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# Exploring mental dungeons and slaying psychic dragons : an exploratory study

Michael S. Sargent

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Michael Stansfeld Sargent  
Exploring mental dungeons and  
slaying psychic dragons: an  
exploratory study

## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study examined the experiences of participants with table-top role-playing and with the gaming community. Specifically this study asked: In what ways do fantasy play and participation in the role-playing community benefit participants? This study aimed to address the lack of social work literature regarding the emotional and social benefits that role-playing games provide consumers.

Data were collected from interviews with six individuals who regularly engage in tabletop role-playing games. The study asked open ended questions regarding participants' experiences with the role-playing community, thematic and emotional content experienced within the fantasy setting, and benefits participants felt they'd gained from role-playing games and access to that community.

The key findings of this study were that community access and feelings of belonging were an important part of the role-playing experience, that participants reported the context of fantasy play decreased their social anxiety which allowed them to interact with their own emotional content meaningful ways, and that role experimentation through their characters led to improved social skills in all participants.

**EXPLORING MENTAL DUNGEONS AND SLAYING PSYCHIC DRAGONS: AN  
EXPLORATORY STUDY**

A qualitative study submitted in fulfillment for the  
requirements of the degree of Master of Social  
Work

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2014

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
------------------------	----

TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
------------------------	-----

### CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
----------------------	---

II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
----------------------------	---

III. METHODOLOGY.....	13
-----------------------	----

IV. FINDINGS .....	19
--------------------	----

V. DISCUSSION.....	29
--------------------	----

REFERENCES .....	35
------------------	----

### APPENDICES

Appendix A: Informed consent form.....	38
--	----

Appendix B: Flyer.....	41
------------------------	----

Appendix C: Demographic survey.....	42
-------------------------------------	----

Appendix D: Interview guidelines .....	43
--	----

Appendix E: Referral list .....	44
---------------------------------	----

Appendix F: HSR approval letter .....	45
---------------------------------------	----

## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the following study is to strengthen the body of social work literature on the characteristics of tabletop role-playing that are beneficial to the consumer and to gain insight into the functions role-playing games serve for the individuals who participate in them.

The use of role-playing in toddlers and school-age children is a generally accepted means by which children develop cultural competencies and empathy toward others while strengthening their executive functions. Role-playing can be used as a teaching tool and is frequently utilized in business settings, conflict mediation, military training, in the classroom, and as an empathy-building exercise in therapeutic sessions. Role-playing is also found as a leisure activity that appears in various forms, from board and video games to historic reenactments.

For the reader who is not familiar with role-playing games or the gaming community, I will introduce here exactly what a role-playing game is, how they came about, and take a closer look at the structure of tabletop role-playing games on which, will be the focus of the following study. Role-playing games (RPG's) can take many forms, from massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG's), storytelling single-player video games, trading card and tabletop war games, and imagination-based tabletop role-playing games. These formats all have one thing in common, namely that each player assumes the role of another. Modern role-playing games are all direct descendants of Dungeons & Dragons, which was released in 1974 and was

itself born from a cultural movement created by the 1950's release of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (Tresca, 2011).

Tabletop role-playing games, the best known of which is Dungeons & Dragons, utilize players' imaginations rather than a board or game pieces. Players co-construct the narrative through collaborative play. The game is run by a single person, not a playing character (PC) who is in charge of creating the overarching scenarios in which the players participate. This facilitator is referred to variously as a game master (GM), dungeon master (DM), or referee. The GM is a non-participatory omnipotent liaison between the players and the fantasy world of the game who narrates the goings-on in the game, assumes the roles of various non-player characters (NPC's), and interprets the results of various dice rolls in relation to the rules of the agreed upon game system. The game system is a complex set of preexisting rules by which the game is played and Dungeons & Dragons is one such system providing the structure needed to play. With the GM's template, it is the players who cooperatively build worlds through their participation.

Players begin by creating characters, which are often detailed and in-depth. Each character is complete with unique personal histories and statistics (stats) that denote physical and mental prowess such as one's strength, dexterity, wisdom, and intelligence. Players also assign characters with aptitudes, skills, and abilities that might include things such as etiquette, pickpocketing, alchemy, animal husbandry, arcane knowledge, or mercantile as well as many others. Players are usually given a number of points to assign to their stats and skills, and these numbers will factor into a formula determined by the various special dice used in the game. The twenty-sided die (d20) is most commonly used and determines the outcomes of actions PCs choose to take. Players choose a race, and each of which comes with unique abilities, vulnerabilities, and augmented stats. These include humans and demi-human species such as

elves, dwarves, trolls, gnomes, and many others. Players also pick a class that denotes their profession, as well as their role in the group. Some classic examples of classes include cleric, warrior, wizard, and thief. Lastly, players choose an alignment for their character that is meant to determine the motives and value set of the character. Examples of alignments are lawful good, chaotic good, neutral, lawful evil, and chaotic evil. Alignment provides a template to guide the behavior and interactions of the PC with other PCs and NPCs within the campaign. The campaign is a term denoting the current set of objectives and story line being participated in during the current game session. Characters develop over time in these games, which can extend over a period of years.

What drew me to this area for study was an observation made over my time as a member of the gaming community and as a professional in mental health. Individuals in the gaming community with a history of trauma or adverse experiences early in life seemed, to me, less impacted and perhaps galvanized against those negative experiences. They presented with more developed social and emotional skills, affect regulation, and resiliency to stress than those who did not engage in role-playing games. I wondered about what was happening through these games that was beneficial. One perspective views role-playing games as having the potential to bolster these skills in adolescents and adults who play by providing a space where they can practice them from the vantage point of their character, removed from the anxiety of judgment by others (Bowman, 2010).

Only a single case study could be found outlining the efficacy of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) as a tool in psychodynamic treatment. Blackmon (1994) identified that after two years with a client with schizotypal personality disorder who had little progress in treatment, D&D was the turning point in therapy that brought the client to wellness. He found that unconscious



patterns and urges were being acted out within the game that could be brought into therapy by discussing the behaviors of the fantasy character. Blackmon asserted that this structured environment put the client at less risk of distress than he might have felt in a real-life setting when exploring his problematic patterns, and asserted that D&D was ultimately the key player in the client's recovery.

