

An Exploration of Emotional Resilience Developed Through Tabletop Role-Play

Abstract: This study aimed to expand on the research into tabletop role-play and social and emotional development, focusing on emotional resilience. 109 participants responded to a survey inquiring about their experiences with long-term, multiplayer tabletop role-play, including characters that were meaningful to them and six factors of emotional resilience: comfort with challenges, ability to problem solve, emotional expression, ability to handle criticism, social connection, and self-perception. Out of these 109 participants, three were chosen to expand on their answers from the survey and were interviewed. The participants included players, game masters, and those who did both, and included participants from diverse backgrounds. A phenomenological approach was taken while the data was coded for themes using NVivo software. 26 key themes were identified that linked tabletop role-play to the development of emotional resilience. The themes were put into four categories: trends found in characters, dramatic rehearsal, social development, and emotional development. The study found that these themes aligned with the three areas of skill development needed to grow emotional resilience (Barry 2018), as well as therapeutic powers of play (Pliske, Stauffer, and Werner-Lin 2021), and beneficial forces of group therapy (Yalom and Leszcz 2020). The results of this study can be applied to make home-games more safe, rewarding, and meaningful, but can also guide practitioners wishing to use therapeutically applied role-playing games in their practices.

Keywords: bleed, emotional growth, emotional resilience, therapeutic, role-playing games, social development, tabletop

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1. INTRODUCTION

Play has the ability to guide, empower, and connect us. From schoolyard games to your weekly *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign, play shapes people's lives and can mold them for the better.

Schaefer and Peabody (2019) define play as having "freedom from the constraints of reality, positive affect, flexibility, intrinsic motivation, inner control, and a focus on the process of the activity rather than the outcome" (4). After about the age of 5, children shift from symbolic play to social play with cooperation and rules to follow, preparing them for tasks associated with adulthood (Drewes and Schaefer 2016). However, studies show that, though not as socially acceptable as games played by children, play performed by adults can develop close relationships, establish safety and security between players, signify acceptance, reduce conflict, encourage communication, induce flexible thinking, create excitement and positive affect, and relieve stress (Coe 2017; Van Vleet and Feeney 2015). Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson believed that play was our way of "mastering and adapting to the world" (Miller 2016, 144), one key tool in the quest to achieve healthy development as we age. Play can help us "understand what it [means] to be human" (Pliske, Stauffer, and

Werner-Lin 2021, 250), and help us build self-worth and confidence, experience catharsis, and develop needed social bonds (Bui, Vander Dussen, and Widera 2024; Pliske, Stauffer, and Werner-Lin 2021). When we take control of the stories we tell through play, we establish a newfound sense of security and empower ourselves (Ogawa 2004).

1.1 Benefits of Tabletop Role-Play

Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) are a specific type of “games with rules” (Drewes and Schaefer 2016) where players work cooperatively to tell a story guided by the game’s mechanics, which frequently have an element of randomness to them such as rolling dice or pulling cards from a deck. Though still a growing field, there is an increasing amount of evidence that playing tabletop RPGs can be beneficial to social and emotional health (Bowman 2013; Coe 2017; Connell 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023; Meriläinen 2012; Walsh and Linehan 2024), such as fostering personal development (Daniau 2016), increasing social skills (Henning et al. 2024; Varrette et al. 2023; Slaughter and Orth 2023; Orr, King, and McGonnell 2020), and decreasing social anxiety (Bowman 2013; Varrette et al. 2023).

Playing tabletop RPGs can be beneficial to learning as well. Research shows that being offered choices increases both performance and engagement (Patall et al. 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018) and that learning is enhanced by a connection to emotions and a social situation, as well as the presence of intrinsic motivation (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018). The playfulness, meaningfulness, and attractiveness of games naturally enhances intrinsic motivation (Zainuddin et al. 2020) and helps learners to achieve the three basic needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (2020) which encourages players to stay engaged with the game over time (Bowman and Lieberoth 2018). In a 2012 study, 65% of role-players said they had learned new, useful things from RPGs, and over half of those surveyed said their problem-solving skills had increased (Meriläinen). Tabletop RPGs give players “an imaginative space in which they can practice and develop decision making, planning, social skills, conflict resolution, probabilistic thinking, goal development, and teamwork” (Coe 2017, 2855). The potential reasons for this learning range from Vygotsky’s dialectical process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, where learners are challenged with new information and must integrate it into their existing worldview (Miller 2016), the observational learning explored in Social Learning Theory (Miller 2016), or exploring lessons through the metaphor of story and learning from indirect teaching (Pliske, Stauffer, and Werner-Lin 2021), as well as other avenues.

A large majority of role-players find important romantic and platonic relationships through role-play, with those relationships making up a significant part of their social lives (Meriläinen 2012) including meeting spouses through role-play (Bowman 2013). Tabletop RPGs help players connect with others socially (Adams 2013; Bowman 2013; Bowman and Lieberoth 2018; Coe 2017; Meriläinen 2012; Orr, King, and McGonnell 2020; Walsh and Linehan 2024), can help increase social competence and success (Henning et al. 2024; Meriläinen 2012; Orr, King, and McGonnell 2020), and can foster inclusion (Coe 2017), empathy (Meriläinen 2012), and moral involvement (Adams 2013; Haarman 2022). In fact, in order to be considered a “good gamer”, one must embody prosocial traits such as cooperation, selflessness, and authenticity (Bowman and Lieberoth 2018).

The control and autonomy expressed over collaborative storytelling can also lead to emotional growth (Ogawa 2004). Role-play can lead to increased self-acceptance, self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-regulation, and confidence (Bui, Vander Dussen, and Widera 2024; Coe 2017; Walsh and Linehan 2024). Playing tabletop RPGs can help players learn to respond well under pressure in addition to helping them explore identity and understand themselves and their own emotions (Coe 2017) through their player-characters: roles enacted by players that are central to the narrative.

