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# Art Therapy Meets Dungeons and Dragons: Supporting the Development of Social Skills in High School Students

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**Abstract**

This arts-based research explores the current literature on the clinical uses of Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) using art and play therapies. Previous studies that intersect with D&D and expressive arts interventions have been traditionally focused on drama and play therapies while this study focused on open studio practices based on art therapy methodologies. D&D in clinical settings has been effective in developing social connection between peers and emotional regulation.

A 10-week art therapy group was conducted in a school setting with adolescents with academic anxiety, socioemotional disabilities, and developmental disabilities. The author provided a space for participants to create art in the presence of peers, imparted the use of painting as a coping technique, observed the multitude of ways in which participants derived satisfaction from D&D, and deconstructed the effect of in-game mechanics on participants' play. D&D has the potential to be a versatile expressive arts medium that allows clinicians and clients to utilize their individual strengths and competencies in a safe and engaging manner. The author provides suggestions on how the framework can be adapted using emerging technologies and suggestions on how to modify both art and play to match the individual needs of clients.

 *Keywords:* adolescents, Dungeons & Dragons, art therapy, group therapy, roleplaying games, play therapy, social development, schools, miniature painting

**Introduction**

In the field of expressive therapies, play therapy is an established evidence-based treatment deemed appropriate for children. According to the Association for Play Therapy, play therapists "use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development" (APT, n.d). Developmental theorists and early childhood educators know that there is more to play than being entertained and that it is an intuitive way children interpret the world. In Piaget's and Erikson's development models, individuals continue to develop beyond their childhood and into adulthood, but the continuation of learning through play beyond early developmental stages is relatively unexplored. This research aims to expand on the use of play across all populations, highlight the versatility of play for socioemotional development, and provide therapeutic insight into how clinicians may accommodate contemporary forms of play.

Since its inception in 1974, the Dungeons and Dragons franchise (D&D or DND) has captivated fans with its ability to draw inspiration from anything and everything fantasy. Campaigns can run anywhere between a 3-hour one-shot (an abridged scenario played in one sitting) to adventures spanning decades. Players are first tasked with creating their characters, choosing their fantasy race, profession, aptitudes, magical abilities, origin, and moral alignment. Imaginal roleplaying can manifest from the conception of the player's character or occur spontaneously in gameplay. The personalization that goes into playing D&D has given enthusiasts avenues to channel their creative energies through art, writing, and performance.

Even for those without the tabletop experience, D&D has become embedded in popular media. With the overwhelming success of such series as Netflix's *Stranger Things*, the *Critical Role* webseries, and recipient of 2023's Game of the Year Award Larian Studio's *Baldur's Gate 3*, mainstream audiences have more exposure to roleplaying games than ever before. Once considered a niche hobby, tropes of playing D&D have become as ubiquitous as the fantasy conventions that inspire them.

This author asserts that clinicians working with younger populations can deepen their connection to clients and their perspectives by having an understanding of their clients' vested interests. Through a therapeutic lens, the improvisational nature of D&D routinely engages players' cognitive abilities (perceptual reasoning, critical, processing speed) and executive functioning (organizational skills, problem solving abilities, emotional memory, working memory) in an intuitive and compelling manner. With an appropriate foundation, the expressive arts can serve as a medium to transfer and develop clients' existing regulatory skills.

This author experienced the ways in which play is woven into modern lifestyles and persists in being a valid form of learning throughout all stages of life. Prior to any formal art therapy training, they have always been immersed in both art and play as an artist, museum educator, competitive card game and arcade game player, and tabletop wargaming enthusiast. They believe that there is great value in integrating a clinician's personal knowledge in practicing art and play therapy. D&D was chosen as the expressive therapy medium for this study for its name recognition amongst gaming populations, preexisting interests from research participants, and the moldability of its game systems to accommodate therapeutic goals.

Throughout this text, the author will be using the terms author, facilitator, researcher, and Dungeon Master interchangeably to refer to themselves depending on the role fulfilled.

## Literature Review

**History of D&D in clinical settings**

In one of the earliest documented articles reporting the use of D&D in mental health literature, Blackmon (1994) published a case report in which they incorporated the content of their client's play sessions in therapy to delve into their emotional processing capabilities. They presented that, although the scenarios that client experienced took place in a fantasy setting, the anger and isolation were presenting issues that existed outside of the game. D&D allowed the client to safely speak about their emotions in an indirect manner before transitioning to more traditional treatment.

Blackmon (1994) initially met the use of D&D with reluctance but saw their client's enthusiasm for the material and the prosocial activity it promoted as reasons to integrate it into their treatment. Prior to the mainstream success of D&D, the stereotype of the average D&D player was of a social outcast with a reclusive personality. However, perceptions among mental health professionals have changed over time as D&D has become more prevalent. Online surveys conducted by Lis et al. (2015) found that psychiatrists in Canada did not presume higher rates of psychopathy among roleplaying game players.

