A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Therapeutic Aspects of Tabletop Roleplaying Games

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of the West of England, Bristol for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology

Department of Health and Social Sciences

University of the West of England, Bristol

September 2022

Word Count: 39,979

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Acknowledgments

I would like to begin to thank my wonderful partner Emma. You have always believed that I am capable of great things. You have seen me through the best and most challenging parts of this project, and you always encouraged me to push on. I truly owe this to you.

An enormous thank you to my incredible daughter Daisy. You came along on my final year of study and became the greatest part of me.

I am forever grateful to Jason. Without your support this project would never have been completed.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my course tutors and friends at UWE for your support. I have had the privilege of being a part of an amazing cohort throughout my training, and I would like to thank you all for being there for me. I would particularly like to thank Sammie and Hattie. Your wisdom and encouragement have been an inspiration to me.

I am forever thankful to Miltos for supervising me. Your guidance, insights, and passion motivated me to complete this project. You have kept me on track and had faith in me, you will always be my role model in this profession.

I would like to thank my local gaming group who are amazing. I have enjoyed co-creating wondrous worlds, and portraying the wildest parts of my psyche through my characters with you. I would particularly like to thank Egor. You made me very welcome to this group and remain one of the greatest Game Masters I have had the pleasure of knowing. I would also like to thank Jamie for supporting this project.

A special thanks to the participants in this study. You have provided this thesis with experiences that are both meaningful and moving. I wish you all of the best in your role playing adventures.

I am proud to have undertaken this project and I thank everyone that I have encountered on this journey.

Finally, I would like to thank table-top role playing gamers worldwide, this project is for you.

Abstract

Table-top Role Playing Games (RPGs) have risen in popularity since their conception in the 1970's. While some literature has explored their emergent psychological processes, very few studies have explicitly reflected on the therapeutic potential of these games, particularly from a phenomenological perspective. In this study, views, perceptions, and experiences of eight UK-based players were gathered through semi-structured interviews assisted by multi-modal diaries. These interviews were then transcribed and analysed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The analysis settled on two superordinate themes. 'Symbolic Play' consisted of two sub-themes: '*Expression Through Play*', which captured participants' idiosyncratic experiences of projecting fears, fantasies, desires, and taboos onto their characters; and '*Working Through Difficulties*', which illustrates how players symbolically navigate their past experiences, or current difficulties through their character and the worlds they co-produce. The second superordinate theme 'When Players Come Together' also embodied two sub-themes: '*Playing In Person Helps with Immersion*', which explored the experience of moving to online play from face-to-face as a result of the COVID-19 social restrictions, highlighting the importance of intimacy and physical proximity when playing in person; and '*When Things Fall Apart: The Significance and Perils of the Group*', which examined conflicts the participants experienced as part of the role playing group, exploring what is counter-therapeutic in an attempt to provide an answer to what is therapeutic. I conclude by arguing that tabletop role-playing games play stage to profoundly therapeutic processes such as play, symbolism, containment, mirroring, and witnessing as they show us how players relate to themselves and the group. Strengths and limitations of the study are examined before arriving at some tentative

recommendations regarding the value of role-playing vis-à-vis therapeutic growth, amongst other implications of the study. Reflexive commentary is offered throughout the thesis in an attempt to both bracket and pay attention to the phenomenology of the researcher, which has contributed to the double hermeneutic of sense-making in this research.

Literature Review

Background and Introduction to Table-top Role Playing Games

The Game Master says to you "You are cornered, the town guards caught you in the castle where you should not have been. The guard closest to you snarls and then says "What are you doing here?"". You answer "I'm one of the new servants here and forgot my uniform". The Game Master asked you to roll a deception check to see if the guards believe you. You roll a 17 on a 20 sided dice and say to the Game Master "I rolled a 17, if I add my modifier then 19". The Game Master responds "The guard says "Okay go and get a spare uniform from the kitchen and don't forget it again"". You say that you scurry off, checking that you still have the crown that you stole in your satchel.

Table-top Role Playing Games (RPGs) take on many forms, they can consist of different gameplay mechanics or world settings, but essentially follow the idea of a player creating and developing a character, and using that character to live in these fantasy worlds. Often played around a table (although playing online has increased in popularity) using pen, paper and dice, the players make decisions for their character while the Game Master (GM) narrates the overarching story, mediates decisions and rules, and provides consequences for the decisions based on dice rolls from the GM and the players. Together, the players, GM, and dice rolls form a narrative that shapes the world they are playing in. This narrative can take the adventurers into perilous dungeons consisting of monsters and puzzles that they must overcome. These can take place in vast fantasy settings, or sci-fi related universes with planetary exploration and battles to name a few. One of the key aspects of RPGs is that they are not designed to have a winner, these are collaborative experiences in which the characters work together as a

party, progressing through the narrative and are rewarded for their efforts via an experience points system that allows them to ‘level up’ and access more powerful abilities, equipment, and spells. The most popular RPG is Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), with an estimated 50 million people having played since its creation in 1974 (Wieland, 2021), while in 2017 alone 8.6 million people played in the United States (Chan, 2018). Despite this popularity, academic scholarship on the topic of table-top RPGs has been scarce, especially within psychology.

This study aims to provide insight into the therapeutic aspects of RPGs that are played in the ‘real world’ and necessitate players sharing a physical space (as opposed to virtual RPGs played online and/or games against artificial intelligence as an opponent). The acronym RPGs will be used throughout the thesis to refer to table-top role playing games, unless otherwise specified.

Character Creation

Arguably one of the most important aspects of an RPG is for a player to create their character; this allows them the freedom to play as whoever they wish to. There are many aspects to consider when creating a character and even though the possibilities are nearly endless, they are delimited by certain rules of the game, as well as any specific constraints that the GM might want to impose to ensure an interesting and challenging game. Many players have their characters for several years, watching them grow alongside themselves. Such an investment means that the accomplishments of the character are deeply felt, and the players may live vicariously through their characters (Ewalt, 2014).

Within most RPGs a player must pick a race, this often includes humans, elves and dwarves, and is followed by picking a gender (unless a player is playing a sentient construct). Once race and gender are determined, players must then pick a 'class' for their character; this is a role the character plays as part of the group. The class can also be seen as a profession within the game, having abilities and skills associated with them. Classes include wizards, warriors, clerics, paladins and rogues. Many players might choose a class that they identify with, desiring their character to be an extension of themselves (Fine, 1983 / 2002). For example, somebody who prizes athletic prowess, strength, and stamina might choose to play a warrior/fighter character, whose role within the group is to overcome enemies in physical combat. 'Alignment' is another attribute of character creation and can be defined as the moral compass of the character. This moral alignment reflects the ethical framework that impacts upon decisions made by the character throughout the game. Within RPGs there are often nine alignments, which use a grid based system involving: Good, Neutral and Evil, with combinations of: Lawful, Neutral and Chaotic. An example of this is a 'Lawful Good' character, who is dependable to uphold the law, and may make moral decisions based on saving innocent lives at great personal cost. A 'Chaotic Good' character, would not hesitate to break the law or bend the rules in order to achieve an outcome that is construed as essentially 'good', such as stealing money to give to the poor. Whereas a 'Chaotic Evil' character may make decisions impulsively for reasons of greed, hatred or amusement. Certain character 'classes' are associated with particular 'alignments', in that a paladin is usually 'lawful good', and a necromancer is often associated with some sort of 'evil' alignment. As RPGs require the group to work together to ensure survival, it is often advised that players choose alignments that fit with the other characters to promote cooperation. However, unlike the novels that

inspired the games, such as Lord of the Rings, it is important to note that within RPGs, a good alignment does not mean that they will necessarily succeed. Instead success is usually based on deeds, adventuring or deceit within the game world. A character's alignment often drives the decisions within the game and players can display guilt if they make choices that go against their alignment, such as being deceived into doing something they would not choose to do (Gough, 2013). The alignment may also influence the character's backstory. However, alignment can evolve and change during a campaign, making it one of the least fixed attributes of a character.

The backstory is a narrative explaining how the character has got to the moment of starting the game (or adventure), and justifies behaviour throughout. These stories are created from the imagination of the players and are influenced by their cultural history, often taking inspiration from TV, film, and literature to encourage player growth throughout the game (Ballsun-Stanton & Russell, 2012). When creating their character, a player often rolls dice to determine game play mechanics, applying these to strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma (or equivalent, depending on the game). As the players progress in their games, their characters will gain experience points. Once these points meet certain thresholds the players 'level up', allowing them to upgrade skills and abilities, as well as increasing the health they have, and the damage they can deal in future encounters.

When discussing research into character creation, the most influential study is that of sociologist Gary Alan Fine (1983 / 2002). Fine conducted the first study relating to RPGs and the people who play them in 1983, with a view to research and detail the RPG community, and understand how shared fantasies are created, the meanings attached to them, and the identities

formed in the process. Through character creation, Fine observed that a player could choose to either role play a character distinctly different from themselves, or use the character as an extension of their self. This is also identified in Richard Gough's (2013) study on character creation in video games. Gough found that some players chose avatars that represented themselves, while others chose avatars that increased their chances of success with 'perks' reflecting their preferred play style, rather than mirroring aspects of their existing identity. Fine developed his 'Frame Theory' from his research, which he posed as an evolution of Erving Goffman's (1975) 'Frame Analysis'. Through this, Fine identified that when playing an RPG, players interact using three frames: the player, the game mechanics, and the character. The first frame is that of the player, this is the person who is playing the game. The players must also have a basic understanding of the game mechanics, which constitutes a second frame, the player will interact with others through these mechanics such as dice rolls and information on their character sheet. The third frame is that of the character, this frame is particularly interesting as the other two frames are aware of and control the character, yet the character is unaware of the other frames, as the character is enmeshed in the narrative (Connell, Kilmer, & Kilmer, 2020). It is important to note that within Fine's study the therapeutic aspects were not queried. However, there have been applications of Fine's 'Frame Theory' in RPG therapeutic literature, which will be discussed later in the context of therapeutic interventions and group conflict. Although Fine's study is influential among RPG literature as it is heavily referenced, it is now out-dated. This is evidenced in the perspectives of the players at that time. For example, Fine states that at the time women only represented a small proportion of RPG players. When speculating about possible reasons behind this, he concluded that *"women and men have different orientations to leisure*

activities" (p. 63). Fine also suggested that as these games were structured around adventure and war, they would appeal to men, who would not find the game *"fun"* if women were to join (p. 70). These perspectives do not reflect modern RPGs as women now make up approximately 40% of D&D players (Kane, 2018), contribute to a quarter of the writing team for the D&D handbook, and make up 75% of the marketing team (D'Anastasio, 2014). However, it is important to note that these perspectives were indicative of the times, where misogyny and patriarchal thinking was prevalent. Furthermore, there are no longer stereotypical penalties attached to gender as there were in the early editions of these games.

Power and the Game Master

Within RPGs it is often essential that there is a Game Master (GM), or in D&D, a Dungeon Master (DM); this person facilitates the game, presents the plot, selects monsters and other adversaries, creates maps, and introduces non-player characters for the players to interact with. A GM is not always a static position that a person must play, any person willing can become a GM and it is actively encouraged within a gaming group that the role of GM is cycled. There are many reasons for people wanting to become a GM, and equally as many reasons why they do not. Being a GM can be a great creative outlet, and as the person essentially running the game, they are the person holding the group and facilitating the fun. Additionally, people may be attracted to the role of GM because of a desire to experiment with power. On the other side of this, choosing to become a GM can take a great deal of time and preparation as well as considerable commitment throughout the campaign. Despite the willingness to want to become a GM, there are still some skills that are needed in order to run a successful game. There are

many ideas surrounding what makes a good GM and one of the leading influences in the RPG community on this is Guy Sclanders (2014). Sclanders web video series highlights that a GMs responsibility is to create and have fun. Sclanders brings attention to three factors that should be followed: First is the use of imagination, Sclanders argues that a GM does not require a 'good imagination', instead researching appropriately themed imagery, being able to recall personal experience, allow inspiration to come from everyday events, and practice freeform association which is described as the skill of linking stories and ideas together quickly as not to set the players down a determined path, instead the story can become fluid around the players choices and actions. The second point that is made is for the GM to ask the players questions, as this allows for an understanding about what is going well and what is not, this facilitates an inclusive environment that is changeable to meet the needs of the players. The final point is working with the players to create a backstory for their characters, which can run alongside the story being told by the GM, and explore what that character might want to achieve in the game (Sclanders, 2014). Additional to this, Fine (1983 / 2002) argues that it is important that the GM strikes a balance and provides a suitable challenge for the players to remain engaged, identify with their characters, and immerse themselves into a fictional world. As such, power plays an important part in RPG sessions, especially in regards to the GM. Although the players have ultimate control of the decisions their character makes, the GM has control over the outcomes of those decisions. Further to this, as the world, scenario and setting are created by the GM, they are essentially defined as a 'god' (Fine, 1983 / 2002) within that RPG. Fine (1983 / 2002) argues that this power is held and maintained by the GM throughout the game. However, others claim that the power possessed by the GM diminishes as a game progresses. Markus Montola (2009) argues

that initially the GM begins with the majority of this power as they dictate what is happening. However, as the game continues and the players become invested into the narrative, power is ultimately shared as player choice becomes increasingly more significant in shaping the world. This can become problematic when conflicts concerning moral dilemmas arise. As the world created is limited only by the players' and GM's imagination, and as the players have choice, they may use this context to enact desires that are deemed unacceptable in the real world. To illustrate, 'murder hobo' is a common term used in the community when a player uses violence as their primary means of action and will loot and kill indiscriminately (Dant, Feldman, & Lutters, 2019).

Influenced by the ideas of Michel Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish*, Daniel Mackay (2001) outlines structures of power within RPGs. He makes the argument that the GM takes on a policing role within the campaign and depending on how the player behaves, this determines how the GM distributes punishment and rewards. These rewards can be read as gratitude from the GM to the players whether these be experience points or items the characters can use to gain further power in the game. Even though players are able to roleplay their characters to take any action they wish, the framework set out and reinforced by the GM provides boundaries to which the players might or might not conform. The GM has the ability to generate any rules and laws they wish in the world they have created, whether this be order through democracy or a vicious dictator. As the players often want what is best for their characters due to the investments made, they would need to abide by these rules and laws for fear of punishment. This could be one of the factors that attracts a person to play the role of a GM in a game.

Miniatures, Maps, and Dice: The Ingredients of a 'Secure Base'

There are many ways to play RPGs, most involve the players sitting around a table. However, increasing in popularity are online methods using virtual table-tops (VVTs; Hall, 2019), which work in conjunction with voice channels for communicating. These systems allow players to take part in RPGs from isolated communities, disparate countries, and from a distance due to the COVID-19 social restrictions. Popular VVTs are Fantasy Grounds (SmiteWorks, 2021) and Roll20 (The Orr Group, 2021), and the voice channels are often used with Discord (Discord Inc, 2021), or Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, 2021). Playing online has helped many to stay connected, allowing new games to begin and continue existing ones that began in person. For some it is a preferred way to play, as players who have difficulties interacting with others due to anxiety or shyness can role play more comfortably from behind a screen (Scriven, 2021).

Despite the rise in online play, playing together in person holds many benefits. The thrill of seeing a 20 being rolled on a 20 sided dice which critically hits the creature they are fighting can be exhilarating, often eliciting a cheer from everybody at the table, including the GM. The embodied experience of people coming together to play in a physical space is something that is difficult to replicate. Paul Scriven (2021) looked at the impact COVID-19 had on players of D&D. Compiling data from discussion threads on Google, forums, and Reddit, Scriven identified through thematic analysis a number of themes that highlighted both the positive and negative impact of players moving to online play. From the positive aspects, there is an emphasis on the ability to create a more visual environment for the players through digital art. There is less planning required by the GM due to the VVT allowing quick access to the mechanics of the game. He also found that it

was more accessible to people with anxiety. Despite these positive aspects, Scriven highlighted how the negative aspects were more prevalent, with the loss if face-to-face play being one of these. Essentially, the social aspects of face-to-face were missed, highlighting that meeting likeminded people from a shared community to "hang out" was important. This was emphasised via an example of one participant sharing that they had played with the same group for twenty years, and the connection they had was disrupted by playing online. Another participant shared a powerful and common sentiment: *"You're not a voice on the internet, you're a real person"* (p. 8) which illustrates the loss of human connection that comes from being together. The loss of tangible objects from the games was also a factor that prevented players from fully enjoying the online experience.

Although not specifically RPGs, Rogerson, Gibbs and Smith (2016) looked at what makes playing boardgames in person important. Similar to Scriven's research, the social aspects of gaming were seen as valuable, using an example from one participant explaining that they enjoy how likeminded people physically come together to play. Additionally, Rogerson, Gibbs and Smith (ibid.) describe how the material and component aspects of the games are important. For RPGs these components and material aspects relate to miniatures, scenery, maps, handouts and dice. Within these games vast set pieces can be created by the GM and destroyed by the players. 3d printing is growing in popularity and allows players and GMs the flexibility to create their own characters and scenery to their liking, how they envisage them, further adding to the immersion in the games. Donald Winnicott (1971 / 2005) proposed in his 'transitional objects' concept that a child will identify and relate to an object, showing this unconditional love as a way of mitigating the distress of separation from the child and their mother as they get older. As

adults, transitional objects still hold importance as they can provide a platform to experiment with fantasies and impulses (Joshi, 2008). In the context of RPGs, miniatures, dice and scenery can become these transitional objects where players can express their desires and experience them as real, having control over the actions of these object where they may find difficulties with control in other aspects of their life. Reinforcing this point, Allan Mitchell (2014), author of *Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child*, outlines the notion that we can portray our internal world through creating worlds and playing with miniatures, proposing that if the world we live in is threatening and frightening, reducing its size to miniature form may provide a greater level of understanding. These arguments indicate the potentially therapeutic importance of playing in person.

Many of the arguments thus far highlight how in person play can hold greater therapeutic value. However, it is important to note that online play can also hold these qualities, particularly in regards to transitional objects. Players can project their desires, fears and experiences onto digital entities such as tokens on popular VVTs, allowing these to become transitional objects (Koles & Nagy, 2016). Additionally, players can also project these unknown aspects of themselves onto their character sheet, decorating them with artwork and character pictures, whether this be a physical item or developed on an online medium, allowing those who play without any visual stimulation (often known as theatre of the mind), to use these items as transitional objects.

Returning to the socialisation aspects, playing RPGs with a collaborative group could constitute a ‘secure base’ (Bowlby, 1988) from an attachment theory perspective. John Bowlby (1969) purported that a child learns to react differently depending on how often they were separated, and how distant they are from their primary care giver. If the child is given adequate and

consistent attention from their care giver they form a ‘secure attachment’. However, if they do not they can develop an ‘insecure attachment’, developing patterns of anxious, ambivalent, and avoidant behaviour. It is through a secure attachment that a ‘secure base’ can be formed whereby a child or adolescent can explore the world from and return to, which allows for comfort, meeting psychological and physical needs (Bowlby, 1988). Attachment patterns in adults are often a continuation of childhood patterns within different relationships, including friendships (Welch & Houser, 2010). Within psychotherapy, the therapist aspires to provide a secure base for the client, which in turn facilitates the development of a secure attachment (Moore & Gelso, 2011) and the exploration of painful material. It could be argued that such a ‘secure base’ manifests in RPGs through the coming together of friends, as the group can meet the comfort and psychological needs of the individual (Welch & Houser, 2010). Whilst looking at team work, Biggart, Ward, Cook & Schofield (2017) found that creating a safe work environment by providing a secure base in their social work department allowed for the team to feel valued, accepted, and able to talk about their difficulties through empathy. Their work mimicked a model based on the provision of a secure base for children in foster care by Schofield & Beek (2014). They concluded that the staff were able to reach their full potential in their area of practice as the secure base was in place for them. Although they do not say that a secure base within the workplace can change an insecure attachment style to a secure attachment style, they do allude to it, saying that burnout and stress which they associate with an insecure attachment are reduced when a secure base is created.

Playing RPGs can therefore form a ‘secure base’ if the relationships created are strong, safe and secure, but also if certain material conditions are met.

This could hold therapeutic qualities as it would allow for a shift from an insecure attachment to more secure foundations, holding benefits to the player beyond the table-top. A secure base and secure attachments can be established both from online (Lin, 2015) and in person play. However, it could be argued that playing in person holds greater therapeutic value as many aspects such as how body language can be seen and the coming together in a physical space can further develop the bonds necessary for secure attachments and a secure base. Playing in person allows for activities that transcend the tabletop, such as bonding over snacks and physical intimacy, which are difficult to replicate online as important components to the rituals of these games are missing.

A Clash of Worlds

As I have already argued, the coming together of players is an important part of RPG games. However, it is inevitable that when groups are formed, conflicts may arise. There are many communities that share these difficult experiences within RPGs, the most popular being on Reddit under the subreddit r/rpghorrorstories (Reddit, 2016), which has 234,000 members. Within this forum, players share stories on how groups have fractured. Many of these encounters involve one or more players who disrupt the group, creating a toxic environment.

Sarah Lynne Bowman is a researcher from America, focusing her work on the social aspects and character development of role playing games from an analytical perspective. In an interesting journal article, Bowman (2013) explored social conflict in RPGs. Using thematic analysis and interviewing thirty international players from RPGs (both online and in person) and Live

Action Role Play (LARP), Bowman developed some key themes. These themes highlight how group dynamics contributed to the breakdown of many of the parties whether this be through players attempting to form unwanted romantic relationships with other players, to what Bowman called ‘schisms’, which are described as a fracture of the group into subgroups where players ‘pick a side’ of the argument that had begun the rupture. Bowman describes how the conflict in these groups often inhibits immersion as player agency is reduced if other disruptive players are taking power away from them, either by being selfish with their decisions, or through destructive choices, defending their actions with *“it’s what my character would do”* (p. 14).

This argument that a player is doing what their character would do is what Montola and Holopainen (2012) call ‘alibi’. Alibi is essentially an agreement between players that the actions within the game are not those of the player but of the character. Bowman and Schrier (2018) elaborate by explaining that alibi allows for players to create a distance between themselves and their character in a similar vein as dissociation, as the mind is in a different state during play while taking on this alter ego. Alibi can allow for a safe emotional distance from the character, which can allow for greater experimentation with roles. However, alibi can inevitably generate problems as taking on the persona of their character can also be used to excuse unacceptable behaviour, such as the example provided from Bowman (2013).

This stresses the importance of a social contract in RPGs, in which players can establish boundaries of what is, and is not appropriate within these games. Also, they provide an understanding that the games are intended to be enjoyable, and set in an imaginary world. RPGs are unpredictable due to the improvisational nature of them, and players will expose vulnerable aspects of themselves that are normally hidden (Bowman, 2022a), because

of this it is vital that the players feel safe in this environment. Safety in RPGs allow for the players to reduce inhibitions and therefore allow them to become immersed in the world they are playing in (Bowman, 2022a). Normalising the safety discourse can be incredibly beneficial to players as it can allow for a culture of safety in which players can be transparent in what they feel is appropriate or not, preventing distress if players are not able to communicate if social boundaries are broken. The social contract can be developed in what is known as a 'session zero', which is a planned meeting taking place prior to the campaign starting. During this session zero the players can learn about the setting and what rules the GM will mediate. The session provides the space for the players to vocalise what they would like to achieve from the game along with their intentions, and importantly, the players and GM get to discuss what behaviours they would not deem appropriate from other players, to enable a safe and enjoyable environment for all involved. This also allows the players to establish if their play style is compatible with one another (Bowman, 2022b). During a session zero a consent form can be provided to establish boundaries. An example of a popular checklist that can be presented to players is by Sean Reynolds and Shanna Germain (2019). This checklist has been developed from many years of player experience to provide safety within RPGs (Bowman, 2022b). The checklist covers subjects such as horror, sex, and mental health elements, and players can then decide if they are happy to experience these in their game, if they might need further discussion if the theme arises, or they do not want these themes included at all (Reynolds & Germain, 2019). The benefit of having such a system presented in the session zero allows for the players consent to be appreciated. Also, the checklists can be anonymous, allowing the players to avoid any uncomfortable conversations or disclosures. Additionally, a tool that is often used to facilitate safety while playing is known as the 'X Card'

(Stavropoulos, 2013), and can be introduced in the session zero. This safety tool allows for players to have access to a card with a cross on that they can present at the table if there are any subjects that arise where they might deem inappropriate or triggering for them with no questions asked. The game can then either be retconned or a time jump can take place to when this theme is no longer present.

Through providing a safe environment in the gaming space a ‘container’ can be formed. Wilfred Bion (1961) developed the idea of a psychological container, arguing that an environment that is psychologically safe and secure is important, allowing individuals to then project elements of their psyche to alleviate anxiety. Within RPGs this can be generated by the group itself through collective creativity and storytelling, as free association through improvisation become the projected elements (Lasley, 2020). With this in mind, the safer and more secure the container is, the greater the therapeutic potential. Through this container the players are able to unconsciously project their emotions, which allows them to be processed, enabling the players to then understand and tolerate them consciously. Bowman and Hugaas (2021) argue that a ‘transformational container’ can exist within RPGs where the environment is specifically designed to be safe, holding and secure, to allow for this projection to become transformational therapeutically. These spaces are built around trust, consent, and group unity to develop personal growth and emotional safety. Within groups there is often the need for a leader (Bion, 1961) and within RPGs this is often the responsibility of the GM. The GM is seen as the mediator for the group and is often expected to resolve any social issues that arise (Bowman, 2013). With this in mind they are often expected to facilitate the container for the group. Bion (1961) argues that all groups have an unconscious need to be

saved, and the GM is often the person to provide this security for the group, essentially containing the space of the game. However, when a group faces difficulties or conflict they often fall into what Bion (ibid.) called ‘basic assumptions’. There are three basic assumptions that occur which enable the group to survive, with two of these being relevant in RPGs: dependency, and fight-flight. In ‘dependency’ the group will look to gain safety from a leader to relieve them of their anxieties. This leader is expected to solve the groups problems while the other group members become passive, acting through the leader. In terms of what this might look like in an RPG, the players might have a conflict between each other and look to the GM to resolve this. If the GM is not able to adhere to this dependency, the group might become disbanded or a new GM might be sought, for this cycle to repeat again. The ‘fight-flight’ basic assumption is when the group either attack (fight) or flee (flight) from conflict within or outside of the group. An example of this within RPG might be if there is a disruptive player, the group might become hostile in confronting them, and the group will look to the GM to lead this attack. These basic assumptions have been discussed thus far in terms of the players and the GM, and it is important to note that these dynamics can also take place within the game through the players’ characters. However, conflicts between the characters can, and do flow into conflicts between the players, as well as conflicts between the players flowing into conflicts between the characters.