This research has relevance to social work practice when considering the mandate of social workers within the preamble of the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) to serve and empower people who are vulnerable, oppressed, or living in poverty, with attention paid to the environmental forces that address these issues. The potential of tabletop role-playing games to strengthen executive functioning, to build empathy and social competencies, as well as to strengthen other skills cannot be ignored. As a social worker, I am mandated to explore new avenues of research and areas with the potential to empower others and enhance their well-being. In one case study participation in Dungeons & Dragons allowed for an individual to explore unconscious themes, building social skills, and enhance affect regulation and executive function. The client's involvement in D&D resulted in significant gains to his well-being while also lessening the emotional risk to the client that can result from directly exploring such themes (Blackmon, 1994).

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

This chapter begins with a review of the existing research and body of knowledge regarding role-playing games and fantasy play. The theoretical perspective of relational theory will be discussed, laying the groundwork for analyzing the data collected from participants. Next, the chapter will address research concerning the treatment efficacy of role-playing games, similar play therapy interventions, and the implications for future interventions. Lastly, this chapter will explore who plays role-playing games, who can benefit from them, and the implications for further research.

### **Role-Playing Games and Psychodynamic Theory**

Relational theory is a psychodynamic model that upholds the tenets of object relations, attachment, self psychology, and other psychodynamic theories in interpreting the inner world of the client. It differs from these theoretical perspectives in its "attention to context and interest in the impact of relationships and the dynamics of mental life" (Wachtel, 2008, p. 7). While relational therapists still utilize perspectives such as object relations and attachment theory to conceptualize themes and the inner workings of the client, therapeutic content is considered as the unique expression of that content in relation to that specific therapist (Wachtel, 2008). In other words, the therapist is "not really observing 'the patient,' but the patient in relation to a particular kind of interpersonal relationship with a particular individual who has particular

qualities and is responding to the patient's own qualities in particular ways" (Wachtel, 2008, p. 17).

Relational theory—a psychodynamic model that views subjective experiences as occurring within a relational context—is a well suited lens from which to view the subjective components of Dungeons & Dragons and similar table-top role-playing games, particularly because of the social and collaborative environment in which these games take place. Relational theory accounts for changes in how a person's experiences are dependent on the relational context in which they occur at that moment (Wachtel, 2008, p. 19). Relational theorists view "our understanding of other people [as] always infused with and mediated by our own subjectivity" (Wachtel, 2008, p. 18). Blackmon (1995) asserted that the core therapeutic value of role-playing was not just the in the game's ability to alter the subjective experience for one player, but for that player in relation to other participants.

Tresca (2011) explains one of the benefits garnered by game participants is in the opportunity to adopt alternate personhoods that provide experiences outside of their real-world identity. Imaginary play is an essential activity for child development and a behavior that is found in every normally developing child in every country on Earth (Tresca, 2011). Fantasy play contributes to the development of a sense of oneself in relation to others and builds an understanding of the rules and roles of their community and culture (Tresca, 2011). For the individual suffering from arrested development or fixation, the implication is that "role-playing games offer (these) players... opportunities to work on their self-concept and to further develop their personal identities" (Rossetlet & Stauffer, 2013, p. 173). At the heart of this process is the role of play as a tool for behavioral and symbolic learning or, in the case of pathological character traits, restructuring (Fried, 1992 p. 45).

According to Smith & Renter (1997) play allows a child to practice problem solving and affect modulation. As children play, their ability to problem solve and meaningfully utilize symbolic content increases (Botha & Dunn, 2009; Fried, 1992; Matorin, 1996; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). The space created through play allows a low-risk environment for trying out new behaviors by reducing the negative effects of the child's actions and allowing the child to learn in a safe environment (Klingemann, 1995; Matorin, 1996; Smith & Renter, 1997). The other essential function concerns sociodramatic play or imaginary play involving social content and language and the role of these two in the child developing a symbolic context to behavior.

Smith (2006) highlights the connection between sociodramatic play and the increased development of social and emotional skills in children. He asserts that one can “play with the meaning or form of a new language in ways that do not conform to a learner's current knowledge of the linguistic system,” and that this “may serve to destabilize the system, making possible its growth and change” (p. 418).

In a complicated society where no single identity is allowed to exist, each individual must choose a role congruent with cultural demands. Role-playing provides an outlet to experience a relief from social obligation and permission to explore the repressed and culturally incongruent urges or fantasies of the player in an ego-integrative way (Smith, 2006). Klingemann (1995) supports a similar stance, and discusses the value in such experiences as allowing participants to experience feelings of power and control that can be gained by playing out scenarios of simulated risks.

Of interest... is the finding that voluntary risk-exposure is consistent with individual perception of power and control and leads to a significant underestimation of subjective risk... such exposure is also an interesting link to risky leisure activities and to the

simulation of risk and uncertainty in games in general. Thus it might be speculated that playing and simulating risks and temporarily entering situations with thrill and danger, fulfill important individual needs for security and provide an illusion of control when societal risks have become objectively uncontrollable. (p. 112)

### **Treatment Efficacy and Future Interventions**

The case report by Blackmon (1994) concerning the use of a fantasy game called Dungeons & Dragons illustrates how the game may "serve to free fears and feelings for useful consciousness with enhanced ego development so as to improve the patient's ability to interact with others and feel comfortable with himself" (p. 624). The case followed a young man who was referred to therapy after a suicide attempt, and explained how the client made little progress in therapy after two years until he began engaging in a fantasy role-playing game outside of therapy. Aside from gaining a community and support network, where previously he had none, the games allowed this individual to experience his own feelings, wishes, and traumas through "the motives and feelings of the character as he schemed and acted" (p. 627). The game also provided an outlet for feelings of anger and resentment that this individual held toward his handicapped brother, whom he felt his parents abandoned him in preference of.