Sousa et al. (2023) conducted a large-scale systematic analysis of studies across educational and social science fields on using board games, tabletop games, and other analog

games. They compared the methodologies used and expected outcomes of each study and examined the games' efficacy as learning tools, relations between game mechanics and promoting learning, and accessibility and inclusion as players. They concluded that analog games promote meaningful learning and social engagement.

Contemporary clinicians approach D&D from a therapeutic lens, not just out of professional intrigue, but also from the perspective of players and Dungeon Masters themselves. Utilizing the eclectic nature of intermodal expressive arts therapy, knowledge of D&D can enable clinicians to develop original treatment methods that address the specific strengths and needs of their clientele that aligns with their personal interests (Bautista, 2022; Mendoza, 2020).

**Therapeutic applications of D&D**

Enfield (2007) shared their observations on the use of miniature roleplaying games, D&D and Marvel HeroClix, with preadolescent and adolescent clients in both group and individual settings. Taking on the roles of superheroes and fantasy heroes allowed clients the opportunity to enact elements of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, an adventure in which the hero overcomes conflicts and develops their sense of self in the process. Enfield (2007) modified the rules of D&D to meet the developmental level and needs of their population and therapeutic goals.

Gutierrez (2017) conducted qualitative interviews with mental health professionals about the use of tabletop roleplaying games in social work. They reported positive experiences in utilizing roleplaying games with adolescents who have suffered trauma and abuse. They also found that customization in roleplaying games allowed them to adapt the practice to clients of

any range, create client-tailored narratives, meet the needs of both group and individual settings, and provide safety for clients to explore trauma.

Drawing from Campbell's hero's journey concept, Bautista (2022) provided a framework for a group therapy plan that closely adhered to the structure of unmodified D&D while drawing upon therapeutic principles of identifying personal strengths, roleplay and de-roling, and emotional regulation using the Zones of Regulation curriculum. Campaign progression was designed to correspond to the ongoing development of clients' emotional regulation and social skills.

**Benefits to roleplay and character immersion**

Roleplaying is a fundamental aspect to any D&D game. While a designated Dungeon Master (DM) is responsible for crafting their shared world, players are the engine that pushes the narrative forward. At a glance, roleplaying can remain confined within the in-game world, but the real-world benefits go beyond the play session. The fantasy setting allows players to enact extraordinary feats and embrace their adventurous sides. Roleplaying provides a safe opportunity for players to escape from reality and experiment with decisions that they may not necessarily perform in real life. For players who experience a limited sense of autonomy, exhibiting control in a fantasy realm can bolster one's self-efficacy and self-esteem (Hughes, 1988).

D&D asks players to take on the role of their characters which can invite significant emotional investment on the players' behalf. Character creation is an involved process that requires players to decide their fantasy race, class, statistics, skill proficiencies, equipment, and

backstory at the bare minimum. When using D&D to explore characters through a therapeutic lens, greater levels of roleplaying require an equivalent act of de-roling to ground themselves back in reality. Based in psychotherapy and drama therapy, the act of de-roling can create emotional distance needed to help process visceral experiences and encourages clients to debrief and engage in self-reflection (Gualeni et al., 2017).

As part of creating a character, players are asked to choose a moral alignment. While D&D campaigns do not necessarily need to abide by real world moral standards, the fantasy trope of good versus evil is present across many settings. This brings into question whether players' behavior within in-game moral dilemmas affect real world moral reasoning. In a small-scale quantitative study, Wright et al. (2020) surveyed two groups of college students, one who participated in a semester-long gaming group and a nongaming group. They used the Defining Issues Test (DIT-2) to measure participant's moral development and moral reasoning and found that the gaming group showed a notable decrease in promotion of self-interests than their counterparts. These findings suggested that roleplaying games promoted participants' consideration for community interests.

**Social benefits of D&D**

Early portrayals of D&D in the 1980s and 1990s have associated players as a niche subculture within "nerd or geek" communities and its negative associations with social reclusivity. This perception contradicts the social aspects of D&D and the range of emotions and personality needed in order to play the game. Lorenz et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study

in which D&D players reported higher extraversion scores in the Big Five Personality test than their nongaming counterparts. Among these players, there was a positive correlation between extraversion and their in-game characters' Charisma score, the statistic that determines the success of social interactions including persuasion, deception, and intimidation. While in-game mechanics tend to reward players with higher levels of participation, extraverted players gravitated towards characters that allowed them to utilize their strengths as sociable individuals.

Communication styles that occur within the game may influence how players behave in reality. Using fantasy theme analysis of their D&D group's written communication on social media, Adams (2013) reported that group members' communication satisfied players' real world social needs and reflected their shared group values. Their established in-game relationships bolstered real world friendships between participants.

