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# Playing to Find Out: Adapting Story Games for Group Therapy with Teens

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# Playing to Find Out: Adapting Story Games for Group Therapy with Teens

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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### Abstract

Millions of adolescents in the United States face childhood trauma and its sequelae, and group therapy is a common treatment. The purpose of this project was to examine the field of role-playing game design with an eye toward developing future group therapy methods for adolescents with trauma histories. Using a qualitative textual analysis research design that was a mix of grounded theory and content analysis, two contemporary role-playing game texts, *Apocalypse World* and *Monsterhearts*, were analyzed. The text was coded, and themes were generated to organize the findings. Findings indicated that RPGs and group therapy share a great deal structurally. In addition, RPGs provide a way to approach triggering material in a safe way, through a fictional avatar. Findings also suggested that these RPG texts teach users how to play the game in a clear manner that could be helpful for future writers of group therapy manuals to emulate. These findings indicate that RPGs are a potentially fruitful field in which to develop new group therapy methods, and that these games would provide excellent starting points for such therapies.

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### **Introduction**

Each year, millions of American children face psychological trauma of some sort (Sedlak et al., 2006; Fairbank, 2008). This may take the form of abuse or neglect, witnessing violence, experiencing a medical emergency or natural disaster, or any other among a terrifying array of potential misfortunes. (Moroz, 2005; American Psychological Association, 2008). The American Psychological Association reports that more than two thirds of American children have experienced a traumatic event by age 16 (APA, 2008).

One nationwide study found that, over the course of 2006, 1.25 million children faced abuse or neglect from caregivers (Sedlak et al., 2006). While this number shows a 26 per cent rate reduction in the incidence of maltreatment when compared with numbers from the 1990s, it still implies that one out of every 58 American children faces maltreatment every year (Sedlak et al., 2006). In the same year, more than 8 million American children received emergency medical care for severe injuries (APA, 2008). When the entire span of childhood is considered, at least 39% of American teenagers have witnessed community violence and at least 25% have experienced sexual abuse (APA, 2008). Trauma is a very real presence in the lives of American children and adolescents.

Many adolescents with trauma histories experienced their trauma in early childhood. It is well documented that childhood trauma is a risk factor for many unpleasant outcomes in adolescence and adulthood. Children who face trauma are at greater risk for, among other things: Depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, delinquency and criminality (Moroz, 2005; Gold, Sullivan & Lewis, 2011). One longitudinal study by the Center for Disease Control found that children who face trauma are up to five times more likely to attempt suicide during their lifetime when compared to children who have not (Dube et. al, 2001)

The burden of childhood trauma tends to fall disproportionately upon those who are already of minority or underprivileged status. Girls face sexual abuse at more than five times the rate boys do, for example (Sedlak et al., 2006). Native American youths face a disproportionate amount of serious injury (APA, 2008). Children with physical disabilities experience double the rate of neglect than able-bodied children, and face a far greater chance of being severely injured because of such maltreatment (Sedlak et al., 2006). Perhaps most strikingly, African American and Hispanic children face greater levels of maltreatment (compared to white children) across the board; the chief exception being that Hispanic children face emotional abuse at significantly lower rates than white or African American children (Sedlak et al. 2006).

Childhood trauma is an issue of public health and of social justice. As social workers, our code of ethics calls for us to focus on problems of social justice; this entails addressing issues—like childhood trauma—that disproportionately affect vulnerable or oppressed individuals and populations (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). There exist, of course, several methods of treatment for adolescents with traumatic histories. Play therapy and supportive therapy are commonly recommended by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2008). However, the sheer scope of this issue—around 5.1% of adolescents show symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder—indicates that there is a need for clinical interventions to address trauma in adolescents (Fairbank, 2008). Also there is very little evidence regarding what treatments are effective for particular demographic groups; the APA, in fact, argues that existing forms of treatment need to be adapted and new forms explored for use with traumatized populations (APA, 2008).

The question, then, is how to best address the needs of this large, vulnerable and diverse population. There is no universally recommended approach, and there seems to be a need for

new methods of treatment. With this paper, I hope to draw attention to the therapeutic potential of techniques currently being explored in a separate discipline: Role-playing game design.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Group Therapy: Appropriate for Adolescent Trauma**

For children and adolescents with trauma histories, group therapy is a common treatment. The particulars vary from group to group. Some groups are psychoeducational in nature, focusing on educating the members on related topics like posttraumatic stress disorder or the cultural context of abuse (Roe-Sepowitz, Pate, Bedard & Greenwald, 2009; Ahrens & Rexford, 2002). Others focus on helping the survivors heal through telling their stories (deYoung & Corbin, 1994; Bannister, 1997). Still others have an emphasis on managing the symptoms of PTSD or depression, disorders that can result from trauma (Ahrens & Rexford, 2002).

Group therapy is recommended in these cases for a few reasons. Adolescence is a time in which people tend to look toward peers for support and validation, so therapy may be more effective in the context of other adolescents. (Jacobs, Masson & Harvill, 2002, p. 359; Corder, 1994). When the trauma is sexual in nature, feelings of humiliation and shame are common, and adolescents often experience relief when they discover that peers have had similar experiences and emotions (Bannister, 1997, p. 85). Additionally, transference of negative associations onto an adult therapist sometimes results in outright rejection in individual therapy; Corder argues that the presence of peers can “dilute” this effect (Corder, 1994, p. 2).

#### **A Hole in the Literature: Group Methods**

Despite the fact that group therapy is a commonly recommended treatment for adolescents, the literature is relatively sparse on the subject of concrete methods of running these groups. Even textbooks on educating students about the professional practice of group work fall

short in outlining specific strategies. For example, Jacobs, Masson and Harvill, in their book *Group Counseling: Strategies and Skills* (2002), give one piece of concrete advice for running groups with this population: The sessions should last between 40 and 90 minutes. The rest of their advice is abstract skills that the therapist needs; they instruct the group leader to “take charge”, “use structure” and “make it interesting”, but do not give actual techniques for doing so (Jacobs, Masson & Harvill, 2002, pp. 360-1).

In another popular text devoted to group work, *An Introduction to Group Work Practice*, Toseland and Rivas spend most of the text analyzing group work from an abstract, theoretical perspective. They discuss the various stages of group work, leadership styles and group dynamics. There is a small section of the text that discusses concrete techniques for treatment groups; it covers specialized, purposeful interventions such as progressive muscle relaxation and deep breathing. While this list of information is useful, the text does not make it clear when and in what situations these techniques are most effectively used (2012).

These are some of the more thorough sets of technical guidelines available for clinicians hoping to run treatment groups for adolescents. Other authors give even less; Zastrow, for example, provides two pages of techniques (such as using I-statements and classic empathy formulae like “What you seem to be saying is...”) designed to resolve conflicts in a neutral fashion—these techniques, he says, “are much less likely to produce an argument” (1999, pp. 162-163).

**Clinicians on their own.** With such a scarcity of concrete advice for clinicians to follow, clinicians wind up learning technique through trial and error, or through direct advice from other practitioners. Learning how to run group through trial and error takes a long time, and relies heavily on the intuition of the therapist in question. Group work takes weeks, and mistakes can

cause damage to a relationship or a client; while group work appears to have information about theory, education regarding applied practice requires conveying information about applied skills so that each therapist does not have to learn how to do everything on their own.

Direct advice from experienced practitioners is a more efficient conduit for the transfer of technical skill than classroom instruction. It can, however, lead to cults of personality—i.e., one particularly charismatic practitioner gains followers who become trained in their techniques. In these situations, techniques often prove less effective when administered by those outside the in-group. This criticism has been levied at various therapists, including several play therapists (Gil, 1994).

### **Lack of Concrete Methods: A Role-Playing Parallel.**

A similar problem—a lack of effective teaching methods for facilitators—has been recognized in the role-playing game design community since the late 1990's. Games required people to run them, but the advice given in the texts of these games ran a wide variety of quality, from coherent and useful, to over-general, to actively harmful. Describing the game design situation, Ron Edwards writes:

I use a physics analogy: prior to the insights of Newtonian physics, bridges could be built. Some of them were built rather well. However, in retrospect, we are well aware that in order to build the bridge, the designer must have been at the very least according with Newtonian physics through (1) luck, (2) imitation of something else that worked, (3) use of principles that did not conflict with Newtonian physics in a way that mattered for the job, or (4) a non-articulated understanding of those principles. I consider the analogy to be exact for role-playing games (Edwards, 2001).

This analogy is apt for group therapy techniques as well—while it is clearly possible for therapists to run groups well without clear technical guidance, the presence of such guidance could streamline the process by which group clinicians achieve mastery, and thus allow them to focus time on other aspects of the therapy.