Blackmon (1994) describes how "play could be used as a repetition/compulsion to re-experience events that overwhelm the ego, and thus to master them," and that it could also reduce the buildup of overwhelming emotions that can hinder treatment and put the client at risk (p.628). Furthermore, the structured nature of these games provides an even safer environment than many existing therapeutic interventions for exploring waking fantasy. The safe environment is facilitated in part by the complex rules and structure involved in these games (Bellinson, 2013; Blackmon, 1994; Klingemann, 1995; Matorin, 1996). A tabletop game provides an emotional

buffer between the player and his or her past experience of trauma, and allows the player to participate in re-enactments with the company of others and in an organized way (Pedro-Carroll & Jones, 2005; Racine & Sévigny, 2001; Smith & Renter, 1997). In effect, these strict rules provide safety, giving "patients an opportunity to explore their mental dungeons and slay their psychic dragons" (Blackmon, 1994, p. 631).

In a similar vein, personal narratives that emerge through self-constructed game play, such as tabletop role-playing, have been shown to be a well-suited adjunct for treatment of a range of conduct and adjustment disorders in adolescents (Smith & Renter, 1997). The study by Kowert and Oldmeadow (2013) looked at the relationships between participation in role-playing games and self-confidence. They found that a content analysis of interactions between peers within the games "revealed that emotional content vastly predominates task-oriented conversations" (p. 1872). Kowert et al. also found that players reported that they valued the input of their peers not only in the game, but in real world settings as well. Another study assessed the use of games in helping homeless women explore their trauma narratives. This study found that the events shared in-game by a group of players can be a catalyst for the building of mutual support outside of the game context (Racine & Sévigny, 2001).

Smith and Renter (1997) found that while role-playing games improved impulse control, social skills, and communication skills, they did so only as an adjunct to treatment and were not recommended as the sole intervention for any adolescent or family system. While unconscious content could be looked at in sessions, much of what is advantageous in addressing a lack of social skills is simply the increased opportunity to connect with others provided by these games (Oppenheim-Leaf, Leaf, & Call, 2012).

Kowert and Oldmeadow (2013) stated that "up to 75% of game players report having 'good friends' within their gaming communities" and that regular participation in these types of games resulted in longer-lasting, more resilient and intimate friendships than were found in other mediated group activities such as sports, board games, and video games (p. 1872). This type of play is also effective in solving parent/child problems with children who had difficulty with acting out, poor impulse control, and poor social and communication skills (Smith & Renter, 1997; Fried, 1992). While other researchers found that role-playing resulted in an increase in social skills (Racine & Sévigny 2001; Smith & Renter, 1997; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Oppenheim-Leaf et al., 2012), in their study on game involvement and social competence, Kowert and Oldmeadow (2013) also found that people who were less socially engaged than average were drawn to involvement in this kind of fantasy play.

### **Who Plays and Who Benefits**

Some two point five million people engage in tabletop role-playing games monthly, with almost twice that number engaging in other types of role-playing activities on a semi-regular basis (Tresca, 2011). "Participation in all kinds of active or passive games has become highly popular... these long-term trends seem to have gone unnoticed by most (clinical) specialists" (Klingermann, 1995, p.99-100).

In a study from the Journal of Consumer Research, Holbrook, Chestnit, Oliva, & Greenleaf (1984) tested the relationship between personality and performance in a type of game relating to emotional response to that game. The authors describe games as a subcategory of play distinguished by the games' characteristic of having rules that determine whether someone is performing well or poorly (Holbrook et al., 1984, p.729). The importance of rules in therapeutic play is that they "provide a forum in which one may demonstrate one's skill so as to reinforce

one's sense of competence by displaying mastery or control" (p.729). The article provided demographic information and verbal and quantitative SAT scores, although it did not include the number of participants in the study. Participants were made to play a video game before the subject developed a positive or negative feeling toward that game. Verbal and visual versions of the video game were randomly assigned and involved landing a spacecraft on the moon. Verbal versions of the game provided the spacecraft's internal information such as fuel and velocity via text, while the visual versions showed the craft actually flying on the screen and required the subject to manipulate it with a joystick. Findings of this study seem to indicate that enjoyment of the game was directly related to visual or verbal aptitudes of the individual, or as the researchers described it, "emotions do depend on personality/game congruity" (p.737). Implications of this study may be that those individuals who interact more verbally might be most likely to engage with sufficient depth in a tabletop role-playing game to benefit from it therapeutically.

Limitations of the Holbrook et al. (1984) study are that, while researchers collected demographic information, they failed to provide it within their results. There is no way to assess if there is a significant difference based on sex, gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. While they did explore verbal and visual characteristics, they did not assess any other characteristics or skill requirements that might lead to enjoyment of the game. Their findings are relevant to this study, however, in that they suggest that there might be a personality template best suited for using tabletop role-playing as a therapeutic tool for some, where it might not be advantageous for others.

## **Summary**

The core therapeutic benefit of role-playing seems to exist within the shared narrative experience of one participant in relation to other participants, providing an opportunity to explore



one's sense of self in relation to others (Blackmon, 1994; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Tresca, 2011; Wachtel, 2008). The existing data seems to indicate that there are mechanisms at work within role-playing games that have therapeutic potential. What those mechanisms are and how they are benefitting people is a scarcity in the social work literature base, an occurrence that this study aims to address.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

The ultimate question to be answered by this study was, "in what ways do fantasy play and participation in this community benefit participants?" The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight into the beneficial functions tabletop role-playing games serve for individuals who participate in them. I sought to assess the value of such games as a tool for strengthening social skills, building emotional resiliency, and accessing unconscious themes and archetypes for individuals. My assessment was done by establishing if, and in what ways, personal themes for individuals were acted out through their characters as well as gauging players' emotional reactions and attachments to players, characters, and scenarios within the game. Interviewees identified benefits from tabletop role-playing such as improved community access, strengthened emotional and social skills, and an emotional outlet that they would not have had otherwise. The implication is that this type of play could be a valuable adjunct for some in therapy.

A qualitative research design was the best fit for this study for several reasons in no particular order. First, the inductive nature of this study was advantageous in exploring the relevance of this topic with the aim of formulating a hypothesis relating to the therapeutic value of these games. Second, the subjective nature of experience in an imagination-based activity, as well as the personal value garnered by a participants' affiliations with their communities, were best assessed through open-ended questions and personal narratives with the aim of extrapolating information from the themes that emerge regarding what participants found beneficial about role-

playing games. Lastly, a qualitative study is well suited for identifying emerging themes within the participants' narratives of their real-life experiences and projections of themselves through their in-game personas (Engel & Schutt, 2003).