While most literature about the use of roleplaying games draws in clients already familiar with the source material, roleplaying games can be effective in fulfilling social connections. Abbott et al. (2022) conducted group therapy sessions with participants who have had no prior D&D experience and shared negative experiences with traditional group talk therapy. The facilitators designed their campaign around a shared objective to promote collaboration among members and providing opportunities for players to practice confrontation, accept mistakes, and feel empowered through successful roleplay. Facilitators reported an increase in group cohesion over the course of the year and development of meaningful relationships.

**Impact of game elements on treatment plans**

Throughout academic literature, the design and game mechanics of D&D has often been overlooked in lieu of emotional and social development through character-driven exploration and narrative storytelling. However, it is worth considering the implications that these game mechanics hold and how they affect players' decisions.

Patton (2013) framed 20th century performance art and contemporary art movements through the lens of game design philosophy. The art educator defined structured play as "[using] game-making methods to explore and expose rules of social, political, economic, and environmental systems" (Patton, 2013, p. 36). In their action research study, Patton (2013) theorized a curriculum to expand students' ability to recognize the implications game systems carry and imbue games with deeper meaning through design. Their curriculum was then taught to students ages 8-13 in weeklong summer courses. Applying principles of structure play, the students designed games using a framework that categorized design elements in games into four categories: entities to Move towards, undesired elements to Avoid, objects Released from performing actions, and the Contact necessary to complete objectives (MARC). Implementation of the MARC framework encouraged students to engage their players in abstract thought, consider how game mechanics can serve as forms of self-expression, and form connections to daily life.

Although D&D is improvisational in nature, integrating intentional game design can yield positive results when adapting D&D or similar game systems to therapeutic interventions. Tying clients' treatment goals into the game, designing interactions that facilitate character development, modeling real world social conventions, and providing opportunities to apply

problem solving skills are among the innumerable ways that the clinician DM can influence players.

**Meeting the developmental needs of adolescents through D&D**

Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) documented the use of tabletop roleplaying games in the treatment of gifted children and adolescents with behavioral, emotional, or social adjustment issues as part of their psychoeducation based in Adlerian play therapy concepts. The counselor crafted individual and group goals to improve intrapersonal and interpersonal skills among clients. The contents of the game focused on promoting collaboration among members, learning effective communication styles, and practicing problem solving skills in safe settings. After their interventions, parents and teachers reported fewer behavioral and academic problems at school, improved social functioning with peers, and decreased impulsivity in clients.

**Neurodivergence in play therapy and D&D**

As clinicians adapted D&D and other roleplaying games into expressive arts therapy interventions, its close connection to play therapy brings into consideration the suitability of roleplaying games with specific populations, namely young children and children with developmental disabilities. While play therapy engages clients in cognitive flexibility, self-awareness, executive functioning skills, and perspective-taking (Bui et al., 2024), there are elements of D&D that were developed independently from its found therapeutic value.

Polkinghorne et al. (2021) facilitated D&D sessions with children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) through the lens of narrative therapy but identified key dilemmas in using it with

neurodivergent individuals. They posited that a neurotypical definition of charisma limits the roleplaying that can occur during session for individuals with ASD. According to the D&D Player's Handbook, charisma measures "[the player's] ability to interact effectively with others… it includes such factors as confidence and eloquence, and it can represent a charming or commanding personality" (Crawford et al., 2014, p. 178).

Polkinghorne et al. (2021) understood that the initial design of the ability score system could inadvertently reinforce cognitive rigidity that is common in players with ASD and impede therapeutic goals of addressing areas of improvement. During play, they did not want to diminish player's actions and were selective about which actions required dice rolls to succeed. The act of rolling dice using their character's unfavored ability scores may disincentivize players from taking risks, taking them out of their performance. A character's in-game statistics may still contribute to a player's roleplaying by reinforcing their personality traits and backstory, but they do not outright inhibit the actions that players can perform. They believed that rewarding successful roleplay to be more important than following the game rules as written. Their modifications reaffirmed their actions and ultimately encouraged their players to utilize their full capabilities and develop real-world feelings of empowerment.

## Methodology

The program discussed in this capstone thesis spanned the course of 10 weeks from November 2023 until January 2024 and was conducted at the author's internship site. The art therapy group met during school hours during a designated 30-minute block in the morning for

students to access academic support from teachers, meet with various counselors for guidance or mental health services, or participate in school-wide community events. The allotted time allowed students to explore opportunities that would otherwise conflict with extracurricular activities, social events, and studies. Participation throughout the program varied depending on how students utilized this period to meet their needs.

Prior to the start of the program, students were referred to this author by members of the school's counseling department based on prior knowledge of their interest in D&D, involvement in the school's D&D club, and their presenting symptoms. Students were informed about the therapeutic nature of the group and were emailed an online survey to collect information including gender, grade level, familiarity with D&D, familiarity with art making, expected attendance, the character that they wish to paint, and any art materials they want to explore.