Over the following years, the RPG design community has expended a good deal of effort, largely in online communities, coming up with adequate means to address this issue. Many theories have arisen and changed, and many games have sprung up to demonstrate different elements of these theories. It is my contention that some of these games have concrete tools that would be directly applicable in clinical practice with groups. There are, however, some basic questions that need to be addressed before exploring this possibility further.

### **What Is a Role-Playing Game?**

In his essay, “What is an RPG”, Kim first cites the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines a role-playing game (RPG) as “a game in which the players take on the roles of imaginary characters, usually in a setting created by a referee, and thereby experience the imagined adventures of these characters” (Kim, 2013). This definition, like most, includes some items it arguably should not, and excludes some it should include. Kim (2013) gives the examples of Clue and flight simulation video games—in both of these games you control the actions of an imaginary character, but he argues that neither is an RPG. He proposes a more experiential definition: “Hypothetically, a person watching the game...suggests a move, and your reply is ‘No, my character wouldn’t do that.’ If that happens, or is capable of happening, then at some level you are playing a role-playing game” (Kim, 2013, p. 1). The distinction is one of motive. In a board game, a player makes decisions entirely based on achieving tactical and strategic ends. On the other hand, in a role-playing game, a player makes in-game decisions, at least partly, with the intent of maintaining the verisimilitude of a fictional world, including character consistency. All in all, this is a rather philosophical definition.

Here is an attempt at a more descriptive and comprehensive definition. Role-playing games, at least in their contemporary conception, tend to take one of a few different forms. There

are computer RPGs, which are video games in which a player chooses decisions from a list of predetermined options. There are live-action RPGs, or *larps*, in which the players move around and perform the actions of characters. Most relevantly to this paper, there are table-top RPGs, in which the players produce the fiction through speech. Players either describe the actions of their characters, or speak in their characters' voices—it is common, in practice, for a player to switch back and forth between these modes fluidly.

**Adjudication of conflict.** RPGs have some method of adjudication; when a player declares that something happens, the game system has rules in place to determine whether or not that declaration is true. In his 1995 game *Everway*, Jonathan Tweet distinguishes between three forms of resolution: Drama, in which it is a particular player's or group of players' job to decide what happens; Fortune, in which the decision is delegated to a randomization device (frequently dice of various shape); and Karma, in which predetermined values are compared in a systematized fashion to determine the outcome.

**Player role assignment.** Players are frequently assigned roles. The most common division of roles is that one player is a referee (or game master, Dungeon master, Storyteller, MC, etc.) and each other player has control over a single player character, or PC. The referee's job is to describe the world and its non-player character (NPC) inhabitants, and to get final say when it comes to adjudication. Players of RPGs typically meet several times for game sessions—meeting once a week to play for four hours, for example.

This structure makes tabletop RPGs seem particularly well-suited to adaptation into the realm of group work. Regular weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly meetings parallel the group treatment structure, while the role of referee would seem a natural fit for the therapist to step into.

RPGs also have an advantage when it comes to use with a teenage population. Namely, much of the development of the market for role-playing games has occurred with this population already in mind. A survey by Wizards of the Coast (who publish current editions of *Dungeons and Dragons*) found that 41% of people who played role-playing games were between the ages of 12 and 18 (Wizards of the Coast, 2000).

## **Play**

The idea of combining guided play with therapy is almost as old as therapy itself. Hermine Hug-Hellmuth advocated its use in the psychoanalysis of children as early as 1919 (Gil, 1994, p. 3). Her ideas were incorporated into the more famous therapeutic models of Melanie Klein and Anna Freud (Arroyo & Plastow, 2012). Freud, Hug-Hellmuth and Klein were working within the model of pure psychoanalysis; play therapy was, in their minds, a way to activate a child's unconscious mind and gain access to it.

By the 1930's, David Levy was using play therapy in a more directly representational fashion. He pioneered a technique called *release therapy*, wherein (after a baseline period of free play) the therapist introduced play materials intentionally designed to trigger a child's fears or traumas, and thus allowed the child to explore their own fears in the safe environment of play (Levy, 1939). In release therapy, dolls frequently acted as stand-ins for real people in the child's life. The fictive nature of this representation granted the child freedom to enact situations that would be dangerous or impossible in real life, such as a vicious attack upon a doll who represented a mean older sibling (Levy, 1939).

At this point in the history, play therapy seems to have diverged into two camps. One followed a *structured play therapy* model, and honed Levy's release therapy into techniques to more efficiently and effectively help a child confront past traumas. The other followed (and

included) Carl Rogers' *client-centered therapy*, which primarily used play to facilitate the development of a strong therapeutic alliance between the therapist and a child.

In the 1970's, some play therapy techniques began to inch closer to role-playing games. In Irwin and Malloy's "Family Puppet Interview" (FPI), from 1975, the therapist invites the members of a family to choose from an array of animal puppets, and then to use the puppets to tell a wholly original story (Gil, 1994). Like other forms of play therapy, this technique allows the therapist to observe family dynamics while putting the family at ease. In addition, Gil notes an important aspect of the FPI, one that is important to role-playing-games in particular: It provides a discrete opportunity for symbolic or metaphoric communication. That is, a child can make it clear that, for example, a shark puppet symbolizes something in the real world, like anger or a parent (Gil, 1994).

One fact remained consistent across all these therapeutic modalities, however: play therapy was, and continues to be, recommended for use primarily in the treatment of pre-adolescent children. While some of the principles of play therapy seem relevant, it is clear that a therapeutic model for adolescents will need some input from other sources.

### **Drama**

The use of role-playing in clinical work has a few historical precedents. The concept that the client is likely to have deep-seated issues, and have trouble talking about those issues, is a central one to psychoanalysis and its intellectual descendents. The idea of a fictional mediating device to help overcome this trouble—which role-playing offers—proved alluring to several noted therapists, and thus the seeds of role-playing games can be found scattered in a few different methodological fields.

**Psychodrama.** Concurrent with the development of play therapy, another European psychoanalyst, Jacob Moreno, spent the 1920's and 30's honing a set of therapeutic techniques called *psychodrama*. Psychodrama is a type of individual therapy that takes the form of a stage performance. The client, with the assistance of a therapist (in the role of a director) and several assistants (who play characters for the client to interact with), recreates scenes from their past, and explores them in an attempt to reach catharsis (Ridge, 2010).

In clinical settings, psychodrama has been demonstrated to be particularly helpful in the treatment of trauma. For example, children who have suffered abuse may find that, through the role-play and storytelling techniques of psychodrama, they are capable of addressing issues that proved too difficult to discuss directly with a therapist (Bannister, 2007). Unlike play therapy, psychodrama is also effective with adults. One study found that it was an effective method for helping Holocaust survivors construct healthy self-identities (Peleg, Lev-Wiesel and Yanig, 2014).

There are some commonly-cited limitations of psychodrama that make it potentially less than ideal for use with a group of adolescents with traumatic histories. As is the case with all forms of therapy, there is potential for a poorly trained or incompetent therapist to do real psychological damage to the client (Blatner, 1968). The fact that psychodrama depends heavily on the personal charisma of the therapist, though, and that techniques are taught intuitively (rather than with concrete instructions) makes it a particularly dangerous modality to use with a vulnerable population such as adolescents with trauma histories (Wilkins, 1999). In addition, psychodrama requires that a great deal of resources, including the time of multiple trained staff, be expended toward the therapeutic betterment of a single individual (Ridge, 2010). However beneficial psychodrama may be, it is a relatively costly and time-consuming intervention. If

another intervention could offer similar outcomes at a more efficient rate, then it would be preferable for use in many practical situations.

**Family therapy.** During the mid-20th century, several therapists developed methods of treating a family unit as a client in group therapy. Several of these clinicians, including Nathan Ackerman and Salvador Minuchin, included game-like elements in their models, but it was Virginia Satir who went the furthest in the direction of role-play. With the publication of the book *Peoplemaking* (1972), she introduced the concept of role-playing wholesale into the realm of group work with families. Indeed, it could be argued that, as this book predates the 1974 publication of the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, it contains the first published role-playing game. A two-chapter section of *Peoplemaking* could be published today as an RPG, and would be placed in the category of “parlor larp”. A closer analysis is perhaps in order.

**Satir’s family larp.** Two chapters in the middle of *Peoplemaking* constitute instructions for a therapist to run a particular set of exercises. The purpose of these exercises is to demonstrate to families that some particular communication styles have the potential to damage familial relationships.

