Exploring the Use of Tabletop Gaming for Wellness

Alyssia Merrick
James Cook University
1 James Cook Dr
Douglas, 4814
alyssia.merrick@my.jcu.edu.au

Dr Dan J Miller, Dr Amanda Krause
James Cook University
1 James Cook Dr
Douglas. 4814
07 4781 5157
daniel.miller1@jcu.edu.au, amanda.krause1@jcu.edu.au

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INTRODUCTION

Tabletop gaming has increased in popularity over the past decade, with a particular resurgence from the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic. Research into tabletop role-playing games has suggested that they could be utilised as therapeutic tools (Arenas et al., 2022). Qualitative case studies examining the impact of a range of tabletop role-playing games (e.g., *Call of Cthulhu, Dungeons & Dragons)* demonstrate that these games can support psychological and social development (Abbott et al., 2021; Hughes, 1988), positively impacting social skills and quality of life (Kato, 2019). Moreovoer, recent quantitative research continues to demonstrate that tabletop role-playing games can benefit both mental health (Merrick et al., 2024) and social skills (Varrette, 2023).

Previous research exploring perceptions of the use of role-playing games to promote psychosocial attributes demonstrated that 22% of surveyed psychiatrists perceive an association between these games and psychopathology (Lis et al., 2015) and 75% of interviewed social workers agreed that they needed to learn more about these games (Ben-Ezra et al., 2018). By interviewing mental health practitioners about the ways in which they utilise tabletop role-playing games in a therapeutic context for adolescents, Gutierrez (2017) found that the games could be used as exposure therapy, used as group therapy, client-tailored, and utilised for any age. However, Gutierrez' (2017) study only included five participants, and thus replication with a larger participant pool is needed to provide more evidence.

The present study aimed to collect data regarding the current use of tabletop role-playing games as a modality to bolster wellness in Australia. It focuses on exploring the perceived utility that tabletop role-playing games have on wellness by interviewing Game Masters (e.g., game facilitators who are Psychologists, Educators, etc.) who run their games in a professional manner for the promotion of wellness (defined as "a holistic integration of physical, mental, and spiritual well-being" –

Stoewen, 2017, p. 861). This study is guided by the following research question: How is tabletop role-playing games currerntly used for wellness promotion in Australia?

Data collection for this study is planned for late 2024. A convience sample of approximately 15 Australian residents who act as Game Masters using tabletop role-playing games for the promotion of wellness will be recruited. Individual, semi-structured interviews will be conducted using videoconferencing software. Prepared questions focus on the current usage of tabletop-roleplaying games for wellness, their perceived psychosocial benefits, targetted populations, current barriers of use and training for Game Masters. Verbatim transcripts will be analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) via the NVivo program. Reflexive thematic analysis is used to identfy patterns or themes throughout data set/s and will thus aid in identifying common ideas in each of interviews which can be synthesised in the paper.

Preliminary findings will be presented at the conference. The findings from this research will assist in outlining the current availabilities of tabletop roleplaying games for wellness programs. This body of work should also assist in providing rationale to conducting these programs.

BIO
Alyssia Merrick (BPsych Hons) is a PhD researcher located at James Cook University, Townsville. Their research primarily focuses on the impacts of play on adults, with a particular focus on the employment of tabletop gaming as an intervention for wellbeing.

Dr Dan J Miller is a researcher and lecturer located at James Cook University, Townsville. His research focuses on the social psychology of digital media, sexuality, and wellbeing.

Dr Amanda E. Krause is a Senior Lecturer (Psychology) in the College of Healthcare Sciences at James Cook University (Queensland, Australia). As a music psychology scholar, she studies how we experience music and the radio in our everyday lives. Her research asks how these experiences influence our health and well-being.

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