In the first two sessions, the group introduced themselves, established shared expectations, and recalled stories of past adventures. These sessions functioned as what is known within the D&D community as Session 0, a preliminary session between players and DM where players are able to voice their needs and expectations in upcoming gaming sessions. Session 0 mirrors establishing community guidelines in early sessions that is common practice in group therapy.

From the third session onwards, the group adapted an open studio format with materials provided. Participants picked out unpainted plastic or pewter models based on the characters they introduced to the group and painted using water-based acrylic paints. As participants painted

their miniatures, the facilitator prepared weekly conversation topics around how the students engage in playing D&D, progression in their current campaigns, assistance with miniature painting techniques, and incorporating self-care within their daily lives. Interactions between students ranged from sharing art techniques amongst one another, finding common interests within the group, and bonding over shared experiences as students. Group cohesion was aided by the self-directed nature of the open studio and individualized attention.

The facilitator intended to incorporate a worldbuilding component in the form of handcrafted dioramas where participants may construct scenes that reflect upon past successes or environments that emphasized the sense of belonging, but due to time limitations and the participants self-advocacy of their individual needs, the structure of the program was revised to focus on developing their individual characters.

The facilitator first intended to create a character to play alongside students to shift the traditional power dynamic of counselor-client in therapeutic settings, but their role shifted to one closer to the Dungeon Master. While the participants envisioned their characters' origins during the studio sessions, their narratives existed independently from one another. After deliberation, the facilitator decided that it was more appropriate for the participants' characters to coexist within the same world rather than in isolated environments. They created a common enemy for participants to band together against and utilize their strengths demonstrated throughout sessions.

Through an arts-based reflection, the facilitator created a diorama using mixed media and populated it with creatures. The artwork was created with the goal of creating a fantasy-themed

visualization of each clients' islands of competence and consolidating them into a single, celebratory adventure, translating their strengths as individuals into the cohesion of the group. The diorama's completion matched the relative level of the participants' miniatures. Participants were invited to give observer feedback throughout the co-creation process. Reciprocal artmaking and collaboration acted as conduits for emotional attunement and developing social relationships within the group. While the acts of creating art and playing in the presence of others corroborate with conventional methods of building social bonds, they also trigger the neurological stimulus of mirror neurons which promote neuroplasticity, stimulate empathic responses, and enable means of nonverbal, kinesthetic communications (Stewart et al., 2016).

For the final session, participants played in an abridged adventure, known as a one-shot within the community. Over the course of 30 minutes, participants role played as their respective avatars, scouting out a treasure den before engaging in two rounds of combat. The DM prepared measures within the rules of the game to guide players through completion in a nondeterministic manner. The students enacted a scenario in which they infiltrated a treasure trove and faced an ogre and a pack of goblins. Using additional tools and contextual clues left by the facilitator and their own D&D expertise, they bested the creatures after two rounds of combat. The DM took care to narrate the players' actions in manners which were reinforced with their characters' motivations, past gaming experiences, and preferred play styles. Upon the program's completion, participants kept their miniatures as transitional objects for future play sessions.

The methodology was designed to impart socioemotional introspection and developing artmaking as self-regulatory exercise as forms of indirect intervention where participants could

process the information learned in session into their interpersonal interactions. As the program

progressed, reintroducing supervised play allowed for direct intervention to nurture and measure

their social growth (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). Although the methodology was developed

primarily through the theoretical lens of art therapy, the author encourages modifying the

modality and treatment plan to the preferences and skillsets of both clinician and clients.

## Results

When this researcher reflected upon the session notes and participant feedback, three

major themes emerged which could be subdivided into 13 subthemes. The multitude of ways that

individuals enjoy D&D media allowed the participants to engage in the program according to

their individual strengths and preferences as artists, players, and fans of the franchise. As a

group, these qualities became more apparent as the participants interacted with one another

through conversations, artistic guidance, and cooperative play that may have been overshadowed

had engagement been limited only to a single modality.

**Themes in studio session**

### Hobby as self-care

In a survey sent to participants prior to the start of the program, 2 out of 3 participants

reported having played D&D previously, while one student only had experience creating a

character sheet. While participants were unfamiliar with miniature painting as a hobby,

familiarity with artmaking ranged from somewhat comfortable to very comfortable. During the

introductory session, all three participants opted to paint a character that they played previously.

Since the program was designed to incorporate the participants' interest in D&D, they saw it as a small reprieve from the daily stressors of academic rigor. Through their wellness courses, special education classrooms, and counseling sessions, the participants have been exposed to art and crafts as a coping skill for emotional regulation. As miniatures are not required to play D&D and add to the preparation time of a play session, participants perceived the use of miniatures in play as a new and interesting form of engaging with the game. The facilitator acknowledged the overarching goal of painting to relax and therefore sought to provide guidance with the more difficult aspects of miniature painting.