Chapter 5 (“Patterns of Communication”) is devoted to in-depth descriptions of four different roles, each of whom uses a different unhealthy style of communication. She identifies the Placater, who tries to appease everyone and evokes guilt to get their way; the Blamer, who blames someone else for everything and manipulates through fear; the Computer, who communicates in a manner of affected neutrality and tries to sound smarter and more detached than everyone else; and the Distracter, who says and does irrelevant things to try to end the conflict without a resolution. In addition to a communication type and motivation, Satir gives

each of these roles a physical posture and style of movement; e.g. the Blamer is to tower over people and always be pointing a finger.

Then, in Chapter 6 (“Communication Games”), Satir shows how to put these characters into action. She outlines many potential triadic combinations of family members for the clients to play, and also outlines common combinations of communication roles she sees. For example, a husband, wife, and second child who are also a Computer, a Blamer, and a Distracter, respectively. She recommends people play characters of the same gender. People, however, are not playing themselves—they are to come up with new given and family names (Satir, 1972, p. 82).

Satir has, thus far, outlined the roles and role assignment technique for her game. She caps it off by placing the characters in a situation and giving them a conflict to attempt to resolve: “Set the oven timer for five minutes. If there is any particular conflict brewing in your family, use this as your topic. If you do not have such a situation, then try to plan something together—a meal, a vacation, a garage clean-up, or anything else” (Satir, 1972, pp. 84-85). She even includes a debrief period, similar to those found in many modern larps, for the players to talk about their experiences amongst each other and cool down.

This example from family therapy, then, is the closest example out there of a modern role-playing-game being developed by a clinician for therapeutic use. Satir seems to agree that the presence of a fictional mediation device makes certain types of breakthroughs more likely; as she puts it, “more learning is possible when people use different names” (Satir, 1972, p. 82). This particular game, however, is designed for use in family therapy. This makes its wholesale adoption for use with groups of adolescents questionable, though parts of the model may work if carefully adapted.

### **RPG Technology for Therapeutic Use**

Thus far, this overview has addressed how advances in different fields of therapy have produced practices similar to role-playing games in various ways. While theorists tend to agree that no currently produced games pass muster as clinical tools, there are still a few role-playing games that have gotten close to different elements of the therapeutic experience (Fortugno, 2014).

**Silence Keeps Me a Victim (Rhoer, 2008).** Clyde Rhoer designed this game in order to combat the oppressive culture of silence that surrounds the topic of child sexual abuse. It is a two-player game that uses purposefully unsettling imagery from dream and metaphor; the players create the story of a young child searching a dreamlike landscape for his voice and his heart.

The game plays with narrative in a way designed to induce feelings of discomfort in the players. Most RPGs are designed to create a coherent story with some sort of conflict and arc. *Silence Keeps Me a Victim* specifically warns the person creating the world away from that; the game creates—using elements of the players’ personal dreams as inspiration—a strange world that the players explore as if in a dream. Any coherent plots that arise are fleeting and incidental.

The text includes a specific disclaimer that this game is not a therapeutic tool. However, it is still supposed to engender exploration, sharing, and discussion on the topic. These goals seem directly applicable in a therapeutic context, as a reluctance to talk about taboo subjects can persist in therapy.

**Lines, veils, the X-Card and player safety.** In *Sex and Sorcery* (Edwards, 2003), Ron Edwards introduced the concepts of *lines* and *veils*. These were the first explicit attempts to address the emotional safety of players with game rules. A brief explanation: If a player knows

that a particular subject—children in danger, for example—will ruin their game experience, then they have the option of drawing a line or a veil over that subject. A line means that, in the fiction of the game, no children are in danger. Nowhere in the game-world does that situation exist. A veil over a subject is less severe, and means that, while children may be in danger in the world, that scenario always exists “off-screen”—it will never be described as if it is currently happening and the player characters will never come in direct contact with it.

The concept of player safety has been addressed by different designers since then. Vincent Baker introduced and named two specific styles of play: *Nobody Gets Hurt*, in which the game is analogous to a safe space—nothing potentially dangerous or traumatic is discussed or addressed; and *I Will Not Abandon You*, in which the players agree beforehand to support each other in tentatively exploring difficult or potentially harmful topics. John Stavropoulos invented and popularized the X-Card in 2010; it is a card placed on the table that anyone can pick up at any time if they feel uncomfortable. When this happens, the game halts and the problem is addressed. These advances in safety technology seem like methods of keeping conversation within the psychological “therapeutic window”; i.e., preventing a client’s level of engagement from being either too low to retain their interest or so intense that their emotions become dysregulated.

### **Role-Playing Therapy**

Therapy and role-playing games are very different fields, and their respective corpuses of literature vary wildly in terms of size and type. That said, there is enough conceptual overlap between the two to make research into their intersection potentially fruitful. Several fields of therapy have explored territory that shares ground with that of RPGs. Psychodrama, group therapy, and play therapy are all established fields of therapy recommended for use with people

with trauma histories, and each shares a key element with role-playing games: Group therapy shares structure, psychodrama shares role-playing, and play therapy shares games and stories. Virginia Satir, in the discipline of family therapy, has written entire therapeutic techniques that are, ultimately, indistinguishable from some types of RPG.

Coming from the other direction, RPG design has approached topics relevant to therapy at various points. Many designers, in particular, have looked to establish mechanical ways to ensure the safety of the players at the table. A few have written games whose purpose verges on the therapeutic in nature. Now that the theoretical groundwork for research into therapy RPGs has been established, the next step is to perform exploratory research in the field.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study is an analysis of the text of published role-playing games. Since this is a corpus largely unexamined by the fields of psychology and social work, a strong conceptual framework is needed to guide this process. This analysis centers around elements of a few different, but related, models.

#### **Group Therapy**

Group therapy has been a popular modality for decades. Group work consists of small groups of clients working together toward a shared goal, often with the facilitation of one or more clinicians (Toseland & Rivas, 2012). These groups can be classified by their goals. Task groups are focused around meeting needs external to the group, while treatment groups focus on meeting the needs of the group members themselves.

The theory of group work largely focuses on taxonomies and structural elements of groups. Treatment groups are further divided into types based on their specific goals: Support groups, psychoeducation groups, therapy groups, and self-help groups are common.

Structurally, theorists often divide group work into stages. Tuckman's famous mnemonic about the stages of a group's life is "Forming, storming, norming, and performing"; i.e., groups come together, then there is a period of internal conflict, then they establish rules and rituals, and finally they work effectively toward their common goal. On the level of the individual session, many theories identify a beginning stage, a middle/work stage, and a closing stage to a session of group work. The beginning stage is short and serves to ritually signal the start of group, the work stage is where the majority of therapy takes place, and the closing stage is a way to bring everyone together and establish continuity between sessions (Toseland & Rivas, 2012). It is these structural elements that I will be most interested in finding parallels to in the games I examine.

### **Trauma Model**

John Bowlby originally based his ideas of attachment theory around the notion that a human, by default, would form secure attachments with caregivers; if the child did not attach securely, that meant the caregiver had done something wrong. He later expanded his ideas to note that, while the actions of a caregiver could certainly cause attachment problems, so too could other forms of misadventure in early childhood.

This is an expression of the trauma model of psychiatry, which posits that traumatic experiences, particularly in early childhood, are often the root causes of psychological problems in later life. From the trauma model come the related concepts of dissociation and repression. Dissociation is the idea that, during times of extreme stress, the human mind will shut down and stop interpreting information coherently in order to protect itself. This can mean that memories of traumatic experiences are scattered or inaccessible to the conscious mind; this is repression.

Also implicit to the trauma model (as well as much of psychodynamic theory) is the idea that trauma needs to be confronted in order to be dealt with. Through the telling of stories and the use of metaphor, I suspect that role-playing games will provide a way for people with traumatic histories to address parts of their lives that are difficult for them to approach intentionally (Bannister, 1997).

### **Posttraumatic Stress Disorder**

The American Psychiatric Association recognizes that people who face trauma sometimes develop a set of several characteristic symptoms. The trauma may impose itself on the person's life, in the form of nightmares, intrusive memories of the event, or even flashbacks in which the individual feels or acts as though the traumatic event is currently happening (APA, 2013). People who suffer trauma may also experience extreme psychological distress when exposed to things or concepts—i.e., triggers—that symbolize part of the traumatic event (APA, 2013).

Another cluster of PTSD symptoms involves avoidance. PTSD sufferers are often acutely aware of their triggers, and this can cause them to avoid areas of their life that have the potential to trigger them. If untreated, this can lead to a cycle of avoidance, where the PTSD sufferer's life becomes more and more cloistered as they attempt to avoid all triggers until they are completely isolated from the outside world (APA, 2013).

Any form of therapy designed to treat people who have faced trauma should be able to safely accommodate these symptoms; I will be on the lookout for game elements, such as the power to call for a break, that serve this end.