### **Sample**

Working in conjunction with The Dreaming Comics and Games, a local comic book shop that has donated a small amount of store credit as incentive for people to participate in this study, six participants were recruited from among the numerous role-playing groups that meet regularly at this establishment. They participated in this study on a voluntary basis. Each received a ten-dollar gift certificate, redeemable at The Dreaming Comics and Games, on arrival for the interview. In compliance with HSR guidelines, participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, how their information would be used, and confidentiality practices in the informed consent form (Appendix A). To participate in this study, participants had to be over the age of eighteen and currently engaged in a regularly meeting and active role-playing group or have had more than two years' experience playing table-top roleplaying games. The reason for the criteria of participants who are more engaged in the role-playing community, or with longer-term experience with role-playing games, was to assess if there were long-term benefits that participants garnered. If there were, these benefits would be more prominent in players with more experience role-playing. This sample will likely be representative of other role-playing groups throughout this geographic area, since it is one of only a few venues in the city that supports participation in the activity of tabletop role-playing, and many of these community members are transient between this and the other available venues.

## **Recruitment**

A flyer (Appendix B) was distributed by management staff at The Dreaming to members who met to participate in role-playing groups at that venue. Flyers were also left at this shop outlining the study and providing contact and qualifying information to potential participants. Interestingly, about half of the participants responding to this flyer saw it in shops other than The Dreaming Comics and Games, meaning that the community itself distributed these flyers over a wider than anticipated geographic region. The furthest respondent to participate in this study came from a city nearly three hundred miles away. I screened participants for age and level of engagement in the role-playing community. Only those individuals over the age of eighteen who were either currently engaged in a long-term role-playing campaign of three or more months or have had two or more years' experience with roleplaying were able to participate in this study. The criteria for participation are outlined in the flyer (Appendix B).

## **Data Collection**

I gathered qualitative data via interviews that lasted between 30 and 75 minutes. At the beginning of each interview, I gave participants a demographic information survey to document age, gender identity, sexual orientation, frequency of participation in tabletop role-playing, number of years of participation in tabletop role-playing games, racial and ethnic identity, occupational information or professional goals, and economic status. The intent of the demographic information survey was to further contextualize themes for the interviewee in the proceeding interview and assessment of data (Appendix C).

Interview narratives were recorded digitally on a hand-held recording device, and then transcribed to text for analysis by this researcher after which the data files of voice recordings were deleted from the device. Interviewees were informed of their rights and given a consent

form outlining this researcher's obligation to maintain records for a specified amount of time (Appendix A). They were also apprised as to the steps that will be taken to protect their information, and in accordance with federal guidelines, disposed of after three years. These data will be stored on an encrypted external hard drive for the requisite amount of time, at which point the data files will be shredded using software designed for the disposal of sensitive data files. The paper files for consent and demographic surveys will be stored separately from the data files in a locked filing cabinet.

For many, tabletop role-playing is a very personal and nuanced experience that varies greatly between individuals. For this reason, interviews as a data collection method were an appropriate choice, since they allowed for themes to emerge between these varied experiences that would be missed by more quantitative measures (Engel & Schutt, 2003). Information and experiences of interviewees were expected to vary from one interview to another. Therefore the use of open-ended questions and a flexible approach to data collection was deemed most advantageous in exploring the perceived benefits and experiences of participants in RPG's. Interview questions were loosely structured and addressed themes of community access and participation, thematic content and emotional experiences, as well as therapeutic benefits and personal gains. Questions were left open-ended in order to encourage in-depth narrative responses from participants about the value of role-playing as a community and culture, their in-character experiences and intersections between their lives outside of the game and experiences within the game. The interview questions (Appendix D) were based around guidelines that were designed to elicit information regarding participants' experiences with the role-playing community, look for significant intersections between in-game and real-world experiences of

participants, and gain insight into the perceived benefits gained by participants through in-game content and community participation.

Participants were made to feel supported by the researcher and questions were asked in a non-judgmental and non-accusatory fashion. Data about personal issues and traumas were not directly connected in an effort to limit the discomfort of participants. Data regarding trauma were collected if participants offered the information without prompting, at which point the researcher asked if they would speak more to that, informing the participants of their rights not to do so. In insuring the use of data gathered from participants was delivered in a respectful fashion, the data have been presented in ways that portray trends from a strengths-based perspective reflected in the use of participant quotes and interpretation of emerging themes gathered from the data.

### **Data Analysis**

To avoid bias in the analysis of these data, a uniform narrative analysis method was developed for interpreting the responses and experiences of the interviewees. Based on emerging themes after the initial review of transcribed materials, relevant categories in participant responses were identified and coded by content using the Nvivo 10 software for qualitative analysis. From these, a matrix was created to help organize the collected data and allow for the next phase of data analysis wherein the frequency of responses within each of the identified categories was tracked within each narrative to provide clarity in identifying any emerging patterns among participants. As well as insight into the efficacy of role-playing as a means of assessing unconscious and archetypal themes for individuals and other factors that could have had value therapeutically or increased the resiliency of participants in coping with stress.

Because of the small nature of this role-playing community, confidentiality could not be insured insofar as the participation of research subjects in this study. Identifying information was

changed within this paper. However, participants did need to disclose their names to receive the store credit offered as an incentive. Appointments were scheduled with at least a one hour gap between meetings or on separate days, which limited the chance of participants' running into one another in the waiting room of the interview suite.

The small sample size of six participants raises further concerns to confidentiality. To further protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms were not used nor was information presented in such a way that it might create an identifiable character profile of a participant. Rather, quotes and data gathered were used generally to demonstrate themes that arose between interview content.

Initially, I placed flyers only at The Dreaming, but after receiving fewer responses than anticipated, I talked to the owner of the shop and asked him if he might be willing to put the word out more directly to the groups who role-play in his store. I received several more responses from participants.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the benefits experienced by participants in tabletop role-playing, and to assess the form and function of those benefits. Due to the scarcity of existing research focusing on the therapeutic benefits of this type of structured play in adults, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge concerning the perceived benefits and value of tabletop role-playing games.