Blackstock (2016) reported that those who role-played through larp (live-action role-play) “found their characters acting as a mirror that gave them insight into their own real-life experiences and motivations” (8), and that larpers developed social confidence and conflict resolution skills, engaging in self-reflection after role-play experiences to relate events during play to their real lives (8). In a discussion of play therapy, Ray et al. said while being “provided an environment characterized by safety, acceptance, and therefore freedom to explore self” children undergoing play therapy are “empowered to build self-concept, personal responsibility, self-direction, self-acceptance, decision-making skills, sense of control, self-reliance, coping awareness and skills, internal source of evaluation, and trust” (2022, 137). The emotional impact that tabletop RPGs have on players may be in large part due to the 20 core therapeutic powers of play discussed by Pliske, Stauffer, and Werner-Lin (2021). They say that these core agents improve well-being and self-care by “facilitating communication ... fostering emotional wellness ... enhancing social relationships ... and increasing personal strengths” (244-245). There is evidence that playing tabletop RPGs helps foster healthy development as we age (Coe 2017).

1.2 The Therapeutic Elements of tabletop RPGs

With all this in mind, we can see why there are a growing number of practitioners using tabletop RPGs for the purpose of fostering wellness in psychiatric patients (Connell 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023; Varrette et al. 2023). While home-games can be powerful agents of growth and change, a shared story led by a trained professional can be even more impactful. Though there are a wide variety of elements that could feed into this phenomenon, the four that stand out in the literature are the concepts of good vs. evil and altruism in play, Doppelgangers or “close to home” characters, bleed, and dramatic rehearsal.

The fight between good and evil is one that may seem self-evident in many tabletop RPGs, but is also a studied phenomenon when it comes to its beneficial impact. Kawitzky (2020) says that the shared qualities of tabletop role-play and critical utopianism create situations that are “less about technical improvement, and more about players exercising their capacity for imaginative, potentially revolutionary, hoping” (135). Fine (2002) says that the “folk ideas” of the game and game master “capture the ‘essence’ of a society—its core beliefs and central values” (76). The folk ideas of many early tabletop RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* include, Fine argues, ideas such as unlimited good, unambiguous good vs. evil, and results that rely on courage more than the luck of good rolls. In a 2013 fantasy theme analysis, Adams found that good vs. evil was a strong component of *Dungeons & Dragons*, saying that “Players consistently demonstrated that they fought for what was morally right and saw each other in the role of a hero” (80) suggesting this met a need in the players to participate in moral involvement. Though the game and table never explicitly stated the player-characters (PCs) must perform only morally good deeds, “ultimately they sought to protect others, punish evil-doers, and restore what was right in their storyline” (81). Both hope for ourselves and our peers as well as altruism towards others are hugely therapeutic powers that aid in the healing process (Yalom and Leszcz 2020).

Erikson argued that children in the third stage of development model their behavior off of “ideal prototypes” such as “hero” (Miller 2016, 142), but will try out new social roles and behavior as they age. Many players choose to play characters who are in some way similar to themselves in order to connect more with the game and story, known as Doppelgangers or “close to home” characters (Bowman and Lieberoth 2018). In fact, some therapeutic practitioners urge their patients to create player-characters who are aspirational to them, such as in their ability to assert boundaries or be brave. This creates an alibi for patients to try out new behavior and practice behaviors they don’t feel confident embodying in the real world (Connell 2023). In a 2017 study, Coe found that some of the reasons people play tabletop RPGs to begin with include “identity exploration,” “real versus ideal self,” and “understanding self through gaming” (2854) which included characters who were based off specific fragments of the player, such as a flaw they saw in themselves, fully realized. Cross

(2012), who asserts she is one of many who discovered her transgender identity through role-playing games, said that role-playing “is an act of constant ‘becoming’ that allows for self-conscious ... social reconstruction” (72-73, emphasis removed) and that it is “an act of imaginative constitution, making and remaking” (82).

The key element of this transference from game to player and vice versa is bleed. Bleed is defined by the Vi åker jeep designer collective as being “experienced by a player when her thoughts and feelings are influenced by those of her character, or vice versa. With increasing bleed, the border between player and character becomes more and more transparent” such as when affection between players is manifested between the PCs as well (Vi åker jeep Role-Playing Collective n.d.). Some players may choose to “play for bleed” in order to be more emotionally connected to the story and characters. Due to the way the human brain is wired, we process stories and our real lives very similarly, using our same skills of theory of mind and mirroring when dealing with fiction (Bowman and Lieberoth 2018). Though steps can be taken to reduce bleed if unwanted, bleed and immersion are very natural when it comes to collaborative storytelling such as playing tabletop RPGs (Bowman and Lieberoth 2018; Lankoski and Järvelä 2012). Games that aim for bleed, known as bleed designs, “weaken the protective frame of play in order to explore powerful emotions” (Montola 2010, 155, emphasis removed). Players have reported bleed being invaluable for embracing learning experiences and fostering self-analysis (Bowman 2013), which can both be important for healing and growth (Yalom and Leszcz 2020). Bleed can lead to steering, or directing a character’s actions for out-of-game reasons, which could “provide a space where [players] can approach challenging issues” (Walsh and Linehan 2024). Fantasy and pretend play, such as role-play, can be used by players to “act out their world or experiences via metaphor and symbols” while creative role-play “provided gradual exposure to emotions and metaphors for examining those emotions indirectly through a character or a performance” (Pliske, Stauffer, and Werner-Lin 2021, 251). Though our tendency towards noble stories of heroics and altruism can be gratifying for role-players, it is the bleed effect that allows us to internalize these stories, reflect on them, and ultimately utilize them for personal development and emotional growth.