## Methods

As this is a pioneering study in the field, I had very little in the way of existing models to work from. In order to identify an appropriate starting point for therapeutic role-playing game design, I analyzed the texts of a pair of already published role-playing games. Many RPGs include multiple books. *Basic Dungeons & Dragons*, generally considered the first published tabletop RPG, had dozens, and many other games followed in its footsteps in that regard.

The games I wound up investigating, however, consist of a single book apiece. A game text is a book or other document that includes everything needed to play a particular game. Game texts include rules at the minimum, but often also include fiction, illustrations and other descriptive elements to give the players a better sense of genre and setting. At least one person, in general, needs to be familiar with the game text in order to play a particular game, and games often go better if everyone is familiar with it.

My intent was to identify which elements of the game texts could be adapted to a group work setting, and which elements needed to be expunged or extensively reworked. I chose to combine the technique of thematic analysis with a grounded theory approach and analyze a pair of games, *Apocalypse World* and *Monsterhearts*.

## Design

Thematic analysis is a type of qualitative analysis that focuses on large-scale meanings of texts. Grounded theory analysis, on the other hand, involves line-by-line examination of a text; each line is assigned a *code*, and then the list of codes is analyzed for patterns (Padgett, 2008, p. 32). Since my texts were rather large, I chose to combine the two techniques in an attempt to retain some of the rigor of grounded theory while keeping a slightly bigger-picture view of the texts.

Instead of assigning codes line by line, I divided the text into roughly paragraph-sized chunks, I then performed open coding, assigning each chunk a code or two, corresponding to what I considered the most salient points therein. I then performed a second pass to standardize the codes, so that codes like “Mean MC” and “MC is antagonistic” were called the same thing. If a code or group of similar codes was particularly prevalent throughout a text, I assigned it the title of *theme*. Through this method, I was able to approximate the most important concepts within the texts. I then analyzed these themes with reference to my conceptual framework of group work and trauma theory.

### **Sampling**

For this study, I used criterion sampling. Criterion sampling is a type of purposive sampling in which subjects are chosen with regards to a set of criteria. I defined the population as the set of all tabletop role-playing games currently in print. The criteria were: There must be a pair of games, one of which is a hack of the other; I must have played both games in order to have a good understanding of them; and the games must be designed for multiple sessions of play (i.e., adaptable for a group therapy setting).

These criteria narrowed the field to two pairs of games: Ben Lehman’s *Polaris* and Anna Kreider’s hack *Thou Art But a Warrior*; and Vincent Baker’s *Apocalypse World* and Avery McDaldno’s *Monsterhearts*. From these, I determined that the insights gained from examining *Apocalypse World* and *Monsterhearts* would be more helpful in designing a therapy game for adolescents with traumatic histories.

**Why *Apocalypse World*.** While each game had ample design space to explore, *Polaris* had some elements that make it troublesome for my purposes. Most pertinently, it only functions

with precisely four players; that limits the potential group size to either a group of four, or a facilitator and a group of three.

Another logistical issue is that *Polaris* was a GM-less game; all players have equal power within the rules. This negated one of the key advantages that role-playing games could have in adaptation for group therapy: The position of the GM is a natural fit for the clinician. This could be worked around, probably by assigning the GM a facilitator position, but still would make the adaptation process a little more awkward.

Thematically, *Polaris* was also somewhat problematic. The story it produces is always a chivalric tragedy in which the world is destroyed, and all the characters along with it. Both it and *Thou Art But a Warrior* are brutally sad games that seem difficult to translate into a therapeutic setting.

*Apocalypse World*, by contrast, was a very strong candidate. It was eminently adaptable; dozens of published games use variations on its rules. Of these games (“hacks” in designer lingo), *Monsterhearts* was the only one that I had played for multiple sessions, and its high school setting seemed like it would provide useful insights for a game targeted toward adolescents.

It not only had a game master (called the MC); it contained a set of concrete and functional instructions for its MC to follow. This is a rarity among games and seems particularly handy for use in a clinical setting, especially by a clinician who is not overly familiar with other role-playing games.

The MC was also a very reactive position; most of the narrative power lay in the hands of the players. In my experience, games of *Apocalypse World* tended to tell stories where several friends or allies found themselves in a dysfunctional world and, through play, made of it what

they wanted. In *Polaris*, death is inevitable; in *Apocalypse World*, players' characters get more powerful through play until they can shape the world how they want it. This narrative arc seemed like it could be adapted provide a powerful and empowering therapeutic experience.

### Findings

The purpose of this research is twofold. Firstly, my intent is to identify tools and techniques that the field of tabletop roleplaying games can provide for use in a group therapy setting. My secondary purpose is to demonstrate the potential of the form to be adapted for specific audiences; namely, that of teenagers with trauma histories.

I analyzed 284 pages of *Apocalypse World* and 142 pages of *Monsterhearts*—the entirety of both books, save the indexes. Both games are exceedingly rich with thematic material. On my initial pass through, I identified 23 distinct themes in *Apocalypse World*, and 30 in *Monsterhearts*. I was able to condense the themes somewhat. In addition, I noted a significant amount of thematic overlap between the two texts. The overlap was sometimes identical; for example, both had “violence” as a theme. In other cases, the overlap required some interpretation; the *Apocalypse World* theme of “The MC is adversarial” and the *Monsterhearts* theme of “The MC targets players,” had they been part of the same text, would have gotten combined into a single theme. Because of this overlap, in order to conduct a coherent thematic analysis of the two, I elected to organize the themes of each game into three metathematic categories that spanned both texts.

A great deal of text in each game is devoted to describing or evoking a particular tone for that game. Themes that serve this purpose I termed “tonal themes”. A second category, “structural themes”, has a purpose that pertained to the overall structure of the game and/or the story the game intended to create. I also identified a significant number of themes regarding the

actual humans playing the game and their interactions with each other; I called these “table themes”.

### Tonal Themes

**Violence.** Both games deal with fictional violence. A bit more here, such as the general story line or something that helps establish this. Each game text includes descriptions of fictional violence:

*Then gradually you get your senses back, and that noise you thought was your skull cracking is actually your door splitting and splintering down, and that noise you thought was your blood is their chainsaw* (Baker, 2010, p. 156).

*Mr. Lupa’s got blood on his collar, and his right eye is swollen shut* (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 137).

Each text also includes rules regarding violence. Characters in each game have measurements called *stats*; these are adjective descriptions that serve as rough measurements of how effective a character is in a particular area of life. One of the five stats an *Apocalypse World* PC has is **hard**, (described as “violent, aggressive, strong-willed, mean” [Baker, 2010, p. 14]) while *Monsterhearts* PCs have a corresponding stat of **volatile** (“aggressive, unpredictable” [Mcdaldno, 9]).

The functionality of each game hinges on the idea of moves triggered via fictional events. When a player describes a fictional event occurring that falls under the purview of an existing move, then that move is triggered and the mechanics of the game get invoked, often involving dice and stats. Each game has a list of Basic Moves, which every player has access to. And the stats of **hard** and **volatile** have correspondingly violent Basic Moves associated with them:

*When you try to **seize something by force**, or to secure your hold on something, roll+hard. On a hit, choose options. On a 10+, choose 3. On a 7–9, choose 2:*

- *you take definite hold of it*

- *you suffer little harm*
- *you inflict terrible harm*
- *you impress, dismay or frighten your enemy* (Baker, 2010, p. 86)

*When you **lash out physically**, roll with volatile. On a 10 up, you harm them and choose one: the harm is great (add 1); you gain 1 String on them; they need to hold steady before they can retaliate (during this scene).* (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 19)

(A brief note about the numbers here. Both these games use the central die mechanic of rolling two six-sided dice, and then adding or subtracting the value of a stat. The result of this calculation determines the outcome of an event. “+1” and “-1” here modify these rolls in various situations.)

Violence also is apparent from the more peripheral rules. *Apocalypse World* has rules describing what happens when a vehicle gets attacked:

*4-harm: breakdown. Catastrophic functional damage, can be repaired in a garage but not in the field, or can be used for parts. 3-harm can blow through to passengers”* (Baker, 2010, p. 171).

And, from *Monsterhearts*, the description of the Ghoul’s darkest self begins:

*You will maim, kill and destroy anything in between you and the nearest object of your hunger.* (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 57)

Violence is a core element of *Apocalypse World*. It is likely that every session will contain a firefight or violent display. Players will likely have their characters both perform violent acts and be on the receiving end. Violence is less central to *Monsterhearts*; it is a tool that some but not all characters will be expected to use.