Interestingly, one of the key concepts that Sarah Lynne Bowman (2015) has developed concerns a phenomenon known as ‘bleed’. ‘Bleed’ was first conveyed in a study by Markus Montola (2010) and highlights how the player and the character both influence each other, allowing each to experience what the other is experiencing. Importantly, Montola argues that the more

this happens the more the boundaries between the character and player are blurred. Bowman (2015) describes ‘bleed’ as a two way process: having the ability to ‘bleed-in’ and ‘bleed-out’. ‘Bleed-in’ occurs when aspects of the players internal world are portrayed through the character unconsciously, and ‘bleed-out’ being when aspects, such as emotions of the character become part of the player, also unconsciously. These processes manifest in many ways; an example of ‘bleed-in’ is when a player becomes upset with another player and therefore targets that player’s character. An example of ‘bleed-out’ is when a disagreement between characters results in one player personally insulting another player. Consequences of ‘bleed’ can disrupt a game, create lasting conflict, and sometimes rupture relationships within the group to a point where these cannot be resolved. Importantly, Bowman outlines ‘bleed’ as being neutral, having both positive and negative aspects, some of the negative aspects being provided as examples above. However, ‘bleed’ can provide an intensely positive transformative experience as when a character experiences love, happiness and pleasure, through ‘bleed’ the player also experiences these. It is important to note that ‘bleed’ does not always happen as it often depends on how close a player is to their character through immersion, and how able they are to separate real life from the dynamics of the adventure. Interestingly, Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer (2020) discuss how bleed can come from a confusion of Fine’s (1983 / 2002) ‘frames’. From this perspective there is confusion between the player frame and the character frame, creating an unconscious emotional exchange between the two. Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer (ibid.) discuss how this exchange can promote positive change for the player when they are presented with a difficulty that their character can overcome, which can then be integrated into the self. An example to illustrate this could be a player struggling to manage anxiety, where their character does not. This

character's confidence in challenging uncertainty can be integrated into the player through this confusion between the frames.

Bleed and alibi can be observed on a continuum: if a player exhibits more elements of bleed, they will show less signs of alibi, and vice versa (Bowman & Hugaas, 2021). To explain this further, if a player has a good relationship with their parents, and their character does not, this would generate more alibi as the player would be playing this character having less of an emotional connection with them. However, if both the player and character have turbulent relationships with their parents, this would yield greater bleed with less alibi, as the players emotional connection with their character will be greater due to shared circumstances.

Expanding on the idea of bleed, Whitney Beltrán (2012) argues that bleed has many interpretations with her own being 'ego bleed'. Whitney Beltrán's (ibid.) ideas differ from Markus Montola's (2010) and later Sarah Lynne Bowman's (2015) as Beltrán (ibid.) argues that with ego bleed there is less of an emphasis on emotions and more on how the player or character as a whole is projected onto the character or player both in any given moment and over time. This can hold many therapeutic benefits, for example, a player may have difficulty confronting others, yet plays a character that is a brash hero who is both assertive and confident. This character then "rubs off" (p. 96) on them through ego bleed, allowing the player to be able to tolerate conflict.

Similar to bleed, another phenomenon known as 'steering' is an aspect of player behaviour within RPGs which can affect the group. Steering can be described as a conscious choice to drive the motivations of their character to forward the player's agenda (Montola, Stenros & Saitta, 2015). Montola, Stenros and Saitta (2015) argue that a character's actions are constantly

being influenced by the player's motivations, and players will create an illusion that this is not happening for the benefit of the player but for the character. This can happen in subtle ways. For example, within a game a player might be presented with a decision: one that would be congruent with their character's motives and ideals, and the other that would create for a better story moment. From this example, if the player chose the latter, the other players might not know that the decision was made by the player, thus upholding the illusion. Steering can also be quite overt, a character could make romantic moves towards another character because the player harbours feelings towards the player, thus 'steering' an encounter towards a flirtatious exchange which would not otherwise take place. This player knows that their motivations are driven by conscious choice, whereas the others players might see this as only part of the narrative.

Mythology and Archetypes with Character Roles

Sigmund Freud (1899 / 1997) based many of his theories around symbolic meanings originating in mythology. An example of this is his use of the tale of the Greek King Oedipus who unknowingly murdered his father followed by marrying his mother and fathering children with her, a tragedy that had been prophesised by the oracle. Freud used this mythical story to develop his theory of the 'Oedipus Complex' in which he theorised that every child has an unconscious desire to 'topple' their same sex parent, and have sexual desires for their opposite sex parent. Freud is widely credited with popularising the idea that the unconscious mind exerts a powerful influence over conscious behaviour and mapping the topography of the psyche. Carl Jung (1968) developed Freud's (1915) topographical model of the mind. He thought of the psyche as having three structural parts: consciousness which

is what we are aware of, personal unconsciousness holding our repressed and forgotten memories, and the collective unconsciousness which is a set of patterns and beliefs we inherit from our ancestors. Jung believed that these three facets of the psyche do not function individually, and instead continually interact with one another. These differences of opinion on the functioning of the unconscious contributed to Jung and Freud's disagreements, and eventually ended their personal and professional relationship (Falzeder, 2013). Jung emphasised that stories, myths, and fairy-tales hold secrets to our inner world, hence the reason why we feel we can resonate with them.

From the perspective of Joseph Campbell (1949 / 2008) it is no coincidence that stories, myths and fairy-tales have common themes throughout history and across the world when these cultures and societies had not interacted with one another. Joseph Campbell was an American author and teacher of comparative mythology, who was heavily influenced by the works of Freud and Jung. Building on Jung's notion of the collective unconscious, Campbell believed that within sleep all of the monsters and magic from our childhood lies, as well as stories from previous generations spanning the entire history of mankind. Campbell argues that if these ideas from the unconscious became conscious through overcoming their challenges and life potentialities in dreams, this person would become the 'boon-bringer' or the hero of their time. According to Jung this collective unconsciousness creates personality 'archetypes' consisting of innate patterns which are universally inherited. Jung described these as innate psychological urges, which manifest into fantasies and show themselves as symbolic images. These archetypes are activated when interacting with reality and take on different forms depending on the situation, culture, and individual (Jung, 1990). Stories have often

transported us to these archetypal lands, whether through magical wardrobes, or a door to wonderland (Pearson, Smail, & Watts, 2013). Jung outlined multiple archetypes, however there are a few that are of psychological interest regarding RPGs. The 'persona', is like a mask and represents how one presents themselves to others to meet societal expectations. At the other side of the persona is the 'shadow'. This is the aspect of the unconscious where anxiety, shame and guilt lie, along with aspects of the self that are hidden away and disavowed by the 'persona'. The 'shadow' is what we tend to project onto others; such as when our personal failings are experienced as moral deficiencies in others. This shadow is usually characterised as the 'bad side' and an example of this in popular culture could be portrayed through Dr Jekyll's Mr Hyde.

An example of how this can be played out through an RPG could be a players character as a 'warlock' adventuring with a party to reach a morally good goal, yet the source of the warlocks powers are through a pact with a demon. Within D&D this shadow archetype is portrayed as a realm within the 'planes of existence' where alternate dimensions of reality exist, known as the *'Shadowfell'*. This realm is described as a mirror of the material world yet void of all colour and objects distorted to represent death rather than life (Wizards of the Coast, 2014). One of D&D's many accompanying books detailing lore, monsters, and additional characters is named 'Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes' (2018), which describes the story of an Elven Queen who wished to reach the *'Feywild'* (which is understood to be the polar opposite of the Shadowfell) but was betrayed and descended into the *Shadowfell*. She resides in what is described as a bleak maze, where *"mortals that enter the Raven Queen's realm are almost instantly confronted with a glimpse into their own internal landscape. Because she is fascinated with emotions, the*

Raven Queen worms into the unconscious minds and memories of her visitors, bringing forth visions from the deepest reaches of their psyches" (ibid., p.60). This could be understood as a representation of the archetype of 'the shadow', including projection as described by the Raven Queen's unique abilities. Jung stated that there are countless archetypes, all having different functions, including the jester, villain and rogue (Jung, 1968). A further example of an archetype being played out within RPGs by a player might be a person who has had a psychologically turbulent past playing the role of a cleric due to their healing properties, activating the archetype of the 'wounded healer' (Kirmayer, 2003; Rice, 2011; Hadjiosif, 2021). Bringing Jungian psychoanalytic ideas to bear on the psychological processes underpinning RPGs opens up the possibility that players may be able to gain a glimpse of their 'true self', and the experimentation of the attributes performed by the player through their character have real world psychological significance (Bowman, 2010).

These ideas of activating archetypes through playing different roles is not unique to RPGs and is the basis of certain schools of Drama Therapy, particularly Jungian. Pearson, Smail and Watts (2013) describe how imaginative improvisation and role play create a 'bridge in' and a 'bridge out' of archetypes. The 'bridging in' signals a retreat into the imaginary world of the person's inner fantasies, and the 'bridging out' captures a reflective process whereby the metaphoric images relate to the person's emotional pain. The authors discuss how a client may state that they had a loving mother and a fortunate childhood, only to enact a scene in which there is a controlling and destructive witch which they need to overcome, symbolising a different relationship with their mother. This allows for the client to bridge into an imaginary archetypal reality where these images are expressed, and

once bridged out, allow for sense making of their past as well as added strength to be translated into their real world, promoting (healing) change. Within RPGs, this 'bridge in' and 'bridge out' could represent immersion in and out of the player's character. Additionally, Pearson, Smail and Watts discuss how certain stories, myths and fairy-tales draw people in as they connect to the underlying, symbolic meaning behind them, and acting them out through drama can create these same changes. This facilitates what Jung describes as the individuation process, in which the unconscious aspects of one's personality are brought forward and integrated into the conscious to create a well-functioning whole (Jung, 1990). Jung states that it is a human task to become aware of the unconscious as it is pushed through to the conscious. The more the unconscious is avoided, the further the person strays from their potential to reach this individuation. It is with this premise in mind then, that RPGs could hold psychotherapeutic value as they hold the potential to facilitate this transformative process. It is important to note that Jung's idea of individuation has traditionally been seen as an individual process. However, Bowman (2017) argues that this individuation process can take place in a group setting. Players will often 'debrief' with one another following the games, whether this be through social meetings or through messaging services. It is through these conversations where players give praise to one another's achievements and reflect on the games high and low moments with a focus on each of their characters deeds. Reflection plays a significant role in the in individuation process as one could not make the unconscious conscious if they are not aware that they are doing so. It is therefore through group reflection that not only does the individual gather a greater understanding of their self, but also the group as a whole.

Many RPGs contain more specific archetypal personas: The popular RPG 'D&D' names these 'character classes' which span from a 'barbarian' (defined by their primitive rage fed by anger and pain), to a 'wizard' (who uses their superior intelligence to control the fabric of space and reality through magic) (Wizards of the Coast, 2014). The futuristic dystopian 'Cyberpunk 2020' defines these as 'roles' with examples ranging from 'netrunners' who have cybernetic modifications allowing them to become ultimate hackers, to 'corporates' who strive to climb the ladder of capitalism in search of power and control (Pondsmith, 2005). The RPG horror fiction based on H.P Lovecraft's story 'Call of Cthulhu' has 'professions' ranging from 'accountants' who specialise in investigation skills based on an analysis of numbers and business contacts, to 'bounty hunters' who hunt down people on the outskirts of the law (Petersen, 2016). The archetypes presented by these games may resonate with certain players because they facilitate some unconscious needs. What is unique about RPGs is that they play stage to psychological changes and allow insight to emerge through a story, played by characters within the framework of a fantasy world, a group, and the game rules. Through 'bridging in' with immersion players connect with archetypes, which may unlock aspects of their unconscious.

Typologies of Players

Sarah Lynne Bowman's (2010) most relevant research for this study examined how players create community, solve problems and explore identity. Taking the role of a participant and observer, Bowman recruited nineteen participants, which included herself, using a qualitative methodology collecting data from a mixture of face-to-face interviews, email responses and observations. Bowman's study highlights some important

factors, providing insights into why players may choose a specific character, arguing that there are four main reasons for a player to choose a particular character archetype within a game: A fellow player or the GM may request that the player chooses a specific archetype to provide a balanced group with abilities that complement each other; the player may choose an archetype that would make for good role playing opportunities with the other members of the party; the player may be drawn to a particular character archetype from popular literature, video games, and film; the player feels that they need to explore aspects of their inner psyche and thus choose an archetype to complement this. Taking the perspective of Jung and Campbell, these last two reasons can be interwound as these popular characters could be a reflection of our collective unconscious, and thus providing a reason to explore the inner psyche.

From the information gathered about the players in her study Bowman (2010) developed nine typologies which outlined characteristics of archetypes the players presented and how these would be portrayed. These nine typologies are as follows: 'The Doppelganger Self' is when a player portrays their character as themselves, whether this is consistent with their character sheet or not. Bowman describes this as a 'what if' scenario: "What if I were transported into this realm, how would I react?". This would then be portrayed through the character. 'The Devoid Self' is explained as a portrayal of a character that is similar to the player, however, an aspect of themselves is removed. Bowman provides an example of this being a character that lacks empathy. 'The Augmented Self' is described as similar to 'The Doppelganger Self' with extra powers. This is comparable to Fine's (1983 / 2002) explanation of characters being an extension of the player. Using this typology, a player would imagine themselves in this scenario and picture

them with additional powers, this would then be portrayed through the character. ‘The Fragmented Self’ is a player that portrays aspects of themself in their character that might not be a prominent part of themselves, this is then amplified to become a major part of how the character is represented. An example of this could be a disruptive attribute that is not an occupying facet of the player’s personality, yet in their character, it is their predominant characteristic. Bowman describes ‘The Repressed Self’ as a playful and youthful aspect of the player portrayed within the character. This is often seen as a humorous, carefree character that allows the player to express a time when they were a child where the pain and suffering in the world did not exist. ‘The Idealized Self’ is explained as attributes and confidence in a character that the player does not have in reality. Bowman provides examples of characters wanting to be the ‘hero’ in scenarios, and other examples of characters having strong physical abilities when the players may have a disability. ‘The Oppositional Self’ is described as a player portraying attributes in their character that the player does not identify with. This can be character values and beliefs that go against what the players might adopt. An example of this could be a players character being a lawful good paladin, following the law set out by their god, when in reality, the player could be an atheist. ‘The Experimental Self’ is explained as a player not having a specific affinitive attachment to their character, and instead the player experimenting with ideas that are interesting to the plot, or present an exciting experience around the table. Finally, ‘The Taboo Self’ is when a player experiments with subjects that are not appropriate in our society. This could be a character committing acts of murder and torture. These are behaviours that players would be punished for in their own lives, yet they can experiment with these in a safe environment without consequence in the games, other than the consequences as part of the created world, or if they break social etiquette

at the table by performing these acts. Bowman argues that the archetypes that players portray through their characters are then carried over to their real life in what she calls ‘Integration’. These typologies from Bowman do provide useful insights into how players can express themselves through their characters. From a therapeutic perspective this is important as it allows the unconscious (archetypes) to become conscious.

The Function of Play: From Childhood to Adulthood

Play is a fundamental part of development, and from an early age as humans we explore the world through play. It is not only humans that play, animals also engage in play, and within the animal kingdom, the rules of play are created by the animals taking part, and there is a level of flexibility to these rules; thus play can be seen as a form of communication (Palagi, et al., 2015). It can therefore be argued that play is universal, and an aspect of fun and enjoyment for most living beings.

However, what separates humans from other animals in terms of play is humans’ capacity to use symbols (Wagoner, 2010) and therefore engagement in symbolic play. Symbolic play, otherwise known as *pretend*, *make believe,* and *fantasy play* (Pellegrini, 2009) is the idea of using one’s imagination to represent a role that is separate from a role based in reality (Tokic, 2020). An example of this might be a child talking to their teddies at an imaginary tea party, or an adult portraying a wizard in an RPG. Children develop the capacity for symbolic play between the ages of three to six with it serving an important role developmentally (Pellegrini, 2009). Children will use symbolic play to develop cognitive skills, creativity, adopt complex emotions, discover gender roles, and overcome egocentrism, which would

allow them to understand another person's perspective (Petrovic-Soco, 2014).

Jean Piaget (1951 / 2000) a prominent psychologist who specialised in child development, stressed the importance of symbolic play, stating that children learn through symbolic play. Piaget argued that young children's symbolic play often followed a practical use, such as a child imagining that a stick is a spoon to feed themself. When a child is able to understand what objects represent, children can then expand on their imagination, being able to replace one role (in reality) for another (in their imagination). Erik Erikson (1943;1948 as cited in Erikson, Hoffmann, & Miller, 2019), a psychologist and psychoanalyst, not only highlighted the importance of symbolic play as a developmental process, but also a therapeutic process. Erikson stressed the importance of symbolic play as a way to access the psyche of a child and reach what they are not able to verbalise. From Erikson's perspective, children of the same age play in similar ways. However, what separated Erikson's ideas from others at that time was his emphasis on the child learning from their mistakes, expressing their frustrations, and their repressed desires through symbolic play. It is important to note that within this section the emphasis in the literature discussed thus far has been on child development and symbolic play, this is because literature and research on symbolic play in adults is limited as many of the influential authors claim that symbolic play is often associated with early childhood (Goncu & Perone, 2005). Goncu and Perone (2005) argue that play is a developmental process that spans a person's lifetime. Using the example of improvisational theatre as they argue it is the closest resemblance to children's symbolic play, Goncu and Perone discuss how adults, like children, use symbolic play as a way of making sense of their experiences. Specifically focusing on Western

cultures, they brought about conclusions from personal testimony accounts from actors that these adults are able to re-live experiences and work through issues that they are not able to in their normal lives, with improvisational theatre providing an outlet for this. In addition, Goncu and Perone consider the role of improvisational theatre as a social activity. In their view, improvisational theatre can provide a medium for adults to share and relate to one another's experiences to connect with each other over a desire to make sense of and work through these difficulties together. Comparisons from improvisational theatre to RPGs are quite clear: they both require the participants to think and act spontaneously while taking on the role or roles of another. From this, it can therefore be assumed that RPGs can make use of symbolic play and allow the players to make sense of and work through their experiences through symbolic means.

Within therapeutic literature, symbolic play is not a subject that has been widely discussed. However, of the modalities that do discuss symbolic play, psychoanalysis is at the forefront, as symbolism is often attributed to unconscious communication (Lagana, 2019). Sigmund Freud (1920 / 1959) emphasised that dreams were a passage to the unconscious for both adults and children, and play is also an avenue into the unconscious for children. Freud stressed the importance of play as a way to master the past by re-enacting difficult events:

> *"In the play of children we seem to arrive at the conclusion that the child repeats even the unpleasant experiences because through his own activity he gains a far more thorough mastery of the strong impression than was possible by mere passive experience."* (p. 43)

Freud argued that a child having suffered a difficult experience would re-enact that experience symbolically to the child they are playing with as a

cathartic revenge exercise. This is an example of how play holds symbolic meaning as a way to work through a child's difficulties. Freud claimed that as adults there is no longer a need for play, however, adults engage in play and Freud argued that this is a way for an adult to re-experience the pleasure they once had as a child (Freud, 1905 as cited in Holowchak, 2011). Carl Jung's (1963) views differed from Freud's as Jung reflected on a building block game he played as a child. Jung claimed that experiencing play as an adult does not lead to the same fulfilment one had as a child, instead it revives the unresolved difficulties from childhood (Bruner, 2000).

Following these ideas, psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's (1971 / 2005) writings have been influential in highlighting the importance of play throughout the lifespan*: "It is good to remember always that playing is itself a therapy"* (p. 67). Winnicott believed that playing allowed for creativity, and creativity allowed for a life worth living: *"in playing, and perhaps only in playing, the child or adult is free to be creative"* (p. 71). When Winnicott discusses creativity, it is important to differentiate between the traditional definition of creativity, as it is not intended in the sense of making things, instead as the space between the child (internal world) and the mother (external world) where a person can discover the world through active participation or play. Winnicott referred to the internal world as the unconscious and the external world as the conscious, therefore creativity acts as a bridge between these two through symbolic meaning. Within RPGs this bridging between the conscious and unconscious could facilitate therapeutic change through sense making of their experiences as the players can explore and express symbolic meaning through their characters.

Play Therapy

As an intervention, play therapy has been shown to be an effective therapy for children (Bruner, 2000; Leblanc & Ritchie, 2001; Bratton, Ray, Rhine, & Jones, 2005; Lin & Bratton, 2015) and is used to help children express fears, conflicts, anxiety, regulate emotion and process difficult material through symbolic reworking (Bruner, 2000). With adults, very few studies have been conducted, and literature is sparse. However, a review of extant literature suggests that play therapy with adults is an effective intervention (Schaefer, 2003; Garrett, 2014; Doyle & Magor-Blatch, 2017; Olson-Morrison, 2017; Geoffrion, 2018). Play therapy for adults often involves a therapist observing a client using sand-play, or building blocks, where a miniature world is created which symbolises the adult's inner world (Bruner, 2000). Play therapy can function for adults in a similar form as with children, in that it can provide a medium for traumatic material to be worked through when that material is difficult to verbalise, or is otherwise inaccessible through conscious means (Bruner, 2000). Debra Olson-Morrison (2017) argues that play therapy can be used as an effective treatment for adults who experienced childhood developmental trauma. Through a case presentation of a forty-three year old woman, Olson-Morrison highlighted how her client used sand play to place items in a way that symbolised her internal world, which allowed her to communicate her traumatic experiences. Similarly, Kirsten Doyle and Lynne Magor-Blatch (2017) carried out ten sessions with an adult client named Mrs A, a fifty-two year old woman who experienced childhood trauma involving sexual and physical abuse. Through symbolic play using sand play, Mrs A was able to reduce the symptoms of her depression and was able to communicate and make sense of her experiences through nonverbal means. Four themes were presented from

the observation of Mrs A, of these the theme titled ‘externalising issues’ holds relevance to RPGs as Mrs A identifies how she was able to provide structure to her experiences through organising items during play. Within RPGs a player who is planning a character, although possibly not necessarily having physical items to manipulate (although miniatures and artwork would complement this), could symbolically integrate their own experiences into their characters experiences as a way to make sense of them through playing the game. Furthermore, a GM plans and structures an adventure or campaign and their experiences can be symbolically implemented within this.

In addition to individual adult play therapy, adult group therapy has also been investigated. Katharina Bruner (2000) proposed that in a group setting, the feedback from others can facilitate insights that are outside of their awareness. Bruner provides an example of a group of clients consisting of five women and one man, and their activity was building houses from blocks. One of the clients built theirs small and next to another client’s larger house. The insight that emerged was that the client with a small house was getting their strength and power from the larger house due to their co-dependency. Bruner concludes that group play therapy can bring about the insights that individual work alone cannot, as it allows the clients to connect with each other to understand the relationships they have experienced within their lives. It is important to acknowledge that a therapist is not present in RPGs to provide interpretations that could lead to insights for change. However, Winnicott (1971 / 2005) makes an argument for the need to not interpret, and instead allow the person to come to their own understanding, as *“it is the patient and only the patient who has the answers.”* (p. 116). An RPG adventure or campaign is not a story woven individually by a GM, it is based on collaborative storytelling. Given what has been discussed, it could be that

the GM symbolically presents their experiences within their setting and the players provide insights based on their own characters motivations and beliefs, which could facilitate therapeutic change. An example of this might be a GMs NPC: a reflection of the GM, being told that they are a great friend by one of the players characters, challenging a negative belief that the GM might have about themself.

Therapeutic Value of RPGs

Throughout this literature review I have already highlighted some therapeutic aspects of RPGs, in particular the Jungian idea of the psyche being activated when playing these games, highlighting how the research from Fine (1983 / 2002) and Bowman (2010) can be applied therapeutically. Adding to these perspectives has been the idea that symbolism in play can prompt therapeutic processes. Searching for specific research and literature into the therapeutic aspects of RPGs brings limited results. Psychoanalytic insights on the therapeutic qualities of RPGs are explored in a case study by Wayne Blackmon (1994). Blackmon is an American psychiatrist who wrote his treatment encounter in a case study following a nineteen year old male client he named Fred. Fred was described as an obsessional, schizoid personality, who made multiple attempts at suicide. Blackmon illustrates how Fred did not fully engage in the therapy and a great deal of the work was building the therapeutic relationship. During the second year of working together, Fred joined a D&D group and shared his experiences. Blackmon found that D&D allowed Fred to express his inner self, when this was not deemed possible in any other aspect of his life. Fred was able to experiment with feelings, choices and desires through his ‘chaotic evil’ character in the game, and then explored these further in therapy. Importantly, Fred was able to explore

internal conflict within a safe and non-threatening environment by bringing material from the game to his therapy sessions. This rendered the character an intermediary to the real world, and a facilitator for Fred to understand his unconscious. Blackmon emphasised the method's success in allowing Fred to have healthier perspectives on life, and wondered whether this intervention might allow others to *"slay their psychic dragons"* (p. 628). Blackmon's case study is cited in numerous literature articles (Sargent, 2014; Gutierrez, 2017; Scott & Hoberg, 2017), arguably netting influence. However, D&D was in its second edition when this case study was published and the game is now on its fifth edition. Many aspects of the game have changed, including a greater emphasis on role-play and character backstory. It would be interesting to see the insights drawn from Fred's work in a modern setting.

