought upon by an expectation to act in a manner that aligns with the character's appearance or presentation (Ash, 2016). Consider Fern, the aforementioned wood-elf druid, and the contrast between her and her player, as a relational example in the context of D&D.

Fern, for starters, is an elf, which suggests she has sharp features and pointy ears. Her homeland is by the sea, so her skin is olive and freckled. She has long, curly hair, and stands at 5'7" with a lithe build that is nimble enough to leap to and from the branches of the tallest trees. While born into nobility, she was exiled from her hometown and had since made a living as a con artist, who got her way with dexterous hands and a silver tongue that spoke in an accent that was vastly different from her player's. She is excitable and bubbly and is quite stubborn when she does not get her way. On the contrary, her player, naturally, is a human, born of Asian descent, ascertaining a more rounded face and rounded ears. Her player also hails from an island nation, though her skin is of a different shade and is decorated in beauty marks instead of freckles. She has short, black hair, and her physique is broader and sturdier than her character's. Her background is less fantastical, as she has never opted to deal with any illicit undertakings. Finally, the accent she speaks in is not her own when she plays Fern, and she is comparatively less outgoing and childish, for her personality can be described as level-headed and motherly.

Depicted thus far is an interweaving of character and player characteristics, illustrated through traits that are either shared or exclusive to Fern and her player. The Proteus Effect, in this case, manifests in Fern's player's adoption of another accent during play or the fact that she must adhere to a personality that is a jarring contradistinction from her own when she decides to embody Fern. Because Fern's demeanor *seems* wild, there is an expectation garnered on the part of the player that she must also *be* wild.

It was postulated that connections formed by players to their in-game characters were based on visual aesthetics that were reflective of their own countenance. But more thorough reviews of existing literature acknowledged the presence of an empathic constituent that is involved in the nurturing of this "perceived embodiment" (De Rooj et al., 2017). Research by Jang et al. (2010) recognized that player self-similarity could also be evoked through an emotional attachment formed with the in-game character. According to this understanding is the assertion that people have the capacity to develop the same degrees of empathy for fictional characters, whether avatars created by the player, or NPCs pre-programmed into the game, as is generated for real-life people (Nomura and Akai, 2012).

Johansson and Verhagen (2011) documented the evolution of NPC characterization in the context of video games, spotlighting the burgeoning efforts of designers to program characters specifically designed to be empathized with, precisely because it increases player investment in the narrative of the game. Similar logic is noticeable in D&D, where much of the world is shaped by the characters who pre-exist in the world before the arrival of the party. Yet, what is observably unique to the gameplay of D&D is that the creator of these NPCs is actively present with the players in the space, typically having assumed the role of the DM. Of the many advantages that this format offers in the realm of make-believe play, one of the most prominent caters to the D&D play space as a facilitated environment for applying social skills (Lear, 2020). Practicing effective communication, for instance, is

comparatively more effective when attempted with D&D NPCs over video game NPCs, as they are unhampered by the necessity to abide by pre-programmed dialogue.

Session Zero

D&D campaigns are group gatherings at their core, with the real-time nature of the free-flowing mutual interactions among the players allowing for a truly enriching social experience for those involved. As with any group setting, the group dynamic must be facilitated with a certain level of tact, or else may compromise the comfort and safety of the members. In D&D, this responsibility falls to the DM, who must ensure that all party members are held accountable for their actions during the game and are likewise made aware of the expectations and limitations of the other players in the campaign. Topics such as ideal schedules and schedule conflicts, house rules, and even strict, player-specific trigger warnings to be observed were among the many logistical conversations that were conventionally initiated during the pre-campaign meeting termed “session zero” or “session 0” (Level 1 Geek, 2020). Jiang et al. (2015) observed that this method of hosting an information session prior to discussing the actual topic in a series of group meetings, was effective even outside of D&D circumstances, evidenced by a positive correlation between the presence of session zero and overall group member retention. Specifically, that participants were more likely to consistently attend workshops that had initially offered a pre-workshop briefing, in comparison to those that omitted them.