**Camaraderie in the studio**

During sessions, it was expected for participants to converse with one another as they painted. While one participant would primarily share the progress in their D&D play outside of the therapeutic group, they individually felt comfortable enough to share details about their classes, recent social developments, upcoming plans, and common interests including gaming, television, movies, and other forms of entertainment. The participants did not share classes with one another and would have limited interactions prior to meeting in the program; thus, these forms of interactions proved important in establishing rapport within the group in early sessions. Their freeform interactions gave them exposure to each other's different opinions, preferences, and personalities.

As the school semester progressed, participants occasionally entered sessions feeling overwhelmed due to classwork, grades, and maintaining peer relationships. Without prompting,

they naturally consoled one another, offering advice and validating their feelings. When it came time to select courses for the upcoming school year, the two 11th grade participants provided their experiences with teachers, shared their views on extracurricular activities, and highlighted student run activities that they enjoyed to the youngest 9th grader of the group. The older participants deemed it appropriate to provide guidance to the younger student and model organizational skills as part of their responsibilities as upper-level students.

**Importance of co-creation**

In the middle of the painting process, the presence of peers and shared progress amongst them became a natural motivator for participants. The initial applications of paint and selection of characters were intuitive for participants as it felt like an extension of the character creation process for them. Participants first encountered difficulty when working on details as small as several millimeters in size. The precision and finesse required to match the standards they envisioned was a source of frustration for one participant who showed the most enthusiasm for D&D but lacked the requisite painting experience.

While the facilitator helped, one participant taking Advanced Placement art classes also aided the group members with fine detail work. Intuitively, the group members were able to recognize each other's strengths. It became evident to this researcher that the progress of the entire group was as important to the therapeutic process as individual growth. During sessions where only one participant was in attendance, participants were more prone to becoming

distracted or frustrated when painting. In sessions with two or more participants, group members were more likely to take pride in their accomplishments and provide encouragement to others.

Upon completion of the base miniature, participants proceeded to add secondary elements to their pieces. One participant decorated the base of their miniature while another sculpted horns and a tail using modeling putty to more closely match their drawings of the character. As they finished their artwork, the facilitator introduced their arts-based reflection (the diorama that they were to play on, see Appendix A) to provide a model of continued co-creation. The progress on the diorama paralleled the progress that the participants made on their miniatures. Participants were encouraged to give the facilitator suggestions on what to add to the diorama, resulting in the addition of treasure piles and the cave setting. These complex elements served as visual indicators signifying the end of the program and built anticipation for the final session ending in play. Upon reflection, the diorama emphasized the therapeutic witnessing between participants during artmaking and later served as a vessel to translate that witnessing into collaborative play.

**Process versus product**

The debate of process versus product is an ongoing discussion throughout art education and art therapy spaces. Although this author aligns with process over product, this program was presented to participants with the product as a primary incentive. The intention of the miniature as a transitional object was to mark the competition of the program, remind participants of self-

regulation techniques acquired through artmaking, and to evoke the positive social bonds formed with other group members.

The emphasis of process work throughout the studio program served to demystify what adolescents may construe as a barrier into the hobby. This researcher introduced several miniature painting techniques that require minimal effort while producing high-impact visuals including dry brushing, glazing, acrylic washes, and zenithal lighting. While the participant most versed in artmaking enjoyed the process, it was evident that the painting process had inadvertently become a source of stress for others, even with guidance. In facilitating this program, it became apparent that there was no debate of process versus product, but that it could represent the potential of process *and* product.

**Themes discovered through play**

**Importance of play**

During the eighth week of the program, one participant unable to attend due to academic commitments for several weeks came back. In the single session, the facilitator streamlined the painting process, and they made significant progress together in order to rejoin the group. While working with the participant, conversations gravitated towards forms of entertainment media such as electronic games. For this participant, the artmaking was secondary, and their involvement served as a reminder that it was not solely art then play but *art and play* together. Moving forward, the researcher aimed to integrate more elements of play into the final session.

**Shared play styles and roles between group members**

In D&D, there are a variety of classes that players can choose from including weapon wielding physical attackers, magical spellcasters, and cunning tricksters who rely on stealth and deception. By happenstance, all three participants had interest in playing high strength and low intelligence barbarian and fighter characters. There was a novelty in enacting the fantasy of an impulsive, brute force character that resonated with the manner they wanted to approach D&D.

In a tabletop roleplaying game as improvisational and narrative as D&D, there are advantages to playing a more one-dimensional character. For players who feel overwhelmed by the depth and complexity of the game system, it can be beneficial to consolidate decision making in roleplaying and combat. In the character creation process, it may guide the player in writing their backstory and motivations. The low intelligence ability score was an easily understandable character flaw that could intuitively create challenging and memorable scenarios. Through a therapeutic lens, roleplaying the aggressive character in-game may enable a player to use the play as an appropriate outlet for aggressive behaviors without fear of real-world consequences.