More recently, Michael Sargent (2014) explored how RPGs can provide therapeutic value. For his Master's degree in Social Work, he interviewed six adults who had two or more years' experience playing RPGs. Themes were developed from interviews with players about their personal experiences of the game. The study found that feelings of belonging and being part of a community, the relational shared narrative of playing a role, working through internal conflict, and coping with real world stress were of value to the participants. Furthermore, participants expressed the importance of experimenting with new personas, which led to players' exploring their gender identity and sexuality. As an illustration, one participant explained that a trope for their characters was that they were gay, this took place before the participant had told anybody they were gay themselves. The participant talked about how he was able to experiment with his characters, which made it easier when he eventually came out. Adding to the theme, another participant identifying as transgender discussed their experiences with the

game. The participant talked about the freedom the game gives and how consistently playing as a female character contributed to them coming into their gender identity. However, Sargent did not address any details regarding the GM, focusing only on players' interaction with the games. It would have been interesting to see what this group of participants made of being a GM and the potential therapeutic aspect the role may hold.

Another recent paper highlighting the therapeutic aspects of RPGs is from Stephane Daniau (2016), a researcher in Canada. Using a combination of a literature review and action research, Daniau discusses the conditions for successful RPGs, stating that playing for long periods of time with a small group of between three and six in a playful atmosphere creates an environment where the group's imagination and learning processes can flourish. When these conditions are met Daniau argues that the ability for improvisation improves, as well as supporting the development of empathy through shared feelings and understanding consequences. Furthermore, Daniau highlights how RPGs facilitate making meaningful relationships while evaluating existing ones.

Therapeutic Interventions based on RPGs

Building on therapeutic aspects that have been discussed in the literature, therapists have incorporated RPGs into their practice. Scott and Hoberg (2017) are practicing existential therapists and became inspired to work with RPGs as an intervention after hearing about the therapeutic benefits from one of their clients. Their book offers a guide for therapists to use RPGs as a group therapy tool, particularly with young people. This guide provides the foundations of a successful game as it attends to concerns which were also

outlined by Daniau (2016), pertaining to imagination and learning to flourish by creating a suitable atmosphere with a small group. Scott and Hoberg (2017) explain that the process of using RPGs as a therapeutic intervention can facilitate both emotional healing and emotional growth. They provide few modifications to the original games and the therapist plays the role of the GM. Scott and Hoberg begin by highlighting how the hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell (1949 / 2008) can provide a basis to create the adventure around. The Hero's Journey is a phenomenon highlighted by Campbell as a familiar story arch from mythology where a hero will answer the call to adventure, overcome a distinct challenge, and return home having learnt something substantial. Furthermore, the authors state that managing and selecting a group to complement each other's strengths and weaknesses is a skill in itself. They argue that paying attention to the group composition and group dynamics can facilitate growth, social skills and community. They discuss the benefits of therapists creating NPCs that resemble real world people for the players in order for them to experiment with social interactions. Despite creating the tools for young people with social anxiety, they outline how they can be beneficial for a plethora of presenting issues that therapists are trained to work with, such as providing social experimentation for people on the Autism spectrum and facilitating goal focused tasks for people with attention difficulties. They discuss how people who have a history of abuse may feel powerless in making decisions, however the games can provide an avenue where decisions can be facilitated and rewarded, making them therapeutically beneficial.

It is important to note that Scott and Hoberg (2017) present some problematic ideas. One recommendation that they mention is not to kill the players' characters, whether accidentally or on purpose. If the players know that there

are few consequences to their actions it may have a detrimental effect on their playing experience. Fine (1983 / 2002) describes a situation in his study in which a GM would be reluctant to 'kill' certain player characters. The absence of threat contributed to low motivation and disinterest, Fine writes: *"players became disgruntled with the campaign and decided to commit suicide en masse"* (p. 161). However, preventing players characters from dying could be for logistical reasons and a character dying could present issues such as whether or not the therapy ends if this happens, or how it might continue if another character is created. Another problematic matter is that of the power difference between the therapist who is the GM and the client who is the player. The GM has taken on the role of 'god' in this setting, essentially holding the fate of the character in their hands. This could be difficult for a client who has had power taken from them in the past, such as survivors of abuse.

Further work that explores the ideas of a therapeutic intervention in this domain has been published by Raul Gutierrez (2017). Gutierrez undertook a dissertation for his Master's Degree in Social Work by interviewing five therapists in America who use RPGs as an intervention tool in group therapy. Through face-to-face, telephone and email interviews, and a qualitative methodology, Gutierrez discusses how a one-to-one game with a therapist and client can be beneficial, particularly when incorporating the material the client has already brought to the therapeutic relationship. Gutierrez argues that this approach has worked with some clients when other interventions did not. However, the interviewed therapists argued that the interventions were best suited to a group setting as the games can provide a collective experience for managing difficult situations akin to exposure therapy, by providing a buffer for the real world. Also highlighted are how effective RPGs

as a therapy tool can be for all ages, from adolescents to adults. However, there is not a clear distinction of the type of modality the therapists worked from, although from the language used within the literature, I assumed that they work through a cognitive behavioural model, yet it is not clear how this was applied.

Building on Fine's (1983 / 2002) 'Frame Theory', Connell, Kilmer and Kilmer (2020) explore how this theory can be applied therapeutically. Taking inspiration from Boccamazzo & Connell's (2019, as cited in Connell, Kilmer & Kilmer, 2020) seminar on the applied uses of RPGs, they propose a fourth frame which they gave the name 'The Therapeutic Frame'. This frame is used to provide in-game interventions to promote therapeutic change. In order for this to be achieved Connell, Kilmer and Kilmer put forward the idea of a 'therapeutic GM' that can provide these interventions and deliver measurements in the form of self-reported measures, indications from the players to track progress on this therapeutic change. It is argued that the therapeutic GM can provide social conflict and other difficulties the client might be experiencing as a way for their characters to overcome, and providing this fourth frame, the client can create emotional distance, helping them to process these difficulties safely. This is similar to how Blackmon (1994) described his clients character as being an intermediary to his internal world. However, the idea of a 'therapeutic GM' brings concerns regarding power as mentioned above when discussing Scott and Hoberg's (2017) intervention ideas. This power imbalance is increased further with the use of self-reported measures if they were to be used in these situations. Psychometric measurements are already a contentious issue in therapeutic practice as they have a tendency to imply what is wrong with a person rather than what happened to them (Strawbridge, 2016). To place these in a

therapeutic modality where the therapist is in a ‘god’ role could impact on the therapeutic relationship negatively as there may be a need for the clients to appease their ‘god’, creating an incongruent environment.

Daniel Hand (2021), an illustrator, game designer, and integrative counsellor, wrote an interesting article in the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) magazine ‘Therapy Today’ about utilising RPGs as a therapeutic intervention. Within this article Hand provides some case examples where he utilised RPGs in one to one therapy, with himself as the GM and the client portraying a character. Hand presents an eleven year old client by the name of Eustace, who created a Dragonborn (humanoid dragon) character he named Lung. Eustace had recently moved to the UK from China when he was seen by Hand, and it was described that Eustace was finding it difficult with this readjustment, especially in school. Hand explained that Eustace found it very difficult making decisions as there was an underlying fear of getting something wrong. This resulted in Eustace not communicating at all throughout most of his day. Eustace developed Lung with Hand and was able to communicate through role playing and understand that decisions could be made without the fear of extreme consequences. In addition to Eustace, Hand briefly spoke of another client, Jill, a fifteen year old girl. Jill developed her characters backstory describing her father being kidnapped. Hand describes how Jill’s parents had divorced and her mother was remarrying. Through portraying this character, Jill was able to vent her frustration by taking revenge on these kidnappers which enabled her to develop insights that her relationship with her father still existed. Hand emphasises the ‘arm’s length approach’ as being important to the process, which is essentially the ‘intermediary’ spoken about by Blackmon (1994), and the ‘emotional distance’ described by Connell, Kilmer and Kilmer (2020).

Hand describes how the clients can project their desires, hopes, dreams, and less socially appropriate aspects onto their characters to acknowledge that these are a part of themselves in a safe environment. Hand identifies that not only is the relationship between the therapist and client important but also the relationship between the client and their character to allow them to identify with the emotions their character is feeling and actions they are taking, this way the client can then learn from their character. It is important to note that Hand identifies a very valid argument that RPG interventions would not be for everyone, highlighting that some clients would not feel comfortable role playing a fictional character.

Rationale and Aims

As I have hopefully evidenced, research in the field of RPGs from a psychological perspective is limited. Even more limited, is research regarding identity and meaning in RPGs (Bowman, 2010), with some of the most influential studies being outdated (Blackmon, 1994; Fine, 1983 / 2002). Recent research has outlined the benefits of RPGs and how they can hold therapeutic value (Bowman, 2010; Sargent, 2014; Daniau, 2016) and some have gone on to develop specific interventions incorporating RPGs (Scott & Hoberg, 2017; Gutierrez, 2017; Connell, Kilmer & Kilmer, 2021; Hand, 2021). The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of players in order to gain insight into the therapeutic aspects of RPGs from a counselling psychology perspective.

The rationale for doing so is two-fold. Firstly, the study hopes to shed psychological light onto a social activity that is vastly under-studied within psychology, and which is growing in popularity (Ewalt, 2014; Chan, 2018).

Secondly, the study can inform therapeutic practitioners of the therapeutic qualities RPGs provide, so they may be informed when working with their clients. The study will address the following research questions:

1. What might be experienced as therapeutic in playing RPGs on a regular basis?

2. What can counselling psychologists learn from the therapeutic qualities of RPGs?

Methodology

Research Design

As the purpose of this study was to investigate a topic of psychological interest and explore meanings attached to it, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. This is because qualitative research allows for data to be collected and interpreted in a way that does not look for a definitive answer; instead it captures and probes people's accounts and the subjective meanings associated with these, without aiming to arrive at an objective truth. This is in contrast to quantitative research based on a positivist perspective, with an emphasis on validity and replication, which aim to establish or refute objective facts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). For this study Thematic Analysis (TA) was considered as it would allow for generating themes and provides a great deal of flexibility with ontology and epistemology. Additionally, TA can be used to address a variety of research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). However, TA does not lend itself to detailed first-person accounts of people's experiences, and the 'voices' of the individual can be lost in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). There is also less of an emphasis on idiography (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This study focused on a small sample looking at the lived experiences of RPG players, and how they make sense of these lived experiences; for this reason Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012) was deemed the most suitable method of data analysis. Bowman and Lieberoth (2018) demonstrate the importance of phenomenological research in RPGs by arguing that players rarely consciously lie about their experiences, and the aspects that are omitted from their narrative, such as meaning can be developed by the researcher taking an interpretive view. As IPA aims to

expand understanding of a particular phenomenon rather than seek causal explanations, it was deemed appropriate for the research questions posed by this study.

IPA has its roots in health psychology and was developed by Jonathan Smith (1996) based on the argument that psychology can be both experimental and experiential. Smith emphasised the experiential as this has historically been suppressed in the field of psychology. It is this focus on lived experience which has made IPA increasingly popular in counselling psychology (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This methodology is influenced by three core areas of philosophy. Firstly, phenomenology, which is the study of understanding subjective experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Hermeneutics is the second area, which is the theory of interpretation. This is important as something that could otherwise be unseen becomes seen, much like translating an experience for others to understand (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Within IPA, there is what is known as a 'double hermeneutic', whereby the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant's sense making (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). The third underpinning is idiography, which has a focus on how experiences have become understood from a particular perspective (Shinebourne, 2011), and involves the in-depth study of individuals rather than generalisable laws that describe populations. For this reason IPA is suited to a critical realist ontological perspective, as it identifies with an overarching reality, yet realises that this consists of idiosyncratic experiences, subjectivity, and influences from society and culture (Braun & Clarke, 2013) as well as contextual factors. In this thesis, the Covid-19 pandemic can be seen as a contextual factor that influenced both its design and its findings.

Epistemology

Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge, how it is generated, and how we understand if it is legitimate and meaningful, essentially exploring the question of what is possible to know (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Epistemology can be observed as a continuum (Leavy, 2014), put simply, there is on one side 'positivism', and on the other 'constructionism'. Positivism proposes that knowledge can be gained from the scientific method and statistical means through observation, and this can be achieved through controlling variables to reach an objective truth. Positivism adopts a viewpoint that there is a direct relationship between the world and our perspective of it, and we can therefore understand the world by observing it (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Whereas constructionism assumes that the way that knowledge is created about the world is not an accurate representation of reality. From this viewpoint, knowledge is produced in a complex matrix of social, political, material, and historical factors to which there is no definitive truth (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Between these two lies 'contextualism'. This places knowledge as not being that of a single reality and instead emerging through contexts. Similar to the ontological perspective of critical realism, contextualism accepts that a truth may exist but we are unable to reach it. Although we may not get to a universal truth, what contextualist research produces may be true in certain contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This study is based on a 'contextualist' perspective as the participants' truth was sought through phenomenological inquiry, yet as a researcher, I was bringing my own assumptions and understandings. The knowledge that emerged in this inquiry was inevitably bound by the historical, social, and material conditions that my participants and I were living in (for example British culture in the late 2010s/early 2020s and the upheavals brought about by the covid-19

pandemic). Indeed, the 'double hermeneutic', moulded the knowledge that was created. IPA advises researchers to 'bracket' their assumptions, in an attempt to avoid the most egregious pitfalls of unchecked subjectivity. As a trainee counselling psychologist, I endeavour to give the reader glimpses of my internal process throughout the thesis, starting with a brief reflexive statement below.

Reflexivity

Phenomenological research rests on the double hermeneutic, which involves myself as a sense-making agent contributing to the final findings. It is important to identify areas where I might have influenced the knowledge being created. Braun & Clarke (2013) argue that 'it is important to own your perspective', recognising myself as part of the research. I am a thirty-eight year old white British man, currently studying counselling psychology at doctorate level. I am heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, and describe myself as agnostic. My training on this course is based around the theoretical perspectives of psychodynamic, cognitive behavioural, and systemic approaches. My interest in RPGs stems from my own experiences with these games. I have been a member of the RPG community for twelve years and have found these games beneficial for my own mental health as well as the many people I have played these games with. Of the RPGs that I play, my experiences have been predominantly with D&D, however, I have played Pathfinder, Call of Cthulhu, and Shadowrun. For this reason I can be considered to have an 'insider status' (Braun & Clarke, 2013) regarding this research. However, simply stating my intersecting identities (or those of my participants for that matter) does not guarantee proper reflexive engagement with the data and the research process. "Reflexive practice can be some of

the most challenging and important work in qualitative research" (Mitchell et al. 2018, p. 673).

As part of my reflexive process it was important to keep a journal throughout the research, in order to create a space for me to consider the extent to which I was viewing the participants' experiences through my own lenses. Segments from this diary are dispersed and elaborated on throughout the thesis, in order to make my own voice more transparent and enhance the credibility of my analysis (Yardley, 2011).

As I strived to be reflexive throughout this project, providing my own insights and experiences playing these games, I felt it important to bracket myself and not take on an observer-as-participant role. This was because I felt that it is important to keep the focus on the participants experiences, and not cloud the double hermeneutic process by attempting to interpret my own understanding alongside the participants.

Recruitment of Participants

IPA strives for a homogenous sample (Shinebourne, 2011); as RPG players are a distinctive group with common goals (the desire to role-play, share a narrative experience, and work cooperatively within a shared space), it can be argued that this will inevitably yield a homogenous sample (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). However, there are a number of criteria that I used in the recruitment of the participants to further ensure homogeneity of the sample. The sample size recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012) in IPA research for professional doctorates is between four and ten. I therefore aimed for and recruited eight participants for this study. This sample size allowed for the unique personal experiences of the participants to be

portrayed in substantial detail, favouring quality over quantity (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Further inclusion criteria were that the participants must have been over eighteen years of age and that they had been an active member in an RPG with a GM, where character creation was an important aspect. Participants needed at least three years' experience with RPGs as this was deemed to be a sufficient period for these games to have had some impact on the player. Furthermore, at least half of the participant group needed to have experience of being a GM. The study invited participants of any gender, cultural background, sexual orientation, disability, and race. However, it was a criterion that participants were fluent in English and a resident in the United Kingdom. Recruitment was sought through word of mouth from my connections within the RPG community, a sampling method known as 'snowballing'. Additionally, recruitment was facilitated via an advertisement on the online social media platform Reddit, and permission was gained from the administrators before this took effect. The advert to encourage recruitment can be found in the appendix (see appendix A).

Participant Information

Table 1: Basic Participant Demographic Information with Pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Demographic Information
Miles	White, Male, Aged 54 Middle Class, Heterosexual, Able-bodied
Phillip	White, Male, Aged 52 Middle Class, Heterosexual, Able-bodied
Dominic	White, Male, Aged 27 Working Class, Heterosexual, Disabled
Harris	White, Male, Aged 47 Middle Class, Bisexual, Disabled
Jane	White, Female, Aged 25 Working Class, Bisexual, Able-bodied
Adrian	White, Male, Aged 28 Middle Class, Bisexual, Able-bodied
Ella	White, Female, Aged 24 Middle Class, Heterosexual, Able-bodied
Morgan	White, Male, Aged 25 Middle Class, Bisexual, Able-bodied

For more information regarding the participants, including the games they play, please see appendix F.

Ethical Issues

This study's ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Health and Applied Science Faculty Research Ethics Committee (see appendix D). There are a number of ethical considerations that were raised in the application. Most notably, due to the questions surrounding lived experience, participants might have brought distressing content which could have resulted in them feeling vulnerable, for this reason information and signposting was provided, highlighting free or low cost counselling services. A participant information form (see appendix E) outlined what was expected from the participants, and a consent form (see appendix C) outlined what

they were agreeing to. These were given to the participants prior to the interviews. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants was upheld with the use of pseudonyms. Regarding data management, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. This information was held encrypted on a secure drive and the personal information was destroyed once the thesis was complete.

Data Collection

Due to the risks brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant social distancing restrictions, the form of data collection for this study was through online face-to-face interviews. Additionally, the participants were encouraged to create a researcher directed multi-modal scrapbook diary for three weeks, capturing their experiences playing RPGs. Braun, Clarke and Gray (2017) argue that diaries allow for participants to gather ideas and thoughts over a period of time that suits them. They can then allow for these thoughts to be structured in a way that they feel is coherent and provide illustrations to emphasize points. These can consist of drawings, detailed game notes, or thoughts and feelings associated with the game. Furthermore, participants could have included their character sheets and world building notes. These diaries were used for inspiration when answering questions within the interviews and probe the phenomenon under investigation (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012). These diaries were not to be collected following the interview; they were instead for the participants to keep. Therefore, the purpose of this form of data collection was to stimulate and engage the participants, as well as informing the questions in the online video interview. To accommodate participants as much as possible, the diaries were a strongly encouraged feature of participation, but not a

requirement. I therefore ensured that I would not turn away participants who had not completed their diaries, or if they forgot to bring them to the interview.

The online video interviews followed a semi-structured schedule, and consisted of open ended questions that allowed the participants to reflect and talk extensively about their experiences with RPGs. As recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012), this schedule consisted of ten to twenty questions (see appendix B), with the interview times ranging between forty-five and ninety minutes. The interviews were piloted, as this allowed for any oversights in the schedule to become evident (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The pilot interview was not used in the analysis as the interview schedule changed substantially after this. The online video interviews were recorded, and consent for this was sought from the participant consent form (see appendix C).

An important consideration to discuss and acknowledge is the asymmetric power dynamic that takes place in a qualitative interview. Steinar Kvale (2006) argues that interviews may imply that they are a cooperative conversation based around dialogue, when the purpose of these interviews are for the benefit of the interviewer. This power imbalance can be particularly problematic from a counselling psychology perspective as I am a trainee, learning therapeutic theory and skills which could cause the participant to talk about something they later regret due to their defences being circumvented, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and their privacy invaded. Additionally, one of the crucial factors of a qualitative interview is to build rapport with the participant (Braun & Clarke, 2013), it was important that the dynamic did not become that of a therapist and client, as this would have detracted from the purpose of the interview and raise further ethical concerns (Kvale, 2006). However, as aspects of this asymmetry of

power are unavoidable, it was deemed beneficial to make it explicit, accepting this power and emphasize transparency. It was therefore important for me to discuss the potential power imbalance with the participants in order for 'rapport' to not be interpreted as a masquerade of friendship where I would have been the only beneficiary.

Adjustments due to COVID-19

While recruitment was underway, the UK government enforced social distancing restrictions, thus prohibiting the possibility of face-to-face interviews. Therefore this study used online video interviews as a data collection method. Although online video interviews have been shown to be effective (Lo Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016), concerns regarding the diaries were considered, as it was thought that the participants may have had difficulties showing the pages and illustrations. This was not an issue during the interviews as they could be clearly communicated through the video call. Additionally, another consideration that was explored was how the diaries could have differed from expected, as the participants would presumably be playing their games online rather than face-to-face. Playing RPGs online has become very popular, especially due to the pandemic (Abbott, 2020), and the dynamic of play differs from face-to-face due to the lack of immediacy, the thrill of rolling the dice in front of others, and the tension face-to-face story telling can bring (Montague, 2019). It is also important to acknowledge that the pandemic was considerably impactful. It is therefore important to recognise that the minds of the participants were occupied by the unprecedented upheavals and disruption to life as we knew it.

Analytic Approach

One of the areas that makes IPA unique from other methodologies is the process of analysis. The focus of the analytic process is on the participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences. In order for this analysis to take place, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012) describe a six stage process, which this project followed.

The first of these was to gather an understanding of the participants' experiences with RPGs. This was achieved through line-by-line analysis for each participant. Through a reading and re-reading of the data I was able to immerse myself and allow for each participant to be the focus of the analysis.

The second stage involved some initial note taking. This consisted of taking note of interesting phenomenological material within the transcript that related to the research questions. This allowed me to begin to gather an understanding of how each participant made sense of RPGs. Also, this brought out ideas around what therapeutic aspects the participants gained from these games. Through this stage a comprehensive set of notes and comments were created on the transcripts. Furthermore, this stage began to look at the participants' lived world. Through this, the context of the material provided the early stages of the interpretive process and I began to identify the reasons why the participants brought the specific material from my own perspective. Additionally, the note taking was useful for outlining the language, similarities and differences, as well as contradictions in what the participants were saying. This note taking took the form of three types of comments: Firstly, 'descriptive comments', which provided a face value account of what the participants were communicating, often constructed from key words, explanations and assumptions. Second were 'linguistic comments', which encourage a focus on how the participants present their

experiences, taking into consideration the language they use, the tone, repetition, as well as metaphors. Finally, ‘conceptual comments’ provided interpretative notes to the data. These were at a conceptual level and took an interrogative approach. These comments incorporated my personal reflections to interpret what maybe underlying the personal experiences of the participants. The note taking process also provided an opportunity for de-contextualization, through this I could gather a deeper understanding of the data by observing the transcript in different ways, focusing on particular words. This was achieved through separating sentences and reading the transcripts backwards. Once the notes were created, emergent themes were developed. These emergent themes were developed consisting of short sentences or words that summarised my understandings from the material I was working with (for an example of this coding process see appendix G).

Following the development of emergent themes, the development of sub-themes took place. The premise behind this stage was to reduce the amount of data collected from the notes and emergent themes while maintaining complexity. These sub-themes incorporated specific sections of the transcript as well as overall impressions from the entire interview. Furthermore, these took into consideration the lived experiences of playing RPGs from the participants as well as my own experiences. These sub-themes therefore became a collaboration of both the understandings and interpretations of these experiences within the games. Themes within IPA differ from other qualitative methods. For example, in TA themes are gained across an entire dataset of participants whereas at this stage in IPA the themes are highlighted for each individual participant (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Once the sub-themes were ordered chronologically they were mapped in a way that they could be pieced together. At this stage, some sub-themes that

did not fit the research questions were discarded. For the themes that were kept, patterns emerged regarding the participants lived experiences with RPGs to create what Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012) call 'superordinate' themes.

The fifth stage was to move onto the next case. As the study involved more than one participant, it was important to follow the intricate steps outlined above for all. It was necessary to take into account each participant as a separate person and acknowledge that although they were a homogenous sample, their lived experiences with RPGs were different. However, it was also important at this stage to be mindful that the current analytical process could have been influenced by the previous participant's process.

Finally, the last part of the process of analysis was to look for patterns across cases. Once the participants' accounts had been individually analysed, similarities were identified across the data-set.

Reflections on IPA as used with this study

My experience with IPA prior to this study had been limited, and my anxiety around conducting this research in line with IPA sensibilities was the subject of many discussions with my supervisor. I found using the staged processes set out by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012) to be very helpful as they provide clear instructions on each stage of the methodological process. Despite this, following this procedure was not without its challenges. I found myself immersed in considerably rich data from the long transcripts that I obtained, and the emergent themes were vast. Following this initial encounter with an almost unmanageable volume of 'blocks of meaning', I realised that I had created a small number of developed sub-themes with a large number of

emergent themes encompassing them, which I felt drowned out much of the rich data captured by certain emergent themes as it became lost within the sea of other emergent themes. I therefore restarted the process of developing sub-themes, creating more with less encompassing emergent themes (an extract of these emergent themes together with their corresponding initial sub-themes for Harris can be seen in appendix H). However, this still yielded a large number of sub-themes. After discussions with my supervisor, we identified that the vast quantity of sub-themes created from the emergent themes would be difficult to document within this research project at the write up stage without losing the richness of the experiences. Also, we agreed that I could go deeper with my interpretations into what the therapeutic aspects mean through these sub-themes. I therefore began the process again, finally settling on two superordinate themes each comprising of two sub-themes, which are presented in the analysis that follows.