While bleed is a delivery method for growth through role-play, the mechanism underlying this process within the role-play itself is what philosopher and educator John Dewey refers to as “dramatic rehearsal” (Dewey 1960). Haarman (2022) argues that role-play allows players to take on different traits and behaviors, requiring them to think from outside perspectives. This expands imagination, builds critical problem-solving skills, enhances empathy, and may ultimately lead to more civic behavior (Dewey 1960; Haarman 2022). If-game thinking describes when a player frequently fantasizes about their game, including conversations they may have in-character and potential character relationships (Bowman and Lieberoth 2018). Players frequently report finding this kind of immersion to be meaningful to them (2018). As a therapeutically applied RPG practitioner, Connell (2023) said that her patients are frequently helped by tabletop role-play’s inclination towards perspective taking, practicing conversational skills, practicing behaviors such as expressing autonomy and enforcing boundaries without real world consequences, and being able to face potentially traumatic events with “agency, control, and support” (71-72), which helps to process the events and feelings surrounding them.

Dewey’s concept of dramatic rehearsal—in which, through the act of deliberation, an individual considers various courses of action and plays them out through their conclusion along with any potential consequences, not weighing the utility of the outcome, but taking care to consider context and character (Dewey 1960; Hamington 2010)—is perfectly encapsulated in the social storytelling of multiplayer tabletop RPGs, especially those run in long-term campaigns. This method of role-play—getting to practice for emotional, social, and political situations—falls under Erikson’s conception of *ritual*, as “provid[ing] ready-made solutions to the problems of everyday life” (Miller 2016, 145). These rituals, or dramatic rehearsal, add to our pool of potential responses when making decisions as we go about our days. Essentially, the things we practice during role-play get encoded into our long-term memory and are added to a mental database of communication and

behavior that we can utilize during future interactions (van Reemst, Fischer, and Zwirs 2016). According to group therapy practitioners, getting interpersonal feedback on social situations, gaining insight into your intent vs. actual impact on others, imitating others' behavior, and learning from others are all powerful healing agents that lead to growth and increased well-being (Yalom and Leszcz 2020).

1.3 Researching Emotional Resilience

The following study aimed to add to the research on the benefits of tabletop RPGs by examining the connection between long-term, multiplayer tabletop role-play and the development of emotional resilience. The study defines emotional resilience as “relative resistance to psychosocial risk experiences,” separate from social competence, self-efficacy, or general positive mental health, and less tied to overall positive experiences than to interpersonal relationship patterns (Rutter 1999, 120). Emotional resilience is one of four aspects of personal resilience, along with physical, mental, and emotional, and deals with emotional range and flexibility, self-regulation, and positive relationships (McCarty and Childre 2010). Emotional resiliency can be broken into three categories: personal skills (including self-acceptance, dealing with uncertainty, coping with failure and success, challenging perfectionism, and problem-solving), social skills (including empathy, comfort in social interactions, and conversational skills), and life skills (including coping with unfairness, resolving personal conflicts, coping with stress, and pragmatism). The development of these skills typically leads to increased confidence, an enhanced ability to cope with stress, better problem-solving, improved relationships, developed social skills, and increased compassion for the self and others (Barry 2018).

Due to my own development of emotional resilience because of tabletop role-play, the study aimed to explore the questions of what effect tabletop RPGs specifically have on emotional resilience, and what aspects of tabletop role-play are associated with the growth of emotional resilience, putting the experiences of others in dialogue with my own.

2. METHODS

This study took a phenomenological approach to researching the question of tabletop role-play's relationship to emotional resilience.

2.1 Participants

For this study, 109 participants completed an online survey exploring their development of emotional resilience in relation to their tabletop role-play experiences. After the survey was closed and data was collected, three survey respondents were contacted for a follow-up interview. These three participants provided additional documentation about significant characters they had played as PCs or NPCs (non player-characters).

Participants were 18 years or older and American citizens. They had been playing multiplayer tabletop RPGs for at least 6 months and had played at least 3 sessions of role-play over the course of that time. Participants were a mix of players and game masters (GMs), with 54 identifying as players, 30 as GMs, and 25 filling both roles fairly equally. All participants self-reported as having experienced emotional or mental health challenges within the three years before beginning tabletop role-play. Participants came from diverse backgrounds and experiences, with 95 identifying as queer or LGBT, disabled, neurodivergent, a marginalized race or ethnicity, a religious minority, fat, or formerly homeless.

Participants were recruited from the general tabletop forum page of itch.io, an independent gaming website that hosts many tabletop RPGs for sale, and Tumblr, a blogging platform popular with tabletop fans, which was tagged with relevant hashtags such as “indie tabletop RPGs” and “TTRPG community.” The link to the survey was also spread through word-of-mouth, with several participants expressing that they had shared it with their gaming circles.

2.2 The Survey

Survey questions were based on Rutter (1999), McCraty and Childre (2010), and Barry's (2018) work on emotional resilience, as well as adapted from clinical psychologist Madhuleena Roy Chowdhury's Emotional Resilience Self-Assessment tool (2019) and psychology professor and resiliency expert Al Siebert's Resiliency Quiz (2005). The questions were self-reflective and revolved around changes observed during the course of participants' tabletop role-play careers. Some questions were open-ended, while others prompted participants to reflect on whether certain qualities had improved, stayed the same, or gotten more challenging since beginning tabletop role-play. The major topics these questions revolved around were comfort with challenges, problem-solving ability, emotional expression, ability to handle criticism, social connection, and self-perception. Additional questions inquired into characters played by the participants that stood out as meaningful to them.

2.3 The Interviews

The three interviewees were chosen from the survey responses because their answers exemplified trends and themes that appeared in the data. Two were a player and GM who self-disclosed as being from a marginalized community, and one was equally a player and GM who did not identify as marginalized. In addition to the interview, they provided additional documentation beforehand that included descriptions and backstories of significant characters they had played. The interviews were semi-structured and designed to expand on common themes found in their survey responses.