In both cases, violence is treated as a normal part of the play experience. The world is dangerous, but fictional—and even the fictional consequences on the PCs have mitigating factors. Both *Apocalypse World* and *Monsterhearts* contain ways that a player can have a

character avoid serious injury by choosing other fictional consequences instead. An *Apocalypse World* character can, instead of dying from an injury, choose to take a permanent *debility* instead; it hurts one of their stats, but makes their wounds heal. Similarly, a *Monsterhearts* player may choose to have their character enter their Darkest Self (invoke the most negative and horrific aspects of their skin) to get rid of all their wounds.

In these ways, the games demonstrate that the world is a violent place, but a safe one for them to explore. Through the mediating effect of the fiction, and the safeguards against truly devastating consequences the game puts in play, it encourages players to explore violent content. This can be seen as a sort of exposure therapy, where players can approach scary content at their own speed while remaining personally safe. This provides a model by which other games might be able to explore other types of content associated with trauma.

**Supernatural weirdness.** The settings of *Apocalypse World* and *Monsterhearts* include various forms of supernatural elements. Much like with violence, PCs in these games have a stat that evokes this particular tonal theme: **Weird** in *Apocalypse World* and **dark** in *Monsterhearts*. *Apocalypse World* contains the Basic Move (which uses weird) of “open your brain to the world’s psychic maelstrom” (Baker, p. 88), which *Monsterhearts* turns into the dark move “gaze into the abyss” (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 20).

This theme permeates each text deeply. *Apocalypse World* has, for example, savvyheads who can talk to machines (“things speak”, [Baker, 2010, p. 76]) and brainers who can use a “violation glove” (p. 35) to plant psychic commands in people using “in-brain puppet strings” (p. 35). As a game about supernatural monsters, *Monsterhearts* expresses this theme even more persistently. Players choose what type of PC they would like to play from a list of ten *skins*, seven of which are explicitly supernatural in nature: The Fae, the Ghost, the Ghoul, the Infernal,

the Vampire, the Werewolf and the Witch (Mcdaldno 2011, p. 38). The Ghost can get the ability to walk through walls (p. 51), the Werewolf turns into a “terrifying wolf-creature” (p. 82), and the Witch casts hexes that can make people’s teeth fall out (p. 86).

A flavor of supernatural weirdness is also distinctly present in the descriptive text in each game. *Apocalypse World* describes brainers as having “creepy hearts, dead souls, and eyes like broken things” (Baker, p. 2) and hocuses as taking advantage of “the miasma left over from the explosion of psychic hate and desperation that gave *Apocalypse World* its birth” (p. 4). *Monsterhearts* instructs a Fae player to choose “a new age name” or “a mystical name” (Mcdaldno, p. 45)

The supernatural material in these games spans a range of tones, from beautiful to creepy to horrific. The presence of these supernatural elements makes it clear that the world of the fiction is an imaginary one; it helps maintain the degree of separation players experience between the real world and the one of the game.

The particular supernatural elements found in each game serve, functionally, as genre signifiers; e.g., the presence of vampires and werewolves establish *Monsterhearts* as a teen supernatural romance. Genre is a shorthand by which players and MC alike can figure out what sort of actions and characters are appropriate for a story. If a designer of a therapeutic game wants to involve supernatural elements, they would need to examine what sort of genre needs the game would have. The potential horror and darkness would need to be monitored and applied purposefully within the game, if at all.

**Sex, sexuality, and sensuality.** The one stat that both *Apocalypse World* and *Monsterhearts* PCs share is **hot**, meaning “attractive, subtle, gracious, sexy” (Baker, 2010, p. 14) or “gorgeous, alluring, exciting” (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 9) respectively. Moves that involve these

stats tend to involve using sex appeal or personal charisma in an active way, as in this battlebabe move:

***Dangerous & sexy:** when you enter into a charged situation, roll+hot. On a 10+, hold 2. On a 7–9, hold 1. Spend your hold 1 for 1 to make eye contact with an NPC present, who freezes or flinches and can't take action until you break it off. (Baker, p. 28).*

In addition, All PCs in both games have a move (called a “special” in *Apocalypse World* and a “sex move” in *Monsterhearts*) that activates when that character has sex. For example, the driver special is:

*If you and another character have sex, roll+cool. On a 10+, it's cool, no big deal. On a 7–9, give them +1 to their Hx with you on their sheet, but give yourself -1 to your Hx with them on yours. On a miss, you gotta go: take -1 ongoing, until you prove that it's not like they own you or nothing. (Baker, 2010, p. 48)*

A second example is the Chosen's sex move:

*When you have sex, heal all of your wounds, and cure all of your Conditions. If they disgust you, give them a String. If you disgust yourself, give them a String (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 42).*

Each of these games includes a subtheme of transgressive sexuality and queerness. *Monsterhearts* is more explicit about the matter; it has a small chapter entitled Queer Content that describes ways monstrosity can be a metaphor for queerness and exhorts the players to “use the game to explore and challenge your own ideas about gender, sexuality, relationships, what's normal and what's monstrous” (Mcdaldno, p. 31).

*Apocalypse World*, for its part, couches its queer content in less direct terms. Each PC has a “look” consisting of items the player chooses from lists, customized for each playbook. The first such list for each playbook loosely corresponds to gender presentation (the lists are

untitled); the skinner's choices are "man, woman, ambiguous, transgressing, or androgyne" (Baker, p. 80).

Adolescence is a time during which many people explore and discover elements of their sexualities, genders, and gender expressions. These games provide a controlled space in which players can do so; a player can explore what it feels like to try on various identities, with little consequence. This freedom of exploration has definite potential for use in group work with adolescents.

**Treat characters like real people.** This is a theme from *Apocalypse World* that seems to have been carried over wholesale into *Monsterhearts*. In the instructions for how to introduce players to *Apocalypse World*, the text lays out precisely what to say:

*To the players: your job is to play your characters as though they were real people, in whatever circumstances they find themselves — cool, competent, dangerous people, but real.*

*My job as MC is to treat your characters as though they were real people too, and to act as though Apocalypse World were real* (Baker, p. 96).

*Monsterhearts* describes the player's role in similar terms:

*When you play Monsterhearts, you become one of these teenage monsters. You explore their secrets and fears. You bring them to life.* (Mcdaldno, p. 2).

Both games include instructions for the MC to "address yourself to the characters, not the players" (Baker, 2010, p. 110; Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 96). The games' most prominent mechanical method of encouraging the people at the table to think of the characters as real people is through questions. Each game includes multiple moves that allow people to ask each other questions about characters, and have the answers become true. For example, *Apocalypse World* has the Basic Move of "read a person":

*When you **read a person**, roll+sharp. On a 10+, hold 3. On a 7–9, hold 1. While you’re interacting with them, spend your hold to ask their player questions, 1 for 1:*

- *is your character telling the truth?*
- *what’s your character really feeling?*
- *what does your character intend to do?*
- *what does your character wish I’d do? (Baker, 2010, p. 201)*

And the Ghost’s sex move from *Monsterhearts* is:

*When you have sex with someone, you both get to ask a question of one another’s characters. This can be spoken by your character, or simply asked player-to-player. The other person must answer honestly and directly. (Mcdaldno, p. 52).*

One feature group therapy provides is the freedom for participants to ask and answer questions of each other. Since therapy is a confidential setting, and participants are unlikely to have external relationships, it is a place that people can get used to the experience of talking openly about themselves. These games normalize this process a step further, by mechanizing question-asking in a fictional context. Participants get practice answering questions honestly through the safety of a fictional medium.

**Juxtaposition.** The final tonal theme that both texts share is that of juxtaposition. Each game uses the technique of placing contrasting or complementary elements in close proximity to each other. In *Apocalypse World*, the battlebabe can get the move “Dangerous & Sexy” (combining themes of sex and violence). The brainer gear contains the “violation glove”, which, when worn, means that “for purposes of brainer moves, mere skin contact counts as time and intimacy” (combining sex and weirdness) (Baker, 2010, p. 245). The savvyhead is a sort of psychic mechanic, and their special combines three themes (sex, weirdness, and question-asking):

*If you and another character have sex, they [your sex partner] automatically speak to you (p76), as though they were a thing and you'd rolled a 10+, whether you have the move or not. The other player and the MC will answer your questions between them (Baker, p. 78).*

*Monsterhearts* juxtaposes themes in similar ways. The text tells the MC that “the moment you draw a line in the fiction, start thinking about ways to blur and bend it” (Mcdaldno, p. 97). The Witch’s sex move allows the Witch to get a sympathetic token (used for magic) from their sex partner (Mcdaldno, p. 88), and the Ghoul can seduce people by talking about their own death (Mcdaldno, p. 56).

**Tonal differences.** While, as a hack, *Monsterhearts* clearly shares a lot of material with *Apocalypse World*, some clear thematic differences between the two are present. Even in the shared themes, there are some distinctions in how they manifest. Violence in *Apocalypse World* uses distinctly more guns than violence than in *Monsterhearts*; the supernatural element in *Monsterhearts* is primarily fantasy-flavored, while the supernatural in *Apocalypse World* involves weird technology, cults, and psychic business.