Similarly, characters with defining flaws that defied the player's chosen fantasy race and profession appealed to participants. While the character may be at a disadvantage from a gameplay perspective, seasoned players are able to circumvent these weaknesses through knowledge of the game system and create opportunities to develop their character's narrative.

While D&D typically draws influence from the high fantasy writing genre, it is up to player and DM discretion to set the tone for their own stories. Players who feel confined in an overly serious world can intentionally interject humor through their dramatic play. For example,

the party meticulously snuck into the monsters' lair only to reveal themselves intentionally to engage in combat. In the same session, one player threw their only close-combat weapon to make an impromptu ranged attack, leaving them unarmed. While their actions may not have been strategically sound, the premise of unpredictable actions yielding fantastical results and breaking the tone of the fantasy setting were prime motivators for the participants.

**Addressing party imbalance and cooperative play**

The participants noticed the similarity in the first sessions and one participant volunteered to create a new character in order to add variety to the team. Combat encounters in D&D can vary greatly depending on the monsters they encounter, each with their share of weaknesses to exploit. An adventuring party that shared the same relative strengths would face either a stalemate or defeat if they were mismatched against their foes. The average D&D party opts to create a balanced team that fills offensive, defensive, and supportive roles in order to handle any situation. Experienced players understand that even a strong character is unable to perform every task on their own.

While the participants chose to paint their half elf fighter, dwarf barbarian, and tiefling barbarian, the participant that offered to create a new character in the beginning sessions chose to play as a supporting nature cleric instead using a proxy miniature. The individual's act of filling in a needed role was twofold: to offer a variety of solutions for the scenario and to experience D&D as a collaborative game.

**Effects of stat distribution onto character personality and roleplaying**

Distribution of stats, or ability scores, in D&D directly contributes to how effective a player will be in performing in-combat and out-of-combat tasks. For example, a character with a high dexterity score will have more success performing stealth actions and sleight of hand whereas a character with a high wisdom score may be exceptionally observant of their surroundings. There are three methods for assigning stats: point-buy where players are given a limited number of points to allocate, standard array where players are given predetermined numbers to assign to the ability, and rolling for stats which uses dice rolls to generate numbers.

Of the three participants, two of which had limited play experience had no strong preference for one system over the other. The participant with the most play experience preferred rolling for stats as the physical action of rolling dice was part of the intrinsic charm. Introducing randomness may result in overtuned characters who overshadow their teammates during play sessions or underperforming characters that leave their player unsatisfied.

Standard array and point buy systems ensure that players can select their relative strengths and weaknesses. Players optimize their characters by intentionally lowering underutilized ability scores. However, this may reinforce a notion that character deficiencies are a requisite of strengths. Possessing clearly defined strengths and weaknesses may inadvertently limit the actions that players may take due to abilities influencing the likelihood of success.

Ability scores can operate independently from character personality, but the participants of this research chose to incorporate them into the roleplaying and their backstories. During gameplay, the facilitator reiterated that ability scores do not restrict the actions that players are

permitted to take and that they were encouraged to discover unconventional solutions. The

reinforcement led to the participants attempting to perform stealth actions while none of their

characters were especially proficient at it. DMs can situationally reward players for immersive

roleplaying through in-game mechanics such as giving players advantage on dice rolls, or two

dice rollings and picking the higher number, rewarding players magical equipment to offset

select weaknesses, and creating individualized quests to increase player agency.

**Using art to enhance storytelling**

During the final game session, the facilitator took care to select monsters that the

participant's adventuring party could feasibly handle. They crafted the scenario so the

adventurers would be at a numerical disadvantage but pitted them against goblins which

participants knew were weak and prone to flee. The primary antagonist of the scenario was an

intimidating ogre that could be defeated if the three players concentrated their efforts on it.

One of the goblin miniatures was sculpted with a cylindrical tube in hand. In tabletop

gaming communities, the term "What You See Is What You Get" refers to a model whose

equipment is depicted onto the model itself. Participants were given the opportunity to use their

Perception skills to notice that the object was a smokepowder grenade which can ignite and deal

damage to monsters within an in-game 10-meter radius. The defeat of the specific goblin was a

contributing factor in their victory.

Weaving the art of the model lessened the need for pure imagination. If the same

conditions were met using purely Theater of Mind, or purely imaginative play without the use of

representational objects, the researcher risked the narrative moment coming off as inauthentic and may detract from the experience. Additional painting and sculpting as gaming sessions go on provide opportunities for players to commemorate their victories such as through markings on armor or newly acquired equipment.

**Themes discovered through facilitator's artistic reflection**

### Ungeneralizability of fantasy tropes

In the Dungeon Master's Guide, DMs are given full control in establishing the setting. They are encouraged to adapt fantasy worlds and settings from their favorite books and movies. DMs are also able to create their new worlds from imagination, commonly known in the larger D&D community as homebrew content. Whatever world the DM creates, it is important for players and the DM to share and understand the core assumptions of that world.