2.4 Data Analysis

Once the survey was completed, an inductive method was taken to identify themes found in the data by coding it using NVivo software. Once major themes were identified, interviewees were chosen and contacted. Once the interviews were complete, they were transcribed and were also coded through NVivo, along with the additional character documentation. Themes were then put into categories based on common factors that aligned with the literature on emotional resilience.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Participants were provided a participant information form before the survey began, explaining their right to exit the study at any time as well as what the study would entail. They had the option of not opting in to a follow-up interview and therefore remaining completely anonymous in the survey portion of the study. Interviewees were contacted through provided email addresses, and were given codenames on all documentation that was saved, such as interview notes and transcripts. All data from the study was stored on a protected, private computer, and interview recordings were deleted after being transcribed. Character names are redacted in selected quotations to protect the privacy of participants. Written permission was given by my table members to discuss their characters without using names in the discussion portion of the paper. The study passed Oklahoma State University's IRB process before being conducted.

2.6 Reflexivity Statement

I, as the researcher, have been playing tabletop RPGs for 8 years, from the classics to small indie games, as well as publishing my own systems for the last 2 years. I have played with groups that changed the trajectory of my

life for the better and made me lifelong friends, groups that caused many sleepless nights over strife and upset that ultimately broke up long-term relationships, and much in between. Despite this polarity of experiences, I believe that the growth I've achieved during this time has been in large part due to tabletop role-play, which is what led me to pursue graduate education and perform research in this field. I believe my insights into and connection with this community were beneficial to my ability to parse the data and draw meaningful conclusions, and both guided my choices in how to conduct this study.

3. FINDINGS

A total of 41 themes were identified in the data. The themes were referenced against the literature, some were pruned for lack of relevance and some combined, and then those that were supported by the literature and appeared in a fifth or more of the responses were organized into four categories (trends found in characters, dramatic rehearsal, social development, and emotional development). In addition to the 19 qualifying themes, six subthemes were included that appeared in less responses but fleshed out or supported a main theme, and one theme was included that did not appear in the survey responses but was spoken of extensively by all three interviewees.

For example, the following responses were found to fit an overall trend of participants using their characters as idealized selves to strive to emulate, and were thus coded as “role model”:

In a way, D—was wish fulfillment ... If D—could let go of the crushing weight of everything, while also holding on to the things which truly mattered, I could as well. (Participant 17)

Watching her find her voice and become an important player speaking up for what she knows is right. It makes me feel like maybe I can do that someday, too. (Participant 28)

In general, I came to understand that she is who I wanted to be seen as, or at least a major part of that. (Participant 36)

Out of the total 109 participants, only 1 participant reported no growth in any category. After all responses were token-counted for indicating no change, negative change, or positive change, 77.8% of the total responses to the questions indicated mild to immense positive growth, or 487 of the total 626 question responses. This is compared to 13 total instances of negative change from 9 participants. Most participants clearly labeled their direction of change, with tokens including terms like “improved” or “deepened” for a positive change, “stayed the same” or “neutral” for no change, and “weakened” or “got worse” for negative changes. Questions that were skipped by participants were not included in this total count. Participants who were both players and GMs equally reported growth the most frequently, especially when it came to comfort with challenges, emotional expression, and self-perception.

Table 1 shows the categories along with their themes and subthemes from most to least prevalent in the responses, with subthemes marked with an asterisk and italicized.

Table 1. Themes and subthemes by category and prevalence.

Category	Themes and Subthemes	Prevalence
Social development		(298)
	Social connection	88
	Heightened expression	74
	Social skills	46
	<i>*Empathy</i>	*20
	<i>*Improvisation</i>	*18
	<i>*Character different to player</i>	*17
	Collaborative problem-solving	32
	Respect and safety	3
Emotional development		(232)
	Self-esteem	68
	Creativity	44
	Emotional growth	39
	Confidence	35
	<i>*Comfort with failure</i>	*14
	Self-reflection	32
Dramatic rehearsal		(179)
	Identity exploration	41
	Trauma exploration	40
	<i>*Complicated romance</i>	*9
	Emotion exploration	36
	Dramatic rehearsal	30
	Religious exploration	23
Trends found in characters		(159)
	Close-to-home characters	42
	<i>*Character as role model</i>	*12
	Altruism	32
	Chosen family	25
	Difficult family	25
	Loss of family	23

3.1 Trends Found in Characters

The first category was trends found in characters, which related most closely to research on good vs. evil (Adams 2013; Fine 2002; Kawitzky 2020), altruism (Adams 2013; Yalom and Leszcz 2020), and “close to home” characters (Bowman and Lieberoth 2018). The themes under this category were “close to home characters” with the subtheme of “character as role model”, “difficult family”, “loss of family”, “chosen family”, and “altruism.”

The most common theme in this category was “close to home” characters, with 42 participants discussing how playing characters who were in some way similar to themselves was beneficial both to their relationship with their character and themselves. Some participants reported this allowed them to accept parts of themselves they were unable to before, or develop self-care, such as Participant 52, who said, “especially as I put a lot of pieces myself into my characters and I care for them a *lot* (so by extension, I care for myself)” (Participant 52).

There was a subset of participants who fell into this theme who specifically indicated using their characters as role models, either intentionally creating them with aspirational qualities, or growing to appreciate their qualities in ways they had not before. Participant 54 explained, “She exemplifies the traits that I want to inhabit in my own life – selflessness, kindness, empathy, and a willingness to do anything for the people she loves” (Participant 54).

There were two common trends in the backstories of the characters participants considered most meaningful to themselves. 25 participants included that their characters had grown up with difficult family, from messy to abusive, such as Participant 62, whose character, “grew up in a broken home, telling lies to keep the peace between abusive parents” (Participant 62).

There was overlap between these characters and the 23 characters who had experienced loss of family members, such as Participant 5, who said, “She was a scorned and emotional warrior in her flock due to the death of her important father, who wanted to prevent the upcoming war between her flock and another” (Participant 5). Though the characters who had lost family members included family that was both biological and chosen or adoptive, those that indicated messy or abusive families were far more often about their characters’ biological family members.