This chapter outlines the data collected from interviews with six individuals who regularly engage in tabletop role-playing games. The first finding is that community access and feelings of belonging were an important part of the role-playing experience for players. Second, the relational context of the shared narrative played a role in participants' ability to interact with their own internal content in meaningful ways. Third, the role experimentation of an adopted persona was identified for the majority (n=5) as a tool for behavioral and symbolic learning. Lastly, all six participants reported gains to their social skills, and most (n=5) identified their in-game experiences as helping them cope with stress. Demographic information was collected from each participant regarding age, racial identity, gender identity, economic status, education level, and number of years playing.



## **Demographic Survey Data**

This study consisted of six participants. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 64 years old. Of these, five were 25 years of age or older. Five participants identified as male and one identified as transgender, primarily female. Five of the participants were employed: three, in computer science; one, in community organizing; and one, in security management. The other participant was a student. All participants had at least an Associate of Arts or equivalent degree, three participants had a Bachelor of Arts or equivalent, and two report attending some college. As to racial and ethnic identity, two participants identified as Chinese American, and four as Caucasian. The length of time involved in role-playing varied, with one participant who has played role-playing games between 2 and 5 years, and five participants playing for 10 or more years regularly, with three of those five having between 21 and 30 years' experience playing role-playing games, and one participant having more than 31 years' experience playing role-playing games.

## **Community Access and Participation**

While all six participants endorsed some amount of engagement with the role-playing community, and five of these also identified the role-playing community as a primary support group. One participant stated, "When I started hanging out at the game store and playing, the rifts campaign that was my primary support group in real space." Other participants described similarly important relationships originating from the role-playing community.

Of the participants, five cited role-playing as a means to promote new and lasting relationships with other people. This was well summed up by one participant, who said, "I think it is not atypical that people who get involved in these games find that they have plugged into a community, and it's a community that they are a part of that builds and grows with them."

Of the five, three further stated that role-playing prompted their relationships with their existing significant other. Only one participant did not experience role-playing as a means for promoting friendships, but rather as an activity he engaged in with existing friends.

### **Belonging**

Five participants endorsed strong feelings of identification and belonging toward the role-playing community. Of the participants who identified the role-playing community as a primary support, all five participants endorsed, in various degrees and manners, ways in which their relationships that originated in this community helped them through a difficult time, or to cope with stress.

### **Relational Content and Personal Experiences**

Of the participants, five reported experiences of loss or trauma during childhood. These ranged from experiences of abuse and neglect, to childhood homelessness and cultural conflicts concerning gender and sexual identity. All five attributed their successful navigation of these traumas to role-playing in various ways and to varying degrees.

All six participants advocated the importance of the shared experience in their enjoyment of in-game content. This sentiment was captured in the following narrative:

You get five people around a table, they all start coming up with characters. They all start sharing their cool ideas for characters. They start getting into their character and playing. The voice, the personality, and that leads to more imaginative actions, more in character actions than they would have taken normally. And pretty soon you forget that the person sitting across from you isn't an orc or a dragon or a girl.

Five of the participants connected the importance of the shared narrative in the creation of that experience in allowing them to interact with their own emotional content. One participant commented on this:

I tended to avoid people and tended to be very much a loner but when I had this community its like hey there's all these people I can interact with and safely, I don't have to worry about getting fired or beat up I'm not going to get looked at weird. It's just, you know you're expected to be weird.

One of the most striking similarities among participants was that they all reported the shared narrative inherent in this type of game to be an important component behind what they found beneficial from the role-playing experience. One explained the following:

Because you're hanging out with role-players, you're generally going to get a certain level of interaction with them...you get to see their response to these things. Like you put them in a situation that you might identify with in that moment in time. You got to see 8 different dudes' reactions to what they would do, as the character what would they do in that situation, and seeing that many people identify not directly, but indirectly, I think you don't become a victim of over-use of empathy or pity, or things like that. You get to see people by going through the games, you get to act out things in the game that you can't do in real life.

The trend in experience among these participants was best summed up by one description regarding how the roleplaying community "tends to be a little bit more progressive, maybe accepting, experimental, and having all of those qualities, and so those two pieces of my experience were pretty much definitive of the duality of my socialization and psychological development." Of the five participants who identified the role-playing community as an

important social identity, all identified the attitudes of acceptance and the non-judgmental characteristic of the role-playing community as a draw to their participation within that group. As put by one participant, the roleplaying community was "a way to connect with people. A safe environment to explore that connection in different ways."

### **Role Experimentation**

Three participants identified role-playing as a relief of social obligations allowing them to role-play aspects of themselves that are not culturally endorsed. For five of the participants, the broader theme of role experimentation emerged from the interviews as an important part of their shared and personal experiences in role-playing. One participant, who identified as transgender, described the experience as follows:

Being in that environment where I was free to be who I was. Anything I wanted to be and no one cared who I was or what I was. There was a lot of coming to terms with my own gender identity in that and I tended to play predominantly female characters and identify more as a female, not that you'd guess that often based on my appearance. There was a lot of that I didn't really understand or deal with but throughout my gaming career I've almost always played and preferred female characters. Once I came to terms with my gender identify that became more, "okay that's this part of me and that's how it's expressed," and I can understand that now how I worked through that without ever being able to admit to myself that 'hey this is who I am...' Looking back at it that was really, really important for me. It was something that I tended to focus a lot of my internal turmoil on... being able to deal with gender identity that was at my core that I didn't really have another outlet for.

Another participant offered the following:

A very good example is that almost all of my in-game characters are gay. So, long before I came out and was comfortable hanging out with gay people, having homosexual relationships, and telling my parents about it, I'd play gay characters. In the game, that was a, kind of a fun sort of thing. In fact, it was sort of interesting because, for example, one thing that's very commonplace even when it was just pen and paper, long before video games came along, a lot of my friends, as you might imagine, who played games were other guys. But it wasn't unusual for guys to select to play female characters, and I guess that was always a thing and even people who don't have any gender confusion or any other struggles with that, it turns out that it turns out that playing a female character is a sexy thing to do and always has been in the gaming community. But for me, playing a gay character was a little bit out of the box compared to that sort of thing, but it didn't seem or feel as weird. It also allowed me to do weird things like play a male character who was having, um, relationship with female characters played by male players, and while I didn't conscientiously think about that as a therapeutic thing, but it did give me a chance to have sort of a, like, layered interaction with another male on a romantic level vis-à-vis, or using a female avatar.