As D&D is highly reliant on the capacity of the DM to lead the players through the story, it becomes the DM’s responsibility to facilitate a non-judgmental roleplay space and engage players in frequent debriefing sessions to ensure that trust, understanding, and sensitivity to others’ needs are present at each session (Daniau, 2016). Otherwise, players may feel invalidated or ignored, should the DM act on personal biases and dismiss player input that would otherwise be conducive to the game’s progression (Polkinghorne, et al.,

2021). In authoring a manual for *Wickedness*, another type of tabletop roleplay game that utilizes Tarot cards as the primary game tool, Veselak (2021) proposed a method for practicing accountability and self-regulation while traversing the roleplay space: “Upset vs. Oofed” (p. 10-11). This was a gaming mechanic that encouraged players to accurately discern between feeling genuinely triggered, upset, or severely put-off by a certain concept or scenario that happened in the game, or simply feeling “oofed.” Veselak (2011) defined the terminology through the following vignette:

When you're enjoying a piece of fiction, you might let your sympathy run wild and feel the big emotions the characters are feeling. This is fun, even when those big feelings are otherwise negative, like fear, anger, or loss. We call these fun-bad feelings "oofs." Sometimes, though, we go from being oofed to being upset in the regular, terrible way. It can be tricky to tell the difference, but try to ask yourself, “Am I enjoying these feelings?” (p. 10)

Resonant to Veselak’s (2012) statement on feeling deeply for a character, a certain level of discipline must be exercised to moderate the amount of empathy felt for the NPCs in the D&D campaign, as players can grow invested in their fictional characters and can become directly affected, themselves (Nomura & Akai, 2012). For instance, as the players engage in a living, dynamic world of high-risk adventure, there will be opportunities to process grief and loss, such as through the death of a major character (Sidhu & Carter, 2021). And while the characters themselves may be fictional, the emotions felt by players in response to their fate are quite real. Thus, Alfonso (2020) stressed the mindful and grounded traversal of the fictional space with a constant reminder to properly terminate by separating the player from the character through the post-roleplay process of “de-roling” (Gualeni et al., 2017, p. 2). This involves executing an action or routine in order to intentionally withdraw oneself from

the embodied role and is one that is commonly demonstrated in interventions found in psychodrama and drama therapy approaches (Gualeni et al., 2017).

Discussion

The trajectory of the current literature review strove to address the gap in the field of mental health concerning the use of tabletop roleplay games, specifically D&D, as a viable form of creative intervention for adolescents who were developing their social skills, in addition to offering recommendations on how to integrate this approach in the intermodal expressive arts therapy practice. The focus on imagination in make-believe play, along with the capacity of the fictional space to inspire creative exploration across a multitude of art forms, concretizes its designation as a form of intermodal expressive arts therapy. This therapeutic utility is evident in the parallels between D&D sessions and group therapy settings, whereby the DM is perceived as the leader or facilitator who is then tasked with the responsibility to ensure all members consent to the logistical and practical implications discussed during session zero. Inferred here is the idea that a negligent or tactless DM or group therapy facilitator will be counterproductive to player growth in the group, which could otherwise benefit from the cooperative play element in roleplay games. The theory persists especially if the DM is *also* the group facilitator.

Because roleplay insinuates an involvement with the fictional world, it offers a productive environment for honing one's social aptitude, given that the [liminal] space provided can be manipulated according to the needs of those who choose to immerse themselves in it (Knill et al., 2005). Considered to be a coping mechanism in the form of escapism, discussions surrounding the retreat into a fictional realm evidenced that much of the appeal of the simulated space stems from a personal agency, whereby players can exercise an active input over a majority of its constituents. Players are still advised to exercise caution when exploring the fictional reality, however, dysregulated immersion can not only

breed extreme escapist activities such as addiction but also affect the player on a highly emotional level, knowing that humans are able to empathize even with NPCs, which can prompt such influential projective tendencies as the Proteus effect. To regulate the vulnerability of this investment and mitigate the likelihood of retaining residual emotional affliction, de-roling as a technique modeled from approaches in psychodrama and drama therapy was advised to practice when the roleplay session has terminated (Alfonso, 2020).