A similar number of participants (25) indicated their characters found a chosen family either in their backstories or over the course of the campaign. Participant 25 said of their campaign, “Particularly what stuck with me was the sisterly relationship she formed with another PC, which actually brought me and the other player extremely close as friends” (Participant 54).

Finally, 32 participants indicated that embodying altruism and storylines of fighting for good were important to their gameplay. Participant 2 said of their character, “She was also based on the idea of militant decency. The idea that you can look at the world and its flaws and injustices and be intensely ANGRY and turn that into energy to do the right thing and make the world a better place” (Participant 2).

3.2 Dramatic Rehearsal

The second category was dramatic rehearsal, which most closely related to research on dramatic rehearsal (Dewey 1960; Haarman 2022; Hamington 2010) and bleed (Bowman and Lieberoth 2018; Lankoski and Järvelä 2012). The themes were: dramatic rehearsal, identity exploration, religious exploration, trauma exploration, which included the subtheme of complicated romance, and emotion exploration.

30 participants referenced the idea of dramatic rehearsal rather directly, such as Participant 62, who said, “I’ve always been a problem solver, but being able to adapt to playing other characters allows me to be able to shift my point of view to help me see problems from different angles” (Participant 62). These partici-

pants explained that perspective taking and practice for future social situations was a key benefit of tabletop role-play for them.

Many participants used their characters and campaigns to explore charged topics such as identity, religion, stigmatized or challenging emotions, and trauma. A subset of these responses (17 participants) indicated that playing characters of a different sexuality or gender to how they originally identified allowed them to come to terms with their own queerness, including one participant who named herself after a meaningful female character she'd played. This included Participant 27, who said,

While G— originally began the game identifying as male (like I did), I used their shape changing powers to explore my gender further. G— eventually settled into assuming primarily female forms, and through this I was able to build up the courage to come out to my fellow players- including my brother. G— was a bit of a loose cannon but through her I was able to show that being a different gender wouldn't change who I was. (Participant 27)

Other identities explored by participants included disability, neurodivergence, and racial identity.

There was also a selection of participants who used their characters to explore religion, either damaging religious experiences such as cults, or, like Participant 11, playing religious characters such as clerics and paladins in order to explore a healthier relationship to faith: "I am not a person of faith. C— is, and I wasn't expecting her to be, or to help me explore and heal from some experiences I had around faith as a young disabled person" (Participant 11).

Nearly on par with exploring identity, many participants (40) explored themes of trauma with their characters. Some of these depictions of trauma were very fantastical and prototypical examples of a *D&D* adventuring party. Others explored grounded trauma in a fantastical way, such as Interviewee "S", who gave her characters homebrew mechanics for the magical effects of abuse from caregivers. Others still played through situations of neglect, abuse, and other very real-life trauma. This helped some participants reflect on, process, and move on from past experiences. Others had situations they were in currently were reframed by the story and the other characters' and players' reactions reflecting them back in a new context. A small but significant portion of these responses dealt with complicated, toxic, or abusive romantic relationships:

I have previously experienced manipulation in a romantic relationship. Being able to play through the aftermath of leaving an abusive relationship helped me work through my own emotions from my past. (Participant 56)

Encountering fictional situations with my character in positions that (unbeknownst to the GM) mirrored some of the emotionally abusive situations I was in myself at the time gave me a way to see those situations for what they were, and to practice getting out of them in a low-stakes, not-real-time setting with some added emotional distance. (Participant 73)

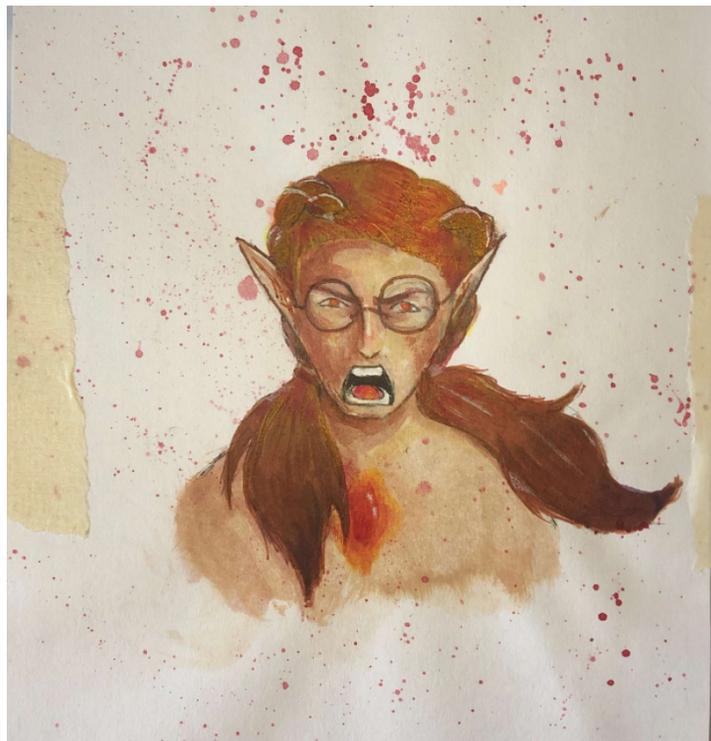
Finally, a significant portion of participants used their characters as tools for exploring particular challenging, painful, or stigmatized emotions, such as Participant 8.

His story is largely about moving beyond bereavement, about learning to accept the presence of grief within your life, and to understand that life still goes on even after earth-shattering events ... Simply put, M— is an exploration of my grief over losing people. (Participant 8)

Emotions that participants explored included grief, horror, desperation, protectiveness, desire, fear, empathy, loneliness, obsession, and compassion, however, by far the most common emotion for participants to explore with their characters was anger. Many participants discussed having repressed or been disallowed anger that they were able to inhabit for the first time with their characters.