These five participants also utilized the theoretical position of their adopted persona similarly as a tool for behavioral and symbolic learning, and four discussed benefitted further in their real-world interactions by drawing from their in-game interactions with characters and non-player characters (NPC's). One participant described how this improved their social skills and feelings of mastery by stating the following:

You get to actually sort of play those out, practice those, say "how could I do this better?" And you actually have the opportunity to do it better. So you kind of re-do it and re-do it

And say "hey, this is a better way to get what I want" or a better way to deal with this situation.

These five participants described experiences where role-playing helped them to resolve some kind of inner conflict. Here is one such narrative:

It's something that helps me to kind of get away from that, from the stress in the world and maybe deal with some of my more negative emotions and thoughts and not worrying about them having an impact that I'll have to deal with later on down the road.

While all participants endorsed benefitting in some ways from role-playing, only the five participants who had also experienced varying early childhood traumas and life stressors described role-playing games as the means by which they worked through and found resolution to those experiences. Only these participants who endorsed experiencing a significant life stressor related role-playing to the resolution of the resulting inner conflict. While their experiences differed, the mechanism behind the resolution of their conflict remained constant among all five individuals. Of note as well is that these five individuals also noted an affinity toward verbal learning in their endorsement of the role-playing experience as promoting creative thought through either reading or writing.

The tendency toward acceptance in the role-playing community was cited by more than half of participants to have been a factor in reducing fears of consequence, allowing them to act out and experience personal themes in-game, through their characters. One participant stated that, "I have a very difficult time dealing with people in general, and so it was an environment where I could actually deal with people and learn. I guess in a large part, it helped me learn how to deal with people." These four participants discussed the importance of the rules and structure

of the role-playing game as providing them with an emotional buffer and reducing anxieties from emotional content. Here is an example:

I think in large part just having that role-play structure, understanding how that structure works helped me to work through real-life interactions, so I can actually interact with people, develop some social skills and not, not be completely awkward and anxious and unable to interact with people.

Another participant described how practicing social skills in a role-playing game was helpful to them in the following narrative:

I knew that from role-playing what escalates and what didn't. I'd never been in that situation in real life. I haven't really ever had a fight that ever escalated out of control but I knew how to handle it. So I know that that didn't come from firsthand experience. It was theoretical experience.

One participant, diagnosed later in life with autism spectrum disorder, felt that role-playing was at the heart in promoting their currently high-function social skills. He describes this as follows:

With being ASD...I like structures, I like protocols, logic, rational progressions, and you know, games, role-playing games very much have that. There's a set of clear, well-defined rules, which real-life doesn't have, so I can sort of look back at some of those rules for some of my real-life interactions, and sort of filter everything that happens through that and use that as a basis for my response and actions.

### **Common Benefits and Personal Gains**

All six participants endorsed experiencing some common benefits from role-playing. These included enjoyment of a playful activity, improved social skills, enjoyment of the shared

narrative experience, and increased exposure to others. Half of the participants reported increases in feelings of mastery and control, relating variously to tangible proof of progress through leveling up, feelings of accomplishment after completing a goal, and overcoming obstacles. These emotionally rewarding characteristics inherent within role-playing games were a factor for all participants in their enjoyment of the role-playing experience.

All participants endorsed varying gains in relation to their social skills because they interacted with theoretical situations in-game that later provided structure in its application to real-world interactions. In addition, two participants further stated that the medium of interaction and attitudes of community non-judgment greatly reduced their experiences of social anxiety, allowing them to interact with their own narrative and thematic content within the game.

Five of the participants identified their experiences in-game as helping them cope with stress. Four of these participants believed that access to the role-playing community either helped them cope with stress or increased their resiliency toward stress by strengthening their social supports. The five participants who identified role-playing as a coping mechanism described the intersection between their access to real-world support and experiences with role-playing games. This was captured in the following narrative shared by a participant:

We go out of our way to get together to game, and whenever our games go on hiatus, we have monthly dinners together just so we don't lose touch with each other. And so, I think that has been very valuable, 'cause those are the types of relationships, this most significant one I currently have in that category.

## **Summary**

This chapter presented the findings from interviews with six participants who regularly engaged in tabletop role-playing games. For all participants, role-playing was a fun and playful



group activity that increased wellbeing and provided a shared experience to have with friends. The majority of participants identified the role-playing community as a source of social support wherein they formed new and lasting relationships. A major theme emerged among the experiences of five participants who had experienced significant life stressors in that they all felt able to use fantasy play to confront or explore that content in a meaningful way. Characteristics of the community, coupled with participants' in-game content were important factors for these five participants as a mechanism for coping in various ways. All of the participants who acted out personal content and conflicts through their characters in the game described how accessing that content in the context of the shared narrative and experience increased their self-concepts and resolutions of inner conflicts.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

This qualitative, exploratory study sought to gain insight into the beneficial functions tabletop role-playing games serve for the individuals who participate in them and to uncover the value of such games as a tool for strengthening social skills, building emotional resiliency, and accessing unconscious themes for individuals in a beneficial way. This chapter will first explore the prominent findings gathered from the narratives of participants within the context of the existing literature reviewed. These findings include the following: community access and social supports were important components of role-playing for all participants; self exploration within the context of the shared narrative was paramount in enabling five of of participants to interact with and resolve inner conflicts; all participants reported increased confidence in their social skills resulting from in game role experimentation; and lastly, five participants reported increased emotional resiliency. The chapter will close with implications for clinical referral, areas for future research, and a chapter summary.

#### **Themes and Findings in Relation to the Literature**

A theme arose across the interviews regarding the mechanisms involved in the participants' interactions and benefits from role-playing. The process occurs at the intersection of real world and fantasy play interactions with others with feelings of acceptance from the real world community the participant engages with and the rules and structure of the role-playing

system creates a low-risk environment allowing the individual to experience their personal themes through a shared narrative (Blackmon, 1995).