With the interest of promulgating relevant discourse that more deeply examines tabletop roleplay games as viable creative interventions, two main points of discussion now arise to shepherd future exploration of the medium, hailing from the limitations, therein, of the current research endeavor. The first inquiry is concerned with the importance of developing an adolescent's psychosocial capacity. This need was acknowledged repeatedly in the literature that went on to emphasize the specific areas of cognitive growth that were beneficial to building relationships and having effective conversations with peers and peer groups (Malin et al., 2014; McFarland et al., 2014; Napolitano et al., 2021; Nooner et al., 2012; Orben et al., 2020; Salmela-Aro, 2011; Sanders, 2013; Wright et al., 2020). That this thesis culminated in the conceptualization of a full, ten-week D&D campaign model tailored specifically for the purpose of learning and applying social skills (see Appendix), implies an alignment with the belief that such development can only be achieved through a group setting. This is expected, considering that the chosen creative intervention of D&D is typically facilitated in a group. However, in extrapolating the *roleplay* aspect of D&D as an intervention, research by Chaplan-Hoang (2021) and Selisky (2017) argued that dyadic interactions naturally, could also be conducive to psychosocial growth, with the former author detailing how a one-on-one D&D session between a player and a DM, was successfully navigated. This assertion leads one to question what format a one-on-one D&D

session would adopt and whether this might instead be considered a more intimate psychodrama approach or a form of personal narrative therapy.

The second point of discussion engages in the discourse regarding the longitudinal feasibility of tabletop roleplay as a method for developing social skills. With the rise of video games and other forms of immersive media, it is not uncommon for individuals to develop some form of affinity for seeking pleasure through these escapist means, as noted in Evans' (2001, as cited in Subudhi et al., 2020) categorization of escapist activities. Personal accounts have indeed witnessed strong tendencies to become addicted *to* the make-believe space, whether in D&D or an iteration of the medium, as with text-based forms of roleplay, for the very reason that these offered a social solace, especially amidst the pandemic. The emerging question asks: how does one intervene when an intervention becomes thoroughly intervening? Reframing the presented inquiry results in an investigation of what can be done to address an over-immersion into the D&D space. Noted earlier was the importance of managing one's investment in escapist coping mechanisms. Still, it is not uncommon for individuals to actively build on this investment once they are aware of the therapeutic benefit. In doing so, the detrimental effects can outweigh the benefits. How then, can facilitators or expressive arts therapists utilizing the roleplaying medium as an intervention, strive to encourage moderation of these outlets to mitigate the likelihood of compromising their true healing capacity? Alfonso (2020) had asserted de-roling or the idea of bringing oneself out of the play-space upon terminating the experience. Yet, the act of de-roling is admittedly a voluntary method that requires a willingness of the player to engage in it. How does one navigate a situation wherein the player refuses to terminate play or resists removal from the experience of embodying a character?

On a final note, the discipline of psychology desires to cultivate an understanding of human behavior that is multifaceted, multicultural, and historically accurate as far as what

can be obtained through experimentation and observation within a specific timeframe. However, in this venture to be accepting of perspectives that improve the definition of realistic collective efforts are unknowingly upended by a most uncanny rival: reality itself. Because this thesis desired to address the hindrances to social interaction brought upon by COVID-19, by suggesting alternative means of play, such as migrating D&D games to the virtual space, it failed to consider a means of accommodating those who were unable to secure a feasible internet connection, such as individuals from a lower socioeconomic status. That this pattern of unintentional exclusion markedly persists with each innovation leads one to wonder: “just to what extent are we, as expressive therapists, who pride ourselves on meeting others where they are at, willing to accept the moments when we simply cannot?”

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Appendix

Example 10-Week D&D Group Therapy Curriculum Concept for Social Skills Development

This proposed group therapy module intends to be conducted over the course of ten weeks, under the moderation of a designated clinician, who will assume the role of group facilitator and DM. D&D sessions can be hosted as full “campaigns,” wherein sessions follow an overarching plot, or as “one-shots,” which cater to a new storyline each session. It is completely possible to combine or apply both formats to generate the best experience for the players or group members. In terms of this proposed module, each weekly session will be termed as a “chapter,” to simulate being immersed in a dynamic story. Inspiration for the overarching plot of this group campaign will be drawn from a therapeutic framework that proposes utilizing the three phases of Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero’s Journey*¹ as a guide to help navigate the process of change. The customized working synopsis for this 10-week module is as follows:

Strength Cores are the life force of the people in this mystical world.