And you know, a very common trope in this roleplaying game is that a person goes through their first change to become a werewolf when they encounter something that fills them with so much rage that it inspires them to action. And one of the things with this character that I wanted to do was to reflect on my own experiences with rage, because, as somebody that was bullied, like, in the handful of places where I did stand up for myself, it turned into something where every fucker in the room was coming to stop me. And the bully was, of course, let go, and I was the one that got in trouble and, you know ... So, I wanted to make explorations with a character that had always denied themselves their own rage. (Interviewee “M”)

Figure 1. Interviewee’s character experiencing magically-induced rage



3.3 Social Development

The third category was social development, which was focused around the growth in Barry’s (2018) social skills and life skills necessary for emotional resilience, as well as growth goals for therapeutically applied RPG and group therapy practitioners (Connell 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023; Yalom and Leszcz 2020). This category included themes of social connection; social skills and its subthemes of improvisation, empathy, and character different to player; “heightened expression; collaborative problem solving; and respect and safety.

The theme of players finding social connection through tabletop RPGs was by far the most prevalent, with 88 participants of the total 109 reporting that they found more, better, or deeper connections with others through role-play. One stated, “I’ve always been a bit of an introvert, but when you and your players bleed and cry together, we form an almost unbreakable bond.” (Interviewee “M”)

It seems likely that this increased connection was in part due to role-play helping participants develop social skills. In fact, six of the participants indicating a growth in this area used the exact phrase “social skills” for what had improved due to role-play. Many participants indicated that they now felt more comfortable speaking to others, with 18 participants referring to this skill as improvisation. One mentioned:

TTRPGs really exercise my skills in improvisation – maybe I have a plan but the players have gone somewhere I didn’t expect, so I come up with something on the spot. I can’t retcon because that makes for an inconsistent/less enjoyable session, so I [know] to be able to roll with the punches and commit to whatever I’ve already got going on. This is really handy in other parts of my life as well, such as work. (Participant 95)

Another stated, “I used to have severe social anxiety, fear of approaching people and talking to strangers, but getting to ‘practice’ all that helped me overcome it. (Participant 58)

Participants who indicated more and better connection with others explained that role-play had increased their empathy and compassion for others, allowing them to connect deeper with more and more diverse people. One stated, “This has prompted me to be a better listener and accepting of others with differing experiences to [my] own, which makes us all better rounded.” (Participant 65)

Some indicated that playing characters who were different to them is what helped them see other points of view and increase their compassion. One stated, “When I pretend to be my character, I have to sometimes make hard choices that I would never make in real life but my character does. That dissonance has made me a better person, I think” (Participant 104).

Many participants (74) also indicated that role-play increased their ability to express themselves, either when it came to communication or talking about their emotions. This was the second most prevalent theme amongst participants. One participant stated:

I think that I have become more able to have emotionally difficult conversations since starting role-playing. I have always struggled with things like confrontation and just generally difficult conversations, but through roleplay and having a safe environment to act these situations out, I feel like I have been able to better handle these types of conversations ... This is probably the number one thing that has improved since starting tabletop roleplay. (Participant 54)

One specific skill that was brought up in the responses was that of collaborative problem solving. 32 participants explained that while before, they would trend towards tackling challenges alone, if at all, after role-play, they consulted friends on what to do and how to approach challenging situations. These participants indicated going to their “teams,” often fellow players, at various stages in tackling a problem to get advice or feedback, such as Participant 52, who said,

I am much more creative with solutions and able to actually ask for help in more situations ... to turn to my team and crowdsource solutions and then suggest a plan (when before I was more likely to internalize, panic, and then put it off until I couldn’t anymore). (Participant 52)

Though not present in the survey responses, a key topic of conversation in all three of the interviews conducted was the matter of respect. All three had experienced frustrating, upsetting, or traumatizing experiences at tables in the past, despite their obvious emotional growth through tabletop role-play at the time of the study. When asked about these experiences in comparison to their meaningful and healing experiences with role-play, the answer always came down to respect.

“I enforce a pretty strict boundary of trust, communication, [and] respect between the players and the storytellers,” said Interviewee “M” (it/she), who had experienced disrespect and bigotry at tables past. She discussed having to carve out safe spaces where there had been none in early decades of the tabletop RPG community. The use of safety tools (tools designed to navigate player consent and comfort during role-play) was something also brought up by Interviewee “V” (he/him), who used safety tools “always.” He preferred a traffic light system—using red, yellow, and green cards to indicate how comfortable someone was with the current scene. “If something starts to get a little bit hazy, they shift to yellow, and we double check real quick or we start to shift away. And I always hope to avoid red having to be used at all. But sometimes it has come out before.”

In contrast, Interviewee “M” utilized consent forms with various topics to be cautious about or avoid in order to ensure player comfort during horror campaigns. Having come from a decades-long career in tabletop role-play, it said, “I guess that what a lot of people take for granted with tabletop gaming is that things are currently inherently safer than they used to be...I think that a lot of people are starting to underestimate the importance of tabletop safety tools.” This was reflected in the experiences of Interviewee “S” (she/they), who played for several years with a DM who would not listen to player requests for lower-intensity play. “It was way too stressful. There were times where I had to physically step outside, because I was, like, shaking and sobbing.” Utilizing safety tools and respecting the boundaries and consent of all those at the table not only leads to better role-play experiences and closer bonds, but also avoids harming players and even possibly inducing trauma.

3.4 Emotional Development

The fourth and final category was emotional development. This revolved around Barry’s (2018) personal skills, in addition to the aftereffects of growth in emotional resilience. Like the previous category, it included goals from TA-RPGs and group therapy. The final category included the themes of creativity, confidence and its subtheme of comfort with failure, self-reflection, self-esteem, and emotional growth.

A high number of participants (44) indicated that tabletop RPGs made them more creative, and motivated them to renew lost creativity or take up new creative hobbies. This included drawing, painting, creative writing, storytelling, homebrew, and game design. One participant stated, “I suddenly had a flood of creativity and motivation to create art where in years previous there had been none.” (Participant 6)

Participants said that after tabletop role-play, they felt more confident. Some indicated this was due to increased social skills, and others said this feeling was directly influenced by their characters, such as Participant 37, who said, “Q— was outgoing, funny, loud and enjoyable to play, and she was so different from me that falling into that character helped me feel better about myself” (Participant 37).