Interestingly, the participants who cited reading and writing as important components to their role-playing experiences were also the ones who seemed to connect with in-game content in an emotionally transformative way. This is consistent with the findings of Holbrook et al. (1984), which suggests that verbal, rather than visual, individuals might benefit most from a language based game. Language plays a role in creating the shared narrative, allowing individuals to interact with behavioral and symbolic content with in-campaign content, as well as being implicated as a component of what might be therapeutic about these games (Smith, 2006).

Five participants reported that the role-experimentation through the shared narrative and their characters allowed them to interact with their personal narratives in a meaningful way. Smith (2006) describes how the act of playing in a group context allows an individual to try out new combinations of behavior that, under the functional pressure of real world application, normally wouldn't be tried. Indeed, in all the interviews, the function of play arose as an important component of role-playing. The safe community context in which the game took place allowed for the exploring of roles and behaviors that would not be tried elsewhere for all participants. Similarly, the rules and structure within the game system seemed to minimize the risk for participants in engaging in symbolic play within the shared narrative. All participants endorsed gains to their theoretical understanding of social situations and, as a result, an increase in their feelings of confidence in navigating social situations.

The existing information on role-playing does a sound job accounting for the importance of the relational context of the shared narrative being the mechanism behind which are opportunities for growth through interaction with personal themes (Wachtel, 2008). However,

very little is mentioned regarding the relationships that can grow from those shared experiences in real life and how that enhances the quality of life for members of the role-playing community.

The study found five participants identified the role-playing community as one of their primary social groups from which new relationships and friendships were made, and four of these endorsed strong feelings of identification and belonging toward the role-playing community. All of the participants described important events occurring throughout the campaign, such as the death of a character, group victories and losses, and memorable experiences, as cathartic and almost as impactful as having gone through those experiences in real life with the group. In this way, role-playing promoted new relationships over time through the shared narrative by simulating experiences and creating real attachments between participants. The end result for at least four participants was an increase in their sense of belonging and resiliency from stress that come from their feelings of being supported by, and belonging to, a community. These shared, imaginary experiences seemed to be a catalyst for feelings of mutual support. In line with existing research, for at least four participants, these events assisted them in accessing their aspects of self through the shared narrative by further increasing their sense of support when accessing their own content.

A trend among participants was the interrelatedness between access and support from the community and their feelings of security in exploring their own emotional content in game. The use of play as a therapeutic and learning tool is a well-studied area and highlights the role of the fantasy setting in minimizing the fear of consequences in one's behavior, thereby promoting a less risky setting to learn in (Smith, 2006; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). While the role of imaginary play in the development of children is well understood from a treatment perspective, utilizing imaginary play therapeutically in this context, for adults is not (Klingermann, 1995).

One feature that makes role-playing unique is that it seems to meet certain social and emotional needs in its adolescent and adult participants not accounted for in existing treatment strategies or in our understanding of imaginary play in children (1995).

### **Implications for Clinical Practice**

Three participants endorsed the role-playing setting as the first place they felt safe enough to experience their various aspects of self. As an adjunct to treatment, this study has implications for role-playing being well-suited for more than just instances of conduct and adjustment disorders (Smith & Renter, 1997 p. 67). For the participants of this study, role-playing was an effective tool in addressing personal thematic content in their personal narratives, and building social and emotional skills. The parallel process of community access and support along with the self exploration that occurred within the existential experience of the shared fantasy narrative was central to benefits of increased social confidence, improved self-concept, belonging, and self-awareness enjoyed by the participants in this study. This study also provides insight into the experiences and processes behind in-game content, shedding light on what is valuable in those interactions. Implications for social work practice appears to be in the ability of role-playing games to repair social networks and build social supports, and address an array of thematic content for individuals, including traumatic and existential issues for individuals, particularly those that the individual is guarded against.

The participants who seemed to engage most deeply with role-playing seemed to have an affinity towards a verbal thinking style. Clinicians should be aware of this in suggesting role-playing to clients. Individuals with early life stressors and poor access to a strong social network might benefit most from playing table-top roleplaying. It is unclear how in-game content should

be brought into the therapy room but what is certain is that unconscious themes were acted out within the context of the shared narrative experience.

### **Limitation and Areas for Future Research**

The biggest limitation of this study was its small sample size of six participants. While considerable effort was made to reach the role-playing groups at one venue, more participants might have been recruited had I timed by recruitment efforts with one of several role-playing conventions in my geographic area. The small sample size might also have resulted from reluctance to discuss personal experiences in game with a stranger. One solution to this might have been found had I joined a role-playing group, thereby building trust with the players through participation in the shared narrative and observing these interactions first hand.

A second limitation of this study is that it did not particularly focus on the use of role-playing as a means for individuals to familiarize themselves with and explore their gender and sexual identities while lessening the existential impact experienced by some. Future studies could look into the role of player identification with the gender of their character or that of a fellow PC since this was not the focus of this study but was a benefit experienced by two participants and might look at how role-playing interacts with content related to sexual and gender identity and sense of self or how fantasy play increases resiliency for individuals first exploring their sexual or gender identities.

Another limitation is that this study did not actually collect any data from within a therapeutic context or measure the effectiveness of table-top roleplaying as an adjunct to treatment or in symptom reduction. A future study might seek to look at how role-playing can be used to address past experiences of the PCs by reflecting their histories within campaign material.

## **Summary**

This chapter compared the findings of this study against existing literature. Relevant themes that emerged most notably related to the parallel process between the characteristics of the community and the structure of the game that promoted a variety of transformative and beneficial experiences. Existing research addressed how role-playing can be beneficial theoretically, but seemed to miss the real world community qualities promoting a certain kind of in-game experience by meeting the needs of its participants for feelings of acceptance, camaraderie, and safety.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA**

.....

**Title of Study: Traversing Mental Dungeons and Slaying Psychic Dragons: An Exploratory Study into the Therapeutic Effects of Role-Playing Games**

**Researcher: Michael Sargent, Smith College School for Social Work, (XXX)XXX-XXXX**

.....