These manifestations of energy have a tangible form that reveals itself to each individual, granting them powers and abilities as they grow and are willing to dedicate themselves to the responsibility of honing their Cores. But when a malevolent, envious entity wreaks havoc on the land and sets out to steal these Cores, the citizens fall into discord and chaos befalls a once-peaceful nation. It becomes the task of an unlikely band of adventurers—those few remaining with their Cores—to restore balance to the world

...while learning a thing or two about themselves and others along the way.

¹ Williams, C. (2019). The hero’s journey: A mudmap for change. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 59(4), 522-539. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167817705499>

Week 1, Session 0. D&D campaigns typically begin with a “Session 0” which introduces the players to each other, to the rules, and the mechanics of tabletop gaming. In terms of the group, this first session is when the members will also be introduced to the concept of D&D for social skills development. Characters will be created here as per the DMs, or in this case, the group facilitator, instruction, and will be established along with a “party motto” which must be some form of encouraging quote that the members put together themselves and will say altogether to officially mark at which point in the session when members can begin to embody their D&D character. A second quote, the “party farewell” will be formed as well, which will mark at what point they can stop being their character (de-rolling). As per the working plotline, players will be encouraged to define their Strength Core, or what they believe their primary personal strength is, and bring the object that represents it for each Zoom session.

Week 2, Chapter 1. The first official session of the group campaign will introduce members to the check-in technique that will be utilized, moving forward. Inspired by the *Zones of Regulation*², the group facilitator will ask each member to choose a color—either red, yellow, blue, or green—that best describes how they are currently feeling. This check-in is done to help evaluate the members' moods and alert levels so that interventions can be conducted as necessary to determine if it would be feasible for the members to engage in the plot for the day. The chapter begins when the members recite their party motto and ends when the members recite the party farewell. A quick, post-session check-in will be conducted and one-on-one chats with the group facilitator can be conducted if need be.

Week 3, Chapter 2. The session will be conducted, as usual, beginning with the Zones of Regulation check-in and then opening the story with the party motto. The first few minutes will be dedicated to a brief recap of the previous week before jumping right back into the

² Kuypers, L. M. (2011). *The zones of regulation*. Think Social Publishing Inc.

plot. The session ends as usual, with members closing and de-roling with the party farewell. A quick, post-session check-in will be conducted and one-on-one chats with the group facilitator can be conducted if need be.

Week 4, Chapter 3. Given the time frame of the module, the group will be able to have processing sessions every third chapter. The session will open up as usual with the Zones of Regulation check-in but will instead jump into asking the members to elaborate on their colors and connect these with their experience of being in the social skills D&D group so far. The session will close with a movement offering exercise to cap off the day.

Week 5, Chapter 4. The session will be conducted in the format of **Week 3, Chapter 2**. By this point in the story, the adventurers are learning that the reason the Strength Cores were stolen by the malevolent entity was that they were jealous that everyone else had special skills that they did not possess themselves and believed that by taking them from others by force, they would be able to gain these powers as well.

Week 6, Chapter 5. The session will be conducted in the format of **Week 5, Chapter 4**. By this point in the story, the adventurers are learning of the whereabouts of the malevolent entity that stole the Strength Cores.

Week 7, Chapter 6. As this is the sixth chapter in the story, the session will be conducted in the format of **Week 4, Chapter 3**. The group will also be reminded that the D&D sessions will be ending in three weeks.

Week 8, Chapter 7. The session will be conducted in the format of **Week 6, Chapter 5**. By this point in the story, the adventurers are learning of the true nature of a Strength Core—it is simply a belief that was fostered over many centuries by those in power that desired to boast about their material gains. In actuality, the core of a person lives within them as a will or motivation and an external object is not the source of one's true strength.

Week 9, Chapter 8. The session will be conducted in the format of **Week 8, Chapter 7**. By this point in the story, the adventurers have confronted the medieval entity and must defeat them without the use of their Strength Cores.

Week 10, Chapter 9. As this is the ninth chapter in the story, the session will be conducted in the format of **Week 7, Chapter 6**, which will also offer a good stopping point for the campaign thus far. From here, the group members and group facilitator can decide if they would like to continue the campaign or disband the party. Regardless of the decision, the members must be reminded of the original intended purpose of these D&D sessions in the first place, which was to help them develop real-world social skills by engaging in a fictional storyline. The members will be thanked for their participation and by this point, must be able to acknowledge that they can hone their strengths all on their own.