Analysis

The analysis is organised as two superordinate themes, each with two sub-themes. The first of these superordinate themes is titled ‘Symbolic Play’ and explores the experiences of the participants using RPGs to symbolically represent aspects of their internal world. The sub-theme ‘Expression Through Play’ investigates how the participants use RPGs to experiment with roles through their characters. The sub-theme ‘Working Through Difficulties’ looks at how the participants use RPGs to symbolically reflect and make sense of aspects of their past. The second superordinate theme presented is ‘When Players Come Together’ which inquires into the therapeutic value of the social aspect of RPGs. The sub-theme ‘Playing In Person Helps With Immersion’ explores among other things how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the participants, resulting in many of the players moving to online play due to social distancing restrictions. This sub-theme looks at how moving online takes away from being connected through face-to-face play, and how this face-to-face play helps with immersion. The sub-theme 'When Things Fall Apart: The Significance and Perils of the Group’ examines difficult experiences the participants had as part of the role playing group. The premise behind this sub-theme is to explore what is counter-therapeutic in an attempt to provide a fuller answer to the research question. Thus, it can be thought of as part of the ‘shadow’ of therapeutic processes and interactions.

I have presented the participants’ accounts in detail, in a case by case fashion. My aim was to provide rich data via substantial quotations, allowing each participant’s voice to emerge, provide a structured narrative for the reader to follow, and hopefully help the reader to familiarise themselves with

and understand each of my participants. Wherever I present excerpts from the interviews, I have left them mostly unedited in order to retain as much as possible the idiosyncrasies and vernacular of the participants. Additionally, I have developed this analysis from my perspective as a trainee counselling psychologist, and therefore I have referenced therapeutic literature within. The discussion is then used to explore how the insights emerging in the analysis correspond to the existing literature on RPGs.

Superordinate Theme: Symbolic Play – Sub-Theme: 'Expression Through Play'

This sub-theme theme presents the experiences of the participants experimenting with roles and desires, whether this be going against what others say they are, or exploring taboo subjects. In addition to this, the sub-theme highlights the participants conflicts where they question who they are and how far they can go with taboo subjects. These accounts provide examples on how RPGs can allow for an outlet into these aspects playfully and symbolically.

Ella began playing at a young age and has fond memories from this time. During this time she recalled how she was able to play out her desires:

> *"…I was about 5 years old and I started taking an interest when he [Ella's father] had friends and family round… um… and so I actually created my first character when I was 5, and that's a really nice memory for me because… um… I… I wanted to be a magician, I loved all things kind of wizardry… um… but dad thought it would be really funny if… um… if "Oh you could be a necromancer, yeah that would be nice", so it was really funny because I… my character was… I was too low level to actually raise any zombies or anything, but I called my character Princess Sunbeam…"* (Ella)

This excerpt shows how D&D created a special bond between Ella and her father, and her father's input in creating her character seemed to cultivate their bond further, as Ella emphasises how she holds this memory dear to her, as nostalgia. These positive childhood experiences appeared to bring joy to Ella as she describes her desires from that age, these being: wanting

to be a magician, and being a princess. For Ella, the idea of exploration and creativity was appropriate for her age at the time as she highlights here:

> *"…it's interesting because as I grew up my characters that I created more recently have a lot more depth to them, this character, my Princess Sunbeam originally, I don't really have a backstory for her… um… I don't really have a sort of alignment, or a motive for what she wants to get out of quests, she's a lot more… um… she's very appearance heavy I remember…"* (Ella)

Here Ella speaks about how *Princess Sunbeam* had little motivation other than wanting to adventure. From Erik Erikson's (1950 / 1993) developmental perspective Ella was at the end of 'Initiative vs. Guilt' and the beginning of 'Industry vs. Inferiority' stages. At this time in Ella's development Erikson argued that pretend play is important for exploring herself. Additionally, this coincides with Piaget's (1951 / 2000) developmental theory where pretend (or symbolic) play is important for cognitive development, learning, and symbolic thought. It therefore seems that these games were helpful for her development by allowing her to pretend play, which facilitated an exploration of these desires. Ella has changed the way she plays from being five years old and explains how she now develops characters here:

> *"…it's very much gone deeper, I care more… I care about different character qualities now than I did back then… um… it's less about being a beautiful princess and more about… um… kind of experimenting with pacifism… maybe we don't always have to attack the hordes that invade the city kind of thing, exploring diplomacy and just… I guess higher level concepts I suppose."* (Ella)

Ella highlights how she plays differently from when she was a child. It is clear that for Ella there is an emphasis on experimentation with pacifism. Throughout the interview I was given the impression from Ella that being a pacifist is part of who she is. I was left with a feeling therefore that Ella was portraying an aspect of herself though these pacifist characters, and these scenarios where she did not wish to attack the hordes, instead seeking diplomacy appeared to be a way for her to express these values and explore these newfound concerns. However, on at least one occasion Ella did explore embodying a character that was different from herself:

> *"I'll tell you what, very recently as a… kind of more and more joking one shot campaign… um… I did make a character trait… um… or a character based on trait's that are completely different from myself but in a bad way. So somebody that was very rude and um… was almost like creepy in how they came across, because it was really fun to embody something that I don't necessarily like, and to [laugh], it sounds bad but to make my friends uncomfortable…"* (Ella)

Ella explains here how she was able to explore what it might be like to be rude and creepy through her D&D character. It is interesting that she created this character whom she did not necessarily like, highlighting that they were different from herself in a bad way. By creating and playing this character it could be that Ella is expressing hidden attributes of herself which go against her pacifist values, which she expressed in some of her other characters and potentially providing a way to explore these parts and integrate them. Additionally, following laughter Ella mentions that she enjoyed portraying this character as it made her friends uncomfortable. It seems that Ella and her

friends got enjoyment from Ella portraying this character and it appeared to provide Ella with validation.

Reflective Comment: This extract of my analysis appears to capture my own assumptions on pacifism. I explain how Ella expressed this rude character and stated that the opposite would be her expression of pacifism. Thus, I seem to implicitly believe that pacifists are also polite, which is not always the case. More can be said around Ella's experiences of pacifism. Between the ages of twelve to eighteen Ella would be going through Erik Erikson's (1950 / 1993) fifth stage: 'Identity vs. Role Confusion'. According to Erikson, during this time Ella would be developing a sense of personal identity while exploring her beliefs and values. I wonder therefore whether this was the time that Ella was able to develop these ideas around pacifism, and used RPGs to experiment with them. Additionally, this would coincide with Piaget's (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958) final stage: 'Formal Operational/Thinking'. This begins around the age of eleven and twelve, and is where Piaget argues that abstract thought begins. Based on Piaget's theory, this would have been when Ella began to experiment with her pacifist ideas, as she would be beginning to view the world through a more complex lens, understanding that good and evil do not necessarily exist and that there are consequences to actions.

For Morgan, the idea of playing something different from himself is appealing. However, Morgan highlights how certain conditions need to be in place for this to happen:

> *"I think the fact that my confidence has increased a lot also helps, in that there are some characters that I wouldn't have played when I first*

> *started role playing because I wouldn't have the confidence to try and act that out. I think also the group you're playing with helps a lot, in that if its people you trust then you can be more open, and then able to detach your character from your person."* (Morgan)

Morgan emphasises that the ability to play a character that is separate from himself is facilitated by his own confidence and the trust in the group. Winnicott (1971 / 2005) identifies that if confidence is constricted, then the ability to explore the area between the internal and external world where creative play exists is also hindered. Importantly, it appears that for Morgan, this confidence is closely associated with trust, meaning that if the trust does not exist, then the confidence cannot be gained. Morgan also experiments with characters that appear different, yet he identifies that these are aspects of himself:

> *"…it was really like "Well okay, I'm quite nerdy and quite shy, and you know, reasonably intelligent, so I'm going to intentionally play a very loud boisterous, dumb person". I think a lot of the times in the motives and personalities it can come across again like I think the fear of death thing is a big thing, especially in a lot of my villains, that has come across and that has come from me, and it's almost a thing that in a way you don't even realise until I kind of look back on it…"* (Morgan)

Looking at this example, it seems as though Morgan was playing these characters unknowing that he was portraying aspects of himself, and it seems that Morgan is highlighting that although these characters appear different from himself, they all present aspects of himself that are hidden. It is important to note that Morgan makes the realisation that he has portrayed aspects of himself through his characters through reflection, potentially

making the unconscious, conscious which is the foundation of psychoanalysis (Jung, 1990).

For Jane, experimentation is an important part of the games, the idea of being something different from herself seems to have been developed from when she first began playing:

> *"Um… but then as time went on I was like "Well actually one of the things I haven't ever experimented with in my character creation was you know, other genders, why haven't I done that? That sounds fun, let's do that", um… so… so… now I… I… I don't know if there is necessarily a pattern but I'm not limiting myself to just… to just female characters, although I am realising that both of my ones right now are."* (Jane)

Jane highlights here how she identified that she had not played other genders, questioning why she had not done this before. It could be that she had developed confidence in the game to enable this expression of gender. From a Jungian perspective, Jane would be facilitating the archetype of her 'animus', which allows her to portray masculine elements (Jung, 1983). Importantly, these games provide the freedom for this expression as she identified that she is not limited. This experimentation for Jane is not restricted to the expression of gender, she identifies here how it has been brought on by the frustration of being labelled as something that she does not want to be identified as:

> *"… something that was thrown at me, um… like that phase of "Oh you're such a goodie two shoes", and I'm like "No, do you know what I'm going to be really really evil", um… and I'm just going to like, yeah just switch off that moral centre and, and really get into it… um… so*

> *I think yeah, it being kind of the ultimate difference from me… um… and I.. I do kind of want to do it again because it was just so… um… yeah, just so different to how I would normally behave that it truly felt transformative and I could, I could actually… literally not be me anymore for a bit which now I say it out loud sounds a bit sad but there we go [laugh]."* (Jane)

For Jane it seemed that RPGs provide an ability to express what she is not, and Jane was able to go against the stereotype that she had been given with this character providing a way to express this. Jane discusses how it allowed her to *"switch off that moral centre"*. It seems that this could have been a release from the constraints that are put upon Jane in the real world. Following from this, Jane also mentions how this was a *"transformative experience"*. I am left wondering if Jane is hinting that she learnt from this character, and able to express more of this character in herself. This is reminiscent of Joseph Campbell's (2008) 'Heroes Journey' which provides the template for change and growth through understanding oneself based on the journeys we embark on. It is also important to note how Jane points out that she is not happy in herself from how she says that her characters can "*literally not be me anymore"* followed by her admitting that it *"sounds a bit sad".* It therefore seems all the more important for Jane to have the outlet to experiment with different roles as an escape from who she is. However, there appears to be a fear for Jane of embodying this evil character:

> *"…I didn't see anything [of herself] in my fully evil character, I think in the beginning definitely, but… which you know, maybe is a little bit worrying as a sign that I might turn evil one day, I hope not [laugh]."* (Jane)

In this extract Jane highlights that she could identify herself in the original idea for her character. However, as Jane developed this character she indicated that she "*didn't see anything [of herself] in my fully evil character*". This was followed by Jane indicating a fear that she may end up like her character. It is evident that this statement contradicts her previous extract where she said she actively wanted to play and embrace an 'evil' character, and the fear that she expressed could have been a way to distance herself from the evil character to defend herself from turning into them. This side of Jane seemed important to express as it appeared to allow her to experiment with the rejected parts of herself, her shadow (Jung, 1983).

Phillip also highlights what exploring hidden aspects of oneself through a character feels like:

> *"There was one character that I really enjoyed playing, who… um… was a female thief… um… who… um… was very… very much self-centred, everything was about her… um… so you know if sort of someone got really badly injured I complained about them getting their blood on my robes… um… you know it's all about this great calamity that has happened, but how does it make me feel? And that was quite like… that again was something very much that I'm not… I… I care about people quite a lot but she was all about caring about herself…"* (Phillip)

Here Phillip talked about how he enjoyed playing a female, potentially expressing the 'anima', which is the female archetype of the psyche (Jung, 1983). In addition to this, Phillip's character is very different from how he identifies as, evidenced by saying *"…in some ways I'm still quite introverted…"* and *"…I'm a relatively quiet person…"* earlier in the interview. Phillip spoke about how the world was at stake in this game, referring to a

"*great calamity",* and Phillip highlights how his character is centred around herself, asking himself the question of "*how does it make me feel?".* This question was potentially posed for Phillip as well as his character, allowing Phillip to embody this character to feel what they feel. Phillip explores this embodiment further after being asked what it was that connected him to the character:

> *"Again because it wasn't me, I suppose. So… at every… every time she would have to make a decision I'd think "what would I do? Well I'll do something else as her then". So… um… it was quite a… it was actually quite a fun character to play, it was quite a… it felt quite different from me so… um… yeah."* (Phillip)

Here Phillip discusses how he was able to connect to the character because it was not him and how he would think of what he would do, then do the opposite for his character. It appeared cathartic for Phillip to express what he would not normally do, and experience what it is like to be selfish. This is evident from the previous extract where he says "…*I care about people quite a lot but she was all about caring about herself…".* From this, it could be that Phillip is filling a need to express self-confidence (Goncu & Perone, 2005).

Reflection from Theme: Providing some insights into how I came to some of the conclusions within this theme, I have experiences experimenting with roles within RPGs. When I first began playing RPGs my early characters would tend to be fighters. I believe that this was because I had a desire to be a hero, to confirm to myself that I am a good person. Subsequently, my way of creating characters evolved and I then embodied the joker of the group, as a way of seeking attention. I believe that this stemmed from a need to be liked at the time. After working through these character types, I now feel that I am less defined by an unconscious drive to play a certain type of character. However, most of my characters follow the alignment of chaotic good, potentially to appease the hero and joker inside of me.

Superordinate Theme: Symbolic Play – Sub-Theme: 'Working Through Difficulties'

This sub-theme was developed from the understanding that the participants were allowing RPGs to facilitate their understanding of their own difficulties through symbolism.

Several of the participants described experiences playing RPGs where they were able to work through internal conflicts and difficulties:

> *"…but table role playing has in essence saved my life in… in… at some points, through distraction, through working through things, through seeing things through different eyes…" (Harris)*

> *"… I've commented for a very long time that RPs have been somewhat the most important things for me working out some of my own issues." (Adrian)*

For Adrian enacting the role of GM enabled him to symbolically reflect his experiences and feelings of the loss of his girlfriend in his teens:

> *"…I've been taking a small group through a huge campaign I have played that is based off of my experiences of when I lost my girlfriend, and the loss of it is very similar. A lot of the plot points are very symbolic of certain things that were happening at the time, and the main kind of antagonist for that entire series is based off of my ex from that very closely." (Adrian)*

This powerful excerpt demonstrates how Adrian was able to express how he utilised RPGs as a way to understand the loss through emotional expression where he had not been able to before. In addition to this, Adrian used these

games as a way of communicating his experiences to the meaningful people in his life, when he found this difficult through words:

> *"…my fiancé is one of the players and she's very supportive of this, very keen to be able to see the… kind of… much more than me just kind of telling her about it which kind of just tends to drop to quite factual, because it's a hard conversation." (Adrian)*

Here Adrian is placing the emphasis and potentially responsibility on his fiancé asking for this process, creating a distance from his own need to process. This could be because Adrian finds it difficult to communicate the difficulties of loss in conventional ways, even within this interview, making RPGs even more important for him to express himself. Adrian was able to use these symbolic representations of his loss to gather an understanding of his inner world:

> *"…it's kind of been big for me being able to kind of reflect and analyse it very in depth to the things that were happening at the time, and starting to see the way the events were unfolding from that kind of slightly older, slightly more experienced position, being able to see quite clearly "this is when that particular path started, and these are the things that drove it on the way it did"." (Adrian)*

Adrian is reflecting from a position where he feels he is able to begin to make sense of the difficulties of his loss. In addition, this appears to be a form of sublimation (Freud, 1930) for Adrian as he is able to pour his grief into a creative endeavour, thus working through it. When asked what this might look like in a game, Adrian describes a disjointed experience which was a reflection of his inner world:

> *"…they [players in the campaign] kind of ended up in this metaphysical location, the thing that's not real but kind of a mental association of something, and they got in one session a crash course in some of my internal emotions as I sometimes get, my kind of fears from like friendship and relationships and anxieties, and stresses of loss, and that type of thing. It was quite liberating opening myself up that heavily in one go…" (Adrian)*

Adrian is referring to taking his players through aspects of his inner world as a *"crash course"*, which appears to be a way for him to communicate to his players his distress, as well as to legitimise it and possibly get a reaction. Additionally, Adrian hints at a cathartic nature of being able to express his feelings in front of an audience and make sense of these experiences as a single process through these games, which is important to him. It appeared that Adrian had discovered a way to work through his experiences of loss within his game by being a GM, and creating a world for others to navigate. Thus, his friends (the players in the campaign) are invited into a complex landscape and possibly contribute to the grieving and sense-making processes.

Ella describes experiences of working through difficulties through her character. Ella spoke about her difficulties at university and how she translated these into her characters' backstory:

> *"…so in third year I started to have horrible panic attacks and… um… I just really struggled at uni generally that year… um… and I yeah, basically I shut down… um… I found it really hard to talk to people about my experience, I just didn't know how to reach out for help, and I translated that into my characters backstory…" (Ella)*

Within the interview, Ella found it difficult to talk about her difficulties during her time at university and her broken sentences reflect this. It seems that she is processing what she is willing to share, possibly as a way to disguise her vulnerability. This was followed by her disclosing that she "*found it really hard to talk to people"* about her experiences, which could explain why this character was used as a way of working through these difficulties. Ella described how she translated these difficulties into one of her characters backstories through symbolic representation:

> *"…her backstories actually… um… a reflection of my own mental health journey to date. So I put a lot of heart and soul into thinking about how I wanted to personify my own personal experience… um… the various life events I've been through and how that would translate in a fantasy world… so that's incredible and… that's incredibly meaningful to me because she is almost a different version of me, she's been through hard stuff in the same way I have but she's come out in a different way…" (Ella)*

The character Ella is referring to here is a Goliath made out of stone, who was once a mighty warrior. The idea that they are made of stone could potentially hold meaning as a desire to be tough in the face of her difficulties. Ella describes how she put her *"heart and soul"* into this character development, appearing to develop her character almost as a work of art with pride, it seems that this care is necessary for her to be able to create an accurate portrayal of her difficulties. Additionally, Ella discusses how her character being in a fantasy world has enabled her to develop a different version of herself. It seems that this could be a representation of her fantasised self, yet one that has become integrated as an extension of herself. Ella also describes how her character was able to learn, and thus

she has been able to learn from her character based on the bond she has with them:

> *"…she learnt to be a lot more wise and… um… yeah, just learnt to do things differently, and that's again kind of what happened for me, I was approaching my own mental health in quite a negative way and I was very much telling myself "You've just got to keep soldiering on, you've got to get through this", but that wasn't kind of compassionate, so… my character has become more kind of compassionate…" (Ella)*

Ella describes here that seeing her difficulties through the eyes of her character has enabled her to have a different perspective on life's struggles. It appears Ella was able to channel her struggles with mental health into her character's backstory, gathering a greater understanding of her difficulties. In addition to this, it seems that Ella has been able to work through her anxieties through an idealised self which she created as a character that she plays, and she has been able to learn from this character as they have become an extension of herself.

Harris also discussed how he used his characters to work through difficulties. He describes here how he creates characters with specific handicaps which he will then embody:

> *"Um, I don't know whether I create a character specifically with handicaps but I find them [pause] just… more… and more able to… personify them. Those that I have no connection to don't mean that much to me." (Harris)*

For Harris it is important to have these obstacles as part of his characters in order to create a bond with them. Harris used the words *"don't mean that much to me"* in a way which suggests he is dismissive of characters that do

not meet this criterion, instead seemingly opting for certain characters to fulfil certain processes. Providing an example and to bring light to what this process might be, Harris explains how he integrated his stammer in his characters:

> *"…I used to stammer when I'm under severe strain so I would add stammering to a character. As a caster for instance you have to kind of overcome the stuttering to actually cast spells, and that causes its own tension for instance." (Harris)*

Within this excerpt, Harris highlights how he once had a stammer and how he portrays this within a character of his. Harris developed a considerable difficulty for his character as they require their voice to perform major tasks, such as cast spells, this implies that Harris does not play these games in order to 'win'. Additionally, It seems that portraying his character in this way could be a pathway to acceptance for Harris by recognising his own stammer through a character that is a powerful wizard despite this difficulty. Harris explores other ways in which he develops characters with distinct difficulties to create a bond with them:

> *"I have difficulty with pretty characters, so… um… none of my characters would be beautiful, they might be charismatic but I will always disfigure them in some way. Um… explain a scar, or they're blind, or you know, they… they... they… hide their features, even though they are beautiful they hide it behind a mask and they don't take off the mask." (Harris)*

Here Harris describes his characters as charismatic and beautiful, yet disfigured. It is interesting that Harris states that he "*will always disfigure them in some way"*, which suggests that he is punishing these characters,

potentially as a way of reflecting his own difficulties, projecting them onto the conscious layers of his characters. This could be a way for Harris to place the aspects of himself that he is less conscious of onto the visible aspects of his characters. This could be a reflection of splitting (Feldman, 2014), where Harris has separated these difficulties from the beauty he speaks of on the inside. This could also be interpreted by his later statement that "*even though they are beautiful",* implying that there is more to his characters beneath the surface, which is difficult to reach as "*they don't take off the mask"*. It could be that he is trying to work through these difficult aspects of himself by integrating this split, making these difficulties more explicit rather than implicit. Harris further emphasises how he hides the *"beautiful"* aspects of his characters behind the mask that is presented while he begins to discover these insights through our interview:

> *"…but the mask is the character not what is shown, what… or what is underneath, it is the blank that is the character [pause], and I'm not certain what that says, but now I've noticed it I'll think about it [laugh]." (Harris)*
>
> *"Um, so that's interesting actually now that… wow… this is almost therapy [laugh], um… it's the same kind of insight." (Harris)*

Harris is using our interview as an opportunity to reflect on the significance of his RPG experiences and the extent to which they are a form of 'working through'. It seems that it was important for Harris to make this connection as he seemed unaware that he was using his characters in this way. Harris appears to use his characters as a way to work through his present and past difficulties and if they do not serve this purpose he risks losing a connection with them.

Reflections from Theme: I have reflected on many of my own characters' backstories and identified aspects of myself and my own past within these as hidden meanings. An example of this being a bard I created who had been kicked out of a band as part of their backstory, representing my own feelings of exclusion at a young age. During my playthrough with this character I benefitted from the acceptance this character received from the other players' characters, potentially as a symbolic representation of acceptance for myself.

Superordinate Theme: When Players Come Together – Sub-Theme: 'Playing In Person Helps with Immersion'

Social interaction is vital for people's well-being, providing short term and long term benefits (Umberson & Montez, 2010). The Covid-19 pandemic introduced 'social distancing' in our lives, protective measures that have nonetheless had a negative effect on people's wellbeing. This has been well-documented in news articles (Clarkson, 2020; McMullam, Phillip, Hulley-Jones, & Blight, 2020) as well as research (Marronquin, Vine, & Morgan, 2020). For many of the participants, the physical space that hosts RPGs is important and it seems that the pandemic presented problems as social distancing restrictions moved the games from a physical space to online. Harris alludes to this in this extract:

> *"I mean I've been in IT [information technology] all my life and I'm honestly struggling running games online, as a GM, even as a player I actually struggle and I'm not certain why that is."* (Harris)

Harris puts forward his profession to signal his familiarity with digital technology as he shares his struggle in making a transition to playing online. Harris goes on to further explain the struggle:

> *"Um, but I struggle online, because I want to use the Roll20, I want to use all those things but I don't have enough time to really do it as best as I can, therefore I don't do it."* (Harris)

> *"Now that I have the [3d] printer I'm expanding into creating more scenery, modular stuff that I can build for them, that's more out of a "Wow that is cool, that is interesting, let's do that"…"* (Harris)

It seems that for Harris here, the idea of showing something physical and in person presents the *"wow"* factor that he spoke about. This could be

recreated using online means such as creating maps for Roll20. However, Harris' expression of creativity appears to be part of what makes the hobby appealing to him, where he is able to create physical objects through his 3d printer, paint them and display them to his group to facilitate immersion.

Dominic spoke about his disappointment at not being able to show a miniature of a dragon due to having to move online:

> *"It was a bit unfortunate though that because we had just come up to a particular part of the story the other day where my players were fighting their first dragon, and I wanted it to be meaningful and impactful, and really build the ambiance. I bought this model, I actually went out and bought the young green dragon model, as the one actual model I bought as an official place it on the board and bang there you are, there's your green dragon. However, unfortunately COVID stopped that so I had it on the webcam bringing up this model because I can't do anything else with it [laugh]."* (Dominic)

Dominic describes in detail how he had envisaged his scene taking place and his frustration at this being stopped due to lockdown restrictions. The way in which Dominic explained that he wanted the experience to be *"meaningful and impactful"* highlights how he was hurt from having this experience taken away. Dominic emphasises the green dragon as a physical model here by using the word *"actual"* twice, it seems that he wanted to see his players' reactions in person when he presented this, to potentially add to the immersion of the scene. Dominic further describes how the pandemic has restricted his ability to develop immersion through acting:

> *"…I think one of the problems I have with the whole COVID situation is in person I think I'm a lot more full on with my acting and… my like… the way I am from being the NPC characters and creatures, especially creatures, in person whereas obviously now we are being behind screens and in little window boxes I haven't really moved so much to act, like the things I'm trying to embody and also like because I have to be aware of other people in the house that I live with I'm trying to be quieter…"* (Dominic)

This extract demonstrates how Dominic embodies the characters and creatures that he plays by acting out their characteristics. It is important to note that nothing is stopping Dominic from moving and acting behind the screen, it could be that it is important for Dominic to be seen, to capture the ambiance he mentioned before and facilitate immersion for himself and his players. It seems that the restrictions brought about by the pandemic have taken away some of this immersion that is important to Dominic. Here Dominic talks about his hopes for returning face-to-face:

> *"…we are hoping that when lockdown finishes that we can then go back to playing as a group in person, because the DM for this game was actually my very first DM where I played, he was the one who introduced me to the group."* (Dominic)

It seems important for Dominic to recapture the experience of when he first began playing with the person who introduced him to the game, and for Dominic, the only way to do this is to return to face-to-face.