The tonal themes I identified in *Apocalypse World* alone are:

**Action heroics.** *Apocalypse World* simulates the world of violent post-apocalyptic action movies. PCs in *Apocalypse World* have the **cool** stat, which allows them to utilize the Basic Move of “do something under fire,” which is a catch-all move for attempting dangerous stunts (Baker, 2010, p. 191). The operator—a playbook designed leading a crew and pulling odd jobs—can design a “signature weapon” to carry (Baker, p. 72) and the driver—a playbook who gets car-related skills—can get rewarded with armor for going “straight into danger without hedging their bets” (Baker, p. 46).

**Scarcity.** The setting of *Apocalypse World* places the PCs in a position where they do not have access to all their basic survival needs, and neither does anyone else. As the chopper's description reads:

*Apocalypse World is all scarcity, of course it is. There's not enough wholesome food, not enough untainted water, not enough security, not enough light, not enough electricity, not enough children, not enough hope. (Baker, 2010, p. 3)*

The game's rules demonstrate scarcity in the way the MC is instructed to provide threats in the game. It provides a list of "fundamental" scarcities and tells the MC:

*Ask yourself: whose hunger threatens the players' characters? Whose thirst threatens them? Whose ignorance does? And so on down the list. (Baker, p. 137)*

*Monsterhearts* establishes its distinctive tone by eliminating these particular themes and replacing them with:

**Big emotions.** Characters in *Monsterhearts* are mostly teenagers, and they deal with powerful emotions in teenage ways. The Fae "wears [their] heart on [their] sleeve" (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 47) and the Ghost gets rewarded "when others dump their emotional problems" on them (Mcdaldno, p. 51). One of the Growing-Up Moves PCs can gain when they advance is "share your pain", which mechanically allows them to heal (Mcdaldno, p. 35).

Some skins have a particular focus on trauma; the Ghost, in particular, "is all about channeling past trauma" (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 53), while the Chosen may be "marked by trauma" (Mcdaldno, p. 40), but deals with it through physical endurance and apathy (Mcdaldno, p. 43).

**Power and dominance.** *Monsterhearts* encourages the players to explore unhealthy and unbalanced emotional relationships. One of the Basic Moves, “shut someone down”, simulates engaging in petty social conflict (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 18). The vampire skin “is about emotional entrenchment and emotional dominance”, while the queen “is about turning cliques and popularity into weapons” (Mcdaldno, p. 73).

In contrast with these skins, which reward dominance, the mortal skin rewards the player for “benefiting from codependency, and racking up experience” (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 68). They have a supernatural lover, and achieve in-game rewards for being treated poorly. For example, the move “Excuses Are My Armour” reads, “When you ignore some blatant problem with your lover or how they treat you, mark experience” (Mcdaldno, p. 66). Here, you may want to discuss whether this is a good move to emulate in teen groups. It may be so the person can experience the feeling, or maybe it must be followed with discussion to process? Your thoughts ...

There is also the central mechanic of Strings, which represent “the emotional hold that you have over people”, and which a player can spend for a variety of effects, such as causing a character “to falter, hesitate, or freeze up momentarily” (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 21). Strings allow for long-term accumulation of social power.

### Structural Themes

**Nuts and bolts.** A significant amount of text in each game is devoted to rules text that is simply there to make the game functional. For example, the stat choices that the hardholder gets in *Apocalypse World*:

*Choose one set:*

- *Cool-1 Hard+2 Hot+1 Sharp+1 Weird=0*
- *Cool+1 Hard+2 Hot+1 Sharp+1 Weird-2*
- *Cool-2 Hard+2 Hot=0 Sharp+2 Weird=0*
- *Cool=0 Hard+2 Hot+1 Sharp-1 Weird+1* (Baker, 2010, p. 57).

There is a small amount of thematic information there, but the chief message expressed is that this is a game with specific terms, jargon, and notation. For the uninitiated: During character creation, a player making a hardholder character chooses one of these four sets of stats. The words are the stats, and the numbers are their starting values. Looking at the sets, the one commonality is that the hardholder always starts at Hard+2. This (as established earlier) means that the character will more likely be effective at acting violently. However, there are no guarantees; the dice could always turn against the roller, and they could fail spectacularly at an action they thought they would master easily, just like in life. This fictional information is present, but it requires understanding multiple layers of technical notation to interpret. This sort of code is frequent throughout the text.

**Exploration of rules.** Each game encourages the players to explore the boundaries of the rules provided, and to create their own rules when necessary. *Apocalypse World*, in particular, is modular; that is, parts of the rules are optional, and can be included or excluded at the whims of the play group. The text provides two optional sets of rules: “barter moves” (which are part of the game by default, but may be removed “if you think they might not suit your *Apocalypse World*” [Baker, 2010, p. 210]) and the “optional battle moves”, which the players can use if they want grittier battles (Baker, p. 212).

Each game encourages the players and MC to create custom moves in various situations. There is an entire chapter in *Apocalypse World* devoted to the subject. It describes creating custom moves to make threats more unique:

*If you're in a fist fight with Rolfball and you take harm, you take s-harm (ap) in addition to the usual harm.* (Baker, 2010, p. 269).

*Apocalypse World* also encourages the players to create custom moves to fill gaps in the ruleset and give PCs more options; for example, it describes a player creating a custom “assassin” move because he wanted to be better able to attack from hiding (Baker, 2010, p. 271).

*Monsterhearts* has the MC create custom moves as well. The text states that “*Monsterhearts* is designed to be tinkered with” and describes how to modify skins and the set of moves the MC can make in order to better suit a particular game (Mcdaldno, 2011, pp. 134-5). One of the season advancements a *Monsterhearts* PC can take is to “rewrite your Sex Move” and another is to “rewrite your Darkest Self”; these options grant players the power to tinker with the edges of the ruleset (Mcdaldno, p. 33).

Finally, *Apocalypse World* goes further and encourages people to modify the ruleset until the game is no longer recognizable as *Apocalypse World*. It gives potential snippets of a zombie game, a spaceship adventure game, and an Iron-age Celtic game that use the *Apocalypse World* framework (Baker, 2010, p. 278). This mutability is described in the author’s words:

*So, yeah, based on Apocalypse World, but Apocalypse World no longer? Fuck yeah* (Baker, p. 278).

This idea that the players can change the rules as they go along could have powerful resonance in a group work setting with adolescents. Adolescence is a time of learning to navigate the rules of social systems and hierarchies, where adults often claim the role of unquestionable authority figures. Allowing and encouraging players to suggest and implement changes to the rule system could be empowering to teens.

**Overall structure.** Each game has its own particular dramatic arc it attempts to create. The large-scale question *Apocalypse World* games try to answer is whether the PCs can stick

together and create or find a place in a harsh environment where they can live lives of relative satisfaction, or as Baker says in “Why to Play”:

*Because the characters are together against a horrific world. They’re carving out their little space of hope and freedom in the filth and violence, and they’re trying to hold onto it. Do they have it in them? What are they going to have to do to hold it together? Are they prepared, tough enough, strong enough and willing? (Baker, 2010, p. 16).*

The PCs in *Apocalypse World* begin with very few ways to make things safe, permanent or beautiful. **Seize by force** allows PCs to “take definite hold” of something, but such hold is temporary (Baker, 2010, p. 86). A starting PC with access to **augury** can “isolate and protect a thing from the world’s psychic maelstrom...for a while” (Baker, p. 90).

But after five advancements, a character gains access to the expanded improvements, several of which allow the characters to make more progress toward establishing a safe space. They can advance their various Basic Moves, unlocking new options. In particular, advancing **seduce or manipulate** allows them to establish NPC allies, who are the only characters in the game who can be guaranteed not to act against them. Advancing **seize by force**, on the other hand, allows the player to mark something “as the character’s in some profound existential way” (Baker, 2010, p. 185-186). The combination of several such moves allows for a story structure to take form over the course of several sessions, in which the PCs start in chaos and attempt to create some semblance of order in it.

In *Monsterhearts*, the structure is much more clearly and strictly laid out. *Monsterhearts* has seasons with breaks in between.

*Seasons work like this: after someone buys their 5th advance, the Season Advances are unlocked, and there’s one more session left after this one before the season ends. (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 32).*

This structure has a parallel thematic component. A PC starts out as a “messed-up teenage heartbreaker who’s secretly a monster” (Mcdaldno, p. 7), but can use the Season Advances to gain access to the Growing Up moves, which allow a character to “navigate and put a stop to all the teenage bullshit going on around [them]” (Mcdaldno, p. 34). For example, instead of using **hot** to manipulate others, the Growing Up moves allow a character to “make others feel beautiful” (Mcdaldno, p. 35).