**Introduction**

- You are being asked to be in an exploratory research study that seeks to further the current body of knowledge for social work practice concerning the psychological and communal benefits experienced by people who engage in tabletop role-playing games.
- You were selected as a possible participant because of your regular participation in role-play activities.
- I ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

**Purpose of Study**

- The purpose of the study is to gather information from regularly participating role-players on how their in-game experiences and participation in the role-playing community has affected them. A secondary purpose of this study aims to address the gaps in the current body of knowledge concerning the potential for role-playing to promote well-being in its participants and to speculate on these characteristics that may have therapeutic value.
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master's in social work degree.
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

**Description of the Study Procedures**

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: fill out a short demographic survey, participate in an interview that will last at most ninety minutes and discuss your relationship to your characters and experiences in-game. You may be asked to discuss areas of difficulty in your life that were improved by role-playing or that community. You may be asked for a follow-up interview in the event that one might be needed.

**Risks/Discomforts of being in this Study**

- The study has the following risks. First, you might experience some emotional discomfort after recounting past hardships or traumas during the course of this study. You have the right to withhold any information you do not feel comfortable sharing, although the likelihood of this discomfort is high if you have experienced a trauma, even if you choose not to share it. The likelihood of this risk depends on each person, their experience with trauma and their relationship to it. Lasting emotional distress is unlikely. Second, there is a high likelihood that you may experience feelings of

vulnerability in discussing sensitive information with a stranger.

### **Benefits of being in the Study**

- The benefits of participation include helping expand the body of social work knowledge concerning the largely unexplored activity of tabletop role-playing.
- The field of social work and society benefit from your participation in this exploratory study by providing insight into an underrepresented community and an activity that could be a powerful therapeutic tool in helping others achieve or maintain well-being.

### **Confidentiality**

- Your participation will be kept confidential. Your name will be changed to protect your anonymity within the study, and all identifying information will be removed from your transcript. Your name may be shared with my research advisor and the human subjects review board. Meetings will take place in a private office at 1521 Northeast Ravenna Boulevard in the University District on weekends and evenings. The records of this study will be kept confidential. These interviews will be audio recorded. Only this researcher will have access to these recordings for the purpose of transcription and data analysis.
- All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. I will not include any information in any report I may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

### **Payments/gift**

- You will receive \$10 in store credit at The Dreaming Comics and Games as a thanks for your participation in this study. You will receive payment at the conclusion of your interview regardless of whether or not your interview is used in this study.

### **Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* (up to the date noted below) without affecting your relationship with the researcher of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point noted below. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by April 15, 2014. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis.

### **Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Michael Sargent at msargent@smith.edu or by telephone at (XXX)XXX-XXXX. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

**Consent**

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep.

**1. I agree to be audio taped for this interview:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B

Flyer

# WANTED

## GAMERS FOR RESEARCH

**CONTACT:**

**Michael Sargent**

**MSW student/Researcher/Clinician**

At [REDACTED] or email at: [Msargent@smith.edu](mailto:Msargent@smith.edu)  
for more information on how you could further the study of clinical social work in this exploratory study on table-top roleplaying.

**SMITH COLLEGE SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL WORK.**

**MUST BE 18 OR OLDER TO PARTICIPATE**

**OTHER CRITERIA.**

Been a table-top gamer for over 2 years.

Are open to sharing your in game/in character & out of game experience with the researcher.

Would like to contribute in a study with the potential to help others achieve wellness by furthering clinical understanding of Role-play as a therapeutic tool.

**A GIFT!!**

Receive \$10.00 in store credit at The Dreaming Comics & Games for your time (about 90 minutes)

**BENEFITING**

The practice of Clinical social work and this MSW student by helping him graduate!!

## Appendix C

### Demographic Survey

Which of the following best describes your gender identity?

- Male
- Female
- Transgender
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Which of the following best describes your racial identity

- Multiracial
- If so, what groups? \_\_\_\_\_
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Pacific islander
- Black/ African American
- Hispanic/Latina
- White/Caucasian
- Not mentioned? please write in: \_\_\_\_\_

To which age group do you belong?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-64
- 64-74
- 75+

My annual income falls between

- \$0-\$24,999
- \$25,000 - \$44,999
- \$45,000-59,999
- \$60,000 – 99,999
- \$100,000 +

Highest grade completed or degree/certificate earned \_\_\_\_\_

Professional goals or Current occupation:

How many years have you been a member of the Role-playing community?

## Appendix D

### Interview Guidelines

#### Questions relating to role-playing as a community and culture

- How did you get started in roleplaying and what has it been like for you?
- How have your social supports changed since participating in role-playing?
- What does it mean to be a member of this community?

#### Thematic content Emotional experiences in role-playing

- What in-character experiences were the most impactful?
- Tell me about the background of characters you have identified with most
- What in-game campaigns, victories, or losses were particularly meaningful to you?
- What, if anything, did you get from these characters and campaigns that you didn't get elsewhere?
- How has role-playing helped you through a difficult time or cope with stress?

#### Questions relating to benefits from role-playing

- What benefits have you gained from playing fantasy games?
- What benefits do you experience from role-playing that are different from other types of games?
- How has your life been impacted by participation in the role-playing community?
- How do you think others could benefit from role-playing?
- Is there anything you want to add that I did not ask you about?



## Appendix E

### Referral list

University of Washington  
Counseling Center  
401 Schmitz Hall, Box 355830  
Seattle, WA 98195-5830

Phone: (206) 543-1240

Seattle Counseling Services  
LGBTQ counseling resource  
1216 Pine Street, Suite 300  
Seattle, WA 98101

Telephone/TTY: (206) 323-1768  
FAX: (206) 323-2184 [info@seattlecounseling.org](mailto:info@seattlecounseling.org)

Sound Mental Health  
1600 E Olive Street  
Seattle, WA 98122  
Phone: (206) 302-2300  
Video Phone: (206) 455-7929 (Deaf Services)  
Toll Free: 1 (800) 828-1449  
email: [info@smh.org](mailto:info@smh.org)

Seattle Veteran's center  
2030 9th Ave; Suite 210  
Seattle, WA 98121  
206-553-2706

Appendix F

HSP Approval Letter



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

January 13, 2014

Michael Sargent

Dear Michael,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Mary Beth Averill, Research Advisor