Jane talks about how she uses the tools available to play online during the pandemic:

> *"…we can do role plays over the internet, you know, so we can have people on video chat like this or… um… um… oh god what is, Roll20 and things like that, there are ways…"* (Jane)

Here Jane finds it difficult to recall the name of the online program that she uses. I was left with the feeling that this could have been because she is not as invested in playing online as she is face-to-face. It's almost as though the online mode is a second-best option which becomes viable only because there is no other. This is supported when Jane discusses how she enjoys the social aspects outside of the game, highlighting the bond she creates with her peers:

> *"…it's the similar thing of I get to meet up with whoever it is who is in my campaign and… you know… usually as well after a session or before a session they'll be just a social thing, you know, back before COVID, we'd maybe go to a pub or you know, they'd come round and… the session would start at 8 but they'd come round at 7 and we'd chat or whatever."* (Jane)

Jane talks about how her friendships with the players transcends the table-top experience. Also, she discusses the pandemic and how it took away many of the social interactions she had with her group. It seems then that COVID took away from the embodied experience that is made possible by face-to-face games. This highlights the importance of having an in person game.

Miles highlights how he has developed a bond with his group that is stronger when they are face-to-face:

> *"So it just gets deep, the more you, the more time you spend with a group the more, well as I say we play two, three times a week and*

> *you know when COVID is lifted enough so we can meet face-to-face again, we will always meet once a week, we'll always have a hot chocolate or a beer or whatever and play a game, and that social interaction is really important, we go to the [gaming café], and you walk in and all the staff know you, you know and people come over and shake your hand, and it's just, it's like coming home."* (Miles)

Here Miles describes how he is able to play more games in a week through online means and this will return to once a week when they can meet in person. It is apparent that Miles finds it preferable to have less game time if it means that they can meet in person and have the experience of being within his community at his gaming café. The use of *"coming home"* is a powerful statement. Home can be seen as a place of safety, containment and where family is. This could represent a 'secure base' (Bowlby, 1988) for Miles, where he is able to return to a place where he developed safe and secure attachments, which allowed him to express himself and explore his inner world through gaming with others (Goetz, 2017). By *"coming home"*, it seems that Miles is implying he has 'found his way home', possibly referring to the nostalgia, safety, and playfulness he had from playing these games as a child. This is evident from how Miles describes this environment here:

> *"Um yeah, so for me it's that comradeship was probably 50% you know and the rest really it's probably having an environment to feel, to feel comfortable in again, so the [gaming café] fills in the rest of the gap, just the building, the people."* (Miles)

As well as the gaming café, Miles highlights here the *"comradeship"* of playing RPGs. The relationships Miles has formed at this gaming café are important to him and seeing familiar people in person is valuable. Miles further explains why playing with others face-to-face is important to him:

"Um so again neurolinguistic programming is something that I'd learnt as it was really useful as a manager, well I find I use that when I'm playing D&D, and that helps me understand the people, I'm listening to what they're saying and obviously we've been playing over Roll20 and DnDBeyond and Discord, we use those three apps to play online so that we keep the games going, and also video camera, we use video cameras as well. But I find that when I was sat with someone I'm sat with a group in real life, you know I can tell by their body posture and the way they say things and the emphasis on words you know what their triggers are and what their real intent is, and I love that again, understanding the puppet master as well as the puppet is really intriguing, um, and it gives me a level of interest that keeps me engaged." (Miles)

Miles explains that he benefits from observing social cues when he plays and how this can only be achieved when he is "*sat with a group in real life".* The richness of communication seems to get lost, or at least diluted in online gaming sessions. It could be argued that similarly to therapy, communication is fundamentally important for developing any relationships, and the non-verbal components allow them to connect and to take root at a deeper level (Deepika, 2015). Also of note is how Miles discusses that he interprets body language in order to be one step ahead of the other players or the GM; it seems that Miles thoroughly enjoys this aspect of the game as he finds it intriguing and it keeps him engaged.

Phillip describes how the socialisation aspect of RPGs matters a great deal to him:

"…start somewhere between 7 and 8 o'clock, depending on when the official start time is, and they go on to about 11. And we have, you

know, if we're at someone's house we have crisps and coffee and drinks and all that stuff, you know beer, that doesn't happen quite so much as we are sitting by computers. But if we are doing an all-day game which will run from 11 o'clock in the morning to 11 o'clock at night, we might order pizza, and again sit there and have pizza, a little break in the game, so the socialisation is quite useful." (Phillip)

In this extract Phillip explains how snacks and drinks go hand-in-hand with gaming in his group and how this experiential aspect of their rituals has been taken away due to moving to online play. In addition, Phillip talks about how some of his games can span for twelve hours; it is apparent that most of this time is playing these games as he refers to the time they would have to eat pizza as "*a little break in the game"*. This length of game does not happen in their online games as the social aspects of being in person with snacks and drinks appear to add to the enjoyment and drive the group to play for extended periods of time. Phillip further emphasises how important the social aspects are to him alongside the game itself:

"…sort of what it does for me, and like I say, I think it's the socialisation. If there was a non-game thing, you know, I could be down the pub chatting, watching football with my mates, or I could be playing D&D, and they both have a purpose that's very similar… um… and the D&D… you know… has the whole exploration, adventure, role play, storytelling associated with it, which is why I do that, rather than getting drunk…" (Phillip)

Phillip here presents two options for himself, one which involves him spending time drinking at a pub with his friends, and the other playing D&D with his friends. Phillip concludes from these options that D&D is his preferred choice.

Ella spoke about how she struggled with playing online as she found it difficult to concentrate:

> *"…but with the kind of recent challenges I suppose… um… yeah I just felt deflated and just like I kind of wasted my time, and even sometimes I'd go off and do something else or I'd start playing on the Nintendo Switch, I'll just crack out Animal Crossing or something [laugh]…"* (Ella)

Ella alludes to the pandemic as *"recent challenges"* and described the difficulties she has experienced because of the restrictions that were in place. Ella highlights her disappointment at having to play online, how it felt like it is a waste of her time, often finding another activity to do while she is playing. It could also be that Ella's laugh at the end of this extract was used as a way to distract her from the *"deflated"* feelings she had bought up when discussing it here, further emphasising the sadness she experiences from not playing these games in person. Ella elaborates on her difficulties of online play further here:

> *"…I was twiddling my thumbs the entire time, and I was really struggling to concentrate, that was another example of a virtual game, and I find again with virtual games it's that much harder to concentrate, because I've got less stimulation, I don't have people's camera so I can't see people's faces, I'm only going off what people have said, technical difficulties mean that sometimes you can't hear people, and it… um… for me that is a lot less inclusive… um… and fun when those kind of things happen."* (Ella)

Here Ella talks about how she experienced less stimulation when playing online. I was left wondering if this has a snowball effect for Ella: the less

stimulation she received through being online, leads to her having less concentration, which then reduces the immersion in these games disrupting her enjoyment. Ella describes frustrations of playing online such as technical difficulties that take away from the social experience, resulting in Ella feeling left out, which is evident from her saying that the experience is "*a lot less inclusive"* when these difficulties occur.

Morgan has avoided online play entirely, alluding to the importance of being face-to-face for these sessions:

> *"…some people go into a role play wanting like a very serious kind of character drama, and say like there is one that's on hold because of the pandemic now, but people went in very much knowing that that's what it's going to be about…"* (Morgan)

Here, Morgan mentions that his game is on hold due to the social distancing restrictions. It is interesting that Morgan has not found an alternative way to play his games during the pandemic. It seems to be a very intimate experience for him and his players, one that he sees as not possible, or not worth trying to replicate in an online space.

Reflections from Theme: Playing in person is also important to me. Like many of the participants here, COVID-19 restrictions pushed my games online using Discord, Roll20 and DNDBeyond. I found it difficult to concentrate and keep track of what was happening as a player, and I found that I lacked motivation to plan as a GM. I particularly struggled without the social aspects of face-to-face play, where I was not able to connect with my friends before and after playing. I also noticed that a lot of the humour that would bounce around from player to player was lost playing online as the amusing set pieces and jokes would lose momentum without animated body language.

Superordinate Theme: When Players Come Together – Sub-Theme: 'When Things Fall Apart: The Significance and Perils of the Group'

This sub-theme was developed with the understanding that experiences of conflict can highlight what might be therapeutic when players come together through an examination of what goes wrong when these conflicts occur.

Jane describes how her first game was subject to absences which resulted in the game beginning to fall apart:

> *"…toward the end of the first one I ever… the first role play I ever did who was GMed by my then boyfriend, things started to fall apart a little bit… um… people were kind of dropping out or for whatever reason you know, we were all at university so sometimes it was for work related reasons, one person just dropped out of university entirely so… he never came back… um… and so it's started to kind of fall a little bit apart…"* (Jane)

This extract from Jane was from a question I asked about her worst experience playing these games. It is interesting that Jane's worst experience is of people dropping out of the games. It is clear that a group is needed to play these games and the idea of not having a group is a threat to the experience. Jane seems to experience the loss of players as powerful, which is evident from her use of language, using the words *"dropped"* and *"fall"* which indicate a great disappointment. I was left with a feeling that Jane experienced elements of abandonment around the long-term viability of the group, with a painful realisation that these experiences are limited. This statement was followed shortly afterwards by Jane sharing another experience of loss in her group, this time from the GM:

> *"…then there was another one, a couple of years ago where our GM just left and didn't tell anybody and just suddenly it was like "Oh okay I guess the story is over then?", um… we ended up continuing it on but with a different GM but we could never have known what would have happened if that GM had stayed on."* (Jane)

This particular loss appeared difficult for Jane as she emphasised how this happened suddenly and without warning. Experiences of loss in the game were impactful to Jane as later in the interview, when asked *"What makes for a good GM?"*, Jane answered with *"…just actually showing up to the sessions and not dropping off the face of the earth suddenly…"*. Coupled with Jane questioning if the story was now over, I was left with a feeling that there was considerable anger towards this GM for abandoning Jane. From this, Jane seems to be describing the basic assumption of dependency (Bion, 1961), where she could be seeking a group leader (the GM) to ease the anxiety she is experiencing of not being able to play the game and continue the story and bring consistency and certainty. If Jane's group did become dependent, the previous GM would have been seen as omnipotent and would not have been able to be replaced, therefore justifying the anger at this loss. Jane identified that she would not have been able to take the place of the GM, saying that this *"…happened before I started GMing so I couldn't then step up…".* It is possible that this added to the helplessness of the situation. Jane goes on to describe how there was an attempt to continue the campaign and later how this did not work:

> *"…it was a little bit stressful… um… you know, it's a cliché but, you know, those role plays at the time when they were good were a happy place for me anyway… um… maybe not for some of the other players who were having the arguments but you know, for me it was… it was*

almost like um… someone had come in and just taken away one of my fun things that I could do" (Jane)

Jane talked here about how the loss of the GM made her feel, emphasising the stress she experienced. Following this, Jane spoke about how these games represent a "*happy place"*. It could be inferred that being in these groups and playing these games reduce stress and anxiety based on the stress and anxiety she experienced when it is "*taken away".* The boundaries that the group created essentially acted as a container for her anxiety (AGPA, 2007). Jane spoke as though *"someone"* was taking the game away from her, and from the anger that had been expressed, it could be surmised that this was the GM she was referring to. It is important to note that this was the first mention of arguments in the interview, and sheds light into some of the potential conflicts that were being experienced and potentially the reason why the GM left. I was left wondering if these conflicts prompted a threat to the safety of the group (AGPA, 2007), triggering a rupture that could not be repaired, resulting in the GM leaving. On subsequent reflection there seems to be a link between attachment theory and Jane's experiences of abandonment with her players and GM. Jane expressed substantial loss within the games she played, particularly focusing on feelings of abandonment around the GM leaving. There also appeared to be a fear of abandonment based on the anxiety expressed around future GMs *"…not dropping off the face of the earth suddenly…"*. I am left wondering if Janes reaction to the loss and abandonment of these players and GM in the present, and fear for the future are based on loss and abandonment she experienced in childhood. Linking to attachment theory, Jane expressed earlier in the interview that she had been a victim of bullying at school and used literature to escape: *"…I went to kind of escape the stuff at school and*

like… um… just yeah, you know, bullying in school…". It could be that these experiences contributed to an 'insecure attachment style' that might then influence the attachments she makes as an adult (Koiv, 2012), resulting in the relationship loss in the games reinforcing the belief that others will abandon her.

Overall, for Jane the therapeutic qualities of the game were compromised by loss in the group. Although there were attempts to repair the group to return to "*a happy place"*, this was not possible due to the dependence on the GM, which subsequently resulted in the group disbanding. Clearly, this can have a damaging impact on players; for Jane it resulted in feelings of stress, anger and possibly anxiety.

Conflicts in groups can come a from a number of players. Phillip explains here how there was a conflict in his group involving two members:

> *"…so he [another player] tends to do that sort of where he moans until he gets his own way a bit, but this time… um… the DM and sort of the two other players went "Okay, we are fed up of your moaning, we are fed up of you not taking part in the game. You know, being so negative, sitting at the back not being interested", and there was someone else, one of his friends was kind of doing it a bit as well…"*
> (Phillip)

Phillip here describes how two of the players were disrupting the group through complaining and being disinterested. I picked up on Phillip's anger, particularly towards one of the people involved as the other person was only mentioned briefly. It appears this disruption had a lasting impact on Phillip as it posed a risk to the group and the game. While there are undoubtedly many interpersonal factors that weigh in how group conflict can play out, such as

personality clashes, it is clear that being uninterested and disengaged threatens one of the foundational pillars of RPGs: immersion. Thus, immersion requires commitment from all group members. Phillip continues to describe the conflict in the group and how it made him feel:

> *"…and [the other players] went "Alright, we're not going to play here anymore, we're just going to stop the game". So that was a bit annoying because, you know, I could… you know, they're all my friends, so what do you do? Um… so that was quite painful, and in the end, I ended up… um… the game… as I don't know if you've had an experience of games stopping before. Have you had any experience of a game stopping?"* (Phillip)

Phillip explains here how the group began to fracture, expressing his frustration at this happening. It appears that the pain Phillip is experiencing is due to the idea of the group being disbanded, and their behaviour posed a risk to this group and the game he was playing. It is important to note that when talking about stopping the game, Phillip says here *"I ended up"* before correcting himself, implying that he came to the decision to end the game. This was followed by Phillip looking for reassurance from me as he wanted to know whether I had experienced the pain of a game stopping. Phillip perhaps in seeking reassurance was trying to reduce his anxiety (Feldman, 1993) and confirm whether he made the right decision supporting the game being stopped. Phillip explains what often happens in his experience when players are removed from the group so that the game can continue:

> *"Now if you're the person kind of being dumped, what tends to happen is the game stops for a week and then restarts at a different location with a subset of the… party as a different game, even though*

> *actually they kind of just tacitly kick out a player. No one says "We're kicking you out", they stop the game and then they restart it."* (Phillip)

Here Phillip describes how the group survived by stopping the game and restarting without the disruptive player(s). When taking into account Bion's (1961) basic assumptions, fight-flight comes to mind as there was a need to preserve the group and the game. It seems that for Phillip's group there was an initial 'fight' response as the perceived disruptive players of the group were confronted, and in this passage Phillip highlights the 'flight' basic assumption as the group fled from the disruptive players to then restart, allowing the group to survive. Phillip reflects on the decision to remove these players and wrestles with the ethics of such an outcome:

> *"But that was a… you know… a horrible… just from the you know… when we were kind of kicking the people out of the game and you know… is that really pleasant and nice and fair?"* (Phillip)

The idea of removing people from the group was impactful for Phillip which is reflected in the pauses he made when speaking. Phillip questions whether this was fair, again seeking reassurance, hinting that this was potentially an anxiety provoking experience. I was left wondering whether Phillip's questioning in this instance was a fear that this might have occurred unknowingly for him, or the potential for this happening to him in the future. Phillip describes in these extracts his experiences of removing disruptive players from his groups. For this to happen Phillip explains that the game stops for everyone, following this the game then starts back again without the disruptive players. Thinking therapeutically, from Phillip's perspective the disruptive players posed a risk to the harmony of the group. Although it was difficult for Phillip to manage the confrontation, questioning whether it was

fair, and battling with guilt, Phillip describes how the harmony was restored in the group following this incident using an example of new players joining:

> *"And now we've had a couple of other people join now, and its good… there's a couple of old friends of mine who haven't played D&D for 10 years, so this game they were really interested in playing because they wanted to get into it again. So it's kind of… its worked out okay for me because I'm still playing D&D, I'm still playing with my mate."* (Phillip)

When playing RPGs group conflict can result from actions the players' characters take. Miles describes how one of his characters was disruptive to the other characters in the group:

> *"…every time we came to a new situation I would be like you know jump into it saying "Oh no I want to look at that one, I want to look at this one". And I just drove the party mad, until in the end they started blocking me, they wouldn't allow me to go into rooms, and I got so angry, in the real world about this, even though I knew why they were doing it, but I couldn't accept that."* (Miles)

Miles demonstrates here the incompatibility his character presented with the rest of the party. I was left wondering if the anger that was generated from Miles was a result of frustration at his character not being accepted by the party, which for Miles could have translated as the other players in the group not accepting him. This raises the question as to whether there are two forms of group dynamics at play: one where the players are together in a group, and the other where the characters are together as a group. It is evident that Miles is a valued member of his group based on how he describes his

interactions in other areas of the interview. It seems that Miles' character was not valued in the same way Miles is, both from the other players perspective as well as their characters'. It is interesting that Miles did not adapt his character to conform to the group and instead he embodied the vision that he had for this character. From this, Miles made the decision to remove his character from the game:

> *"After the game I called the DM up and said "James, I want to get rid of this character, I love him but I can't play him, because this group won't allow me to play him the way he needs to be played and I can't change him…"* (Miles)

Miles explains here how he communicated with the GM to reluctantly retire his character as he claims he cannot play them with the group. Miles confirms again how he is not able to adapt his character and instead would rather not play them. An alternative explanation for why Miles might have retired his character could have been to preserve the in-person group: It seems that Miles' character presented a problem to the group, having the potential to become a destructive process that could have threatened the safety and survival of the group. It also could have been that one of the reasons Miles retired this character was to resolve the conflicts that had arisen when he stated the other players *"started blocking me, they wouldn't allow me to go into rooms…"* and because Miles connected to the vision of that character, he did not want to change them. It is important to note that Miles has the insight to identify that his character was a problem to the other players and was able to remove him from the game before the destructive process of the group could happen. When asked how he removed his character from the game, Miles shared:

> *"So actually I kind of slipped away, I ended up going down a hole in a ship and actually just left, and decided that honestly this wasn't the group for me. And they came looking for me, I mean they spent two adventures looking for my character that I knew had left, but I didn't tell them that, so it got kind of weird, but a good weird."* (Miles)

Here Miles describes how his character separated from the group with the intention of disappearing, and the other characters spent two sessions looking for them. It is interesting how Miles uses *"I"* when he refers to his character here which could be reflective of the bond he felt towards them, further supporting the reason why he could not change their behaviour to work with the group. Another key observation is how there seems to be a level of excitement with the decision he made. Miles talked about how the rest of the party looked for his character and this could have brought about the realisation that his character was valued within the group, which is reflected in Miles speaking about how it was "*a good weird".*

Reflections from Theme: I have personally played in games with GMs that have held boundaries and the group; for me it is a vastly different experience from a GM that does not. My experiences with the latter left me feeling anxious as the lack of boundaries created an unsafe environment for both me and my character. I also felt distracted from the game, which disrupted the immersion for me. I have felt more connected to games where the GM holds something akin to the boundaries set out in therapy, i.e. safety, trust and consistency.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

The aim of this study was to gain insights into the therapeutic aspects of RPGs from the experiences of players. I recruited experienced players in order to get hold of a phenomenological, 'insider's view' on the topic rather than seek to objectively describe it. The analysis was conducted from my position as a trainee counselling psychologist looking to identify the therapeutic aspects of these games, which I have a personal connection to. RPG literature was not included in this process as I felt that the unique experiences of the participants might get lost within the combination of literature. This discussion will therefore bring together the insights identified from the analysis with the existing RPG literature, in relation to the two overarching themes that I explored in the thesis. Additionally, this discussion will examine implications that are raised from this research, as well as the strengths and limitations of the study.

Two superordinate themes were developed from the interpretive analysis, which provide an answer to the main research question that sparked this inquiry. The first superordinate theme, 'Symbolic Play', highlighted symbolic and metaphorical processes, a kind of simulation that takes place within the boundaries of these seemingly boundless worlds, that amounts to something therapeutic for their inhabitants. This superordinate theme was composed of two sub-themes: 'Expression Through Play' and 'Symbolically Working Through Difficulties'. The second superordinate theme, 'When Players Come Together', highlighted the unique collaborative experiences these games provide when players meet, exploring how immersion is developed by coming together, and how this is disrupted through conflict. Within this

superordinate theme were two sub-themes: ‘Playing In Person Helps with Immersion’ and 'When Things Fall Apart: The Significance and Perils of the Group'. These superordinate themes along with sub-themes will be further discussed.

Symbolic Play

This section will discuss the findings of the superordinate theme: ‘Symbolic Play’, in relation to RPG literature. The key findings in the superordinate theme titled ‘Symbolic Play’ highlights how RPGs allowed the participants to utilise these games to represent aspects of themselves that they found difficult to express in their everyday lives. In the sub-theme ‘Expression Through Play’, I followed the experiences of four of the participants: Ella, Morgan, Jane, and Phillip. From the RPG literature, Sarah Lynne Bowman’s (2010) insights on expression through play are most relevant. Bowman’s typologies (ibid.) highlight different ways in which players can express aspects of themselves through playing RPGs. From the nine typologies identified by Bowman, four can be detected in participants’ descriptions. Ella’s first character “Princess Sunshine” evokes ‘The Idealized Self’, as she highlighted how she wanted to hold power in magic and be a princess; this was discussed alongside the developmental stages which are congruent with children of that age wanting to role play as a superhero (Davis & Johns, 2020). Ella discussed how she developed the way she plays to experiment with pacifism, this speaks to ‘The Augmented Self’ as these were values and beliefs that she holds, and having the power of a character allowed her to utilise them in scenarios where violence would often be used in these games. The final extract from Ella’s experiences showed how she played a character that she described as being very different from herself, explaining that this

character was offensive and disturbing, claiming that it was enjoyable to embody someone that she does not like. This is akin to Bowman's 'The Oppositional Self' which is described as an outlet to display attributes that are in opposition to how the person presents in their normal life. The 'Oppositional Self' was also evident in Jane and Phillip's experiences. Jane explained how she developed her "evil character" to be the opposite of herself, going against the stereotype given to her by others, and using this character as an outlet for her frustrations. Phillip's experience was based around playing a character that was "self-centred", bringing into focus a type of cathartic enjoyment at expressing unfavourable traits and personality attributes that cannot find expression in his everyday life. The extracts that represent the oppositional self also resemble 'alibi' (Montola and Holopainen, 2012), as their seemed to be an emphasis on the actions in their games being represented by the characters and not the players. As the characters were separate from the players it allowed for a psychological distance and safety, enabling the release of frustrations and cathartic expression. Importantly, the therapeutic aspects that can be concluded from the 'Expression Through Play' sub-theme follow Bowman's conclusions on the typologies. Bowman explains that the more players express and experiment with different aspects of themselves, the more they can learn about themselves and these characters' strengths, which can then become a part of them (Bowman, 2010).

Also encompassing the 'Symbolic Play' superordinate theme is the 'Working Through Difficulties' sub-theme, following the experiences of Adrian, Ella, and Harris. This sub-theme explored how the participants process and navigate internal conflict and difficulties by symbolically working through these as their character or as a GM. From the RPG literature, Blackmon's

(1994) case study is relevant to this sub-theme. Blackmon outlined how his client was able to work through feelings of aggression which resulted in a 'murderous rage' in the game; this Blackmon argues was facilitated by a safe environment and the ability to distance his character from himself. The mechanisms at play appear to hold resemblance for the participants within this sub-theme. It is important to note that Blackmon referenced how his client was able to recognise that his actions in the game were symbolic of his difficulties, claiming that these games provide a means to allow the players to become more aware of what is unconscious (Blackmon, 1994). In the same way, the participants in this sub-theme were able to identify and bring experiences that were symbolic of their internal conflicts. Sargent (2014) identified the theme 'Role Experimentation' in their research, which closely links to the sub-theme in this study. Sargent described how many childhood traumas and life stressors were worked through, and resolutions were found for those experiences by playing these games. It is unfortunate that Sargent did not elaborate on these themes in their study, and the example they used to portray the resolution of internal conflict did not describe this well. Nevertheless, the experiences bought by the participants in this research build on Sargent's study, providing in depth accounts of players working through their difficulties. Returning to Bowman's (2010) typologies, Harris' experience fits with 'The Devoid Self' which is described as the creation of a character that is put at a disadvantage, often with a disability which the player does not have, explaining how his characters often have scars or are disfigured in some way. It is interesting that Harris outlines that his characters must have a disability, and if they do not, then he cannot connect with them. Harris also highlighted a character he created that had a stammer in the same way that he did and used this as a setback that needed to be overcome in order to cast spells. This fits more neatly with Bowman's 'The

Doppelganger Self' which is described as a character that mirrors the player. It seems that for Harris, the idea of portraying these characters was not necessarily to use these disadvantages as an interesting story point to immerse himself as Bowman describes, but instead offered a way for him to symbolically work through the difficulties he faces, whether explicitly in the case of his stammer, or implicit with the characters he created that were disfigured. Ella's experiences of learning from her character shares similarities with one of the participants in Bowman's (2010) study, who claimed that they could learn from their character as they could externalise a part of themselves through expressing one of the typologies set out by Bowman. However, where Ella's story differs from Bowman's examples are the way in which she symbolically integrated her own difficulties into her characters backstory. It seems that Ella's role playing experience was able to achieve a level of immersion that allowed empathy for her character (Bowman, 2018), which then allowed her to empathise with herself.