A smaller subset of participants reported that part of this increased confidence was specifically that they felt more comfortable with failure or the potential for it. They were less fearful, more inclined to take risks, and felt better about being corrected by others. One participant states, “A lot of my anxiety about doing something wrong or looking silly/stupid has gone away, since I’ve had space to express myself and fail safely” (Participant 14).

Participants also indicated that role-play, and especially inhabiting their characters, gave them a way to reflect on themselves, leading to acceptance, understanding, and change. One participant shared, “I feel more in tune with who I am as a person, because weirdly, spending time pretending to be other people has let me figure out myself in a more precise way” (Participant 2).

For a lot of participants, this, as well as other aspects of role-play, led to them developing better self-esteem. Participants criticized themselves less, learned to appreciate aspects of themselves they saw reflected in their characters, grew into their identities, and developed self-love. One participant stated, “In incorporating various personality traits into my characters, I’ve really learned to love parts of myself I used to be afraid of” (Participant 7).

Overall, this led to a lot of general emotional growth for participants. They reported being more comfortable in themselves, being kinder, being better able to handle criticism, having a better understanding of their own feelings, feeling hopeful about the future, being more tolerant of stress, being more open and mature, rejecting people-pleasing, communicating about boundaries, and being more comfortable with vulnerability. One participant said:

I got a grasp on my depression during the period I played her. I watched her accept herself. I played her as she actively chose to behave differently, as she became hopeful. It was what I needed at the time. To see that someone achingly sad could find contentment. (Participant 44)

Another participant stated, “Playing E— was really just speedrunning healing, haha.” (Participant 52)

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align with research on the therapeutic powers of play (Pliske, Stauffer, and Werner-Lin 2021) and the benefits tabletop RPGs have on social and emotional health (Adams 2013; Bowman 2013; Coe 2017; Connell 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023; Meriläinen 2012; Walsh and Linehan 2024). The themes revealed in the data mirrored the benefits of group therapy (Yalom and Leszcz 2020). Participants reported many areas of growth that Barry (2018) discusses as key elements of emotional resilience.

4.1 Therapeutic Forces

Pliske, Stauffer, and Werner-Lin (2021) discuss 20 core forces that make play therapeutic and can improve well-being and aid healing. 13 of these forces appeared as themes or within themes in the findings. These include: heightened abilities of self-expression, access to the unconscious, indirect learning, abreaction (recreating traumatic events through play), fostering positive emotions, stress management, increased attachment to others, heightened social competence, increased empathy, creative problem-solving, moral development, increased self-esteem, and overall increased resiliency. Interestingly, catharsis, which they list as another core force and is listed as a therapeutic power of group therapy (Yalom and Leszcz 2020), was not a major theme in the data, with only six participants mentioning catharsis as a benefit of tabletop RPGs.

However, several themes do align with Yalom and Leszcz’s (2020) benefits of group therapy. Increased emotional intelligence was discussed by many participants, along with altruism both within the game and between players, mirroring of family dynamics and structures (especially between PCs), learning new socialization techniques, healing from seeing someone else with similar challenges deal with issues (known as vicarious or spectator therapy), role-play giving players a space to experiment with new behavior, interpersonal learning, and what’s known as the corrective emotional experience, where players were re-exposed to emotional situations they weren’t able to handle in the past, but now under better and safer circumstances.

These forces and beneficial effects of role-play can lead to what McGonigal (2015) discusses as *post-traumatic growth*. She explains that those who’ve undergone a traumatic event sometimes come out the other side stronger and healthier. The five most common things those who’ve experienced post-traumatic growth say is that they’re no longer afraid to pursue happiness over other priorities, that they’re closer to their loved ones, that they understand themselves better, that they have a new sense of meaning and purpose, and that they’re more focused on their own goals and dreams (5). However, she says that those who take on a big challenge (for instance, dedicating to a regular, long-term tabletop RPG campaign and all the in-game challenges and emotions that come with it) can also experience this growth, whether they’ve undergone a trauma or not.

This is known as *post-ecstatic growth*, and may be even more relevant to the emotional growth seen in those who play tabletop RPGs long-term. This also could align with the finding that those who both played and GMed equally were more comfortable with challenges, had higher instances of heightened emotional expression, and better self-perception than those who mainly did one or the other. They were experiencing the benefits of play and group cohesion along with the benefits of managing, planning for, and running a big project. While many indie tabletop RPGs place less responsibility on the GM than *D&D* or *Pathfinder*, there still are elements of responsibility for the emotional well-being of the group, whether it be planning events they will enjoy, creating enticing NPCs based on the players' interests, or encouraging the use of safety tools. There are also different types of affirmation between making choices the table enjoys as a PC and running a story that the players find meaning in.

4.2 Emotional Resilience

Barry (2018) describes emotional resilience as our ability to cope with adversity, with the development of resiliency skills leading to improved mental health, increased confidence, increased ability to cope with stress, better problem solving, better relationships, increased social skills, increased compassion, and a developed sense of pragmatism. The themes found in the data very much support that long-term, multiplayer tabletop role-play increases emotional resilience and the development of resiliency skills in players.

He identifies three categories of skills that all feed into emotional resiliency. Of these, the themes echo that tabletop RPGs develop life skills such as being able to resolve conflicts in a healthier way and coping with stress; social skills such as empathy, comfort with communication, and better social interactions; and personal skills such as self-acceptance, dealing with anxiety, coping with failure, putting an end to catastrophizing, and problem-solving.

