

Critical Fail - Addressing problematic designs in table-top role-playing games for narrative therapy and community wellbeing.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Table-Top Role-Playing Games (TTRPG) such as Dungeons and Dragons (D&D, Gygax, 1978) are increasingly being used in therapeutic and educational contexts (Blackmon, 1994; Kato, 2019; Kwan, 2017; Zayas & Lewis, 1986), because of the way that their core mechanics encourage cooperative storytelling (Bowman & Lieberoth, 2018) and provide opportunities for meaning-making in a safe fictional world. Research on the effectiveness of TTRPG's in the context of narrative therapy evidences great potential for building resilience and improving the wellbeing of participants (Enfield, 2007; Zayas & Lewis, 1986; Kato & Fujino, 2015). However, throughout the existing literature of games as therapy, less consideration has been spent on the design of the games themselves, primarily using out of the box games such as Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) as the game world without significant adapting of the work to suit the client (Ascherman, 1993; Blackmon, 1994; Kato et al, 2012; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). Due to the popularity and commercial availability of D&D, it is no surprise that this is the game of choice for therapists. The potential of a TTRPG is the opportunity of collaborative, agentic storytelling apparently unconstrained by technology and scaffolded by an analogue system of dice and character sheets, but what the game system itself is contributing to the therapeutic experience is not typically examined. This lack of exploration of its specific contributions coupled with the fact that the game itself has been criticized for its overt cultural biases (Garcia, 2017) provides an opportunity for design lead research to ask what more can be done?

When examining the mechanics, the high level of player agency aligns well with the collaborative approaches of narrative therapy (White et al, 1990), a form of therapy that focuses on collaborative-based co-authorship of a patients self-narrative. Games such as D&D let the players and a Game Master (GM) collaborate to tell the story of their characters within a co-authored world. The GM facilitates play, describing the world and the actions of its denizens, whilst the players narrate their actions. This collaborative narration forms the main interaction between the GM and the players, with the dice being used to determine the success of actions taken. Achieving a certain result in the dice will result in a successful action, failing to do so may result in consequences, of which the GM will invent. Thus, while two different player groups may play the same adventure, the stories they experience will be vastly different. For players to experience a high level of narrative value within the game (Chauvin et al, 2015), they must be engaged with it through their interactions with the game's systems. These systems must be robust and invisible because this level of player agency cannot be achieved if the systems actively break engagement for the player.

There is a deeply problematic tension between the use of these systems as therapy and the understanding of them as systems which carry meaning in their own right. For example, D&D's player character (PC) sheet asks that the player level up their statistics manually. In D&D these include a range, including combat statistics and personality statistics. While players may enjoy building their character's statistics, simplifying the intricacies of interpersonal communication skills to a simple charisma statistic provides a problematic uncomfortableness in the context of therapeutic play for some neuro-diverse participants, one that I have experienced personally in my practice as an educator for children on the autism spectrum. For example, the D&D 5th edition players handbook rules (Crawford, 2014, p165) states "Charisma measures your ability to interact effectively with others". This creates a tension that exists beyond just the surface level of the label and name given to the ability, rather where the description and use of the mechanics themselves align with bullying that

these players are often the victims of in the real world. If we want to promote these game worlds as a safe space for therapeutic play, then we as designers need to provide this opportunity, through improving the overall conceptualisation of the game and the cultural relevance of the settings (Zayas & Lewis, 1986) by engaging in the decolonisation of the systems (Garcia, 2017), so that we may empower such use.

To this end, the study discussed in this presentation seeks to perform an analysis of best practices in terms of design and use of table-top roleplaying games, exploring how these systems can be further developed to better facilitate therapeutic intervention. This will be done by presenting the initial findings of a larger practice-based study that seeks to engage in the narrative inquiry of playtest sessions, collaborative design workshops with therapists and educators in the development of a useable taxonomy for the narrative mechanisms within TTRPG's in therapeutic contexts that can be used by designers, therapists and educators.

BIO

Adric Polkinghorne is a game and narrative designer currently completing a Doctor of the Creative Industries. His work builds upon his experience in industry as a professional game developer along with his work with vulnerable communities using table-top roleplaying games.

Dr. Jane (Truna) Turner is a game and interaction designer, education and researcher. Her research focuses on criticality, meaning making and experiential placemaking. She is interested in the material and cultural aspects of game designing and the ways that design and designing are mimetic 'storying' practices.

Dr. Manuela Taboada is a designer, researcher and lecturer working across environmental sciences and design. Her background in complex emergency, design activism and decolonial design defines the way she critically engages transdisciplinary and multi-cultural teams to design change and systems transitions.

Dr. Jeremy Kerr is a principal researcher on the Autism CRC 'Knowledge Translation Project', a national digital resources and learning community initiative. He also leads the 'Digital Tools in Therapeutic Interventions' project, a co-design collaboration with psychologists across Australia to innovate changes in practice. His work with secondary schools includes the co-development of the ISHS Innovation Hub, a school-wide initiative based on design-led transformation of the educational sector.

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