Adrian's experiences of being a GM, guiding his players through his grief for his girlfriend was seen as a way of him developing an understanding, and being able to communicate this to his players. It is apparent that for Adrian, this could only have been achieved through being a GM, as the world building was a fictional world that had elements of real pain, with the story originating from him, then interacted with by the players. Another interesting perspective that can be related to this sub-theme is Fine's (1983 / 2002) 'Frame Theory'. Fine outlines how the players in a RPG switch through frames during a game, these frames being: the character, the game mechanics, and the player. This sub-theme illustrates that the participants project the aspects that are known and sometimes unknown to them from the player frame and symbolically represent them in the character frame. This is akin to 'bleed-in' as described

by Bowman (2015), as emotions are projected into the character from the player. This is also reminiscent of ‘ego bleed’ (Beltrán, 2012). Taking Adrian as an example, the unresolved grief of Adrian’s girlfriend had become a part of who he is, and through portraying this within the game he was able to begin to tolerate this loss within himself, becoming a profoundly transformational process.

A Relationship with Oneself

It is my intention that this section will discuss the superordinate theme: ‘Symbolic Play’, further bringing together an understanding as to what the findings mean from a therapeutic perspective. The experiences of symbolic play that were expressed by the participants allowed for these players to understand themselves through experimenting with desires, fears, and fantasies, or traversing their difficulties by projecting them onto their characters and the world they have created. These aspects are translated into stories or narratives that are shared among the other players, so that grief and distress can be shared, and difficulties, values, and beliefs can be validated. For these participants, symbolically representing obscured aspects of themselves through RPGs provides an outlet for sense making, which might not be able to be expressed elsewhere. It is clear that through experimentation with roles, players can test how far they can push values and beliefs within a safe and boundaried environment. The elements of the group will be further discussed later, yet the players within the party produce an environment where the players form trust, which then builds confidence to explore their internal world through symbolic means. Expressing and exposing these narratives to others (i.e. an emotionally invested, active audience) is an important part of this process and akin to ‘witnessing’ from

narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990; Freedman, 2014). The players are, in some sense, telling their personal story through their characters and the other players are interacting with that story through their own characters, providing an intersubjective richness (Layton, 2008; Kuchuk, 2020) and a communal retelling of this story, allowing the players to become witnesses to, and active participants in wondrous, fictional, and often unpredictable journeys. This echoes Edgar Levenson's observations on therapy process (1972, as cited in Layton, 2008; p.5), who argues that it is not the traditional ideas of psychoanalytic psychotherapy (such as interpretation, transference and counter-transference) that make it work. Instead it is to be mutually stuck and immersed in the difficulties that are being experienced and expressed, with the healing coming from having to navigate a way out together. Thus, in a similar vein, the intersubjective space in RPGs might be fostering a process whereby the players are navigating their way to an understanding of their own experiences, ultimately developing a more congruent relationship with their 'self'. As such, the fictional partially serves the function of further making sense of lived experience.

The relationship between the player and their character was widely discussed by the participants and I got a sense that if the bond between the player and the character is strong, the embodiment of this relationship provides a sharing of emotions allowing for a cathartic release. This bond is important, and I noticed that the players were thankful of their characters contributions to their understanding of distress, overcoming difficulties together, sharing emotions, and learning from one another. This was portrayed as though they were a different person, and not an aspect of themselves. Keeping their characters separate, at arm's length so to speak (Hand, 2021), creates a buffer to the outside world (Blackmon, 1994),

providing emotional distance (Connell, Kilmer, & Kilmer, 2020), which allows for the phenomenon of 'bleed' (Bowman, 2015) and 'ego bleed' (Beltrán, 2012) to take place. The players are able to 'bridge in' (Pearson, Smail, & Watts, 2013) through immersion to symbolically project their unconscious desires, fears, taboos, fantasies as well as their difficult experiences onto these characters, which then allows them to become integrated into their psyche, a process akin to the integration of the shadow (Jung, 1990). Therefore the roleplaying game process allows for the players to understand, master, and exercise agency over their experiences and distress. Furthermore, the insights gained through the relationship with themselves aide in the evaluation of relationships with others, as their desires, fears and fantasies can become known to them, providing them the power and autonomy to potentially change how these are expressed, as opposed to being bindingly determined by them. In short, the roleplaying game process can be described as an avenue of exploration of one's relationship with the 'self'.

When Players Come Together

This section will discuss the findings of the superordinate theme: 'When Players Come Together', in relation to RPG literature. This superordinate theme explored the social aspects of RPGs and highlighted the therapeutic qualities associated with playing in a group. The first of the sub-themes I presented was 'Playing In Person Helps with Immersion', which followed the experiences of Harris, Dominic, Jane, Miles, Phillip, Ella, and Morgan. It is evident that the experiences that formed the bedrock of this theme arose in the context of the social distancing restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants in this study were used to and highly valued

playing in person. The pandemic presented them with a binary choice: find remote alternatives or not play at all. In this sub-theme, I highlight the difficulties these participants experienced, as at the time of the interviews they were no longer playing face-to-face. The findings from this theme support the conclusions from Scriven's (2021) study, particularly around his theme encompassing 'Negative Experiences'. Ella's experiences of not being able to concentrate when playing online echo Scriven's findings, which showed transitioning to remote play contributed to players becoming distracted and having difficulties concentrating. It is clear that if one is distracted then immersion suffers, which inhibits both the enjoyment of the game and the therapeutic aspects outlined in 'Symbolic Play' from taking place. Dominic's experiences of finding role-playing difficult while playing online were also discussed in Scriven's study, highlighting how the role-playing aspects were undermined by a rupture in intimacy that playing online brings. Jane, Miles, and Phillip talked about the importance of the social interaction elements of RPGs. These were community aspects that transcend the table-top experience, whether this be meeting at the pub as Jane discussed, a gaming café from Miles' experiences, or just sharing food and drinks in a communal way as described by Phillip. Details highlighting the importance of socialisation were discussed in Scriven's study. Surprisingly, for Scriven's participants, this was not a prevalent issue, yet in this study it was something that appeared to be a substantial factor that was at the forefront of the participants' experiences when making the transition to online play; it also appeared to be a strong contributing factor for why they played RPGs. This socialisation was also discussed by Bowman (2013), where the activities that surround the games are important for the development of trust within the group. As RPGs rely on a shared imagination, trust is important for facilitating immersion (Bowman, 2018), which in turn

allows the players to feel comfortable and safe within imaginary worlds, enabling and setting in motion the benefits seen in 'Symbolic Play'. Harris spoke about the material objects associated with the games, how 3d printing set pieces are important to him, and how these could not be replicated online. Interestingly (and not mentioned in the analysis) Miles also uses a 3d printer to create terrain and miniatures for face-to-face play, and Dominic also described how one of his players would print miniatures and Dominic would paint them. The loss of tangible objects was raised by Scriven (2021), as players develop considerable investments into crafting terrain and painting miniatures. This echoes Rogerson, Gibbs and Smith's (2016) study around the materiality of boardgames, which highlighted the importance of having physical components. Digitising artifacts of the game that carry symbolic power (such as the infamous multisided dice) takes away from the experience and satisfaction of playing a game face-to-face with others with tangible objects. It is important to note that although the players in this study found it difficult to transition to playing RPGs online, they all did, other than Morgan and Harris. From this it can be concluded that playing online is more favourable than not playing at all.

The sub-theme 'When Things Fall Apart: The Significance and Perils of the Group', was also within the superordinate theme 'When Players Come Together'. The experiences outlined in this sub-theme drew from rich and interesting data. Admittedly, I would have liked to have probed deeper into this area if I was given the opportunity to redesign the study from the beginning, as I found my participants' accounts particularly fascinating. 'When Things Fall Apart: The Significance and Perils of the Group' followed the experiences of Jane, Phillip, and Miles, and highlighted some difficulties within the roleplaying groups which caused conflict. These encounters took

away from the enjoyable experience of playing, and highlight what therapeutic aspects are threatened in the face of conflict, and how. The experiences highlighted by the participants were in line with many of the accounts described by players in the 'RPG Horror Stories' subreddit (Reddit, 2016), showing that conflicts are a common occurrence in these games. From the RPG literature, Fine's (1983 / 2002) 'Frame Theory', and Bowman's (2013) research on social conflict are relevant to this sub-theme. Both Jane and Phillip's experiences share similarities with the theme 'Schisms' in Bowman's (2013) findings. Jane's experience of loss following conflict was highlighted, with attempts to repair without success. Bowman describes how loss in the group followed by the need to seek new players can cause unresolved conflict in these games, where new players can find it difficult to integrate due to the group history. This could be why Jane's initial group had difficulty maintaining play. Jane also outlined her experience of a GM leaving, which left her feeling abandoned and frustrated as there was no one to replace them, despite trying. Bowman highlights how it is often the perception of players that the GM is the adjudicator of social problems, and Jane alluded to conflicts the GM was trying to resolve prior to them leaving. Without this moderator for the game and the group Jane explained how it felt like the game had been taken away from her. Phillip described how there was a conflict that occurred between two players and the GM in the game. The idea of removing disruptive players from the group was discussed by Bowman. However, within this incident Phillip explained how the group was disbanded, then reformed without the disruptive players, this demonstrates how there was a rupture in the group which was repaired by removing these players. In the context of Fine's (1983 / 2002) 'Frame Theory', the experiences that were discussed from Jane and Phillip all seem to take place through the players frame, with the conflicts taking place outside of the game itself. For Jane

these were events that contributed to players leaving, and for Phillip this was due to distracted and disruptive players. From these experiences, if these conflicts in the player frame cannot be resolved, it is difficult for the character frame to continue without some form of resolution. The experience brought by Miles highlighted how his character disrupted the group, illustrating how this conflict took place in the character frame. For Miles there was the potential for this conflict to spill into the player frame. However, Miles was able to prevent this from happening by removing his character from the game. The experience presented by Miles was also a factor for social conflict outlined by Bowman (2013). Miles expressed how his character was particularly disruptive to the point that the other characters needed to intervene. For Miles then, this character could have enabled him to take pleasure in what Bowman called the 'Spotlight Moments', where Miles was the centre of attention, whether this be good or bad. This appeared to have taken away the enjoyment from the other players at the table, as Miles was seeking greater agency. Additionally, the idea that Miles could not change the way he played appears to be because he became immersed in the character (Bowman, 2018). Bowman (2018) describes how players can develop a level of catharsis when they are immersed in their characters, and the group prevented Miles from experiencing this through blocking his actions. Additionally, this level of immersion appears to be prompting negative 'Bleed' (Bowman, 2015) for Miles, as his character's motivation seemed to be inflexible, potentially driving a part of Miles' internal world.

A Relationship with Others

Similar to the section 'A Relationship with Oneself', this section will bring together a further therapeutic understanding of the superordinate theme:

‘When Players Come Together’, based on my perspective as a trainee counselling psychologist and an RPG player. The experiences within this superordinate theme captured how the participants relate with one another, representing unique insights into the powerful interactions that take place when these players come together, and the dynamics that can make or break a group. I felt it was important to capture the disappointment, pain, and anxieties the participants presented when important relational aspects of these games were taken away, such as the loss of in person playing brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, and group conflicts that rupture the playing experience. The reason these experiences are important from a therapeutic perspective is that the negative feelings expressed show what had been lost from when the groups were together in person. Also, the experiences provide insights into conflicts that hold the potential to form stronger bonds between the players through rupture and repair. A rupture followed by repair is important in psychotherapy as it provides an opportunity to deepen the therapeutic relationship by clarifying disagreements, renegotiating, and exploring the circumstances that created the rupture (Muran, Eubanks, & Samstag, 2021). This can then allow the client in therapy to tolerate conflict, and provide an understanding that we live in an imperfect world (Winnicott, 1988).

Within both of the sub-themes, the idea of immersion breaking experiences was a key issue. Immersion facilitates the process of expression through the phenomena ‘bleed’ (Bowman, 2015), ‘ego bleed’ (Beltrán, 2012), and ‘alibi’ (Montola and Holopainen, 2012), and the therapeutic benefits from this can be seen in ‘Symbolic Play’. Trust was seen as an important component of the group as this contributed to safety and containment, and I got a sense that the connection within the groups was considerably strong, akin to a

family based on the intimacy described in their experiences. The groups meeting together allow for rituals that transcend the table-top experience, and these outside factors help develop trust (Bowman, 2013), but they also contribute to a ‘secure base’ with ‘secure attachments’ (Bowlby, 1988). This is important as having a safe place where these players can meet with trusting relationships can allow for their inner world to be explored (Goetz, 2017). This is seen in therapy where a secure base is a crucial part of the process, allowing the client to feel safe within the boundaries of the therapeutic frame, facilitating an exploration of their internal world, and the working through of difficulties (Gray, 2014). Encapsulated within this is the idea of the GM holding the group together. The GM is seen as the mediator for social problems (Bowman, 2013), and the experiences outlined in this study show that if a player leaves the group, there can be a sense of loss felt, yet the game can continue. However, if the GM leaves, it is difficult to continue, particularly within the narrative threads that have already been formed. There is therefore a ‘dependency’ (Bion, 1961) on the GM, as they hold boundaries and contain the group, essentially relieving the group anxiety. Additionally, without the GM the players would not be able to benefit from the process of ‘witnessing’ (Freedman, 2014), as the narrative of the players, or their symbolic story would have no foundation to work from, as the players’ narratives are built around the GM’s.

There seemed to be other therapeutic phenomena taking place within the group that this study begins to articulate. The intimacy of being together in person allowed for a “wow factor”, where an expression of creativity could take place, particularly when presenting crafted set pieces, or painted miniatures, again creating a level of immersion for the players. These material objects are important for the participants which was highlighted by

their loss due to the social distancing restrictions. These material objects can hold therapeutic value. The idea of the ‘transitional object’ (Winnicott, 2005) is very relevant, as players are able to express their own desires, fears and fantasies through miniatures and within the scenery that has been crafted. These objects represent an intermediary between the players internal world (characterised by symbolic meaning), and their external world (where they are playing a game with others) (Hill, 2002). The miniaturisation in physical form of this symbolic internal world allows for the threatening and frightening parts to be mastered and understood as they can assert power over what they can see, create, and destroy (Mitchell, 2014). It seems that for the participants, being able to do this as part of a group is important, potentially as a way to collaborate in working through their difficulties together. Also, these objects evoke childhood and invite play. They provide a platform for these heroes, villains, and creatures to come alive and interact spontaneously, it cannot be denied that there is something quite magical and enchanting about this.

Additionally, the idea of being seen is important in these games and mirroring plays a considerable part in this. Mirroring is important as it allows a person to understand the self through seeing it reflected in others (Weinberg & Toder, 2004). Arguably, mirroring is inhibited in online interactions, which are stripped of many bodily cues and spontaneous intersubjective reactions. Mirroring is an important skill that is learnt as a therapist as it validates a clients experience (Blum, 2015), builds rapport (Iacoboni, 2008), and allows the client to understand their self by seeing themselves reflected in the therapist (Weinberg & Toder, 2004). Within RPGs there is a group of players, this creates a ‘hall of mirrors’ (Foulkes, 1964) where the players are reflecting each other, while also seeing themselves through their reflection in the other

players. These multiple mirrors allow for different perspectives to be mirrored back, which in turn might provide a greater understanding of oneself. This is especially important as these are meaningful relationships, developing within a 'like-minded' community of gamers that understands them, and which is built on a foundation of trust, in other words a secure base.

Finally, the players project aspects of their 'self' that they are not aware of onto their characters. Through the group coming together and reflecting on their characters journey, feats, accomplishments, and mistakes, these archetypes that have been embodied by the players can become known to them as a collective process, akin to a form of group individuation (Bowman, 2017).

Reflections from the Findings

As emphasised in the methodology, I play RPGs and have done for some time. These games are a large part of my life and are important to me. I have personally identified ways in which I have been able to symbolically represent my own internal world, through being a player and a GM in my games, which prompted me to conduct this research. I therefore have a strong insider position and had some expectations regarding what I might find that I attempted to bracket during the course of this research. It was of no surprise to me that the participants expressed that they were able to experiment with roles and work through their difficulties. Prior to starting the process of interviewing I had built my knowledge on the literature, spoken to my fellow players and had been an active member of RPG forums where discussions of this nature had taken place. What did come as a surprise was the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on the participants. I had struggled with moving

to online play, missing the intimacy of face-to-face play. However, at the time of the interviews I was unaware that it was such a widespread concern, as I began the interview process just after the social distancing restrictions were put in place.

I anticipated more data on the participants' perspectives on power as a GM and player. My own experiences of power in these games, particularly as a GM hold importance. I enjoy the feeling of power over the world I have created, knowing what might happen next, and slowly revealing this to the players. Additionally, as a player I have been a part of games where the GM has used the power they have over the world to punish the players. An example of this was during a game I played, a GM killed the whole party, only to bring us back to life by a celestial figure. I felt that this was scripted to happen, taking power and agency away from myself and the players. For the GM however, this could have been cathartic. Nevertheless, although questions surrounding power were a part of the interview schedule, I did not manage to pursue a more detailed exploration of its place within the research topic. I believe this is one of the wonders of qualitative research, which does not always proceed linearly or according to a predetermined plan. Ultimately, my analytic strategy was informed by the main research question, whose pursuit provided some answers but also exposed even more questions.

Evaluation of this Research Project

This study has provided some rich experiences of RPG players as it explored the therapeutic aspects of these games. The gamers that were interviewed for this study were passionate about these games and this was reflected in the length of the interviews (between forty-five and ninety minutes). Most of

the interviews were closer to the ninety minutes, as the participants had a lot to say on the subject. The analysis was presented in a case by case design; this was intended to allow each participant's voice to be heard and for the reader to understand and become familiar with each participant, while also providing an audit trail of the analysis. The depth of the present analysis was achieved through several readings of the transcripts and multiple attempts at thematic clustering, as well as regular discussions with my supervisor.

This is the first IPA study to capture the experiences of RPG players inquiring specifically into the therapeutic aspects of these games. As the research question was a phenomenological question, a phenomenological approach was needed. The use of phenomenology and interpretation to examine a subjective view of RPG players is championed by Bowman and Lieberoth (2018), who explain that they "… allow players to express themselves, make sense of their experiences, reflect upon the relationships between themselves and their characters, validate the significance of specific moments, and share with others" (p. 252). Bowman and Lieberoth (ibid.) also draw attention to 'secondary revision' (Freud, 1997). Secondary revision is a Freudian concept where the meaning of the dream is repressed in order for conscious thought to provide a narrative. Similar to how one describes a dream, Bowman and Lieberoth argue that players also repress certain aspects of their experience, such as psychological meaning behind gameplay. The way that IPA is beneficial in this instance is that it captures the phenomenological experience of the players and allows for the psychological meaning to be interpreted by myself. This pairs with my own values of prizing subjective experience, a hallmark of counselling psychology scholarship (BPS, Division of Counselling Psychology, 2006; Rizq, 2010; Strawbridge, 2016). My role as a trainee counselling psychologist practicing

in the National Health Service allows me to view and work with psychological distress by exploring the meaning behind the lived experiences of the people in the service. I believe that my position as an interpretive researcher who has a strong insider status constitutes a considerable strength of this research.

It is equally important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Firstly, due to the social distancing restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic the interviews took place online. Although this allowed participants to be recruited and interviewed from around the UK, the virtual interviews are subject to some of the same concerns which were highlighted in the sub-theme 'Playing in Person Helps with Immersion''. Perhaps face-to-face interviews would have enabled a greater investment in the interview from the participants, less distractions and the capacity for developing a deeper level of rapport, factors which would have likely enriched the intersubjective space and yielded richer data. Additionally, holding the sessions remotely meant that the transcriptions were missing many non-verbal components that could have furthered the interpretation process of the analysis. Interestingly, a plethora of research and literature has been published addressing the concerns of virtual interviews, whether this be due to excluding people that are not comfortable or familiar with technology (Irani, 2018), or privacy issues based on participants' homes being visible behind them (Kessa, Pavlakis, & Richards, 2021). However, Braun and Clarke (2013) argue that virtual interviews should not be regarded as inferior alternatives to face-to-face interviews, discussing how they can provide a safer space for participants to disclose information, as being in their homes behind a screen can allow for greater anonymity, as well as allowing for a more diverse group of

participants to be interviewed as the virtual platforms are more accessible for people with physical disabilities and mobility difficulties.

A significant limitation of the study lies in the singular modality through which data was collected: individual interviews. One to one interviews are one of three ways data could have been collected, the other viable options being: focus groups and observations. Focus groups allow for data to be collected from a group of participants, in the case of RPGs this could be the party of players. These groups can be beneficial for capturing conversations between the players, allowing ideas to build (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Observations are another way of capturing data in relation to the research question. Observations hold benefits: they would capture raw experiences from the games, allow for the five senses to be captured, and they allow for a 'observer-as-participant' role, meaning that I would play the RPG games with the group, becoming immersed in the research and allowing for a greater insider perspective (Baker, 2006). I believe that by implementing observations as well as bringing a party together as a focus group could provide first hand encounters where group dynamics could be explored from different perspectives. This method of data collection was carried out by Fine (1983 / 2002) and Bowman (2010) who both demonstrated that they could obtain rich and engaging experiences from players. Interestingly, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012) claim that IPA can incorporate observational methods, citing an example from Larkin and Griffiths (2002) where their IPA analysis was based on observations and notes from an addiction recovery centre. However, this example was not using an observer-as-participant role. Although, participant observation in this project would have provided considerable data that would have been interesting to both analyse, ultimately I felt that it could have drowned out the voices from the interviews

due to how I wanted to present this project. Additionally, my intention was to capture the participants accounts of their own experiences and I felt that this was best achieved with the semi structured interviews. Furthermore, observations would have caused considerable delays as the data collection was gathered during the pandemic and social distancing restrictions would have prevented face to face observation. Despite this, I would like to look into this combination of data collection in the future, potentially integrating elements of an observer-as-participant role. However, if I was to use IPA with this future study this could bring complications within interpretation based on the double hermeneutic process as discussed in my reflexive statements in the methodology.

Other limitations of the study pertain to the sense-making resources that I have brought to bear upon the data. As a trainee counselling psychologist predominantly working with adult individuals, I have limited access to the skills and knowledge-base of play therapy and group therapy. It is blatantly obvious that there is much to be said about group dynamics, and a deeper engagement with the psychology of groups would have yielded a richer and more granular description of group process. Interestingly, Joe Lasley's (2020) PhD thesis examining gaming groups in Dungeons and Dragons is an example of group dynamics in this area. Similarly to Bowman (2010) and Fine (1983 / 2002), Lasley also used observation alongside semi-structured interviews with Thematic Analysis to develop themes pointing towards RPGs being a storytelling process which are able to contain emotions for the players.

Finally, the recruitment process perpetuated some elements of what is called 'the usual suspects' in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). All of the participants were white, cisgender, most identifying as middle class and able-

bodied. The difficulty of having a sample that captures predominantly these demographics is that certain privileged assumptions might continue to dominate the research literature as the findings might not be representative of minority groups. The reason the 'usual suspects' appear in this study might relate to the snowball sampling method, as one participant recommended another within their own community. One way that a future study could obtain a more diverse group of participants is to cast a wider net by recruiting from other countries and having an advert on more social media platforms. However, one aspect of this study that was captured was that of the eight participants, two identified as female. As discussed in the literature, Fine (1983 / 2002) explained that during the time of his study, RPGs were dominated by male players. With the recruitment of two female players this study highlights how playing RPGs have changed since the 1980's, becoming more inclusive. Additionally, four of the participants identified as bisexual, providing visibility for this population through this sample, this is important as this demographic has been historically marginalised (Hayfield, Clarke, & Halliwell, 2014).

Implications of this Research

Reflections and Insights in Therapy

The present study can be used as a way of informing therapists of the existence of this hobby, and the benefits it may hold for their clients. A therapeutic practitioner can enquire about the investments clients have into their characters and what they mean to them. They may wish to help people explore what is being symbolised by their character's attributes and

background story, as well as learn something from the choices they make within the game, and the role they play in their party.

RPG in Therapy

Learning from these experiences and the emergent therapeutic qualities can provide a stepping stone for the development of a specific intervention involving RPGs. In regards to what an intervention of this type could look like, a therapist can observe their clients playing RPGs, and this could be the basis for one-to-one work following the sessions, exploring the themes that are highlighted in this study. Additionally, an intervention can take place allowing the therapist to work with the clients to develop characters that symbolically represent their own difficulties and struggles, which they can then explore following the RPG sessions in one-to-one therapy sessions. Finally, the therapist can act as the GM to facilitate a group working with their past or current difficulties through symbolic representations and bring questions and insights to the players to develop sense making, similar to how Hand (2021) introduces RPGs in his therapeutic work. It is important that if this intervention is to be developed a potential power imbalance is addressed. This could be where the client might wish to appease the therapeutic GM to seek and gain mechanical advantages. Also, the therapeutic GM would have ultimate control of the fate of the players character, placing the power in the relationship with the therapist. These issues could potentially inhibit the processing of therapeutic material, and become detrimental to the therapeutic relationship.

Social Prescribing

Looking at implications on a wider scale, RPG communities can be signposted to, or created as part of NHS Social Prescribing. Social

Prescribing (NHS, 2020a) is a part of the Universal Personalised Care (NHS, 2020b) programme, which was developed from the NHS Long Term Plan (NHS, 2019). Social Prescribing enables healthcare professionals to refer individuals to non-clinical community activities to support health and well-being. Based on the therapeutic benefits highlighted by this study, RPGs would be highly compatible with this service.