That said, there are factors of tabletop role-play that could weaken the development of these skills or the emotional benefits as well. Discussed by Bowman (2013), there are many potential social pitfalls when it comes to role-play groups, such as strife between players when bleed happens over conflicts in or out of game; antisocial behaviors like leaning on the excuse of "It's what my character would do" while causing upset with in-game choices; cutthroat and backstabbing behaviors between PCs, as well as secret-keeping and scheming against fellow party members; an over-focus on rules and "winning" the game; and from the GM side, imposing narratives on the PCs without their cooperation, being overprotective of NPCs, having NPCs solve important problems for the players, and lack of direction in sandbox-style games.

The interviewees shared similar experiences of lack of trust and respect at tables, bad behavior from players ruining everyone else's experiences, and seemingly malicious GMs causing trauma reactions in players week after week. And yet, these participants continued coming back to these games and still all demonstrated great amounts of love for and growth because of tabletop RPGs. In the same way one friendship can be traumatizing without lessening the human need for close friendship, having bad experiences at the table does not erase that tabletop RPGs fulfill very human needs of connection, care, heroics, extraordinary experiences, and creativity (Adams 2013; Coe 2017; Orr 2020; Walsh and Linehan 2024).

4.3 Limitations

The method of recruiting participants very possibly led to a higher instance of participants from marginalized communities, and who lean towards telling more narrative-heavy stories. The results may have looked different if more recruitment was done at places like gaming stores, which tend to draw a different audience, or in circles that prioritize crunchy and combat-focused games. Recruitment was done through channels where people who were still currently playing tabletop RPGs were most likely to see the posts. This likely skewed

the data towards people who were currently having positive experiences with tabletop RPGs, or had not fully quit the hobby. The high percentage of positive responses may not hold in the face of a different population of respondents, even if the themes stayed consistent. Finally, there is also a version of this study that traded the large number of survey responses for more numerous in-depth interviews. As respect and safety was a theme that only appeared in the interviews, different themes might have come from this method.

4.4 Future Research

There is still more that needs to be understood about the potential therapeutic benefits of tabletop RPGs. Are there specific games that are more or most suited to developing emotional growth in players? Are the potential social pitfalls of role-play (Bowman 2013) a uniquely harmful threat to players who've undergone "small T" or Type II trauma (Connell 2023; Ogawa 2004)? When should bleed be harnessed for growth and when is it detrimental? Which safety tools are most beneficial in which circumstances, and when could an overuse of safety tools get in the way of meaningful, impactful experiences (Montola 2010)? These are all questions future research could seek to answer in order to develop the literature on the benefits of tabletop RPGs.

5. CONCLUSION

Tabletop role-play can be a powerful force for good. It allows players to come together in moments of shared creativity, encouraging moving storytelling that explores conflict and hardship, identity and experience, and connection and emotionality. Players can find growth and healing through these shared narratives, learning vital skills to improve their lives and their relationships with others. Over time, tabletop role-play can foster emotional resilience in players, even in the face of past damaging experiences with the hobby. We humans crave the play, connection, and meaning-making that comes from tabletop RPGs. This study explored the effect tabletop role-play has on emotional resilience, identifying 26 key themes that highlight how tabletop RPGs can help us grow. My hope is that more research is done into the benefits of role-play, allowing players to make informed choices on how to get the most out of their games, and giving therapeutically applied RPG practitioners even more of a leg-up when it comes to helping their clients. Whether or not tabletop RPGs can change the world, they can certainly change our worlds. How can your next game help you grow?

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APPENDIX A: Survey Questions

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?
2. Are you a United States citizen?
3. Have you played a multiplayer tabletop roleplaying game?
 - Multiplayer tabletop RPGs include pen and paper roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons* where there are either multiple players and no Game Master (person running the game) or one Game Master and multiple players.
4. Have you been playing multiplayer tabletop RPGs for 6 months or longer?
5. Have you played three or more roleplay sessions?
 - Role-play includes when you are acting as your character, and does not include Session 0s or character creation sessions.
6. Did you experience mental or emotional struggles within three years of beginning tabletop roleplay?
 - Challenges might include mental health conditions, disabilities that restrict daily life, traumatic experiences, and/or marginalization

7. After reading the participant information form, do you consent to taking part in this study?
8. Will you answer the prompts honestly, to your level of comfort?
 - You do not have to share details that make you upset, or that would be identifiable to those who know you. You are able to answer with little or more detail, up to your comfort level
9. Do you consider yourself a part of a marginalized community?
 - Marginalized identities may include holding queer identities, being disabled, being a person of color, being of a minority religion, or others
- 10. OPTIONAL:** What marginalized community or communities do you consider yourself to be a part of?
 - You may be broad or specific, to your level of comfort
11. Are you more often ...
 - A player
 - A game master
 - Both equally

PART 1: The Survey Begins

12. How do you feel that you've changed since starting tabletop roleplay, if at all?

PART 2: Finish the Sentence

Consider the prompt, and then finish the sentence. Has the topic stayed the same, improved, or gotten more challenging for you?

13. Since starting tabletop roleplay, my comfort level when taking on challenges has...
14. Since starting tabletop roleplay, my ability to find solutions to problems has...
15. When approaching challenges, my strategy is now...
16. Since starting tabletop roleplay, my ability to express challenging emotions has...
17. Since starting tabletop roleplay, my ability to handle criticism has...
18. Since starting tabletop roleplay, my connection to other people has...
19. Since starting tabletop roleplay, my perception of myself has...

PART 3: Characters

20. When designing my characters, I tend to...
21. Please provide a one-paragraph description of your most meaningful character and their backstory
 - How you define or decide "most meaningful" is up to you. The character does not have to be the one you've played the longest, only the one that stands out to you the most
22. Why is this character the most meaningful to you?

PART 4: Interview

23. Would you be interested in taking part in an optional follow-up interview on this same topic?
24. Do you consent to your audio being recorded during the interview?
 - Audio will be recorded through Zoom in order for a transcript of the interview to be made. The recording will be stored on a password-protected private computer, and deleted within a week of the interview taking place.

25. Please provide the best email to contact you for an interview
- Only three participants will be contacted for a follow-up interview. Participants will be contacted after the survey is closed and all data is collected on April 12th.

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