*Monsterhearts* has several smaller plot arcs contained within its season structure. The Infernal (a skin who has made a bargain with a dark power) is described as being “interesting and powerful because they are compliant with [a] story arc of meteoric power and sudden withdrawal” (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 63). The text states that “small goals will sometimes gain momentum and evolve into major plot arcs” (Mcdaldno, p. 32). These smaller arcs are intended to combine to create a larger structure in which the teenage monsters grow into young adult monsters and find emotional maturity.

Therapy is, among other things, a process for facilitating positive change in clients. The gradual changes in these games that drive the plot and empower the characters could serve as a powerful parallel to the personal growth happening within the players. These changes, in both fiction and reality, are sometimes gradual, sometimes sudden, and sometimes even frightening, but they ultimately allow the player or character to become someone new.

### **Table Themes**

**Play to find out.** This is one of the many mottoes of *Apocalypse World*, and is a theme of both games. Baker explains its meaning:

*There’s a certain discipline you need in order to MC Apocalypse World. You have to commit yourself to the game’s fiction’s own internal logic and causality, driven by the players’ characters. You have to open yourself to caring what happens, but*

*when it comes time to say what happens, you have to set what you hope for aside* (Baker, 2010, pp. 108-9).

In other words, “DO NOT pre-plan a storyline” (Baker, 2010, p. 108). The 1st Session Worksheet (for the MC to fill out during the first session) has a section titled “I wonder...”, where the MC is supposed to place fictional questions that they are curious to find out the answer to through play (Baker, p. 127).

*Monsterhearts* has similar instructions. The players are supposed to “play to find out what happens, what’s important, and what [they] want” (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 13). *Monsterhearts* rephrases the concept as “remaining feral”, and states that

*The game loses its magic when any one player attempts to take control of the future of the story. It becomes small enough to fit inside one person’s head. The other players turn into audience members instead of participants. Nobody’s experience is enriched when one person turns the collective story into their own private story* (Mcdaldno, p. 29).

This concept carries over to group therapy. It is a collective journey and a surprising one, and any attempt by a group member to control or dominate the experience for the entire group is likely unhelpful.

**Text facilitation.** A significant portion of each text is devoted to making the rules comprehensible to players, and making the game easier to play. Some of this text is mundane references within the text; for example: “For questions about gear, weapons, gangs, holdings and the rest of the crap, look it up in the crap chapter, starting page 235” (Baker, 2010, p. 100).

Each game also includes examples of rules in play. *Monsterhearts* uses an example to explain Strings: “Heraldo [an NPC] has two Strings on Robin, and one String on Vanessa. Bradford has two Strings on Robin. Thus, the MC has three String tallies to keep track of between these two NPCs” (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 107).

*Apocalypse World* is much more extensive in its use of examples. For every basic move, there are multiple examples of its use in play. Additionally, *Apocalypse World* contains an in-play example of a “mistake and correction” for each move. Take **read a person**:

*Wilson’s connected with Keeler to ask for her help, and she’s reluctant, so he decides to read her. He hits with an 11. “Okay! So how could I get you to help me, what do you intend to do, and I guess what are you really feeling—” “Whoa stop,” I say. “Hold onto those, ask them during the conversation, not all up front. You can ask one now if you want, but then you two keep talking. Ask them as you go.” (Baker, 2010, p. 202).*

The third primary method of text facilitation that these games use is clarification and repetition. *Apocalypse World* has several moves that deal with violence, and contains a section titled “Acting With Violence” to clarify what move should be used in what situation. An excerpt:

*Seizing by force is very strictly only for fights, times when characters move with violence directly against people able to defend themselves. If the situation doesn’t allow for a full exchange of blows, attack for attack, harm for harm, toe to toe, it’s not seizing by force (Baker, 2010, p. 197).*

In *Monsterhearts*, each skin description has a section that clarifies issues that might come up while playing that skin. The Witch’s clarification section, for example, includes this:

*With the Hex Illusions, you choose which type of illusions the hexed sees, but the MC gets to describe the specific visions and the reactions of the hexed. (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 89).*

**Table facilitation.** These games include, too, text devoted to making the game run more smoothly in person. Both games have extensive (and very similar) instructions on how to prepare for and run the first session of the game. Here are the preparatory instructions for the *Monsterhearts* MC:

*Before you start a game of Monsterhearts, you'll need to do some setup work. First, arrange a dedicated time to play with your friends. Be clear that it takes 3-4 hours to play a session of the game, and that the game might entail multiple sessions if everyone is on board. You'll need to print one copy of each of the following: all of the Skins, the Reference Booklet, the MC Booklet, and the Menace Booklet. Each of these is a double-sided piece of letter paper that needs to be folded in half. You'll also need pencils, erasers, and dice. At a minimum, you need two dice, but two per player may be preferable (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 117).*

Each has some ritualized elements to the character creation process. During the first session, *Monsterhearts* instructs the people around the table to “go around clockwise and have everyone announce one of the Skins in front of them, and then read its flavour text...in their most melodramatic voice” (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 118). *Apocalypse World* has its players go around in a circle and “introduce their characters by name, look and outlook” (Baker, 2010, p. 66).

The sessions for *Apocalypse World* also follow a somewhat ritualized structure. Each session starts with “highlighting stats” (Baker, 2010, p. 180). Then roleplaying begins with “beginning-of-session moves”, such as the hardholder’s wealth move:

*If your hold is secure and your rule unchallenged, at the beginning of the session, roll+hard. On a 10+, you have surplus at hand and available for the needs of the session. On a 7–9, you have surplus, but choose 1 want. On a miss, or if your hold is compromised or your rule contested, your hold is in want (Baker, p. 58).*

Beginning-of-session moves begin the “moves snowball” that provides the bulk of play, and the session concludes with the end-of-session move, where players acknowledge that they have learned more about each other’s characters:

*At the end of every session, choose a character who knows you better than they used to. If there’s more than one, choose one at your whim. Tell that player to add +1 to their Hx with you on their sheet. If this brings them to Hx+4, they reset to Hx+1 (and therefore mark experience) (Baker, 2010, p. 88).*

Sessions of *Monsterhearts* include the highlighting of stats and the moves snowball, but the beginning- and end-of-session moves are absent. *Apocalypse World* also advises taking breaks frequently during sessions, arguing that “a player worn out and at a loss now, after a break might have great ideas and enthusiasm. Better to call a break early, even, than to go past anyone’s endurance” (Baker, 2010, p. 122).

This structure and advice mirrors that found in group work. Running a group requires careful preparation by the therapist, and rituals in the opening and closing stages can often help ground participants in the present moment. Group therapy can be even more emotionally taxing than a role-playing game, and so breaks are helpful there as well.

**The MC is both supportive and adversarial.** Both games describe the MC’s role in depth, and give them somewhat conflicting instructions. *Apocalypse World* and *Monsterhearts* both call for the MC to make “hard moves”:

*...when a player’s character hands you the perfect opportunity on a golden plate, make as hard and direct a move as you like. It’s not the meaner the better, although mean is often good. Best is: make it irrevocable* (Baker, 2010, p. 117).

*Monsterhearts* asks the MC to try to “push” the players’ “buttons” with their choices (Mcdaldno, 2011, p. 131), while *Apocalypse World*, in describing a move in which a player gains **weird** whenever an NPC dies in their care, states that “When a player takes this move, I make it a personal goal to get her to weird+3 by session 5” (Baker, 2010, p. 217). To put that in more mundane terms, the player makes a choice to have their character receive a minor benefit whenever they fail to save an NPC’s life. The MC, in response, takes that as a challenge to try to kill off as many people in the PC’s care as possible. In this instance, the MC and player are somewhat at odds; the MC is aggressively responding in the fiction against the player’s choices.

But each game also provides instructions that the MC should be supportive of the players and their characters. “Be a fan of the player characters” is a guiding principle in each game (Baker, 2010, p. 110; McDaldno, 2011, p. 95). “Always say what honesty demands” is another; the MC should be forthcoming with the truth (Mcdaldno, p. 94; Baker, p. 109). The *Apocalypse World* rules also include an example of the MC allowing a player to take back a move based on incomplete information:

*Bran’s player: “Your SHOTGUN? You put your SHOTGUN in my face and I said fuck you? Uh, no, no. I thought you just meant your pistol. Can I get a do-overs?”*

*Yes, of course he can. (Baker, 162).*

A group therapist needs to be able to shift between different stances as well. Sometimes the right action is to let conversation flow freely, and say nothing; sometimes it is to direct conversation; sometimes it may even be appropriate to confront someone or halt conversation. A potential therapy game designer should be aware of this.