Implications for Counselling Psychology

Therapy is reactive, meaning that one does not seek therapy unless they are in some form of psychological distress. The benefit of RPGs is that they hold the potential to be preventative, allowing players to find meaning in their experiences and be a part of a community that facilitates well-being without the need for therapeutic interventions. This is of particular importance with the ever-growing cost of living and the financial commitment that is associated with private therapy. This would allow for a 'bottom up' rather than a 'top down' approach to psychological distress, allowing mental health professionals to empower people to work through their own difficulties without being told that they require someone that can deliver interventions in order to alleviate their distress (Harper, 2016). By making this argument I by no means wish to discredit the use of therapeutic interventions, instead I am highlighting the importance of pre-emptive measures for distress. This research therefore illustrates the therapeutic process of RPGs. Arguably, these forms of therapeutic cultural activities are what counselling psychology research should be focusing on. These ideas fit with the philosophy of counselling psychology as it centres itself on phenomenology and the shared humanity in all of us, as opposed to the already prevalent reliance on

diagnosis and power structures associated with psychology's need to prove itself as a science (Strawbridge, 2016).

Reflective Conclusions

There has been a growing body of literature and research on RPGs. However, there are very few studies that highlighted the mechanisms that facilitate or underpin therapeutic processes. By undertaking this study, it was my intention and hope that the details of how these games are therapeutic would be illuminated, and this was, indeed, achieved, even if I'm left with a feeling that I've only scraped the surface.

The findings of this study sketch out how players relate to themselves and to others, and how the process of playing these games provides a therapeutic benefit. The experiences that represented 'Symbolic Play' showed how the players relate to themselves through an expression of their fears, desires, fantasies, and a navigation of material that is symbolically presented through their character, or created world, through immersion. This theme highlighted the strong bond players have with their characters which allows for these projected aspects to be integrated into the psyche. The way players relate with others was witnessed in the 'When Players Come Together' theme, which highlighted the perils of these RPG groups to understand what is important for the players. The intimacy of playing in person as a group provides a safe and contained environment, which is facilitated and mediated by the GM. It seems that when these conditions are in place, immersion can take place, which can then provide the benefits shown in the 'Symbolic Play' theme.

It is therefore my recommendation that although one could train as a therapeutic GM, the process of just playing RPGs should be trusted, and there is little need for training in therapeutic GMs as these games hold and play stage to profoundly therapeutic processes such as play, symbolism, containment, mirroring, and witnessing. In short, I was able to document empirically some aspects of these games that I recognise in my own clinical work: working with survivors of trauma within the National Health Service in the United Kingdom, and helping them navigate through their experiences often using symbolism, as their experiences are often too distressing to verbalise.

Whilst developing my literature review, I identified writing that I found difficult to understand based on the language used; this is particularly prevalent in psychoanalytic works. It was therefore my intention to write this thesis from the perspective of a gamer, for other gamers, instead of this being a document written for other researchers. These games matter to me and I believe that this is a strength of my research: communicating something meaningful to people that are interested in this subject, who by and large are not fluent in 'academic constructs' (a euphemism for jargon). It is my hope that this study, might provide insights for gamers into helpful processes that can happen while immersed in the epic landscapes of medieval fantasy, sci-fi universes, and nuclear wastelands, playing as bards, fighters, and sorceresses. It is also my hope that it inspires others to undertake therapeutic research with RPGs to build on what this study began to illuminate.

Following the completion of this study I plan to publish these themes with my supervisor, as this will enable other researchers to build on the ideas presented, and allow for a wider audience to read the findings. I also plan to

present these findings to gamers, to ensure that the knowledge that was provided by the gamers, goes back to the gamers.

In brief summary, the ideas outlined in this research show the therapeutic value of RPGs as a process, and I believe that the 'soul' of this study is captured eloquently by Sean Hunt (2019) from the London Masters Guide, who tweeted:

"Dungeon Master expectation: A master storyteller who gets to weave epic adventures for their friends.

DM reality: An accidental therapist who has to guide a group of friends through weird parts of their personalities, whilst pretending to be a goblin."

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Appendix

Appendix A – Advert for the study

Table-Top Gamers Wanted for Research Project Exploring Identity and the Therapeutic Aspects of Role-Playing Games

Criteria:

Adults 18 and over who are or have been active members in table-top role playing games, involving a Game Master for at least three years, and where character creation is important.

Need to be a UK resident.

Face-to-face interviews either in Bristol or over online video call.

A diary will be needed to be completed to help with the interview questions.

Contact:

Graham Ball

Studying Counselling Psychology at the University of the West of England

Email: graham2.ball@live.uwe.ac.uk

Supervisors details:

Miltos Hadjiosif

Miltos.Hadjiosif@uwe.ac.uk

This research has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee

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Appendix B – Interview Schedule

Starting Questions

1. Which table-top role-playing games have you played?

2. When did you start playing?

3. Have you had experience at being a Game Master and for how long?

4. Have you had personal therapy?

Main Questions

Can you tell me a bit more about that? What do you mean by #?

is this okay to talk about?

Therapeutic aspects

1. What is it about table-top role-playing games that draw you to them?

A) What table-top role-playing games do you feel you personally connect with?
B) how did you start?
C) what keeps you playing?
D) what is the most important about them?

2. From your experience, do you see any aspects of table-top role-playing games that are therapeutic?

A) Has a table-top role-playing game helped you therapeutically in anyway?
B) Have they influenced you as a person? (prompts: personal relationships, goals, difficult situations, inspirational moments).
C) What context is it therapeutic, were there outside factors? Look at the whole story what happened outside of the game.

3. What is your most memorable experience in a table-top role-playing game and what did it mean to you as a person?

Character Creation

1. What inspires you in creating a character? (Including creating a backstory, alignment)

A) Do your habits in creating characters changed over time?
B) Do you have any specific traits in mind when you create a character? (Are they present in all characters?)
C) Do you choose a specific Gender?
D) What aspects of yourself do you see in the characters you play?

Groups and Community

1. Do you have any experiences as a group that did not go so well?

2. What are your experiences of being part of a gaming community, how has this impacted on you?

Game Master Questions

1. What do you feel makes for a great game master?

2. What kind of game master are you?

3. What does it feel like to run a game?

4. What elements of power do you feel are involved as a game master?

    A) How does it feel to hold this power?

5. Do you use scenery, miniatures (player and GM), or theatre of the mind. What do these aspects mean to you?

Diary

Let's discuss the diary you worked on.

A) Are there any sources you can share that you can't put into words?

B) Was there something in these that really stuck out as impactful?

Ending

1. How did you expect this interview to go, did you find it easy to convey your experience? Was there anything you wanted to say but felt you couldn't?

2. Do you have any questions or concerns?

3. Don't forget that you can withdraw from this study.

Appendix C – Participant Consent Form

Identity and the therapeutic aspects of Role Playing Games

Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research on Tabletop Role Playing Games.

My name is Graham Ball and I am a psychology postgraduate student in the Department of Health and Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol. I am collecting this data collection for my dissertation. My research is supervised by Dr Miltos Hadjiosif. He can be contacted at the Department of Health and Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, telephone: (0117) 3281234; Email: Miltos.Hadjiosif@uwe.ac.uk if you have any queries about the research.

Before we begin I would like to emphasize that:

- your participation is entirely voluntary

- you are free to refuse to answer any question

- you are free to withdraw at any time [within the limits specified on the information sheet].

- you are consenting to the interview audio being recorded [details of how this data is handled are on the information sheet].

You are also the 'expert'. There are no right or wrong answers and I am interested in everything you have to say.

Please sign this form to show that you have read the contents of this form and of the participant information sheet and you consent to participate in the research:

_____ (Signed)

_____ (Printed)

_____ (Date)

Please return the signed copy of this form to me.

This research has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC)

Appendix D – Ethical approval

This appendix has been redacted as personal information was present

Appendix E – Participant Information Sheet

Identity and the therapeutic aspects of Role Playing Games

Participant Information Sheet

Who are the researchers and what is the research about?

Thank you for your interest in this research. This project aims to explore the meaning behind the lived experiences of table-top role-playing gamers, focusing on identity and any therapeutic aspects that this hobby might involve. My name is Graham Ball and I am a counselling psychology trainee at the University of the West of England, Bristol. I am completing this research for my doctoral project. My research is supervised by Dr Miltos Hadjiosif (see below for his contact details).

What does participation involve?

You are invited to participate in a qualitative interview – a qualitative interview is a 'conversation with a purpose'; you will be asked to answer questions in your own words. The questions will cover aspects of table-top role playing games involving character creation, therapeutic aspects of the game, and experiences as a game master. The interview will be audio recorded and I will transcribe (type-up) the interview for the purposes of analysis. On the day of the interview, I will ask you to read and sign a consent form. You will also be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire. This is for me to gain a sense of who is taking part in the research. I will discuss what is going to happen in the interview and you will be given an opportunity to ask any questions that you might have. You will be given another opportunity to ask questions at the end of the interview.

Prior to this interview you will be asked to complete a short diary of your time playing role playing games covering three weeks, this is for you to keep and will only be used to discuss and explore aspects relevant to the research during the interview. In this diary you can write or illustrate areas of the game which you feel maybe relevant to your identity or providing therapeutic aspects while you are playing. These can consist of drawings, detailed game notes, details on character sheets, world building notes or thoughts and feelings associated with the game.

Who can participate?

To take part in my research, you must be:

1. 18 years old or over
2. A player with over 3 years' experience of playing tabletop RPGs that involve a Game Master (or Dungeon Master).
3. Fluent in English and a resident of the United Kingdom.

4. Not under significant distress at the time of interview.

How will the data be used?

Your interview data will be anonymised (i.e., any information that can identify you will be removed) and analysed for my research project. This means extracts from your interview may be quoted in my dissertation and in any publications and presentations arising from the research. The demographic data for all of the participants will be compiled into a table and included in my dissertation and in any publications or presentations arising from the research. The information you provide will be treated confidentially and personally identifiable details will be stored separately from the data. The only people who will have access to your data are myself (Graham Ball) and my research supervisor (Miltos Hadjiosif).

Email correspondence between yourself and the researcher will be deleted from all folders when communication has been completed or issues, queries have been resolved. Additionally, your data, including transcripts and personal information will be destroyed once the research project has been published.

What are the benefits of taking part?

You will get the opportunity to participate in a research project on an under researched area (i.e. the psychology of RPGs) and hopefully contribute to our understanding of this hobby.

How do I withdraw from the research?

If you decide you want to withdraw from the research please contact me via email. You do not need to provide any reason to explain your wish to withdraw from the study, and you can do so at any stage during the interview. Please note that there are certain points beyond which it will be impossible to withdraw from the research – for instance, when I have submitted my dissertation. Therefore, I strongly encourage you to contact me within a month of participation if you wish to withdraw your data. I'd like to emphasise that participation in this research is voluntary and all information provided is anonymous where possible.

Are there any risks involved?

We don't anticipate any particular risks to you with participating in this research; however, there is always the potential for research participation to raise uncomfortable and distressing issues. For this reason we have provided information on resource are available to you. If you are not a student at UWE or you would prefer an off campus counselling service the following website lists free or low cost counselling services in the local area: http://www.bristolmind.org.uk/bsn/counselling.

If you have any questions about this research please contact myself or my research supervisor: Dr Miltos Hadjiosif, Department of Health and Social Sciences, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY

Researcher Email: graham2.ball@live.uwe.ac.uk

Research Supervisor Email: Miltos.Hadjiosif@uwe.ac.uk

This research has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC)

Appendix F – Additional Participant Information

Miles

At the time of the interview, Miles (Pseudonym) described himself as a 54 year old, middle class, able-bodied white male, heterosexual and married. Miles explained that he is self-employed as a miniature 3d printer and painter. Miles explained that he had therapy a number of years ago following the break up with his ex-wife. At the time of the interview Miles played Dungeons and Dragons fifth edition exclusively. However, Miles explains that in the past he has played Rimquest, Gamma World, Car Wars, Pathfinder, Carbon 2085, Traveller, and Cyberpunk. Miles began playing and GMing these games when he was 14 years of age and played for around 10 years, stopping because he drifted apart from the people he played with. Miles explained that he did not play again until a few years ago when he reconnected with the games following the break up with his ex-wife after finding a gaming cafe.

Phillip

Phillip (Pseudonym) explained that he is a 52 year old software engineer, identifying as a white, able-bodied, middle class, heterosexual male, who at the time of the study was divorced from a marriage. Phillip explained that he has played all of the editions of Dungeons and Dragons, as well as Pathfinder, Paranoia, Call of Cthulhu, Cyberpunk, Traveller, Shadowrun and various General Universal Role Playing (GURP) system games. Phillip began playing at the age of 13 and explained that he has not been a Game Master for as long, but had for many years. Phillip explained that he has not had any form of therapy.

Dominic

At the time of the interview, Dominic (Pseudonym) described himself as a 27 year old, working class, white, heterosexual married male, identifying as disabled, and working as a civil servant. Dominic plays Dungeons and Dragons fifth edition and in the past has played fourth edition as well as Fantasy Flight Games Star Wars, and a Warhammer RPG. Dominic and has been playing for around 5 years and has recently starting being a GM. Dominic explained that he also engages in Live Action Role Play (LARP) events. Dominic explained that he has not had any form of therapy.

Harris

Harris (Pseudonym) described himself as a 47 year old, middle class, white male, who is currently unemployed and previously worked as an IT systems administrator. Harris identifies as disabled and described his sexuality as bisexual on the demographic form and pansexual within the interview. Harris states that he is currently in therapy for PTSD and long term trauma based on his experience of being in the military, as well as a paramedic. Harris plays a variety of RPGs which include Dungeons and Dragons, Pathfinder, Call of Cthulhu, Vampire Masquerade, Exulted, Digenesis, and Warhammer RPG. He began playing RPGs as a player around the age of 13 and a Game Master around the age of 17.

Jane

Jane (Pseudonym) described herself as a 25 year old, middle class, white, able-bodied, bisexual female who at the time of the interview was a full-time student. Jane explained that she had therapy 4 years ago for a few months. Jane began playing RPGs 5 years ago and has experience of being a GM for 2 years. Jane has played Dungeons and Dragons fifth edition, Star Wars table-top RPG, Dragon Age table-top RPG, as well as a uniquely self-created system developed by a friend of Janes.

Adrian

At the time of the interview, Adrian (Pseudonym) described himself as a 28 year old, white, middle class, able-bodied, bisexual male, employed as a consultant systems engineer. Adrian explained that he has had therapy twice on separate occasions, once in his teens following the loss of a partner, and again in his early 20's while at university, which he identifies as being "lingerings" from the aforementioned, and how this had impacted on his current relationship. Adrian plays a variety of RPGs which include Dungeons and Dragons (particularly 4th edition), Mutants and Masterminds, Serenity, Abney Park's Airship Pirates, End of the World Zombie Apocalypse, Vampire Masquerade, and Paranoia. Adrian started playing RPGs at the age of 8 as a player, and as a Game Master started at the age 10.

Ella

Ella (Pseudonym) described herself as a 24 year old, white, middle class, able-bodied heterosexual female working as an HR professional. Ella explained that she has had therapy in the past. Ella predominantly plays Dungeons and Dragons fifth edition, and has played fourth edition in the past, as well as playing Pathfinder, Dark Heresy and Call of Cthulhu. Ella began playing RPGs at the age of 5 when she played Dungeons and Dragons with her father and his friends. Ella explained that she began playing more RPGs when she started University. At the time of the interview Ella did not have experience of being a GM. However, she was beginning the preparation to run a game, and was anticipating that this would happen shortly after the interview. Ella explained that she also engages in Live Action Role Play (LARP) events.

Morgan

Morgan (Pseudonym) described himself as a 25 year old, white middle class, able-bodied, bisexual male, who at the time of the interview was studying full-time at University. Morgan explained that he has had therapy in the past. Morgan describes playing prominent self-created RPGs varying in settings, including fantasy, steam punk, and sci-fi. Morgan has also played Dungeons and Dragons, Pathfinder, Call of Cthulhu and Fate. Morgan began Live Action Role Play (LARP) with his brother at the age of 11 and this shortly progressed in to RPGs, with Morgan developing his first rule-set and with this became a GM.

Appendix G – Example of Transcript with Emergent Themes, Exploratory Comments and Reflections

Extract of Transcript for Harris

Emergent Themes	**Original Transcript**	**Exploratory Comments** – Descriptive – *Linguistic* – Conceptual Descriptive – Describing what the participant has said *Linguistic – Exploring specific use of language* Conceptual – Interrogative and conceptual	**Personal Reflections**
	G: Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in this study. H: No problem at all, it's very interesting to… It's something similar that I'm probably going to be doing in a couple of years. G: Oh fantastic, what sort of thing are you thing about doing?		
Holding value in TTRPGs as a therapeutic tool. Taking the games seriously. Exploring darker impulses.	H: Well because of my experience in role playing games etc in a community we've developed here in West London. My experience as a paramedic in south Africa etc, I've seen that people are not getting the help they need in a timely manner which is kind of pushing me to.. follow the path on how table top has helped me, helped them. it's the whole identity things, it's the whole I can be whoever I want to be and deal in small bite pieces my darker sides or my darker impulses. So it's just interesting and it's going to be helpful for them as well. G: Brilliant.	Therapeutic aspect mean a lot to Harris. It seems as though Harris wants TTRPGs to be recognised as therapeutic tool. Seen how it has helped himself and others. Takes it seriously. Exploring different aspects of self. What darker impulses are Harris referring to here? Is this an outlet for these darker impulses or are they a way to understand them? Is he referring to being a player and a GM?	It really struck me about how serious Harris took these games, and how he felt there were therapeutic implications for them. It surprised me that Harris came out so openly with talking about his darker impulses. I feel that when I play there are many aspects of my darker self that I can portray, such as reacting violently to NPCs that upset me or my character – actions that I would not take as a person.
	H: Although I'm more Transactional Analysis kind of focused at the moment more than anything else but that might change. G: Excellent, so a couple of things before we start. [introduction to the study] G: What table top role playing games have you played?	Can relate to different therapeutic modalities.	
Darker games to explore darker impulses.	H: A lot of them. My first experienced was D&D the red box, advanced dungeons and dragons. I've played all of the Dungeons and Dragon editions all the way through to Pathfinder, through to Cthulhu, through to Exulted, you know to Digenesis, Warhammer… many, I've pretty much… um.. also as part of our community it means	Played a large number of games. It appears that other than D&D, the games Harris plays have a darker element to them. Also, looking at the themes Harris plays within D&D, these are also quite dark. Why is this? is this to draw out this darker side and these darker impulses?	I was surprised by the games Harris has played. Of these I have only played D&D, Pathfinder, and Call of Cthulhu. From my experience of Call of Cthulhu and researching the other games these dark themes really jumped out at me. Call of Cthulhu is a scary game for me.

Extract of Transcript for Ella

Emergent Themes	**Original Transcript**	**Exploratory Comments** – Descriptive – *Linguistic* – Conceptual Descriptive – Describing what the participant has said *Linguistic – Exploring specific use of language* Conceptual – Interrogative and conceptual
Meeting social needs. Expressing self with others. Providing enjoyment and pleasure. Expression of creativity. Creating a bond with others. Immortalised memories through art.	M: Oh that's a really good question. Um… I think… it's the relationship that you have with all the players. I think collectively there's this collaboration of building a story, it's not all about what the DM has in mind, collectively as group you create something together, and there's something really magical about that… um… the way you… you do get to do something a bit creative, maybe, I mean my role for example, I don't get to do a huge amount of creative endeavour in my work, I'm quite an artsy person, I like to draw, and D&D kind of follo… sort of follows through into that creative outlet for me, so when I create something with friends, it just makes it that much more special, we have this sort of shared experience, it's like a memory that we can draw upon sort of later and… um… sort of the weeks ahead if there's a particular joke that comes up and tends to stick, it becomes this sort of nice private joke that we all remember… especially if we keep notes, I've come across… oh and fan art, that's a thing that I do, notes and fan art I come across, you know a year later or months later and I'll be like "Oh god, I completely forgot that happened", and it's really nice to relive that memory from D&D I think. G: Excellent. Fan art, can you say a little bit more about what that means to you?	Relationship with the other players. This appears to meet social needs for Ella. Collaborative story telling. It seems that Ella is able to express herself through these stories and be met with acceptance for this. *Ella refers to the collaborative story telling as "magical"*. This appears to hold great importance to Ella, these games seem removed from everyday life. A creative outlet. It seems important that Ella is able to express herself through her creativity. Shared experience. It seems that Ella creates a bond with her party through a shared narrative. Memorable moments. These seem to be memories that Ella is able to relive fondly.
Embodying character through art. Developing nostalgia through art. Recognition of the GM.	M: Yeah, so as I say quite like… um… drawing and bit's like that, so I've drawn my character… um… and… um… most of that in terms of when I draw my characters sort of very much self-portrait base, but when I draw my group, or certain events that have happened, they're either kind of comedic scenarios of what's happened, sort of encapsulating that forever, immortalise this hilarious moment in the group, or it's… um… what's the word, it's a like a… I draw like my… um… group photos of what all of us sort of thing… um… were we are all sort of happy as our characters and getting along… um… and sort of having the DM peeking out from a cloud at the top so we include him as well, you know. G: Brilliant. You mentioned escapism earlier being therapeutic, but do you see any other aspects of tabletop roleplaying games that are therapeutic?	Creating fan art. Is this another way for Ella to embody her character, creating an even more established bond and facilitating immersion? Drawing memorable moments. These seem to be ways of immortalising the moments and bring nostalgia in the future. Having the GM included in the drawings. It seems important that Ella recognises the GM as part of the story.
Belonging and validated. Being accepted by others. Trust through likeminded people.	M: I think it gives you quite a good sense of belonging… um… that's… that was one of the… good things about going to uni in first year, and probably the first society I joined was… um… D&D and wargames, and that gave me a really nice feeling of "Yes, there are other nerds here, it's not just me" [laugh], um… I didn't necessarily have that in my cohort, there wasn't that necessarily that understanding of "Yes, I really like fantasy stuff", um… but with D&D typically there's a lot of likeminded people, a lot of interest that's shared… um… typically a level of creative endeavours or problem solving is the	Sense of belonging. This seems to be an important factor for Ella. This appears to bring Ella a sense of being valued and validated. *Identifying as a 'nerd'*. This appears to be a sense of acceptance that she is no longer an outsider. Likeminded people. I wonder if it helps to have likeminded people to facilitate trust while playing these games to then provide a safe environment?

Appendix H – Extract of Initial Sub-Themes from Emergent Themes from Jane

Developed Sub-Themes	Emergent Themes
Agency	Providing an illusion of choice. Adapting to promote agency and autonomy for the players. Group autonomy. No choice in railroading. The more choices the better. Homebrew and autonomy. Creating a sense of agency. GM promoting agency and autonomy.
Social Aspects	Meeting Jane's social needs. Collaborative storytelling. The games facilitating a friendship bond. Collaborative expression. Climatic collaborative storytelling. Meeting social needs. Being creative with friends. Meeting social needs at university. Spending time with friends. Preference to the embodied experience of face to face. Preference to face to face. Social Needs.
A Safe Place	Providing a containing environment for the players. Connection to a safe group. Dependency on the GM. Trusting group prompting confidence. Safety to express emotions. Holding and consistency. Safe environment to express self. Returning to the safety of friends. Development of a safe trusted group. GM containing the group. TTRPGs as a safe place.
Threat to Safety	Anxiety when game is threatened. Threat to safety with group confrontation. People leaving the game as a threat to the character. Fear of losing players. Fight-flight in group. Alienated from the community through toxicity. Difficulty finding safe and containing groups on the internet. Resistance to the games due to stereotyping.
Having Fun	Joyful anticipation for the games. Invested greatly into the hobby. Validation and fear. The enjoyment of the game overcame fears stereotyping. Reflection of experiences bringing happiness. Enjoyment in immersion. Positive feedback from the players. Enjoyment from providing enjoyment. Validation from others for creativity. Preference for roleplay.

Appendix I – Summary of the Study

A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Therapeutic Aspects of Table-top Roleplaying Games

Abstract

Table-top Role Playing Games (RPGs) have risen in popularity since their conception in the 1970's. While some literature exists exploring the psychological processes, very few studies have reflected on the therapeutic potential of these games, particularly from a phenomenological perspective. In this study, views, perceptions, and experiences of eight players were gathered through semi-structured interviews assisted by multi-modal diaries. These interviews were then transcribed and analysed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This summary of the final thesis focuses on the sub-theme: 'Expression Through Play', which was a part of the superordinate theme 'Symbolic Play'. This sub-theme captured the unique experiences of these players projecting fears, fantasies, desires, and taboos onto their characters. Conclusions within this summary explore how these games play stage to therapeutic processes such as play, symbolism, and witnessing through a relationship with themselves. Recommendations from this study are that the process of playing RPGs is greatly beneficial and should be trusted as an activity in the community, without the need for therapeutic intervention. Further implications are also discussed.

Introduction

Table-top Role Playing Games (RPGs) are often played around a table, using a pen, paper, and dice with a different number of sides. These games utilise a specific set of rules which enable players to use their imagination, creating a cooperative narrative (Sargent, 2014). They take place within fantasy world settings that often gain inspiration from high fantasy novels,

movies and video games (Ewalt, 2014). These games are usually played with three to eight people; the players' role is to create a character with certain game-related ability attributes, as well as select their gender, race, appearance, moral alignment, and develop a background story (Wizards of the Coast, 2014). The player can use this character as a way of displaying traits s/he wishes to have within the real world, then use this character to make choices, solve puzzles and fight monsters (Fine, 1983 / 2002). Furthermore, these characters can provide a safe medium to explore difficult decisions, sexuality and gender identity (Sargent, 2014). One of the key aspects of RPGs is that they are not designed to have a winner, these are collaborative experiences in which the characters work together progressing through the narrative, and are rewarded for their efforts via an experience points system that allows them to 'level up' and access more powerful abilities, equipment, and spells.