The participants of this research report having little to moderate experience with D&D media and have used their generalized knowledge of fantasy tropes to understand the setting. For the program, their knowledge was adequate, but players who are more engrossed in D&D specific lore may become bothered by any deviations from the source material. A D&D enthusiast can readily differentiate between gnome wizards, halfling sorcerers, and dwarven warlocks whereas a layperson may consider them the same character.

The D&D multiverse is undoubtedly rich, but that depth may inadvertently reinforce cognitive rigidity in players who strictly adhere to D&D source materials. A clinician that incorporates D&D into their play therapy or art therapy treatment must take into consideration

how invested their clients are to the overall settings and rules and prepare to make proper

adjustments to match client expectations (Enfield, 2007).

**Crafting the scenario to the strengths and needs of players**

When taking into consideration the participants' preferred styles of play and characters'

in-game abilities, the facilitator selected monsters within their capability. To match the physical

combat of the barbarians and fighters, monsters with lower armor class attributes were chosen

and they held no ranged weapons. To offset a numerical disadvantage, the monsters were

positioned at a distance where a Dash action is required to get into attack range, disabling their

ability to attack during that round and ensuring that participants are able to get the first attacks of

the battle. Magic casting enemies were intentionally omitted so as to not exploit any apparent

weaknesses of the characters.

The preparation put into the scenario demonstrated the role that the DM plays as the

arbiter of the rules and the importance of having a unifying ruleset (see Appendix B). The rules

remained consistent to maintain the integrity of the play session. While DMs retain control of

enemy characters, their intentions are not necessarily to play against the players, but with them.

The principle of working alongside participants naturally transferred from the studio art portion

of the program. Maintaining congruence between art and play was instrumental in

acknowledging the time and efforts of the participants.

**Identifying client strengths and sources of satisfaction**

The versatility of D&D as both art and play have revealed to this researcher contextual strengths that may not have manifested in solely studio nor play sessions. Taking into account self-reported measures of familiarity with D&D, self-reported familiarity with art making, completion of miniature, and researcher estimations of artistic skill, there was no significant predictor between these observed factors and perceived student satisfaction. The three students derived satisfaction in three different ways: one found the most satisfaction in the final play session, one enjoyed the completion of the art product, and one found value in the social aspect of student interaction.

**Game modifications**

As a relatively inexperienced DM, the facilitator took considerable precautions to guide participants to victory. After researching dialogue options across various computer roleplaying games, possible solutions were written in advance including non-combative stealth and negotiation routes. Following Polkinghorne et al.'s (2021) suggestions, players were not required to roll dice on actions that would not directly affect the story to encourage player agency.

When participants immersed themselves fully as their character, they were rewarded with the ability to roll for advantage (rolling two dice and picking the higher number). Characters used modified standard array for their ability scores and were scaled up in level for the encounter. Enemies rolled to hit as normal, but used the average rules of dice when calculating damage to prevent statistically improbable dice rolls from defeating players in a single blow. These modifications were put into place to curb the phenomenon of "bad dice."

Game modifications for therapeutic use typically remove or simplify game mechanics, but the addition of game mechanics can also similarly enhance the experience. Borrowing from squad-based wargames such as *Warhammer 40,000*, enemies were forced to make morale tests using their charisma ability scores at the end of the round, causing them to flee the more monsters were defeated. The mechanic encouraged players to strategize with one another, developed the narrative, and helped clear a path towards victory.

When utilizing house rules, clinicians must consider whether the modifications align with the treatment goals. Too many modifications jeopardize player agency while no modifications at all can lead to disastrous results and players removing themselves from the game altogether. If treatment goals were focused on radical acceptance, then incorporating low stakes dice rolls can be an effective way of learning to tolerate the unexpected. Conversely, if learning social communication styles is the primary goal, then introducing natural consequences during roleplaying with non-player characters may reinforce real world social skills (Gutierrez, 2017).

## Discussion

This study provided a 10-week art therapy methodology using miniature painting and roleplaying games in schools. Adolescents aged 14 to 17 with socioemotional and developmental disabilities were referred to by this researcher based on their interest in D&D and their availability. Participants created characters to represent themselves, painted miniatures that corresponded to them in an open studio format and roleplayed as their characters in a final play session to commemorate their time together.

This study aims to build upon the work of clinicians using roleplaying games in therapy and to modernize definitions of play to include a wider range of activities. While there is a growing interest in the use of roleplaying games through drama, play, and narrative therapies, there is a shortage of interventions where art is the primary expressive arts modality by contrast. This research also provides a general framework for art therapists to develop peer learning in an open studio format.

**Limitations**

Due to the circumstances of conducting the program in a school setting, the facilitator needed to work around the constraints of a rotating school schedule and voluntary student participation. This resulted in not every participant being able to complete their miniature. Attendance naturally decreased during school-wide testing periods and around holiday breaks.