**Remembering teenagerhood.** *Monsterhearts* has a small but significant table theme that the players are adults, and through playing *Monsterhearts* they will remember and enact events from their teenage years. It says that the characters are “who we used to be, who we still are sometimes” and that “you play to get lost, and to remember” (Mcdaldno, 2). It also states that “This isn’t really a game about monsters. It’s a game about the confusion that arises when your body and your social world start changing without your permission” (Mcdaldno, 30). Teenage years, in *Monsterhearts*, are a time of emotions whose intensity render them almost unrecognizable to adults, and the game is intended to be “a conduit for feeling all these melodramatic and passionate and beautiful and hideous teenage things” (Mcdaldno, 96).

## Discussion

To reiterate: The central purpose of this research was to identify ways in which the field of tabletop roleplaying game design could provide insights into group therapy. I then hoped to be able to apply those insights to the specific population of adolescents with trauma histories.

### Insights

**Structure.** The clearest through line between tabletop games and group therapy is structural. Some of the parallels were apparent before this research. The structure of one MC and several players mirrors that of one therapist and several clients, and both types of interaction require regular meetings of approximately similar length.

In addition, *Apocalypse World*, turned out to have a session structure that very closely mirrored group therapy models proposed in many social work texts (Jacobs, Masson and Harvill, 2002, p. 70). The common model of group work involves a beginning phase to get clients oriented and focused and a middle (or work) phase that takes up most of the time and in which the bulk of therapy is performed. There is also a closing phase that acts as an ending ritual and a way to ensure continuity between sessions.

These beginning, middle and closing phases are matched one-to-one in a session of *Apocalypse World*. As a beginning phase, *Apocalypse World* provides the highlighting of stats, which is a simple ritual that gets the players reacquainted with each others' characters. Since each character gets a stat highlighted by a player and another highlighted by the MC, it also serves as a subtle reminder that players and the MC are all people in the room whose preferences are worth paying attention to.

The bulk of the group work session is the middle, or working, phase. Most of an *Apocalypse World* session is spent roleplaying. Beginning-of-session moves act as a segue

between the highlighting ritual and the roleplaying. This middle phase is the longest part of the session, and where the bulk of attention is focused. The majority of the rules in the text are designed to take place during this phase.

*Apocalypse World* has a closing ritual as well: The end of session move, wherein players grant each other a token reward for getting to know each other's characters better. It is a small but real acknowledgement of the interpersonal growth the players have achieved during the session. The end of session move takes very little time and ensures that the players leave the session on a positive and reflective note.

*Monsterhearts* does some of these things—highlighting stats and the work phase—but does not have a comparable closing ritual. On the other hand, it does have a mechanized method of letting the players know that the game will be ending in one more session; perhaps there is something there to learn about approaching the closing stage of a group.

These structural parallels indicate potential for exploration here. The *Apocalypse World* framework seems like a promising starting point for some form of group therapy.

**Instructional style.** *Apocalypse World*, in particular, is written in a manner that easily conveys to a potential MC the appropriate method by which to run the game. It provides a list of principles and agendas for the MC to follow during play, and then gives detailed explanations and examples for each one. Many group work instructional texts provide techniques and examples as well, but *Apocalypse World* does so in a more precise manner. Compare an example of an intervention from *Apocalypse World* to one from Toseland and Rivas:

*Wilson's connected with Keeler to ask for her help, and she's reluctant, so he decides to read her. He hits with an 11. "Okay! So how could I get you to help me, what do you intend to do, and I guess what are you really feeling—" "Whoa stop," I say. "Hold onto those, ask them during the conversation, not all up front. You can ask one now if you want, but then you two keep talking. Ask them as you go." (Baker, 202)*

*In response to a question about what he was feeling, and obviously angry group member stated, "I'm not feeling anything." When the worker responded that people are always feeling something, no matter how light, the member said, "I'm feeling that your interpretation of my behavior is not correct." This statement was, of course, a thought, not a feeling. The statement also reflected the difficulty this member had in acknowledging this feeling. The worker had several choices at this point. The worker could wait for other members to talk about how they experienced the member's behavior or ask the group how they perceived the member. Then, the worker could lead the group in a discussion about how feelings are expressed and how they are perceived. The worker could also help the member to comment on and integrate the feedback he received from the group and become more aware of how he is perceived by others (Toseland & Rivas, 296).*

The example from Toseland and Rivas lists the potential actions the worker might take, but does not actually show what it would look like if the therapist did so. In contrast, the *Apocalypse World* example shows what words an individual MC might say in that given situation. A budding therapist might become confused reading the Toseland and Rivas example; when they say "The worker could also help the member to comment on and integrate the feedback he received from the group and become more aware of how he is perceived by others," it is not made clear how precisely to do any of that. *Apocalypse World's* style of giving examples might be more a more effective method of education than the one from the group work textbook.

**Hackability.** *Monsterhearts's* very existence provides evidence of the potential for a group therapy model based on the *Apocalypse World* framework. Despite having the same basic skeleton of rules, *Monsterhearts* provides a substantially different tonal experience. Where *Apocalypse World* tells stories of rugged action heroes prevailing against terrain, *Monsterhearts* crafts horror narratives about adolescent emotion. This tonal malleability would prove useful to a potential creator of a game for group therapy; the narrative and themes could be tailored to fit a specific demographic.

### **Applications for Adolescents with Trauma**

**Stories of mastery and maturity.** *Apocalypse World* and *Monsterhearts* each give their players the opportunity to play through potentially therapeutic narratives. Characters in both games start with little control over their environment and few effective ways of gaining control. The season advancements in *Monsterhearts* and the advanced improvements in *Apocalypse World* grant characters the ability to acquire control, safety, and fulfilling friendships. Playing through these narratives of growth would seem to be akin to the therapeutic use of psychodrama. Properly calibrated, a game could allow trauma victims to play through their own corrective experiences, and help them heal.

**Exposure.** Both games involve potentially triggering content. Violence is ubiquitous in *Apocalypse World* and present in *Monsterhearts*. Its ultimate consequence on the player's character is always up to the player, however—it is next to impossible to kill a PC without the player's approval in either game. The world in each game is violent, but safe for the players to explore. This process could be interpreted as a type of exposure therapy: a player can experience consequence-light violence through the mediating lens of fiction, and thereby get more comfortable with a potential trigger. The way these games approach violence and its consequences could provide a model for therapy games to approach other potentially triggering subjects.

**Demographic appeal.** As established, roleplaying games are played by adolescents in significant numbers. It seems likely that there would be a portion of the adolescent population for whom the idea of meeting every week to play a game is more intrinsically exciting than typical group therapy. Obtaining the buy-in of a client is a key part of any effective therapeutic process.

The enjoyment factor of roleplaying games would seem to be a likely source of buy-in for adolescent clients.

### **Study Limitations**

In retrospect, this study's design was somewhat poorly aligned with its research question. Or, rather, it should have been two separate studies: An exploratory study to assess *Apocalypse World* for applicability to group therapy, and then a second one to focus on a population for potential treatment. Attempting to answer both these questions simultaneously and with the same methodology was overly ambitious on my part.

Additionally, the field of roleplaying game design is one whose academic scholarship is limited and very new. Many of my literature sources were game texts themselves and articles written by designers. I hope that this research can do its small part to help the nascent academic field grow into something rich and useful.

The triggering content of potential games would have to be monitored closely; there is a difference between exposure therapy and repeated flooding of a trauma victim. There is existing game technology in place whose purpose is to limit flooding; the X-card in particular seems like an applicable model to use here. However, the desire to provide an entertaining narrative may encourage players and MCs alike to insert triggering content in a surprising fashion—not a therapeutic decision when dealing with a population with a history of trauma.

### **Further Research**

This research was designed to provide support for future research: In particular, research into the design of group therapy interventions that use the *Apocalypse World* system as a model. The potential for such an intervention has been established; now the question of its effectiveness

needs to be answered. In order to do so, someone will have to design a roleplaying game-based therapy and test it.

There are also game-specific concerns that could be investigated. This research evaluated the *Apocalypse World* system, but there are hundreds of existing RPG systems out there. Research could be done on any of them, or on the field of RPGs as a whole, in an attempt to design a new therapy game wholecloth.

### **Conclusion**

Careful textual analysis of these two game texts has indicated several ways in which role-playing games show promise as an inspiration or medium for group therapy. The game structure, particularly that of *Apocalypse World*, mirrors the structure of group therapy quite closely. The games themselves demonstrate potential methods of approaching traumatic material in a powerful and engaging way. Such thematic material could even be tailored to the needs of a particular group. Finally, the text of *Apocalypse World* itself could provide a model for a way to write instructional group work texts in the future.

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