Within these games, there is often a person in charge of creating the details and challenges of a given adventure, somebody who tells a story that either s/he has created or plays from a premade story module; this person is called a 'Game Master' (GM), or in Dungeons and Dragons is called a Dungeon Master (DM). The GM uses the rules and narrative to facilitate the players' progression in the story and provides consequences for the players' actions, with dice rolls determining the outcome for both the GM and the players. The most popular table-top RPG is Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), with an estimated 39 million people having played since its creation in 1974 (Ewalt, 2014), while in 2017 alone 8.6 million people played in the United States (Chan, 2018). Despite this popularity, academic scholarship on the topic of table-top RPGs has been scarce, especially within psychology.

This study will aim to provide insight into the therapeutic aspects of RPGs that are played in the 'real world' and necessitate players sharing a physical space (as opposed to virtual RPGs played online and often against artificial intelligence as an opponent). The acronym RPGs will be used throughout the thesis to refer to table-top role playing games, unless otherwise specified.

Typologies of Players

Sarah Lynne Bowman (2010) is a researcher from America, focusing her work on the social aspects and character development of role playing games from an analytical perspective. Bowman's most relevant research for this study examined how players create community, solve problems and explore identity. Taking the role of a participant and observer Bowman recruited nineteen participants, which included herself, using a qualitative methodology collecting data from a mixture of face-to-face interviews, email responses and observations. Bowman's study highlights some important factors, providing insight into why players may choose a specific character arguing that there are four main reasons for a player to choose a particular character archetype within a game: A fellow player or the GM may request that the player chooses a specific archetype to provide a balanced group with abilities that complement each other; the player may choose an archetype that would make for good role playing opportunities with the other members of the party; the player may be drawn to a particular character archetype from popular literature, video games, and film; the player feels that they need to explore aspects of their inner psyche and thus choose an archetype to complement this. Taking the perspective of Jung and Campbell, these last two reasons can be interwound as these popular characters could be a reflection of our collective unconscious, and thus providing a reason to explore the inner psyche.

From the information gathered about the players in her study Bowman (2010) developed nine typologies which outlined characteristics of archetypes the players presented and how these would be portrayed. These nine typologies are as follows: 'The Doppelganger Self' is when a player portrays their character as themselves, whether this is consistent with their character sheet or not. Bowman describes this as a 'what if' scenario: "What if I were transported into this realm, how would I react?". This would then be portrayed through the character. 'The Devoid Self' is explained as a portrayal of a character that is similar to the player, however, an aspect of themselves is removed. Bowman provides an example of this being a character that lacks empathy. 'The Augmented Self' is described as similar to 'The Doppelganger Self'

with extra powers. This is comparable to Fine's (1983 / 2002) explanation of characters being an extension of the player. Using this typology, a player would imagine themselves in this scenario and picture them with additional powers, this would then be portrayed through the character. 'The Fragmented Self' is a player that portrays aspects of themself in their character that might not be a prominent part of themselves, this is then amplified to become a major part of how the character is represented. An example of this could be a disruptive attribute that is not an occupying facet of the player's personality, yet in their character, it is their predominant characteristic. Bowman describes 'The Repressed Self' as a playful and youthful aspect of the player portrayed within the character. This is often seen as a humorous, carefree character that allows the player to express a time when they were a child where the pain and suffering in the world did not exist. 'The Idealized Self' is explained as attributes and confidence in a character that the player does not have in reality. Bowman provides examples of characters wanting to be the 'hero' in scenarios, and other examples of characters having strong physical abilities when the players may have a disability. 'The Oppositional Self' is described as a player portraying attributes in their character that the player does not identify with. This can be character values and beliefs that go against what the players might adopt. An example of this could be a players character being a lawful good paladin, following the law set out by their god, when in reality, the player could be an atheist. 'The Experimental Self' is explained as a player not having a specific affinitive attachment to their character and instead the player experimenting with ideas that are interesting to the plot or present an exciting experience around the table. Finally, 'The Taboo Self' is when a player experiments with subjects that are not appropriate in our society. This could be a character committing acts of murder and torture. These are behaviours that players would be punished for in their own lives, yet they can experiment with these in a safe environment without consequence in the games, other than the consequences as part of the created world or if they break social etiquette at the table by performing these acts. Bowman argues that the archetypes that players portray through their characters are then carried over to their real life in what she calls 'Integration'. These typologies from Bowman do provide useful insights into how players can express themselves

through their characters. From a therapeutic perspective this is important as it allows the unconscious (archetypes) to become conscious.

Aims

The rationale for this study is two-fold. Firstly, the study hopes to shed psychological light onto a social activity that is vastly under-studied within psychology, and which is growing in popularity (Ewalt, 2014; Chan, 2018). Secondly, the study can inform therapeutic practitioners of the therapeutic qualities RPGs provide, so they may be informed when working with their clients. The study will address the following research questions:

1. What might be experienced as therapeutic in playing RPGs on a regular basis?

2. What can counselling psychologists learn from the therapeutic qualities of RPGs?

Methodology

Research Design

As the purpose of this study was to investigate a topic of psychological interest and explore meanings attached to it, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. This is because qualitative research allows for data to be collected and interpreted in a way that does not look for a definitive answer; instead it captures and probes people's accounts and the subjective meanings associated with these, without aiming to arrive at an objective truth. This is in contrast to quantitative research based on a positivist perspective, with an emphasis on validity and replication, which aim to establish or refute objective facts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This study focused on a small sample looking at the lived experience of RPG players, and how they make sense of these lived experiences; for this reason Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012) was deemed the most suitable methodology. Bowman and Lieberoth (2018) demonstrate the importance of

phenomenological research in RPG by arguing that players rarely consciously lie about their experiences, and the aspects that are omitted from their narrative, such as meaning can be developed by the researcher taking an interpretive view.

Epistemology

This study is based on a 'contextualist' perspective as the participants' truth was sought through phenomenological inquiry, yet as a researcher, I was bringing my own assumptions and understandings. The knowledge that emerged in this inquiry was inevitably bound by the historical, social, and material conditions that my participants and I were living. IPA advises researchers to 'bracket' their assumptions, in an attempt to avoid the most egregious pitfalls of unchecked subjectivity. As a trainee counselling psychologist, I endeavour to give the reader glimpses of my internal process throughout the thesis, starting with a brief reflexive statement below.

Reflexivity

Phenomenological research rests on the double hermeneutic, which involves myself as a sense-making agent contributing to the final findings. It is important to identify areas where I might have influenced the knowledge being created. Braun & Clarke (2013) argue that 'it is important to own your perspective', recognising myself as part of the research. I am a thirty-eight year old white British man, currently studying counselling psychology at doctorate level. I am heterosexual, cisgender and able-bodied and describe myself as agnostic. My training on this course is based around the theoretical perspectives of psychodynamic, cognitive behavioural therapy, and systemic approaches. My interest in RPGs stems from my own experiences with these games. I have been a member of the RPG community for twelve years and have found these games beneficial for my own mental health as well as the many people I have played these games with. Of the RPGs that I play, my experiences have been

predominantly with D&D, however, I have played Pathfinder, Call of Cthulhu and Shadowrun. For this reason I can be considered to have an 'insider status' (Braun & Clarke, 2013) regarding this research. As a reflexive process it was important for me to keep a journal throughout the research, in order to create a space for me to consider the extent to which I was viewing the participants' experiences through my own.

Recruitment of Participants

There are a number of criteria that I used in the recruitment of the participants to further ensure homogeneity of the sample studied. The sample size recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012) in IPA research for professional doctorates is between four and ten. I therefore aimed for and recruited eight participants for this study. This sample size allowed for the unique personal experiences of the participants to be portrayed in substantial detail, favouring quality over quantity (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Further inclusion criteria were that the participants must have been over eighteen years of age, that they had been an active member in an RPG with a GM, and where character creation was an important aspect. Participants must have had at least three years' experience with RPGs as this was deemed to be a sufficient period for these games to have had some impact on the player. Furthermore, at least half of the participant group would have needed to have had experience of being a GM. The study invited participants of any gender, cultural background, sexual orientation, disability, and race. However, it was a criterion that participants were fluent in English and a resident in the United Kingdom. Recruitment was sought through word of mouth from my connections within the RPG community, a sampling method known as 'snowballing'. Additionally, recruitment was facilitated via an advertisement on the online social media platform Reddit, and permission was gained from the administrators before this took effect.

Participant Information

Table 1: Basic Participant Demographic Information with Pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Demographic Information
Miles	White, Male, Aged 54 Middle Class, Heterosexual, Able-bodied
Phillip	White, Male, Aged 52 Middle Class, Heterosexual, Able-bodied
Dominic	White, Male, Aged 27 Working Class, Heterosexual, Disabled
Harris	White, Male, Aged 47 Middle Class, Bisexual, Disabled
Jane	White, Female, Aged 25 Working Class, Bisexual, Able-bodied
Adrian	White, Male, Aged 28 Middle Class, Bisexual, Able-bodied
Ella	White, Female, Aged 24 Middle Class, Heterosexual, Able-bodied
Morgan	White, Male, Aged 25 Middle Class, Bisexual, Able-bodied

Data Collection

Due to the ethical considerations bought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing restrictions, the form of data collection for this study was through online face-to-face interviews. Additionally, the participants were encouraged to create a researcher directed multi-modal scrapbook diary for three weeks, capturing their experiences playing RPGs. These diaries were used for inspiration when answering questions within the interviews and probe the phenomenon under investigation (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012). The diaries were not to be collected following the interview; they were instead for the participants to keep. Therefore, the purpose of this form of data collection was to stimulate and engage the participants, as well as informing the questions in the online face-to-face interview. I ensured that I would not turn away participants who had not completed their diaries, or if they forgot to bring them to the interview.

The online video interviews took place through a semi-structured schedule, and consisted of open ended questions that allowed the participants to reflect and talk extensively about their experiences with RPGs. This schedule consisted of ten to twenty questions, with the interview times ranging between forty-five and ninety minutes. The interviews were piloted, as this

allowed for any oversights in the schedule to become evident (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The pilot interview was not used in the analysis as the interview schedule changed substantially after this. The online video interviews were recorded, and consent for this was sought from the participant consent form.

Analysis

The focus of the analytic process is on the participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences. In order for this analysis to take place, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012) describe a six stage process, which this project followed.

Stage One

The first of these was to gather an understanding of the participants' experiences with RPGs. This was achieved through line-by-line analysis for each participant.

Stage Two

The second stage involved some initial note taking. This consisted of taking note of interesting phenomenological material within the transcript that related to the research questions. This note taking took the form of three types of comments: Firstly, descriptive comments, which provided a face value account of what the participants were communicating, often constructed from key words, explanations and assumptions. Second were linguistic comments, which encourage a focus on how the participants present their experiences, taking into consideration the language they use, the tone, repetition, as well as metaphors. Finally, conceptual comments provided interpretative notes to the data. These were at a conceptual level and took an interrogative approach.

Stage Three

Once the notes were created, emergent themes were developed. These emergent themes were developed consisting of short sentences or words that summarised my understandings from the material I was working with.

Stage Four

Following the development of emergent themes, the development of sub-themes took place. The premise behind this stage was to reduce the amount of data collected from the notes and emergent themes while maintaining complexity. These sub-themes incorporated specific sections of the transcript as well as overall impressions from the entire interview.

Stage Five

The fifth stage was to move onto the next case. It was necessary to take into account each participant as a separate person and acknowledge that although they were a homogenous sample, their lived experiences with RPGs was different. However, it was also important at this stage to be mindful that the current analytical process could have been influenced by the previous participant's process.

Stage Six

Finally, the last part of the process of analysis was to look for patterns across cases. Once the participants' accounts had been individually analysed, similarities were identified across the data-set.

Analysis

The analysis presented in this summary represents the sub-theme 'Expression Through Play', which was one of two sub-themes encompassing the superordinate theme: 'Symbolic Play'.

Expression Through Play

This sub-theme theme presents the experiences of the participants experimenting with roles and desires, whether this be going against what others say they are, or exploring taboo subjects. In addition to this, the sub-theme highlights the participants conflicts where they question who they are and how far they can go with taboo subjects. These accounts provide examples on how RPGs can allow for an outlet into these aspects playfully and symbolically.

Ella began playing at a young age and has fond memories from this time. During this time she recalled how she was able to play out her desires:

> *"…I was about 5 years old and I started taking an interest when he [Ella's father] had friends and family round… um… and so I actually created my first character when I was 5, and that's a really nice memory for me because… um… I… I wanted to be a magician, I loved all things kind of wizardry… um… but dad thought it would be really funny if… um… if "Oh you could be a necromancer, yeah that would be nice", so it was really funny because I… my character was… I was too low level to actually raise any zombies or anything, but I called my character Princess Sunbeam…"* (Ella)

This excerpt shows how D&D created a special bond between Ella and her father, and her father's input in creating her character seemed to cultivate their bond further, as Ella emphasises how she holds this memory dear to her, as nostalgia. These positive childhood experiences appeared to bring joy to Ella as she describes her desires from that age, these being: wanting to be a magician, and being a princess. For Ella, the idea of exploration and creativity was appropriate for her age at the time as she highlights here:

> *"…it's interesting because as I grew up my characters that I created more recently have a lot more depth to them, this character, my Princess Sunbeam originally, I don't really have a backstory for her… um… I don't really have a sort or alignment, or a motive for what she wants to get out of quests, she's a lot more… um… she's very appearance heavy I remember…"* (Ella)

Here Ella speaks about how *Princess Sunbeam* had little motivation other than wanting to adventure. From Erik Erikson's (1950 / 1993) developmental perspective Ella was at the end of 'Initiative vs. Guilt' and the beginning of 'Industry vs. Inferiority' stages. At this time in Ella's development Erikson argued that pretend play is important for exploring herself. Additionally, this coincides with Piaget's (1951 / 2000) developmental theory where pretend (or symbolic) play is important for cognitive development, learning, and symbolic thought. It therefore seems that these games were helpful for her development by allowing her to pretend play, which facilitated an exploration of these desires. Ella has changed the way she plays from being five years old and explains how she now develops characters here:

> *"…it's very much gone deeper, I care more… I care about different character qualities now than I did back then… um… it's less about being a beautiful princess and more about… um… kind of experimenting with passivism… maybe we don't always have to attack the hordes that invade the city kind of thing, exploring diplomacy and just… I guess higher level concepts I suppose."* (Ella)

Ella highlights how she plays differently from when she was a child. It is clear that for Ella there is an emphasis on experimentation with pacifism. Throughout the interview I was given the impression from Ella that passivism is part of who she is. I was left with a feeling therefore that Ella was portraying an aspect of herself though these pacifist characters, and these scenarios where she did not wish to attack the hordes, instead seeking diplomacy appeared to be a way for her to express these values and explore these newfound concerns. However, on at least one occasion Ella did explore embodying a character that was different from herself:

> *"I'll tell you what, very recently as a… kind of more and more joking one shot campaign… um… I did make a character trait… um… or a character based on trait's that are completely different from myself but in a bad way. So somebody that was very rude and um… was almost like creepy in how they came across, because it was really fun to embody something that I don't necessarily like, and to [laugh], it sounds bad but to make my friends uncomfortable…"* (Ella)

Ella explains here how she was able to explore what it might be like to be rude and creepy through her D&D character. It is interesting that she created this character whom she did not necessarily like, highlighting that they were different from herself in a bad way. By creating and playing this character it could be that Ella is expressing hidden attributes of herself which go against her passivism values, which she expressed in some of her other characters and potentially providing a way to explore these parts and integrate them. Additionally, following laughter Ella mentions that she enjoyed portraying this character as it made her friends uncomfortable. It seems that Ella and her friends got enjoyment from Ella portraying this character and it appeared to provide Ella with validation.

For Morgan, the idea of playing something different from himself is appealing. However, Morgan highlights how certain conditions need to be in place for this to happen:

> *"I think the fact that my confidence has increased a lot also helps, in that there are some characters that I wouldn't have played when I first started role playing because I wouldn't have the confidence to try and act that out. I think also the group you're playing with helps a lot, in that if its people you trust then you can be more open, and then able to detach your character from your person."* (Morgan)

Morgan emphasises that the ability to play a character that is separate from himself is facilitated by his own confidence and the trust in the group. Winnicott (1971 / 2005) identifies that if confidence is constricted, then the ability to explore the area between the internal and external world where creative play exists is also hindered. Importantly, it appears that for Morgan, this confidence is closely associated with trust, meaning that if the trust does not exist, then the confidence cannot be gained. Morgan also experiments with characters that appear different, yet he identifies that these are aspects of himself:

> *"…it was really like "Well okay, I'm quite nerdy and quite shy, and you know, reasonably intelligent, so I'm going to intentionally play a very loud boisterous, dumb person". I think a lot of the times in the motives and personalities it can come across again like I*

think the fear of death thing is a big thing, especially in a lot of my villains, that has come across and that has come from me, and it's almost a thing that in a way you don't even realise until I kind of look back on it…" (Morgan)

Looking at this example, it seems as though Morgan was playing these characters unknowing that he was portraying aspects of himself and it seems that Morgan is highlighting that although these characters appear different from himself, they all present aspects of himself that are hidden. It is important to note that Morgan makes the realisation that he has portrayed aspects of himself through his characters through reflection, potentially making the unconscious, conscious which is the foundation of psychoanalysis (Jung, 1990).

For Jane, experimentation is an important part of the games, the idea of being something different from herself seems to have been developed from when she first began playing:

"Um… but then as time went on I was like "Well actually one of the things I haven't ever experimented with in my character creation was you know, other genders, why haven't I done that? That sounds fun, let's do that", um… so… so… now I… I… I don't know if there is necessarily a pattern but I'm not limiting myself to just… to just female character although I am realising that both of my ones right now are." (Jane)

Jane highlights here how she identified that she had not played other genders, questioning why she had not done this before. It could be that she had developed confidence in the game to enable this expression of gender. From a Jungian perspective, Jane would be facilitating the archetype of her 'animus', which allows her to portray masculine elements (Jung, 1983). Importantly, these games provide the freedom for this expression as she identified that she is not limited. This experimentation for Jane is not restricted to the expression of gender, she identifies here how it has been brought on by the frustration of being labelled as something that she does not want to be identified as:

"… something that was thrown at me, um… like that phase of "Oh you're such a goodie two shoes", and I'm like "No, do you know what I'm going to be really really evil", um…

and I'm just going to like, yeah just switch off that moral centre and, and really get into it… um… so I think yeah, it being kind of the ultimate difference from me… um… and I.. I do kind of want to do it again because it was just so… um… yeah, just so different to how I would normally behave that it truly felt transformative and I could, I could actually… literally not be me anymore for a bit which now I say it out loud sounds a bit sad but there we go [laugh]." (Jane)

For Jane it seemed that RPGs provide an ability to express what she is not, and Jane was able to go against the stereotype that she had been given with this character providing a way to express this. Jane discusses how it allowed her to *"switch off that moral centre"*. It seems that this could have been a release from the constraints that are put upon Jane in the real world. Following from this, Jane also mentions how this was a *"transformative experience"*. I am left wondering if Jane is hinting that she learnt from this character, and able to express more of this character in herself. This is reminiscent of Joseph Campbell's (2008) 'Heroes Journey' which provides the template for change and growth through understanding oneself based on the journeys we embark on. It is also important to note how Jane points out that she is not happy in herself from how she says that her characters can "*literally not be me anymore"* followed by her admitting that it *"sounds a bit sad".* It therefore seems all the more important for Jane to have the outlet to experiment with different roles as an escape from who she is. However, there appears to be a fear for Jane of embodying this evil character:

"…I didn't see anything [of herself] in my fully evil character, I think in the beginning definitely, but… which you know, maybe is a little bit worrying as a sign that I might turn evil one day, I hope not [laugh]." (Jane)

In this extract Jane highlights that she could identify herself in the original idea for her character. However, as Jane developed this character she indicated that she "*didn't see anything [of herself] in my fully evil character"*. This was followed by Jane indicating a fear that she may end up like her character. It is evident that this statement contradicts her previous extract where she said she actively wanted to play and embrace an 'evil' character, and the

fear that she expressed could have been a way to distance herself from the evil character to defend herself from turning into them. This side of Jane seemed important to express as it appeared to allow her to experiment with the rejected parts of herself, her shadow (Jung, 1983).

Phillip also highlights what exploring hidden aspects of oneself through a character feels like:

> *"There was one character that I really enjoyed playing, who… um… was a female thief… um… who… um… was very… very much self-centred, everything was about her… um… so you know if sort of someone got really badly injured I complained about them getting their blood on my robes… um… you know it's all about this great calamity that has happened, but how does it make me feel? And that was quite like… that again was something very much that I'm not… I… I care about people quite a lot but she was all about caring about herself…"* (Phillip)

Here Phillip talked about how he enjoyed playing a female, potentially expressing the 'anima', which is the female archetype of the psyche (Jung, 1983). In addition to this, Phillip's character is very different from how he identifies as, evidenced by saying *"…in some ways I'm still quite introverted…"* and *"…I'm a relatively quiet person…"* earlier in the interview. Phillip spoke about how the world was at stake in this game, referring to a "*great calamity",* and Phillip highlights how his character is centred around herself, asking himself the question of "*how does it make me feel?".* This question was potentially posed for Phillip as well as his character, allowing Phillip to embody this character to feel what they feel. Phillip explores this embodiment further after being asked what it was that connected him to the character:

> *"Again because it wasn't me, I suppose. So… at every… every time she would have to make a decision I'd think "what would I do? Well I'll do something else as her then". So… um… it was quite a… it was actually quite a fun character to play, it was quite a… it felt quite different from me so… um… yeah."* (Phillip)

Here Phillip discusses how he was able to connect to the character because it was not him and how he would think of what he would do, then do the opposite for his character. It appeared cathartic for Phillip to express what he would not normally do, and experience what it is like to be selfish. This is evident from the previous extract where he says "…*I care about people quite a lot but she was all about caring about herself…".* From this, it could be that Phillip is filling a need to express self-confidence (Goncu & Perone, 2005).

Discussion

Symbolic Play

This section will discuss the findings of 'Expression Through Play' in relation to RPG literature. In this sub-theme I followed the experiences of four of the participants: Ella, Morgan, Jane, and Phillip. From the RPG literature, there are a number of studies and insights that have highlighted expression through play. Bowman's typologies (2010) highlight different ways in which players can express aspects of themselves through playing RPGs. From the nine typologies identified by Bowman, four can be detected in participants' descriptions. Ella's first character "Princess Sunshine" was a comparable to 'The Idealized Self' as she highlighted how she wanted to hold power in magic and be a princess; this was discussed alongside the developmental stages which are congruent with children of that age wanting to role play as a superhero (Davis & Johns, 2020). Ella discussed how she developed the way she plays to experiment with pacifism, this evokes 'The Augmented Self' as these were values and beliefs that she holds, and having the power of a character allowed her to utilise them in scenarios where violence would often be used in these games. The final extract from Ella's experiences showed how she played a character that she described as being very different from herself, explaining that this character was offensive and disturbing, claiming that it was enjoyable to embody someone that she does not like. This is akin to Bowman's 'The Oppositional Self' which is described as an outlet to display attributes that are in opposition to how the person

presents in their normal life. This ‘Oppositional Self’ was also evident in Jane and Phillip’s experiences. Jane explained how she developed her “evil character” to be the opposite of herself, going against the stereotype given to her by others, and using this character as an outlet for her frustrations. Phillip’s experience was based around playing a character that was “self-centred”, bringing into focus a type of cathartic enjoyment at expressing unfavourable traits and personality attributes that cannot find expression in his everyday life. The therapeutic aspects that can be concluded from the ‘Expression Through Play’ sub-theme follow Bowman’s (2010) conclusions on the typologies. Bowman explains that the more players express and experiment with different aspects of themselves, the more they can learn about themselves and these characters strengths can become a part of them (Bowman, 2010).

Conclusions

The experiences of symbolic play that were expressed by the participants allowed for these players to understand themselves through experimenting with desires, fears, taboos and fantasies by projecting them onto their characters. These aspects are translated into stories or narratives that are shared among the other players, and through this grief and distress can be shared, and difficulties, values, and beliefs can be validated. For these participants, symbolically representing hidden aspects of themselves through RPGs provides an outlet for sense making through this narrative, which might not be able to be expressed elsewhere. It is clear that from the experimentation of roles that players can test how far they can push values and beliefs within a safe and boundaried environment. The other players within the group produce an environment where the players form trust, which then allows for the players to possess the confidence to be able to explore their internal world through symbolic means. Expressing these narratives to others as an active audience is an important part of this process and akin to ‘witnessing’ from narrative therapy (Freedman, 2014). The players are telling their personal story through their characters and the other players are interacting with that story

through their own characters, providing a richness and a retelling of this story, allowing the players to become witnesses to their own journeys to further make sense of them.

The relationship between the player and character was widely discussed by the participants and I got a sense that if the bond between the player and the character is strong, the embodiment of this relationship provides a sharing of emotions allowing for a cathartic release. This bond is important, and I noticed that the players were thankful of their characters contributions to their understanding of distress, overcoming difficulties together, sharing emotions, and learning from one another. This was portrayed as though they were a different person, and not an aspect of themselves. Keeping their characters separate, at arm's length (Hand, 2021), creates a buffer to the outside world (Blackmon, 1994), providing emotional distance (Connell, Kilmer, & Kilmer, 2020), which allows for the phenomenon of 'bleed' (Bowman, 2015) to take place. The players are able 'bridge in' (Pearson, Smail, & Watts, 2013) through immersion to symbolically project their unconscious desires, fears, taboos, fantasies, which then allow them to become integrated into their psyche, akin to the integration of the shadow (Jung, 1990). Therefore the process allows for the players to understand, master, and exercise agency over their experiences and distress. Furthermore, the insights gained through the relationship with themselves aide in the evaluation of relationships with others, as their desires, fears and fantasies can become known to them, providing them the power and autonomy to change how these are expressed, as opposed to being unknowingly controlled by them.

It is therefore my recommendation that the process of just playing RPGs should be trusted, and there is little need for training in therapeutic GMs as these games hold and play stage to profoundly therapeutic processes such as play, symbolism and witnessing.

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