Managing the contents of sessions in a 30-minute block for both painting and play proved to be difficult. Preparing painting areas without a dedicated classroom was also challenging. Ideally, additional sessions to develop character backstories through writing or dramatic play would have spread out the preparation required for the end of the program. Taking into consideration the academic responsibilities of participants, the researcher avoided giving students psychoeducational homework on top of their coursework. If the methodology were to be adapted to a private practice, weekend or seasonal sessions may better suit young populations.

In the planning stages, participants initially intended to recreate themselves through their miniature. However, this presented issues when participants showed interest in fantasy races with

fewer humanoid features such as the bird-like aarakocra and the insectoid thri-kreen. Limiting their characters to be only a representation of self could be antithetical to the boundless potential of fantasy roleplaying and indeed was restrictive for one participant. This also became a logistical issue when participants were not able to find miniatures that best matched their character. One possible solution was the use of 3-D printing technology, but both researcher and participants lacked the technical knowledge required to make use of the school's printer.

The painting and use of miniatures in D&D was integrated in the design of the program, but miniatures remain an optional element in roleplaying. Two students backed out of the program after the introductory session as their typical play sessions do not make use of miniatures at all. The researcher considered whether there were alternative tasks that they could be involved in and whether they could participate in the play session, but ultimately decided that the rapport building during studio sessions was essential to meeting group treatment goals.

**Future Considerations**

There is greater latent potential of self-representation through miniature painting than what was written in the study. Tabletop miniatures are typically made of either plastic, resin, or pewter and come unpainted. The artwork on the box may provide a suggested color scheme from the manufacturer, but it is up to the artist to decide on how to paint their models. Future studies have an ample opportunity to engage clients in exploring their real-world connections to cultural heritage, spirituality, indigenous folklore, and expressive symbols of identity. In doing so,

miniature painting may further treatment goals that emphasize building community, integrating social justice practices, and nurturing formation of identity.

Studies show that roleplaying games can be an effective and engaging form of treatment in group therapy; however, playing without the proper clinical scaffolding may not meet the criteria of addressing treatment goals. The facilitator should take care to limit the size of each play session to give members equal opportunities to highlight individual accomplishments and retain player engagement. Therapeutic play would be best facilitated by a competent therapist as a form of direct intervention.

Future clinicians should consider the individual strengths of themselves and their clients. If one were to continue using visual art, the artmaking aspect of this research could be adapted into sculpting, landscape painting, or character drawings. It may be even more crucial to set expectations for therapeutic play through a Session 0 for players with years of D&D experience that may come in with heightened expectations. Session 0's are typically conducted before the start of a campaign, but it should be noted that it may be necessary to revisit and revise group norms should the need arise.

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# Appendix

## Appendix A



*Dungeons and Dragons Diorama: Ogre Den*, 11 x 7 x 3", cardboard, plastic, resin, clay, epoxy, glass painted with water-based acrylic paints

Description: View of the inside of the diorama for playing. One ogre miniature, three goblins, and two *Warhammer Fantasy* Squigs occupy a cave with tiled floors and treasure piles strewn around the room.

Description: Closed view of the diorama. Cardboard box painted to represent a Dungeons and Dragons mimic, a treasure box monster with teeth and eyes.

**Appendix B**

**Dungeon Master notes from January 23, 2024**

Scenario: The ogre is lost in a daze and remains stationary in the far end of the room. Goblin A lugs an unrefined chunk of gold towards the gold pile. Goblin B twirls an unidentified stick in their hand out of boredom. Goblin C chases the small creature in a circle as the larger creature chases it. The creatures use the same stat line as a Wolf.

On a Perception check of 10 (55 percent chance) or higher, player characters will identify the smell of smokepowder coming from goblin B's grenade. Each player is offered the opportunity to make the Perception check upon their first interaction with goblin B. Upon defeat, the grenade ignites causing 2d6 points of damage to creatures within a 10 foot radius.

Approaching from the right will force an interaction with goblin C. Players may attempt to use either their Intimidation, Deception, or Persuasion skills to convince goblin C and its creatures to turn against their allies temporarily on a successful roll of 12 or higher (45 percent chance). Players may gain Advantage (a second die roll) with immersive roleplaying.

Defeating any goblin instills fear in every other creature. Creatures must make a successful Charisma roll in order to remain in combat.

Unaccounted actions that players want to perform are always rolled using their greatest proficiency.

Defeat of the ogre ends combat immediately and players are victorious.

# *THESIS APPROVAL FORM*

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**Expressive Therapies Division**
**Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Art Therapy, MA**

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**Title:**  Art Therapy Meets Dungeons and Dragons: Supporting the Development of Social Skills in High School Students_____

**Date of Graduation:** ____May 18, 2024_____
In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

**Thesis Advisor:**